Designing tours of university libraries and other cultural institutions for international visitors

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Abstract

Introducing international groups of visitors to Thai cultural institutions is a familiar challenge that may be made more effective by some degree of preparation. This article examines specific approaches to welcoming visitors in an era of global pandemic prevention measures.

In addition to methods involving tour groups, the possibility of virtual tours is considered, to be posted on the institution website. In this way, interesting and meaningful facts about the institution may be communicated to foreigners and other visitors even when visits are impossible for practical reasons.

Scheduling tours, individualized presentations, and concluding tours are considered as part of the presentation experience. These findings suggest that by creative planning, giving tours may be a more productive form of communication and publicity, raising the international profile and reputation of Thai institutions.

Keywords: Tours, Guides, Cultural institutions, Innovation.

Introduction

The Pridi Banomyong Library, Thammasat University (TU) was visited a number of times from 2018 until February 2020, when closure due to the worldwide Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic created a pause in such tours.

According to TU Library statistics, from January 2018 to February 2020, a total of 49 tours were conducted for visitors. These visitors comprised 655 Thai people and 713 foreigners, suggesting that under normal conditions, foreign visitors slightly outnumber Thai visitors seeking tours to the library. This means that foreign visitors enjoy a plurality among those receiving guided tours of the library.

The national origins of the visitors varied, with groups from these countries being represented, taking into account that some groups contained people from more than a single country:

Nation of origin	Number of groups	Visitors
Thailand	22	655
Several countries	5	157
Indonesia	4	104
Malaysia	4	91
China	4	216
Laos	3	70
India	2	22
Singapore	1	23
Japan	1	7
Pakistan	1	6
Myanmar	1	16
United States of America	1	1
Total	**49**	**1,368**

In the above list, where the visitors had several different national origins and were not identified as being from one or two individual nations, then they were classified as being

from "several countries." The number of visitors per group ranged from one to 106, although most groups contained well over 20 persons. The average number of visitors per group, calculated by dividing the total number of visitors, 1368, by the number of groups, 49, equals 27.9 visitors per group.

Ideally, an in-person tour allows for gracious welcoming of visitors that in principle should create a more permanent connection with visitors.

Also, by physically walking through a library, a visitor may acquire strong memories that will endure, while seeing a video may not be as memorable.

Nevertheless, at a time of COVID-19 pandemic, virtual tours are useful supplements and better than nothing, in terms of visually introducing cultural institutions.

At best, they may act as advertisements to interest potential visitors in scheduling visits later, when COVID-19 restrictions are no longer in effect. Even when standard in-person visits are possible, short virtual tours may serve as cost saving measures, since they convey information without the need for visitors to spend money on travel, hotels, and other expenses associated with fact-finding missions.

In addition, the use of new technology may increase the interest of conventional presentations, when virtual tours are used to introduce current resources and plans for the future.

A wide variety of tour groups, from expert researchers and university administrators to first year students may benefit from such virtual information.

Drawing inferences: The importance of research

Often, when tours of cultural institutions in Thailand are announced to staff, they are told simply that "35 professors from Indonesia" are expected, or some similar summary. It is appropriate to know more about who the visitors will be, in order to prepare the tour and also write an account of it later to be posted online.

If the visitors are from an institution which has, or is planning to have, some formal association with the Thai institution, such as signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU), this would be advantageous to know before the visit begins, in order to mention it during the tour. If so, the tour may be part of a series of exchanges and visits between international entities.

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Since tour groups are in essence transitory, posting information about each visit online can preserve the contact and show genuine interest in exchange of information about different international institutions. So, each tour of the Pridi Banomyong Library is described in a blog entry for the Thammasat University Library blog so that after the visit, the tour group may observe that their visit was noted and appreciated (Prifysgol Aberystwyth University, 2018).

In addition, the Thammasat University Library Facebook page typically posts photos taken during the visit of the participants. These images are accompanied by a brief text identifying the visitors. The purpose of the Thammasat University Library blog entry is to describe in supplementary depth some interesting features of the institutions represented by the visitors, and sometimes focus on the achievements of the visitors themselves.

This information may be obtained by Googling the names of the institutions and visitors. In many countries, university professors and others have professional homepages with lists of publications and other information. It is particularly interesting to note if a library being visited owns a copy of a book written by one of the visitors, or otherwise has some connection to the institution or the nation being visited.

If there was previous interaction at the institutional level, that might also be noted in any written record of the visit. These examples of ongoing interchange demonstrate one of the basic purposes of educational exchange.

To cite another example, on 17 January 2020, the Thammasat University Library was visited by a group of students and instructors from The University of Malaya.

