

**CURRENT ISSUES IN TOURISM:
THAILAND AND BEYOND
INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE**

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Tourism studies as a definable field of study is now experiencing something of an impasse. There have been recent attempts to rejuvenate and redefine it, and to rescue it from the dominance of Euro-American perspectives in the analysis of the tourist experience and of cultural encounters generated by and derived from Western travellers on holiday and at play in countries other than their own. In this regard, tourism has been seen increasingly in the context of what has been referred to as the "mobilities" paradigm, particularly in sociological approaches. In other words, tourism as a discretionary form of travel to seek relaxation, pleasure, leisure and new experiences is now seen as one kind of mobility among other kinds of movement from one place to another (Urry 2000, 2007). It is also argued that this approach helps remove tourism studies from Eurocentric perspectives and it enables tourism studies to widen its range and to address new and emerging tourisms including long-stay, retirement, visiting friends and family, business and conventions, and volunteering, among others (Cohen and Cohen 2012, 2014; King and Porananond 2014: 1–21).

The early focus on Western tourists visiting other places, often in less developed or emerging countries, which could provide sun, sand, sea, shopping (and in the case of some tourist sites, sex), encouraged researchers in the developing field of tourism studies to examine issues of inequality and economic, social and cultural exploitation. It also gave rise to a set of concepts which were more relevant to a western leisure experience: Urry's influential "tourist gaze," MacCannell's seminal proposition of "staged authenticity," Graburn's excursion into rites of transition and the anthropological concept of a "sacred journey," and Nash's economic underdevelopment and globalisation thesis of "tourism as a form of imperialism," among others (Urry 2002, 1993, 1995; Urry and Larsen 2012; MacCannell 1973, 1999; Graburn 1989; Nash 1989).

This special issue which comprises three broad conceptual presentations covering general issues, themes and concepts with reference to

Southeast Asian/Asian tourism (Victor King, David Harrison and T. C. Chang) and three chapters focusing specifically on dimensions of tourism in Thailand (Nara Huttasin, Hans Mommaas and Luuk Knippenberg; Ploysri Porananond; and Alexander Trupp) is based on papers delivered at an international conference on the theme of "Tourism and Development: Growth and Diversity," 29–30 August 2014, organised and led by Dr. Ploysri Porananond at the Centre for Tourism Studies and Academic Services at Chiang Mai University. It raises issues which address some of the current debates about tourism but then locates general conceptual issues within particular studies of the effects of tourism development in Thailand, which has been and remains a major and formative site of international tourism activity in Southeast Asia. One of the main concerns of this special issue is to explore the rise of domestic or intra-Asian travel rather than international travel from Western countries to Asia and to view with some scepticism attempts to construct theoretical schemes or paradigms in attempts to address and understand the tourist experience.

Victor King's opening article entitled "Substantive and Conceptual Issues in Tourism Research in Southeast Asia: A Personal Engagement" addresses the recent deliberations on the future direction of tourism research, and among other matters, considers Erik Cohen's and Scott Cohen's important paper (2012) which identifies seven dominant themes in current tourism studies: the first two comprise social justice and environmental sustainability—one socio-cultural and the other natural; overall these themes can be encapsulated in the increasing concerns about ethical, responsible and informed tourism, inclusion, equality and consultation.

The next two themes embrace the unpredictable (natural disasters and terrorism)—those events which can destroy or at least seriously undermine a tourism site. The next theme is heritage tourism which has become increasingly important in the context of government, NGO and civil society concerns about local and national heritage and the intervention of UNESCO and other international bodies in the protection and conservation of global heritage. The sixth theme identified is that of embodiment and effect, drawing attention to the fact that the tourist gaze has been superseded by the inclusion of the full range of bodily or sensory experiences in tourism encounters. Finally, there is the theme of "mediatisation" embracing the creation by the tourist industry of imaginary places, and the importance of simulacra and symbolisation in the tourist experience.

However, what the author has argued elsewhere (see, for example King 2015) is that, rather than the concept of mobility, the issues listed above can be understood in terms of the very straightforward notions of

encounter and interaction. The issue of social justice and the ethics of tourism development and activities (of inclusion, equality, participation and consultation) can be explained in relation to the encounters between those who are exploited and marginalised and those who benefit from tourism. Responsible and informed tourism can be achieved as part of educative engagements; in other words the concept of encounter is important in understanding the relationships between those who inform, instruct and advise and those to whom information and guidance is disseminated.

