

## The Operation of “Zero-Dollar Tours” after Their Rising Popularity in Thailand-A Case Study of Phuket, A Province Located in Southern Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the operation of “Zero-Dollar Tours” in Phuket and stakeholders involved in this kind of operation. The methodology of the research concerned qualitative data gathered by interviewing key informants in the province to analyze the “Zero- Dollar Tours” operation in Phuket, as well as to examine sustainable solutions to address this kind of travel package within Thailand. The findings were as follows: (1) “Zero-Dollar Tours” focuses on the lowest price with highest quantity of tourists involving businesses both in private and public sectors, (2) its impacts destroy economy and create crime in the provinces and country, and (3) the sustainable solutions should be started with local citizens creating the conscious love of homeland as well as the supports from the public section to protect the local image and community.

**Keywords :** Zero-Dollar Tours, Operation, Phuket, Tourism, Thailand

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## Introduction

Regarding the world economic situation, the economy around the world has recently faced enormous crisis, including in Thailand. Thus, the tourism and hospitality industry has become a significant sector in solving the country's economic crisis (Komchadluek, 2016; Manager, 2016; Thairath, 2016). In 2016, Thailand welcomed 32,573,545 tourists, which generated a total of THB2.51 million in revenue. Within this revenue, Chinese travelers are the most important spenders, generating THB 439,287 million in 2016 (Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2017).

The tourism and hospitality industry has become a significant sector of the economy in Thailand, where Phuket is the most popular destination, offering sea, sand, sun, and plenty of activities. The impacts of “Zero-Dollar Tours” have been discussed since they began in recent years (Rungsrisawat, 2013); its concept is to provide a cheap travel package for tourists and force them to buy expensive souvenirs in the shops under their chain of operation (Santhideva, 2013; Yoojamrus, 2016). Currently, many famous tourist destinations in Thailand are affected by the “Zero-Dollar Tour,” and although the number of tourists is increasing, the country does not receive tax as much as it could (ChinaDaily, 2016; Komchadluek, 2016).

## Research Objective

The aim of the research is to study the operation of “Zero-Dollar Tours” after their rising popularity in Thailand – a case study of Phuket, a province located in southern Thailand. The following objectives are assessed in order to achieve the aim of the research:

1. To explore the understanding of people regarding the meaning of “Zero-Dollar Tours.”
2. To investigate the operation and stakeholders of “Zero-Dollar Tours” in Phuket province, Thailand.
3. To explore the impact of “Zero-Dollar Tours” on Phuket province, Thailand.
4. To identify and propose sustainable solutions to address the impacts of “Zero-Dollar Tours.”

The aim and objectives are achieved through a process of collecting and analyzing data based on the qualitative method via interviews. The findings are collected from interviewing key informants (KIs) in Phuket province, Thailand.

## Literature Review

Thailand is ranked one of the world's top five destinations for Chinese tourists to visit. The most popular destinations in Thailand are Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang-Mai (ChinaDaily, 2016). "Zero-Dollar Tours" refer to groups of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand who bought a tour package from low-cost travel agencies in China. Chinese travel agencies create and offer these cheap packages to Chinese tourists and send them to local agencies in Thailand without paying any tour fare to Thai travel agencies (Komchadluek, 2016; Yoojamrus, 2016).

The concept of the "Zero-Dollar Tours" is to provide a cheap travel package for tourists (Rungsrisawat, 2013; Santhideva, 2013; Yoojamrus, 2016). However, Chinese tourists do not recognize the irregularity of these tours because of their passion for travelling and preference for lower spending, thereby becoming the victims of the travel operators. When these Chinese tourists arrive at a destination in Thailand, the tour leaders will bring them to expensive souvenir stores, forcing them to buy expensive products and watch pornographic shows for the purpose of generating profit from these activities. If Chinese tourists indicate that they are not willing to follow their tour leader, the tour leader will enforce or do physical harm to them until the tourists surrender and agree to buy souvenirs and watch the shows (Santhideva, 2013).

