

The Cultural Identity of Thungsong Railway Platform, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province

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Abstract

The present study aimed to survey and analyze the cultural identity of the railway platform in Thungsong District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, which in the past was a very important transportation hub in the area. In-dept interviews were employed to collect data. The findings showed that the platform in Thungsong Junction Railway Station possessed a cultural identity that reflected the way of life and the beliefs of the local community. This identity was outstanding due to a blend of traditional culture and changes from urban and social development. The platform's role, which connected people in the southern region with other parts of the country was a key factor in creating the unique identity of the Thungsong platform. The way of life of people living around Thungsong Junction Railway Station is mainly about commerce. The cultural identity of Thungsong Railway Junction Platform was its role as a hub city with heavy traveler traffic. Consequently, local people's way of life was deeply connected with Thungsong Railway Junction. What local people most wished to preserve were Thungsong Junction Railway Station, railway staff houses, the old steam locomotive, local traditions and culture and the people's lifestyle, respectively. There were additional suggestions from people living around Thungsong Junction Railway Station, proposing the construction of a souvenir shopping center in front of the station, the landscaping improvements at the station and surrounding areas including the railway staff houses. Cleanliness, particularly in public spaces and on roads had to be monitored.

Keywords: Identity, Railway platform culture, Thungsong railway junction

Background and Significance of the study

Thungsong Railway Junction in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province has long been a significant place that connects transportation in the southern region to other parts of Thailand. The railway station has played an important role in trade, travel, and economic promotion in the area. The platform of the station has, therefore, become a social and cultural hub which reflects the way of life and beliefs of the local community. It connects people from various areas and encourages cultural exchange and perception during travel.

However, at present, Thungsong railway platform encounters social and cultural changes caused by urban development and technological advancement. The development of new facilities and infrastructure, as well as the expansion of other transportation modes may result in a loss of the traditional cultural values or identity that the platform once possessed. This study is thus important in understanding the remaining cultural identity of Thungsong railway platform and its role in fostering insight into local history and preserving significant values and uniqueness of the community in the present and for the future. A study of the cultural identity of the platform

is then crucial for the conservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of sustainable tourism in the area. Additionally, it raises awareness of the social and historical value that can be passed on to the younger generation and to visitors coming to Thungsong.

Due to the government policies, university-level institutions of which missions are to produce knowledgeable and capable graduates for serving society and to have staff conduct research, as well as provide academic services in accordance with the national strategies on development and human potential enhancement, the researchers are, hence, interested in studying Thungsong, a town with a good economy and a long history deeply connected to its unique social, economic, and cultural context. It is also an important rail transport hub in the South. Thungsong is a high potential city and a crucial rail transportation and transport route connecting the Andaman Sea coast to the Gulf of Thailand. Thungsong Junction Railway Station is, thus, an area possessing a diverse cultural heritage that creates a unique local identity and holds great potential for further development of cultural tourism.

Objectives of the study

1) To study and analyze the cultural identity of the railway platform in Thungsong, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, which reflects the way of life and beliefs of the local community.

2) To examine the role and importance of Thungsong railway platform in economic and social development of the area, as well as its significance in promoting tourism and preserving cultural heritage.

3) To propose guidelines for preserving and promoting the cultural identity of Thungsong railway platform in the present and future.

Scope of the study

An in-depth interview conducted through a structured questionnaire was administered with the participants living around Thungsong junction railway station (an area within a 3-kilometer radius of Thungsong Junction Railway Station). The sample group was selected using a purposive sampling method, which is a non-

probability sampling technique, and the snowball sampling method was applied to obtain a total of 50 participants who were the residents continuously living in the area surrounding Thungsong junction railway station for more than five years. An observation of the lifestyle of people in the area was also carried out. All collected data was then analyzed, summarized, and linked to a narrative about the identity of Thungsong, a town with a close connection with the rail transport system over several decades.

Definitions of terms

1) Identity refers to the sum of specific features of something which makes it well-known or memorable.

2) Platform culture refers to the culture associated with the existence of a railway station or rail transport in the particular area.

3) Thungsong Junction Railway Station refers to the railway station located in Pakphrak Sub-district, Thungsong District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. It is an important rail transport hub in the South of Thailand.

