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We Travel Together? Assessing Domestic Tourism during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Thailand

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This picture taken on 24 October 2021 shows a domestic tourist posing for a selfie with her mobile phone while taking a ferry to Phi Phi Island, Phuket, in Thailand. Photo: Candida NG/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has devastated Thailand's tourism industry and emphasized the country's economic dependence on this sector. It has cost Thailand at least three million tourism-dependent jobs, and, more broadly, left up to 7.5 million workers without employment in 2020 and 2021.
- Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) programmes have attempted to reinvigorate demand from international travellers, and efforts to promote domestic tourism have developed amidst stagnant international arrivals.
- Domestic tourism programmes have been envisioned and implemented based on the notion of domestic tourists primarily being middle- to upper-middle-class, Bangkok-based, Thai people, a conception that ignores the habits, desires, and backgrounds of millions of domestic tourists, such as those from the Northeast region of Thailand, or Isan.
- The TAT-sponsored programme, *Rao thiao duaikan*, or We Travel Together, is a COVID-19 domestic tourism relief project that subsidizes accommodation, air travel, and other amenities for Thai tourists, and it has generally been received favourably among users.
- We Travel Together and other TAT campaigns do not go far enough in reimagining domestic tourism to reflect Thailand's regional dynamism, to respond to the needs of diverse groups of domestic tourists, or to make travel more accessible and guided by environmentally responsible and regenerative principles.

INTRODUCTION

Siblings Ing and Som wound their way through the crowds on the thirty-fourth floor of Roi Et Tower, inching closer to the glass-floored skywalk that would afford them a bird's eye view of Roi Et town and, if they dared to look down, a vertiginous glimpse of the park that lay about one hundred metres below their feet. The last time Som and Ing spent time in their home province of Roi Et in Northeast Thailand in early 2020, the tower was still under construction, its golden, circular pan pipe-shaped structure not yet soaring above the town's other famously tall attraction, the 59.2 metre standing Buddha image at Wat Burapha Phiram temple. The tower joins the Buddha as one of Roi Et province's main tourist destinations, and Roi Et Tower was built specifically to enhance the local tourism industry and to celebrate the province's unique musical heritage.

The seven-hour bus ride from Bangkok to Roi Et passed quickly for Ing and Som, who had not ventured home to spend time with their family since the start of the pandemic, worried about transmitting COVID to elderly relatives and trying to save money working full-time jobs at a call centre in Bangkok. Receiving a full course of vaccinations helped them to feel safer, as did news of Thailand's steadily decreasing daily COVID-19 infection numbers, and so they planned their short trip to coincide with the April 2022 Songkran holidays. Roi Et Tower, or Ho Wot 101 as the building is known in Thai,¹ was the siblings' first stop – just a quick thiao, or visit – before they continued to their house in a nearby village; they would revisit Ho Wot the following day with their whole family, but wanted multiple opportunities to take photos and selfies with the stunning views.²

Ing and Som were part of a group of up to 3.34 million Thai and foreign tourists who criss-crossed the country over the week of April 11 through 17, according to Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) projections.³ The TAT, as well as the millions of Thai people who work in the tourism sector, hope that this increase in travel will expand as Thailand continues to relax its requirements for international entry and the local safety measures implemented in response to the pandemic.

The devastating impact of the pandemic on Thailand's previously thriving tourism industry has been carefully documented as state agencies and private entities devise strategies to spur recovery and to support millions of workers. While programmes such as the "Phuket Sandbox" attempted to reinvigorate demand from international travellers, efforts to promote domestic tourism developed in tandem, as policymakers realized that international arrivals would remain stagnant for some time. This paper considers the landscape of domestic tourism in Northeast Thailand and the TAT's domestic tourism initiatives, including "We Travel Together", or *Rao thiao duaikan* (hereafter WTT). It analyses the TAT's and WTT's ideal target tourists and the conceptualizations of "tourism" that underpin their programming, contending that travellers like Ing and Som are part of a large but under-recognized group of Thai domestic tourists. With the COVID-19 pandemic providing an

opportunity to reevaluate how tourism occurs and is promoted, the paper contends that the TAT ought to reappraise its approach and to take seriously the travel habits of Thai people from different regions and diverse economic backgrounds.

