Encountering the new "Other": Domestic tourism in Thailand

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ABSTRACT: In Thailand, one of the world's leading tourist destinations, Thais are no longer merely "hosts" to foreign tourists but also to their compatriots who have become tourists themselves. The rising significance of domestic tourism reveals the need to critically rethink notions of the familiar and the strange in tourism studies. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Northeastern Thailand, I argue that Othering is not limited to transnational host-guest-interactions. In the small town I studied domestic tourist encounters were similarly embedded in power relations, namely in the dominant discourses of urban-rural relations in contemporary Thailand. Nostalgic feelings have opened up the countryside as a pleasurable amenity for city dwellers seeking relaxation from work and unbearable urban conditions. Their rural hosts, however, disliked the Other from the city against whom even Western tourists appeared familiar.

Introduction

For Asia, a "mobile future" (Winter 2009, 315) has been predicted. The steady increase in domestic tourist trips in Thailand is part of this development. In one of the world's leading tourist destinations Thais are no longer merely "hosts" to international "tourists", they have themselves entered the global stage of tourism performances. They are no longer merely the exotic Other of the Western (*farang*) tourists' "gaze" (Urry 2002) but have themselves taken their cameras and view their own country through the lens of tourism. Furthermore, as hosts, they no longer observe and judge the behavior of only Western and, increasingly, Asian tourists. As hosts, Thais, more and more, face interaction with their fellow compatriots.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork[1] in a small Northeastern town I argue against implicit assumptions underlying tourism studies which denied a relative difference between hosts and guests in domestic tourism. I show that, to Thai hosts, Thai tourists are not more familiar than the foreign tourists. The domestic tourism encounter was embedded in powerful notions of urban-rural relations in contemporary Thailand. By looking at these host-guest interactions, albeit place-specific (Chan 2009), I argue that domestic tourism produces its own surprising notions of the "Other".

Thailand: The foreign tourists' other

Thailand is a tourist destination par excellence. Ever since American GIs began coming for "rest and recreation" in the 1960s the number of international tourist arrivals has increased year by year (except for occasional short-term declines). In 2016, visitor statistics exceeded the 30 million mark for the first time. Each successive government has not only made an effort to ensure this important source of foreign revenue and create job opportunities but has also endeavored to "govern" the foreign gaze (Morrison 2013). Against simplistic Western representations of Thailand as the "Land of Smiles" (Kortländer 2000), it sought an image that was much more diversified than the exotic, and particularly erotic, Other. Exotic temples remained an important symbolic asset but the vicious connotations of sex tourism were to be replaced by natural, historic, ethnic as well as modern cosmopolitan attractions. Heterogenization also emerged regarding the tourists' origins. The continuously growing influx has increasingly been generated by the Asian market (Cohen 1996, 2001). Of the 32.59 million international visitors in 2016, two thirds (21,66 million) originated from East Asia. 8.76 million Chinese alone arrived in contrast to only 6.17 Europeans.[2] Their massive presence did not go unnoticed by those hosting them: Social media is rife with complaints about the inad-

2 These numbers are based on statistics published by the Department of Tourism of Thailand (http://tourism2.tourism.go.th/home/listcontent/11/221/276 [11.03.2017]).

equate behavior of this most lucrative national group (e.g. Austin 2015a, 2015b; Lefevre 2015).

Hosts on the move: Domestic tourism

Whereas international tourism has been actively promoted all along, primarily to boost economic development, domestic tourism has been treated with less priority. Domestic visitors were expected to generate less revenue due to their supposed lesser spending capacity (Cohen 2014a, 248; Peleggi 1996, 436). Initially, domestic tourism was encouraged to compensate for fluctuations in the international market. Worldwide economic crises, regional natural disasters like the tsunami of 2004 or domestic political instabilities in the last decade caused by the conflict between Red and Yellow Shirts were followed by fears of a decline in international arrivals and calls for domestic visitors to bridge the gap. Another gap, a spatial one, was to be filled by domestic tourism: To balance the expansion of international tourism on a "north-to-south 'tourism axis'" (Cohen 1996, 7) from Chiang Mai in the North via Bangkok to the islands in the South, domestic tourism flows were directed to the Northeastern provinces (Cohen 2014a, 248f; Lunda 2014, 409). Furthermore, a recurring theme in the promotion of domestic tourism has been the prevention of capital outflow. Instead of travelling and spending money abroad the Thai population was offered incentives to discover their own country (Kaosa-ard, Bezic, and White 2001, 131). For local tourists, sightseeing within Thailand nurtures identification with Thainess as it "involves feelings of loyalty to Buddhism, the monarchy and the nation" (Peleggi 2002, 69).