In 2015, more than 7.9 million mainland Chinese tourists visited Thailand, generating 376 billion baht in revenue for the Thai economy. According to those numbers, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) expects that approximately 10.5 million Chinese visitors will visit, with an estimated expenditure of 509 billion baht in 2016 (ChinaDaily, 2016). However, the majority of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand are low-income employees in plants or companies who seek low-cost traveling packages and travel to Thailand with "Zero-Dollar Tours" (Keawprommarn, 2016; Rungsrisawat, 2013). Due to the communication problems of Chinese tourists, as well as their lack of English skills, they need to follow the tour leader, accept the violent situations in which they find themselves, and buy expensive products (Santhideva, 2013).

In 2016, the "Zero-Dollar Tours" was stated to be one of the enormous problems in Thailand. General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Prime Minister of Thailand, defined the "Zero-Dollar Tour" issue as the country's economic crisis because "Zero-Dollar Tours" prevent the Thai tourism business from growing and destroy the reputation as well as the image of the country. Not only the country's reputation but also its international relationships (Komchadluek, 2016) are threatened. As mentioned above, the concept of "Zero-Dollar Tours" is that the agencies provide cheap packages to tourists; however, after tourists are faced with violence, they report that violence to their government. Some countries have warned their citizens to reconsider their travel or stop their trips

to Thailand, especially problematic destinations like Phuket and Chiang-Mai (Santhideva, 2013; Yoojamrus, 2016). Thus, the government of Thailand is trying to find ways to launch policies to stop the “Zero-Dollar Tours” in Thailand, as well as prevent this kind of travel package from operating in Thailand at all (Komchadluek, 2016; Manager, 2016).

However, those policies have not been written as other standard policies have; the Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha made his command to eliminate the “Zero-Dollar Tours” from Thailand by using his power through ‘Article 44’ from the 2014 interim constitution (Thairath, 2016a); a special authority for General Prayut Chan-o-Cha, who is both the Head of the National Council for Peace and Order and the Prime Minister of Thailand, to control and solve urgent situations occurring during the country’s current reformation (Naewna, 2016).

Phuket, a province located in southern Thailand, faces “Zero-Dollar Tours” issues all over the area because Phuket is the most popular destination for Chinese travelers, offering sea, sand, sun, and other activities (Santhideva, 2013). After the Prime Minister’s command was made, there are still two companies, named Fu-An Travel and Sin-Yuan Travel, operating “Zero-Dollar Tours” in Thailand with hired tourist buses and coaches from the O-A Transport Company without making any payment. In addition, Fu-An Travel and Sin-Yuan Travel must bring their tourists to the destinations listed by O-A Transport. Four of these destinations are listed: Royal Gems International, Royal Paradise, Royal Thai Herbs, and Bangkok Handicraft Center. All of these destinations sell high-priced souvenirs to tourists. Moreover, the O-A Transport Company provides 20 – 30% of the total sales of each group to Fu-An Travel and Sin-Yuan Travel as compensation (Komchadluek, 2016; Manager, 2016).

These companies are not only a serious issue in Thailand but also in China. Ms. XingHong Jang, Director of China’s National Tourism Administration in Thailand, noted that Thai-Chinese tourism should focus on quality and sustainability: reasonable prices, quality service, safety and security for both tourists and the destination (Manager, 2016). However, economic analysts have claimed that “Zero-Dollar Tours” have been operating in Thailand for ten years, and there are signs that they will continue to do so (Santhideva, 2013).

## Research Methodology

### Research design

This research seeks to study the operation of “Zero-Dollar Tours” after their rising popularity in Phuket province, Thailand. Therefore, the appropriate method for this paper is the qualitative method because this research requires in-depth information about the impacts from “Zero-Dollar

Tours" through interviews with local stakeholders in Phuket province. This method will uncover the characteristics and causes of problems occurring in the area of research and sustainable solutions to solve the "Zero-Dollar Tours" issue.

