

DETERIORATION OF HERITAGE SHOPHOUSES TURNED INTO HOSTELS IN PHUKET OLD TOWN, THAILAND, DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, the hostel industry was popular in Thailand especially in Phuket due to the growth of tourism. The heritage shophouses in Phuket Old Town were turned into hostels to serve backpackers and other tourists fascinated with local culture. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 caused an economic crisis in the tourism industry, causing the industry in Phuket to become sluggish. This paper aims to find the factors in the shutdown of some Phuket shophouse hostels during the pandemic, resulting in the deterioration of the heritage buildings and the deserted old town. The research method is to survey the number of operating and closed heritage shophouse hostel operations in Phuket Old Town. The social and economic issues were analysed by using in-depth interviews of selected hostel owners, relevant people, and secondary data. The study found that restrictions on tourism imposed by the relevant authorities causes a shortage of budget to run the business and renovate the properties. The closed shophouse hostels cannot get the government support because they had not registered for a hotel license. To get a hotel license, the hostels must renovate the buildings according to the relevant Ministerial Regulations. However, the regulations did not consider the existing elements and structures of heritage buildings; they affect the values and authenticity of the buildings and the Old Town, prompting the deterioration of these places. As a result, to preserve architectural and historic values of Phuket shophouses and to keep the building in use, a new approach of adaptive reuse in hostels should be provided following the relevant regulations for the safety and comfort of the building users, and the local activities.

Keywords: conservation, adaptive reuse, hostel, Phuket, old town, shophouse, COVID-19.

1 INTRODUCTION

The shophouses in historic districts have been widely conserved by adaptive reuse methods to maintain the buildings and be a part of urban sustainability [1]. This approach also helps recreate the atmosphere of historical times for visitors, allowing them to appreciate the cultural significance [2]. It can also help to revitalize the local districts [3]. Phuket had been one of the provinces in Thailand that had attracted many foreign tourists, resulting in growing numbers of rooms in beach hotels [4] and the renovation of old buildings into hostels, especially in Phuket Old Town. However, after the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, the government decided to shut down the borders, so foreign tourists could not travel to Thailand. This led to a temporary or even permanent closure of several hostels including those in Phuket Old Town. When the buildings are not used, they deteriorated and so did the districts around them.

This paper, thus, would like to study the factors in the hostel closures in Phuket Old Town during the pandemic, in order to find ways of adapting the usage of the buildings and ensuring that they are kept in good condition. The study area is the shophouse hostels in the cultural environment conservation zone or the Old Town conservation area of Phuket City Municipality according to the Ministerial Regulation of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment on the Designation of the Protected Areas and the Measures to Conserve the Environment of the Areas in Phuket B.E. 2553 (2010) (MRMNREDPAMCAEP) [5] as shown in Fig. 1.



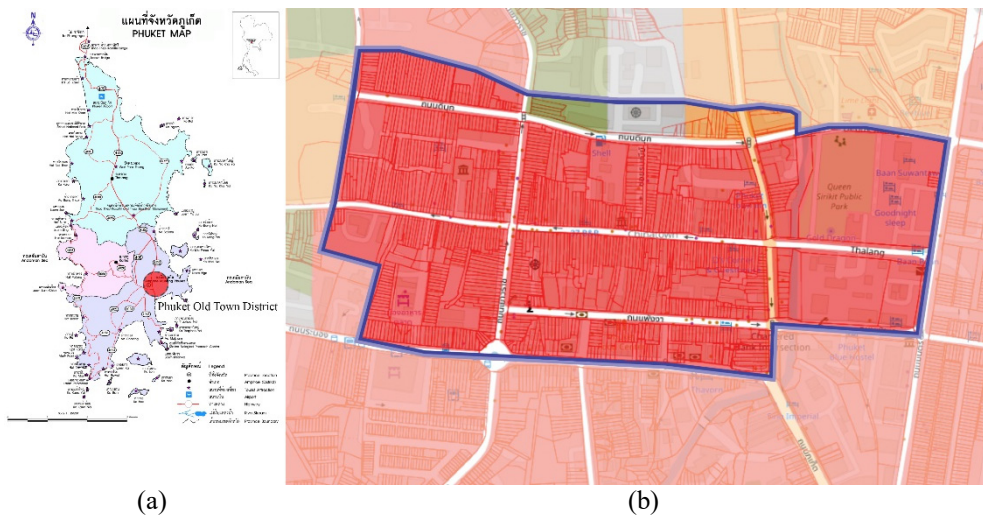


Figure 1: (a) Map of Phuket; (b) The Cultural Environment Conservation or the Old Town Conservation area of Phuket City Municipality according to MRMNREDPAMCAEP. (Source: (a) Phuket Provincial Office; and (b) Information Technology Bureau, Department of Lands, 2021, developed by Author.)