In its online history overview, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) mentions domestic travel for the first time in 2003 (TAT n.d.). In terms of numbers and revenue it has since then grown in significance. In 2016, domestic travel accounted for about one third of tourism revenue: Of the total earnings to the amount of 2.52 trillion Baht (US$ 71 billion) 866 billion Baht (US$ 24.53 billion) were generated by the domestic market alone (TAT 2017). Obviously, hosts have become tourists themselves.

Travel within the Siamese, or respectively Thai, "geo-body" (Thongchai 1994) is not a new phenomenon. In the 19th century the

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monarchy and royal elite established seaside and mountain resorts which later became popular holiday destinations for ordinary Thais. Visiting friends and relatives, pilgrimages to famous monasteries and merit-making trips have been occasions for travel ever since (Cohen 2014a, 246-248). However, it was not until the expansion of infra-structure, the development of new means of travel and the growth of a particular industry that "Thai citizens could really begin 'dreaming' of being tourists" (Evrard and Prasit 2009, 244). Heritage policies and the idealization of the rural also had a considerable influence on the development of modern mass travel (ibid.).

Table 1. Domestic trips.

Year	Number of trips (estimated)
1998	51,680,000
2007	83,230,000
2011	91,000,000
2012	93,000,000
2013	107,400,000
2014	136,800,000
2015	138,800,000
2016	145,000,000

Sources: 1998, 2007, 2011 from Cohen 2014a, 248; 2012 from TAT 2011, cited in Lunda 2014, 408; 2013 from TAT 2012, cited in Lunda 2014, 408; 2014 from TAT 2013; 2015 from TAT 2016; 2016 from TAT 2017. Figures for 2012, 2013 and 2014 are target numbers anticipated by the TAT.

Nostalgic gaze at the countryside

In Asia, most notably Japan (Creighton 1997; Graburn 1995; Iwabuchi 2002), the quest for leisure mobility has been boosted by nostalgic feelings. In Thailand, these sentiments have their roots in the tremendous industrialization and urbanization processes in the last quarter of the 20th century in which "[t]he balance of economy and society shifted decisively from rural to urban, and from parochial to

open and globalized" (Baker and Pasuk 2014, 199). "The changes," writes Thongchai (1995), "have been so fast, forceful and disruptive that the contrast between the past and present can be felt in every way. One consequence is social nostalgia" (117). Part of the resulting commodification of the past in museums, archives or historical parks was the popularization of local history by intellectuals such as Chatthip Nartsupha. As a critic of industrial progress he maintained that the Thai village economy and community have withstood state and capitalist forces. He embraced the village "as the site of hope, where the possibilities for transformational change could be found in self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and other communal values" (Reynolds 2013, 8; cf. Pasuk and Baker 2013; Chatthip 1999 [1984]).

His Community Culture school of thought gained strength during the Asian financial crisis in 1997 during which the Thai baht collapsed dramatically. In response to the intervention of the IMF, a nationalist movement of NGO activists, Buddhist monks and some business leaders opposed the liberalizing measures fearing Western encroachment at the expense of Thai communal values. The rejection of globalization and consumerism and the call for a return to rural self-reliance, which has been characterized as "localism" (Hewison 2000), gained further momentum from King Bhumibol's birthday speech: "Being a tiger is not important. What is important is to have enough to eat and to live; and to have an economy which provides enough to eat and live. … We have to live carefully and we have to go back to do things which are not complicated and which do not use elaborate, expensive equipment. We need to move backwards in order to move forwards" (Baker and Pasuk 2014, 260). The former King propagated an alternative economic order, "sufficiency economy" (*setthakit pho phiang*), which is based on rural autarchy, localized exchange of household surpluses and limited external exchange to gain access to resources and technology (Walker 2010).[3]

