



Cultural Identity Through Symbolism:

The Role of Provincial Seals in Thai City Branding and Regional Development

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Abstract

This research examines Thailand's provincial seals as symbolic tools of local identity construction and civic representation within the broader framework of city branding and regional development. The objective of this research is to investigate how these official symbols contribute to the construction of brand identity within the Thai urban context. While existing literature on city branding largely focuses on contemporary visual strategies in Western contexts, this study highlights the role of historically rooted symbols specifically, provincial seals as visual expressions of place identity in Thailand. Originally introduced during a period of state-led modernization in the mid-20th century, these seals remain in active use and are deeply embedded in local cultural narratives. This study employed a qualitative research design. Data were collected using a structured observation form from all 76 provinces of Thailand and one special administrative region (Bangkok). The collected data were analyzed through content analysis focusing on visual components to identify and interpret the characteristics and symbolic meanings within the observed materials. The result categorizes symbolic elements into two primary identity types: tangible (e.g., architecture, landscapes, animals, agriculture) and intangible (e.g., myths, beliefs, local names, handicrafts). Findings reveal that most seals contain hybrid identity structures, combining two to three symbolic elements that reflect a region's physical characteristics and intangible cultural heritage. The most frequently represented categories include historical and mythological themes, followed by religious architecture and geographic landmarks. Regional analysis shows diverse patterns of symbolic emphasis, corresponding to local traditions and socio-cultural environments. These visual narratives reinforce collective memory, local pride, and cultural continuity. The study argues that provincial seals function as more than administrative insignias; they serve as cultural artifacts that contribute to community identity, visual storytelling, and decentralized development. This research contributes to the field of community development by demonstrating how traditional symbols can inform contemporary city branding strategies rooted in cultural authenticity and local engagement.

Keywords: Provincial Seals, City Branding, Visual Identity, Cultural Symbolism, Regional Development, Thai Urban Policy

Introduction

In recent decades, the practice of city branding has gained significant traction among policymakers, urban planners, and scholars seeking to position cities within increasingly competitive global, regional, and national landscapes. Evolving from the principles of commercial product branding, city branding encompasses both tangible and intangible elements of place identity, involving stakeholders in the co-construction of meanings that shape a city's image and reputation. Central to this process are visual identity tools such as logos and emblems, which act as symbolic signifiers of civic character and cultural distinctiveness. While much of the literature on city branding focuses on Western contexts and contemporary visual communication strategies, less attention has been given to how historically rooted symbols such as provincial seals function as enduring representations of local identity within broader urban development efforts.

In today's interconnected world effectively operating as a single global marketplace countries, regions, and cities alike are increasingly focused on constructing and communicating their own brands in order to compete for attention and influence. The competition spans various domains, including consumer markets, tourism, foreign



investment, international education, business networks, global sporting events, and cultural exchanges. This growing emphasis on visibility and reputation has led to the proliferation of branding efforts by a wide range of actors, both formal and informal. These include governmental agencies, ministries, NGOs, independent organizations, and private corporations. However, as Anholt (2007) points out, the lack of coordination among these diverse actors often results in conflicting or contradictory messaging, ultimately weakening the effectiveness of national or city-level branding strategies. Furthermore, city marketers often assume that the city's branding is entirely controllable and manageable, believing that a uniform approach can be effectively employed in city brand communication. Zenker and Braun (2017) propose the "City Branded House Strategy", a branding and communication framework designed to address the complexities of urban branding. This strategy aims to advance current scholarly discourse and assist city marketers, as well as other urban policymakers, in managing city brands more effectively.

In the context of Thailand, city branding intersects with a rich tradition of symbolic representation, shaped by national policies, religious narratives, and local heritage. One particularly underexplored yet ubiquitous form of visual identity in Thai urban governance is the provincial seal. Introduced as part of a state-led modernization project in the mid-20th century, these seals continue to serve as official emblems of each province and are widely used in administrative signage, documents, and civic communication. Despite their prevalence, provincial seals have not been adequately examined through the lens of city branding, particularly in terms of their capacity to communicate intangible identity elements such as history, myth, belief, and cultural pride. In addition, Zhang et al. (2025) suggest that City logos play a crucial role in shaping city image and brand awareness, with abstract and concrete logo types influencing perception differently depending on the inclusion of city information or cultural symbols. However, visual aesthetics affect city brand perception independently, while a positive city reputation consistently enhances brand engagement.

The objective of this research is to investigate how these official symbols contribute to the construction of brand identity within the Thai urban context. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing the visual content of all 76 provincial seals and one special administrative region (Bangkok), with the aim of understanding how these symbols contribute to city brand identity within Thailand's evolving urban landscape. Drawing on frameworks from branding theory, place identity, and visual communication, the research investigates the types of identity tangible and intangible represented in the seals, and how these vary across regions. By doing so, the study not only offers new insights into the symbolic architecture of Thai provincial identity but also contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of cultural heritage in contemporary city branding and smart city development.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design with the aim of exploring city branding strategies in Thailand, focusing particularly on the projected visual identities of cities as expressed through provincial seals. The objective was to investigate how these official symbols contribute to the construction of intangible brand identity within the Thai urban context. The research population consisted of the official provincial seals from all 76 provinces and one special administrative region (Bangkok) were identified as the target group for this study, covering the entire national administrative landscape. Data were collected using a structured observation form as research tool and were collected through visual documentation of all provincial seals, which are publicly accessible and legally recognized symbols used in provincial administration, signage, and communication. The collected data were