DOMESTIC TOURISM, THE TAT, AND THE NORTHEAST REGION

COVID-19 has cost Thailand about three million tourism-dependent jobs,⁴ and some observers estimate that, in total, 6.6 to 7.5 million workers were left without employment in 2020 and 2021.⁵ The second wave of the pandemic caused the economy to contract by 2.6 per cent in the first quarter of 2021, which followed a 6.1 per cent drop in GDP in 2020, one of the steepest contractions among ASEAN states.⁶ In 2019, tourism accounted for 21 per cent of Thailand's GDP, making it one of the region's economies that is most dependent on the sector. Concerns about reviving the industry are now thus particularly keen.⁷ In 2019, 77,393,030 international tourists visited Thailand, and 229,748,960 domestic tourists made trips within the country, for a total of 307,141,990 people.⁸ Numbers of domestic tourists continue to vastly exceed those of international visitors, and this group contributes significantly to total tourism-generated revenue every year. According to the TAT's most recent annual report, published in 2017, domestic tourists were responsible for 33.2 per cent (934,364.43 million baht) of total tourism-generated revenue (2,817,994.43 million baht) in the 2017 fiscal year.⁹

Though occupying an important position on Thailand's intertwined tourism and economic landscape, domestic tourists and their distinct habits, desires, and interests are often overlooked by researchers and policymakers. As Evrard and Prasit emphasize, "Domestic tourism is not simply an emulation of international tourism... it has its own historical and cultural dynamics".¹⁰ Günther concurs, while affirming the interrelated nature of Western and Asian/domestic mobilities.¹¹ Destinations favoured by domestic travellers both overlap with and differ from those preferred by Western tourists, who tend to visit Thailand for beach holidays, wellness/medical services,¹² and encounters predicated on their perceptions of Thailand's exotic, erotic Otherness and corresponding non-modern "authenticity". Similarly, domestic tourists sometimes seek nostalgic immersion in locations associated with past-ness and idealized rurality, while also wishing to experience Otherness through hybridized symbols of Western "modernity". This latter urge is evident in the popularity of Roi Et's musical skyscraper Ho Wot, visited by Som and Ing and around 3,000 other tourists per day during Songkran.¹³ Whether idealized or modern, all of these locations become tourist attractions through the commodification, fetishization, and sanitization of national and local histories and identities – processes inherent to the business of tourism.

The TAT, an agency within the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, plays a large role in influencing the desires of domestic tourists and shaping the images of each of Thailand's 77 provinces through its tourism campaigns.¹⁴ Endeavouring to encourage Thai people to visit all six regions of Thailand, the TAT has developed distinct brand identities for each region as part of its 2022 domestic tourism campaign organized around three ideas: "Nature to Keep, Food to Explore, Thainess to Discover".¹⁵ In an interview with the author, Pum, a

TAT officer in Central Thailand, explained that brand identities and values attached to each region must be unique so that Thai tourists do not view some areas as “the same” as others and thus not worthy of a visit, and so that tourism service providers do not feel that they must compete with other regions with similar identities. “Chic Central” draws on Bangkok’s cosmopolitanism, “East at Ease” highlights the Eastern seaboard’s relaxed beaches, “North Nostalgia” foregrounds the historical cachet of Northern Thailand, “Savoury South” is a flavourful call to eat one’s way through Southern Thailand, and “Isan in Love” urges Thai visitors to fall in love with the Northeast.

