Thai Interpretation of Socio-cultural Impacts of Tourism Development in Beach Resort

Somruthai Soontayatron

Faculty of Sports Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 10330, Thailand

Abstract Buddhism has played an important role in Thai culture and influence on Thais' thought. The main principle of Thai Buddhism is to maintain harmony in people's minds and between people in the society. Consequently, avoidance of conflict and social confrontation of Thai people becomes a significant value. Social exchange theory is supported by plenty of research evidences that suggest the exchange system is useful for the evaluation of tourism impacts but nobody takes cultural background of host residents in to an account in term of the application. Koh Samui Island, a famous seaside resort town situated in the Southern coast of Thailand, was set as a case study of this research. A constructivist paradigm with semi-structured interviews was adopted. This study explores an overview of Thai culture which is necessary to interpret the residents' social construction of the socio-cultural impacts of tourism development and allows the focus to move away from a purely Western socio-cultural interpretation leading to a better understanding of resident responses to the impacts of tourism in a Thai context.

Keywords Thai Interpretation, Social Exchange Theory, Socio-cultural Impacts, Tourism Development

1. Introduction

Tourism has been criticised for its uneven distribution of negative and positive impacts upon host destinations. Assessing the impacts of tourism to determine sustainable ways of development, for the benefit of both hosts and guests is a challenge for the tourism industry. A wide range of literature claims that tourism has played a positive role in the socio-economic development of many countries[26]. On the other hand, studies also show that tourism can cause negative impacts upon the environment, culture and society in many destinations31]. Many host communities place their hopes on tourism as an economic driver and a development tool. However, it is still unclear whether tourism is more useful or harmful in many host destinations. There is a perception that international tourism can provide a quick path to make the transition from a traditional way of life to a modern form of society. Many studies show that destinations consider these changes positively in terms of modernisation and economic affluence[25][26][31]. However, the interaction between two different cultures creates change processes over time, especially in an Eastern context where the modernisation process is Western in orientation. Western studies assume what are negative and positive impacts of tourism but crucially, nobody looks from Thai perspective.

* Corresponding author:
somruthai_s@hotmail.com (Somruthai Soontayatron)

Previous studies on residents' attitudes and perceptions toward socio-cultural impacts of tourism identify various relationships[1][13][16][21][22][[23][35][37]. Factors influencing residents' attitudes and perceptions toward tourism development can be classified into demographic and socio-economic factors[16] (e.g. age, gender, occupational situation, educational level, level of income and the place of residence), personal factors (e.g. family background, socialisation process, state of mental health), cultural factors (e.g. religion, local culture), and factors related to tourism development (e.g. economic dependence). The relationship between socio-demographic factors and the residents' attitudes toward tourism are not conclusive. Much less analysis has focused on the influence of cultural factors from host lenses. While these previous socio-cultural impact studies have focused on socio-demographic factors, this study focused on cultural factors and studying in a Thai setting from a Thai perspective.

Koh Samui Island, a famous seaside resort town situated in the Southern coast of Thailand, was set as a case study of this research. The official religion of Koh Samui and the entire of Thailand are represented by Buddhism[9]. Thai people see Buddhism as a philosophy or a way of life as well as a code of principles and practices that broaden their perception and compassion rather than being a religion in the traditional sense of the word[9][10]. Buddhism has taught people to minimise a way of life dependent upon material possessions, the creation of harmony and peacefulness is the ultimate goal[9]. Thai people adhere to Buddhism as a fundamental part of their everyday life[17] and Buddhism

was and remains a dominant force in Thai society. Even though every religion has a similar core philosophy, they have different guidelines and code of practices for people who follow them. Western tourists have a greater distance from religious belief compared to Thai people and this lead to question on the application of Western theories to Thai culture.

This study poses a challenge to the assumptions of current research and proposes an approach based on a Thai interpretation of socio-cultural impacts of tourism development. The Western scholars who have researched the socio-cultural impacts of tourism development in host societies have developed approaches to, and models for, measuring tourism impacts. However, given the nature of Thai culture, which is influenced strongly by Buddhism, Thai people may perceive tourism impacts differently.

2. Thai Culture

2.1. Core Fundamental

Generally, harmony, respect and dignity are an immense concern for Thai people. Additionally, Thai people understand that it is inappropriate to display anger, temper, impolite behaviour and impatience in front of others[7]. To maintain their composure is important for Thai people so they do not normally criticise openly or question each other while socialising[4]. In contrast, Western people are more straight forward about their feelings and an openly criticism is acceptable for them. Conflict between two different cultures may therefore occur.

