

# HERITAGE INTERPRETATION: ANALYSIS STUDY OF LABOR HERITAGE IN THE CASE OF THAI LABOR MUSEUM, BANGKOK, THAILAND

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*Thai Labor Museum in Bangkok is the first and the only museum in Thailand that brings many aspects and issues about Thai laborers to public awareness. The heritage narrated in this museum regards the significance of Thai history and contemporary events that involve Thai laborers in the political and social dimensions. The museum represents historical realm of Thai labor and recognizes labor identities through their hard time of works and life. The purpose of this study was identified with the following research questions: (1) how is the situation of the interpretation of heritage in the case of Thai Labor Museum?; and (2) what could be alternative interpretation approach for labor heritage? Based on the qualitative approach, the study used SWOT analysis framework as the method, carried out with the existing interpretation of the museum. Primary, secondary and tertiary interpretations were suggested. Also, critical issues and problems for interpretation at the site were addressed. Additionally, the study marks tourism route potential, connecting the museum with the historic railway factory heritage at Makkasan Workshop. Future development would create a new public and tourism precinct set amongst the backdrop of the industrial heritage of Thailand.*

**Keywords:** heritage, interpretation, labor heritage, Thai Labor Museum

## Introduction

Thai Labor Museum is located on Nikhom Rotfai Road, Makkasan, Ratchathewi. The museum is a single- story, red building that was firstly the railway police station, and later became the office of the State Railway of Thailand Labor Union. It became the museum on October 17, 1993 with the cooperation and discussions of many groups of people from public and private sectors, scholars in the field of labor studies, historians and archivists, with a support of a German political foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation (FES).

**Figure 1**  
The location of Thai Labor Museum along the railway



Outside the museum is a monument titled ‘Dignity of Labor’, which shows a man and a woman pushing the huge wheel of history. The museum exhibits a historical background of Thai laborers in 7 rooms: (1) Room 1 is about slave labors during the Phrai-Corvee system (Sakdina or Feudal System) which is the foundation of ancient Thai society; (2) Room 2 tells us about Chinese coolies, the locally sourced unskilled labors; (3) Labors and the reforms of Thailand in the reign of King Rama V as the major transitional period in Thai history; (4) Room 4 depicts the life of Thai laborers before and after the revolution in 1932; (5) Room 5 narrates how Thai laborers during the World War II and Cold War; (6) Room 6 is about the October 14 uprising to the economic crisis and life of Thai workers during the pro-democracy period, and more emphasis on women and child labor, truck drivers and boxers; and (7) Room 7 is called the cultural room, dedicated to the story of a labor artist, Jit Phumisak who was one of the most significant thinker and intellectual of Thailand.

Between rooms no. 1-5 is a tunnel that symbolizes a transition of Thai laborers from the past to the more contemporary time. The reason for selecting this museum for the study is the fact that it is the only museum about Thai laborers in Thailand.

**Figure 2**  
**The museum building**



## **Literature And Theory**

Heritage interpretation was first defined in 1957 by Freeman Tilden in his book *Interpreting our Heritage*, as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information”. After Tilden’s book was published, the term ‘heritage interpretation’ has been defined in different ways, but his key principles are still widely adopted [1].

Heritage interpretation associates with sharing memories and experiences by connecting between people and place. Interpretation must be based on sound information and thematically organized, and utilizes communication techniques that connect between interpreter, audience and the heritage resource. An interesting aspect of interpretation for contemporary heritage is that it should promote exploration of knowledge and ideas, and encourage reflection and debate [2]. Interpretation also refers to presentation of uniqueness of places or objects to public understanding, which can be for pleasure and enjoyment or for education. Effects of interpretation require good media [3].

Mainly, there are 2 methods of presentation. The first is guided interpretation experiences such as walks, talks, demonstrations and observations, performance such as re-enactments, role playing, plays, poetry readings, dance and music, any other activity programs, and special events. The second is self-guided programs. Many museums and heritage sites apply this method and visitors prefer this method. The method includes publications, exhibitions, information panels and site specific interpretation boards, signage, graphic illustrations such as artworks, photographs, maps, and other visual material, computer interactive and video games. This method highly stimulates visitors' interaction with the heritage place and objects.