How is sustainability in tourism addressed? Presumably in the arena in which tourists engage with nature and the communities they visit. How are unpredictable and unanticipated natural and political events analysed? Presumably by addressing the ways in which hosts and guests encounter, interact with and respond to these events. It is not merely that there is engagement with natural and human-derived crises but also with those who are involved in these shared experiences. Furthermore, at the heart of our understanding of heritage tourism is the need to address the complex interactions and encounters between the multiple interest groups and stakeholders involved in the construction, selection, interpretation, representation, deployment, conservation and transformation of heritage, in both its tangible and intangible forms.

As for the next theme, embodiment is all about encounter and interaction. If you are expressing bodily reactions or you are involved in a touristic experience using a range of sensory devices then you are doing this in relation to others and/or material things out there. And finally, with regard to "mediatisation" the focus has to be on the relation between tourists and the images and imaginaries, and the symbols and representations of tourist assets. Furthermore, the interpretation of them must also be about engagements and encounters between those who access, receive and interpret and those who create and disseminate messages as well as engagements with the messages themselves.

Erik and Scott Cohen also propose a paradigm shift to overcome the impasse in the study of tourism and the dominance of Eurocentrism (2014). They pitch this primarily at the theoretical level. For them, what it means for tourism studies is that it becomes absorbed into a wider paradigm of "mobilities." They also refer to Syed Farid Alatas' call for the need for "alternative discourses," which argues for the development of non-Western perspectives, an Asian logic and intelligibility, underpinned by the need to indigenise (or in this case Asianise) the social sciences (2006; and see Alneng 2002). However, the author remains sceptical about the possibility of the emergence of new paradigms, though in empirical terms the author has already argued, along with others, that it is imperative to encourage

much more research by Asians on Asia and fully recognise Asian agendas (see Porananond and King 2014).

In this connection, if the author refers back to earlier debates in Southeast Asian studies, then we have been addressing calls for local or Asian theories and approaches since the 1960s at least (King 2001). The author does not think that these have yet emerged. On the empirical level, indeed there are opportunities to present and emphasise local interests, views, priorities and interpretations. Reminiscent of the very early post-war debates about the importance of moving away from Western-centred perspectives and constructing autonomous or domestic histories of Southeast Asia, we can of course agree with Tim Winter (2008, 2009) and his colleagues (see Winter et al. 2008) that we need "to centre" or "re-centre" scholarship from Asia, write histories of Asian tourism, build institutional support in Asia for the critical study of Asian tourism, address the imbalances between particular countries in Asia, and feed critical thinking into policy-making. However, the development of "grounded theory and alternative discourses," as Winter himself notes, appears to be "the trickiest issue of all" (2008: 322). But, in response, do we require a paradigm shift to address these issues? The author suggests, in the first paper in this special issue that, rather than new paradigms and alternative discourses, we can continue to address these encounters and experiences in terms of the social science concepts currently available to us, although of course, where necessary, with suitable cross-cultural and contextual modification and qualification.

David Harrison, in his paper entitled "Development Theory and Tourism in Developing Countries: What Has Theory Ever Done for Us?" expresses a similar scepticism in relation to the relevance of theory or paradigms, in this case development theory, to research on tourism. Harrison suggests that, although relatively little research into the processes and effects of tourism has been based specifically on modernisation theory, the alternative discourses of world systems, underdevelopment and dependency theory have often been the basis of academic critiques of tourism as a tool for development. Nevertheless, these criticisms have rarely been taken up by policy-makers and governments, though popularised versions have been adopted by groups and movements opposed, in particular, to mass tourism (and capitalism). He further argues that while tourism sustainability is an obviously positive objective neither alternative tourism development nor sustainable tourism development are models or theories, and to award them the status of paradigms is mistaken. Overall he proposes that the days of grand theory in development studies are, in any case, over and that the agenda is now dominated by lower level concerns

such as poverty alleviation, gender equality and basic needs—"a theoretically-informed empiricism."