Thai culture has many social customs that rule Thai people's behaviour particularly in public settings[17]. For the most part, Thai people are extremely open-minded regarding tourists who are unfamiliar with their customs so that they often forget they are in another country where people have different ideas about their personal manner[10]. For those tourists who take the time to learn and follow Thai customs, a greater insight into the culture is gained and most Thai people will respond with obvious appreciation[18]. Thai people would be more appreciated if tourists learnt their culture, what they should and should not do, before their journey to reduce damage to the host culture.

2.2. Behind the Thai Smile

Thailand is known as the 'Land of Smiles'. The Thai smile is a real phenomenon with a genuine social purpose[17]. It is used as a part of a greeting but also to comfort in difficult circumstances. When it comes to an aggressive or angry situation, a smile is the first defence in the hope of preventing further problems[18]. It is also used to save someone from embarrassment when they do something unintentional or shameful in public. The smile is a way to ask forgiveness or to apologise and in return to forgive the mistake[10]. The Thai smile has attracted

tourists to visit Thailand for decades as it provides an ideal welcome for visitors; however, Thai people hide their real feeling behind the smile that Western visitors might not interpret and it can lead to misunderstanding.

2.3. Avoidance of Confrontation

The easy-going and mild-manner social atmosphere in Thailand with the avoidance of expressions of anger, displeasure and criticism is unique[17]. This controlled balance of social stability is sometimes upset by an act of violence, which is confusing and unexpected for Thai society[10]. Thai people believe that life consists of many uncertainties that are out of human control[19]. A fundamental rule in Thai social interaction is to avoid open, face-to-face conflict. This is evident in how Thais handle conflict and criticism[17]. Thais usually find indirect ways to soften negative messages and avoid public confrontation, regardless of whether that confrontation involves an inferior, an equal, or at worst, a superior[7]. Besides, maintaining Thais' composure is important to strengthen and smooth the interaction within relationships[7][18].

Avoiding confrontation is a positive value in Thai society[7][10]. When conflicts arise in a Western society, Westerners have courts available for resolution[17]. There is a bias towards pushing forward for compensation of wrongs committed against person or property. Such a bias is far less evident in Thai society where people will often withdraw gracefully rather than confront the wrongdoer and demand compensation or punishment[7][10][18]. For Thai people, one of the most effective methods in dealing with conflicts is to assure the conflicts do not occur at all[7][9][17]. However, despite the Thai fondness for avoidance of confrontation, conflicts do arise which demand a response. In such cases, Thai people will seek compromise[18]. In a tourism context, tourists who visit Thailand would not understand this avoidance of confrontation and this might lead to a misunderstanding and cultural conflict. On the other hand, the high value of avoidance of confrontation allows Thai people to cope with impacts of tourism and inappropriate behaviour of tourists. The Thai pattern of avoiding open social confrontation naturally influences the modes of resolving conflicts[10]

3. Social Exchange Theory

The assessment of socio-cultural impacts is difficult. Firstly, it is complex and hard to separate socio-cultural impacts from other impacts. Secondly, it is difficult to measure them[6][26]. A number of theories introduced by many scholars have been proposed. Doxey's index of irritation and Butler's lifecycle models are industry focused but there have been many criticism that both models do not focus on the host community. Therefore, both Doxey and Butler's models are not useful to measure socio-cultural impacts but Ap[2] states that social exchange theory is more relevant to socio-cultural changes.

Social exchange theory was developed by Emerson[8] and has been applied to various research contexts. The principle of social exchange theory suggests that exchanges will occur if the process creates valued rewards as well as offering more benefits than costs[15][32][36]. One of the most often quoted studies in a tourism context is that of Ap[2]. He applied social exchange theory to explain the changes in a host destination in response to tourism. The theory involves the exchange of resources between individuals or groups when interacting; for instance, there is the exchange during the processes of interaction between host residents and visitors[2]. The theory explains the variability in response to tourism by individuals and various groups in the social exchange process which engage at the individual and community stage[24][33]. The theory suggests that individuals or groups decide exchanges after weighing benefits and costs. Individuals' attitudes depend on the perceptions of exchange they are making. Subsequently, individuals who evaluate and perceive beneficial rewards in the exchange, have different perceptions from those who perceive the exchange as harmful[26]. In the tourism prospect, these principles suggest that residents are willing to enter into an exchange with tourists if they can collect some benefits without incurring unacceptable cost. If local residents theoretically believe tourism is a valuable source, and the costs they gain do not exceed the benefits, the exchange will support tourism development[34].

