
A Study Of Thailand's Sex Tourism

Sex Tourism in Thailand As we enter a new millennium the post-colonial nations in the world are still searching for ways to compete in an increasingly globalized, consumption driven economic environment. Many developing countries have speculated that Tourism is an effective catalyst for development as well as increased international understanding. Thailand, who has embraced tourism as the key to its modernization strategy, has been hailed by many as a paradigm for success. Over the past twenty years Thailand has enjoyed one of the fastest economic growth rates of any developing country. This rapid progress has allowed Thailand to emerge as an economic leader in the Third world. The \$4 billion a year in tourism revenue is the core support of the Thai economy (Bishop, p. VI). Thai officials have attributed the success of the tourism industry to the many attractions located in various parts of the country as well as the uniqueness of the Thai people --- their friendliness and hospitality (Bishop, p. 67). However the Thai government has failed to recognize the contributions of sex tourism which is estimated to generate about \$1.5 billion every year, according to Professor Krikiat Phiapatserithan of Thammasat University (World congress, regional profiles, p. 3).

Thailand's failure to recognize the sex tourism is reflective of the discourse used by the worldwide tourism industry to analyze the industry's success. From the standpoint of the tourism industry the success of tourism is directly related only to economic factors, anything else is seen as unnecessary. It is in the best interest of tourism corporations and the countries that are dependent on tourism to discourage the circulation of information regarding any of the potential negative effects related to tourism. The censorship of information by these entities has caused much of the general public to be ignorant of the adverse consequences of the mass tourist industry in Thailand. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the sex tourism, using Thailand as the basis of my investigation. I will begin by shedding light on the complex social and economic factors that has formed the modern sex industry of Thailand. Then I will link the damaging effects to the Thailand's cultural values and quality of life to the emergence of child sex tourism, which in recent years has emerged as a significant contributor of tourist revenue. Subsequently I will give examples of how deliberate manipulations of information by the Thai government and the tourism industry is responsible for the spread of inaccurate images relating to sex tourism. Then I will attempt to link the manipulation of information to tourist's behaviors and attitudes as well as Thai government policy.

In conclusion I will give the future outlook for sex tourism in Thailand. Historical, Social and Economic Roots: Vietnam is believed by many to be the beginning of the creation of a large-scale sex industry in Thailand. During the Vietnam War Thailand was a popular destination for rest and relaxation for American servicemen. To meet the demands of American soldiers, who

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were eager to pay for a temporary sexual partner, new brothels and go-go bars sprang up almost overnight. Following the war the Thai government took an active stance in promoting the growth of the tourist industry in the hope that it would contribute to the modernization process.

The half-a-million prostitutes left over from the war were seen as a commodity that could be actively exploited in exchange for the influx of much needed foreign currency. Sex tours from Japan brought many free spending Japanese that significantly aided to the rapid growth of tourism. Tourist arrivals jumped from one million in 1973 to five million in 1990. During this time the Thai government made no attempts to curb the growth of prostitution. In fact they adopted measures that encouraged its growth. Deputy Prime Minister Boonchoo Rojanasathian urged the national conference of provincial governors to encourage certain entertainment , which might be viewed as disgusting and embarrassing because they are related to sexual pleasures (Jubilee, p. 3). The result of this speech was the relaxation of regulations regarding the operation of bars . Eventually the growth of Thailand s tourist industry succeeded in creating rapid economic growth, and modernization. However, Thailand has become so dependent on the tourist industry that a significant reduction of the number of tourist, for any reason, would likely result in the collapse of the entire Thai economy, which would result in widespread poverty. This is one reason why Thai officials have been reluctant to crack down on the sex industry, which is estimated to contribute a quarter of all of the revenues brought in by tourism. The rapid growth and modernization created by tourism has rapidly changed the economic and social structures of Thailand. These shifts have caused the Thai economy and Thai women to be enslaved to the sex trade. Thailand s total gross national income has nearly tripled in the past 50 years (World Congress, background, p. 2).