A perspective of heritage interpretation is that its main aim is not instruction, but provocation. To communicate significant ideas about a place or a phenomenon to public audiences, heritage interpretation can be designed in a systematic way or in non-formal educational way, in order to establish both cognitive and emotional links between audiences or visitors and the heritage [4]. It is especially if heritage, sites, objects or phenomenon being interpreted may not be attractive or have some sensitive cases or those representing hostile concepts; emotional effect of interpretation is significant. In the case of Thai Labor Museum, narratives of labors in historical, social, cultural, political and even industrial dimensions are being told, whereas objects in the museum are only the primary means to the core ideas.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this study was identified with the following research questions: (1) how is the situation of the interpretation of heritage in the case of Thai Labor Museum?; and (2) what could be alternative interpretation approach for labor heritage? Based on the qualitative approach, the study used SWOT analysis framework as the method, carried out with the existing interpretation of the museum.

## **Results**

### ***Heritage Background of the Site***

The physical building itself is significant as it was formerly the office of railway police station with a prison, which can still be seen today. Later this place had been used as the office of Labor Union of State Railway of Thailand for many years. This museum narrates the plights of Thai laborers in different periods of time, in which Thailand had been through. The heritage of this museum regards the significance of Thai history and contemporary events that involve Thai laborers in the political and social dimensions with the support of a German political foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation (FES) whose value towards labors touches upon the socio-political aspect.

The museum is also the first and the only museum in Thailand that brings many aspects and issues about Thai laborers that have been almost ignored in the society, to the public awareness. Interpretation is a part of how we manage and understand our heritage. For the case of Thai Labor Museum, labors seem to be viewed as a human (labor) heritage, who are ordinary people working in constructions of national infrastructures. The sense of the museum reflects that it is not only an understanding from the society that Thai laborers hope for, but as well, there is a voice made for equal rights from the society and public (i.e. the

government) and the private (i.e. their employers) sectors to take more care of them, particularly in terms of social welfares and physical safety and security at work.

### ***The Existing Interpretation***

Arriving at the museum appears outstandingly in front of the monument a statue casted in plaster with the title ‘The Monument of Labor Dignity’. The monument was built with a strong will to express the dignity of Thai laborers and to give honor to them. It is portrayed by a man and a woman who represent the labor group helping each other pushing a heavy wheel, under which is a military tank, to move forward.

The wheel that is being pushed forward and is crushing on the military tank is a symbolic act telling that Thai history has been driven forward by groups of Thai laborers, while also sending the message of anti- dictatorship through the military tank as the symbol. This backdrop conveys the theme of the museum interpretation, rendering an image of government and manufacturing businesses as a protagonist to the living hood of Thai laborers or workers.

A little further on its left hand side stood a tourist attraction sign provided by the authority. It tells us that this attraction is a ‘museum’ type of attraction. However, this is not quite rational when it appears a picture of earthenware.

**Figure 3**  
**Museum tourist attraction sign**



What should be noted about this place is its location that is not fostered in the tourism enclave, not like those other museums in the Bangkok old quarter. The museum locates in the very place that creates a marginal feeling around the Makkasan area suppressed by the view of toll road above the building and decayed urban environment that surrounds. It is an irony of the fact that the museum’s location and the story inside do a real match in a sense. This feeling continues when stepping inside the museum.

The physical location and building emphasizes the linear narratives of the story in the museum. At the first entry the museum creates a ghostly feeling due to its dark and dim atmosphere. Stepping through an old glass sliding door leads to the first small area inside that may be considered as a foyer. There is a small notebook on the reception counter for visitors to write or give expression, feedbacks and comments towards the museum. This is good as visitors can express their feelings right after the visit, as well as being beneficial to the management of visitor in receiving immediate descriptive responses from visitors. As the author observed, many people expressed their positive and cheerful feelings towards the museum, and sympathy to Thai workers. An orientation to the museum is very simple: a staff

in casual look comes out to welcome and gives visitors a brochure. Because of the small space, there is no visitor facility, in which it is understandable. It is sort of office as well but very small.

