

Shaping Southeast Asia: Tracing Tourism Imaginaries in Guidebooks and Travel Blogs

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Tourism constitutes both an economic activity and a cultural force that involves a dynamic interplay between travelers and their ideas about the societies they visit. This paper traces the construction and negotiation of “tourism imaginaries” (Salazar, 2012) in popular guidebooks and independent travel-blogs, critically examining questions of representation and power relations in a Southeast Asian context. Employing critical discourse analysis, this paper investigates how particular Southeast Asian destinations are represented from a Western perspective. Whereas long-established commercial media such as guidebooks function mainly to communicate destination images to the reader, recent participatory media formats (e.g. travel-blogs) are more experienced-based and enable tourists to form ideas about foreign places in idiosyncratic ways. The preliminary insights of this study show that hegemonic narratives from guidebooks are rather reproduced than critically challenged and subverted in the examples under review.

Keywords: Guidebooks; Power; Tourism and Destination Images; Tourism Imaginaries; Travel-Blogs

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Following Crang (2014), tourism can be seen as “a very literal sort of geography” (p. 68). It writes the earth by inscribing meaning onto places via the communication of narratives, myths, and dreams that effectively construct the destinations tourists consume (Crang, 2014, p. 68). At the heart of this semiotic process lie “tourism imaginaries”, which operate “as socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning making and world shaping devices” (Salazar, 2012, p. 864). From this perspective, tourism constitutes a powerful cultural force that involves practices of mediating and interpreting the world. Likewise, it can provide a window into the cultural organization of societies and intercultural power differentials on a global scale (Wilkes, 2013, p. 33-34). The present paper is part of an ongoing dissertation project, investigating the construction of destination images in popular guidebooks and independent travel-blogs and tracing matters of power and identity in a regional Southeast Asian context.

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF TOURIST AGENCY

Scarles and Lester (2013) point out that tourism research has predominately investigated destination images as they are constructed through important media texts such as guidebooks and brochures (pp. 1-2). However, with the recent pro-

liferation of new media, tourists are no longer confined to their role as passive media consumers but increasingly emerge as active agents with the potential to shape representations of places themselves (Larsen, 2006, p. 79). Travel blogs have gained importance in this regard as travelers frequently use them to share their holiday experiences with friends and the general public (Chandralal, Rindfleish, & Valenzuela, 2015, p. 681). Furthermore, blog entries reveal insights into travelers' feelings and emotions and provide feedback on how tourists actually interpret a destination (Banyai & Glover, 2012, p. 268). Accordingly, a more comprehensive understanding of destination images can be gained by comparatively investigating the joint knowledge mediation between professionally projected images and tourists' reflexive accounts (Bell, 2013, pp. 116-118). Consequently, I adopt a research strategy that combines the analysis of top-down circulation of place narratives (e.g. in guidebooks) as well as tourist-bloggers' capacities to negotiate sites via new media along the axis of interpretation and reproduction (e.g. in travel blogs).

To investigate the potentially tension-ridden interplay between discourse, geography, and power, I apply critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; KhoshraviNiK, 2010; Van Djik, 1993) vis-à-vis Said's (1978) notion of Orientalism as a conceptual framework for the discursive construction of regional inequalities. In that sense, power and lack of power are conceptualized as a function of access to discourse, so that particular social conditions can be legitimized through the communication of beliefs, ideologies, and ideas via systems of representation (Van Djik, 1993, p. 256). Central to this process is the encoding of social macro-structures (e.g. ideologies of colonialism and Western hegemony) into textual micro-structures by means of strategic linguistic choices. These strategies include the in- or exclusion of actors in the text, the ways these actors and their actions are put into perspective, and the arguments that are used for or against them (KhoshraviNiK, 2010, pp. 64-66). In brief, the goal of this study is to explore how particular destinations are represented in terms of difference and otherness, and to what extent the voice of the commercial guidebook coincides with or differs from the experience-based format of the independent travel blog.