Expected benefits

1) To identify the cultural identity of the communities around Thungsong Junction Railway Station, in order to use it for further public relations and to raise awareness of Thungsong District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.

2) To identify the cultural identity of the communities surrounding Thungsong Junction Railway Station for future preservation of arts and culture in Thungsong District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.

Related studies and theories

The researchers studied relevant theories and previous research as a framework for the study as follows.

1) Identity theory

Stryker and Burke (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000) defined the word 'identity' as a small unit in sociological studies that connects to attitudes toward the self or uniqueness. It is a role-based relationship and behavior that arise from an individual's role.

Kathryn Woodward (1997) stated that “identity” is a word that must be linked to the word “difference.” When people define themselves by saying “Who am I?”, it is often based on an understanding of “Whom am I different from?”, for example, differences in religion, ethnicity, or language.

2) Cultural ecology theory

Important anthropologists in this group include Julian H. Steward, Daryll Forde, Clifford Geertz and Marvin Harris.

Steward defined ecology as “an adaptation to environmental conditions.” Cultural ecology, hence, means the study of the cultural rules or principles that result from the adaptation to the environment (of each human society). As a result, cultural ecology is different from social ecology because cultural ecology aims to find rules that explain the source of certain cultural features and patterns in particular environments, rather than aiming to discover general principles that can apply to all cultures and environments. The most important thing in this theory is “Cultural Core,” which refers to “the group of cultural features or patterns most closely related to activities for living and economic management.” This focuses on how material culture (technological system or tool) is employed differently and how it leads to varying social management in different environments. This is because each environment may support or limit the utilization of this technology.

3) Cultural diffusion theory

This theory emphasizes historical processes which explain cultural change, known as “Historical Particularism.” An anthropologist associated with this concept is Franz Boas, a German anthropologist who worked as a lecturer at Columbia University in the United States. He emphasized that “cultural diffusion is a process in which important features of one culture spread to another, with adjustments made to suit the new culture.” He also supported the idea that “cultures can be measured by comparing different cultures and evaluating their superior or inferior characteristics.” Nevertheless, he still believed that “no culture is better or worse than another.”

H.G. Barnett, an American anthropologist interested in ideas related to innovation, thought that innovation was a representation of one culture which was transmitted to another. In his work “Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change” (1953), the word ‘innovation’ was defined as any new idea, behavior, or object that differs in quality from original forms. Barnett believed that “culture changes because of innovation,” but at the same time, some cultures may obstruct or not support innovation; therefore, he proposed that there should be methods to promote innovation within a society or culture.

Everett M. Rogers, the author of “Diffusion of Innovations,” emphasized that “most social changes are caused by the diffusion of culture from external sources rather than from internal invention.” Innovation being transmitted can be an idea through the symbolic adoption, which is difficult to be transmitted or it can be an object adopted through action, which is more visible. Rogers also stated that “for an innovation to be easily accepted, it should possess five key characteristics which were (1) being more advantageous (Relative Advantage) (2) being compatible with the culture of the adopting society (Compatibility) (3) not being overly complex (Less Complexity) (4) being suitable for trial use on a limited basis (Divisibility) and (5) being visible (Visibility).

In conclusion, the theory of cultural diffusion helps explain the methods and processes by which one culture spreads to another, with the realization of the similarities and differences between the two cultures.

4) Related studies

4.1) *The study of cultural identity and beliefs of Kohyor community by Sermsak Khunpol*

This qualitative research aimed to study and identify the cultural identity and beliefs of Kohyor community. Data collection was divided into two parts: a survey along with analysis of the community’s cultural beliefs through document study and a fieldwork in which in-depth interviews were administered with informants selected through snowball sampling. Additionally, a quantitative survey was conducted with 352 local residents of Kohyor. The findings showed that the community’s cultural identity and beliefs could be divided into two main

categories which were beliefs tied to religion and beliefs related to daily living and earning a living. These were expressed through rituals, individual practices, and various traditions, all of which were rooted in the religious geography of the area and enriched by local legends or folktales. The community thought that this identity could be communicated to tourists to make them aware of the importance of local culture. Although new religious places were established in the community, they could not gain the locals' belief and acceptance as part of their cultural identity.