transcribed, coded then analyzed using content analysis technique, specifically through a visual image analysis approach. This involved systematic examination of visual elements such as symbols and cultural references to interpret the underlying identity narratives conveyed through each seal. Following the analysis, the seals were categorized into thematic groups based on recurring visual motifs, symbolic references, and conceptual origins. These categories provided the basis for the subsequent discussion and interpretation, leading toward conclusions about the role of provincial seals in city branding in Thailand.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the evolution of branding concepts from product-based models to place-oriented strategies, focusing on city brand identity and logo design. It then contextualizes these frameworks within Thailand's urban development, with particular attention to national policies and the historical emergence of provincial seals. By doing so, this section highlights a conceptual gap in understanding how provincial seals may function as intangible identity markers within Thai city branding efforts.

From Product Branding to Place Branding

The concept of branding has existed for over a century. Its earliest forms were utilitarian, serving to distinguish ownership such as branding livestock or enslaved individuals. However, the modern notion of branding within a commercial context emerged in the 19th century, following the Industrial Revolution (Davis, 2009).

The American Marketing Association (AMA), one of the most influential professional bodies in the field of marketing, defines a brand as “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (American Marketing Association, n.d.). Kotler (1988) offers a similar definition, describing a brand as “a name, term, logo, design, or a combination thereof, aimed at identifying a product or service of one vendor or manufacturer and distinguishing it from competitors”. These early definitions indicate that branding was initially focused on establishing a tangible identity that could be physically perceived and used to create distinction in a competitive market.

Over time, branding evolved into a strategic process. As Kotler and Keller (2015) suggest, branding strategies have become a central force in empowering products and services. Kapferer (2012) further asserts that the definition and role of branding have continuously developed in response to broader economic and social changes. In recent decades, increasing emphasis has been placed on the intangible dimensions of brand identity. These include concepts such as brand value, brand image, and consumer-perceived value, which function as expressions of trust and promise between the brand and its audience.

Furthermore, the scope of branding has expanded beyond products and services to encompass places. In the field of place branding where the context is significantly more complex than that of product branding researchers have noted key distinctions. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006) argue that branding, in marketing research, is not merely about naming or identifying a product. When applied to places, branding cannot arbitrarily assign new identities. This is because places inherently possess unique characteristics rooted in their physical, sociological, psychological, and cultural dimensions (Simões & Dibb, 2001).

Place Brand Building

Kavaratzis (2008) outlines a comprehensive framework for place brand development, which consists of four key stages: 1) Vision and strategy, 2) Internal culture, local communities, and synergies, 3) Actions including



infrastructure, cityscape, gateways, and opportunities, 4) Communication. This phased approach emphasizes the holistic and multi-layered nature of place branding. While Kavaratzis emphasizes strategic and infrastructural layers in city branding, Aitken and Campelo (2011) stress the co-creation aspect that roots branding in community identity. These perspectives suggest both top-down and bottom-up processes are essential for sustainable place branding. Their model emphasizes four foundational elements of place brand identity as “The Four Rs”: 1) Rights, referring to the legitimate entitlements of citizens, 2) Roles, denoting their social functions, 3) Responsibilities, encompassing civic obligations, 4) Relationships, which highlight the interpersonal and communal ties that shape the social fabric of a place. Further elaborating on the interconnected elements of place identity, Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) conceptualize the dynamic relationship between place culture, place identity, and place image. These elements engage in a continuous interplay of expressing, reflecting, mirroring, and impressing upon one another, underscoring the complexity of managing place brands.

City typology is another important consideration in developing effective strategic planning and branding policies. Anttiroiko (2014; 2015) introduces the concept of city profiles, constructed through both tangible and intangible inputs. He classifies cities into four main categories: 1) Capital cities, which serve as financial and business centers, 2) Knowledge cities, encompassing university towns, science hubs, and centers for high technology, 3) Mobility cities, such as transport hubs, healthcare centers, and MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, Exhibitions) destinations, 4) Pleasure cities, including cultural cities, tourism centers, creative cities, and cities known for retail and services.

A critical component in place branding is the role of city stakeholders. Merrilees et al. (2013) identify a diverse set of stakeholders who influence the city’s brand, including residents, businesses, tourists, investors, labor forces, and governing bodies. Expanding on this, Henninger et al. (2016) explore stakeholder engagement in the city branding process. They categorize stakeholders into six key groups: 1) Local political actors (e.g., city councils), 2) Economic groups (e.g., chambers of commerce), 3) Educational institutions (e.g., colleges and universities), 4) Sports and recreational organizations (e.g., sports clubs), 5) Business sectors, 6) Residents.

Building upon this, the next section explores how brand identity and visual elements particularly logos serve as essential components in shaping city image.

City Brand Identity and City Logo

According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), brand identity is a central conceptual element that connects various components of a brand. It is closely linked to branding strategy and brand longevity, serving as a symbolic representation of the brand’s promise to its consumers. They emphasize that brand identity should be profound and thoughtfully constructed through in-depth analysis and systematic development before implementation and evaluation.