2 BACKGROUND

Since the early 19th century, Phuket was one of the renowned cities for Chinese mining and ports in the Malay Peninsula. Chinese people who had immigrated to Phuket were trading tin mining products with Penang in Malaysia [6] which was a colony of England [7]. This led to the diffusion of Peranakan culture (Malay-Chinese, a.k.a. Straits Chinese) with its prominent traditions, cuisine, outfits, and architecture [8] (Fig. 2). The culture emerged when Southeast Chinese men immigrated to the Malay Peninsula and married local Malay women [9]. In terms of architecture, the diffusion involved shophouses which combined Chinese and Western characteristics, also known as “Sino-Colonial style” or “Straits Eclectic style” [7]. The structure and the layout of buildings were influenced by domestic life of Southeast Chinese [10]. Specifically, the interior layout, there is an area called Chim Chae which is a courtyard with a well to store rainwater for daily use (Fig. 3). According to the Chinese maxim, Fengshui, rainwater represents wealth and prosperity [11]. Moreover, this courtyard was designed to allow natural light and good ventilation [12]. So Chim Chae was a significant part of the heritage shophouse’s design. The climate-responsive design demonstrates the wisdom of the Chinese while the stucco decorations on the front façades are a combination of Chinese auspicious symbols [7] and western arts. However, in 1981, the tin trade became sluggish because its price in the global markets declined and the amount of tin from mining also decreased [13]. As a result, the government introduced a policy to support the tourism industry instead of the mining industry, turning beach areas into the new economic centres [14]. Many hotels were constructed, and people moved from downtown to the beach areas for employment while some shophouses in the Old Town were turned into new businesses to serve tourists [15].



Figure 2: The characteristic of shophouses in Penang and Phuket. (a) Penang, Malaysia; and (b) Phuket Old Town, Thailand.



Figure 3: Courtyards in shophouses in Phuket Old Town. (a) Dou Brew Coffee and Craft, Phuket, Thailand; and (b) 99 Oldtown Boutique Guesthouse, Phuket, Thailand.

This is how Phuket becomes one of the popular provinces in Thailand among foreigners. According to the tourism statistics data of Southern Thailand, Phuket ranked first for being visited by the tourists. In 2019, Phuket welcomed 14,545,187 tourist arrivals. This number increased by 2.83% from 2018. Among them, 10,636,315 were international arrivals which accounted for 73.13% of the total tourists [16]. Thanks to the rapidly thriving economy and tourism in Phuket, the accommodations there have grown dramatically. The record of department of Business Development in 2019 reveals that Phuket ranked first in Southern Thailand in terms of hotel business. At national scale, it was second only to Bangkok [17].

Moreover, the statistics data shows that in 2018 there were 16,579,971 foreigner guests which accounted for 90.3% of the total guests in Phuket [18].

Nevertheless, in 2010, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment formulated the guideline to conserve and develop Phuket Old Town by designating the cultural environment conservation zone or old buildings area in MRMNREDPAMCAEP. Later in 2017, there was a designation of Phuket Old Town in Mueng District in Phuket, extending the original old town zone in order to control the development around the Old Town [19]. This created the trend towards conserving old buildings with adaptive reuse method which could achieve by transforming old shophouses in the Old Town into hostels. A hostel is an accommodation similar to a dormitory with 2–30 beds. The guests need to share the room with other guests and use the facilities – such as bathrooms, toilets, kitchens, and party zones – in a public space [20]. Hostels are cheaper than beach hotels as well as providing old town atmosphere and located in the centre of Phuket Island which means it is convenient for the guests to travel to other areas of the province. That is why they are popular among backpackers and solo travellers, especially those from Europe. A survey with some solo travellers staying in hostels in Mueng District, Phuket [21] found that in April–May 2017 there were 219 European guests out of 400 guests which accounted for 54.75% of the total guests choosing to stay in hostels. Unsurprisingly, Phuket is a province that generates substantial income for Thailand, and the main source of income is the tourism industry. The huge number of hotels and hostels were constructed to respond to the increasing foreign tourists visiting the province.