**Figure 4**  
At the entrance to the museum



Each of the six rooms in the museum depicts the evolution of the labor movement and their fight to obtain fair treatment. The continuity of the interpretive content in each room is quite strong, arranged in accordance with the main events of the country including the reforms in the reign of King Rama V, the Siamese Revolution in 1932, the October 14 uprising, and the World War II and Cold War. Designing the exhibitions in different rooms is good in that it is clear about the smaller themes and helps visitors structure the walk and where to stop. In each six exhibition room, there are many old documents such as news, contract papers, governmental announcements, and old artifacts displayed; these build up feelings of both incongruity and sorrows in the hardship and poverty of Thai laborers.

A combination of these six rooms gives a sense of sequence of the historical content about Thai laborers. Each room has a clear portrayal of its socio- cultural context of Thai laborers from the past to present. Nevertheless, another dimension of the interpretation, the visual environment seems less effective. If visitors expect to receive the knowledge about Thai laborers, this museum plays this role very well. Contrarily, the displays of objects are quite in confusion and distraction. For example, in the first room, the room that exhibits the life of slaves during the Phrai- Corvee system: there are some artifacts of earthenware, a model of Chedi and a collection of the agricultural equipment. If the staff did not tell visitors why these objects were displayed here, visitors might not understand a linkage. This collection of equipment was used by slaves.

**Figure 5**  
Boards narrating slave labors during the Phrai- Corvee system (Sakdina/ Feudalism)



Everything has center: the universe, the world, countries, cities, people, and even objects and pieces of text. The idea of a center is important and vital, as center provides a



focus [5]. With centers come margin that provides limits, edges, borders and boundaries. Once entering the first exhibit room, the idea of center does not exist. The position that seems to be the center of the display appears two traveling cases that block the eyes from seeing as the first impression the core theme of the room. In contrast, the room no. 4 which depicts the life of Thai laborers before and after the revolution in 1932, applies very well the idea of center, with the help of a glass exhibition box in the middle of the room displaying old documents, surrounded by posters narrating many transitional events that affected Thai laborers before and after the revolution in 1932.

An interesting thing that should have been exhibited in a more outstanding manner is an iron knot or an emblem which was cast as the memorial of the Siamese Revolution of 1932 or the Siamese coup d'état of 1932, the turning point of Thai politics. Today the real one is embedded at the Equestrian Statue of King Rama V the Great. In regards to use of technology, actually there are audio- visual kiosks installed in order to demonstrate working of laborers but they are not working.

The museum thus lacks of visual meaning making in its interpretation. What appears pleasant that gives a certain level of visual experience is a collection of small 3D icons exhibited to demonstrate workers at work in each period.

The largest section is the section on the right hand side of the museum once entering the museum, which may be considered as the section that creates a tertiary experience of the museum's interpretation to visitors. This large part is dedicated to the more contemporary issues of Thai workers, for instance issues about child and women workers, events and activities related to Thai workers, workers' social welfares, including the unforgettable tragedies occurred to clothing factories because of the poor working conditions or nonconformity to basic safety regulations.

**Figure 6**  
**The audio- visual kiosks**



**Figure 7**  
**3D icons demonstrating workers at work**



Even though the display of this section does not give any much information, display of the burned stuff such as dolls produced in the factory in a glass box contributes effective interpretation on emotion. This can be a good marker that gives a symbolic meaning, and let visitors look at the burned dolls and think beyond what appears in front of them to other similar events in our society. Above the box shows some words that tell us the number of workers who died in the fire event, other factory fire accidents and some other pictures of the losses. There is a truck model exhibited there to convey about the perspectives and life of truck drivers, which is very Thai. Contrarily, the story of boxers as workers was well explained, even though not in an impressive presentation.