4.2) The use of identity to promote tourism in Udon Thani Province by Benjawan Suphanangthong

This research aimed to study Udon Thani's policy on using identity and media in the public relation of tourism, and the sample group's responses to the use of identity. A mixed-methods approach was employed. Qualitative research included a review of related documents and in-depth interviews with five personnels from relevant government and private sectors involving in using the identity for Udon Thani tourism promotion. As for quantitative research, questionnaires were distributed to 400 Thai tourists visiting Udon Thani. The results identified seven important identity or specific features of Udon Thani Province which were world heritage sites and historical parks, forest monasteries greatly respected by Thai people, handicrafts based on ancestral wisdom, famous dishes popular among many people, its role as a transportation hub by land and air, its potential as an economic and investment center of upper northeastern Thailand, and its status as the province with the highest number of foreign sons-in-law in Thailand. It was found that "people as media" was the most potential way to promote local identity for tourism, followed by mass media and lastly other media. The majority of participants were impressed with the identity and tourist attractions in Udon Thani and would definitely travel back to the province.

4.3) Changes in the relationship between local arts and culture and community lifestyles: A case study of Wat Wiang community, Wiang Sub-district, Chaiya District, Surat Thani Province by Pichai Sukwun

The local arts and culture of Wat Wiang community, both religious and folk art reflected beliefs that differed obviously from the paths of capitalist development. This was because local arts and culture focused on spiritual development which enhanced human-to-human and human-to-environment relationships based on mutual dependence and respect. Aesthetic values were abstract characteristics embedded in the community's traditional way of life. Therefore, when the context of agricultural society and the natural environment were no longer the community's support, local arts and culture became less important because they were unable to adapt or create added value in the modern capitalist society.

4.4) The creation of value and meaning of Kantang Railway station before the rise of tourism trend by anongnat Rattichot and Ketthawa Boonprakarn

This article aimed to explore the creation of value and meaning of Kantang Railway Station before the rise of tourism. A phenomenological research method was utilized using in-depth interviews conducted with 13 informants. The data were analyzed by categorizing, interpreting and summarizing before being descriptively presented. The study found that, in the past, Kantang Railway Station was valued and defined as a place for goods transport, travel, social gatherings, and commerce. It was the final railway station on the Andaman side and historically renowned as a prosperous central point on the western coast. Over time, Kantang Railway Station declined in its role, but due to its significant meaning and value in the memory of people in the community, stakeholders have developed the station into a cultural tourist attraction.

Research proposition

Values, beliefs, lifestyles, occupations, environments, culture and traditions and the location of Thungsong Junction Railway Station created specific identity of the community around the railway station.

