

DARK TOURISM IN THAILAND – THE “TOURISTIFICATION” OF WARTIME ATROCITIES AND CRIME

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Summary

The main aim of this article is to examine the relatively new phenomenon of “dark tourism” based on two examples from Thailand. The focus is on the question of how, why and with what consequences certain places associated with death, war or crime have become “tourist commodities”, linking the important issue of (public) commemoration with questions of consumer history. The concept of “consumption” in this context is not limited to goods and/or services, but also encompasses the consumption of historical events such as visiting historical sites like the Thai-Burmese “Death Railway” built by prisoners of war in the central Thai province of Kanchanaburi during World War II, or the more subtle example of villages of the so-called Hill Tribe peoples of northern

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Thailand with their past as opium traders in the 19th and 20th centuries, exemplified by the Hmong village Doi Pui.

To analyse how different tourist groups react to the commercialisation of these sites and how their perceptions differ from one another; both local and foreign tourists as well as local experts were interviewed. Based on the theoretical concepts of “dark tourism” and the “tourist gaze”, the connection between commercialisation, “touristification” and memory is discussed.

Keywords: Dark tourism, touristification, tourist gaze, tourist commodities, commercialisation, hill tribes, tourism, Thailand

Zusammenfassung

„DARK TOURISM“ IN THAILAND – DIE „TOURISTIFIZIERUNG“ VON KRIEG UND VERBRECHEN

Hauptziel des vorliegenden Artikels ist es, das relativ neue Phänomen des „Dark Tourism“ anhand von zwei Beispielen aus Thailand zu untersuchen. Im Zentrum steht die Frage, wie, warum und mit welchen Folgen bestimmte Orte, die in Verbindung zu Tod, Krieg oder Verbrechen stehen, zu „touristischen Waren“ geworden sind, wobei die wichtige Frage des (öffentlichen) Gedenkens mit Fragen der Konsumgeschichte verknüpft wird. Der „Konsum“-Begriff ist in diesem Zusammenhang nicht nur auf Waren und/oder Dienstleistungen beschränkt, sondern umfasst auch den Konsum historischer Ereignisse, zum Beispiel den Besuch historischer Stätten wie der thailändisch-burmesischen „Todesisenbahn“, die während des Zweiten Weltkriegs von Kriegsgefangenen in der zentralthailändischen Provinz Kanchanaburi gebaut wurde, oder das subtilere Beispiel von Dörfern der sogenannten Hill Tribe-Völker Nordthailands mit ihrer Vergangenheit als Opiumhändler im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert.

Um zu analysieren, wie verschiedene Touristengruppen auf die Kommerzialisierung dieser Stätten reagieren und wie sich ihre Wahrnehmungen voneinander unterscheiden, wurden sowohl einheimische und ausländische Touristen als auch lokale Experten befragt. Auf der Grundlage der theoretischen Konzepte des „Dark Tourism“ und des „Tourist Gaze“ wird der Zusammenhang zwischen Kommerzialisierung, „Touristifizierung“ und Erinnerung diskutiert.

Schlagwörter: „Dark Tourism“, Touristifizierung, touristischer Blick, touristischer Konsum, Bergstämme, Tourismus, Thailand

1 Introduction

Since the onset of modern mass tourism after the end of World War II, tourism research has developed as a new field of interest within social sciences and humanities. There is a growing number of studies dealing with the social, cultural, economic and/or environmental advantages and disadvantages of tourism for host societies in the Global North as

well as in the Global South (COHEN 2014; MACCANNELL 1973; MAOZ 2006; URRY and LARSEN 2011). Since the late 1990s, early 2000s tourism research also focuses, among other research fields, on the rather “new” touristic phenomenon of “dark” or “thana tourism” (COLLINS-KREINER 2015; KORSTANJE 2017; LENNON and FOLEY 2000; LIGHT 2017; MARTINI and BUDA 2020).

The terms “thana” or “dark tourism” describe touristic sites associated with disaster, atrocity, death, crime, and other forms of tragedies including battlefields, prisons, torture camps, sites of genocides, or places of disasters. Although the phenomenon itself is already much older than the research field, scholars have only recently begun to explore what was later referred to as “dark tourism”. The term was introduced by John LENNON and Malcolm FOLEY in their book “Dark Tourism”, published in 2000. In using this label they “[...] intend[ed] to signify a fundamental shift in which death, disaster and atrocity are being handled by those who offer associated tourism ‘products’” (LENNON and FOLEY 2000, p. 3). Within the last years a growing body of research was conducted on topics related to the umbrella term of “dark tourism” and, as a consequence, dark tourism research was carried into the scientific and (pop-)cultural mainstream (LIGHT 2017, p. 276)

The aim of the present paper is to investigate this rather new phenomenon of “commodifying the dark” and to address the question how, why, and with which consequences certain dark places have become touristic commodities, using the Kingdom of Thailand as an example. When travelling to countries like Thailand especially tourists from so-called “Western” countries – meaning from the United States, Australia, or Western Europe – tend to forget the “dark” parts of the histories of the visited countries. Unlike in Vietnam or Cambodia these “dark spots” are not part of the “tourist gaze” assigned to this country.

