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Cultural heritage, contemporary art, and sustainable social development in restaurant spaces: A comparative study of Kunming and Bangkok

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Abstract: Cultural heritage is increasingly incorporated into commercial environments as a means of strengthening local identity and encouraging public engagement with cultural traditions. Restaurant spaces provide an important setting in which heritage can be interpreted through contemporary artistic practices while remaining closely connected to everyday urban life. This study comparatively examines how local cultural heritage is represented through contemporary art in selected restaurants in Kunming, China, and Bangkok, Thailand, and explores its contribution to spatial identity, cultural communication, and sustainable social development. A qualitative comparative case study involving ten restaurants was undertaken using field observations, visual documentation, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis, supported by visitor perception questionnaires as contextual evidence. The findings reveal that heritage resources are reinterpreted through architectural references, symbolic artifacts, decorative installations, and immersive spatial experiences. Restaurants in Kunming mainly emphasize ethnic diversity and historical narratives, whereas those in Bangkok draw more extensively upon Buddhist symbolism, community traditions, and everyday cultural practices. Although the artistic approaches differ, both contexts demonstrate how commercial environments can facilitate cultural communication and reinforce community identity. Based on these findings, the study proposes a comparative framework explaining the relationships among heritage resources, artistic interpretation, spatial identity, cultural sustainability, and sustainable social development. The proposed framework offers a useful perspective for understanding heritage-based artistic applications in contemporary restaurant environments and provides implications for future cultural design and heritage interpretation.

Keywords: cultural heritage, contemporary art, sustainable social development, cultural sustainability, spatial identity, cultural communication

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage now plays an increasingly visible role in shaping urban identity and distinguishing cities through their public and commercial environments. Heritage is no longer restricted to museums, monuments, historic sites, and other protected areas. Heritage is now a part of our daily lives, especially in urban settings, where we have opportunities to engage with local traditions through normal, everyday social experiences and transactions. The most obvious example of this new way of engaging with our heritage is through restaurants. Restaurants represent one of these everyday settings, combining local cultural resources with contemporary artistic expression to create spaces that communicate cultural meanings while responding to changing patterns of urban consumption. This development illustrates a broader shift in which heritage is interpreted not only as an object of preservation but also as a dynamic

resource supporting cultural continuity, community engagement, and sustainable social development.

Cultural communication, spatial identity, and heritage-based artistic environments may also contribute to sustainable social development by enhancing cultural continuity and community participation, as well as local identity and the transfer of cultural knowledge between generations. Consequently, understanding how cultural heritage is represented in contemporary restaurant spaces may provide insights into broader processes of cultural sustainability and socially sustainable urban development.

The application of culture within the physical spaces of a restaurant provides an excellent illustration of the growing emphasis on cultural experiences in the form of an experiential culture. An increasing number of restaurants are using architectural elements, decorative materials, artistic installations, and spatial stories from their respective cultures to develop unique cultural settings [1]. These types of practices (Traditional resources) create differentiation for commercial purposes and communicate cultural meanings and reinforce local identity through artistic and cultural expression practices of contemporary art contribute to this process by transforming traditional sources of culture into an accessible and meaningful representation of space in contemporary settings. Through the artistic transformation of heritage, cultural heritage will provide immersive experiences to visitors, while they will also experience the historical ties and communal memory of their region.

Although heritage-based commercial environments have attracted increasing academic attention, scholars continue to debate whether commercial adaptation strengthens or weakens the cultural significance of heritage. According to several studies, commercial spaces increase public access to cultural resources by integrating heritage into everyday life. One problem with the market-based interpretation is the tendency to simplify the ways in which our cultures are represented or to make them look more attractive than they appear in historical contexts. This ongoing discussion indicates that representations of heritage should be viewed as part or component of the design strategy used by a business; however, heritage should also be seen as a process of negotiating cultural authenticity, commercial intent, and community values.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to cultural heritage, place identity, and creative urban development, limited research has examined how contemporary art functions as a mechanism of mediating between local cultural heritage and spatial identity within restaurant environments. Existing studies frequently investigate heritage tourism, cultural branding, interior design, and creative industries as separate domains. Consequently, commercial dining spaces have been largely overlooked as cultural platforms communicating heritage values through artistic and spatial practices, and there is little comparative research on how these processes work in different cultural contexts. This is particularly true in Asian cities with unique heritage and fast-changing modern cultures.

In this research, worked at filling a research void through our comparative study of restaurant spaces found in either Kunming, Yunnan, China, and Bangkok, Thailand. The restaurant spaces situated in both cities contrast with each other in their cultural backgrounds but also complement each other. Kunming has a strong multicultural background shaped by the culture of many different ethnic groups [2], While Bangkok

demonstrates a strong Cultural Identity grounded in Buddhist symbols, traditional art, and cultural expressions of the people. This research provides an opportunity to identify standard trends and variances in the way culture is expressed and spatial identity is created based on how local cultural heritage is expressed through modern artistic initiatives in restaurants. The results of this study offer an additional perspective on how heritage-based practices create common areas and a way to compare how current artistic works support urban cultural environments.

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are as follows: (1) to identify local cultural heritage elements incorporated into restaurant spaces in Kunming and Bangkok; (2) to examine how these heritage elements are translated into contemporary artistic expressions; and (3) to develop a comparative framework for understanding the relationship between cultural heritage, contemporary art, spatial identity, and sustainable social development. This study contributes to cultural heritage research by demonstrating how commercial environments can function as meaningful sites of cultural communication and heritage interpretation in contemporary cities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural heritage and urban cultural spaces

Cultural heritage is increasingly recognized as a dynamic resource that contributes to urban identity, social cohesion, and cultural sustainability [3]. Contemporary heritage studies emphasize that cultural heritage extends beyond the preservation of historical artifacts and monuments to include everyday cultural practices, symbolic meanings, and collective memories that are embedded within urban environments [4]. As cities seek to strengthen their cultural distinctiveness in the context of globalization, heritage resources have become important components of urban cultural development and placemaking strategies [5].

