Urban Tourism at Religious Sites: Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm Rajwaramahaviharn (Wat Pho) [*]

การท่องเที่ยวศาสนสถานในเขตเมือง: วัดพระเชตุพนวิมลมังคลารามราชวรมหาวิหาร (วัดโพธิ์)

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Abstract

 The aim of this paper is to examine urban heritage tourism at Wat Pho, located in the midst of the densely populated city of Bangkok, Thailand. The site is a religious heritage site and living Buddhist monastery, housing numerous objects of historic, religious, scientific and artistic importance. It has been included in the UNESCO Memory of the World for its collection of historic and religious stone inscriptions. However, the site is not adequately managed, and faces challenges in maintaining its heritage position. This research incorporates the results of the interviews with monks involved in the administration of Wat Pho. A questionnaire survey of visitors as well as the shopkeepers in the surrounding area was conducted to determine their views regarding the impacts of tourism on the site, advantages and disadvantages of tourism, and problems and potential solutions. The paper makes some recommendations about key religious tourism issues.   Long-term and short-term planning strategies are recommended to achieve sustainability by addressing the prevailing issues such as visitor parking, pollution and litter, overcrowding, and erosion and destruction of sacred objects.

Keywords: Urban tourism, Religious tourism, Buddhist temples, Sustainability, Perceptions, Tourism impacts

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการท่องเที่ยวแหล่งมรดกวัฒนธรรมในเขตเมือง :วัดพระเชตุพน วิมลมังคลารามราชวรมหาวิหาร (วัดโพธิ์) ซึ่งเป็นศาสนสถานที่มีการใช้พื้นที่ประกอบกิจกรรมทางศาสนาอยู่ใน ปัจจุบันและเป็นแหล่งท่องเที่ยวที่ตั้งอยู่ใจกลางกรุงเทพมหานคร เมืองหลวงของประเทศไทย ภายในวัดโพธิ์มี มรดกทางวัฒนธรรมที่มีคุณค่าในด้านต่าง ๆ อยู่มากมาย คณะกรรมการองค์การยูเนสโกแห่งภูมิภาคเอเชีย ประกาศรับรองขึ้นทะเบียนจารึกวัดโพธิ์เป็นมรดกความทรงจำแห่งโลกในปี พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๑ อย่างไรก็ตามวัดโพธิ์ยัง ขาดการบริหารจัดการด้านการท่องเที่ยวที่ดี ส่งผลให้วัดโพธิ์ต้องเผชิญกับความ ท้าทายในการดูแลรักษามรดก ทางวัฒนธรรมให้คงอยู่ได้อย่างยั่งยืนในระยะยาว

งานวิจัยนี้เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลโดยการสัมภาษณ์พระสงฆ์ที่มีส่วนร่วมในการบริหารจัดการด้านการ ท่องเที่ยวภายในวัดโพธิ์ร่วมกับการเก็บข้อมูลจากนักท่องเที่ยวและผู้ประกอบการรายย่อยรอบบริเวณวัดและพื้นที่ ใกล้เคียง เพื่อทราบถึงผลกระทบที่เกิดจากการท่องเที่ยว ข้อดี ข้อเสียของการท่องเที่ยวพร้อมทั้งปัญหาและแนว ทางการแก้ปัญหาที่เกิดขึ้นจากการท่องเที่ยวในวัดโพธิ์ นำไปสู่ข้อเสนอแนะการวางแผนทั้งระยะสั้นและระยะยาว เพื่อความยั่งยืนของพื้นที่ศึกษา

คำสำคัญ: การท่องเที่ยวในเมือง การท่องเที่ยวทางศาสนา วัดในพุทธศาสนา ความยั่งยืน การรับรู้ ผลกระทบของ การท่องเที่ยว

Introduction

Cities offer distinct and diverse tourism environments with a high density of people and structures and dense network of functions, central position in regional and interurban networks, social and cultural heterogeneity and economic multifunctionalism, cities provide a wide range of opportunities for tourism activities of all types (Pearce, 2001). One of these opportunities is built on cultural/historic heritage, specifically religious tourism (Page, 1995; Pearce, 2001). Religious tourism, or religiously motivated visits to religious sites such as temples, cathedrals, pilgrimage sites and other religious places, is a common form of cultural heritage tourism (Shackley, 2001). Religious sites offer visitors the opportunity to experience new or familiar forms of aesthetic and sociocultural heritage (Shackley, 2001). However, tourism of this kind can also be problematic especially if located in busy urban areas. For example, religious tourism may come into conflict with the active use of a site for religious observance, as in the case of temple tourism (Kang, 2009; Wong, McIntosh, & Ryan, 2016). Urban religious tourism sites may also be in need of restoration or conservation, which may be impeded or even worsened by tourism (Page, 1995; Pearce, 2001; Shackley, 2001).