Harrison then suggests that if we reach this conclusion then for those involved in tourism research they have to rethink their current position and the future of research in this field. To this end he presents four important propositions: (1) Capitalism and international tourism will continue for the foreseeable future. He says, "Those who study and carry out research on international tourism need to be realistic. We must assume that international tourism will continue to expand. In addition, irrespective of our own ideologies, it is equally necessary to accept that virtually all tourism is going to be promoted through *some form or another* of capitalism"; (2) Large-scale [mass] tourism will continue to be the norm. He says, "Mass tourism dates back to the mid-nineteenth century and, in many respects, the processes through which it then occurred in developed societies are currently being repeated in developing societies"; (3) Alternative tourism is normally linked to and often dependent on mass tourism and will never replace it. He says, "[M]ost 'alternative tourism' is as capitalistic as mass tourism and, depending on definitions, might often be a *variant* of mass tourism," and citing Weaver, "circumstantial alternative tourism (CAT)—remains small in scale only as a result of 'pre-development dynamics, and not as a consequence of deliberate planning decisions and management decisions'" (2001: 164). Furthermore, "much alternative tourism not only supplements mass tourism... but is dependent upon it... [and] it seems obvious that small-scale versions of alternative tourism will never replace mass tourism!"; and finally (4) International tourism is a cross-border activity linking individuals and institutions in developed and developing societies and needs to be conceptualised as operating in an international and systemic way. He says, "[I]t is no longer appropriate to focus on 'development' or, to use a more neutral term, social change, only in relation to developing societies... [r]egions within the 'developed' world are equally avid in seeking to increase tourist arrivals, the operation of many of the institutions involved, for example, transnational companies, criss-cross national boundaries, and the processes through which they operate are similar (or, at least, comparable) wherever they occur, involving both global processes and local reactions."

On the basis of these propositions, Harrison constructs a "working model" of international tourism, one which incorporates the social, political and economic structures of the societies which generate tourists and those that receive them, as well as the role and structure of the tourist in these societies. He also includes the important variable of the nature of these societies in that this will affect, and in turn be affected by the emergence of

tourism, tourist motivations, the variations in types of tourism, and the support for these different types of tourism in the hospitality, facilities and attractions provided. These developments in tourism provision are, in turn, reflected in the impact of tourism in destination societies, which includes the encounters and interactions between different kinds of tourists and residents or hosts. Finally, Harrison applies his proposals to some of the dimensions and elements of tourism development in ASEAN.

In the third general paper by T. C. Chang entitled "The Asian Wave and Critical Tourism Scholarship" we return to the theme of the rapid and substantial increase in domestic tourism and intra-Asian travel and their revenue generation potential, a theme pursued by Chang and his co-editors, Tim Winter and Peggy Teo earlier in an important book which served to re-orient some of our thinking about tourism in Asia and its future directions (2008). As Chang demonstrates in a very obvious and statistical way, it is clear that Asians are on the move and more so than ever in seeking new experiences and relaxation, and for business and the search for sites for longer term sojourn, among other things; the mainland Chinese in particular are traversing Southeast Asia in large numbers. Chang therefore challenges, with reference to post-colonial critiques, the approaches and analyses which have been framed in terms of Western tourism experiences and presented as characteristic of universal tourism patterns and processes. His interesting and pertinent example of backpackers in Bangkok's Khao San Road, its earlier domination and shaping by young non-Asian, primarily Western and Australian travellers, and the changes introduced when young Asians become involved in the same experience, but with different expectations, behaviours and motivations, is a case in point. But he also warns against homogenising the category of "Asian young backpacker"; it is not a unitary category.

Pursuing this line of reasoning he argues for a critical Asian/Southeast Asian tourism scholarship which consolidates research in the "Asianisation" of this field of studies. But Chang also warns against the proposition that Asian tourism is fundamentally different from Western tourism and that we should then simply discard those concepts and approaches which emerged from these earlier preoccupations. Although he tends towards the view that a new Asian tourism is emerging which requires a reorientation in our concepts and analyses, he emphasises that he does not wish to simply abandon those concepts and ideas which were generated in earlier tourism research and which still have or might have utility. His careful consideration of the need to retain a balance between what is useful from past research and what is developing from current research suggests

again that we are not witnessing necessarily a paradigm shift in tourism studies on Asia.

He then contextualises this Asian-centred perspective by arguing that a "geography-matters" approach is important in the study of tourism in that post-colonialism raises questions about Western-generated tourism knowledge and concepts in addressing Asia, but the "geography-matters" approach emphasises the significance of local context and helps explain tourism outcomes, and differences and similarities across sites. Chang says, "[H]ow and why tourism develops in a particular manner (along with its impacts) depends on *where* it develops. Best practices in eco-tourism or dark tourism will thus be translated differently in different geographic locales because place-based factors—local state policies, community needs and interests, role of labour force and unions, or even local climates, histories, resources, etc.—all affect development plans and outcomes in their unique configurations." More importantly, this approach encourages a focus on local agency "in subverting, negotiating or abetting tourism development." Yet again his grounded approach in geography and his commitment to identifying particular sites of tourism activity suggests that he is not promoting a paradigm shift, even though he supports the move to a more Asia-centred tourism research agenda.

