

Abstract

Key words: Thailand, sex tourism, sex industry, authenticity, voyeurism, tourist experience

Research on sex tourism in Thailand has often focused on western men's sexual interactions with local women (Cohen, 1982; Enloe, 1989; Brown, 2001), and the sexualized entertainment on offer in eroticized tourist spaces/places is assumed to be aimed at western male tourists (Manderson, 1992; Bowes, 2004). While a number of academics have studied sexualized spaces and venues, little has been written on how and to what extent western women engage with this type of touristic entertainment in the Thai (sex tourism) context (Odzer, 1994; Manderson, 1995; Sikes, 2006). This is despite the fact that the number of female tourists visiting Thailand has increased over the past decade (TAT, 2007), and some evidence suggests that the sex industry in Thailand caters for female tourists (Vorakitphokatorn et al, 1994; Williams et al, 2007).

This thesis will argue that western women are curious about the nature of the Thai sex industry, and that some tourist women seek to visually explore sexualized tourist areas as part of their 'tourist experience' in Thailand. Sex tourism is a contentious subject area, and investigating the extent to which western women might engage with the sex industry as part of their tourist experience necessitates a critical engagement with theoretical understandings of female sex tourism. The findings suggest that western women's desire for an authentic tourist experience in Thailand facilitates their entry into sexualized zones. While the history of the sex industry in Thailand has helped to popularize its notoriety, discourses on tourist-oriented sexual spaces suggest that visiting a sexual show is something that is 'ok', and further is part of 'real Thailand'. However, women's visual engagement with the Others who inhabit these spaces reveals a darker side, and perhaps a voyeuristic desire to visit these venues. While part of their motivation to consume the sex industry stems from their understanding of the sex industry as authentically Thai, their contradictory interpretations of Thai sex workers reveals a darker, more complicated picture.

This thesis will examine the lines that divide tourism from sex tourism practices to suggest that consuming difference and the desire to engage with exotic (and erotic) Others underpins all touristic engagements, including tourist interactions with the sex industry. Visual sex tourism practices will be outlined here, and current definitions of sex tourism will be deconstructed to reveal a more complicated picture of tourism/sex tourism practices, which calls for a closer examination of gendered tourism behaviors.