This paper examines the positive and negative impacts of tourism at Wat Pho, a leading Bangkok religious tourism site, and its heritage value in the eyes of relevant stakeholders. It

then provides recommendations for how Wat Pho can be developed into a sustainable urban tourism destination in the short and long term, addressing issues that have been identified by the key stakeholder groups.

Literature Review

Urban tourism

Urban tourism refers to tourism conducted in an urban area, often focusing on the aspects of the city itself (Page, 1995). Cities, as centers of population, culture, commerce and administration, hold many aspects of life that are of interest to tourists, such as museums, historic and religious sites, shopping areas, and other attractions (Page, 1995). The relatively compact geography and accessibility of cities also encourages tourism, as does the wealth of tourism infrastructure such as accommodations and food and drink outlets. Perhaps more importantly, cities are often centers of culture and welcoming to outsiders, offering an opportunity for visitors to gain insight and knowledge into a culture (Selby, 2004). Urban tourism takes place at different scales, from individual sites to international (Pearce, 2001). Residents of a city engage in tourism within their own city, while the city may also draw tourists from regional, national, or even international contexts (Pearce, 2001). Urban tourism is often well accepted by residents because of its economic benefits, although it does also have negative impacts like increased traffic, pollution, and service utilization (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010). The main type of urban tourism we are concerned with in this study is religious tourism.

Religious tourism

Religious tourism typically includes journeys intended for religious observance, either as the main goal of the journey (such as a pilgrimage) or in the context of other tourist activities (Raj & Griffin, 2015). Religious tourism is not limited to religious believers, and may be undertaken by non-believers in a particular religion out of motivations such as curiosity, aesthetic and historic interest, or respect (Raj & Griffin, 2015). Religious tourism does have unique elements, for example unique religious architecture and aesthetic forms (Shih & Kao, 2011). In general, since religious places and sites are usually found in the context of human settlements, they represent part of urban tourism flows (Ayhan & Cubukcu, 2010). However, religious tourism is set apart from other urban tourism destinations by issues such as the site's use as a living religious community or observance site (Wong *et al.*, 2016) or conflicts between different stakeholders (Kang, 2009). Religious tourism also faces challenges of sustainability,

such as conflict between the religious and tourism uses of the site and prioritization of tourism over active religious use or even conservation (Kang, 2009; Wong *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, religious tourism offers opportunities for such sites, including increasing understanding of the religion through tourists' exposure to religious practices, foodways and other cultural activities (Kaplan, 2010; Son & Xu, 2013). Religious tourism's status as a cultural heritage activity may also help to smooth seasonal demand peaks, which helps improve sustainability of the site (Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005). As a form of community-based tourism it can also provide livelihoods for the surrounding community (Wachirasirodom & Tadanithi, 2016).

Cultural heritage value

Cultural heritage sites may be visited for a number of reasons, such as historical importance, aesthetic importance, spiritual importance and so on (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). These aspects of the site speak to the heritage value of the site, which represents the reasons sites are established, maintained, studied and visited (Mason & Avrami, 2002). Heritage value of a site include aesthetic value, economic value, historic value, scientific value, and sociocultural value (Mason & Avrami, 2002). While it is obvious that religious heritage sites have sociocultural value because they relate to the area's religious and spiritual history (Hughes, Bond, & Ballantyne, 2013), these sites also have other forms of heritage value. For Buddhist religious heritage sites, unique styles of temple architecture and religious artworks are commonly identified as contributors to the aesthetic value of the site (Kang, 2009; Kaplan, 2010; Li & Zhu, 2008; Shih & Kao, 2011). Religious sites may also be associated with scientific and historic research, presenting scientific value (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). The economic activity of the site, such as admission purchases, souvenirs, and so on, may also contribute economic value (Selby, 2004).