Social exchange theory is supported by plenty of research evidences that suggest the exchange system is useful for the evaluation of tourism impacts. It also suggests that if a deeper investigation takes place, a more complex relationship is apparent[36]. Consequently, there are numerous reports that residents who perceive benefits from tourism are more likely to support tourism[12]. Nevertheless, there are also several studies that report these residents have a more negative attitude towards tourism than others[36]. This means those residents who benefit from tourism have positive perceptions of the tourism impacts; but with some reservations of the impacts of tourism[15][29]. However, previous application has not involved culture change processes that might be associated with social exchange where cultural expressions are the basis of the exchange[5]. In addition, this theory is tested by many scholars but nobody takes cultural background of host residents in to an account in term of the application. Avoidance of confrontation deeply embeds in Thai culture in order to maintain harmony in the society; therefore, Thai resident attitudes towards socio-cultural impacts of tourism development might be different from previous studies from Western perspective.

4. Methodology

This research adopted a constructivist paradigm with qualitatively semi-structured interviews as the primary methods. Local residents' behaviour patterns and the interactions between them and tourists on a day to day basis as well as residents' perceptions and attitudes towards socio-cultural impacts of tourism development in Koh Samui were investigated. Snowball technique was adopted for recruiting the interviewees. Sixteen interviews were undertaken or until the information reached saturation point. The interview protocol was amended to suit each interviewee's circumstance. In addition, the interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder to enable the researcher to pay attention to what the participant was saying. Notes were also taken to support the recorder. The interviews were transcribed and data from field notes were initially organised by themes into categories in the Thai language to avoid losing the real meaning of the context by translating data to English. New categories and sub-categories were developed from the data. The data were categorised into themes and copied into new files under the theme headings. Thus data were categorised in qualitative content analysis, some blocks of text were used more than once as they related to more than one theme. In the analysis, the participants are given pseudonyms. In this study, the four resident types offered a classification system which facilitated the conceptualisation of certain characteristics and experiences linked with social exchange theory.

- Type one or 'Extensive contact' included local people who had regular direct contact with tourists and depended on tourism. They might be unemployed if there was no tourism.
- Type two or 'Partial contact' covered local residents who had regular contact with tourists, as well, but they were not reliant on tourism for work.
- Type three or 'Neutral concerned with tourism' represents local residents who had indirect or no frequent contact with tourists and received only a part of their income from tourism.
- Type four or 'No contact with tourism' included local people who had no contact with tourists or saw them only in passing.

5. Analysis of Findings

5.1. Embedded Avoidance of Confrontation in Thai Society

According to social exchange theory, it was clear that each resident typology (Extensive contact; Partial contact; Neutral concerned with tourism; No contact with tourism; and Local authorities) had different characteristics and they also had different attitudes towards tourism development. Lek, not surprisingly as she belongs to 'Extensive contact' group, demonstrated that she had a positive perception and attitude towards tourism development but she was also aware of its negative impacts as was Wow.

"I would like tourism in Koh Samui to keep growing bigger as it is good for my business but tourism has brought the destruction of environment as well". (Lek - female, age 38, work at travel agency - Extensive contact)

"I like it because tourism has brought development to Koh Samui such as electricity, internet, hospital and airports…however, I believe that tourism has brought crime and drugs to my community". (Wow – female, age 39, local restaurant owner - Neutral concerned with tourism)

However, Art showed an interesting point. He stated that he did not like tourism but he accepted tourism at the end of the day as tourism had brought a better quality of life and development to his community so far.

"If it's possible, I would like Koh Samui to be back the same as when I was a child before tourism occurred in Koh Samui. Even though there was no road and electricity, I was happy". (Art – male, age 56, teacher - No contact with tourism)

Poo showed that she tried to understand other local people's views and tried to compromise on tourism development matters even though she mentioned that she did not like tourism.

"I do not like it at all. I would like to have good road, public utility, electricity, water supply in Koh Samui without tourism... I am a bit concerned really but totally understand. Local people in Koh Samui, recently, have sold their lands to non-local investors and left agriculture for tourism businesses. Hhh… We relied on coconut plantations in the past but the coconut prices went down and it was not worth to count on it anymore as well as the tourism has become boom in Koh Samui so we have way out. People need to be fed and have money for living. I don't blame them. Hhh… Who is to blame is government". (Poo – female, age 54, housewife - No contact with tourism)

Poo, not surprisingly as she belongs to 'No contact with tourism' group, showed that she had negative attitude towards tourism development; however, she tried to compromise with local people in other typology as she repeatedly stated that she did not like but there was no development without tourism – "concerned but understand" and "do not blame them but government".

