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UP TO THIS POINT, IS CLAIMING CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY STILL IMPORTANT AMID THAILAND'S RAPID GROWTH OF MASS TOURISM?

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Abstract

The success of mass tourism in quantitative terms has brought the country to the position where it is being admired globally. Beautiful natural resources, stunning cultural attractions and a wide range of affordable foods and services can steadily increase international arrival numbers especially from Europe and Asia. However, this situation has led to the perception of the decline in cultural authenticity in tourism contexts for decades. In certain areas of the country, especially the north where cultural clichés are often exhibited rather than the coastal areas in the south, the showcases of cultural authenticity can be considered as local community exploitation or the lack of moral value. This study contributes to tourism planning and policy making on how Thailand should shift its tourism directions without overly or falsely claiming its cultural authenticity.

Keywords: Authenticity, Tourism, Thailand

1. Introduction

Thailand is one of the largest countries in Southeast Asia in terms of areas and population; 513,115 kilometres and 65 million population respectively (BOI, 2018). While there are countless aspects about the country to debate, tourism in Thailand has increasingly received attention from international tourists and the academics alike. Vivid images of various landscapes, architectures, Thai foods and shopping opportunities contrasted by exciting scenes from action films or the film narratives about taboo types of businesses have always been able to intensify the curiosity of the country from generation to generation. Many foreign visitors had earlier on started to admire exotic images and a mixture of modern and traditional tropical lifestyle until later on they decided to make Thailand as their home country, especially after their retirement, which puts Thailand to be among the top 5 countries for retirement living among Spain, Portugal, Colombia and Costa Rica.

Indeed, online travel platforms and applications such as Skycanner, Traveloka, Tripavisor, Airbnb have facilitates for the travellers around the world to explore the countries they wish to go with minimal time and effort. The possibilities to share information, images and storytelling are almost unstoppable in any corner of the world and in any language. As a result, travellers require more sophisticated information where they wish to visit. They have the possibilities to compare almost every aspects of the attractions month, if not years, before their arrivals. The more information they are exposed to, the more questions they would like to

explore. Apparently, not only in physical well-being during vacation that they interested, but also some intellectual aspects of the sites and surrounding people and culture too which has high potential to create intangible values.

2. The Recent Mass Tourism Scenario in Thailand from 2014 – 2018

Although being challenged by new type online behaviors and more competitive markets in the ASEAN region, Thailand can cope relatively well because the government and the private sector strongly support the aging society trend. The following statistics can reflect the growth of Thailand's tourism industry in a nutshell. The average length of stay in Thailand is 2.8 nights which is expected to grow by 6.2% in 2017 to 2020. In the same period of year, the number of hotel rooms is expected to grow at 5.4% per year and the number of hotels establishments to rise to 15,571. The hotel occupancy rate is expected to remain steady at 63% until 2020. Interestingly, Airbnb, where the personal contact with the accommodation owner is more visible, has received a significantly longer length of stay of 7 nights. Yet, its occupancy rate is substantially lower than hotels (RVO, 2017).

3. Type of Successful Tourism Business

With the aim to diversify tourism income throughout Thailand, tourism businesses try to offer leisure experience - based alternatives for international tourists instead of mainly offering value for money in order to serve visiting purpose of international tourists. WTTC (2018) indicates that up to 87.7% of the tourists aim to come to Thailand for a vacation – distinctively different when being compared to only 50% average throughout the world. On the other hand, there are only 12.2% of international tourists who visit Thailand for business purposes yet the government actively tries to attract this segment. The governmental tourism organizations support local tourism businesses to provide creative and unique Thai experiences, i.e. local festivals, tradeshow, heritage events and local food markets (Euromonitor International, 2017).

Above all, there are certain areas that Thailand has performed exceptionally well in tourism market. International tourists appreciate a wide range of outdoor and indoor activities from long daylight hours until late night visiting program such as visiting historical temples in the morning, massage and spa treatment during the afternoon; and visiting fantasy show or night market in the evening.

Thailand's tropical climate also adds the favor to most of the international tourists from colder climates which wish not to suffer from heavy snow storm and short period of daylight during winter. Despite having been developed in terms of tourism infrastructure for several decades, the commodity prices in Thailand are still considered to be value-for-money, especially when being compared to most other Asian countries. This advantage allows tourists to extend their stays longer and to maximize their shopping expenditure for more varieties of products that they desire.