Urban cultural spaces play a significant role in communicating heritage value to diverse audiences [6]. Rather than solely functioning as conservation sites, contemporary urban spaces increasingly facilitate interactions between heritage, culture, and everyday life [7–9]. Commercial environments, public spaces, and creative districts are now recognized as important platforms for producing, interpreting, and experiencing cultural meanings [10]. Consequently, the relationship between heritage and urban space has become an important area of inquiry in cultural studies and heritage research [11].

2.2. Contemporary art as a medium of cultural interpretation

Contemporary art provides an innovative approach for artists to find new ways to represent cultural heritage so that it resonates with audiences and is relevant in today's society. Rather than the method used for traditional heritage exhibitions, where preservation and authenticity are the primary concerns, the approach used for modern artwork is through participation, reconstruction, and experience. Through visual installations, spatial interventions, multimedia applications, and symbolic representations, contemporary art enables cultural narratives to be communicated beyond conventional heritage institutions to a broader audience.

Recent studies suggest that artistic interpretation enhances public engagement with cultural heritage by creating immersive and emotionally meaningful experiences [12]. Contemporary art, therefore, functions not only as an aesthetic practice but also as a communicative medium that connects historical traditions with contemporary cultural realities [13]. This perspective is particularly relevant in commercial and public environments, where heritage values must coexist with changing social expectations and consumer experiences.

2.3. Spatial identity and cultural communication

Spatial identity refers to the meanings, emotions, and cultural associations that individuals attach to specific places. It emerges through interactions between physical environments, cultural symbols, social practices, and collective memories. Previous research indicates that cultural heritage contributes significantly to the construction of spatial identity by providing symbolic references that connect individuals and communities to specific cultural contexts [14,15].

Cultural communication occurs through different types of spatial environments, such as architecture, art, symbols, and material culture, along with the interactions of people with each other. The integration of heritage elements into spatial design enables places to communicate cultural values, while strengthening their local identity. These processes are usually significant for urban environments because cultural distinctiveness is increasingly considered a tool for the sustainable development of culture.

2.4. Restaurant spaces as cultural platforms

Traditionally, restaurant spaces have been understood as commercial environments primarily associated with food consumption and hospitality services. However, contemporary research increasingly recognizes restaurants as cultural spaces that facilitate the expression and transmission of local identity [16]. Through interior design, architectural references, decorative objects, artistic installations, and culinary narratives, restaurants provide opportunities for visitors to engage with cultural heritage in their everyday settings [17].

In many cultures, restaurants serve as informal cultural centers where diners can simultaneously interact with their cultural heritage through multiple senses. In this capacity, they both preserve and reinterpret culture concerning the current socioeconomic context around them. While there is a growing understanding of this function, there has yet to be much study of how contemporary art affects the relationship between the cultural heritage of a community and the spatial identity of that community within the context of restaurants.

2.5. Research Gap and conceptual framework

The literature indicates an increasing scholarly interest in cultural heritage, contemporary art, spatial identity, and cultural communication [18]. However, these topics are frequently examined independently, resulting in a limited understanding of how heritage-based artistic practices operate within commercial cultural spaces [19]. Furthermore, comparative studies investigating these relationships across different

cultural contexts are relatively scarce [20].

Most of the research conducted so far has looked at heritage preservation, restaurants, and their design, place identity, cultural communication, and creative industries as three separate areas of study. Therefore, these areas have been studied separately. Thus, there has been very limited research on the interaction of these four aspects in a commercial setting where cultural heritage is interpreted through modern artistic creation. The existence of fragmented research in this area reveals the need for an integrated approach to analyze how artistic interpretation and spatial identity, heritage resources, and cultural communication contribute to sustainable social development.

To address this gap, this study develops a comparative framework that connects local cultural heritage, contemporary artistic expression, spatial identity formation, and cultural communication. By examining restaurant spaces in Kunming and Bangkok, the study explores how heritage elements are transformed into artistic and spatial experiences that contribute to cultural interpretation and identity construction within contemporary urban environments.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework developed for this study. The framework proposes that local cultural heritage resources are transformed into cultural communication and heritage outcomes through the mediation of contemporary artistic interpretation and spatial identity formation. The model further incorporates a continuous heritage reinterpretation mechanism, reflecting how cultural communication contributes to cultural sustainability, heritage preservation, and the reinterpretation of local cultural resources. The comparative dimension highlights the distinct heritage representation pathways observed in Kunming and Bangkok, illustrating the different approaches to cultural identity construction and heritage communication within restaurant environments.