Anholt (2007) suggests that the concept of city branding has evolved from product branding but differs significantly due to the inherent complexity of urban environments. Contemporary social dynamics further influence city branding practices. As a result, the focus of city branding has shifted from being primarily a top-down government policy to a more public-oriented approach. This evolution has led to the emergence of the concept of Competitive Identity, where nations and cities convey their identities through six key dimensions: 1) Tourism, 2) Brands, 3) Culture, 4) People, 5) Policy, 6) Investment.

Kapferer (2012) outlines six elements essential to building and understanding brand identity: 1) Physique—the tangible attributes of the brand, 2) Personality—the brand’s character, 3) Relationship—the mode of interaction

between the brand and its audience, 4) Culture—the brand’s values and organizational culture, 5) Reflection—the perceived image of the brand’s typical customer, 6) Self-image—how customers see themselves when interacting with the brand. Within this framework, the city logo represents a key component of physical identity, and is often one of the first visual elements considered in the city branding process. The logo symbolizes a city’s assets and its positive attributes in the minds of stakeholders and the general public. It plays an essential role in reinforcing city branding strategies. Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2025) propose that city logos are vital in influencing both city image and brand awareness. The study indicates that abstract and concrete logo designs shape public perception in distinct ways, depending on whether they incorporate city-related information or cultural elements. Nonetheless, the visual appeal of a logo contributes to city brand perception regardless of its degree of abstraction, while a strong city reputation continues to enhance overall brand engagement. However, as Wahyurini (2012) warns, mismanaging the city logo by treating it separately from the broader branding strategy can result in ineffective outcomes. Place logos function as cognitive images, with selected shapes and colors carrying meaning and being retained in the viewer’s memory (Nghiem-Phú, 2015). Nevertheless, Mueller and Schade (2012) note that the absence of stakeholder collaboration in the development of place logos can severely limit their ability to influence external audiences. To ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of city logos, participatory design involving both residents and stakeholders is recommended. Wiratama and Nugroho (2024) also emphasize the crucial role of designers as expert collaborators within multidisciplinary teams. They state that designers act as key intermediaries, translating and reconciling the government’s strategic vision with the needs, values, and aspirations of local communities. Such engagement leads to more impactful and widely accepted city identities (Wahyurini, 2012).

The Evolution of City Branding in Thailand

According to the American Marketing Association (n.d.), a brand is defined as a combination of tangible and intangible elements intended to create a distinct identity for a product or service in order to differentiate it from competitors. While much of the literature focuses on Western contexts, Thailand presents a distinctive case in which city branding intersects with cultural symbolism and state policy. In the context of Thailand, this foundational concept can be seen in the early development of provincial seals, which may be considered the initial form of city branding in the country. The idea of creating provincial seals was introduced during the premiership of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, as part of a broader governmental effort to instill order and discipline among Thai citizens and to project a civilized national image. The government issued public directives encouraging citizens to align with national ideals, including in areas of administration and symbolism. One of these initiatives was the development of provincial seals, with two primary objectives: 1) To create official emblems for each province, following the example of European countries that used heraldic symbols to represent their states or regions, 2) To foster local pride, by giving each province a distinctive symbol representing its identity used and recognized primarily by its own residents.

In 1940 (B.E. 2483), Major General Luang Wichitwathakan, Director-General of the Fine Arts Department, was assigned to lead the design of provincial seals for all provinces. The process was participatory in nature, allowing provincial committees across the country to provide input and suggestions regarding the designs (The Fine Arts Department, 1999). Following the Fine Arts Department’s design initiative, provinces began adopting and using their official seals in 1942 (B.E. 2485). Over time, some seals were modified to include the name of the province or the national Garuda emblem. While a number of provinces later adjusted or modernized



their seal designs, others have continued to use the original versions. These provincial seals can be categorized into five conceptual types based on the imagery used: 1) Names of provinces, 2) Religious or sacred monuments, 3) Historical or legendary narratives, 4) Renowned natural landmarks, 5) Local occupations or representations of natural abundance (The Fine Arts Department, 1999).

Urban Development Policy in Thailand

Urban development in Thailand is primarily guided by provincial development plans, which are aligned with the overarching national development frameworks. These provincial strategies derive their vision and core objectives from two principal national plans: 1) The National Strategy, and 2) The National Economic and Social Development Plan. These two frameworks serve as the foundation for setting directions in regional and urban development across the country, ensuring coherence between local priorities and national policy objectives.

1. The 20-Year National Strategy (B.E. 2561–2580)

Thailand's 20-Year National Strategy serves as a comprehensive framework guiding long-term national development toward stability, citizen well-being, equitable economic growth, and sustainable resource management. Structured across three levels—core vision and objectives, strategic approaches, and implementation plans—it ensures alignment between national goals and sectoral actions (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, Office of the Prime Minister, 2018). To operationalize this strategy, 23 master plans were developed, including Master Plan No. 6: Livable and Smart Cities, which focuses on enhancing urban quality of life through technology-driven development. The plan aligns with national strategies for competitiveness, social equity, and environmental sustainability, addressing urban population growth, infrastructure improvement, and efficient urban management. It emphasizes transforming regional economic hubs and medium-sized cities into smart cities that foster innovation, resource efficiency, and inclusive growth, positioning them as key drivers of balanced regional development.