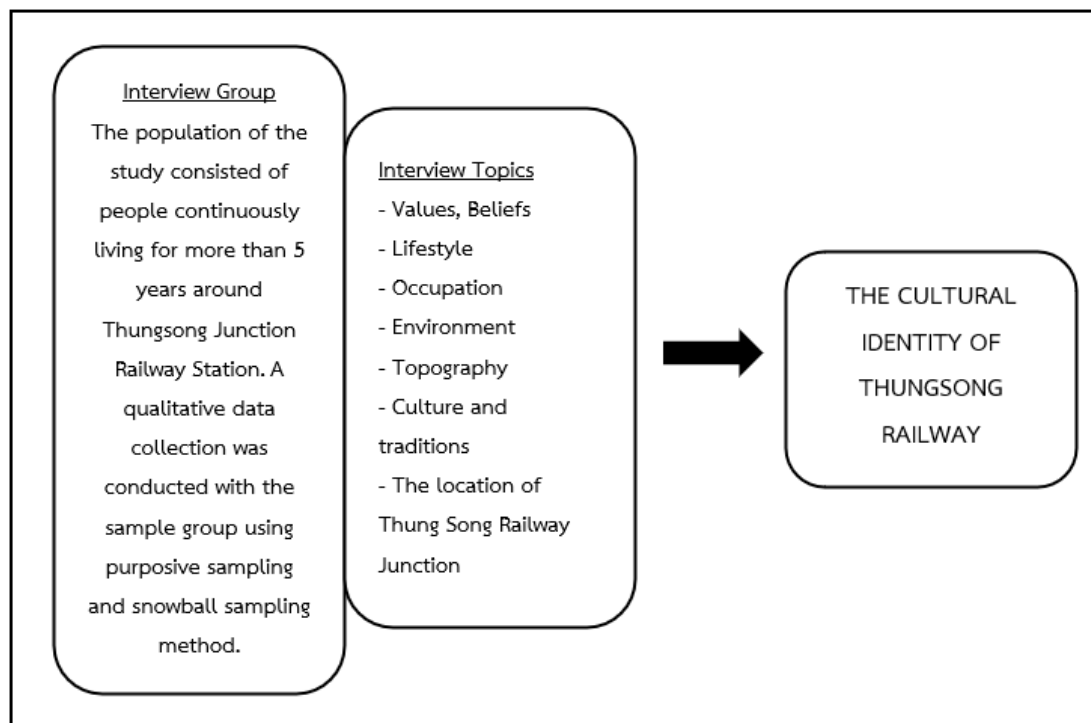


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Research methodology

Population and samples

The population of the study consisted of people continuously living for more than 5 years around Thungsong Junction Railway Station (within a 3 kilometer radius around Thungsong Junction Railway Station). A qualitative data collection was conducted with both males and females whose age was 25 and older. Samples were selected using a specific sample selection method without relying on the principle of probability. The snowball sampling method was also utilized for the interviews until the complete data was obtained.

Research instruments

The instrument used in this research comprised a structured interview form developed by the researchers, based on the objectives, theories, conceptual frameworks appearing in Figure 1 and related research studies. It contained two parts as follows:

Part 1 of the interview aimed to seek for participants' background information, including gender, age, length of

residence in Thungsong District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, occupation and education level.

Part 2 of the interview explored participants' opinions on topics which included the name of Thungsong, the way of life around Thungsong Junction Railway Station, the cultural identity of Thungsong junction platform, the importance of preserving this cultural identity and conserving culture, tradition or values of people living around the station, occupations of people living around the station, the influence of the railway station on Thungsong people's way of life, a development of the cultural identity of the junction platform and additional suggestions.

Data analysis and statistics

A computerized analysis was carried out with the interviewees' general information from part 1 using a ready-made research program for social science research. Part 2 information which was the sample group's interview responses was compiled, analyzed and summarized

impartially using Content Analysis to obtain conclusions hidden in the interview responses in order to understand

the key factors of the emergence of the Thungsong Platform's cultural identity.

Table 1 Interview respondents' general demographic information

General information	Number N = 50	Percentage
1. Gender		
Female	32	64.00
Male	18	36.00
Total	50	100.00
2. Occupation		
Business owner	19	38.00
Merchant	11	22.00
Housemaid	6	12.00
State enterprise employee	6	12.00
Government official	4	8.00
Worker	2	4.00
Agriculturist	1	2.00
Retired government official	1	2.00
Total	50	100.00
3. Education level		
Primary school	13	26.00
Secondary school	9	18.00
Vocational certificate	10	20.00
Bachelor's degree	17	34.00
Master's degree and above	1	2.00
Total	50	100.00
4. Length of time living in the area around Thungsong Junction Railway Station		
5 - 20 years	8	16.00
21 - 40 years	23	46.00
41 - 60 years	12	24.00
More than 60 years	7	14.00
Total	50	100.00

Results

The interview respondents were people living in Thungsong District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, within a radius of no more than 3 kilometers from Thungsong Junction Railway Station and living in the area around Thung Song Junction Railway Station for more than 5 consecutive years. The snowball sampling method was employed to get 50 respondents. Interviews were conducted with these 50 respondents until sufficient information was gathered. Their general demographic information was demonstrated below.

In the study of the origin of the name "Thungsong," most respondents accounting for 26 people, or 52.00% did not know its origin since it has been in use for a long time.