As far as dark tourism activities are concerned the Kingdom of Thailand is a very special case. Thai “dark” or “thana tourism” – unlike its Vietnamese or Cambodian counterparts – does not show any attempts to tell however defined “heroic” national stories of the past and is only partly intended to be educational; instead, such sites are increasingly commodified and associated with “adventure, entertainment and staged horror” both by the international as well as the Thai tourist industry. A well-known example of war crimes committed on Thai soil during World War II is the Thai-Burmese Death Railway across the river Khwae in Kanchanaburi Province. For the present study this site was selected since it can be considered a textbook example for the commercialisation and “touristification” of wartime atrocities and crimes committed by soldiers of the Imperial Army of Japan, supported or at least tolerated by the then Thai and Burmese governments.

Relatively new, on the other hand, is the emergence of non-traditional, crime-related “dark” sites such as the villages of former opium-producing and distributing hill tribes in Northern Thailand, which have a clear educational and ethno-nationalist goal of demonstrating the success of the country’s anti-drug and hill tribe integration policies (HUSA 2017) – a phenomenon that has received only limited scientific attention to date. However, a certain “entertainment and shock”-value seems to be of significant interest as well. This “Dark Hill Tribe Tourism”, as it is labelled in the present article, mainly seems to be of interest to Thai domestic and less to international tourists. From the late 19th and early

20th century onwards and especially after the renaming of the former Kingdom Siam into “Kingdom of Thailand” in 1939, various Thai governments pushed a policy of aggressive “Thaiisation” regarding its various lingual and ethnic minorities (KORFF 2010, 2018).

During the first half of the 20th century mostly members of the large Chinese communities as well as the lingual and ethnic minorities in the border regions towards Laos and Cambodia in the east and northeast, Malaysia in the south and Myanmar in the west were affected by this policy, but from the 1950s onwards the focus shifted to the so-called hill tribe people in the north of Thailand (HUSA 2017; KORFF 2010, 2018). This policy was not only introduced to achieve some degree of cultural and lingual homogenisation, but it also led to the extensive economic marginalisation of once more or less independent ethnic groups. Since the various hill tribes regained some of their cultural and economic independence through various tourism projects in the early 2000s, they have begun to challenge the Thai state’s official narrative about their role, particularly as opium producers over the past century and a half.

Based on the above information, this article has two main objectives:

The first example, the so-called Thai-Burmese Death Railway, perfectly fits into certain politics and cultures of memory, with which different visitor groups deal and react to in different ways; since the memorial sites in and around the city of Kanchanaburi target very diverse audiences, the visitors probably do not always react as intended or claimed (BRAITHWAITE and LEIPER 2010, p. 315; HUSA 2023, p. 29; PRASANNAM 2017, pp. 120ff).

Example number two demonstrates, how the various hill tribe groups and the official Thai state use this “dark” part of the Thai history for both educational as well as entertainment purposes. Thus, the objective of the present article is to ask if this phenomenon of “dark hill tribe tourism” can be seen not only as a kind of counter-narrative to the nation’s “official” history but even as a proud self-representation of these ethnic communities’ histories.

On this basis, the following research questions can be derived for this article:

- How did theatres of war on Thai soil and certain Hill Tribe villages become dark tourism sites or “touristified commodities” in the first place?
- Which governmental or non-governmental institutions initiated this commodification and “touristification”?
- What is the political, social, and economic significance of “dark” sites in the local tourism industry?
- Who is/are the main audience group(s) of interest? And how do the perceptions of the various groups of visitors differ from each other?

Even if the commercialisation of dark sites is heavily criticised by both the public and academics, a certain degree of commercialisation and tourism seems reasonable and perhaps even necessary, especially when the memory of certain events is increasingly in danger of being forgotten due to the passing of the generation of contemporary witnesses. However, the question remains how this (critical) engagement with the sites in questions can be encouraged while still being respectful to the victims and/ or the affected groups.