2. The 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (B.E. 2565–2570)

The 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan serves as a Level 2 strategic framework translating the 20-Year National Strategy into actionable directions, later implemented through agency-specific Level 3 plans (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, Office of the Prime Minister, 2022). However, the Council reported that Thailand's development outcomes remain uneven, with growth concentrated in Bangkok, the Central region, and the Eastern Economic Corridor, while other regions lag behind. Urbanization continues to rise, with 23 million people (34.47%) living in urban areas in 2020, up from 33.91% in 2011. The plan's Strategic Objective 2 promotes collaborative mechanisms among government, private sectors, and communities for inclusive and resilient urban development. Sub-strategy 2.3 emphasizes smart city development responsive to environmental and social needs, integrating traditional values, digital readiness, and technological literacy to foster equitable regional growth.

Results

The analysis of provincial seals from 76 provinces and one special administrative region (Bangkok) revealed that the visual identities represented in these seals can be broadly categorized into two main groups: 1) Tangible Identity, and 2) Intangible Identity. Most provincial seals incorporate only tangible identity elements, while some reflect a combination of both tangible and intangible identities, integrating between 2–3 identity components within a single seal. These mixed representations suggest a layered approach to city identity construction, with tangible

features serving as foundational visual anchors and intangible elements providing deeper cultural or symbolic meaning.

The tangible identity group, in particular, can be classified into seven subcategories based on the dominant imagery and symbolic references used in the seals. These include: 1) Architecture, Historic site/Artefact (religious), 2) Architecture, Historic site/Artefact (non-religious), 3) Geography, Landscape, 4) Natural resource, 5) Agriculture, 6) Proficiency, 7) Animal. While the intangible identity group, can be further classified into three subcategories. These include: 1) History, Legend, Myth, Belief, 2) City's name, 3) Handicraft. These categories serve as the foundation for understanding how visual identity is constructed at the provincial level and how these representations contribute to broader narratives of city and regional branding in Thailand.

Among the various identity types identified in the analysis, the most frequently represented was the intangible identity category, particularly elements related to history, legends, myths, and belief systems, which appeared in 40% of all provincial seals. This was closely followed by the tangible identity of architecture and historic sites or artefacts (religious), found in 39% of the seals, indicating the strong influence of religious heritage in shaping local visual identity. Other prominent categories included geography and landscape (21%), intangible references to the city's name (17%), and animals as symbolic or representative elements (16%). Additionally, non-religious architectural and historic elements were identified in 12% of the seals. Less frequently, but still present, were identity markers associated with natural resources, local proficiencies or skills, and traditional handicrafts, reflecting localized cultural or economic attributes. These identity types and their relative frequencies are visually summarized in Figure 1.

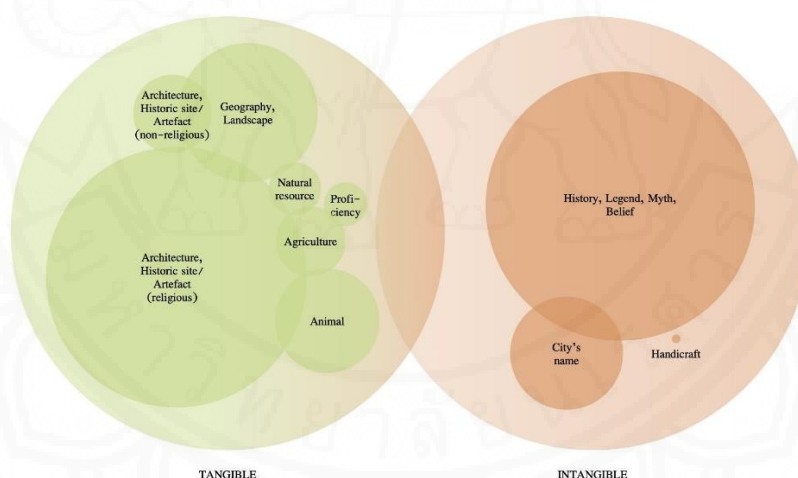


Figure 1 76 Provincial Seals Categorized into Tangible and Intangible Identity.

Source: Author (2025).

Further analysis using content analysis allowed for the identification of recurring themes, which could be categorized according to Thailand's geographical regions. These thematic groupings highlight how different regions emphasize distinct aspects of identity in their provincial seals, reflecting localized cultural values, historical narratives, and natural characteristics. The thematic patterns emerging from each region are summarized as follows:

1. Northern Region

In the Northern region of Thailand, the analysis of provincial seals (see Figure 2) reveals a strong tendency toward the use of hybrid identities, where both tangible and intangible elements are combined. In many cases, 1–3 identity types are integrated within a single seal.