The brand concept of “Isan in Love” was difficult to develop; for TAT marketing experts, Isan did not cohere as easily as other regions around a single expansive theme.¹⁶ Comprising 20 provinces, the region is large and ethnolinguistically diverse. Isan is overwhelmingly populated by speakers of Isan, a dialect of Lao. Regional identity is so wholly associated with Isan language and ethnic identification that non-Isan speakers are usually excluded from Isan regional discourse, even though significant communities of Khmer, Kui, Phu Thai, Vietnamese, and other ethnically minoritized groups inhabit the region. The tired trope of the struggling farmer from Isan or the Isan migrant (taxi driver, masseuse, restaurant server, sex worker, etc.) toiling in Bangkok is long established in film, literature, music, scholarship, and other media.¹⁷ Inhabitants of Isan and Isan migrants in Bangkok are therefore often stigmatized and marginalized in Central Thai discourse, as they are perceived to be poor, undereducated country folk whose Lao-ness or Isan-ness positions them as inferior to Thai people in the codified ethnic hierarchy.¹⁸

The TAT officer Pum emphasized that many Thai people view Isan as “primitive”, less developed, and remote – or *thurakandan* – and so they are less likely to travel there. This is ironic considering that many domestic tourists do seek an escape from chaotic urban conditions via encounters with what they perceive as the pristine, original “Thainess” of the countryside. But in what regions and in what kinds of places and people is “Thainess” thought to reside? Only 13.7 per cent (42,088,075 people) of the total number of domestic tourists in Thailand visited Isan in 2019. The TAT seeks to change Isan’s image by revealing the many good places, things and experiences that can be “*khut*”, or dug up, in Isan.¹⁹

According to the logic of the new TAT campaign, Thai people must be persuaded to visit Isan in order to realize that the region is lovely and lovable. “Love” is a mood that captures its complexity and variety and that packages them as tourist destinations. In this schema, the ideal type “Thai domestic tourist” is not a tourist from within the region, but most likely a middle- to upper-class person living in Bangkok with enough disposable income to travel and plan holidays in other provinces. This understanding was reflected in conversation with the TAT officer; she noted that Central Thailand poses challenges for tourism development because so many tourists choose not to stay overnight – they are close to home, with home being Bangkok and surrounding provinces.

This pattern is borne out in pre-pandemic tourism data on visitor totals by province gathered by the TAT in 2019. Those data classify 52 per cent of all domestic travellers in Central Thailand as “excursionists”, or tourists who make day trips and do not require overnight hotel stays. Some excursionists may choose to travel within their own region due to time

and economic considerations, among other factors, and their numbers are likely to be even higher than reported. And TAT data may not count domestic travellers like Ing and Som as either tourists or excursionists, since they stayed with family instead of booking a hotel and were travelling to and within a province that they also considered to be home. Yet they visited touristic attractions, ate in restaurants, and used the Songkran break for leisure – activities that also characterize the practice of “tourism”. Ing’s and Som’s approach to travel is shared by many Thai people who like to *thiao* – to take shorter or longer trips that might involve lodging in the homes of family and friends as both a way to save money and to enjoy time together.

Compared to Central Thailand, according to TAT data only 30 per cent of domestic tourists in Northern Thailand were excursionists in 2019, and 24.5 per cent of tourists in Southern Thailand were those who made excursion-type trips.²⁰ With 42.1 per cent of visitors to Isan categorized as excursionists, figures for the region were closer to those of Central Thailand, suggesting that many tourists in the Northeast are Northeasterners themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the number of excursionists in Thailand, as people have adapted their behaviours for maximum safety and minimal contact with others. TAT and Thai government responses reveal an awareness of this shift but, as the next section suggests, also a failure to imagine ways to expand travel to meet the needs of tourists from all regions and all backgrounds.

WE TRAVEL TOGETHER?

Rao thiao duaikan, or We Travel Together (WTT) is the main programme implemented by the TAT to support the activities of domestic tourists and tourism service providers during the pandemic. It was first launched in July 2020 and has been renewed three times. The most recent phase, Phase Four, had a budget of nine billion baht and was set to conclude on 31 May 2022. The TAT has proposed to extend it until December 2022 in order to use remaining funds and to continue to encourage Thai people to travel domestically instead of abroad.