Even though residents in the 'Neutral concerned with tourism' group seemed to have a neutral attitude and perception towards tourism development, it could be interpreted that they did not want to make a strong comment towards tourism as they wanted to avoid the conflict as well as remain in harmony and compromise with the other residential types. In this case, it could be seen from Wow's perception towards tourism development as she mentioned that she liked tourism because of its positive impacts but also understood that tourism brought negative impacts. Therefore, it could be summarised that avoidance of confrontation in order to remain in harmony and compromise is still deeply embedded in Thai culture even if it is sometimes upset by other cultures and modernisation. At the end of the day, conflicts are the last thing that Thai people expect or wish to see in their society. There are various social customs controlling Thais' behaviour while

socialising as in other cultures[17] but core fundamental philosophy in Thai culture is to maintain harmony in the society and to make sure that the conflicts do not occur at all[7][9][17]. Therefore, Thai people are keen on avoidance of confrontation[18]. The smiling Thai is increasingly difficult to find given the compromise with the pressures of modernisation and westernisation[4]. The traffic, the inflation, and water flooding onto the streets cause unavoidable damage. However, Thai people are able to cope with day to day problems as Buddhism teaches them a sense of emotional balance and concentration[17].

5.2. The Implication of Social Exchange Theory to Thai Culture

An explanation of the generic value and beliefs of Thai people, their tradition, religious and culture including avoidance of confrontation were presented and analysed. Those values and characteristics provided the essential background for more understanding of Thai culture to the analysis and interpretation of findings. The critique of social exchange theoretical models due to their application to Thai context is examined.

There is apparent difference in the results obtained of social exchange theory in previous studies. It would have been expected that where local residents perceived that tourism was responsible for increased threats to their society, they would be inclined to withdraw support for tourism. However, local residents especially in 'Extensive contact' and 'Partial contact' groups who have beneficial involvement with tourism are likely to support tourism more than those who have no benefit related tourism. Additionally, even though they have awareness of negative socio-cultural impacts brought by tourism, there is no evidence that they would withdraw their support for tourism. Jib and Suay gave a very interesting opinion. This point, they stated that they were aware of all negative impacts of tourism but they supported tourism in their community.

"I like tourism and am so happy to have tourism in my community even though it brings so some social problems. I am sure". (Jib – female, age 28, work at travel agency - Extensive contact)

"I know that tourism brings crime and prostitution to my community but I believe that tourism makes people here have better quality of life. Overall, I like tourism". (Suay – female, age 53, bank officer – Partial contact)

Even though a couple of residents in 'No contact with tourism' group have strong negative feeling toward tourism development and claim tourism is responsible for socio-cultural impacts, residents in 'Neutral concerned with tourism' and 'No contact with tourism' groups overall express neither like nor hate toward tourism since they indirectly receive benefits of tourism by improving their quality of life. Pom and Jew were upset that tourism contributed socio-cultural impacts to their community but also concurred that tourism brought better quality of life to

local people too.

"I admit that tourism has improved quality of life of people in Koh Samui but it also brings so many bad things to my home including prostitution, slum, crime, drug and so many social problems. I feel insecure in my own home". (Pom – male, age 33, fruit seller – Neutral concerned with tourism)

"I don't like tourism at all as it brings so many costs to Koh Samui. It is very dangerous when I go outside. But I have to admit that tourism brings proper electricity, water and good healthcare to Koh Samui (Jew – male, age 75, retired – No contact with tourism)

This apparent result can be explained by social exchange theory, which proposes that local people make trade-offs between costs and benefits of development and do not rationalise their response in a straightforward manner. In this case, it would appear that local residents in 'Extensive contact' and 'Partial contact' groups may be willing to accept the socio-cultural problems in exchange for the personal and community benefits which tourism offers. In the tourism prospect, it is clear with these principles, which local residents willingly enter into an exchange with tourists if they can collect benefits, without incurring heavy expense cost. If local residents theoretically believe tourism as valuable source and the costs they gain do not exceed the benefits, the exchange will support tourism development [22][24][26][31][33][36].

Residents in 'Extensive contact' and 'Partial contact' groups both have greater concerns over the various economic attributes of their community, whereas local residents in 'No contact with tourism' group do not feel concerned with economic issues relating to tourism such as tourist numbers and attractiveness of investment in their community. Lek and Suay showed their happiness if the tourist number increased. Individuals who evaluate and perceive beneficial rewards in the exchange, they have different perceptions with ones who perceive the harmful exchange[36]. Nevertheless, local perceptions toward tourism within communities are various in the combination of effects of tourism development when the intrinsic dimension is regarded. The intrinsic elements include level of involvement in tourism, the residential closeness to the centre of tourist areas, and duration of residence in the areas[5][11][36].