The nostalgic revaluation of the countryside found expression in popular culture and especially tourism. Formerly denigrated as the antithesis of modernity, the rural areas have increasingly been appreciated for their natural beauty, pristine Thainess and the slow pace of

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3 Various scholars have criticized the "sufficiency economy" for being inconsistent with local economic practice and for being politicized in discourses on urban-rural relations (Walker 2010; Elinoff 2014).

life that went missing in city life (Cohen 2014b; Evrard and Prasit 2009; Rigg and Ritchie 2002). Week-end forays to Bangkok's "recreational belt" (Cohen 2014a, 251) or to cultural and natural heritage sites have become a distinctive practice and status marker of urban middle classes who seek relaxation from work and unpleasant urban conditions (King and Parnwell 2011).

Modernity's other: An "ancient" northeastern town

With the reappraisal of the countryside, old market towns like Chiang Khan attracted attention as relics from good old times: "While the Thai middle classes were disparaging rural and small-town life as backward when it was still vital, that life became an attraction when its last, moribund relics have been "rediscovered", and turned into nostalgic reminders of a heritage, that had often been relentlessly destroyed in the name of progress. In the past decade, the very underdevelopment of these towns became an asset, turning them unexpectedly into major attractions for modern urban visitors" (Cohen 2014a, 251f; c.f. Cohen 2014b).

Chiang Khan, a small town in the Northeast on the border with Laos, had its first period of prosperity when cross-border trade on the Mekong flourished. It fell into oblivion when trade shifted from water to the street and the border to Laos was closed as a result of the communist revolution. Henceforth, livelihood opportunities and modernity's promises moved elsewhere, to Bangkok which is 600 km away. As in many other Northeastern villages families started to supplement earnings from agriculture with cash income. Many migrated to find work in Bangkok's factories leaving the elders and children behind (Mills 1997; 1999). Only after Thai urbanites discovered the charm of what since then has been promoted as an "ancient town" (*mueang boran*) did Chiang Khan revitalize. The town's "children and grandchildren", as it was frequently said, returned home opening small businesses in the tourism sector.

Before Chiang Khan rose to be one of the top destinations among Thai tourists only a few Western (*farang*) backpackers found their way there. They passed the village on the way to Nong Khai's international border crossing to Laos, taking a scenic road along the Mekong. A few guesthouses, some owned by *farang* themselves, opened to cater

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to them. But *farang* tourists have remained the exception. Weathered wooden shophouses had a greater appeal to Thais who were swayed by nostalgic discourses. Online networks and communities played a major role in circulating images of old timber facades, abandoned streets and elderly villagers lending nostalgia particular aesthetics. But not only tourists visualized a romantic image of the countryside and shared it in the social media. Those who opened guesthouses, cafés or shops stylized their estates to catch the photographic gaze.

Only within a few years has Chiang Khan developed from being an insider tip for nostalgic Bangkokians into a trendy destination for Thais from all over the country. TV travel programs and popular magazines have widely promoted Chiang Khan's ancient houses, local culture and laid-back way of life. Driven by nostalgic feelings or trend-consciousness almost 600.000 guests visited Chiang Khan in 2013, the year of my fieldwork. Most came for a weekend during the cooler winter months from October to January. What had once drawn the first tourists in, namely the old facades and remnants of local life, soon started to be on the wane: One boutique guesthouse after another replaced the old wooden houses. "Nostalgic gentrification" (Berliner 2012, 783) was accompanied by grievances and nostalgic feelings of cultural loss by people in Chiang Khan. What struck me most about the omnipresent narratives of change was that Chiang Khan's hosts had greater appreciation for the few visiting *farang* tourists whereas fellow-countrymen were without exception blamed for the negative changes.

The host gaze: Thai tourists

While Thai tourists were gazing nostalgically at Chiang Khan, their hosts were active at framing their own notions of their counterparts. The interactions I witnessed during the everyday morning ritual of the alms giving ceremony serve well to illustrate their "host gaze" (cf. Chan 2006; Maoz 2006).

