

## BOOK REVIEW

### Thailand Tourism

Arthur Asa Berger, editor (2007). *The Haworth Hospitality & Tourism*, Binghamton, NY.

As a popular tourist destination in Southeast Asia, Thailand has caught much attention of tourists from Asia and worldwide. Correspondingly, Thailand tourism has become a research topic which tourism scholars would like to put more effort to investigate. This monograph by Berger is a scholarly work that would enhance our general understanding of Thailand tourism, especially from a perspective of socio-cultural analysis. As noted by the author (xvi), several methodologies have been used in discussing the topics in the book. The methodologies relate to the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. Furthermore, the author argues that the book is ethnological because most of the analysis is based on his own travel experiences in Thailand and his interpretations of various aspects of Thai culture.

As not common in reading scholarly books, it proves to be quite enjoyable to read this book. The story-telling writing style makes the book to some extent like a guide book with more in-depth sociological and cultural discussions. The book is literally divided into three parts. Part One, with the title "Tourism in Thailand", consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 briefly discusses the definition of tourism, different forms of tourism, and presents some statistical figures of world tourism with a focus on Thailand tourism as a referring or comparing point. In Chapter 2, the author introduces some typical tourist itineraries in Thailand collected from three tour companies in the United States and one tour company in Thailand. All itineraries take Bangkok as a gateway; following the itineraries, tourists would enter and exit the country through Bangkok. In addition to the collected itineraries, the author also presents an itinerary provided by a Thai tourism scholar. Chapter 3 discusses images of Thailand described in travel literature such as John Gunther's book *Inside Asia* and the *Lonely Planet* guidebooks. The complexities of Thailand, as expressed by the mysterious contradictions of Thai culture, including the



complicated relationships that exist between Thai prostitutes and their clients, are discussed and fully acknowledged. Finally, the author redirects the discussion to the new slogan of Thailand tourism, “Happiness on Earth”. In contrast to the previous chapters, Chapter 4 provides an analysis on the national culture and personality of Thai people. Two themes are discussed here: violence and marriage. Thai people are believed to be “happy-go-lucky” people. However, the Thai society is marked with high violence. The author interprets this societal paradox by noting that the famous Thai smile might be the social face in the Thai society, while behind this social face exists a considerable amount of repressed anger and hostility. Marriage in Thailand as reflected in Thai comic books is discussed and cultural explanations are given.

Part Two, titled “Semiotic Siam”, applies a series of semiotic analyses on prominent social and cultural phenomena in Thailand. This is the most interesting part of the book. With a chapter (Chapter 5) introducing the basics of semiotics, the science of signs, the author spends nearly one-third of the whole book’s length in Chapter 6, discussing social and cultural signs and symbols in Thailand. A dozen of subtopics are elaborated in this chapter. These include the Thai smile, the Thai King, Bangkok as City of Angels, the Buddhist monks and their influence on Thailand, Buddha statues in Thailand, elephants and the Thai psyche, ethnic hill tribes, Wats (temples) in Thailand, the Thai Wai (greeting style by Thai people), Thai food, Thai prostitutes and the sex industry, and a comparison of Thailand and America to understand the concept of “otherness”. Each subtopic deserves a full-length discussion. However, some of them are more worth-noting to the readers’ interest. The famous Thai smile is discussed in a social psychological way. It is interesting to learn that the Thai smile is a forced smile rather than a spontaneous one. The Thai smile is a result of the continual repression of emotions which also explains why there is so much violence in Thai culture. The Buddhist monks are also believed to form part of the character of life in Thailand. In the social hierarchy in Thailand, monks are at the top of the social order. The philosophical and value system held by monks helps explain the prevalent individualism culture in Thailand. The Theravada Buddhism in Thailand hold the tenet that only individuals can be saved and individuals are responsible for saving themselves. Nowadays, some monks have stepped outside the old Buddhism tradition and have been playing a significant role in changing the Thai society such as fighting AIDS. Among other social and cultural features in Thailand, the ethnic hill tribes appear to be of high value to the essence of tourism development. Apart from offering an exotic experience to tourists, the hill

tribes also enable tourists to travel back to old times to see how people lived hundreds of years ago, for the tribes haven't changed their lifestyles for ages and are believed to be the "fourth world". The issues of "authenticity" and "tourist gaze" are also discussed in relation to the hill tribes.

Part Three, titled "Thailand on My Mind", provides the author's recount of his personal traveling experience in Thailand (Chapter 7) and reflection on Thai culture, Thai identity and Thailand (Chapter 8). The author concludes the text by linking Thailand with the human spirit. He proclaims that Thailand is a country that has the power to transform tourists for its rich, complex, and fascinating culture.

The book could be a valuable reference for industry practitioners as well as undergraduate students. However, it is less likely to be treated as a rigid academic work. In many places of the text, proper references should have been added. The text also involves many of the author's personal opinions that do not seem convincing. While the book was written in 2005, seemingly outdated statistical data in 2002 or 2001 were quoted. From a scholarly book with a title like this, tourism scholars would naturally expect to see more focused discussions on different components of the tourism industry in Thailand, such as tourism information centers, travel agencies, hotels, airlines, tourist attractions, and tourism administration system. Unfortunately, none of these has been covered in the book. Nonetheless, the book is still an invaluable contribution to the understanding of Thailand tourism, especially in terms of Thailand's important cultural symbols, icons, and social practices.

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