Advantages and disadvantages of tourism for religious heritage sites

As with other forms of tourism, religious heritage tourism can have positive economic effects (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010; Zaei & Zaei, 2013) and may increase concern for the environment (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Jimura, 2011). It adds to the cultural significance of the religion itself (Kaplan, 2010). It may attract infrastructure and services improvements (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; de Oliveira, 2003; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010; Wang & Pfister, 2008; Zaei & Zaei, 2013). It also helps preserve historic material culture (structures and objects), local and traditional practices, folkways, crafts, food

and other cultural expressions (Andereck *et al.*, 2005; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010; Zaei & Zaei, 2013).

However, there are also disadvantages, which include overcrowding and traffic congestion (Andereck *et al.*, 2005; Cros, 2008; Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Jimura, 2011); increased litter and pollution (Timothy & Boyd, 2006; Hillery, Griffin, Nancarrow, & Syme, 2001; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010; Saveriades, 2000);degradation of the physical integrity of the area and loss of local character (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010); and commercialization and loss of local tradition and intergenerational conflicts (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010; Saveriades, 2000). Sites may also suffer from loss or damage to artifacts and buildings (Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010). This is particularly challenging for living religious heritage sites, where items may not only be of historic interest but actively used in religious practice (Wong *et al.*, 2016).

Research Setting

Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm Rajwaramahaviharn, commonly called Wat Pho or Wat Po, is a historic temple complex and monastery in the Rattanakosin Island or old royal city area of Bangkok. The current temple complex was constructed on the site of an existing complex by King Rama I in 1782, at the start of the Rattanakosin period, and was originally intended as a private temple for the adjoining Royal Palace (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2009). It was substantially extended and restored in the 1830s under the guidance of King Rama III, who began the process of opening Wat Pho to the public (O'Neil, 2008). Today, the temple complex extends to approximately 25,000 feet (O'Neil, 2008). This includes a public temple area and private monastery and monk's quarters. The temple area is surrounded by a small retail district, which mainly includes small stalls and retail shops selling handicrafts, religious goods, and food to tourists that visit the temple, palace and nearby attractions.

Wat Pho has a wealth of cultural heritage. The main temple building, the Four Directions Vihara (Phra Vihara Tis and the enclosing Phra Rabieng cloisters), the Scripture Hall (Phra Mondop) and Assembly Hall (Phra Ubosot) mainly date to the time of King Rama III or earlier (Wat Pho, 2016b). Wat Pho is best known for the Reclining Buddha, or Phra Buddhasaiyas, a 42-meter long statue of the Lord Buddha in a resting pose constructed by King Rama III during the 1832 reconstruction (Wat Pho, 2016c). Other highlights include 244 images of the Buddha, mural paintings depicting folklore, medicine and traditional knowledge, and the Stone Inscriptions, representing history, myth and scientific knowledge from the time of King Rama III (UNESCO, 2011). Wat Pho has been designated as a Memory of the World (UNESCO,

2011). The site also hosts religious and cultural celebrations and the Thai Traditional Medical School.

Methods

The objectives of the paper were to capture multiple stakeholder perspectives on the heritage values, tourism impact, and sustainable management of Wat Pho as an urban religious tourist destination. Stakeholder groups included Wat Pho monks (who both form the religious community and manage the site), tourists, and local shopkeepers (who are affected economically). A mixed methods study was conducted, combining interviews with monks (n=5) working in the administration of Wat Pho and questionnaire surveys of visitors (n-400) and local shopkeepers (n=100). Thematic coding was used for the analysis process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Quantitative surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS. The surveys and interviews addressed topics including their perceived tourism impacts, personal views about the cultural heritage value of Wat Pho, and management recommendations to achieve sustainable tourism of a religious destination in an urban setting.

Findings and Discussion
Visitor Demographics

Visitors were primarily female (68% of domestic visitors, 53% of international visitors). While most domestic visitors were under 25 (73%), most international visitors were 25 to 44 years (55%). In both groups, most participants had a Bachelor education or higher (69% domestic visitors, 82% international visitors). Most participants were first time visitors (50% of domestic visitors, 88% of international visitors). Most participants visited with friends (72% of domestic visitors, 50% of international visitors).

Wat Pho as an urban heritage tourism site

Wat Pho received 867,899 visitors in January-May 2015, compared to about 221,674 visitors in 1991, representing a 10-fold increase in 22 years (Wat Pho Management Office, 2015). This rate of growth is consistent with the general growth of international tourism in Thailand (Vanhalewyk, 2016).