### **Population and sample**

The population size of the research contains 50 people to be interviewed. The interviewees are selected from stakeholders in Phuket province from the public and private sectors selected by the following criteria:

- Interviewees who work closely with the tourism industry in Phuket province.
- Interviewees who live or work in Phuket province more than 10 years being able to indicate the change of Phuket province decade.
- The operation of "Zero-Dollar Tours" affects interviewee's businesses as well as their ways of life.

### **Research instrument**

After the selection, all interviewees are contacted. Questionnaires are spread through each interviewee by phone, face-to-face, and the online questionnaire via link provided.

### **Data collection and ethical considerations**

After the interview and data collection, the ethical considerations of this paper mainly focus on the interviewees. The private information of the respondents was treated secretly, and the responses were managed anonymously in the research.

However, after the interview process, it became clear that this topic relates to many stakeholders in the province, including the local mafia and powerful people. Thus, to protect the safety and security of the respondents, the paper does not show any names of the interviewees, and the research presents only the respondents' occupation.

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis displays the qualitative findings. With 50 population selected, half of them completed full of the interview process due to nervousness of safety and security. The information drawn from these interviews was used to analyze the operation of "Zero-Dollar Tours" in Phuket province as well as sustainable solutions to solve the issues caused by this kind of travel package. These people can be divided into three key informant (KIs) groups based on occupation, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Key Informant Groups (KIs)

Group	Section	Department
Key Informant 1 (KI1)	Government	Justice Court, Government Officers
Key Informant 2 (KI2)	Academic	Lecturer, Researcher, Private Professor
Key Informant 3 (KI3)	Local business	Private Company, PR and Journalist, Entrepreneur, Retired

Source: Survey Data

## Result

As the aim of the research is to study the operation of “Zero-Dollar Tours” after their rising popularity, specifically in Phuket province, Thailand, the results will be presented by each objective.

**1. Objective one:** *To explore the understanding of people regarding the meaning of “Zero Dollar Tours”*

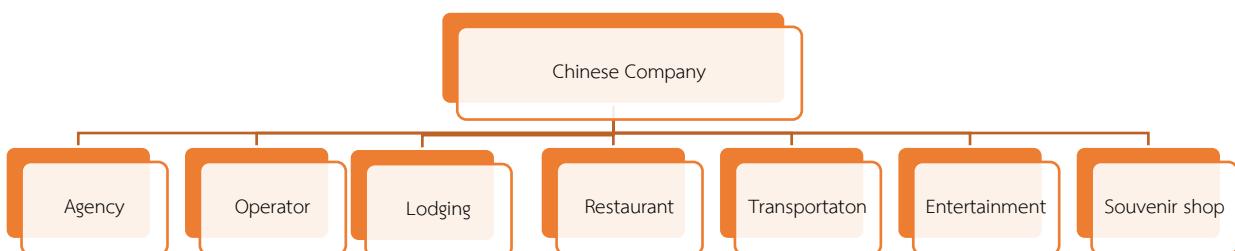
Bangkok Post (2017) defined a “Zero-Dollar Tours” as a tour package for which tourists pay a low price but are then pressured into buying overpriced items. Like numerous news presentations about this type of travel package, the Private Professors (KI2) mentioned that this tourist package in Phuket focuses only on the lowest price and highest quantity of the tourists. Many business sectors cooperate with each other to operate the travel plan, but no one takes any responsibility for the quality of the package, for the tourists, and for destinations, leading to the destruction of Phuket as well as Thailand. Most of the tourists who buy “Zero-Dollar Tours” to Phuket are Chinese. The Chinese travelers coming along with the “Zero-Dollar Tours” are often impolite and disrespectful of the destination’s rules and regulations (as noted by KI3).

One of the stakeholders who is retired from local business in Phuket, provides more information, stating that local people do not gain any advantages and benefits from the “Zero-Dollar Tours.” Additionally, local people and Phuket province experience negative effects from the operation of the “Zero-Dollar Tours;” for example, the province and country do not receive any taxes from the companies who provide “Zero-Dollar Tours” (as mentioned by KI3). Moreover, the understanding of people regarding “Zero-Dollar Tours” connects them to local powerful people, illegal products, and decadent tourist destinations as well as crime (as stated by KI1).