2 Theoretical Foundations and Methodological Aspects

According to most tourism researchers “dark” or “thana tourism” as well as all its sub-categories must be seen as part of heritage tourism (COLLINS-KREINER 2015; DUNKLEY et al. 2011; LENNON and FOLEY 2000; LIGHT 2017). In this context the vast majority of the theoretical approaches up to now has focused on the pilgrimage character of “dark” or “thana tourism”. Especially regarding Southeast Asia, Erik COHEN pointed out that as far as internal (Asian) tourism is concerned, “dark sites” in Southeast Asia almost always turn into pilgrimage sites in order to pay respect to the ancestors and to calm their “restless spirits” (2018, pp. 3ff). This idea of “dark tourism” as a modern pilgrimage has recently also become an important aspect in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, especially in mainly Buddhist societies like in Thailand, where in the months after the disaster local people claimed that they got in touch with the *pis* – the spirits – of those killed by the tsunami.

In recent years war and “crime scene” related dark sites have also become more and more popular. These are usually sites such as prisons and torture camps (e.g., Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh or the Khwae Bridge), but crime tours for tourists in various cities around the world are also part of this type of tourism. But even if a community takes up a stigmatised and ostracised topic and turns it into a tourist attraction with a historically conditioned visual language, this can be described as “crime scene” tourism and thus as “dark tourism”. From this point of view, hill tribe villages with afforested poppy fields, in front of which mainly Thai domestic tourists stand to take photographs, also qualify as such places. On the other hand, there are also museums in Chiang Rai province that tell the same story, but with a different, strongly moralising orientation (CHOUVY 2010, pp. 173ff; HUSA 2017, p. 32).

The advent of modern mass tourism has not only changed the sociology of travel through its “democratisation”, but also the way travellers are dealing with the objects, artefacts, and sites of the destinations they visited. “Tourists present themselves at places of social, historical, and cultural importance” (MACCANNELL 1973, p. 593). Typically, tourists are photographed in front of and/or in buildings that are considered “characteristic” of the regions they visit. In the case of Southeast Asia, for example, these are photographs in or in front of the large temple and palace complexes, such as the old royal palace in Bangkok or the temples of Angkor in Cambodia, but also sites of war or other atrocities such as Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, the Cambodian “Killing Fields” or the Thai-Burma “Death Railway”.

According to John URRY and Jonas LARSEN, this so-called second gaze is the result of a paradigm shift that came about with the advent of modern mass tourism and which the two authors describe as a “performance turn” (LARSEN and URRY 2011, p. 1112). In this context, it should be emphasised that both practices – *gazing* and *performing* – are closely linked:

“Gazing is not merely seeing, but involves physical movement through landscapes, cities and sights, aesthetic sensibility, connecting signs and their referents [...] and embodied practices capturing places and social relations photo-

graphically but also touching, smelling, and hearing objects of the gaze; [...]"
(ibid., p. 1115)

Thus, photos taken in front of and/ or in dark tourism' sites or originally non-touristic memorial sites have recently become more and more affected by these "performative changes". In this form of self-presentation, tourists interact not only with the locals and the sites they visit, but of course also with each other (cf. KOLLAND 2003, pp. 107f; LARSEN and URRY 2011, pp. 1116ff; MACCANNELL 1973, pp. 593ff; SEIDL and MOSER 2009, pp. 11ff). Especially in the context of dark touristic and memorial sites this interactions between visitor(s) and the site were broadly discussed in what has become known as the *#yolo-caust-debate*, which was started by an American photographer in 2015. Its main purpose was to criticise the way especially young people act at Holocaust memorial sites and what kind of photos they post on social media platforms, using which hashtags when visiting these memorials (retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38675835> [April 14, 2019]).

For the present paper semi-structured interviews as wells as participant observation-based research were conducted in Doi Pui village in Chiang Mai province by using a Grounded Theory approach during the analysis itself. In addition, interviews with Prof. Panadda BOONYASARANAI of CESD / RCSD of Chiang Mai University and KHAE-WA, headman of the S'gaw-Karen village Ban Huay E Kang in Chiang Rai Province were conducted in English and Thai.

Throughout February of 2020 eighty semi-structured interviews were conducted with international "Western" tourists, Japanese as well as with domestic tourists in the city of Kanchanaburi at three sites: the Bridge over the River Khwae, the JETHA Museum, and the Death Railway Museum. The interview partners were chosen by a random sampling approach directly at the sites. These interviews were analysed using Philip MAYRING's Qualitative Content Analysis (HUSA 2023, pp. 33f; MAYRING 2010).