The three papers which follow focus specifically on Thailand and address particular issues in tourism in the northern and north-eastern regions of the country. They explore the potential for regional development in the north-eastern region (Isan) through the improved management and coordination of tourism businesses and activities; the ways in which tourist commoditisation transforms elements of traditional culture to do with cuisine in the northern city of Chiang Mai, which has become an important tourist centre; and finally how the Akha, an ethnic minority from the northern uplands, operating first of all as small-scale sellers of souvenirs, have successfully incorporated themselves into the tourism economy of Chiang Mai and then extended their activities to other tourist sites in the capital city Bangkok and in the tourist resorts of south Thailand.

First, Nara Huttasin's, Hans Mommaas's and Luuk Knippenberg's paper evaluates tourism development in the Isan region of Thailand focusing on Ubon Ratchathani. Overall, Thailand has enjoyed a relatively high level of success in tourism development and marketing, but the benefits have been unequal in regional terms, in that the north and south of the country have done well but the Isan region continues to lag behind, although it offers cultural and ethnic diversity and a number of cultural heritage sites. To address this problem, the government of Thailand has launched the "Amazing Isan" campaign to replicate the successful 1997

"Amazing Thailand" campaign and to promote Isan as an inexpensive destination. This involves using tourism as a means to generate regional development by supporting tourism promotion and marketing, establishing tourism information centres, and improving infrastructure and accessibility by, for example, the development of the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) project to build roads linking Thailand to Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam.

Nara Huttasin et al. deploy Michael E. Porter's so-called "Diamond model" which examines international competition from a microeconomic perspective (1990) to analyse tourism economic development in this region of Thailand in a competitive market. The model is used to draw attention to the issue of the competitiveness of regional tourism which in turn requires an efficient utilisation of resources by turning "unused" regional resources into "experience" products and hence economic outputs. According to Nara et al., the "experience" products comprise the service values delivered to tourists and the efficient management of such regional resources as the natural landscape, cultural heritage sites, the existing local small-scale economy and the production process with which tourism firms engage such as transport, accommodation, catering, providing information and organising tours, sight-seeing and entertainment.

Nara, Mommaas and Knippenberg argue that tourism development in Isan is still at a much lower level than it should be because it faces a number of constraints: among others, tourism entrepreneurs give insufficient attention to the quality of human resources, the use of existing knowledge resources, and the utilisation of more capital resources to improve product quality; there is also the lack of a skilled tourism workforce having language and technical skills and hospitality, service and human resource training; there is little coordination in the tourism value chain to enhance the quality of tourism services so that there is greater recognition of tourism activities in Isan by international tourism providers; and finally there is inadequate cooperation between the public and private sectors to coordinate labour supply and to identify market opportunities and threats so that the private sector can compete more effectively.

Implementing a more targeted economic information system is essential in that Nara et al.'s research reveals that the lack of data, together with the scattered and fragmented information available, make it difficult to assess the current status of tourism development in Ubon Ratchathani and the wider Isan region. The study suggests that a coordinated information system might facilitate the decision-making process of policy-makers and related parties so that there is a much more considered and strategic approach to the development of regional tourism in collating, targeting and

disseminating relevant economic and business information on tourism and on identifying and taking advantage of the expanding opportunities in the Greater Mekong Sub-region.

Ploysri Porananond's paper focuses on the transformation and construction of the Khun Tok Dinner as a tourist asset in the northern city of Chiang Mai. Although the Khun Tok refers specifically to a traditional round, low table which was used for serving meals in the ancient Lanna Kingdom, of which Chiang Mai was the capital, it so happened that in 1953, it gave its name to a form of modern party that used the traditional utensil as an appropriate symbol of Lanna culture. This marked the beginning of the transformation of Lanna traditional cuisine and the Khun Tok into a modern style dinner for upper class Chiang Mai residents. Later, this construction of the Khun Tok Dinner was then imitated by local Buddhist groups to host visitors to Chiang Mai. However, in the context of the subsequent development of tourism and the establishment of the Cultural Centre of Old Chiang Mai in 1975, the Khun Tok Dinner increasingly became a tourist attraction. Dancing in traditional costumes was also introduced and in this process of increasing commercialisation only easily cooked Lanna dishes were made available and a limited menu provided, despite the fact that the traditional Lanna cuisine was very varied. Khun Tok Dinner restaurants were then established in the city of Chiang Mai explicitly to cater for the expanding tourism market.

