

Tourism and its impacts to the sociocultural changes: A case study of the Khaosan Road, Bangkok

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to study the impacts of tourism on the local community and cultural values in Khaosan Road exploring both positive and negative tourism impacts as well as the physical influences causing social stress in the area for readers who are interested in tourism and its contribution to the sociocultural changes in order to call attention to the awareness of people towards the following issue.

Khaosan Road, a street in central Bangkok by Chaophraya River at the northern side of Rattanakosin Area, translates as “milled rice road” and is an attribution to the historical role of this street in the rice trade. For past two centuries the street was a quiet residential area with the local population. After tourism becomes popular, the tourists looked for accommodations, the very first business was a small hotel serving the civil servants from other provinces. The guest house business generated profit and motivated locals to turn their houses to small inns and taverns. The increasing numbers of backpackers since then have affected the socio-culture and physical environment of the Khaosan Road. Direct and indirect relations with tourists and interaction with the tourism industry has brought changes in value systems and behavior of the local community.

KEYWORDS : Commodification, Khaosan, Socio-culture, Tourism

Introduction

Khaosan Road is a one kilometer street in the area of Banglamphu in central Bangkok, close to the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaew. There is century old famous Buddhist temple Chana-Songkram located just opposite Khaosan Road. It has been a backpackers' mecca for few decades and a transit base for those foreigners who are making expeditions to neighboring countries like Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. It also gained its fame from the movie based on the book called "The Beach" starred by Leonardo Dicaprio (Kevin, 2017; Mykura, 2017).

In the last 30 years, Khaosan Road has changed from being road with religious significance with its proximity to well-known temples to a world class "backpacker ghetto" (Kevin, 2017). A quiet neighborhood has turned into a hotspot for cheap travelers and is now internationally known as a center for partying. A small one kilometer long street with numerous restaurants, cafes, clubs, bars, pubs, cheap guest houses, travel agents, book shops, tattoo shops, bookshops, and souvenir shops (One Stop Bangkok, 2017).

As tourism industry becomes the significant sector to the economics of Thailand, tourism is often considered as revenue and foreign exchange generating force. So, a substantial number of public campaign and advertisements have been used to promote tourism. Tourism resources; the destinations or tourist attraction where people travel to for relaxation purpose (UNESCO, 2017), should be used efficiently in order to have least impact of the socio-culture of the community (Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2017).

The topic of tourism and its contribution to the sociocultural changes has been discussed due to various reasons. Firstly, tourism resources need to be efficiently used so that they can generate income

without affecting the community. Secondly, the resources should be utilized in such a way that most benefits go to the local community rather than the outsider. Thirdly, the revenue should be widely distributed among the locals. Lastly, tourism resources should be used in such a way that they could be passed on to next generation (Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). This paper is an attempt to study the impact of tourism on the local community and cultural values in Khaosan Road emphasizing the negative impacts of Khaosan community with the main reason is to reveal problems from tourist activities in a community for the protection guideline of other communities which become tourist destination.

Tourism Impacts on Socio-cultural of Khaosan Road

(1) Positive Impacts of Tourism in Khaosan Road

There is no doubt that tourism brings benefits to local residents in Khaosan Road. Firstly, economic effect, tourists bring large amount income and revenue to the area raising the quality of local people having money to spend for living. Secondly, social effect, because of the improvement of infrastructure in Khaosan Road, not only travelers use the new basic structure but also local citizens. Tourism encourages people learn to preserve the traditional customs and share cultural understanding between foreigners and Thais (Simm, 2017), for example, foreign travelers visit Khaosan Road for Songkran festival in Aprils to play water because the road is one of the most popular places for this festival in Thailand (One Stop Bangkok, 2017). Instead of just playing water gun, Thai people educate them about the real tradition and behaviour of the festival. However, nowadays, the

negative impacts seem to more discuss and affect to the area than the positive effects (Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2017; Simm, 2017).