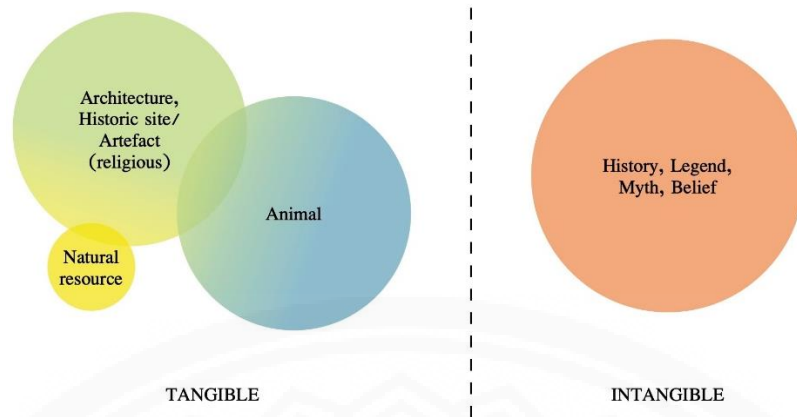


Figure 2 The Analysis of Provincial Seals (Northern Region of Thailand).

Source: Author (2025).

Among the tangible identity categories, two dominant groups were found with equal frequency (66.67%) are 1) Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Religious), and 2) Animals. Within the architectural group, the imagery primarily features stupas and Buddha statues, such as Phra That Hariphunchai in the provincial seal of Lamphun, and Phra Chao Ton Luang of Wat Sri Khom Kham in the seal of Phayao. For animal representations, the imagery reflects both literal and symbolic meanings. For example, the elephant in water featured in the seal of Mae Hong Son represents the region's historical expertise in training wild elephants for warfare and labor. In contrast, the elephant in the Chiang Rai provincial seal symbolizes an omen of prosperity, referencing a legendary vision of a white elephant that foretold the region's historical glory.



Figure 3 Lamphun, Phayao, Mae Hong Son and Chiang Rai Provincial Seals.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

In terms of intangible identity, the dominant theme present in 77.78% of the seals is History, Legend, Myth, and Belief. For instance, the seal of Nan Province features a stupa resting on the back of a sacred ox, referencing the founding legend of the city in which Phraya Phakong dreamt of an ox emerging from the forest, crossing the Nan River, and defecating in a rectangular shape before vanishing, an omen that led to the city's establishment. Similarly, the rooster in the seal of Lampang refers to an ancient legend involving a white rooster, five hermits, and the Buddha, symbolizing the city's spiritual origins.



Figure 4 Nan and Lampang Provincial Seals.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

2. Northeastern Region

In the Northeastern region of Thailand (see Figure 5), provincial seals similarly reflect a hybrid use of visual identities, combining both tangible and intangible elements, with seals typically incorporating between 1–3 identity types.

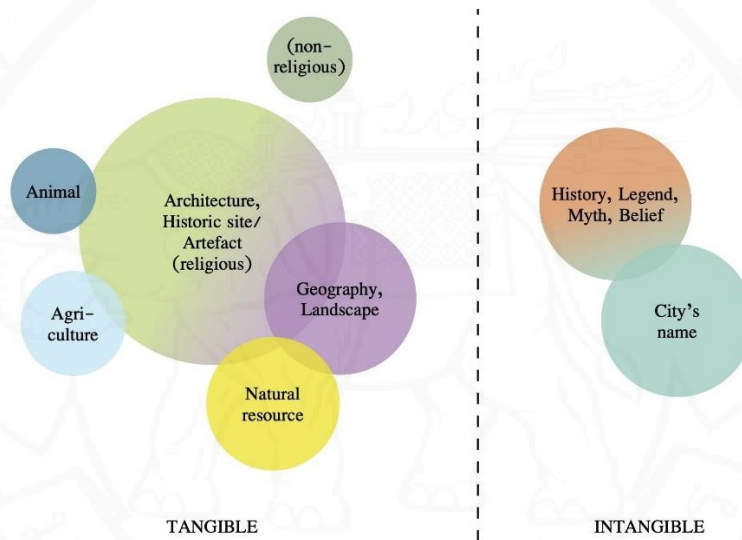


Figure 5 The Analysis of Provincial Seals (Northeastern Region of Thailand).

Source: Author (2025).

Among the tangible identity categories, the most prevalent was Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Religious), found in 60% of the seals. This group prominently features stone sanctuaries, a distinctive form of architecture unique to the region, along with stupas and Buddha images, reflecting the cultural significance of Buddhism in local identity. Secondary identity types appearing in smaller proportions include Geography and Landscape, Natural Resources, Agriculture, Animals, and Non-Religious Architecture and Historic Sites, ranked in descending order of frequency (see Figure 5, left panel). For instance, the seal of Buriram Province features Phanom Rung Stone Castle, a significant Khmer-style structure symbolizing historical and cultural continuity, while the seal of Bueng Kan Province depicts the region's abundant natural scenery, including Phu Thok and Bueng Khong Long, as emblems of the province's ecological richness.



Figure 6 Buriram and Bueng Kan Provincial Seals.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

On the intangible identity side, two primary groups were identified: History, Legend, Myth, and Belief, and City's Name each appearing in 30% of the provincial seals (see Figure 5, right panel). An example of the historical theme is found in the seal of Chaiyaphum Province, which features a war victory flag symbolizing the city's historical foundation and military significance. The seal of Kalasin Province exemplifies the use of city naming, depicting a black swamp (bueng dam) that directly corresponds to the meaning of the province's name.