**2. Objective two:** *To investigate the operation and stakeholders of “Zero-Dollar Tours” in Phuket province, Thailand*

The operation of the “Zero-Dollar Tours” involves stakeholders from both public and private sectors. The road to the “Zero-Dollar Tour” starts with a company in China finding a famous tourist

destination, such as Phuket province, then searching for local joint ventures or operating the company itself. After that, the Chinese company establishes various businesses: travel agencies, tour operators, lodgings, restaurants, transportations, entertainment places, and souvenir shops, all owned by the Chinese company, with Chinese agents running the business in Thailand or operating joint ventures with local businesses. The local businesses operate and share the profit between Thai and Chinese investors (as provided by all KIs groups). The operation chart of “Zero-Dollar Tours” which is summarized from the interviewees’ answer, is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** The operation chart for “Zero-Dollar Tours”

As shown in Figure 1, the parent company in China covers all the businesses related to the tourism and hospitality industry in Phuket province. An agency works on the tickets, for example, accommodations, entertainment shows, and flight tickets, all booked with the companies in the same group. Then, the tour operator takes the responsibility to create the itinerary and take tourists on the travel program (as noted by KI1).

The lodging business handles accommodations. There are two types of lodging business in “Zero-Dollar Tours,” those that are owned by local investors and those that are owned by the parent company in China, which hires Thai people to pretend to be the owners (as mentioned by KI3). The restaurants operate similarly. At first, the restaurants are open to the public, and everyone can dine, but after few months, the restaurants welcome only the specific groups of tourists sent by the tour operator chain (as noted by KI1; KI2).

Transportation deals with coaches, vans and cars taking tourists to their destinations. Thai nominees are responsible for preparing the vehicles, and local guides sit together in the coach but do not provide any information. The nominees receive a small compensation from the parent company (as explained by KI1; KI3). For the entertainment and tourist attractions, the “Zero-Dollar Tours” network rebuilds and makes copies of attractions, for example, at Chaitaram Temple or

Wat Chalong, the most well-known temples in Phuket province, with a famous principal Buddha image, Lung Pho Cham (Chillpainai, 2014). The company will build another church within the temple area, place a fake principal Buddha image, and sell temple coins and images of the Buddha at double or triple the prices of the real one. These attractions welcome only Chinese travelers from “Zero-Dollar Tours” networks (as mentioned by KI1; KI2; KI3). Natural attractions operate under the same idea. Although these companies cannot build new islands or beaches, they lie to tourists by taking them to an island and explaining that the island is a famous attraction, for example, Hey Island (as noted by KI1).

Most travelers buy souvenirs, and souvenir shops are another business in the “Zero-Dollar Tours” network. The parent company from China opens its own souvenir shops, offering all the famous souvenirs in Phuket province (as noted by KI1; KI3). These famous products from Phuket include Phuket pearls and Phuket batik (Srisamut, 2017). The operation of the souvenir shop is called “force-to-buy.” The price of each product is more expensive than market price, at least double or triple. Tour operators drop tourists only at the shops within their chain and force the tourists to buy at least one item. If the tourists refuse to purchase anything, tour leaders will do them physical harm until they buy something in the shops. The tour leader is in charge of making sure that the tourists spend money in the “Zero-Dollar Tours” chain (as explained by KI1; KI2; KI3).

With this kind of operation, it is difficult to run all of those businesses only by a parent company in China, and the business needs local joint ventures or powerful persons who can help the “Zero-Dollar Tours” operate in the Phuket area (as pointed by KI1), such as local investors, local government, and local mafia (as mentioned by KI1; KI2). Figure 1.2 summarizes the findings from interviewees and presents the stakeholders in the “Zero-Dollar Tours” and their operational relationship.