However, despite this rapid growth the disparity of income between the rich and the poor has only widened (Jubilee, p. 4). This disparity has been caused by a drastic shift from an economy based on agriculture to the spread of a market economy. Lower crop prices and crop failures due to drought and floods resulted in widespread poverty among the rural people of Thailand. This has forced the mass migration of the rural population to the cities (Jubilee, p.2). The dire economic reality of these people has caused a disintegration of traditional Thai families. Until recently Thailand was a patriarchal society. One study showed that 73% of the families said they would like to have daughters, while only 27% expressed the desire to have sons (Jubilee, p. 3).

Widespread poverty has lead families to consider children, especially females, as economic burdens. Children and women have dropped to the lowest strata of the socioeconomic scale, and have thus suffered the most (Jubilee, p. 4). The closing of options for many families have compelled parents to force their children to fend for themselves and in some circumstances it has led people to sell their children, especially daughters (World Congress, background, p. 1). The influx of western ideals is another factor that has contributed to the victimization of many

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women and children by the sex industry. The spread of consumerism by the mass media and through face to face interactions with western tourists has caused Thais to increasingly value money and consumer items. Materialism has led many to value possessions more than their sense of self worth. This materialistic greed has led many poor families to sell their children in order to obtain material possessions. The market value of a child is between 7,000 and 30,000 baht, depending on the physical attractiveness of the child (Jubilee, p.2). To families living in constant poverty and who only earn 5,000 baht a year 30,000 baht is very enticing. The emergence of the Child Sex Market: The market for children prostitutes has been created by a number of factors. During the 1970 s pedophiles from Western countries were attracted to Thailand because of its lenient laws against prostitution and the high currency exchange rate (Jubilee, p. 3).

The supply of customers caused pimps to acquire children through sale and through kidnapping to meet their demand. Widespread rural poverty and the low socioeconomic status of children caused the influx of a large supply of rural children that could be acquired relatively cheap. To prevent the interference of the government Thai officials were bribed or in some cases offered a portion of the profits of the trade. When the AIDS epidemic severely hit the sex industry during the 1980 s many sex tourists began to engage in child sex tourism because children were seen as a safe alternative to adults. Child prostitutes were seen as being less risky due to their young age. Contrary to this notion sex with child prostitutes actually increases the likelihood of the transmission of AIDS due to the immature bodies of children (Jubilee, p. 4). In the past decade the media, most specifically the travel industry, has developed a taste for women with girly qualities. The result of this trend is a steadily increasing demand for underage prostitutes as well as the continual decline in the desired age for child prostitutes. Due to these unfortunate circumstances the child sex trade has steadily grown and it is estimated that every year one million children enter the sex trade (World Congress, overview, p. 2).

The Manipulation of the Spread of Information by the Government: Despite the immeasurable damage that the sex trade has caused the people of Thailand the government has refused to take an active role in controlling it. In the name of prosperity the Thai government has reduced its focus on matters relating to tourism to exclude everything that is not strictly an economic function (Bishop, p. 66). In essence the Thai government feels justified in sacrificing an entire generation of women and children for economic development. THAI International, a government funded agency, addressed the problems associated with the AIDS epidemic and the sex trade, not as a threat to the nation or its people, but as a threat to the tourism industry (Bishop, p. 68). It seems that greed for money, and power has led to widespread government corruption that has led to a sickening disintegration of morals.

The Thai government has swept sex tourism under the carpet with a public relations campaign designed at salvaging tourism's identity (Bishop, p. 70). Thai social critic Siriporn Skrobanek