In this case, when describing The University of Malaya (UM), it was possible to note that the Thammasat University Library owns a number of books published by the University of Malaya Press as well as publications produced by research based at The University of Malaya.

Other pertinent information was readily available about distinguished alumni of UM whose writings are also available at the Thammasat University Library, for example the author Edwin Thumboo.

These details show that cultural interaction endures beyond the day of a visit or tour, when collections of libraries, archives, or other cultural institutions permanently offer documentation for Thai researchers, students, and other interested readers.

Noting who the visitors will be and what institution they represent may also be helpful, if enough time is available, in courteously writing a brief email to a professor who might be leading the group to state that the host institution is looking forward to welcoming the visitors. While usually not necessary, this type of message shows a sense of polite hospitality and respect for the visitors.

Similarly, after the visit, it shows good form according to international standards of politeness to write a brief note expressing how pleased the host institution was to receive the visitors. This will typically result in a message of thanks for the tour in response, prolonging the positive international exchange after the visit itself by courteous gestures.

To cite another example, on July 5, 2019, the Thammasat University Library welcomed students, lecturers, and staff from Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine (CDUTCM) for a tour of the Pridi Banomyong Library. On the Thammasat University Library blog account of the visit, it was noted that The Thammasat Library owns a book with material drawn from CDUTCM expertise: *Standard of Chinese Materia Medica in Thailand. Volume 1*.

Future projects discussed included ongoing international cooperation on Chinese medicine and traditional Chinese medicine, as well as Thai medical research on traditional Chinese herbal medicine. This information allows us to place the library visit within a context of wider international cooperation and exchange of expertise.

By including this supplementary information in an account of the library tour, we demonstrate ongoing efforts for international academic and cultural exchange. This shows that we are aware of the context of the tour and its impact on future educational interaction on an international level.

Tour groups are not all alike: Scheduling tours

Another valuable aspect of researching institutions and individual visitors before they arrive is that all tour groups are not alike. If we know in advance that a group of structural engineers will be touring a building or cultural institution, clearly their professional interests will differ from a group of students in the humanities. A tour group of librarians will care about library science, while other groups may be less interested.

This does not mean redesigning an entire tour presentation, but adding some facts that may be of interest to particular groups is a form of courtesy. By acknowledging individual identities and interests, we demonstrate genuine interest in other people, rather than classifying them in anonymous groups to be given identical information whether it applies to them or not.

Because visitors are essentially tourists, they must be considered as travellers on a schedule. For this reason, it is best to find out exactly how much time is available before beginning any presentation of a cultural institution such as a university library. A one-hour tour may have been announced, but if the group arrives late, which often occurs, and must leave at a specific time, this will abridge the presentation, and it is practical to be aware of this beforehand, in order to finish on time and without inconveniencing the visitors.

That way, they will also hear the essential parts of the presentation, rather than a fraction of them, hastily ended whenever it is discovered that they must leave to do some other activity. The staff member leading the tour should be prepared for other changes in scheduling, for example if the group must leave abruptly to meet another appointment.

While planning for visits from international groups, local readers should also be kept in mind. So students at a university library should be prioritized in terms of maintaining a quiet atmosphere for study. In normal times when COVID-19 attendance limits are not an issue, this may mean trying to schedule tours for hours when fewer students visit the library, such as in the morning. In practice, traveling groups have limited flexibility in their own schedules, and usually prefer arriving either just before, or most likely after, lunchtime.

In giving tour presentations of cultural institutions in afternoons when they are crowded with researchers or other visitors, it is best to avoid using voice amplification or other mechanical amplification, trusting instead that the unamplified human voice can motivate a tour group to listen more closely than to a loudly magnified voice.

Microphones and earphones, while possibly giving a positive impression of technological advances, remove the tour group from the guide and make the presentation less natural and more distant. Also, they sometimes do not function adequately, causing potential interruptions and delays. If the presenter reminds the tour group to gather nearby, they will more likely to listen than if they wander away from an amplified voice.

Early preparations

In terms of preparing for forthcoming tours, it is always a good idea to briefly walk around the site to be toured before the visitors arrive, to make sure they are no issues such as electrical lights not functioning, broken light bulbs, minor flooding, or other problems, to present the best image of the place to be visited.

In terms of presentation content, depending on the identity of the international group, it is most effective to assume that they are not informed about Thai history. Asking them how long they have been in the Kingdom may reveal whether they have already seen anything of historical importance or if they have just been moved directly from the airport to their hotel to the site of the tour.

If so, it will be informative to give a brief idea of the geographical setting of the cultural institution, where it is located, and what other points of interest are nearby. Typically there may be no time on the visitors' schedule to see all points of cultural interest on this trip.