The “Zero-Dollar Tours” involves 6 public and private sectors, which are the Chinese parent company, local investors, local politicians, local mafia, local government, and sub-companies of the parent company, as shown in Figure 2. The “Zero-Dollar Tours” can be operated by all of these sectors. The parent company in China offers bribes to the local government, involving all government sectors, to disregard activities and operations of the company in China. Then, the parent company finds joint ventures or establishes its own sub-companies in the Phuket area with the cooperation of local influencers within the province, opening businesses in tourism and hospitality as shown in Figure 1. (as presented by KI1; KI2; KI3).



**Figure 2** Stakeholders and operational relationship of “Zero-Dollar Tours”

The revenue of the “Zero-Dollar Tours” flows solely in the direction of the businesses under the Chinese parent company. Apart from the operation, revenue flows between the companies under control, and the total profit is sent back to the parent company in China; Thailand receives almost nothing from this operation. All Thailand receives is a small amount of tax from the company’s establishment license and employment tax from local employees hired only a few number in each business in which, most of the time, the employees are paid less than the minimum wages so they do not need to pay taxes. Moreover, tourists who come with the “Zero-Dollar Tours” do not respect the destination and pollute the area of Phuket province. Thailand does not have sufficient financial resources in the budget to protect the province because of the lower tax received. In other words, the resources in Phuket province are consumed, but income is never received. This is the reason why people call this kind of travel operation a “Zero-Dollar Tours” (ibid).

**3. Objective three:** *To explore the impact of “Zero-Dollar Tours” on Phuket province, Thailand*

Exploring the impact of the “Zero-Dollar Tours” on Phuket province, Thailand, can be divided into its positive and negative effects. As for positive effects, the government officers in Phuket (KI1) agree that the “Zero-Dollar Tours” emphasizes Phuket province as a popular destination in Thailand because many tourists visit Phuket every year. Additionally, based on the large number of

tourists in Phuket, the Phuket government has created a development plan to improve infrastructure in the province, as well as a promotional plan to attract more people to Phuket, leading to increasing the province's income. Nevertheless, some arguments note that the "Zero-Dollar Tours" does not benefit the area of operation and only damages the province (as mentioned by KI1; KI2; KI3).

In contrast, a wide discussion about the negative impacts of "Zero-Dollar Tours" is essential. The damages to Phuket province from the "Zero-Dollar Tours" can be divided into various factors, such as environment and resources, information about the province, quality of tourists and tour leaders, and local people, as well as income and tax. As for environment and resources, many attractions are destroyed by the operation of "Zero-Dollar Tours." Tourists consume local resources and the environment in Phuket, and they travel as "come-and-go" tourists without a sense of protectiveness for the location, which leads to environmental degeneration as well as pollution around the Phuket area (as noted by KI2; KI3).

As investigated in objective 2, all attractions are rebuilt and copied, both natural and human-made locations. Some arguments ask how tourists do not notice any of this misinformation; the obvious response is that nobody can provide accurate information to them (as noted by KI1; KI2). Information about the province and tourist attractions provided by tour leaders is either inaccurate or specific information that the tour operator wants tourists to know, for instance, fake information. Thai people always cheat in setting product prices to force the tourists to buy products and souvenirs only in their shops. Another reason for the misinformation is the low quality of the tour leaders: all of them are illicit guides without any knowledge of the destination, Thai tradition, or Thai culture, and some of them cannot even speak Thai (as mentioned by KI1; KI2; KI3).

Local people do not experience any benefits from the operation of the "Zero-Dollar Tours". Apart from "Zero-Dollar Tours" tourists consuming the resources and using the infrastructure of Phuket, Phuket's citizens face threats if they try to resist the "Zero-Dollar Tours" operations. The income of the local people decreases because tourists are forced to buy only in the tour-specific stores, affecting the country's income and taxation. The government cannot collect as much tax as is really owed, as all local sectors cover up and conceal their expenses to minimize taxes (as pointed by KI1; KI2). All the negative impacts from the operation of "Zero-Dollar Tours" have direct effects on the image and reputation of Thailand. Tourism in Phuket is destroyed, tourists are afraid to buy travel packages, and the mafia expands in the Phuket area. Finally, Phuket province and Thailand face the problems of low-quality tourists, mafia expansion, and reduced revenue and tax (as noted by KI1; KI2; KI3).