Among local tourists, Chiang Khan is well-known for its alms giving ceremony. Although people everywhere in Buddhist Thailand practice alms giving in the morning, promotional brochures claim that it is unique in Chiang Khan because villagers offer solely sticky rice (the staple food of Northeastern Thailand). Other food supplies

are brought directly to the temples afterwards. Every morning tourists participated and gave alms to the local monks. But in contrast to what had been promoted as Chiang Khan's "way of life" they did not only give sticky rice.

Around 6 a.m., monks of each of the nine monasteries left their compounds to walk through their neighborhoods. Villagers, most of them female and elderly, sat on plastic chairs by the street waiting for the monks to pass by. I frequently joined my host, a massage therapist in her sixties, and her neighbors. Most of the ladies wore the traditional *pha thung* (a sarong like skirt), some additionally wore a sash around their shoulders. All had removed their shoes. I usually bought sticky rice from another neighbor. She worked at Chiang Khan's hospital and had got up early to prepare sticky rice for her acquaintances. She also sold whole sets composed of a basket of sticky rice, water or milk, oranges, flowers and candy bars to tourists who then took a seat on her bamboo mats. When a group of monks passed by I took a ball of sticky rice and put it in each of the monks' bowls which were already filled with sticky rice, flowers, money, boiled eggs, fruit, waffle bars or other sweets and packs of milk, water or juice. Some monks continued to walk along while others stopped to chant while we were listening with folded hands. I continued to sit and chat with my neighbors until every temple had finished its rounds. However, most of the tourists sitting beside me emptied their offerings with the first group of monks and left – not before having taken pictures, of course.

The alms giving ceremony was the most frequently used example when it came to illustrate change. The massage therapist, for instance, commented to me in a formal interview that we had in addition to our numerous informal conversations: "They [tourists] don't understand. In Chiang Khan one has to get up early. After having showered one dresses in a polite manner. One prepares the rice and sits by street. We sit and talk to each other, right? You have observed people giving alms. Villagers are cheerful and ask for each other's wellbeing […] But *people in the city* are always in a hurry, they don't talk to each other. They are not happy. They don't understand the issue of the alms giving ceremony" (interview 03.12.2013, my emphasis & translation).

Her remark illustrates what I continually observed. Speaking of their encounters, Chiang Khan's hosts frequently depicted the Thai tourist as a city dweller who was essentially different from the villagers.

First, the tourists were said to come not from a city in general but from Bangkok in particular whose cultural traditions differ from the Northeast. Regional uniqueness in food, dialect and way of life was pointed out in any travelogue about Chiang Khan in order to highlight the appeal of the "exotic" Northeast (Peleggi 1996, 436). In Central Thailand, Buddhists usually give rice and side dishes into the monks' bowls and tourists wished to do so in Chiang Khan as well, irrespective of the local customs. Others were unsure how to behave properly. I was told stories – often quite amusing ones – of tourists who put the whole basket instead of plain rice into the monks' bowls or who emptied their whole set into one bowl instead of distributing it to several monks. Hence, blame for the transformation of the alms giving ceremony in which sticky rice was no longer the only ingredient given into the monks' bowl was put on the Other from the city.

Secondly, the tourists-cum-townspeople were considered totally unlike people from Chiang Khan because city life was conceived to be fundamentally different from life in Northeastern villages. Not only did they cultivate a different lifestyle of which fashion is only one example: Tourists showing up in short pants and sleeveless shirts in the morning drew criticism for being impolite and disrespectful. My host also ascribed a whole different rhythm of life to the city. She was not the only one evoking the idea that life in Chiang Khan was slow and relaxed in contrast to life in the city where everyone was constantly in a hurry - herself repeating the nostalgic motive which originally made Chiang Khan a popular weekend destination. The impression that Thai tourists did not have the time to wait for each group of monks to pass by but rather moved on to check the next attraction, was taken as a proof.