Phramaha Udom Bhunyapo (personal communication, September 23, 2013) indicated that the political coup in 2014, SARS epidemic, and threats of terrorism had caused a decline in visitation. Its position in the old royal city of Rattanakosin Island, adjacent to other major attractions including the Royal Palace, further enhances its role as an urban tourism site. The

temple complex's position in a dense, heterogeneous historical area clearly marks it out as a potentially valuable urban heritage tourism site (Pearce, 2001; Shackley, 2001). Wat Pho is also a classical religious tourism site, as it is both a historic site of worship and a living religious community. The tourism statistics for the site, as well as interviews with the monks, indicate that the site draws a combination of spiritually led tourists (hoping to worship at the shrine or attend festivals) and intellectually motivated tourists who do not have explicit religious motivations(Shackley, 2001).

Stakeholder perceptions of Wat Pho's heritage value

Using Mason and Avrami's (2002) summary of types of heritage value, it is clear that Wat Pho should be considered a high-value site. Wat Pho's historic value is clear from its original position as a royal temple, as well as its increasingly public and civic role as a site of worship and learning (Ho & Chinnapong, 2013). Aesthetic value is drawn from the architecture and artworks of the site, which represent an unrivalled collection of Thai Buddhist temple architecture and imagery Wat Pho's historic value is clear from its original position as a royal temple, as well as its increasingly open (Ho & Chinnapong, 2013).

The site's sociocultural value relates to its religious and community role, as it hosts major and minor festivals throughout the year, including festivals on Maghapuja Day, Visakhapuja Day, Asalhapuja Day, Songkhran, and Takbarttavo, as well as the Royal Barge Procession (Rayal Kathin).

The site also acts as a storehouse of traditional knowledge, with material objects such as the Stone Inscriptions and Contorted Hermit statues (representing postures said to have health benefits) and the Thai Traditional Medicine School presenting historic and traditional Thai knowledge. These aspects of traditional knowledge, as well as the buildings themselves (laid out according to traditional principles of Thai Buddhist cosmology) represent scientific value.

Finally, economic value accrues to the surrounding area due to the number of visitors who are drawn to the site, supporting both the site and the shops, markets and eateries outside its walls.

Stakeholders in this research had different views of the importance of these roles. The monks considered the site primarily a religious site, with its cultural value as an active site of worship dominating the other values of the site. However, they also acknowledged other types of value. For example, Phramaha Udom stated that Wat Pho has had a scientific and educational role since the time of King Rama III, when the Stone Inscriptions served as the first

public university of Thailand. This educational role continues with the Wat Phra Chetuphon School (the site's primary school), Dhamma and Pali Studies School, Buddhist Sunday School, and the Traditional Medical School, representing substantial scientific value. In contrast, visitors were most likely to value the site's historic value (68% of local visitors and 51% of foreign visitors), the Reclining Buddha image (72% of local visitors, 85% of foreign visitors), and learning about the site (85% of local visitors, 23% of foreign visitors). This points to a potential conflict in the use of the site, which can be problematic when setting priorities (Kang, 2009; Wang & Pfister, 2008; Wong, McIntosh, & Ryan, 2016).

Advantages and disadvantages of tourism for Wat Pho

Stakeholders identified several advantages of tourism for Wat Pho, including that it provides economic benefits (jobs and income for locals) and encourages preservation and learning about the historic and religious nature of the site (Table 1). The monks agreed that tourists could be an advantage for the site, particularly for increasing understanding, stating for example that

"It can indirectly help disseminate Thai customs and culture to tourists via religious tourism" (Phramaha Udom Bhunyapo (personal communication, 2013).

However, there were also several problems. One problem was succinctly summarized by Phra Suthithummanuwat (personal communication, 2013):

"Some foreign tourists seem to have inadequate understanding of Thai traditions and cultures, and as result they behave inappropriately."

This issue was a possible cause of damage to the site. For example,"Some tourists have the tendency to touch Buddha images and mural paintings, unaware that it is against local culture and tradition aside from the potential damage that it would cause on the images. However, we were able to solve this problem by putting warning signs and fence barriers around the images." (Phramaha Nopparat Apichawo, personal communication, September 12, 2013)

Other problems identified included security, parking problems, overcrowding, litter and pollution. These concerns were also echoed by the other stakeholder groups, who noted overcrowding, traffic congestion, noise, litter and pollution as serious negative impacts. These problems are consistent with the advantages and disadvantages of day-to-day management of urban heritage sites. A far deeper problem with the site's long-term management was identified by the monks, though not by visitors. This problem is a lack of long-term planning for sustainability for the site.