Medical tourism is the another segment which can highly attract a large amount of tourists, mostly the senior ones, both from developed countries, especially from Europe and the US, as well as developing countries, mostly from Asia, due to affordable medical rates, high availabilities in most parts of the country, various expertise and medical alternatives such as Thai herbal medicines instead of the mainstream ones. There are up to 53 medical centres accredited by the JCI (Joint Commission International) which is the institution to approve that those medical centres meet high international quality standard (SCB EIC, 2016).

4. The Concept of Authenticity in Tourism

The topics relating to authenticity in tourism have been extensively explored in the academic fields such as cultural studies, tourism management and tourism economy. The case studies being drawn can be seen from many countries which have a high pride to their cultural heritage, especially in Asia and Europe (Halewood and Hannam, 2001; Buchmann *et al.* 2010; Scarpato and Daniele 2003; Chen and Liu, 2018; Carbone *et al.* 2016). Nevertheless, authenticity in

tourism still needs to be examined much more in details for different contexts in each country because it can be developed to become one of the most important philosophies and practices which underpin every aspect of tourism market offerings. This assumption does not apply only to cultural sites but also to digital platforms. The academic literature which portrays the phenomena relating to authenticity in tourism market can provide a great wealth of knowledge, especially how each country and culture tries to commercialize its cultural heritage by rationalizing what should be perceived as authentic. At times, the perception of the country residents matches with the perception of the foreign visitors. However, there are times when the perception of both sides is created by different perspectives.

In the light of theoretical concepts of tourism authenticity, there are far fewer authors who propose their theoretical debates. The early debates began in 1980s which highlight authenticity with fixed criteria (Cohen, 1988). In 1990s until the 2010s, the shift of the debates gave authenticity more flexible perspectives underpinned by the different attitude of foreign visitors when appreciating or judging culture. For instance, Fu *et al.* (2018) suggest that foreign tourist can adjust their expectations to be ready to appreciate customized authenticity in the staged attractions. In some cases, they expect to see both exoticness at the same time with the sense of home. The sincerity of relationship which has developed through the time being spent during the visit. Positive intimacy is the outcome which emerges from such sincerity. The entire experience is likely to be perceived as authentic regardless of what is offered for the tourists. Prince (2017) points out that the longer term of the contacts, the greater depth of memorable feeling can be established. Alternatively, Cohen and Cohen (2017) argue that there are two types of authentication, namely 'cool' authentication which involves experts and authorities such as the UNESCO and other governmental agencies. While 'hot' authentication is underpinned personal beliefs about the event or site, the latter type of authentication increasingly become more vibrant in social media platforms. The sense of validating whether the site is authentic by expressing their own socio - political power can trigger heated debate topics within hours or days.

In the context of tourism in Thailand, Walter's (2016) case study provides a great depth of the examination regarding the international visitors' perception towards one small touristy hill tribe village in Chiang Mai province, northern Thailand. His article envisages not only to what extent do foreign tourists appreciate what they see, but also the fundamental reasons why hill tribe people decide to present the way that they present in order to cope with their living expense as well as the demand of technology. The findings of his study imply us that foreign tourists with high sceptics exist no matter what contexts they are in. By contrast, there are other foreign visitors who require only minutes after having arrived to comprehend the surrounding situations which make them see what they see. This excellent journal article is considered to be a great source for other research to explore authenticity of tourism in Thailand from different perspectives and contexts.

5. Methodology

In order to gain the understanding of the selected international visitors to Thailand, the researcher conducted individual in depth interview with 84 foreign visitors with 12 nationalities who have good command in English language due to the reason that the researcher aims to understand how the concept of authenticity in tourism is constructed by different segments of the visitor and whether the admirable characteristics about authenticity mentioned by the visitors appear to be in parallel with what Thailand tourism agencies try to highlight. Authenticity involves complex objective and subjective explanations created by a person with the lens of past and present experience. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2017) argue that social constructivism can be useful for social science research especially when the concept is not given naturally. In other word, we should not take the given data as facts but they are the pieces of information which are highly constructed by the speakers or the writers. The questions of how and why are far more important to examine the impression, experience and critiques of any interviewee. However, there was a significant limitation being encountered during this data collection process, namely language barriers. Up to 80% of the tourists from eastern Asia

regardless of their age and education background could hardly discuss about tourism concepts and activities that they have experienced. It was almost impossible for them to express their own views in English language. Thus, the data could be considered as slightly superficial in terms of depth. Staff at a number of tour agencies at some popular tourist sites were additionally interviewed. This group of people was a mixture of Thai and foreign citizens with the different lengths of working experience in tourism industry. By contrast, many South Asian tourists and European nationals could provide a great deal of interesting point of view due to their excellent command in English language and their accumulated visiting experiences throughout Thailand. Many visitors among others repeat the visit almost on regular basis.