As for the respondents who knew the origin, they said that the name came from the concept of transportation because the area once was a field where people came to deliver goods. Some said it was a place where materials were gathered for the construction of Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan in Nakhon Si Thammarat. Others said it was a field used for sending food supplies during times of war as it was often a route for military troops. Later, the area became a central hub for goods delivery owing to the presence of the railway used by people in the past as a main goods transportation route. This group consisted of 22 respondents or 44.00%. There were only 2 respondents or 4.00%, who knew the origin of the name mentioned that it used to be Pak Praek Sub-district Municipality. The

origin of the name is therefore believed to come from the characteristics of the area which was a field called “Thong” by local people. When people came to deliver goods or items, it was likely called “Thong Song” which later on was phonetically changed to “Thungsong,” as it is known today. Therefore, according to Stryker and Berg’s theory of identity, which defines identity as a small unit in sociological studies related to the matter of attitudes towards the self or identity, it can be concluded that local people see Thungsong’s identity as being a center of transportation, particularly the rail system. This belief influences their way of life and is reflected in the name of the city which has a meaning related to transportation.

Concerning the way of life around Thungsong Junction Railway Station, most respondents stated that it was a Chinese community engaging in trade. This information was given by 19 respondents, accounting for 38.00%. The second most common response, from 13 people or 26.00%, said that it was a community with many people working in the transportation sector who frequently relocated their residence. Additionally, respondents mentioned that it was the community where people were generous and helped one another. People had a relaxing lifestyle and easy way to make a living. It was an ordinary community with a semi-urban, semi-rural character. Original local people often sold their land in the area and moved to buy farmland on the outskirts. Those who later purchased land here were often Chinese traders who were industrious and possessed a clever thought about business. Another group was railway workers who moved in for work convenience. Once the railway station was established, it brought about a large number of people who traveled, stopped to rest, shopped or visited the area. This made the area around Thungsong Junction Railway Station ideal for trade. Popular goods sold were food and beverages to offer convenience to train passengers during their journey. In the past, local people in this area were very generous, helpful, and supportive of one another. Although nowadays, people tend to be more individualistic and the community becomes semi-urban and semi-rural, the economy in Thungsong has consistently remained strong, comparing to that of other areas. This is because it is a transportation hub and a center

for government offices, educational institutions, and various industrial factories.

Regarding the cultural identity of Thungsong Junction Railway Station platform, the questionnaire respondents accounting for 22 people or 44.00% expressed that the symbols of Thungsong’s identity were the railway station and local trading activities. The next most common opinion, from 7 people or 14.00%, identified Talot Cave as an identity of Thungsong. Another 6 people (12.00%) mentioned that the Clock Tower Roundabout represented the city’s identity. Other responses pointed out that Thungsong’s identity could be identified by King Rama V Public Park, Yong Waterfall, Wat Khao Preedi, the steam locomotive, Thungsong fresh market, the Siam Commercial Bank building, and the Giant Pot of Thai rice noodles Festival. To conclude, the cultural identity of Thungsong junction platform is its being a junction hub with a busy traffic of a large number of people. It is considered a strategic travel point as it is a junction connecting to many provinces. It marks the beginning of the southern railway routes that branch out in various directions. It serves as a transition point for train staff, hosts various railway-related offices, and functions as a goods distribution center. The local people’s way of life is, therefore, deeply related to Thungsong Junction Railway Station. This finding can be explained in accordance with Julian H. Steward’s Cultural Ecology Theory, which defines ecology as an adaptation to the environment by focusing on how material culture is adopted differently and how various forms of social managements are created. Economic activities and the platform’s role as a goods distribution center are connected to the cultural core defined by Steward. These activities and role have influenced Thungsong people for a long time, from the past to the present.

In terms of culture, traditions, and values of the people living around Thungsong Junction Railway Station, 35 people or 70.00% which was the largest number of respondents identified traditional festivals, such as Chak Phra (a Buddhist float procession) and Loy Krathong (a lantern-floating festival) as vital cultural features. The next common response from 6 people or