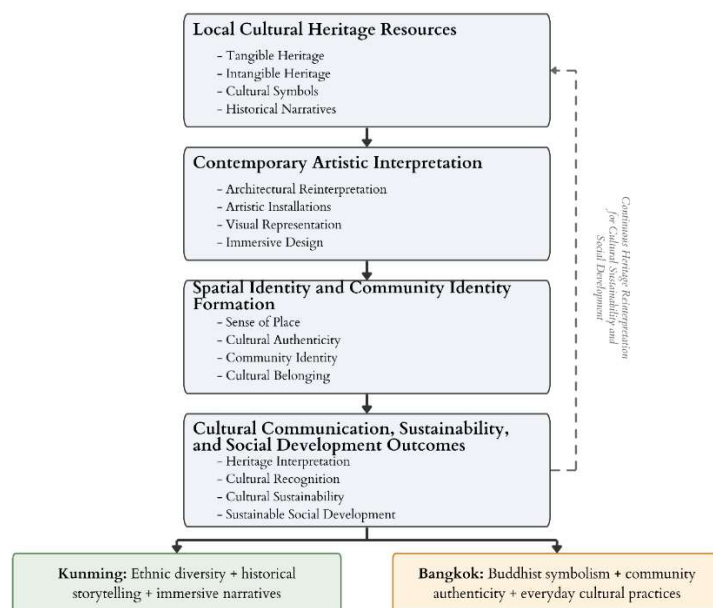


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the proposed heritage-based artistic creation model.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant comparative case study supported by a questionnaire-based visitor perception approach to investigate the representation of local cultural heritage through contemporary art in restaurant spaces. A comparative design was selected because it enables the examination of similarities and differences between distinct cultural contexts while facilitating the identification of broader patterns of cultural communication and spatial identity formation. The research focused on Kunming, China, and Bangkok, Thailand, two cities characterized by rich cultural heritage resources and active cultural consumption environments.

This study primarily employed qualitative methods supported by questionnaire-based visitor perceptions to provide contextual insights into cultural authenticity, spatial identity, and heritage interpretation. Qualitative data were used to explore cultural meanings, artistic interpretations, and spatial characteristics, and questionnaire responses provided supplementary contextual evidence regarding visitors' perceptions of cultural representation and spatial experience.

3.2. Case selection

Ten restaurants were purposively selected as case studies, comprising five restaurants in Kunming and five restaurants in Bangkok. The selection criteria were as follows: (1) explicit incorporation of local cultural heritage elements into spatial design; (2) visible application of artistic interventions or creative design practices; (3) relevance to local cultural identity; and (4) accessibility for field observation and documentation.

The selected restaurants represented various operational scales, target markets, and cultural themes. This diversity allowed the study to capture multiple approaches to heritage interpretation and artistic representation within restaurant environments while maintaining cross-cultural comparability between the two cities' restaurants.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the ten selected restaurants. These cases represent diverse forms of local cultural heritage, artistic interpretation, and spatial identity formation, providing a comparative basis for examining heritage-based restaurant design in Kunming and Bangkok.

Table 1. Profile of selected restaurant cases in Kunming and Bangkok.

Case	Restaurant	Location	Size	Heritage orientation	Spatial identity theme
K1	Jueyan Restaurant	Kunming	Large (220 m ²)	Oriental classical heritage and ethnic culture	Oriental immersive narrative
K2	Qicai Yunduo (Wild Ingredients Bistro)	Kunming	Medium (120 m ²)	Urban local culture and Yunnan lifestyle	Industrial-local fusion identity
K3	Yanhai Restaurant	Kunming	Large (200 m ²)	Rural courtyard heritage and farming culture	Pastoral healing narrative
K4	Little Horse Gang Restaurant	Kunming	Medium (180 m ²)	Tea Horse Road heritage and ethnic crafts	Jianghu cultural narrative
K5	Fengyeji Restaurant	Kunming	Medium (150 m ²)	National trend culture and rural lifestyle	Casual local social identity

Table 1. (*Continued*).

Case	Restaurant	Location	Size	Heritage orientation	Spatial identity theme
B1	Ai Ching Restaurant	Bangkok	Small (90 m ²)	Old-town street food culture	Community affordability identity
B2	Putti Mongkhon Restaurant	Bangkok	Medium (160 m ²)	Bamboo culture and waterfront village heritage	Rural naturalism identity
B3	Nine Cafe	Bangkok	Medium (130 m ²)	Buddhist Zen culture and tropical courtyard heritage	Zen relaxation identity
B4	Oakland Cafe x Restaurants	Bangkok	Medium (140 m ²)	Tropical residential heritage	Neighbourhood courtyard identity
B5	Kaomai Plamun Ampawa	Bangkok	Large (200 m ²)	Waterfront farming heritage	Farming immersion identity

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected using four complementary methods.

A total of 200 respondents participated in the questionnaire survey, including 100 participants from Kunming and 100 participants from Bangkok. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling among visitors who had previously experienced the selected restaurant environments. To improve contextual interpretation, demographic information including age group (18–25, 26–35, 36–45, and 46–65 years), residency status (local residents and tourists), and general visitation characteristics was collected. The questionnaire was employed as supplementary contextual evidence to support qualitative interpretation rather than statistical generalization.

3.3.1. Field observation

Systematic field observations were conducted at each restaurant to document its architectural characteristics, artistic elements, spatial organization, symbolic representations, and visitor interactions. Particular attention was given to how local cultural heritage is embedded within physical and visual environments.

3.3.2. Visual documentation

Photographs and visual records were collected to support the analysis of artistic installations, decorative elements, architectural references, and spatial narratives. These materials provide additional evidence for identifying heritage-related artistic expressions and cultural symbols.

3.3.3. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with restaurant owners, designers, cultural experts, and other relevant stakeholders. The interviews focused on cultural inspiration, artistic decision-making processes, heritage interpretation strategies, and perceptions of cultural identity in restaurant spaces.

The interview participants included restaurant owners, interior designers, local cultural practitioners, and heritage specialists who were directly involved in heritage interpretation or restaurant development. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and followed an interview guide covering heritage inspiration, artistic decision-making, spatial identity, visitor engagement, and perceived cultural significance. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was reached.