Yet it may be useful to inform them, in order to encourage a repeat visit in future. It is also essential to identify people who are honored by having rooms, libraries, and other institutions named after them, such as Professor Pridi Banomyong, Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, and Professor Adul Wichiencharoen, as often they may be unknown to international visitors, even if they are household names in Thailand.

If a cultural institution is named after a less renowned historical personality, it is still possible to describe what contribution the person made and why it is noteworthy. This personalizes the visit, and indicates respect for intellectuals of the past and their achievement.

When presenting a cultural institution, it can interest visitors to have a means of comparison with other international institutions. So, for example, to describe the collection of the Thammasat University Library as containing 1.2 million items is informative, but it is even more pertinent to know that it is comparable in size to the collections of such university libraries as the Singapore National University Library; the National Cheng Kung University, Tainan, Taiwan; and the University of the Philippines Diliman Library.

The Thammasat University Library collection is also commensurate to the Banaras Hindu University Library and the University of Calcutta (Kolkatta) Library, both in India, and the Tamkang University Library, Taipei (Oswald, 2009).

This type of contextual comparison reminds visitors that a Thai cultural institution recognizes its respective place in the world of research.

Individualized presentations

If possible, added interest may be gained during any tour if the group is permitted to visit areas which the public might not always see. For example, the Thammasat University Rare Book Collection, where illustrated printed volumes may be shown to the tour group, is usually memorable for visitors, who enjoy taking photographs of them.

Places of societal impact might also be included in the tour, in addition to biographical and historical data. For example, a non-denominational prayer room in the Pridi Banomyong Library shows that although it is a Buddhist country, Thailand is officially tolerant of all faiths.

Visitors from different nations are usually intrigued by this fact, since at home they may not have prayer rooms in university libraries (for example, Indonesian university libraries do not have prayer rooms, whereas they are typically present in Malaysian university libraries). This evidence that our libraries welcome readers of all religious backgrounds appeals to visitors, especially those from Muslim majority countries.

While presenting a positive and encouraging view of the cultural institution, it shows the most respect for visitors if the tour guide treats visitors, including students, as educated, intelligent people. If the tour is for international researchers who will be using the facilities for their own work, they will naturally be primarily concerned with how to access materials to advance their own work. International students will typically be concerned about fulfilling their academic assignments, and how to get extra assistance from English-speaking staff if necessary.

For these practical-minded visitors, the historical or biographical data will be less urgent than information about how to obtain data in the most efficient way.

The flexibility of content depending on the interests of visitors, which may be learned while the tour is in progress, is one reason that virtual tours are necessarily less effective than in-person visits, as discussed above.

Finishing the tour

If the presenter of the tour has not already obtained contact information about the tour group leader before the visit begins, it may be convenient to ask for a business card either before or at the end of the visit. That should facilitate writing a follow-up message to thank the visitors for taking the time to see the cultural institution.

The institution which receives visitors may also take the initiative to pursue future contact, so that the friendly encounter has more prolonged impact than just the visit. In reality, as soon as most travelers have returned to their home institution, they quickly change focus to more immediate local concerns. So both parties, the visited and visitors, must show determination to produce creative new results from the visit, for there to be a useful posterity to the initial encounter. This can in the form of information exchange, which is surprisingly rare, even when specified in memorandums of understanding (MoUs) or staff exchange, which can be informative and instructional for work teams.

Conclusions and summary

While during the current COVID-19 pandemic, visits by international groups to cultural institutions are temporarily suspended, this is an occasion for further considering and organizing techniques for the most effective presentation of cultural assets. Posting virtual tours online is one way to communicate cultural information, even when visits are possible. They become even more essential during times of lockdown.

Spending some time to research groups that are planning to visit can be highly effective in adapting presentations to interest specific groups but also to acknowledge their individuality and human identity, rather than treat them as an undifferentiated mass of people.

By writing to leaders of tour groups before and after presentations, when this is appropriate, we reinforce ties of communication and extend the visiting experience as well as exchanging mutual reminders of contact information, if any ongoing collaboration occurs.

Designing tours to offer information of specific interest for certain groups also raises the likelihood that the visitors will find the presentation immediately serviceable. Acknowledging that the visitors, as tourists, will often be delayed in arrival and otherwise need to change aspects of the timing of tours unexpectedly, shows acceptance and understanding on the part of the hosts. A flexible attitude is essential.

Ideally, after an international tour, the presentation as well as blog entry or other written record of the visit, gives the impression of concrete cultural interchange, and not merely a touristic visit. This in turn will, it is hoped, lead to further international cooperation, understanding, and interaction in future.

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