12. 00% indicated specific festivals held only in Thungsong, such as the Giant Pot of Thai Rice Noodles Festival and Children's Day event where children were given a free train ride in order to pay respects to the sacred at Wat That Noi in Changklang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat. Four people accounting for 8. 00% highlighted the culture of train travel. Other comments included local trade practices, merit-making at temples on important days, and respect for seniority. In sum, the culture, traditions, and values of the people in Thungsong arise from religion, way of life and a connection with the railway transport system. Those culture and traditions related to important Buddhist traditions include Chak Phra procession, the Giving Fire ritual, Loy Krathong, and Songkran festival. Additionally, due to the large number of Thai-Chinese residents in Thungsong, Chinese New Year and the Vegetarian Festival are also significant and celebrated annually. Thungsong also has a distinct culinary identity, especially the popularity of eating Thai rice noodles (Khanom Jeen), leading to the presence of a lot of Thai rice noodles shops. This popularity creates the Giant Pot of Thai Rice Noodles Festival, which has been held continuously for over 10 years. Moreover, because of the community's deep connection with rail travel, there are train-related cultural traditions, such as a train ride event on Children's Day, where kids are given a free special train round trip from Thungsong to Chandi and enjoy scenic views. This experience can help instill children's connection to rail travel. This finding is in line with Franz Boas's Cultural Diffusion Theory, which emphasizes that "cultural diffusion is the process by which the main characteristics of one culture spread to another by adapting to the new culture". In this case, a new culture that children can enjoy and absorb the experience of the train journey has just arrived after the rail system was established in Thungsong.

With respect to the economy and occupations of the people living around Thungsong Junction Railway Station, most respondents mentioned that people in the area still primarily engaged in trade as they did in the past. This was the response of 23 people, accounting for 46.00%. The next group, 8 people or 16.00%, stated that

the current economy in Thungsong was more sluggish than in the past. However, another group of 5 people accounting for 10.00% thought that the economy was currently better than it was before. Other opinions revealed that fewer people now worked in transportation and railway-related jobs, and the issues of gambling and drug use decreased. There was a change in occupation from trading to employment in government offices and private companies. In summary, the main occupation of the people, especially those living around Thungsong Junction Railway Station do for their living is trade. The most commonly sold goods are food and beverages, available in front of the station, on the platform, and even carried onto the trains by vendors, all of which are considered a unique charm of Thungsong Junction. Apart from trading, many people work in railway-related jobs, and there is a row of railway staff houses located in front of the station. There are also people working as government officials, teachers, and company employees because there are many government offices, educational institutions and industrial factories in Thungsong.

Regarding the influence of Thungsong Junction Railway Station on local residents' way of life, most of the respondents (25 people or 50.00%) mentioned that the railway station made traveling much more convenient. Another 21 people (42.00%) said that the presence of the station improved people's job opportunities and income. A small number of respondents thought that the railway station had no impact on the community life and caused noise pollution. The fact that Thungsong was once rice fields and later became the hub of travel and rail transportation in the South after the construction of Thungsong Junction Railway Station led to changes in lifestyle and culture. This transformed the agricultural city into an urban city focused on trade and services in order to meet the needs of railway passengers. This finding could be supported by Everett M. Rogers' Cultural Diffusion Theory which stated that, "Most of the social changes are caused by the spread of culture from the outside rather than by inventions within society".

With regard to the development of "the cultural identity of Thungsong junction platform," the majority of the respondents which were 36 people or 72.00% wanted

to have the landscape improved. Another 8 people (16.00%) suggested encouraging all sectors' cooperation in developing the area. Additional suggestions were constructing a community product center and focusing on preserving local traditions and culture.

Pertaining to further suggestions, most respondents accounting for 10 people or 20.00% wanted to have the old railway staff houses renovated because they were considered outstanding and attractive features of Thungsong Junction Railway Station. Another 9 people accounting for 18.00% suggested improving the city's landscape. Seven people (14.00%) proposed organizing the community, such as shops, markets, and walkways. Other suggestions included improving cleanliness, transportation systems, restoring important landmarks, like Talot Cave, and preventing flooding problems in the community.

Conclusion and recommendations

The identity of the city as a rail transportation center since the past should be highlighted as a key feature of cultural tourism. Studying lifestyles, culture, and dining, as well as creating attractive check-in points should attract more tourists and encourage repeat visits, which could help stimulate the city's economy.

Future research on the platform culture of Thungsong should focus on how the existing spatial potential and cultural resources can help promote its tourism and economy, especially if the rail transportation system begins to decline in popularity.

Limitations of the research

A large number of elderly people who used to live in Thungsong, especially those living around Thungsong Junction Railway Station, have migrated out of the area. Most of them sold their land to a group of traders and moved to the outskirts for farming, and some of them have passed away. Consequently, it is necessary to interview 50 people in order to obtain adequate information.

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