3 REGULATIONS CONCERNING THE BUILDINGS RENOVATED INTO HOSTELS IN PHUKET OLD TOWN

In the hotel or hostel business, the owners must apply for a hotel license. According to Section 4 of the Hotel Act B.E. 2547 (2004), “hotel” means an accommodation established for business purposes in order to provide a temporary accommodation service for travellers or any other person in exchange for compensation [22]. The act does not define hotels, resorts, hostels, or bed and breakfast separately [20]. Despite that, the structure of an accommodation must comply with the Building Control Act B.E. 2522 (1979) [23] and the Ministerial Regulations on the Categories and Criteria for Hotel Business B.E. 2551 (2008) (MRCCHB) [24].

An accommodation and its facilities are legally bound to be stable and durable as well as having a standardized safety system for staff and guests. However, Section 1, Chapter 1 of the MRCCHB stated that an accommodation will not be considered a hotel as in the definition in Section 4 if the accommodation provides only four rooms or less in total – whether in the same building or separate buildings – and has no more than 20 guests. This remains valid even though its purpose is to provide a temporary accommodation service for travellers or any other person in exchange for compensation. As a result, hostels with less than four rooms and 20 guests are not eligible to apply for a hotel licence.

Due to the trends to renovate other types of buildings into accommodations despite the non-compliance with the regulations mentioned above, the Ministry of Interior implemented the Ministerial Regulations on the Features of Other Building Used for Hotel Business B.E. 2559 (2016), B.E.2561 (No.2) (2018), B.E. 2564 (No.3) (2021) (MRFOBUHB) [25] enabling the old buildings that had been turned into accommodation to be renovated according to the regulations. In this way, the building owners can ask for permission to use the buildings for a hotel business, as long as they fit in with the local surroundings. These structures are typically two- to three-storey shophouses. The regulations relax some of the requirements for renovating and converting other types of buildings into hotels without jeopardizing their safety [26].



According to the Notification of the Rattanakosin and Old Town Conservation and Development Committee on the announcement of the boundary of Phuket Old Town B.E. 2560 (2017) [27], owners of the properties or businesses occupying the properties in Phuket Old Town who want to renovate them into hotels or hostels must purpose a building plan to the Phuket Old Town Conservation and Development Subcommittee's support team for consideration and suggestions. They can submit the plan through the Provincial Office of Natural Resources and Environment in Phuket and attach the feedback with other documents when they ask the Phuket City Municipality Office for a permission to construct or renovate the buildings. Furthermore, the MRMNREDPAMCAEP stated that the cultural environment conservation zone or the Old Town conservation area of Phuket is the area no.4(1) which means that the height of the buildings in this area must not exceed 12 m or three- to four-storesys.

4 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THAILAND

Since early 2020, the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has rapidly and widely spread across the world, resulting in the Emergency decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations, B.E. 2548 (2005) on 25 March 2020 demanding the closure of every immigration checkpoint in Thailand. At the same time, the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand [28] also implemented the Notification on Conditions for International Flight Permit to Thailand (No.3), temporarily prohibiting the entrance of aircraft into Thailand from 3 April 2020 to 30 April 2020; the term was then extended to 30 June 2020. Later on, 1 July 2020, the government allowed visitors who were not visiting for the sake of tourism, such as businessmen, persons seeking medical treatment, and film production crews, to enter the country.

There were, however, still only a few international visitors. Hence, on 15 September 2020, the cabinet permitted tourists to enter Thailand starting from October 2020 on the condition that they must have agreed to the long stay policy. Tourists with a high purchasing power from nations with a low risk of COVID-19 cases [29]. For the qualified tourists, they needed to be in quarantine for 14 days [30].

In mid-2020, Tourism Authority of Thailand, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Department of Health service Support, and Ministry of Public Health developed a project called Amazing Thailand Safety and Health Administration (SHA). The Project urged the businesses in the tourism industry to prepare and conform their properties to be in line with the New Normal. One of the businesses that could participate in this project was the hotel business, as long as they had applied for a hotel license.

Between late-2020 to mid-2021, the COVID-19 situation in Thailand and Phuket specifically was uncertain, so foreign tourist arrivals were restricted. According to the summary of the Phuket situation [31], no foreign tourists visited Thailand, worsening Phuket's economic and trading situation, which solely relied on the tourism industry and related business sectors. Hotel business was also affected, especially hostels which mainly depended on Europeans [21].