GUIDEBOOKS AND REPRESENTATIONAL STRATEGIES

Lonely Planet's recent guidebook on Southeast Asia (the shoestring edition) includes a general qualification of the region as "friendly and intense, historic and devout" (Williams et al., 2014, p. 6). Besides, the guidebook features a full chapter on "People and Culture", which offers additional insights into the construction of the region for the tourists' imagination. Southeast Asia is described as:

A culturally rich region that encompasses most of the world's religions with a tropical flair. Colorful artistic traditions date back to the period of regional empires, when kings and sultans were cultural patrons. Akin to the region's personality, each country's culture chest is generously shared with curious outsiders. (Williams et al., 2014, p. 922)

In this first quote, the reader is transmitted a message of "colorful artistic tradi-

tions” that date back to a bygone period of regional empires, ruled by presumably generous kings. This heritage is said to continue to function as the main source of today’s cultural richness. Furthermore, the passage supposes that it is these attractions that are happily shared with curious travelers – thanks to the region’s taken-for-granted friendly personality and attitude towards foreign visitors.

Besides this seductive framing of Southeast Asia, a somewhat different labeling can be observed in a second quote: “Increasingly, though, the region is moving towards a more urban and industrial way of life. Southeast Asian cities, except for Singapore, are studies in disorder and dysfunction, and are fascinating places for their faults” (Williams et al., 2014, p. 933). As both extracts suggest, the guidebook structures parts of its representational strategy along the binary pairs ‘traditional vs. modern’ and ‘non-problematic vs. potentially problematic’. On the one hand, supposedly century-old manifestations of Southeast Asian culture are labeled as the region’s true authentic heritage and on the other hand, recent socio-economic developments such as urbanization and industrialization are dismissed as chaotic and dysfunctional.

Previous research has revealed that such a perspective is problematic as it implicitly precludes local agency and assumes a false dichotomy of an authentic past and a degenerate present (Tegelberg, 2010, p. 500). As Bhattacharya (1997) has shown in her influential analysis of Lonely Planet India, this narrative strategy of pitting ‘then vs. now’ gives a particular region the positive valence of escape from modernity. Consequently, indigenous development is portrayed in the limelight of a negative attitude towards modernization (p. 383). Any change in the relationship between the modern tourist and the other destination is thus implicitly assumed as inconvenient. Since the Western tourist is encouraged to escape progress towards pre-industrial authenticity, the destination must be discursively precluded from western-like development in order to continue to appear as the pre-modern tourist attraction that is portrayed in the guidebook.

TRAVEL BLOGS, EXPERIENCE, AND INTERPRETATION

The following section demonstrates the potential of travel blogs for this study by means of a further example. As discussed above, travel blogs are gaining increasing importance as vehicles for sharing personal travel stories and they offer researchers the opportunity to better understand how individuals negotiate destinations. Nevertheless, analyzing travel blogs poses a number of challenges. Given that the goal of this study is not and cannot be an exhaustive reading of all available blog posts on Southeast Asia (*travelblog.org* lists 40,600 entries for Thailand alone), I rather screen the material for topic-related blog entries by means of useful key words. In a first step, I will scrutinize Lonely Planet to identify topics and discourses that appear worth investigating (e.g. the above indicated ‘positive past vs. negative present’ dichotomy). In a second step, I search for travel blog entries that relate to these topics. These posts are then analyzed in-depth to better understand how individual tourists interpret their actual experience against the discursive background that my analysis of the guidebook suggests. The following blog entries have been selected from the website *travelblog.org* for an exemplary analysis.