3.3.4. Visitor perception questionnaire

A short visitor perception questionnaire was employed as a supplementary source of contextual information to support the qualitative interpretation of the study, rather than statistical analysis or generalization. The questionnaire was designed to complement the findings derived from field observations, visual documentation, and semi-structured interviews by providing additional insights into visitors' perceptions of cultural authenticity, artistic representation, spatial identity, and overall cultural experience within heritage-based restaurant environments. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling based on their prior experience with selected restaurant cases in Kunming and Bangkok. The questionnaire responses provided contextual evidence that supports the findings for understanding how the representation of heritage and spatial identity is created in the different comparative cases. Hence, the questionnaire data were not used as a formal dataset because they provided only additional contextual information.

3.4. Data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts, field notes, and visual documentation were coded and categorized to identify recurring themes related to cultural heritage representation, artistic interpretation, spatial identity, and cultural communication.

The coding process consisted of three stages: First, open coding was conducted to identify recurring heritage-related themes from the field notes, interview transcripts, and visual documentation. Second, related codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting cultural heritage resources, artistic interpretation, spatial identity and cultural communication. Finally, thematic synthesis was performed to develop cross-case patterns and comparative interpretations across the selected restaurant cases.

To enhance analytical reliability, coding categories were repeatedly reviewed and refined through iterative comparison among field observations, interview transcripts, visual documentation, and visitor perception data. Differences in interpretation were discussed until conceptual consistency was achieved across the comparative cases.

The analysis was conducted in three stages: First, heritage elements were identified and classified as tangible or intangible cultural heritage. Second, artistic applications and spatial design strategies were examined to understand how cultural heritage was translated into contemporary artistic forms. Third, cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify the similarities and differences between Kunming and Bangkok.

Questionnaire responses provided additional contextual value in interpreting qualitative data rather than statistical inference. The integrated use of qualitative data and visitor perspectives allowed for an overall understanding of how heritage art practices were incorporated into restaurant spaces.

3.5. Research framework

Based on a literature review and empirical investigation, this study employed a conceptual framework linking five key dimensions: local cultural heritage, contemporary artistic expression, spatial identity, cultural communication, and

sustainable social development. The framework assumes that heritage elements influence spatial identity through artistic interpretation, while spatial identity contributes to the communication of cultural meanings in contemporary urban environments. The comparative analysis of Kunming and Bangkok provides an empirical basis for evaluating this framework and identifying context-specific variations in heritage representation.

4. Results

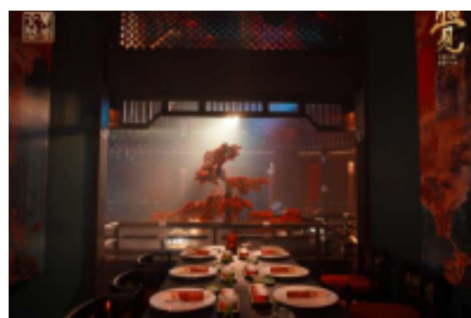
4.1. Cultural heritage elements in restaurant spaces

Based on the findings of the study, restaurants in both Kunming and Bangkok used local cultural heritage as a significant source for creating their spatial identity. However, the heritage resources and the manner in which they were represented in Kunming were significantly different from those in Bangkok.

In Kunming, cultural heritage representation was strongly associated with ethnic diversity, historical narratives, and regional traditions [21]. Heritage elements frequently included ethnic minority motifs, traditional architectural components, agricultural artifacts, Tea Horse Road culture, and symbols associated with local folklore [22]. Both tangible and intangible heritage resources have been integrated into restaurant environments to create immersive cultural experiences. Traditional architectural forms, indigenous materials, ethnic handicrafts, and historical references are commonly employed to establish a distinctive sense of place and cultural authenticity [23].

Jueyan Restaurant serves as an exceptional model of how heritage-based art can be integrated into a business setting and can be utilized for the enjoyment of a culinary experience in Kunming. The combination of traditional ethnic costumes, palace-style banquet halls, and immersive performances creates a highly engaging experience for guests dining at the Jueyan Restaurant. These items are not only decorative but also play a role in narrating the past through artistic expression and help strengthen patrons' connection to the local culture.

Figure 2 illustrates representative examples of heritage-based artistic representation in Jueyan Restaurant, demonstrating how ethnic symbolism, historical narratives, and immersive spatial storytelling are integrated into a contemporary restaurant environment.



(a)



(b)



Figure 2. Heritage-based artistic representation in Jueyan Restaurant, Kunming, illustrating the integration of ethnic cultural symbolism, historical narratives, and immersive spatial storytelling within a contemporary restaurant environment. **(a)** Traditional performance setting; **(b)** Immersive banquet environment; **(c)** Ethnic costume representation; **(d)** Cultural storytelling experience.

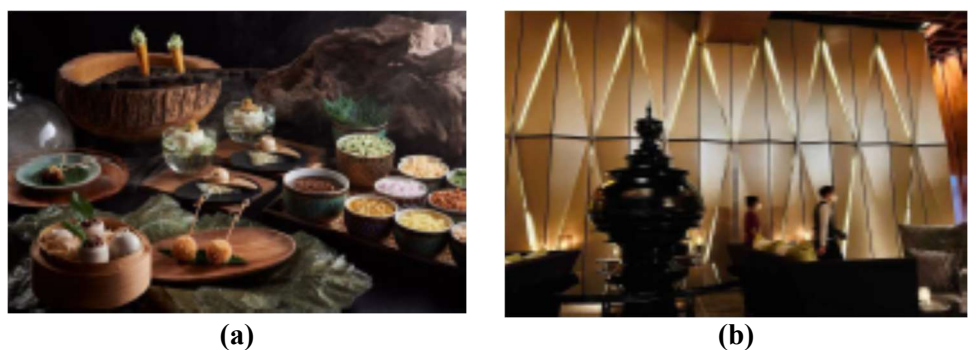
Source: Adapted from Liang Du (2025).