(2) Negative Impacts of Tourism in Khaosan Road

While tourism brings benefits to locals, there are also a range of negative socio-cultural impacts imposed upon a tourist destination, which mainly include two. Firstly when cultures are marketed, the marketing process can lead to the commoditization of the culture. Secondly locals may view tourists as intruders, moving in and taking away the best of the local resources. The socio cultural impacts should be available in towns and it should be designed in such a way that it achieves the ideals of sustainable development (Oppermann and Chon, 1997). Smith (1995) reported that the socio-cultural impacts of tourism occur when there is the interaction between the “host”, or local people, and “guests”, or tourists. However, Glasson, Gofrey and Goodey (1995) argued that the socio-cultural impacts are the “people impacts” of tourism and it concentrates on the day to day changes and quality of life of residents in a destination. Tourist and the host interactions does not only have an effect on the hosts and the host’s society, but also affects the tourists and the tourists’ societies.

Tourism could impact the social and cultural aspects of life in a particular area, depending on the culture and traditions. The interaction between tourists and the host community can be one of the factors that may both positively and negatively affects a community as tourist may not be sensitive to local customs, traditions and standards. The impacts arise when tourism brings about changes in value systems and behavior and thereby threatens indigenous identity. Furthermore, changes often occur in community structure, family

relationships, collective traditional life styles, ceremonies and morality (Simm, 2017; UNEP, 2016). Tourism can cause change or loss of local identity and values, brought about by several closely related influences:

1. Commodification: In terms of tourism, commodification refers to using a place’s culture and the cultural artifacts to make a large enough profit to support part of the area’s economy (Fiaux, 2010). It is widely common for destinations to use the aspect of culture as a mean to attract tourists. This means making culture a commodity and hence packaging and selling it for consumption (Cole, 2007). In today’s tourism, commodification is prevalent everywhere (Fainstein, 2007).

Commoditization of culture is hence inevitable and from the locals view it can have both advantages and disadvantages. It is unquestionably brings economic benefits. However often the commoditization is only selective and designated tourist spaces are created, especially in cities making sure to exclude any signs of poverty that could convey a bad image (Wirth and Freestone, 2003). Culture is probably Thailand’s most saleable commodity. Khaosan Road is a perfect example of commodification of Thai arts and crafts, food, Buddhist artifacts, and clothing. It is one of the top tourist places in Bangkok where a tourist can buy tacky memorabilia bearing Buddha’s image (Kevin, 2017; One Stop Bangkok, 2017). This kind of blatant commercialization of the religion is disrespectful. Commoditization of culture is an essential aspect of tourism with both advantages and disadvantages for both hosts and visitors. Although it is likely that tourists experience something new and provide them awareness about different cultures it can also go too far if it makes for a seemingly fake or staged experience.

The importance of Khaosan Road is blurred at the present time. As mentioned, in last 30 years, Khaosan Road was the religious significance with history in rice community, presently it is a world class “backpacker ghetto” (Kevin, 2017). Local knowledge and culture are faded, not only because tourists do not recognize but also new generation of local citizens lack of these knowledge and concentrate only on selling the area to travelers in form of lodging, restaurant, and souvenirs (Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2017 ; One Stop Bangkok, 2017).

2. Adaptation to tourist demands: Tourists want souvenirs, arts, crafts, cultural manifestations. In many tourist destinations, craftsmen have responded to the growing demand and have made changes in the design of their products to make them more in line with the new customer’s tastes. The interest shown by tourists can contribute to the sense of self-worth of the artists and help conserve a cultural tradition. Cultural erosion may occur in the process of commercializing cultural goods (UNEP, 2016). Tourists those who visits Thailand, want to buy local souvenirs, arts and any cultural related product but in the most cases craftsmen are changing the design of them in order to bring them more in line with the customer’s tastes. Khaosan Road is a traditional place for the locals who converted their homes to be cheap guest houses for the tourists. Most the residents of Khaosan Road now have either turned their homes to be guest houses or restaurants and move themselves to live in other areas in Bangkok (Kevin, 2017).