"It would be great if we can bring more tourists. Then I can earn more money and spread it out to my employees". (Lek – female, age 38, travel agency owner – Extensive contact)

"More tourists could be good. It can bring me money". (Suay – female, age 53, bank officer – Partial contact)

Contrastingly, Poo, a resident in 'No contact with tourism', showed her intention that she did not want more tourists in her community at all. She seemed to be upset with this matter even she realised that more tourists would bring more benefits to her society.

"Oh…nooooo!!! More tourists! I know that they bring us

good economic but I don't want them more anyway". (Poo – female, age 54, housewife – No contact with tourism)

It can be implied that tourist numbers and the economic state in their community are the highest concerns for residents in 'Extensive contact' and 'Partial contact' groups and this demonstrates a significant difference from residents in 'No contact with tourism' group. This is likely due to the fact that residents in 'No contact with tourism' group have less economic opportunity than the other three groups. In addition, even though residents in 'Extensive contact' and 'Partial contact' groups have not received economic benefits to the point that they may have expected, their interest in ongoing tourism development and optimism for future benefits still continues.

For residents in the 'Partial contact' group, generally of lower economic status, concerns over the socio-cultural impacts may not be simply as relevant as economic state in contributing to overall quality of life. McMinn and Cater (1998) also found in their study in Belize that the highest levels of enthusiasm for tourism related economic benefits are among low-income groups. For residents in 'Extensive contact' group, interest over the quality of socio-culture would appear to be more closely tied in with economic dependency. Many scholars support that economic reliance on tourism has been found to be an important discriminator of attitudes toward tourism development[2][14][24][28][36].

It also demonstrates that residents in 'Neutral concerned with tourism' and 'No contact with tourism' groups are more concerned with ongoing socio-cultural quality as this is likely a contributing factor in their sense of belonging and community attachment as Poo, Wow and Art expressed below. Even though some of them were exasperated with tourism development in order to transform their social system to materialism and cash system, they still had a strong sense of belonging to their mother land. Residents, who have a high sense of community attachment, have negative attitudes toward tourism development[3][15][20][30].

"I was born here. There was a while that I went to study in Bangkok but at the end of the day, I want to be here where I was born. Even though things have changed a lot because of tourism, I still want to live and die here, will not definitely move to other town". (Poo – female, age 54, housewife - No contact with tourism)

"My son is studying in Bangkok right now and I go up to see him from time to time. If he still prefers to continually live in Bangkok after graduation, I will not move there as I want to be here. I love Samui, it is my home. But I will visit him sometimes". (Wow – female, age 39, local restaurant owner - Neutral concerned with tourism)

"I am proud to tell everyone that I come from Samui. It is my home and where I was born". (Art – male, age 56, teacher - No contact with tourism)

In a Thai context, the study suggests that local residents seem to have less knowledge of the problems and negative impacts of tourism development in the exchange process due to the fact that Buddha teaching is remained deeply in Thai

society in the respect of living with problems. Instead, they are more open to positive benefits. In the case of Koh Samui, it demonstrates that local people need to accept tourism and slightly overlook its negative as they need something to rely on. As a result, this might incline the balance of the exchange process in favour of tourism more so than elsewhere.

6. Conclusions

Social exchange theory has been tested by many scholars but in this research, there is apparent difference in the results obtained of social exchange theory in those previous studies. Avoidance of confrontation deeply embeds in Thai culture in order to maintain harmony in the society; therefore, Thai resident attitudes towards socio-cultural impacts of tourism development might be different from previous studies from Western perspective. The analysis shows that local residents have awareness of negative socio-cultural impacts brought by tourism but all four resident types have continually supported tourism in their community. It is possible that local residents intended to have fewer acknowledgements of social problems and other negative cultural impacts of tourism development; instead, they are more open to positive benefits in the exchange process due to the fact that Buddha teaching of avoidance of confrontation is remained deeply in Thai society. In short, it means that local people would desire to accept tourism and intent to slightly overlook the truth that tourism brings socio-cultural impacts to their community due to the fact that they are reliance on tourism development. As a result, this might incline the balance of the exchange process in favour of tourism more so than elsewhere. In addition, it could be interpreted that local people in each type would not wish to generate conflicts in the society so they avoided exploring their true feeling towards tourism development. Therefore, it is important to note that further research should recognise and take the importance of the specific cultural characteristics of the host residents in to an account in term of the application of the theory. The influence of cultural and psychological factors should be considered in order to analyse and interpret local residents' social constructions of socio-cultural impacts of tourism and their associated behaviour changes, as well as their responses toward socio-cultural changes.

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