3 The Commercialisation of Horror and Crime – the Example of Two Dark Tourism Sites in Thailand

3.1 "Thaification" Versus the (Re-)Invention of "Hill Tribeness" – The Example of Ban Doi Pui

For most of the 20th century, Thai academia, politics, and mainstream society saw the Hill Tribe people in Northern Thailand less as a part of Thai society, but more as a problem to be solved. The roots of this so-called "Hill Tribe problem" and the changes in the discourse around it have been discussed in various studies throughout the last 40 to 50 years (HUSA 2017, pp. 12ff; KORFF 2010, pp. 63ff; KORFF 2018, pp. 141ff). The present paper, however, will focus on the developments and discussions since the end of the Pacific War in 1945.

Already in 1963, five years after the prohibition of opium cultivation, trade, and consumption in Thailand and the start of the local crop substitution programmes, Patya

SAIHOO of the Faculty of Political Science of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok voiced misgivings about its effectiveness, relying on these colonial period discourse (1963, pp. 35f). According to SAIHOO, a “Thaiification” of the lifestyle and farming methods of the hill tribe peoples – who had become economically, and to some degree also politically, very powerful in the short term through opium poppy cultivation – was a necessity, since only an integration into the Thai agricultural market would make it possible for them to produce and sell “legal” goods in demand. Authors such as SAIHOO, but also the Thai government, took (and for the most part still take) a classic modernisation theory approach, assuming that the hill tribes would initiate this assimilation process of their own accord as soon as they realised how “backward” they were.

An opposite approach was taken by Chantaboon SUTTHI, who argued that the affected hill tribes were even more severely marginalised and discriminated due to the prohibition of traditional cultivation methods. National and international programmes – according to this view – have forced them into monocultural farming, which in turn severely limited the range of agricultural products (SUTTHI 1989, pp. 107ff). This opinion is still held by the majority of authors in the current debate on the so-called “hill tribe problem” since the early 1980s.

In addition, the hill tribes and their economic, social and political position in the societies of Southeast Asia are popular subjects of study for ethnologists and tourism researchers. For instance, Alexander TRUPP (2006) analysed the impact of tourism on the ethnic minorities in Northern Thailand. In this context, the concepts of vulnerability and resilience hold a lot of promise (BÜRKNER 2010; CHRISTMANN et al. 2011). In social science, “resilience” describes a kind of protective mechanism or strategy with which particularly vulnerable groups, such as minorities, attempt to gain as much independence as possible from mainstream society. This study assumes, for example, that both the phenomenon of opium production and the opium trade as well as the shift to new sources of income (such as coffee cultivation or ethno-tourism) following the ban on poppy cultivation can be regarded as resilient actions on the part of Southeast Asian hill tribes, as they enable these groups to survive economically.

Apart from these rather conceptual studies, there is a broad range of case studies in fields such as cultural and social anthropology, political science, or tourism research on various aspects of the population and farming methods in the mountainous north of Southeast Asia, available in English and in Thai.

However, there are considerable gaps in the analysis of the serious changes in the economic, socio-political and power relations between the “highland” and “lowland” populations, ethnic minorities and Thais, centre and periphery, which have been brought about by the replacement of the opium industry since the early 20th century. Parallel to the replacement of opium production as the main source of income, attempts to “thaiize” the hill tribes intensified. Most scientists regard these attempts as very successful, at least on an economic level, while politically there is still a pronounced ambivalence in the way politics and society deal with the hill tribes. As Panadda BOONYASARANAI from Chiang Mai University stated in an interview, this could put the successes achieved in recent decades in the fight against the drug economy of the minorities in Thailand into perspective:

“Thailand will use the assimilation strategy more than an integration strategy, I think. We try to change them to be Thai, [...]. If we integrate them, they can live in their way of life, they can preserve their own culture, their own tradition. [...] They become Thai, but they don’t know how to be Thai. And Thai people still look at them in a strange way. [...]. [...] if we talk in terms of tourism, they are proud to be a part of our rich culture, [...]. If they are invited by the Thai authority of tourism, they will be honoured, but they were never invited [...]” (Interview with Prof. Panadda BOONYASARANAJ, Chiang Mai University, March 5, 2014)

Thai governments have promoted tourism as part of the national development agenda since the 1960s, but “mass tourism” in the true sense only began in the late 1970s. After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the profile of tourists slowly changed from younger men who were stationed in Southeast Asia for several months or longer to “classic” tourists of both sexes and all ages who travelled the country for a few weeks at most. Cultural tourism in the central region around the capital Bangkok, the rapidly growing beach tourism on the coasts and on the islands in the south as well as ethnic and trekking tourism in the north of Thailand were the most popular: “In the course of the last decades of the 20th century Thailand became one of Asia’s principal tourist destinations” (COHEN 2014, p. 243).