**Figure 8**  
**The loss from the Kader Factory fire**



**Figure 9**  
**The story of boxers as workers**



The most impressive sections of this museum include room no.7 which is called the cultural room, dedicating to the story of a labor artist, Jit Phumisak who was one of the most significant thinker and intellectual of Thailand, the transitional tunnel, and a corner in the room about World War II and Cold War. The room of the labor artists plays its role in the interpretation as a more relaxing space, in the aesthetic side about Thai laborers. Folksongs have always been a voice of marginalized society, including groups of workers.

**Figure 10**  
**The Cultural room dedicated to the story of a Labor artist, Jit Phumisak**



**Figure 11**  
**Transitional tunnel**



The songs reflect the marginalized people's lives of Thailand especially after 1930's or the period that marks by the political change from monarchy to constitutional monarchy of the country. Most of the songs emphasize on equal rights of groups of people, normally farmers, factory workers and laborers who have been facing with social exclusion. This is impressive that the life of workers, seen being marginalized, still has a personal space for aesthetics. Physically, the room is small, and has its intrinsic value as the former prison cell. The evidence is the iron door that was formerly a part of the prison. The transitional tunnel creates a sense of changes and transition, enhancing our emotional linkage and flow that goes with changes of many aspects about life, work and roles of Thai workers in the more present time. The tunnel leads visitors to the largest room where the stories also cover how Thai workers have taken actions and social roles in an attempt to push their lives better, for example the roles of women workers, establishment of related organizations and associations, and laws. However, the content is not quite up- to- date.

A corner in the room about World War II and Cold War displays a collection of magazines from the old days during the transition of the Siam during and after the war. What is interesting based on the author's perception is that those magazine covers that show the coverage about communism and American Life... displayed in a cage. This creates a contradictory feeling towards 'American Life' (freedom?) and the cage. Also, this corner gives a sense of anti- communism represented by these magazines and posters with a question of 'communism or freedom'. The *American Life* magazines seem to be signifier of the satire of the modernization, the capitalism and the American Dreams, that have changed many facades of Thailand since then. What locates next to the cage is an exhibit of hair salon, representing new way of life of Thai people that changed to something close to materialism (working in a hair salon rather than in rice field, for instance). Hair salon becomes a metaphor of materialism that places more value on physical beauty. The feeling towards the room is like being in a cinema that shows a documentary film.

The significance of this museum regards the story of laborers in the historical timeline of Thailand that the museum tries to convey to its audiences. Not all objects are the old artifacts like some other museums that display old/ ancient artifacts. This makes it harder for the museum management group to design an interpretation as it is all based on situations and events not being there (even though there are some old documents displayed) but what is being conveyed within the museum can rather happen anywhere in our society. This means that the museum needs a creative process of making its representation about laborers in



Thailand. The significance of the message is rather social and contemporary; a social significance that needs the society to value it at large. Moreover, the museum may not be strongly viewed as a tourist attraction, but rather a center for those who would like to open their perspective to the world of laborers in Thailand. It is not the place to entertain, but rather to cultivate some feelings and senses as well as an understanding towards a group of people in society who somehow have been treated as marginalized people. The interpretation of Thai Labor Museum may form a mental representation about Thai laborers. Visitors could feel that the social group of Thai laborers was an imagery of hardship, unsafe work, and unfair treatment.

### **SWOT Analysis of the Existing Interpretation**

#### ***Strengths***

- The museum is the only one museum and learning center about Thai laborers in Thailand.
- There are old papers and documents that tell us about events and situations in the history of Thai laborers.
- The museum has both the content that gives knowledge and that provokes feelings.
- The location is accessible.
- It has very good website optimization (<http://thaiLabormuseum.org/>) which makes it have strong presence in main search engine (i.e. Google.co.th- with the keywords 'labor museums in Thailand', 'labor museums in Asia', 'labor museums', for example).
- The museum uses social media website, Facebook.com as one of its communication channel (<https://www.facebook.com/thaiLabormuseum>).
- The museum has public lectures, traveling exhibitions and outdoor activities, making the interpretation reaching more audiences.
- The museum management and staffs who work for the museum have a strong will and mutual vision in helping promote the well- being and equal rights of Thai workers.
- There are communities who are groups of people with a common interest getting involved in its interpretive activities.