The host gaze: *Farang* tourists

In contrast to the Thai tourists, Europeans or US-Americans (*farang*) were perceived by the hosts as giving a better, if not ideal, tourism performance. People in Chiang Khan had good memories of the first *farang* tourists. Some remembered how excited they were as kids when foreigners played with them on the streets or when they were told in school to practice their English with them. Most bemoaned the shift in visitors, especially those who had had well-running businesses before

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Thai tourists virtually overran Chiang Khan. They ranked among the losers of Chiang Khan's boom because their mostly simple guesthouses did not comply with the standards and aesthetics that the Thai tourists were demanding (such as air conditioning or private bathrooms). But also those who first opened their guesthouses, cafés or shops when the majority of customers were already Thai openly expressed their wish to receive *farang* as their favored guests.

In contrast to their Thai counterparts, *farang* were perceived as more willing to adapt to "what makes Chiang Khan". According to the hosts, *farang* took their time and stayed longer than Thais who rushed through Chiang Khan within one weekend. They had read up on Chiang Khan before coming and hence were informed that Chiang Khan was a place to relax with few attractions and were pleased to just sit on the Mekong's banks, reading or painting. They were satisfied with simple living conditions and did not ask for boutique standards for which wooden houses had to be removed. In short, they appreciated the nostalgic representation.

That Western tourists appeared to be more familiar than fellow countrymen contradicts not only common sense but also basic premises of tourism theory as I will show in the next section.

The other in tourism studies

Central debates in tourism studies have centered on questions of the relative difference between tourists and hosts. They were based on the notion that tourists travel in quest of authentic experiences with the exotic Other beyond their modern homes (MacCannell 1999 [1976]). This universal claim for travel in search of difference has been widely critiqued for being Eurocentric (Alneng 2002; Cohen and Cohen 2015; Winter, Teo, and Chang 2009a). Empirical evidence from across Asia has revealed that Asian tourists long for modern rather than authentic experiences (e.g. Chan 2006). The object of study, tourism, has in the past not only been narrowly ascribed to Western subjects but has also been biased towards "East/West, North/South encounters" (Winter, Teo, and Chang 2009b, 4). A classical concern of anthropological tourism studies has been how the global impacts on the local (Winter 2007, 29; c.f. Leite and Graburn 2009; Franklin and Crang 2001). Tourists were thereby depicted as more powerful

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outsiders penetrating fragile social and natural environments. The fascination for unequal power relations between the tourist and the touree has led to the disproportionate focus in scholarly debates on international tourism and to the neglect of domestic tourism (Aramberri 2004; Cohen and Cohen 2015; Ghimire 2001; Singh 2009a).[4] Addressing this imbalance, Aramberri writes: "Real tourist interactions between North and South are but a trickle in the river of mass travel; so, why do we keep on talking as though, in the majority of cases, transactions between visitors and locals were not conducted *in the same language?* In fact, both tourists and tourees are more often than not citizens of the same nation and their exchanges take place *within a common culture*" (2004, 8, my emphasis).

Tackling the Eurocentric bias in tourism studies has long been overdue but my empirical findings suggest a cautionary note to uncritically discard difference when it comes to intraregional or domestic tourism. I suggest that domestic tourism contacts are not necessarily conducted "in the same language" or "within a common culture". Nor can a "familiarity and shared values of native guests and hosts", as Singh (2009b, 20) takes as a basis for her volume on domestic tourism in Asia, be assumed. I argue here that quite the contrary is the case and that the construction of otherness, plays a decisive role in domestic encounters. Apart from studies discussing the relationship between tourism, nation-building and ethnic minorities (Adams 1997; Evrard and Prasit 2009), the role that Othering plays in domestic tourism relations has not been addressed so far.

Domestic tourism encounters and the urban other

Conceiving of tourism as deeply embedded in everyday social relations rather than a distinct entity in itself (Leite and Graburn 2009), I suggest that my ethnographic example is read against the backdrop of powerful discourses on a so-called urban-rural divide in Thai society. Irrespective of nostalgic feelings, it is a firmly established belief in Thai society that the city is superior to the countryside. From premodern states (*mueang*) to colonial spatial hierarchies cities have represented the essence of charismatic power, civilization, modernity and prog-

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4 The dichotomy between international and national tourism is not without criticism (Cohen 2014a, Cohen and Cohen 2015 and Ploysri and King 2014).

ress (Tambiah 1976; Thongchai 1994, 2000). It is no wonder then that Bangkok emerged as the economic, political and social center of Thailand.