The respective governments or representatives of the Royal family – especially the late King Bhumibol himself – initiated several measures to foster the socio-economic development of Thailand. In the mountainous regions of northern Thailand, these projects formed the basis for the beginning of ethnic tourism or hill tribe tourism, which soon became very popular with both “western” and local tourists. Around the same time as the emergence of ethno-tourism, the implementation of the state’s anti-drug policy, which aimed to combat poppy cultivation and opium production, also began in the mountainous regions of the northern provinces. (LEEPREECHA 2014, p. 330; see also RENARD 2001, pp. 45ff).

“First the staff of the Thai Forest Department came to the village and introduced the idea to bring tourism to the village. And some villagers agreed, and some didn’t agree with this. [...] they brought another person from an outside area to manage the project. [...] after two years he disappeared, so we cannot move on. [...] we came together and think about running our own project. [...]. [Some people did not agree to participate] [because] there is the problem of taking care of the products. [...] me, together with my friends also cooperated with the government, with the state to identify [...] the spots of growing or producing [opium]. [...] the reason why I helped the state is [...], I have seen my father and brothers and sisters [got] addicted. [...]” (Interview with KHAE-WA, headman of Ban Huay E-Kang, February 25, 2014)

In this context, the question arises as to what extent the reduction of opium poppy cultivation in the “Golden Triangle” in general and in Thailand in particular can be regarded as successful. For today’s Thailand, the answer to this question is a clear yes. Thailand’s anti-drug policy and the associated efforts to convert the opium-based mountain economies are also regarded as exemplary in other countries on the Southeast Asian continent. This

can be seen, for example, in the fact that the Laotian government has launched similar projects in cooperation with the UNODC over the past two decades. Similar projects based on the successful Thai model have also been implemented in Myanmar.

In recent years, however, it seems that the successful eradication of opium poppy cultivation and the “traditional” opium economy in the Golden Triangle has led to a kind of “return of opium poppy”. This is reflected in the way the region’s history as a (former) main opiate growing area is marketed to tourists. Here, the still deeply rooted negative image of the drug-producing mountain tribes is used as a tourist attraction and “positively” charged by transforming it into a “dark” place. As the observations on site have shown, Thai domestic tourism appears to be the main beneficiary of this renewed interest in the opium poppy. But international ethno-tourism also benefits from the opium myth, which already aroused the interest of Western backpackers in the Chiang Mai region in the 1970s (LEEPREECHA 2014, p. 330; TRUPP 2006, p. 72). A good example of a “dark” hill tribe tourist village is the village of Doi Pui in Chiang Mai province, as explained in the following section.

The village of Doi Pui, located a few kilometres outside the city of Chiang Mai, can be considered one of the most important and prestigious projects of the Thai royal family. It is inhabited mainly by members of the Hmong minority and considered to some extent as the “birthplace” of the state development aid projects in Thailand’s north. Therefore, it can also be seen as the beginning of the Royal Projects in the late 1960s (LEEPREECHA 2014, pp. 330ff; RENARD 2001, p. 73).

The project originally began as a purely agricultural project, but soon the focus shifted to tourism. In the 1970s, this was mainly due to its proximity to the city of Chiang Mai and its location in the Doi Suthep-Doi Pui mountains in northern Thailand. Due to the difficult geopolitical situation in Southeast Asia at the time of the Cold War, the only more or less safe access route to the foothills of the Himalaya mountains ran through the region around the northern Thai provincial capital throughout most of the second half of the 20th century. Currently Chiang Mai is still promoted in various travel guides as *the* hitchhiker and trekking centre of Southeast Asia which can be seen as a legacy of this era (DEARDEN 1991, pp. 400ff; TRUPP 2006, pp. 78ff).

The Hmong people in Doi Pui village have focused on hill tribe tourism for several decades. Doi Pui developed into a tourist destination as it was easy and quick to reach from Chiang Mai and excursions to Doi Pui were offered by most larger and smaller travel agencies, whereby the village could be visited both individually and in groups. Due to its proximity to an important urban centre and the nearby royal palace of Bhubing, the village has long been considered drug-free and thus one of the few safe destinations in the entire region (DEARDEN 1991, pp. 420ff; RENARD 2001, pp. 73ff).

Doi Pui has also become an increasingly attractive destination for domestic Thai tourism in recent years. The village’s most important economic foundation is the sale of souvenirs in the form of more or less authentic *tribal art* and the trade with agricultural goods, such as coffee. However, the village has also benefited from the fascination that the opium poppy blossoms and the opium extracted from them exert on visitors, which contributed significantly to the tourism boom in Doi Pui.