Benefits and drawbacks of tourism	Tourists (n=400)		Shopkeepers (n=100)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Benefits				
Preservation of historic site and heritage buildings	244	61.1	55	55
Increase income for local people	201	50.3	61	61
Create jobs for local people	196	48.9	69	69
Generate income for preservation	160	40.1	45	45
Improve infrastructure development	132	33.0	38	38
Increase awareness and concern for the environment	127	31.8	30	30
Disseminates Thai culture	0	0	6	6
Drawbacks				
Overcrowding and traffic congestion	187	47.2	46	46
Litter and air pollution	153	38.4	40	40
Long-term damage to cultural traditions	109	27.3	16	16
Increased noise and pollution from cars	108	27	27	27
Negative changes to area's physical integrity	73	18.2	16	16
Loss and damage to historic sites	70	17.6	7	7
Increased crime rate	60	15.1	19	19
No response	22	5.4	0	0
Unsafe environment	1	0.3	0	0
Foreigners paying higher prices than locals	1	0.3	0	0

Table 1 Benefits and drawbacks of tourism for Wat Pho according to tourists (n = 400) and　shopkeepers (n = 100)

Developing Long-term Sustainable Tourism at Wat Pho

Achieving long-term sustainability for the site is one of the biggest problems identified by the monks, although tourists and shopkeepers did not have much insight in this area. For example, Phra Suthithummanuwat (personal communication, 2013) stated, "*We only have a yearly short-term plan. There is no long-term model scheme in place to improve and manage tourism. Such plan should also aim to make Wat Pho a better international destination. We need to hire professionals to assist in organization, public relations and website management.*"

This represents the biggest problem with the site's long-term sustainability. It is also a common problem for historic and memorial sites in Thailand, due to a lack of resources, including human resources, for conservation and development (Sindhuphak, 2014). However, monks do have insight into how this situation could be improved. For example:

"*Monks can learn and even enhance their understanding of traditional architecture by coordinating with the lecturers of the Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University. A good understanding of architecture will provide a basis for developing good tourist interpretation materials. Wat Pho can also arrange English training programs for some foreign tourists.*" (Phramaha Nopparat Apichawo, personal communication, September 12, 2013)

Thus, while there is a lack of long-term planning on the site, this is an issue that is recognized by the monks tasked with managing the site and one that they have thought about how to rectify it.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Wat Pho is a vibrant urban tourism site that offers a high level of heritage value, particularly sociocultural (religious), aesthetic and historic value. The site provides insight into not just Buddhist art and temple architecture in Thailand, but also the civic history of Thailand. Its connections to the Thai royal family and its long history as a site of royal and public worship from its origin in the Rattanakosin Period have created a unique site full of architectural and historic interest even for non-Buddhists. For Buddhists, the site offers the additional value of being a living religious community, with services, festivals and observances marking the religious calendar throughout the year. The Thai Traditional Medicine School, with its preservation and development of Thai traditional medical techniques, also offers scientific value. Wat Pho's designation as a UNESCO Memory of the World site, in recognition of its Stone Inscriptions and role as an early site of public learning, confirm the site's global heritage value. However, the site does have some problems, of which the most pressing is the lack of long-term planning for sustainable tourism. Immediate problems, including overcrowding,

contribution to pollution, parking, and damage and degradation of architecture and objects, can be managed through implementation of site programs. For example, the site could introduce a timed ticketing system and planned routes through the site, introduce recycling and compost bins, and create a system for site monitoring and inspection to identify and manage object damage (Leask & Fyall, 2006; Wong, McIntosh, & Ryan, 2016; Yoshimura *et al.*, 2014). However, the problem of long-term planning for sustainable tourism, particularly in the face of such rapid tourism development and growth, should be the site's priority. The current site management should consider working with heritage management professionals with appropriate cultural knowledge and skills, in order to implement a long-term management plan that prepares the site for tourism without degrading its character or utility for religious worship. This research has contributed to the literature on cultural heritage tourism and management in Thailand by providing a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder case study of a single site. It has demonstrated the difficulties faced by heritage sites in Thailand, which may have a lack of human resources and heritage knowledge leading to difficulty in long-term planning. It also demonstrated that cultural heritage sites are a major benefit to Thailand, both in terms of its tourist economy and in terms of its long-term preservation of and knowledge about its cultural heritage and history. Thus, Wat Pho and other sites should be preserved because they are critical in understanding the history and culture of Thailand, with the recognition that they are living sites worthy of protection and care.

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