For the visitor situation in January–September 2020, the change rate of foreign visitors in Phuket between 2019 (P) and 2020 (P) was -73.09% . Then on 1 July 2021, the government decided to open Phuket Sandbox to welcome tourists who had received a full course of vaccines that had been prequalified by the Food and Drug Administration of Thailand or the WHO. These tourists did not need to be in quarantine, but they had to stay in Phuket for at least 14 days. During this time, they were required to stay in hotels that passed the standard of Amazing Thailand Safety and Health Administration Plus (SHA Plus) and only travel in permitted vehicles. After 14 days, if they were not infected with COVID-19, they were

allowed to travel to other provinces in Thailand. One of the requirements for the hotels to pass the SHA Plus standard was to pass the SHA standard first.

The requirement meant that some hostels in Phuket Old Town without a hotel license were not qualified for the SHA and SHA Plus standard, and thus could not participate in the Phuket Sandbox project. These hotels could only serve domestic tourists. In July 2020, the government covered 40% of hotel bills, up to a maximum of 3,000 Bath per room per day. However, to participate in the project, hotels and hostels must have applied for a hotel license, which meant that hostels without licenses were unable to participate. Furthermore, one of the measures to restrict the transmission of viruses transmitted through respiratory droplets and direct touch, such as COVID-19, was social distancing, which prohibited large gatherings and required people to stand or sit 1.5–2 m apart [32].

This measure changed how people used buildings, particularly holiday accommodations like hostels with 2–30 beds in a shared room and guests who tended to congregate in one place. Some hotels had shared bedrooms with more than two beds per room. This did not comply with the social-distancing policy. The hostel business in Phuket Old Town was one of the businesses affected by the current situation and economic change. Some hostels were forced to shut down and some needed to close temporary. They were left to deteriorate, causing Phuket Old Town to become quieter than before the pandemic.

5 METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the factors that caused the temporary and permanent shutdown of the hostels in Phuket Old Town or the period without guests during COVID-19, leaving the buildings deserted and deteriorated as well as causing Phuket to become quieter. The researcher collected data with the process as followed.

- Conduct a survey in the Phuket Old Town conservation area according to the MRMNREDPAMCAEP in order to see the number of shophouses turning into hostels and collect physical data of the hostel buildings.
- Study information about the SHA Plus registration to see the number of hostels that were still operating.
- Interview willing people involved in the hostel business and Phuket Old Town including the hostel owners who rented the shophouses, the hostel owners who owned the shophouses, and the president of a committee for the Phuket Old Town community to determine the factors in the temporary or permanent shutdown of the hostels and prepare for the secondary data.
- Collect the secondary data from the interview and use it to analyse the factors in the temporary or permanent shutdown of the hostels, such as the regulations on old building renovation as well as the policies and measures of the government sectors.

6 RESULTS

The statistical data from the local development plan B.E. 2561-2565 (2018–2022) of Phuket City Municipality [33], And the survey in Phuket Old Town reveals that there were 28 hostel buildings located within the Phuket Old Town conservation area according to MRMNREDPAMCAEP. Of all these hostels, nine were still operating and participated in the SHA Plus project. These hostels have hotel licenses. The interviews with the hostels reveal that most hostels with the owners as the landlords have hotel licenses while some hostels in the rented buildings do not have licenses.

According to interviews with relevant people and the secondary data, the factors in the crisis of hostels are as follows.



6.1 Social factors

The structure and the interior layout in some shophouses renovated into hostels in Phuket Old Town are not in line with the regulations, preventing them from applying for a hotel license as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The details of the structure and the layout of facilities that are not in line with the regulations.

Regulations	The details of the structure and the layout of facilities that are not in line with the regulations.
Ministerial Regulations on the Categories and Criteria for Hotel Business B.E. 2551 (2008) (MRCCHB)	• Some hostels have no more than four rooms and no more than 20 guests in total. • A number of hostels have less than 8 m² of usable space, omitting bathrooms, toilets, and balconies.
Ministry of Interior implemented the Ministerial Regulations on the Features of Other Building Used for Hotel Business B.E. 2559 (2016), B.E.2561 (No.2) (2018), B.E. 2564 (No.3) (2021) (MRFOBUHB)	• The empty spaces of the buildings account for less than 10% of each floor. • The width of the hall in the buildings which are one- to two-storeys is less than 1 m. • The width of the hall in the buildings which are more than two storeys is less than 1 m
Ministerial Regulations No. 55 B.E. 2543, Chapter 2, Section 20	• The narrowest-side width of the bedrooms in some hostels is less than 2.5 m.