Nowadays, this myth is cleverly marketed to tourists in Doi Pui: Small opium poppy fields have been planted in and around the village and act as popular photo opportunities, and tourists are also offered the chance to rent a traditional Hmong costume for the duration of their stay, an offer that is mainly used by Thai tourists, but also from one or the other Farang tourist.



Source: Photo by L. C. HUSA, 2014

Figure 1: Thai tourists in front of an opium poppy field in Doi Pui



Source: Photo by K. HUSA, 2013

Figure 2: Western tourists in traditional Hmong costumes in Doi Pui

Here, the ambivalent play with the hill tribe cliché that is widespread in Thai society becomes very clear: on the one hand, the fascination with the opium theme and the “illegal”, but on the other hand, the still strongly negative association of hill tribes with drugs.

The Royal Project in Doi Pui is considered a prime example of positive development work with the ethnic minority communities, and its success can be largely attributed to the strong and early involvement of the royal family. Today, the village is economically well developed and can be reached quickly and easily on good roads from Chiang Mai, even during the rainy season. This could be an opportunity for other ethnic communities in Thailand, but also in the wider region of mainland Southeast Asia, to start similar projects. Since the start of the Crop Substitution Programmes, there has been a transfer of knowledge between hill tribe communities in Thailand and especially in Laos, but also in Yunnan; probably the best-known example is the village of Doi Chang, which now focuses on coffee production.

However, the return of opium due to tourism is and remains an ambivalent issue: on the one hand, this former “dark side” of the hill tribe economy undoubtedly contributes significantly to the tourism boom in the villages concerned, but on the other hand, there are also fears that this will counteract the effectiveness of the anti-drug campaigns.

3.2 The Thai-Burma-Railway – A Memorial Site Turned Tourist Attraction

The so-called “Death Railway” became a tourist attraction due to a chain of coincidences. Thailand’s official historiography and commemorative culture had little to no interest in coming to terms with the country’s role in the Pacific War, as the Second World War is called in Southeast Asia and Oceania, especially given the country’s role during that period. This, however, also applies to other countries that were part of the “Axis” Berlin – Rome – Tokyo during World War II.

Between 1941 and 1944 when Thailand was garrisoned by Japan, the Imperial Army of Japan committed one of the most horrendous war crimes known as the Thai-Burma Railway or “Death Railway” against the mainly Western prisoners of war and the local population. There were already plans by British and American engineers to connect the railroad systems of then formally not colonised Siam (today’s Thailand) and the British colony Burma already during the 19th and early 20th centuries; these plans, however, were given up officially during the 1930s. “When the Japanese army started to take over the control in various parts of Southeast Asia the fast and secure transport of raw materials between Malaya and Burma as well as of Japanese troops throughout the Greater East Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere should be ensured” (HUSA 2023, p. 39).

The construction of the railway started in October 1942 designed, managed, and supervised by Japanese engineers and Japanese as well as Korean guards. The construction of a 415 km long railway link between Ban Pong (Thailand) and Thanbyuzayat (Burma) was finished in December 1943 (BEATTIE 2009, p. 117; BRAITHWAITE and LEIPER 2010, p. 313; FISHER 1947, p. 85ff; HOUGHTON 2014, p. 223; HUSA 2023, pp. 38ff). In total 239,711 people – mainly Asian labourers and European and Australian prisoners of war – were forced to participate in the construction of the railway, nearly half of them (97,652) died.

Originally there was not “the Bridge over the River Khwae” as suggested by the 1957 movie, but two bridges: one made of wood, the other made of iron. Both bridges were destroyed and rebuilt several times due to their strategic importance and in June 1945, right before the Japanese surrender and the end of World War Two in Asia Pacific two months later, both bridges were severely damaged by British bombs. The remains of the wooden bridge were removed right after the war ended, the iron bridge was rebuilt in 1949 and it is still used as a railway bridge, but also the central tourist attraction in the town of Kanchanaburi.

However, when the bridge was rebuilt after the end of World War II, neither a memorial of any kind nor the creation of a tourist attraction was intended (BRAITHWAITE and LEIPER 2010, p. 313; HOUGHTON 2014, p. 224; HUSA 2023, pp. 38ff; KORFF 2018, p. 14; OSBORNE 2002, p. 154; PRASANNAM 2017, p. 11).