In the WTT program, the government subsidizes hotel rooms and plane tickets for up to 40 per cent of the full cost, and registered tourists receive a 600-baht virtual coupon for food and other services to be used at participating providers for each day of their trip. Travellers and businesses apply to participate on the programme’s website, where lists of participating providers organized by province can also be viewed. Tourist participants must be Thai nationals aged 18 and above, and they can only use the subsidies in a province other than the one where they are registered as inhabiting. They also must have a smartphone to download the banking application Pao Tang, or “change purse”, in which the subsidies are deposited. Service providers such as hotels, restaurants, OTOP (One Tambon, One Product) vendors,²¹ and others must be registered as businesses and open bank accounts with Krunghthai Bank, among other verification procedures. The number of tourists entitled to participate in each phase of the programme depended on the budget for that particular phase.

In WTT's first iteration, over 3.5 million people registered, and in Phase Four, 2 million entitlements were available and 1.8 million have been registered.

Responses to WTT from tourists and service providers have been positive overall. The manager at The Bed Hotel, a participating hotel in Roi Et Province, noted that about 10 per cent of bookings made during the pandemic have been WTT-subsidised bookings. He viewed this total as impressive for a short-term programme and when considering the range of booking options that often include discounts and are easily accessible to tourists via platforms like Agoda.²² Tourists who have used the subsidies report satisfaction with the options and savings, especially the hotel bookings that are available at a variety of price points.^{23, 24}

Some tourists, potential tourists, and service providers have noticed shortcomings to the programme. "Tourists who get the most benefit have to live in or near Bangkok", opined Noi, a tourist photographer in Nakhon Phanom province.²⁵ He explained that most domestic air travel routes connected provinces with Bangkok but not with one another. Furthermore, during the pandemic, many tourists opted to travel in their own vehicles for enhanced safety, taking road trips instead of flying or using public buses and minivans. Tourism service providers who rent out vehicles, boats, and driver services can register with WTT, but this option does not seem to have been heavily promoted by the TAT for car travel. Searching the WTT database for WTT-subsidised vehicle rentals in the Northeast, a region where excursion-based and multi-day car trips are common, reveals that only two out of Isan's 20 provinces, Sisaket and Udon Thani, offer WTT-registered vehicle services. In contrast, the southern tourist hub of Phuket boasts 13 vehicle and boat companies to choose from.

One excursionist tourist from Surin, Oui, related that she wished WTT recognized travel within one's own province.²⁶ Since the pandemic started, she was reluctant to travel beyond the province and did not have the budget to do so either. The day before she spoke to the author, she and a group of friends and relatives from her village had packed into her pickup truck to make merit at a temple in the province, located over an hour away, that they had never visited before.²⁷ They could have used WTT coupons to stop for a meal along the way if the programme were more flexible in its conceptualization of "tourism" and "tourists". Pha, a tourism service provider working at a business in Surin, offered her own analysis of WTT. "I think the programme is designed for people like civil servants (*kharatchakan*)".²⁸ She elaborated that they have regular schedules that make it easier to plan holidays, as well as some discretionary income, and that they often travel to other provinces for work, so they can use the hotel booking entitlement. If hotel bookings can be used to facilitate work over pleasure and leisure, why can food vouchers and car subsidies not also support tourism that occurs close to home? These comments illuminate some of the biases built into the WTT programme and Thai domestic tourism infrastructures more broadly.

CONCLUSION

In its 2017 annual report, the TAT outlined one of its goals for the coming year: “Spreading tourism opportunities to people with total monthly household income under 30,000 baht in the hope that tourism would be instrumental to enhance quality of life and encouraging Thai tourists to pay more attention to the environment through the 7 Greens concepts that would help strengthen society and the environment”.²⁹ Pum described how the pandemic has already contributed to a major shift in ideas about crowds at popular heritage and environmental sites, with tourists more willing to sign up for limited spots on apps like QueQ and to wait until their booking time to enter national parks and historical areas. This practice benefits not only tourists, who appreciate a less crowded experience, but also the sites themselves, as a reduced human presence enables regeneration in ecologically threatened habitats, and decreases damage to fragile heritage sites.³⁰