The ethics of researcher role was essential to encourage the respondents to answer with open-mined questions and communication style (Brinkmann, 2014). The respondents should not feel inferior or being discriminated by their race, religion, social status or level of wealth. Their privacy was highly protected as it was not necessary to explore the activity of every respondent's private interest or life style. The researcher attempted not to react to the answer as if it is irrelevant to the topic of authenticity because authenticity can be embedded in almost all of the visiting activities, sites and people.

6. Study Sites

Two cities of Thailand, namely Chiang Mai (40 interviewees) and Pattaya in Chonbury province (45 interviewees), were selected to be the study sites by the assumptions of entirely different characteristics of two places and their popularity among foreign visitors. They both receive the highest amount of international tourists after Bangkok, the capital city. Pattaya, known for its beach, water sport and night life entertainment, received approximately 14 million visitors in 2017 (Fredrickson, 2017); followed by Chiang Mai, known for beautiful ancient architecture, rustic hilly landscape, elephant sanctuaries and balmy climate all year round, which received 9.6 million visitors in 2016 (Singh, 2017). Bangkok was not chosen to be one of the case study sites due to adequate numbers of academic research examining Bangkok for decades. Its modern metropolitan characteristics, which directly attract foreign tourists by its huge opportunities for shopping, the grand palace, the emerald temple, museums and street foods, etc.

7. Findings

It was overwhelming to hear mostly very positive responses from the interviewees from many countries despite of different levels of their English proficiency. The awareness of those selected tourists about themselves and their roles, which have shaped the multifaceted tourist settings across the country, can enlighten many more research topics to be explored. The researcher realized deeply that this research focus is relatively narrow. However, it provides insightful perspectives from the independent travelling tourists with considerably savvy in technology. Perhaps, browsing for images, VDO clips and reviews could have offered them rich resource of information which they actively engage and take their trips as learning experience despite the fact that the main purpose of visiting Thailand is for vacation as mentioned earlier. Their critiques came up with much empathy. In other word, many of the tourists were even capable of finding reasonable excuses for what were presented to them or offered to them which did not entirely meet their satisfaction in terms of cultural authenticity. In sum, there can be three main categories which this finding section should portray clearly in details.

7.1. The Easy-to-Please Segment

This group of tourists came to Thailand with very open-minded attitude. Their age range is wide between the late teens to above 70 years old. In general, their concept of vacation is not only to come to a foreign country to physically relax. Relaxation as well as outdoor activities is, however, important but not always on their top priority. Interestingly they do not always weigh financial value with emotional benefit that they perceive that it is offered to them. Almost in

every step that they take during their visit, they view it as a learning process whether it is sightseeing; go shopping, talking with local people, observing pedestrians on the streets, watching TV in a hotel or restaurant and etc. All of these actions and interactions can have the opportunities to learn something.

Moreover, most tourists from this group are not passive learners but active ones who can constantly compare what is happening in their own countries and what Thailand can offer. Admiringly, they tend to be able to appreciate both sides of the coins with deep understanding of the different contexts that each place has. In terms of cultural authenticity, they almost unitedly express their views that Thai culture is very well preserved despite the format, place and people which have to cope with the disruptive digital era and new trend of the inbound tourists which has radically shifted from Europe to Asia in the past decade. Each person and each nationality of tourist is often keen to observe and exchange views with other nationalities during their visit in Thailand. At times, the conversions can be beyond the pure impression of the visited sites but topics can go further such as to prove whether the reviews on Tripadvisor are reliable. It is not to conclude that this group of tourists does not have any comments. Their mild suggestions range from the lack of signs in English, the difficulties on the transportation especially traffic congestion in big cities and limited public transportation. However, they point out that almost no popular cities can cope with such problems entirely in any continent. Therefore, these problems can be tolerated in general when they do not cause personal harm.