However, while rural provinces have been disadvantaged in terms of access to education, public health, modern subjectivities and democratic participation – a theme which has been articulated and mobilized in the political tensions between the Red and Yellow Shirts during the last decade (Keyes 2012; Sopranzetti 2012) – the strong belief that city life and the urban population are fundamentally different from the countryside and their villagers is unsustainable given the "ever-tightening integration of village and city into a complex national political economy" (Mills 2012, 90). But although the notion of an urban-rural divide and its nostalgic reversion may lack solid footing both remain powerful ideologies with real consequences in everyday life (Thompson, Bunnell, and Parthasarathy 2013, 3; Mills 2012; c.f. Harms 2011).

I have shown that tourist interactions contribute to this clear-cut distinction between the urban and the rural. Interestingly, the tourist endeavor relocated the encounter between the urban and the rural from the city to the countryside. For a long time, Northeasterners have been used to being looked down upon when facing Bangkokians as taxi drivers, domestic servants or in any other position in the capital's low-paid sector (Vorng 2017). The vilification of the Red Shirt protestors (for the most part of Northeastern origin) as stupid buffaloes by parts of the urban middle classes serves as the best example (Keyes 2014, 189). Tourist interactions in Chiang Khan enabled the "reverse gaze" and turned power relations upside down: Not only have urbanites discovered the appeal of the countryside. Furthermore, the rural host drew a caricature of the urban tourist thus countering urban-to-rural romanticisation with rural-urban dispraise. This denigration of city life stands in contrast to the lures of modernity that initially prompted labor migration from the Northeastern provinces to Bangkok (Mills 1997).

In light of these dominant national socio-spatial (re)orderings, the *farang* tourists appeared rather familiar or, at least, harmless. Obviously, this can be explained by the fact that the Northeast is still not on the usual itinerary for foreign tourists. As they were not among the "invading horde", they were not associated with changes in Chiang Khan to the same degree. But numbers were not put to the forefront. Over the years of tourism development, *farang* have remained cultur-

ally distant, but have become familiar. This is well-captured by Pattana (2010) who has argued that during four centuries of relations between Siam/Thailand and the West, *farang* were stripped of their "foreignness" and were made part of "modern Thai selves": "*Farang* […] represents an ethnocultural mirror that measures the imagined hierarchical distance between the Thai, 'We-Self' and the constructed Western 'Other'" (58f).

Conclusion

The steady growth of domestic tourist trips in Thailand represents one facet of "Asia's transformation from mere host destination into a region of mobile consumers" (Winter, Teo, and Chang 2009b, 4). Thais have not only grown accustomed to host Western and, more and more, Asian tourists, but have come to the fore as tourists themselves. Nostalgia rearranged the map worth travelling and allowed for newly ordered urban-rural relations. Faced with the Thai urban Other, Chiang Khan's hosts perceived the *farang* tourist to be less damaging.

My findings urge a critical rethink of notions of the familiar and the strange in tourism research. Domestic tourism, I argue, is not devoid of power imbalances and Othering as tourism studies seem to imply. This is of particular relevance when studying inner- or trans-Asian mobilities which emerged as a relevant research topic only after revealing a Eurocentric bias in theory (Winter, Teo, and Chang 2009a; Ploysri and King 2014). Tourism within the region implies, only at first glance, an encounter with the cultural familiar. The fact that there are no border or continent crossings does not necessarily mean there are no social boundaries to traverse. Furthermore, while it is important to study emerging and expanding trans-Asian mobilities, Western tourism flows should not be discarded. In Chiang Khan, the experience of being host to Western tourists played a part in how Thai tourists were perceived. Western and Asian mobilities are interrelated rather than disconnected, and – as Cohen and Cohen (2015) warned – one should be cautious to avoid "a split in tourism studies between separate paradigms for Western tourism and tourism in the emerging [non-Western] regions" (161).

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