Sustainable, responsible tourism plans must also take all people into account, as the hundreds of millions of Thai domestic tourists who set out across their country annually attest to the life-altering pleasures of travel. Instead of pitching campaign after campaign designed to show how formerly “backwards” regions like Isan can be “elevated” for upwardly mobile Bangkokians and up-market international tourists,³¹ perhaps the TAT could apply more of its budgetary resources to collaborations with public transportation providers. Upgrades to existing local bus, minivan, truck, and train services would increase sustainable travel options for all and improve accessibility to the thousands of villages that have developed community-based tourism initiatives with the support of local government agencies across Thailand.³² In coming years, as the climate crisis intensifies and limits modes of travel, possible destinations, and visitor volumes, such changes to tourism strategies will no longer be choices. Reimagining the “who” and “how” of tourism will only expand opportunities for collective flourishing.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ho Wot translates to Wot Tower, and *wot* is the name of the circular pan pipe musical instrument showcased via the building’s structure and exhibits found within. 101 denotes the province’s name of Roi Et, which is the Thai spelling for the number 101, or “๑๐๑” in Thai numerals. The number refers to Roi Et’s eleven ancient gates built for its vassal states. The number eleven used to be written as “๑๐๑”, which in the modern period is understood to be the number 101 and not 11, or “๑๑” in Thai numerals.

² “Ing” and “Som”, Visitors at Ho Wot, interview with the author, 12 April 2022. All names used in this piece are pseudonyms.

³ The Nation Online, 7 April 2022, “Bangkok Most Likely to be Most Visited City for Songkran” [<https://www.nationthailand.com/thai-destination/40014266>].

⁴ Reuters, 28 September 2021, “Thai industry group scales down tourism forecast, says 3 mln jobs lost” [<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thai-industry-group-scales-down-tourism-forecast-says-3-mln-jobs-lost-2021-09-28/>].

⁵ International Labour Organization, 15 June 2020, “COVID-19 employment and labour market impact in Thailand” [https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/labour-markets/WCMS_747944/lang-en/index.htm].

⁶ The World Bank, 15 July 2021, “Thailand Economic Monitor July 2021: The Road to Recovery” [<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/publication/thailand-economic-monitor-july-2021-the-road-to-recovery>].

⁷ Stella Kaendera and Lamin Leigh, 23 June 2021, “Five Things to Know About Thailand’s Economy and COVID-19”, International Monetary Fund [<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/06/21/na062121-5-things-to-know-about-thailands-economy-and-covid-19>].

⁸ National Statistical Office, Thailand, n.d., “17 Tourism and Sports Branch” [<http://statbbi.nso.go.th/staticreport/page/sector/en/17.aspx>].

⁹ Tourism Authority of Thailand, “Thongthiao withi thai kekai satai lueksueng raingan prajampi 2560” [Chic Thai Tourism in the Chic Thai Way with Profound Style: 2017 Annual Report [https://api.tat.or.th/upload/annual_report/live/%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A2%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%88%E0%B8%B3%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%B5%202560.pdf], 2017.

¹⁰ Olivier Evrard and Prasit Leepreecha, “Monks, Monarchs and Mountain Folks: Domestic Tourism and Internal Colonialism in Northern Thailand”, *Critique of Anthropology* 29, 3 (2009): 300-323.

¹¹ Jelka Günther, “Encountering the new ‘Other’: Domestic Tourism in Thailand”, *Asian Review* 30, 1 (2017): 67-85.

¹² Michael Montesano, 30 March 2022, “Hale and Hearty Plans for Thailand’s Andaman Coast”, Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia. [<https://fulcrum.sg/hale-and-hearty-plans-for-thailands-andaman-coast/>].