As illustrated in **Figure 2**, cultural heritage resources are transformed into immersive spatial experiences through the integration of architectural symbolism, costume-based visual representations, and performative cultural narratives. These elements contribute to the formation of a distinctive restaurant identity while simultaneously communicating local heritage values to visitors.

In contrast, restaurant spaces in Bangkok primarily drew upon Buddhist symbolism, vernacular urban culture, community-based traditions, and everyday cultural practices. Heritage elements often included lotus motifs, traditional Thai decorative patterns, Buddhist imagery, tropical residential aesthetics, and symbols associated with local neighborhood life. Rather than emphasizing historical reconstruction, Bangkok restaurants tended to present heritage through familiar cultural references embedded within contemporary urban experiences [24].

Figure 3 presents representative examples of heritage-based restaurant environments in Bangkok, illustrating how Buddhist symbolism, vernacular aesthetics, and community-oriented cultural identity are incorporated into contemporary restaurant design.

These findings suggest that cultural heritage functions as a significant resource for spatial differentiation and identity formation in both cities, although the heritage narratives emphasized by each location reflect different cultural priorities and historical contexts.



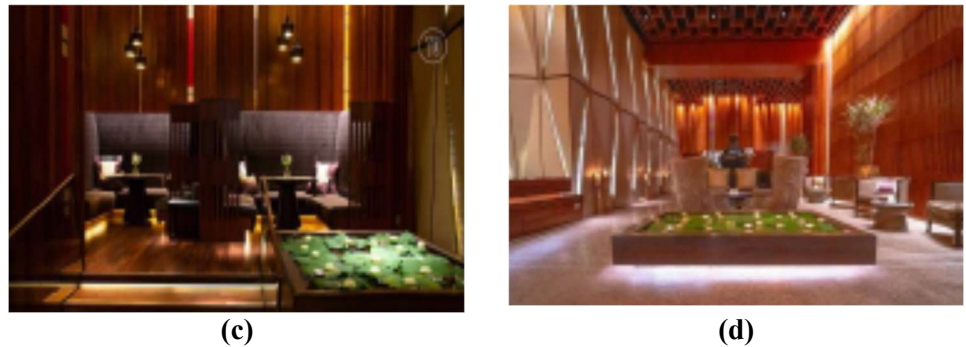


Figure 3. Contemporary interpretations of Thai cultural heritage in restaurant spaces in Bangkok demonstrate the integration of Buddhist symbolism, community-based authenticity, and vernacular cultural identity within contemporary dining environments. The selected restaurants were **(a)** Putti Mongkhon Restaurant, illustrating bamboo culture and waterfront village heritage; **(b)** Nine Cafe, reflecting Buddhist-inspired spatial aesthetics and tropical courtyard heritage; **(c)** Kaomai Plamun Ampawa, representing waterfront farming culture and immersive rural identity; and **(d)** Oakland Cafe x Restaurants, illustrating tropical residential heritage and neighborhood courtyard identity.

Source: Adapted from Liang Du (2025).

4.2. Contemporary artistic expressions and spatial narratives

Contemporary art played a central role in translating cultural heritage into spatial experiences. In the selected cases, artistic expression extended beyond decorative functions and contributed to the construction of cultural narratives within restaurant environments.

Four major forms of artistic application were identified:

1. Architectural interpretation;
2. Artistic installations and symbolic objects;
3. Visual and graphic representations; and
4. Immersive environmental design.

In Kunming, creative interventions are frequently dominated and driven by immersive storytelling, where heritage elements have been combined with large installations, theatrical lighting, historical reference points and symbolic spatial sequences. This combination allows visitors to engage with the storytelling of heritage by moving through and interacting within the space itself. Many of these spaces are similar to cultural exhibition spaces or experiential heritage spaces, rather than traditional restaurant concepts.

In Bangkok, artistic applications are normally subtly and more fully integrated into everyday spatial practices. Artistic expressions of this type are often presented through the design of the furniture, decorative elements, the selection of materials, and the incorporation of visual motifs with symbolic connections to the past. Unlike the creation of an immersive historical narratives, the integration of artistic expression serves to create both cultural familiarity and local identity, by providing subtle yet recognizable cues of culture.

The results demonstrate the use of modern art as a means of making cultural heritage accessible in commercial spaces. The artistic process creates an entirely new context in which traditional cultural resources can exist in a contemporary space and retain both their cultural meaning and their traditional symbolic values.

4.3. Comparative analysis of Kunming and Bangkok

The comparative analysis identified both the commonalities and differences between the two cultural contexts.

Both cities utilized restaurant spaces as platforms for communicating cultural heritage and strengthening spatial identity. In both cases, heritage resources were transformed into visual, material, and experiential forms that contributed to visitor engagement and to cultural recognition.

However, substantial differences emerged regarding the dominant approaches to heritage representation.

Kunming has basically used a narrative-oriented, immersive approach as its main strategy. The city has used dramatic spatial storytelling and historical reconstruction as a way of sharing their heritage, along with using art and symbols to represent the ethnic diversity of their community. Additionally, they use contemporary art as a way to provide cultural experiences that are focused on the audience's experience (experiential) and also have an impact on visual aesthetics.

Conversely, in Bangkok context, a community focused, community oriented and authenticity-based approach was and continues to be used. Heritage is expressed through culturally familiar experiences, such as representations of traditional daily life, religion, as well as local practice and tradition. As a general rule, most of the way that modern artistic interventions are embedded into community life would be seen as more authentic/real than theatrical representations of heritage [25].

These contrasting approaches reflect the broader cultural differences in how heritage is interpreted, experienced, and communicated within urban commercial environments.