3. Physical influences causing social stress in Khaosan Road: The physical power causes social stress and encounters the local community. Cultural degeneration and resource arise conflicts in local community because there is a competition between

the host community and the tourists for making use of prime resources (UKessays, 2017). The physical influences can be listed as followed:

3.1 Cultural clashes: Tourists bring their own customs and habits to the destination and rarely are aware of the cultural shock they cause for the locals. Especially in poorer countries the image of Western tourists can be based on unreal TV shows which cause expectations to be too high and result to bitterness (Dluzewska, 2008). Culture clashes take place in tourist’s areas as Khaosan Road on daily basis because of the diversity of tourists with different cultures, tradition, beliefs, religion, languages, clothing, values and levels of prosperity. As there are different cultures the expectations and meanings of rules also differ across cultures. Rules that are accepted in one culture may not be in another culture. This can cause to misunderstandings and misinterpreting of the rules in other culture. This often leads to difficulties in interaction with hosts, create confusion, conflicts, and generate tension. Breaking the rules in the destination is common amongst tourists either because they ignore them or they are unaware of them (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). Khaosan Road faces the image of a nightlife place for party with beautiful ladies and also prostitute. When travelers visit, most of the time, they believe all girls and women are the prostitutes leading to the destroyed image of Khaosan Road as well as Thailand (Suksam, 2014).

3.2 Behavior of tourists causing irritation: Tourists carelessly fail to respect local people and their moral values in a destination. They may not respect the local traditions by taking pictures where they are not allowed to do so and they may also be not well dressed in religious places like temples, mosques, and church. As an example, tourists in

Khaosan Road are often held by the police for their illegitimate behavior like excessive drinking, male tourists courting local girls, shouting, fighting, and throwing empty bottles on the street. Many time foreigners do not wear shirts and walk shirtless on the street and even hug and kisses openly which is a taboo in Thai culture (Accessible Thailand, 2016; Suksam 2014).

3.3 Crime: The industry provides victims, as tourists are vulnerable to taking risks while on vacation, and less likely to observe safety precautions. Furthermore, as tourists' numbers grow, so too can local hostility toward tourists, thereby increasing the chances that they will be cheated, robbed, or assaulted at the destination (Cooper et al., 2008). Khaosan Road is reported as one of the highest crime areas which the number one case is robbery from both tourist and local citizen's side (Suksam, 2014).

3.4 Crime Threats: According to OSAC (2016) the most criminal activity is limited to "non-confrontational" street crimes and crimes of opportunity including: purse snatching (including drive-by snatchings from motorcycles), pickpocketing, petty theft, jewelry schemes, and tourism fraud. Many tourists have had passports, wallets, and other valuables stolen Khaosan Road, and at other crowded areas. Pickpockets and thieves typically cut into purses or bags with a razor and remove items surreptitiously. Foreigners across Thailand have been robbed of their valuables and other possessions after soliciting the services of commercial sex workers. Violent crimes (murder, rape, assault) against foreigners are relatively rare. Those that do occur typically happen at night, often when victims (both male and female) have been drinking and are separated from their travelling companions. Khaosan is also a hub of illegal activities include illicit drugs, human trafficking, prostitution, document fraud, production of counterfeit goods, etc. (Suksam, 2014).

Conclusion

It can therefore be concluded that the socio-cultural norms of Khaosan Road have changed drastically. A place which once served local rice merchants and religious functions now caters tourists. There are many elements which contributed these changes. Tourists demand is the most important factor in contributing the changes of Khaosan Road since the beginning. Cheap accommodation and food has attracted millions of tourists and pushed the traditional Thai rice market to be changed as a place of pubs, bars, restaurants and cheap hotels. It has also encouraged the local people to rent out their homes as shops, pubs, bars, restaurants and hotels.

Although, Khaosan Road gains benefits from tourism, the negative impacts are innumerable, especially, on the socio-cultural effect. It losses its local identity and values, faces various kinds of crimes. All in all, this sociocultural change occurs to serve the tourism industry and also lack of area protection conscience. Thus, with the continuous impact, socio-culture in Khaosan area will keep changing and, finally, the norms of Khaosan Road will be destroyed. This article emphasizes the negative impacts of Khaosan community revealed problems from tourist activities in Khaosan Road for the guideline of other communities to protect and preserve the local community's values and cultures before becoming a tourist destination.

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