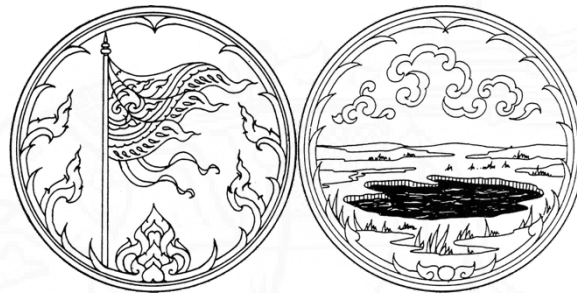


Figure 7 Chaiyaphum and Kalasin Provincial Seals.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

3. Western Region

In the Western region of Thailand (see Figure 8), the analysis of provincial seals reveals a consistent use of hybrid identity structures, with most seals integrating 2 identity types, combining both tangible and intangible elements.

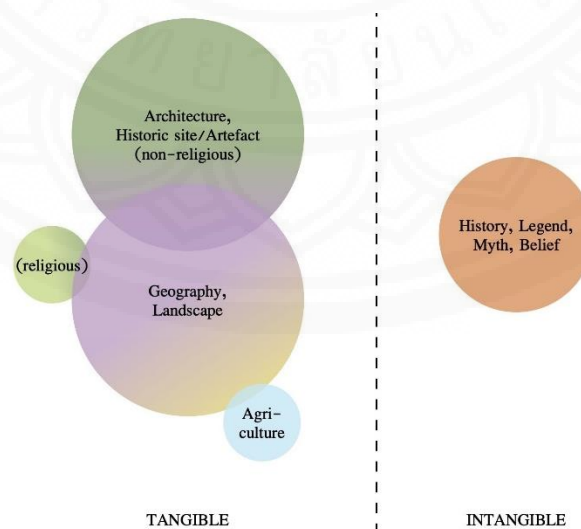


Figure 8 The Analysis of Provincial Seals (Western Region of Thailand).

Source: Author (2025).

Among the tangible identity categories, two dominant groups were observed, each accounting for 40% of the seals which are Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Non-Religious) and Geography and Landscape. These reflect a balance between cultural-historical references and natural features. For instance, the seal of Prachuap Khiri Khan Province features Phra Nakhon Khiri Cave Pavilion (Phra Nakhon Khiri Palace) and the coastal atmosphere of Lak Island, emphasizing both architectural heritage and geographical identity.



Figure 9 Prachuap Khiri Khan Provincial Seal.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

In terms of intangible identity, the most frequently occurring category was History, Legend, Myth, and Belief, appearing in 40% of the seals. A notable example is the seal of Tak Province, which depicts a historical scene associated with King Naresuan the Great, symbolizing the province's military significance and historical legacy.



Figure 10 Tak Provincial Seal.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

4. Central Region

In the Central region of Thailand (see Figure 11), the analysis of provincial seals indicates a consistent use of hybrid identities, with seals incorporating a mix of tangible and intangible elements, ranging from 1-3 identity types.

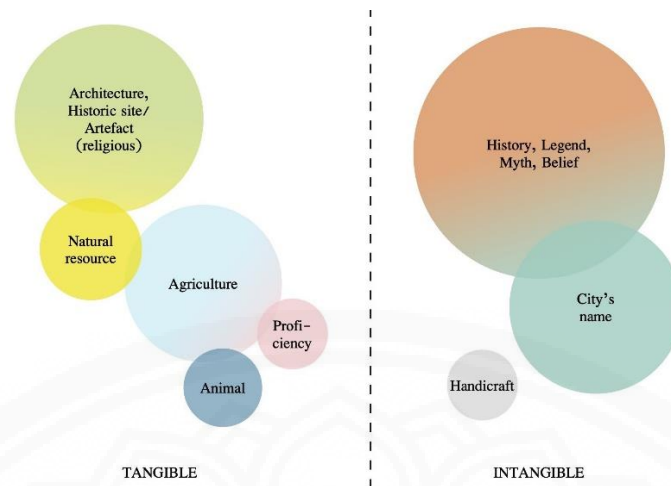


Figure 11 The Analysis of Provincial Seals (Central Region of Thailand).

Source: Author (2025).

Among the tangible identity categories, the most prominent was Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Religious), found in 28% of the provincial seals. This was followed by Agriculture-related imagery, present in 18% of the seals, along with other supporting identity types (see Figure 11). Examples include the seal of Saraburi Province, which features the Phra Phutthabat Mondop, a sacred Buddhist footprint shrine, and the seal of Ang Thong Province, which includes an image of rice ears, symbolizing the province's agricultural heritage.



Figure 12 Saraburi and Ang Thong Provincial Seals.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

Regarding intangible identity, the most frequently represented group was History, Legend, Myth, and Belief, appearing in 50% of the provincial seals. This was followed by City's Name references, accounting for 23%. For instance, the seal of Samut Sakhon Province depicts a Chinese junk ship, symbolizing the province's historical trade routes and settlement origins. Similarly, the seal of Kamphaeng Phet Province features a gem-studded wall, representing both the literal meaning of the province's name ("diamond wall") and its historical legacy.