Table 2 summarizes the principal similarities and differences between Kunming and Bangkok regarding heritage resources, artistic expression, spatial identity, communication strategies, and sustainability approaches identified through the comparative analysis.

Table 2 shows that the two cities use their historical and cultural heritage as the basis for designing restaurants and establishing brand identities. The cultural systems, art forms, design principles, and communication methods used by the two cities differ significantly. Kunming uses a diverse, integrative, mixed approach to heritage presentation, while Bangkok uses authentic, refined, themed approach to presenting its culture. The restaurant industry in each city reflects wider differences in cultural ecology and heritage adaption.

Table 2. Comparative characteristics of heritage-based restaurant design in Kunming and Bangkok.

Dimension	Kunming	Bangkok
Cultural Foundation	Multi-ethnic integration	Buddhist, agrarian, and waterfront cultural traditions [26,27].
Heritage Element Extraction	Broad and diverse extraction of multiple cultural sources [28]	Focused extraction of one or two core cultural themes. Derived from field observations and interview findings.
Dominant Heritage Themes	Tea Horse Road culture, ethnic heritage, rural life, local food culture [29]	Buddhist Zen culture, tropical courtyard culture, waterfront, and farming culture [30,31]
Artistic Expression	Eclectic, vibrant, and experimental [32]	Refined, minimalist, and culturally focused
Design Language	Combination of traditional, industrial, ethnic, and contemporary elements [33]	Simplified traditional forms with strong local authenticity, Derived from comparative field observations.
Material Selection	Rammed earth, bamboo, raw wood, stone, and recycled materials.	Bamboo, rattan, teak wood, terracotta, tropical vegetation
Creative Approach	Collaborative process between designers and restaurant owners.	Designer-led and concept-driven cultural interpretation
Spatial Atmosphere	Dynamic, lively, socially interactive, and culturally diverse.	Calm, relaxed, community-oriented, and nature-integrated
Brand Identity Strategy	Heritage storytelling and immersive cultural narratives.	Cultural authenticity and everyday local experience [34]
Communication Pattern	Emotional resonance and organic social-media sharing.	Design-driven communication and visual branding.
Cultural Orientation	Cultural diversity and hybrid identity [35,36]	Cultural purity and focused identity [37]
Sustainability Logic	Adaptive reuse of local heritage resources through cultural fusion [38,39]	Preservation of cultural authenticity through selective reinterpretation [40]

Note: The comparative characteristics presented in this table were derived from field observations, visual documentation, interview findings, and relevant literature.

4.4. Emerging patterns of cultural communication and spatial identity

The findings revealed four recurring patterns that characterized heritage-based restaurant spaces across both cities.

4.4.1. Heritage translation

Local cultural heritage is transformed into contemporary spatial experiences through artistic interpretation, rather than direct replication. Heritage elements are selectively adapted to suit contemporary audiences and commercial environments.

4.4.2. Symbolic communication

Cultural meanings are communicated through visual symbols, materials, architectural references and artistic interventions. These symbolic systems allow visitors to recognize and interpret cultural narratives in spatial environments.

4.4.3. Spatial identity formation

The integration of cultural heritage contributes to the development of distinctive spatial identities that differentiate restaurant environments from generic, commercial spaces. Spatial identity emerges through the interaction between cultural symbolism, artistic expression, and visitor experience.

4.4.4. Cultural experience production

Restaurant areas are indeed cultural assets that help visitors learn about local traditions and culture through multiple senses. Visual art enhances the sensory

experience by connecting the cultural heritage of the past with the urban experience of the present day.

Collectively, these models demonstrate that restaurants operate as important sites of Cultural Communication, Heritage Expression, and Identity Construction in modern cities.

5. Discussion

5.1. Contemporary art as a mechanism of heritage interpretation

The findings demonstrate that contemporary art functions as an important mechanism for interpreting and communicating cultural heritage within commercial environments. Rather than reproducing heritage elements in their original forms, restaurant spaces selectively reinterpret cultural resources through artistic practices that are compatible with contemporary social and aesthetic contexts. This process supports recent perspectives in heritage studies that view cultural heritage as a dynamic and continuously evolving phenomenon rather than a static collection of historical artifacts [41].

The results show that artistic interpretation not only increases access to cultural heritage by turning traditional images (and symbols), stories (and practice) into an experience that can be understood and enjoyed by people today, but also provides a means of achieving that through space. Contemporary art accomplishes this by using architectural references or art installations; symbolic representations or immersive design techniques; thus making it easier for people to learn about culture in an experiential way. Thus, in addition to being commercial spaces, restaurants function as informal cultural spaces, transmitting as well as redefining the heritage values.

5.2. Cultural communication and spatial identity formation

This study confirms that cultural heritage contributes significantly to the formation of spatial identity. Across both cities, heritage elements were strategically incorporated into restaurant environments to establish distinctive cultural atmospheres and reinforce local identities. The findings support previous research suggesting that spatial identity emerges through interactions between the physical environment, symbolic meanings, and cultural practices [42].

In addition to its findings on the design of physical elements, this research shows that the definition of spatial identity is fundamentally ongoing through the continuing processes of culture communication. The way restaurant spaces appear (visual symbols), present art (artwork), are decorated (materials), and present themselves to visitors through stories (narrative experience) all contribute to how diners understand that culture. One way to describe spatial identity is that it represents the interaction of heritage, artistic representation, and visitor participation in producing results of communication.

Therefore, the findings extend existing discussions on place identity by emphasizing the mediating role of contemporary art in transforming cultural heritage into meaningful spatial experiences.