It took only around 60 years for this transformation to take place. From 1953 when the Khun Tok Dinner was established by a prominent citizen of Chiang Mai, Mr Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda, to welcome his friends to a special event; today it is used to welcome tourists and other customers to the special Khun Tok restaurants in the city. What we also witness here in the process of the touristification of an original cuisine is what we might term a "double transformation." The Khun Tok Dinner was the product of a constructed event in the early 1950s, which drew on certain elements of Lanna culture. It was then further appropriated by the Cultural Centre in Chiang Mai to become a "signifier" of Lanna culture but also a cultural experience designed for tourists. And subsequently it became incorporated as part of the general tourist encounter of Lanna culture in Chiang Mai.

Ploysri Porananond demonstrates through her historical analysis of this element of Lanna culture how a traditional artefact can become the symbol of an invented tradition in the context of the development of tourism. Its original meaning and importance has therefore been lost in its transformation into a cultural attraction for tourists. It is used deliberately to symbolise the "otherness" of Lanna culture and to express the identity of

Chiang Mai as a centre for the celebration of Lanna culture for tourists. Ploysri's paper also provides a valuable contribution to the developing field of study which focuses on the relationship between tourism, food (its ingredients, combinations, styles) and culture.

Finally, Alexander Trupp examines ethnic minority souvenir businesses in Thailand and their expansion into Thailand's urban and beachside tourist areas such as Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Phuket and Koh Samui. As a case study, it focuses on Akha street vendors who have moved, either on a temporary or permanent basis, into some of Thailand's major tourist sites to sell souvenirs. Trupp's paper also considers Akha migratory processes which have been directed to Thailand's urban tourist areas in order to analyse agency perspectives of these small-scale entrepreneurs as well as their integration into social, political and economic structures.

Trupp indicates that several transformations in the highlands such as land-loss, destruction of traditional village structures, improvements in transport, and the development of international tourism encouraged Akha to move into the souvenir business; and these opportunities gave the Akha spaces to become more entrepreneurial by taking over production, distribution and the adaptation of their products in response to tourist demand. To achieve these objectives they then activated social relations with neighbouring ethnic groups, deploying their social capital for souvenir and raw material acquisition and the transfer of information relevant for business start-ups. The ethnic minority souvenir businesses were initiated by external actors but it paved the way for an increasing number of Akha who have gone into business for themselves and then moved to other tourist areas in the south.

For most sellers, Chiang Mai was the starting point, facilitated by transportation improvements so that the distance between Chiang Mai and the northern Akha villages was no longer relevant. Today, the Akha vendor social networks have further expanded and facilitated an extension of Akha souvenir businesses to Bangkok and beachside destinations. There are popular sales areas in Chiang Mai night bazaar and the Khao San road in Bangkok which afford the opportunity for migrants to meet and exchange experiences about sales conditions throughout the country. Akha vendors have become part of the country's tourist and commercial landscape, but their work is neither formally recognised by state institutions nor supported by NGOs.

Trupp argues that though economic pressure and livelihood survival seem to be the main factors explaining Akha involvement in the tourism business and migration, non-economic factors are also important, including rather negative previous employment experiences which have led to the

desire for occupational independence, the possibility to live a life together with a partner, the chance to escape individual or communal histories, and the desire to experience something new. Therefore, Trupp demonstrates that the case of Akha migration into urban and beachside tourist sites have been generated by more than a purely economic survival strategy as neoclassical migration theory has argued.

The three case studies illustrate again the importance of detailed empirical material to engage with local responses to the opportunities which tourism offers in the outer regions of Thailand. Even Nara Huttasin's use of the Porter model demonstrates that it is a relatively low level conceptual tool rather than a paradigm, whilst the papers by Ploysri Porananond and Alexander Trupp provide evidence of local initiatives in inventing traditions and selling souvenirs. It is the author's view that both the general papers and the case studies suggest that a paradigm shift in tourism studies is an unlikely outcome in the near future. We must, however, most certainly shift our focus to Asian tourism within Asia, and to domestic tourism within nation-states within Asia. However, in the author's view, which is supported by the papers in this special issue, this refocused research agenda does not require a new or alternative theoretical or paradigmatic discourse. Relationships, encounters, behaviours, representation, imaging and symbolisation, can be appropriately addressed by well-established, low-level social science concepts, which do not have the status of theories or paradigms.

NOTES

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Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia (Copenhagen: NIAS Press and Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press [2010]); with Park Seung Woo *The Historical Construction of Southeast Asian Studies* (Singapore: ISEAS Press [2013]); with Ploysri Porananond, *Rethinking Asian Tourism: Culture, Encounters and Local Response* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing [2014]); and a sole-edited volume *UNESCO in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative Perspective* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press [2015]).

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