¹³ The construction of Ho Wot began in 2017 with a government budget of 341.8 million baht allocated through the Department of Local Administration of the Ministry of Interior. The tower opened to the public in December 2020, during the pandemic. Visitors pay 50 baht to enter, with reduced price options for senior citizens, civil servants and students. In early April 2022, Ho Wot staff estimated that between 300,000 to 400,000 people had visited the tower since its opening, with daily visitors ranging from a low of 200 people during the peak of the second wave of COVID in July 2021 to 5,000 people on 2 January 2021. The tower has quickly become a symbol of Roi Et’s provincial identity and appears in many *luk thung* music videos as a signifier of the Northeast and of Roi Et, such as Jintara Poonlarp’s *Ho wot yang khoi*, or “Still waiting at Ho Wot” [<https://youtu.be/ivbi9ZLwPA8>]. Also see *Soeng*, or “Dance”, by Annann Khufaet Paetsaen Sao (Annan Twins with Eight Hundred Thousand Sounds) [<https://youtu.be/tNKmVFjbh5I>], and *Nam ta yoi yot khang ho wot yai* or “My Tears Flow Next to Huge Ho Wot” by Gail Sumintra [<https://youtu.be/oesxtkXwx2w>].

¹⁴ The TAT’s 2013 slogan “Amazing Thailand” is now so familiar that Thai people sometimes use it an ironic quip in response to vexing political circumstances.

¹⁵ Tourism Authority of Thailand, 11 February 2022, “‘Visit Thailand Year 2022: Amazing New Chapters’ envisioned Thai tourism transformation” [<https://www.tatnews.org/2022/02/visit-thailand-year-2022-amazing-new-chapters-envisioned-thai-tourism-transformation/>].

¹⁶ “Pum”, TAT officer, interview with the author, 20 April 2022.

¹⁷ These ideas about Isan and Isan people emerge from many sources and media across many periods, including Kampon Boontawee’s 1976 novel, *Luk Isan* (A Child of the Northeast), which was also adapted into a 1982 film; Robert Textor’s foundational 1961 study about pedicab drivers; the work of Mum Jokmok, a comedian, actor, and director from Yasothon province, Isan; the *luk thung*, or child of the fields, and *mor lam* genres of music; and the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who critically examines popular ideas and discourses about the Northeast through sensory, observational-style filmmaking, among many others.

¹⁸ For more on this topic see Charles Keyes, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeast Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1967); Charles Keyes, *Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2014); Matthew Reeder,

“The Roots of Comparative Alterity in Siam: Depicting, Describing, and Defining the Peoples of the World, 1830s–1850s”, *Modern Asian Studies* (2020): 1–47; David Streckfuss, “An ‘Ethnic’ Reading of ‘Thai’ History in the Twilight of the Century-Old Official ‘Thai’ National Model”, *Southeast Asia Research* 20, 3 (2012): 305–327; Thongchai Winichakul, “The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885–1910”, Andrew Turton, ed., *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States* (London: Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 38–62; Peter Vail, “Thailand’s Khmer as ‘invisible minority’: language, ethnicity and cultural politics in north-eastern Thailand”, *Asian Ethnicity* 8, 2 (2007): 111–130.

¹⁹ According to TAT promotional materials, these “good things” can be “discovered” in rapidly growing “smart” cities like Khon Kaen, provinces becoming famous for hosting sports events like Buriram, picturesque towns along the Mekong River like Chiang Khan and Nakhon Phanom, sites that attest to the historic influence of the Khmer Empire in Surin, Buriram, and other provinces, and destinations popularized for their overlapping sacred and natural characteristics like Naka Cave in Bueng Kan province, among myriad other possibilities. For an analysis of the characterization of Thai cultural forms as “good” and “beautiful”; see Alexandra Denes, “Folklorizing Northern Khmer Identity in Thailand: Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Production of ‘Good Culture’”, *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 30, 1 (2015): 1–34.

²⁰ The higher numbers of overnight tourists in these regions may indicate both their established reputations as vacation destinations for people from all over Thailand, and geographic factors that make staying overnight more necessary even for tourists from nearby provinces.

²¹ For analysis of the OTOP programme, see Alexandra Dalferro, 8 April 2022, “Can OTOP Support Northeastern Thailand’s Post-Pandemic Recovery?” ISEAS Perspective 2022/35 [<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-35-can-otop-support-northeastern-thailands-post-pandemic-recovery-by-alexandra-dalferro/>].

²² “Gop”, Hotel manager in Roi Et, interview with the author, 11 April 2022.

²³ Fieldnotes, 11–22 April 2022.