5.3. Heritage-based commercial spaces and urban cultural sustainability

An important implication of this study concerns the role of commercial environments in supporting urban cultural sustainability. Traditionally, heritage preservation has been associated with museums, monuments, and conservation institutions. However, the findings suggest that commercial spaces can also contribute to the preservation and communication of cultural heritage when heritage resources are thoughtfully integrated into spatial designs and artistic practices.

Restaurant spaces provide opportunities for repeated and accessible encounters with local cultures in everyday urban life. Such environments enable cultural heritage to remain visible, relevant, and socially meaningful beyond formal heritage institutions. This perspective aligns with contemporary cultural sustainability approaches that emphasize adaptive reuse, cultural participation, and community engagement.

Although heritage-based restaurants provide cultural continuity, visible culture and community identity, they can also have unintended impacts through the commercialization of heritage. Culture commodification, selective representation, and the possibility that the community may have an absence in decision-making are some of the concerns raised by critical heritage scholars. At its highest level, “heritage-based” urban development can also produce culture gentrification, where commercial interests supersede participation by authentic culture and genuine diversity. Therefore, sustainable social development is not solely the conservation or promotion of heritage symbols, but also involves creating inclusive culture spaces that support community engagement, local representation and equitable access to culture benefits. The majority of the restaurants reviewed in this study in both Kunming and Bangkok serve primarily as cultural communication platforms. Yet, sustaining these businesses in the long term depends on sharing both reliable and continuous relationships between the commercial presentation of the culture and the participation of the local community in this presentation.

The findings also suggest that heritage-based restaurant environments involve ongoing negotiations between cultural authenticity and commercial adaptation. While contemporary artistic interpretation enhances the visibility and accessibility of local cultural heritage, certain forms of representation may selectively emphasize symbolic or visually attractive elements to satisfy visitor expectations and market demand. In this context, heritage communication should not be understood solely as a process of cultural preservation, but also as a process of cultural reconstruction. Heritage elements are typically displayed in the simplest, stylized, or otherwise theatrical manner possible to provide visitors with the ultimate immersive experience. The examples in the discussion are particularly relevant because the types of commercial (tourist) restaurant establishments mentioned represent examples of both commercial and cultural objectives. Therefore, the designers and operators of commercial tourist-type restaurants face the challenge of maintaining a level of cultural integrity when utilizing heritage resources in relation to the modern-day social and economic context [43].

These facts are related to the larger debate surrounding the commodification of heritage. When cultural symbols are commodified, heritage becomes a commodity

consumed through commodification. The commodification of culture often increases public access to culture and creates economically viable products. However, this process can oversimplify cultural traditions, reducing the value of culture to its aesthetic quality rather than its historic value.

These findings suggest that heritage-based restaurant environments should not be evaluated solely according to their commercial success or aesthetic quality. Their long-term contribution to sustainable social development also depends on the extent to which local communities remain active participants in heritage interpretation, cultural decision-making, and the continued transmission of local knowledge. From this perspective, sustainable heritage practice requires an appropriate balance between economic viability, cultural authenticity, and community participation.

The results also indicate that heritage-themed restaurant environments contribute to the sustainable development of society by promoting cultural awareness, helping to create community identity, providing opportunities for cultural participation, and maintaining the visibility of the local culture's traditions in the daily urban environment. These restaurants provide social benefits other than commercial value. The results show that heritage can be a source of long-term sustainability.

5.4. A comparative framework for heritage representation

The comparative analysis revealed two distinct yet interconnected approaches to heritage representation.

Kunming cases primarily adopt an immersive narrative approach characterized by ethnic diversity, historical storytelling, and experiential cultural interpretation. Heritage communication is achieved through dramatic spatial sequences, symbolic installations, and visually intensive artistic environments.

Nevertheless, the immersive narrative strategies observed in several Kunming restaurants may also be interpreted through the concept of “staged authenticity” [44], in which cultural experiences are selectively curated and performed for visitors. From this perspective, heritage representation in commercial environments simultaneously functions as cultural communication and cultural performance. While such approaches enhance visitor engagement and brand differentiation, they may simplify complex cultural realities and transform heritage into consumable spectacles. Consequently, the sustainability of heritage-based commercial spaces depends on balancing experiential attractiveness with culturally responsible representation.

Unlike the above cases, the Bangkok cases utilized an Authenticity Approach based on everyday cultural food traditions, as well as Buddhist Symbolism and Community Identity. As a result, heritage was communicated using subtle cultural references through everyday settings and activities of everyday living.

Based on these findings, a comparative framework is proposed consisting of four interconnected dimensions: (1) cultural heritage resources, (2) contemporary artistic interpretation, (3) spatial identity formation, and (4) cultural communication outcomes. The framework suggests that heritage resources influence spatial identity through artistic mediation, while spatial identity subsequently contributes to the communication and interpretation of cultural meanings within urban environments.

The framework stretches the existing discussions of cultural heritage representation by highlighting the role of commercial spaces as active sites for cultural production, interpretation, and communication. The framework also provides a basis for future research on heritage-based spatial practices across various cultural contexts.

Although previous studies have examined cultural heritage preservation, restaurant design, place identity, and cultural communication as separate areas of inquiry, limited attention has been given to the integration of these dimensions within a unified analytical framework. This study addresses this gap by proposing a Heritage-Based Artistic Creation Model that links local cultural heritage resources, contemporary artistic interpretation, spatial identity formation, and cultural communication outcomes within a single conceptual structure. Unlike traditional heritage studies that concentrate primarily on conservation or representation, the suggested model emphasizes the active transformation of heritage into spatial experiences that can produce cultural appreciation, place attachment, and long-term cultural sustainability. The comparison of Kunming and Bangkok shows the differences in how culture has influenced the ways restaurants reflect heritage in today's world.