#### ***Weaknesses***

- The place is very small and has a limited space (a single- story building).
- Even though it is located in Bangkok downtown, it still lacks of a downtown presence. The museum building is very discreet or unnoticeable.
- It is located in an abandoned environment of Bangkok.
- Its location does not encourage a pleasure walk and walkability yet.
- The interpretation deals with too many objects and too much information in the small space.
- The museum is still limited in technology used in its interpretation.
- Its location is not in a tourist cluster, making it being difficult to make a visit.

#### ***Opportunities***

- The theme of the museum is contemporary and always in the perception of society through news.

- The museum will be re- established as part of a bigger museum to be managed by State Railway of Thailand (informed by a museum staff).
- The government has concerned about well- being of Thai laborers.
- Advancement of information technology can be supporting in terms of marketing and public relations/ publicity.
- There are international organizations that support the museum, represent the voice for, and place their concerns on contemporary labor issues.
- There are interested groups or parties that can involve as partners with the museum (in the form of foundation).
- There are educational institutes that see museum as a learning center for their students.
- General people in different social or institutional groups start to be interested in learning other cultures, not only cultures of different nationalities and races but also of different social groups. This can promote social caring and sharing across wider groups of people for the rights of Thai workers. This can support indirectly the museum's interpretation and communication.
- There is a trend of urban tourism that will give room for city museums to grow.
- Urban regeneration trend that will provoke public awareness and interest in making urban decays more vibrant through different social and cultural activities.
- Railway factory heritage at Makkasan Workshop (near the museum) with future development would create a new public and tourism precinct set amongst the backdrop of the industrial heritage of Thailand.

### ***Threats***

- It is vulnerable to a demolition of the building due to land use need, even though the museum building has social and political significance.
- The museum does not belong to any communities around there. So there is no involvement of local communities in the neighborhood.
- There still is an image of urban decay around the area where the museum is located.
- In general, there still is limited recognition about marketing effort in terms of tourism.

### **Discussion**

#### ***Suggestions of Interpretation***

##### **(a) Primary interpretation**

- The space in front of the entrance could be used more effectively as the museum foyer that introduces and invites visitors to appreciate firstly about the museum and the big picture of the whole thing there.
- Visual display is significant. Letters should be sized in way that facilitates visitors to read. They may use map with interesting facts and figures, so visitors can catch the most important information during their (normally) short visit. Moreover, objects or story of significance should be placed on outstanding level and position.
- Some objects should be removed to allow more spaces.
- Guided walk tour may not be easily designed due to its narrow spaces, both in rooms and the trail. Because of this limitation, self- walk or self- guided walk is what they can design for visitors. What it still lacks of to make an effective self- guided walk is about some

artifacts that have not information at all, whereas the displays cannot convey well why they are exhibited there or how they are significant. Thus significant objects need information.

-Some parts of the content need regular updates that incorporate more contemporary issues.

**(b) Secondary interpretation**

-A suggestion based on the idea of center could be the following: in each room there must be a central icon at the center of the room, as this draws visitors' attention to go to and look at the central spot, and so that they can make their meaning visually at a glance. However, the central icon should convey the theme of the room as well.

-There is a plenty of information on the Internet about Thai laborers from the history and the contemporary events. Interested visitors can actually search and retrieve from this source, and do not have to visit the museum. Thus, the museum should put more effort in techniques of display of objects and atmosphere such as lighting and installations that affects visual and spiritual experiences. There is already a lot of content. What it needs in how to provoke deeper feelings of visitors towards situations Thai workers have been facing.

-There must be a connection of interpretation from the pre- entry until the end of visit. The sculpture in front of the museum that expresses significance of Thai laborers as the national workforces should be repeated throughout the interpretation.