²⁴ Nevertheless, participation in WTT does not necessarily correlate with a sustained increase in domestic tourism, as many tourists expressed that they would not travel again for a while due to ongoing fears of COVID; field notes, 11–22 April 2022).

²⁵ “Noi”, tourism photographer in Nakhon Phanom, interview with the author, 19 April 2022.

²⁶ “Oui”, Surin excursionist, interview with the author, 15 April 2022.

²⁷ The TAT officer Pum dismissed the kind of domestic tourism she referred to as *sattha thua*, or “faith tours”, in which Thai tourists visit temples to make merit and sometimes to search for auspicious signs that portend good luck and wealth, such as configurations that can be translated into lottery ticket numbers. Domestic tourists engage in “faith tourism” for many interconnected reasons, including the desire to make merit, to be in the presence of and to hear the teachings of revered monks, to search for healing or lucky omens, to meditate, to see unique Buddhist art and architecture, to learn about Buddhism and Thai history, and more. Characterizing these interests as superstitious, ignorant, and guided by blind faith (*ngom ngai*) as the TAT officer did, both obfuscates the deep meanings and important pleasures that people experience when visiting temples and misses the economic impact of the volume of such tourism – in which, of course, many Singaporean and Malaysian visitors to Thailand also participate.

²⁸ “Pha”, Employee at a business providing tourism services in Surin Province, interview with the author, 16 April 2022.

²⁹ Tourism Authority of Thailand, “Thongthiao withi thai kekai satai lueksueng raingan prajampi 2560”. The “7 Greens Concept” is not explained in the annual report but is “aimed at all parties concerned with the tourism industry to bear in mind the concrete environmental protection and greenhouse gas emission reduction while undertaking their activities”, with seven foci: Green Activity, Green Heart, Green Community, Green Logistics, Green Tourist Attraction, Green Service, and Social Responsibility and Environment. For more see Tourism Authority of Thailand,

n.d., “7 Greens: The Path of Revolutionising in the New Millennium”:

[<http://adventure.tourismthailand.org/eng/7greens.php>], and Tourism Authority of Thailand, n.d., “7 Greens Concept” [<https://7greens.tourismthailand.org>].

³⁰ This does cause concern among tourism service providers who are accustomed to receiving higher numbers of tourists at their businesses. Pum described how they have been experimenting with raising their prices to make up for the decrease in number of visitors, justifying the increase through the notion of improved experience and atmosphere made possible due to the small crowds.

³¹ For example, Tourism Authority of Thailand, 26 April 2022, “New MICHELIN Guide Thailand 2023 expands into Northeast Region, ‘Isan’” [<https://www.tatnews.org/2022/04/new-michelin-guide-thailand-2023-expands-into-northeast-region-isan/>].

³² In May 2018, Thailand’s Community Development Department (CDD) in the Ministry of Interior launched a new programme to develop and support community-based tourism across Thailand’s 77 provinces called *OTOP Nawatwithi*. The programme’s title articulates a framework that explicitly links the production and consumption of OTOP goods to a new concept – that of *nawatwithi*, a Thai-language portmanteau of the words *nawattakam*, or “innovation”, and *withi chiwit*, or “way of life”, OTOP Nawatwithi thus calls for “new” approaches to increasing tourism opportunities in less commonly visited areas where familiarity with and involvement in OTOP programs already exists, such as silk-producing communities in Surin, cattle-raising groups in Yasothorn, coffee-growing cooperatives in Lampang, and hundreds of other villages selected by CDD for the programme. While *OTOP Nawatwithi* promotes support of local economies and community building, the initiative remains attached to, and sometimes dependent on, an idealized tourism landscape that has yet to be realized. The programme both has enabled communities to access material resources for improving aspects of their own OTOP production processes and for repairing and beautifying public spaces, and has allowed them to connect with other OTOP groups from around Thailand. However, tourists rarely – if ever – visit to partake in the itineraries the communities have painstakingly prepared, and many villages have not generated increased income from tourism. The programme has been extended with fewer participating communities through 2022.

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