In contrast to previous research that focused largely on aspects of heritage preservation, restaurant design, or place identity considered separately, this study demonstrates that these aspects work simultaneously through a modern artistic interpretation of commercial space. The addition of the framework to the findings builds not only the concepts discussed above but also defines the reciprocal influences between heritage-based resources, artistic mediation, spatial identity, and sustainable social development. Another important finding suggests that heritage-based commercial settings serve as additional cultural places that can help preserve heritage through venues beyond traditional heritage-related institutions or museums.

The proposed model explicates the transformation of heritage resources into cultural communication products, unlike conventional design typologies that classify the spatial or decorative features of restaurants. As such, the contribution of this model does not lie in categorizing restaurant interiors but rather in providing clarity on the relational pathway between heritage resources, artistic interpretation, spatial identity formation, and cultural sustainability.

Table 3 presents the proposed Heritage-Based Artistic Creation Model developed from the comparative findings, illustrating the relationships among heritage resources, artistic interpretation, spatial identity formation, cultural communication, and sustainability outcomes.

Table 3 summarizes the proposed heritage-based artistic creation model developed from the comparative findings for Kunming and Bangkok. The model illustrates how local cultural heritage resources are transformed through contemporary artistic interpretation into spatial identity and cultural communication outcomes. The framework further emphasizes the role of cultural sustainability as a mechanism that supports the continuous reinterpretation and preservation of heritage within commercial cultural environments.

Table 3. Proposed heritage-based artistic creation model for restaurant spaces.

Model component	Description	Function in restaurant spaces	Expected cultural outcome
Heritage resource identification	Identification of tangible and intangible local cultural heritage resources, including traditions, symbols, historical narratives, architecture, and cultural practices	Provides the cultural foundation for spatial design and artistic development	Preservation and recognition of local cultural values
Contemporary artistic interpretation	Reinterpretation of heritage resources through contemporary artistic approaches, including architectural adaptation, visual design, installations, and environmental storytelling	Translates heritage into forms that are relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences	Increased cultural engagement and heritage awareness
Spatial identity formation	Integration of artistic and heritage elements into coherent spatial experiences that reflect local identity and cultural authenticity	Creates distinctive restaurant environments and place-based experiences	Strengthened sense of place and cultural belonging
Cultural communication process	Communication of cultural meanings through visual symbols, material selection, atmosphere, narratives, and visitor interactions	Facilitates cultural interpretation and experiential learning	Enhanced cultural understanding and emotional connection
Heritage and Sustainability Outcomes	Long-term reinforcement of cultural visibility, cultural memory, community identity, and heritage continuity	Supports cultural sustainability and adaptive heritage preservation	Continuous heritage reinterpretation and sustainable cultural development

6. Conclusion

This study explored the portrayal of local cultural heritage through contemporary art in restaurants. The results show that restaurants are an important cultural platform where artists turn heritage resources into modern spatial experiences through artistic representation and design. Restaurants are also a means of communication, reinterpretation, and preservation of cultural meaning in daily urban life, together with normal commercial functions.

Comparative results show that restaurants in Kunming primarily value ethnic diversity, historical narratives, and immersive cultural experiences as the main elements of their storytelling. Restaurants in Bangkok mainly focus on community-based authenticity, religious symbolism, and everyday cultural traditions. Both contemporary artistic methods contribute to the development of their identities and create opportunities for cultural exchange in both cities, even if they have different cultural backgrounds. This study found patterns of heritage expression. Four patterns exist: heritage translation, symbolic communication, spatial identity formation, and cultural experience production.

Developments in theory: This study is significant in the field of cultural heritage and cultural communication theories as it shows how contemporary art can be used effectively to mediate between culture as a resource of heritage and spatial identity within commercial environments. The model offers a new approach to creating art that merges the three concepts of cultural heritage resources, contemporary art interpretations, identity creation through spatial experience, and other means of communication. Thus, while developing discussions concerning heritage representation, the work indicates that commercial spaces are not mere sites but

dynamic sites for cultural production (culture-making), interpretation (meaning-making), and communication (cultural transmission). Theoretical contributions.

The findings have practical applications for area planners, restaurant workers, designers, and other cultural specialists looking for ways to incorporate area history into new, modern public spaces. Art created from heritage-based concepts has the potential to increase the visibility of the culture, reinforce area identity, and help create an environment that is sustainable for the ongoing culture with new and rewarding experiences for both local residents and tourists of the area.

In addition to the comparative findings, this framework's implementation will help designers, heritage managers, and local governments when putting culture into commercial spaces and keeping culture real while developing society. Future applications of the framework will be extended beyond the restaurant sector to alternative heritage-based cultural and creative sectors.

This research project has some limitations. It is based on the case of a few restaurants in two cities, so it might not represent all types of heritage-related commercial businesses. Furthermore, while this study focused mostly on the spatial and artistic features of these enterprises, it did not consider many other important economic, management, or policy-related issues. There are numerous opportunities for future research to expand on the study's proposed framework, such as investigating it within different cultural contexts, other commercial sectors, and additional urban environments, as well as assessing visitor experiences and cultural perceptions through large comparative datasets.

Overall, this study highlights the growing significance of contemporary art as a medium for communicating cultural heritage within urban commercial spaces. By demonstrating how heritage resources can be reinterpreted through artistic and spatial practices, this research contributes to broader discussions concerning cultural sustainability, spatial identity, and heritage communication in contemporary cities.

More broadly, the study demonstrates that heritage-based artistic practices in commercial environments can support sustainable social development by reinforcing cultural continuity, strengthening community identity, and facilitating public engagement with local cultural heritage.

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