Lastly, when it comes to consumer behavior especially in shopping, the Europeans, especially the French, the Swiss and the Italians appreciate neat and pricey handicraft objects mostly in small shops. They often appreciate beautiful design and interesting local materials used. They can tolerate the same price ceiling in par with the ones in Europe. On the other hand, the Asians, especially the Chinese, prefer to buy many affordable souvenirs in bulk. They tend not to spend a long time to consider the design but rather to make sure that everyone in their known circles receives something from Thailand. However, tourists from both Europe and Asia do not have major concern about the characteristics of the souvenirs whether they are authentically Thai. It can be mildly assumed that the place and the time that they buy those souvenirs play more significant roles for them that the material itself.

7.2. The Sanctuary Seekers for Their own Interest

This group of tourists mainly comes from Japan and Korea. Their main interest in Thailand is obvious, namely playing golf. Both nationals are the most important guests for all of the golf courses in Chiang Mai and Pattaya with the average night stay approximately up to 5 nights, which is considered to be relatively long. Golf courses are the venue for relaxation especially to be exposed to the sunlight as well as business opportunities arenas. Employees from the same company almost always reserve their golf playing time slot and the accommodation together. The Japanese started this time of vacation lifestyle earlier than the Koreans in 1980s. But in some places the Koreans golf tourist number can be slightly higher the Japanese. Apart from the perspective of enjoying golf as sport and business opportunities, both nationals appreciate high level of hospitality service in Thailand.
Large outdoor landscape, spacious indoor spaces, tropical climate add to the list which gives them extra satisfaction. Both nationals love witness pure natural beauty of Thailand which means Chiang Mai scores significantly more than Pattaya. At Doy Inthanon, which is the highest peak of Thailand, one can see the Japanese and the Korea in every beautiful corner while it is rather rare to find them at the shopping malls and night bazaar. There is also fundamental reason which underpins their behavior why they prefer to stay in hideaway golf courses and avoid shopping at crowded places. It is apparent that they do not always wish to interact with other foreign nationals when they visit Thailand. In other word, their concept of vacation is to pay for very well managed venue, which can provide them ultimate peaceful type of relaxation. Both nationals admire wide range of choices of late night entertainments that Pattaya can offer. It seems that they prefer to see more modern and culturally applied performances with very well-equipped stages rather than solely classical performances with genuine historical settings.

The major concerns of this group of nationals clearly include road safety and food hygiene due to negative news from Thailand reported frequently in Japan and Korea. Thus, overall concept of this group of tourist is indeed very unique due to their political, economic and social backgrounds, which have gradually shaped their ideal lifestyle when spending time on holiday in Thailand.

7.3. The Authenticity Seekers

This group of tourist is considered to be among the smallest group who may also fit into the first or the second group but they could express clearer sense of authenticity. Most of foreign visitors from this group have experienced some performances or staged hill tribe villages or late night entertainment shows. Therefore, they were able to point out some aspects of the inauthenticity such as the Karen Longneck hill tribe lifestyle which they discovered that the residents in this tribe may well have Wi-Fi, mobile phone, large high definition TV or hybrid cars.

However, it made them smile or laugh rather than wishing to validate more items which ones come from the route of the hill tribe culture and which one is not. Most people from this group agree upon that such local people need to put on show for foreign visitors because they have to cope with the living expense and to broaden education possibilities for their children, not just for their own personal wealth. Some tourists in mature age from both Europe and Asia point out that there are surely more examples of this staged village in their own countries than in Thailand, although they realize that the settings they see in Thailand will be partly vanished when they depart. Foreign visitors often spend slightly more time to ask local people about their way of life or their opinion about things around them. On the next stage, they judge the authenticity out of the sincerity that local people delivered to them. Another example of the response concerns about authenticity in wild life. It is obvious that the campaign to let elephant and any type of animal run freely in a free range for tourists rather than being trapped in a limited space works well. The foreign tourists in Chiang Mai highly appreciate elephant sanctuary being open for elephant to run freely and increasingly do not carry on their back. Hence, the sense of being authentic applies not only in terms of culture but also in an open wild life area and management.

8. Discussion

As time goes by, the concept of authenticity in terms of cultural heritage for tourism would be shifted gradually. Not only from the ability of one product or service which can indicate its own authentic characteristics for the tourists, but also the role of the tourists when they judge the level and type of authenticity is rather fluid and interdependent with countless factors which surround them from the country of origin to the country that they visit. There are indeed a great number of applications which we can explore which symbols of authenticity that we can offer for the targeted tourists which we can created more value for the products and service so that it could attract them genuinely in a long run.