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claims that The ruling class values the bodies of poor women as a means to attract tourists to earn foreign exchange. This strategy made Thailand a country where all people who go there, like it and long to return. It is beautiful and there is something for everybody (Bishop, p. 75). In the past decade the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and THAI International has led an effort at attracting affluent white male tourists. One add, issued by a company called incentive Asia Destination Services, promises to turn fantasy into reality and reality into fantasy for deserving high achievers . A brochure titled Thai Values: Travel to the Land of Smiles, says Thai values make Thailand the ultimate incentive; So much for so little; Beauty and the beach; Antiques, Thai arts and crafts all at bargain prices; Living values; The most affordable luxury in Asia; and All the pageantry of Thailand at your command. This advertisement is promoting a form of neo colonialism. Goods in the form of pleasure are exploited by rich ex-imperialistic powers at the expense of a poor undeveloped country (Bishop, p. 70). The Thai government refuses to blatantly acknowledge sex tourism. For if they did it would not be acceptable to openly promote the industry. Instead they promote Thailand as a place with sensuous, beautiful, young women who are eager to serve you to the fullest. The Manipulation of the Spread of Information by the Tourism Industry: There are actual sex tours that you can procure for a modest some of money. The promotional advertising can be found in glossy brochures, and through tour information on the Internet. I was able to find two Asian sex tour agencies on the Internet. It is shocking to see how these ads have contributed to creating and supporting stereotypes about the tourist industry of Thailand.

The first ad that I analyzed is from an agency called Thailand Teenage Girls Bangkok. It reads Have you ever wished you could go on a n exotic vacation and be surrounded by little teenage girls who just want you for sex!! Well if you go a sex vacation you can have sex with lovely little teenage girls like these all day and night a different one each time if you like! Why not take a week vacation to an exotic destination and fuck your brains out. Everything is arranged for you including a guide who can arrange girls for you! See details inside!!! Who knows you may even want to bring one home with you and this can also be arranged! On the front page it shows ten young, dark, nude Thai women. The women on the cover are consciously designed so that the reader believes that all of Thai women are friendly, beautiful, and primitive. The add promotes the hedonistic idea that the women in Thailand who are prostitutes just want you for sex. It fails to mention that many of the women are victims of poverty, and in some cases kidnapping. The most shocking aspect of this add is the deliberate promotion of prostitution with teenage girls. It is not difficult for one to twist the message of the add so that it says come have sex with little girls and boys. It is illegal for companies to sell sex with a minor. However, despite these regulations it still occurs. Danny Smith, an undercover news reporter for a British television channel, secretly recorded with a hidden camera what a tour operator told him I can confirm that we can get you kids about ten or eleven. No problem at all? If you want the kids younger, just give me an age. Give me a number.

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Although child sex tourism is not seen in the general public it certainly exists. There have been cases of children as young as four who have been sold into prostitution (Smith, p. 1). The second add is from Ultimate Asia Sex Tour Travel in Video, which is based out of Honolulu, Hawaii. The first paragraph says: If you ever dreamed of going to Thailand and screwing every night with the most beautiful young sexy girls with thousands of the most luscious sexy girls just waiting to satisfy your wildest sexual fantasies now is the time to go with the Thailand Baht at an all time low!!! It promotes the myth that Thai women are all erotic and beautiful and only wish to please you. Also this add promotes the economic inequalities that allows westerners to exploit Thailand. In the first paragraph of the tour update it says: Have you ever fantasized about secretly escaping to a exotic location surrounded by hundreds of young beautiful sexy half-naked girls without a care if anybody see you or talk about you? This paragraph advocates a ritual inversion of behavior. That is, because you are in a different land surround by people you don t know it is all right to act in ways that you might consider unacceptable behavior in your home society. Also the ad promotes neocolonialism because it supports the idea that the women of this land are primitive and inferior which justifies exploiting them for sex. Conclusion and the Future of Sex Tourism in Thailand:In conclusion, sex tourism, although important to the Thai economy, has many serious consequences that have to a large extent been painted over by the media. Due to Thailand s dependence on the tourism industry it would be impossible to completely abolish the trade at once.

A more equitable distribution of resources among the people of Thailand is necessary for Thailand to be able to end the sex trade. It is important for the world, as well as the people of Thailand, to be informed about the true consequences of sex tourism. This would dispel many of the myths and stereo types that have perpetuated ethnocentric ritual inversions of behavior by western tourist seeking a hedonistic experience. The people of Thailand must be informed of the drastic cost associated with sex tourism. This could potentially cause enough public uproar to prompt changes in the government s stance on sex tourism. Sex Tourism s place in the future in Thailand and the rest of the world is still very uncertain. It will be interesting to see how the nature of the industry changes in the future.

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