Figure 13 Samut Sakhon and Kamphaeng Phet Provincial Seals.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

5. Eastern Region

In the Eastern region of Thailand (see Figure 14), the provincial seals demonstrate a hybrid application of identity types, combining both tangible and intangible elements, with most seals containing 1–3 identities.

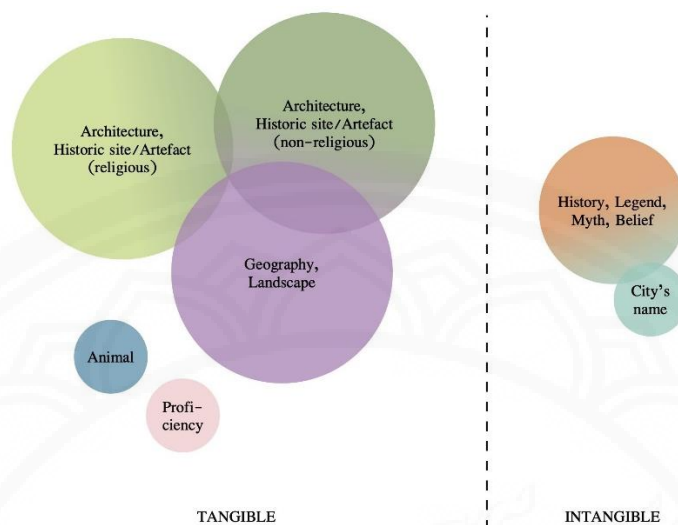


Figure 14 The Analysis of Provincial Seals (Eastern Region of Thailand).

Source: Author (2025).

Among the tangible identity categories, three groups appeared with equal frequency, each accounting for 43% of the provincial seals: 1) Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Religious), 2) Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Non-Religious), and 3) Geography and Landscape. This equal representation indicates a balanced emphasis on religious heritage, historical architecture, and natural features in the construction of visual identity. For example, the seal of Rayong Province features the pavilion where King Rama V once stayed on Samet Island, reflecting royal heritage and geographical significance. Meanwhile, the seal of Sa Kaeo Province displays a Buddha image set in front of the pink sandstone Prasat Khao Noi, symbolizing both religious and architectural importance.



Figure 15 Rayong and Sa Kaeo Provincial Seals.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

In terms of intangible identity, the most commonly observed category was History, Legend, Myth, and Belief, present in 29% of the seals. A notable example is the seal of Prachinburi Province, which features an image of the Sri Maha Bodhi tree, representing the province's historical role in the spread of Buddhism and its religious-cultural legacy.



Figure 16 Prachinburi Provincial Seal.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

6. Southern Region

In the Southern region of Thailand (see Figure 17), provincial seals exhibit a hybrid composition of identities, combining both tangible and intangible elements, typically incorporating 1–3 identity types.

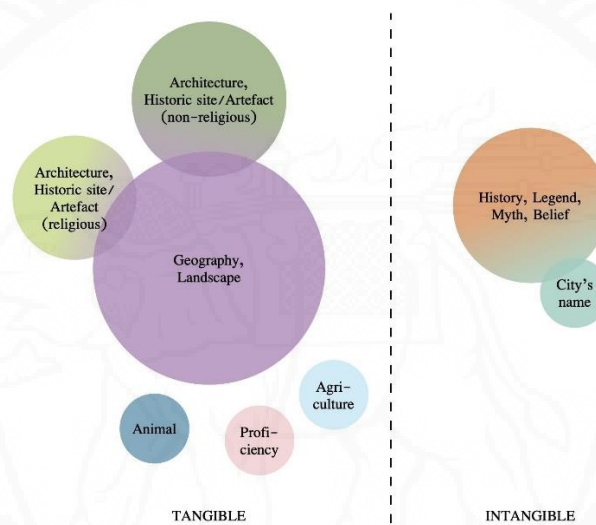


Figure 17 The Analysis of Provincial Seals (Southern Region of Thailand).

Source: Author (2025).

Among the tangible identity categories, the most frequently observed was Geography and Landscape, appearing in 47% of the provincial seals. This indicates the strong influence of the region's natural topography in the construction of visual identity. The next most prominent groups, each found in 27% of the seals, were Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Non-Religious) and Proficiency. For example, the seal of Ranong Province features a palace situated atop Niwet Khiri Hill, symbolizing non-religious historical architecture, while the seal of Yala Province depicts tin miners at work, representing the region's historical economic expertise in tin mining.



Figure 18 Ranong and Yala Provincial Seals.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

Regarding intangible identity, the most frequently found category was History, Legend, Myth, and Belief, appearing in 27% of the provincial seals. A key example is the seal of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, which portrays the Great Stupa (Phra Borommathat) surrounded by the twelve zodiac animals. This imagery references the twelve ancient city-states that were once tributaries of the Nakhon Si Thammarat Kingdom, reflecting the region's historical and spiritual significance.



Figure 19 Nakhon Si Thammarat Provincial Seal.

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.).