Thailand’s memory of World War II is inextricably linked to the bridge over the Khwae, which is certainly due to the film of the same name from 1957. Both the bridge as an iron bridge and the river under its current name did not exist until the late 1950s and early 1960s. The film’s worldwide success made the city of Kanchanaburi and the bridge a must-see for film tourists and war pilgrims, and fuels Kanchanaburi’s tourism industry to this day. After its rebuilding in 1949 Kanchanaburi’s local authorities used the bridge to promote cultural tourism (BRAITHWAITE and LEIPER 2010, pp. 326f.; HUSA 2023, pp. 42ff; PRASANNAM 2017, 130ff).

To some extent, this also seems to be the main reason for the relatively high degree of “Disneyfication” of war crime sites such as the events around the construction of the bridge over the Khwae and commercialisation of the site. Even though the bridge and sur-



Source: Photo by L. C. HUSA, 2020

Figure 3: Tourists crossing the River Khwae Bridge

rounding landmarks like the prisoner of war camp (Figures 3 and 4) were never intended to be memorialised, they were subject to commercial considerations from the beginning, which is related to Thailand’s situation during the Japanese occupation and the Pacific War; this also distinguishes the site from other similar memorials in Europe, America and East or Southeast Asia (HUSA 2023, pp. 42f; PRASANNAM 2017, pp. 130ff).



Source: Photo by L. C. HUSA, 2020

Figure 4: Souvenirs at the “Prisoner of War Camp” in Ban Nuea near Kanchanaburi

This commemorative approach, combined with the way the bridge and the railroad became a tourist attraction in the first place, has resulted in a kind of “dark” Disneyland rather than a true memorial. And as will be shown in the next section, international Western tourists express very mixed feelings about the way the Second World War is commemorated here (HUSA 2023, pp. 43ff). The degree of commercialisation of the Bridge over the Khwae River seems to be especially offensive to German tourists of all age groups, as the war crimes committed by Germans during the Nazi regime have led to a much higher degree of sensitisation and a different idea of an appropriate culture of remembrance in the German-speaking world:

“I wanted to come here already when planning the trip to see the bridge. [...] Up to now the bridge was the only thing me and my girlfriend have seen; we still didn’t decide whether to visit the museums or not. [...]. It is part of [Thailand’s] history what happened here in this place. [...]. [But] [the] way of how the history is represented is quite a culture shock, especially if you’re German. But it is the Thais’ business how they want to deal with their history and how they want to represent it. [...]. What is way more appalling to me is the fact that the bar over there is called

'Prisoner of War Camp', [...]." (Interview 17 with a German tourist at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 3, 2020, translated from German)

However, many visitors of other nationalities seem to be less bothered by the commercialisation than by the crowds of people who seem to come to the bridge just to take a photo:

"[...] this place [...] is [...] a reminder to remember the history as it actually occurred. Without idealising it and just to remember that war is ugly no matter what nationality or no matter where you are from... it is an awful thing. And it does seem a bit strange that there was so much suffering and now that we are here, there is so much photographing... that's a bit surreal... it is weird." (Interview 18 with a US tourist couple at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 3, 2020)

"The main reason to come to Kanchanaburi obviously is the Death Railway as they call it; the Bridge over the River Khwae. We wanted, actually I wanted to see it for myself. I don't know a lot about the history, but I work for the railway in England. Many years ago, I also saw the movie from 1957. We didn't go to any of the museums yet, but we will visit the cemetery after here. I don't know where the museum is. It seems rather strange to me actually that so many people come here to take pictures with the bridge, because I don't know if people actually appreciate the history connected to it. I have taken photos today myself, but... all these selfies that people take... I don't know. I don't really think it commemorates, it doesn't show what happened, the significances. It is a lot of market stalls. I don't like the camp on the other side, I think it is quite disrespectful. The Thais could have done a way better job." (Interview 33 with a British tourist at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 4, 2020)

On the other side Western visitors also seem to appreciate that the bridge is maintained as a monument and warning for future generations:

"This suffering on all sides, hopefully it will help to prevent that anything like that happens again. It is important that this monument is maintained. The war in the East seems to be separated in people's mind from that in the West; it wasn't. It was a world conflict. And I think it is important that the young people, youngsters are shown that war is never a good thing." (Interview 30 with a British tourist at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 4, 2020)

"It is interesting that it became a tourist hot spot, but on the other side it is important to commemorate the history; people need to talk about it. And these guys should do anything they can to get us Westerners to this place. They don't make too much money of it, but it is another view on the history of the country. I wouldn't say it is too bad. Because if they would not do this, I wouldn't know about it. I have learned something today because they told me. We see the tracks and trains and learn how they were built. And also, how long ago all this is, this is almost 80 years ago. The graveyard is from 1946 or so and see how beautiful it still is."