POST 1: Singapore is a good place to start a trip to Asia. It's Asian without any chaos. There are many things I like and appreciate about Singapore: The streets are clean. It is illegal to litter. English is the common language. (The Castelloes, 2009)

POST 2: Hanoi is one of the craziest cities I've ever been to. It's chaos and has a kind of grimy feel to it, but at the same time is totally endearing and pulls you in. (Joey, 2013)

POST 3: 'Breathtaking' is not an over statement when attempting to describe Angkor Wat. In fact there are not enough words to describe the gob-smacking magnificence of Angkor Wat & all its surrounding temples. When the French naturalist, Henri Mouhot, first discovered it in the mid 1800's, after centuries of being hidden in the jungle, he described it as, "A temple that would rival Solomon, erected by some ancient Michelangelo. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome." (Shakespeare, 2014)

Arguably, much of Lonely Planet's above discussed strategy of representing Southeast Asia as friendly, historic, culturally rich, and increasingly industrializing with some negative results can be traced in these three individual accounts. In the first entry, Lonely Planet is almost quoted verbatim when Singapore is qualified as the ideal entry to Southeast Asia for the reason that it is Asian without any chaos. This utterance is, however, problematic as it not only implies that chaos reigns in all other cities in the region, but also assumes that the city is the only economic center in Southeast Asia where industrialization and progress have brought about 'a civilized' way of life with a working legal system, clean streets, and English as a common language. This effectively equals civilization with a particular model of Western lifestyle. Notions of superiority towards other cultures can therefore be traced in this quote.

The second post implicitly confirms the ideological stance of the first one. A different central city in Southeast Asia (Hanoi) is visited by a traveler and qualified as crazy and chaotic with a grimy feel to it. Interestingly, though, the author uses the conjunction "but" which functions to contrast the propositional content of the sentence-initial clause. As can be observed, the contrastive second clause operates as mitigation and balances out the harsh first statement with a possible reference to personal experience and interpretation. Even though Hanoi is described as the craziest city the author has ever seen, actual experience may have induced the person to alter the message and describe the city in positive and even affectionate terms. As such, the short extract is more open to alternative interpretation than the first one and might therefore point towards a more inclusive strategy of negotiating the self vis-à-vis the other.

Thirdly, Angkor Wat is described by using the terms "breathtaking" and "gob-smacking magnificence". This rhetoric of admiration is intra-textually confirmed by a reference to an extra-textual voice: the French naturalist, Henri Mouhot. Notably, the account of a colonial explorer is used in a post-colonial context and country to serve as a reference point for the description of a superb edifice that was erected in pre-colonial times. The double loop of logical implication that underlies the text re-

quires critical examination: Firstly, Mouhot's account of "a temple that would rival Solomon, erected by some ancient Michelangelo [and which] is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome" establishes an implicit link between mythology, the great empires of the ancient world, and European art of the first rank. The temples erected by the Khmer are thus symbolically incorporated into the 'great' tradition of European achievement. Secondly, Mouhot is credited for discovering Angkor "after centuries of being hidden in the jungle". This rhetoric of discovery implies both enduring local decline and the power of colonial conquest to bring to light an architectural greatness that might have been lost forever, so that the temples symbolize the dangers of decadence and thus justify France's moral responsibility in Indochina (Edwards, 2007, p. 20). Taking this into account, the blog reader receives the implicit message that Angkor's now preserved grandiosity still draws heavily from European discovery and Western power of representation. In addition, the absence of local voices in favor of a colonial persona suggests that a supposedly more authentic and reliable past is given greater valence than the present.

Arguably, the comparative reading of the examples introduced above point at representational strategies informed by a Western discourse, claiming superiority over representation and cultural judgment. The blog entries under investigation perpetuate rather than subvert the power differential between self and other by assigning positive valence to a bygone colonial past and/or Western way of life. As these brief examples shall demonstrate, critical discourse analysis makes it possible to draw a connection between tourist texts as social practices and the underlying ideologies by which they might be informed. As a consequence, subsequent research will have to identify further representational strategies and discursive topics in the guidebooks and investigate whether they are sustained or challenged in the blogs. My forthcoming dissertation project will thus identify further representational strategies and discursive topics in the guidebooks and investigate whether they are sustained or challenged in the blogs.



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