**4. Objective four:** *To identify and propose sustainable solutions to address the impacts of “Zero-Dollar Tours”*

The sustainable solution to solve the “Zero-Dollar Tours” issues must start with the local government. Laws should be seriously enforced in the Phuket area; for example, the government should investigate the money that travel agencies and tour operators send back to their parent companies in China, examine which tour operators hire Thai people as their representatives, and ensure that tour leaders and guides have knowledge about local history, tradition, and culture. Moreover, government officers should rotate to other areas or provinces rather than working and staying in the Phuket area for a long time (*ibid*).

Every section in Phuket should work together; the conscious love of homeland is necessary for Phuket’s citizens. The government should support local people and create an association for traveling in Thailand that is run by Thai people; they should also create a symbol for shops and restaurants that are operated by Thai people. Furthermore, the government should focus more on quality of tourism and expenditure of tourists than quantity of tourists, as well as publish news about the “Zero-Dollar Tours” operations to help Chinese people realize their impacts and stop buying these cheap travel packages (as noted by KI1; KI3).

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the tourism and hospitality industry has become a significant economic sector in Thailand where is ranked as one of the world’s top five destinations that Chinese tourists choose to visit. The most popular destinations are Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang-Mai. Budget travel packages serve people with low income who want to spend vacation time in Thailand, especially Phuket province.

The impacts of “Zero-Dollar Tours” operations have been discussed in recent years; the underlying concept is to provide a cheap travel package to tourists and force them to buy expensive souvenirs in shops under their chain of operation. The operation of the “Zero-Dollar Tours” is complicated and has many negative impacts on the area.

As the research results presented, most travel packages to Phuket focus only on the lowest price and quantity of the tourists, and no one takes responsibility for the quality of the package, tourists, and destinations. The people’s understanding regarding “Zero-Dollar Tours” generally related them to the local mafia, illegal products, decadent tourist destinations and crime. The operation of “Zero-Dollar Tours” involves stakeholders from both public and private sectors, starting with a parent company in China searching for local joint ventures or operating by itself.

The “Zero-Dollar Tours” presents Phuket as a popular destination due to the large number of tourists visiting Phuket leading to the development of local infrastructure and a promotional plan to attract more people to increase province’s income. However, the negative impacts of the “Zero-Dollar Tours” have been widely argued to cause only damage to Phuket, such as environmental degeneration, pollution, rebuilt and copied attractions, misinformation of the destination and the Thai people, low quality of tourists and tour leaders, local mafia expansion, illegal activities, and uncollected tax. Moreover, these operations destroy the image and reputation of Thailand.

The sustainable solution to solve the “Zero-Dollar Tours” issue must start with the local government. Laws must be seriously enforced in Phuket. Local people must be educated to love their homeland and gather as an association to promote quality tourism in Phuket. Lastly, it is important for government to focus on quality of tourism and expenditure of tourists, not the quantity of tourists, as well as publish news about “Zero-Dollar Tours” to help Chinese people realize their impacts and stop buying these cheap travel packages.

## Discussion

This research topic could not provide more information on the names of businesses and stakeholders because of the need to protect the safety and security of interviewees. Therefore, this paper can only focus on an overview of “Zero-Dollar Tours” within Phuket province and their effect on the area. Moreover, there were difficulties during the data- collecting process because the informants and respondents take this topic very seriously, due to mafia involvement in the operation and concerns about employment safety.

## Suggestion

This paper focuses on the operation of “Zero-Dollar Tours” in Phuket, mainly presenting the operation of Chinese companies; however, other countries operate similar types of travel packages in Phuket. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate and study other countries in addition to China such as Russia. Moreover, solutions for the “Zero-Dollar Tours” issue should be followed up and work closely with the government as it is a big problem of Thailand.

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