Table 1 The Analysis of Provincial Seals (All Regions of Thailand)

Region	Category	Subcategory	Percentage	Examples
Northern	Tangible Identity	Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Religious)	66.67%	Lamphun Phayao
		Animals	66.67%	Mae Hong Son Chiang Rai
	Intangible Identity	History, Legend, Myth, and Belief	77.78%	Nan
Northeastern	Tangible Identity	Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Religious)	60%	Buriram
		Geography and Landscape, Natural Resources, Agriculture, Animals, and Non-Religious Architecture and Historic Sites	40%	Bueng Kan
	Intangible Identity	History, Legend, Myth, and Belief	30%	Chaiyaphum
Western	Tangible Identity	are Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Non-Religious)	40%	Prachuap Khiri Khan
		Geography and Landscape	40%	
	Intangible Identity	History, Legend, Myth, and Belief	40%	Tak
Central	Tangible Identity	Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Religious)	28%	Saraburi
		Agriculture	18%	Ang Thong
	Intangible Identity	History, Legend, Myth, and Belief	50%	Samut Sakhon
Eastern	Tangible Identity	City's Name	23%	Kamphaeng Phet
		Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Religious)	43%	Rayong
	Intangible Identity	Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Non-Religious)	43%	Sa Kaeo
		Geography and Landscape	43%	
	Tangible Identity	History, Legend, Myth, and Belief	29%	Prachinburi
	Intangible Identity			

**Table 1** (Cont.)

Region	Category	Subcategory	Percentage	Examples
Southern	Tangible	Geography and Landscape	47%	Ranong
		Architecture and Historic Sites/Artefacts (Non-Religious)	27%	
	Identity	Proficiency	27%	Yala
	Intangible	History, Legend, Myth, and Belief	27%	Nakhon
	Identity			Si Thammarat

Source: Author (2025).

Discussion

This study examined how Thailand's provincial seals function as a form of projected visual identity within the broader context of city branding. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of all 76 provinces and one special administrative region (Bangkok), the research reveals the diversity and richness of identity construction in local symbolic representations. The findings reinforce and extend the conceptual frameworks discussed in the literature, particularly those relating to brand identity, place branding, and the role of visual communication in shaping civic image.

As noted by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) and Kapferer (2012), brand identity is a strategic and deeply rooted representation of what an entity stands for. In the context of Thai provincial seals, identity construction reflects both tangible dimensions (such as architecture, geography, and local animals) and intangible dimensions (such as myths, religious beliefs, and city names). This aligns with the literature that suggests place brands, unlike product brands, must engage with existing cultural narratives and socio-historical realities (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Simões & Dibb, 2001).

The study found that intangible identity elements especially those involving history, legend, myth, and belief are the most dominant across regions, appearing in approximately 40% of all seals. This supports the idea that place brands are deeply rooted in collective memory, tradition, and meaning-making processes (Anholt, 2007; Aitken & Campelo, 2011). In contrast to commercial branding that often seeks innovation and differentiation, city branding in Thailand tends to emphasize continuity, reverence, and cultural pride.

Simultaneously, tangible identities particularly religious architecture remain highly influential, suggesting a visually anchored brand strategy that communicates stability and spiritual heritage. The frequent appearance of sacred sites such as stupas and Buddha images supports Kapferer's (2012) claim that physical elements help ground identity in symbolic consistency, while also fulfilling Mueller and Schade's (2012) observation that place logos must evoke shared meaning to be effective.

Regional differences also reflect the interplay between local specificity and national identity. The Northern region, for instance, integrates sacred architecture and animal symbolism, while the Northeastern region emphasizes Khmer-style temples and local landscapes. The Southern region, rich in natural resources, leans toward geography and historical statehood. These regional variations mirror Anttiroiko's (2014; 2015) typology of cities based on physical and symbolic assets, reinforcing the argument that city profiles must align with geographic and cultural contexts.

The hybrid structure of identity found in many seals (with 2–3 combined identity types) supports Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) model of dynamic place identity, in which meaning is co-constructed through the mirroring and interaction of culture, image, and narrative. Moreover, the seals' embedded symbolism reflects a form



of bottom-up co-creation, particularly in cases where historical legends or local crafts are highlighted, echoing Aitken and Campelo's (2011) advocacy for participatory place branding through local rights, roles, and relationships.

Conclusion

Despite this, the study also highlights a gap in national branding policy. While both the 20-Year National Strategy and the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan promote smart city development and regional equity, neither explicitly addresses the role of cultural symbolism or visual identity in urban branding. The absence of national coordination around these symbolic assets may limit Thailand's ability to project a coherent international image, even as local identities flourish.

In summary, this research contributes to the literature on place branding in Southeast Asia by demonstrating how traditional symbols, especially provincial seals, act as enduring tools of identity expression. They provide a foundation for understanding how local governments communicate heritage and pride through official emblems. Future directions might include exploring how these symbols can be revitalized or integrated into digital platforms and smart city branding strategies, ensuring that traditional identity continues to play a meaningful role in contemporary urban development.

Suggestions

Future research could investigate how provincial seals might be reinterpreted and developed into modern, tangible city logos that align with strategic city branding objectives. This includes examining design adaptation processes that retain cultural meaning while enhancing visual clarity, scalability, and usability across platforms. Studies may also explore the perceptions of stakeholders such as residents, tourists, and local officials toward these redesigned logos to ensure cultural relevance and public acceptance. Additionally, comparative research between traditional provincial seals and contemporary branding practices could offer valuable insights into how heritage-based identity elements can be integrated into smart city communication, tourism promotion, and regional development strategies.

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