In a very liberal stance, authenticity can be embedded in any format including digital platforms. They can be presented in service touch points as in the golf courses as well as speed boat reservations. Tourists as consumers in modern era can appreciate artificial settings, partly underpinned by cultural heritage or aesthetics, which cannot always appear in traditional venues or festivities. The sense of sincerity and positive intimacy between foreign tourists and local people will be more than sufficient for years to come to create ultimate visiting experience. Beyond the point of appreciating the authenticity and the beauty in one culture, McKercher *et al.* (2002) propose an interesting model regarding the purpose of visiting (see Figure 1).
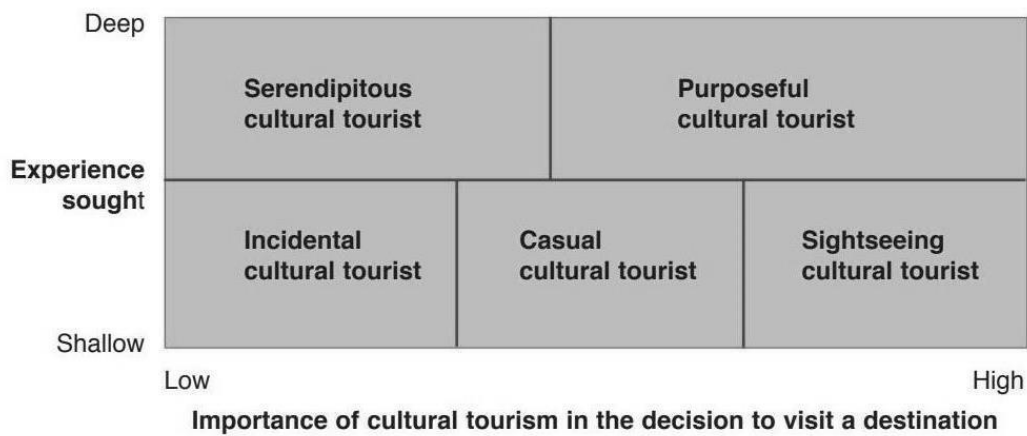
Figure 1. Typology of Cultural Tourists
Source: McKercher *et al.* (2002)

This model portrays the level of interest and the occasion that each tourist happens to fit into one or more position. The repeated rate of the visit can encourage the visitor from a shallow zone to a deeper one. Some of the tourists can implicitly or explicitly visit one place to change themselves internally. It is not always possible to extract and to conclude what is the ideal façade of cultural authenticity to be commoditized; however, in most forms of authenticity that we try to offer, the chances are that they can be easily appreciated at least in Thailand's contexts.

9. Conclusion

Although this research has explored very broad sense of authenticity in only two popular cities in Thailand, it can indicate that there are rooms for creativity for offering many products and services based on culture. The fear to preserve culture in classical format does not have to be the most significant concern in this decade because foreign travelers from around the world are very well-informed despite the language barriers when visiting foreign country. They are likely to appreciate every bit of experience that they encounter. If not, the situations turn into the scenario of a lesson learned rather than a bitter memory resulting in the avoidance to visit such place in the future. Tourism business providers can balance their views to what extent that they should provide space, foods, souvenirs and schedule in order to create the most authentic visiting experience. If they perceive that the aforementioned approach is inauthentic, then what would be the value for the visitors when they perceive untouched sites as unorganized? There are the levels of authenticity which can be shaped up into different classes to satisfy different budget and time limit, for instance the appreciation of a banana leaf plate design in a junk food restaurant located in a touristy town may not be as equal as a traditional fine dining restaurant with ancient recipe in a luxury hideaway resort. Nevertheless, it can indeed leverage the level of satisfaction in terms of cultural and aesthetic presence from an unexpected place. Digital platforms have played a significant role in promoting authenticity in tourism. Travelers can constantly seek for information, photos, videos and reviews from other travelers in almost every language. The power of traveler's generated content is undoubtedly enormous. However, when inexperienced travelers discover that what they encounter is entirely different with what they perceive before from social media platforms, this situation can destroy their trust. Moreover, they would raise the questions of authenticity beyond the cultural aspects. The rate of repeat visit or repeat purchase would have the potential to drop dramatically. Hopefully, other researchers, the academia and tourism businesses can use these research findings as a guideline for their practices and help creating more intensive investigation of authenticity with different perspectives.

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