Table 1 shows the limitations on the renovation of the structure and shophouse uses preventing the registration of a hotel license. The shophouses in Phuket are about 4 to 6 m wide which limit the layout of the rooms, the halls, the bathrooms, and the staircases. This why the layout could not comply with the regulations. Even if it could, the bedrooms would be too small for guests, making them feel uncomfortable.

Moreover, although the regulations do not specify the number and the characteristics of the bathrooms and the toilets, these facilities should be hygienic and sufficient in number. Before the renovations, most shophouses had only one bathroom per level. Changing the layout to comply with regulations will have an impact on the building's renovation as well as the operation of the mechanical and electrical systems.

The restrictions imposed by the regulations make it difficult to renovate the shophouse structure in accordance with the regulations while conserving the value and authenticity of the architectural features. This is a significant financial investment, particularly in terms of the structure. According to the interviews with the relevant people, some building owners and businesses occupying the properties have a limited budget and thus are unable to renovate their buildings appropriately. This means that they cannot apply for a hotel license. For the hostels that have a license, they reutilised the Chim Chae space by building a roof over it as they no longer needed to collect rainwater. As a result, it ruined the signature architecture associated with Phuket shophouses.

6.2 Social factors

Owing to COVID-19, foreign tourists could not visit Phuket. And despite Phuket Sandbox boosting the tourism there, the tourists had to accept a huge amount of costs such as COVID-19 examination costs before and after flights, unusually high flight tickets, hotel charges for at least 14 days, and COVID-19 insurances. Due to COVID-19, many foreign tourists could not visit Phuket and despite the fact that the Phuket Sandbox scheme increased tourism, travellers were forced to bear a large number of extra costs, including COVID-19 examination costs before and after flights, unusually expensive flight tickets, accommodation charges for at least 14 days, and COVID-19 insurance.

Therefore, backpackers and solo travellers which were the main target of the hostels could not afford these additional costs, resulting in a lack of income from these groups. Moreover, if the hostel owners rented the buildings, they would suffer additional costs despite their low income, whereas the hostel owners who owned the buildings had a better chance of survival as they did not need to pay rent. The latter group could just lay off their employees or reduce their salary. Hostels without a hotel license could not participate in the “Phuket Sandbox” or “We Travel Together” projects, and consequently had few, if any guests. As a result, they had to shut the businesses down temporarily or permanently.

In March 2020, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports [34] offered a low-interest loan for tourism businesses to help rescue and recover the industry from the pandemic crisis on the condition that the hotels and hostels must have a hotel license. The hostels without the license were unable to get the help they desperately needed from this measure either. The interviews with the head of the Old Town districts reveal that, during the shutdown of the country, some hostels without the license wanted to apply for one so that they could participate in the rescue and recovery projects offered by the government. However, as they had not had sufficient income during that period nor received any funds from the government, they had insufficient budget to renovate the buildings according to MRFOBUHB.

7 CONCLUSION

The study found that the hostels in Phuket Old Town were forced to shut down because backpackers and solo travellers could not visit Thailand leading to a shortage of their main income. In addition, if the hostel owners needed to pay the rent during this difficult period, they were likely to close the hostels temporarily. If the hostels did not have a hotel license, they could not participate in any remedy projects offered by the government, causing them to be shut down temporarily until their main target could visit the country again or in some cases permanently. During these times, the heritage buildings were left to deteriorate because they were not occupied.

Consequently, the researcher proposes that the hostels that are no longer in operation are utilized as follows in order to keep the buildings operational and in good condition.

- Conduct the assessment of the building conditions qualifies to be renovated according to the regulations so that the hostel owners or businesses occupying the properties without a hotel license will understand their statuses and how to renovate the hostels properly.
- Develop a guideline on how to renovate the shophouses in Phuket Old Town into hostels according to the MRFOBUHB while still maintain the value and authenticity of the shophouse architecture.



- If the hostel buildings cannot be renovated due to either the conditions of structure or a limited budget of the hostel owners, a new use should be proposed for the heritage building adhering to Phuket Old Town activities and policies.
- The Phuket City Municipality Organisation should develop a local regulation which provides the safety and the convenience for the building users while conserving the shophouses in Phuket Old Town because the structure and architectures of the buildings are unique. The local regulation should be discussed among every stakeholder including the government, the hostel owners, the building owners, and the local community.
- To motivate the relevant people, the government should decrease taxes for the building or hostel owners who adjust the utilization of the old buildings without ruining the value of the architecture and their contexts. This method can also encourage the conservation of the heritage buildings and the old town so that they will last longer.

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