**(c) Tertiary interpretation**

-The last room should dedicate more spaces for the section about the King's Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy and alternative living of Thai workers. Currently there is only a huge model that was designed to demonstrate local living through a house in vernacular style and some agricultural equipment below, yet it cannot convey this message unless the staff gives the information. The museum needs to re- interpret about the King's Philosophy and makes this idea more outstanding, with a linkage with the reason why this philosophy becomes significant to Thai workers in the time of modernity. The interpretation of this section can be made more enjoyable and meaningful. The museum can design an interpretation by narrating with use of symbols how the King's Philosophy can promote workers' more quality of living. This will also benefit students' learning about the King's Philosophy.

-Moreover, as the main audiences of the museum are schools and universities, displays should not be designed with too much of depressing atmosphere. Some rooms may be designed with a more friendly and learning environment.

-The museum may not really promoting an individual enjoyment during their visit due to its dim and dark atmosphere. Even though the whole theme of the museum is about the hard life of laborers, the museum can also design an interpretation in a more positive point of view, for example a pleasant or happiness aspects of Thai workers' life. This can play a role of entertaining visitors despite the fact that the museum's interpretation has a serious story to tell.

-Tourism and leisure connection can be addressed. Tourism becomes a useful and contemporary tool to fuel the locals to interpret their heritage or their culture to those who do not belong to. Moreover, urban tourism has actually been growing in this postmodern world. Museum is a result of the 'Heritage Effect' when groups of people seek for their identities and would like to express through their quest of significance. This time would be the most appropriate time for the museum to incorporate tourism in its interpretation plan. Despite a

limited space, the museum should find space for visitors' participation and engagement in creative arts and cultural activities that relate to living of Thai workers. The museum can apply the creative side of the society such as arts and music tourism that involves groups of volunteer workers, run traveling exhibitions with interesting, relevant themes or link with other museums as part of its future tourism promotion. Moreover, the environment outside should be improved to promote urban friendliness and walkability.

-Most of all rooms in the museum narrate the past. This can stimulate nostalgia among visitors. The thing is how to draw visitors back to the past in a combination of suffers, joys and changes of personal perception and attitude about laborers/ workers. This does not mean that the museum needs to change the whole theme about Thai laborers (the plights and fight for equal rights). Little by little there must be some moments to be created that allow visitors to appreciate old- aged culture of laborers in the past. Actually there is a room in the museum that seems to represent this (Room of Jit Phumisak). Nevertheless, the room only displays the music instruments that Jit Phumisak used for playing songs about Thai laborers, some folksongs and some others. The interpretation of this room should be designed by incorporating folk cultural activities, or at least opening of folk songs and music once visitors enter the room, rather than just a static display.

-A living exhibit could be one of interesting ideas to suggest. Living exhibit can be defined as the organization of a structured exhibit in a defined area, which usually places an importance of living heritage [6]. Thus, as the museum has the heritage as human (considered as human asset of the society), living exhibit should be appropriate for the museum of this kind, in which human beings becomes central to the concept of heritage.

-Contemporary stories, especially positive stories about living of Thai laborers should be much more focused. It would be more positive to portray how Thai laborers can be currently supported and empowered, as well as their present contribution to the society in various dimensions. There can be some questions left for visitors to think back after their visit in this regards.

-Visitors' feedbacks can be useful in the interpretation. The museum may arrange a monthly exhibition board of feedbacks and photos at the foyer hall. In return, the museum may have a small souvenir (with the museum logo) for visitors for their testimonies.

## **Conclusion And Future Work**

There are some critical issues and problems for interpretation at the site. The first concerns a limitation of the museum's space and location. This may limit its competency in improving its interpretation and spatial design. Yet, sometimes, there should be way to maximize the existing space for better interpretation that can give more insight and meaning to visitors. Minimum use of objects can also contribute to greater effect to visitor experiences. The museum building itself has a value as the old police station and prison cell that had been through the critical transition of Thailand, and therefore, this significance should have been documented and narrated.

An opportunity associating with heritage and urban tourism is that the museum lies along the railway landscape connected with the historic factory at Makkasan Workshop which has currently been in focus in terms of urban and industrial heritage revival development. This study therefore marks historic and industrial heritage tourism theme route

potential. Future development would create a new public and tourism precinct set amongst the backdrop of the industrial heritage of Thailand. Further studies can be carried out.

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