(Interview 34 with a British tourist at the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, Date of record February 5, 2020)

“This site is of course very important, especially for Thailand and the Thai people, and I think it is important to keep up the memory. It is a rather striking contrast from what you expect to see; [...]” (Interview 35 with a Finnish tourist at the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, Date of record February 5, 2020)

4 The Two Sides of the Coin: Lessons Learnt from the Commodification of “Dark Tourism Sites”

So, what messages do the experiences of the “touristification” of so-called “dark tourism sites” such as the hill tribe village of Doi Pui and the tourist magnet “Bridge over the River Kwai” convey to us? Can the commercialisation and “Disneyfication” of such sites succeed in keeping memories alive that would otherwise have been lost over time with the death of contemporary witnesses? Or is what remains after a visit to such sites mainly a selfie spectacle, whereby the reference to historical events that actually took place is lost? What can we learn from the two examples of Dark Hill Tribe Tourism and Bridge over the River Kwai outlined above?

It can be said that the concept of “Dark Hill Tribe Tourism” is used as a kind of “counter-narrative” through which the various former opium producing hill tribe communities reinvent their identities. This almost proud self-representation of economic power these communities once had as opium traders can be seen as form of self-empowerment achieved via the take-over of government and NGO sponsored projects such as the Crop Substitution Programmes of the Royal Projects. As the case study in the Royal Project village of Doi Pui showed a large portion of these projects can be viewed as very successful. Today, many project villages show considerable economic autonomy, whereby the foundation for this autonomy was not always laid only by national or international development aid, but rather to an increasing degree through the personal initiative of the affected parties as a result of insufficient support from state authorities or project operators.

However, the problem of the marginalisation of the ethnic minorities in the north of Thailand after the end of World War II proved to be a phenomenon of increasing complexity; in addition to the already known problems, discrimination of the population groups affected suddenly became recognisable at a variety of new levels. For example, besides opium production, the issue of land use rights proved to be a central point of conflict between ethnic Thais and the hill tribes.

On the other side the successful elimination of opium poppy cultivation and the “traditional” opium economy in the Golden Triangle face a sort of “return of the poppy blossom” in recent years. The history of the region as a (former) main production region for opiates is marketed towards and in this regard the still deeply anchored negative image of the drug producing hill tribes is used as a tourist attraction; hereby primarily the Thai domestic tourism seems to profit from this newly reawakened interest in the opium poppy

(LEEPREECHA 2014, pp. 330ff; TRUPP 2006, p. 72). The emergence of Dark Tourism within Hill Tribe Tourism might lead to a re-stigmatisation and re-criminalisation of these ethnic communities by the tourism industry and therefore also further their marginalisation; a problem that the providers of the majority society as well as the Hill Tribe communities themselves should keep in mind.

In the long run however, the knowledge and experience made by communities engaged in “Dark Hill Tribe Tourism” might be passed on to communities across the borders in Myanmar, Laos and furthermore also to Vietnam and to Yunnan in the South of China. As mentioned above such knowledge transfer already happened in the case of Doi Chang and this village’s experience in coffee cultivation. In the context of Thai Dark Hill Tribe Tourism this knowledge transfer already started to take place as the quote below shows:

“[...] [D]uring [the 1970s] the city people or also the media or the state say that it is us Hill Tribes who deforest, meaning not only Hmong, but ‘chao kao’ or Hill Tribes... the whole group. So, if we want to delete this misrepresentation, I have to be against this kind of thing. But now the young people in the villages start to plant fake poppy fields so farang and lowland tourists can take pictures with them... or act like they would be chao khao!” (Interview with KHAE-WA, headman of Ban Huay E-Kang, February 25, 2014)

The sites connected to the Thai-Burma Death Railway have become some kind of “Dark Disneyland”, commemorating history in an “alternative way” so to speak. Even though there is this large entertainment character the educational character should not be underestimated given that the history of World War II in the Asia-Pacific region is often a blind spot in historic education. Discussions around “Disneyfication” and commodification of memorial cultures and politics seem to be mainly among academics and (international) tourists. For many domestic and international tourists taking selfies at the bridge is a must do when visiting Kanchanaburi as interview passages from the previous sections have shown, to prove that they “were really there”.

This for sure is an important reason for most tourists to take photos at a site without always knowing or being aware of its history. However, taking a selfie at a “dark site” can be seen as a way of commemoration in its own right as more and more studies try to prove. However, in case of the so called “Death Railway” both factors are equally important since many memorials or commemoration sites display an alternative to the official narratives of the Thai state.

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