



The Political Economy of LGBTQ Tourism in Thailand

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ABSTRACT. For several decades, Thailand has been described as an “LGBTQ paradise” by various travel magazines, and Bangkok is often referred to as the “gay capital of Asia.” However, LGBTQ tourism was not directly targeted by the Thai government until 2013. Over the past decade, the LGBTQ consumer market has grown steadily to the point where it is considered the fastest-growing market in the world, especially in the tourism industry. As a result, many destinations, such as Thailand, are now adopting policies to promote their destination, specifically to LGBTQ tourists. This article explores the political economy of LGBTQ tourism in Thailand, emphasizing how LGBTQ tourism policies between 1980 and 2020 were defined by the existing structures of power and were used to reinforce them. Specifically, we argue that the development of LGBTQ tourism in Thailand is used by those in power for political and/or economic ends. Since the local LGBTQ community’s well-being is not an essential element of LGBTQ tourism, its promotion has not been accompanied by policies that benefit them. Furthermore, as LGBTQ tourists have high purchasing power, the Tourism Authority of Thailand has specifically promoted luxury tourism, thus encouraging the construction of high-end development projects consisting of luxury hotels, condominiums, and shopping malls. Such luxury projects, however, have led to an increased concentration of profits in the hands of the elite, to the detriment of small-scale, locally-owned LGBTQ businesses.

KEYWORDS. LGBTQ tourism · LGBTQ rights · political economy · Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Tourism accounts for 10.4 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP) and contributes 313 million jobs, or 9.9 percent of total employment (WTTC 2018). Because of the economic benefits associated with tourism, many countries, such as Thailand, have made the sector a top priority. Destinations compete for different niches to attract tourists, one of which is the LGBTQ market, which has been on the rise since the 2010s. In 2013, Out Now Consulting estimated that the LGBTQ tourism market, the fastest-growing consumer market in the world, represented a potential of USD 165 billion. The World

Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) corroborated this, stating that the LGBTQ sector had grown faster than the tourism industry as a whole. While the travel and tourism industry grew by 3 percent in 2012, the LGBTQ segment grew by 10 percent (Scowsill 2013). For this reason, many governments have adopted policies targeting LGBTQ tourists to attract this niche market.

Public policy-making involves political and economic forces, where public and private interests are at stake and are often conflicting. As a result, powerful groups can manipulate the outcome of public policies to pursue their own interest (Rausser 2012). Therefore, those in power can instrumentalize policies on LGBTQ tourism to control how it is developed, who gets access to these spaces, and who is excluded from them. As a result, LGBTQ tourism does not necessarily benefit the local LGBTQ community, especially if they are excluded from the decision-making process. Rooting our research on the heterodox approach of international political economy (IPE) through the case of Thailand, we pose two research questions. Firstly, what were the motives behind the promotion and the policies relating to LGBTQ tourism in Thailand? Secondly, what were the outcomes—and more specifically, who benefitted—from these policies? To answer these questions, the evolution of LGBTQ tourism is divided into five phases: 1980–2000, 2001–2006, 2007–2012, 2013–2017, and 2017–2020. Each phase shows how those in power instrumentalized LGBTQ tourism for economic and/or political gains. In the first three phases, these benefits took the form of economic gains for the police, electorate gains for the government, and legitimization of the army after a coup d'état, respectively. These stakeholders were the main beneficiaries of LGBTQ tourism. The local LGBTQ community only benefited from this niche market if their interests converged with those in power. But their interests were by no means a major concern for policymakers. In the last two phases, the way LGBTQ tourism has been promoted shows a change in the type of tourism Thailand wishes to develop. The country is developing “quality tourism,” which aims to attract wealthier tourists. LGBTQ tourism is still promoted, but mainly for luxury vacations. This leads to a decline in small LGBTQ businesses in favor of high-end establishments, thus favoring the economic elite.

This article thus reveals the instrumentalization of LGBTQ tourism for political and economic purposes. It is innovative in its historical approach, analyzing more than forty years of LGBTQ tourism policies in Thailand. This allows for exploring the continuing patterns of

instrumentalization of LGBTQ tourism while documenting how they adapted to the changing political scene. Moreover, there is a serious gap in the literature concerning LGBTQ issues in developing countries because of the scholarly focus on advanced industrialized countries (Siegel 2019). This research partially fills the gap by analyzing how LGBTQ tourism was developed and regulated in Thailand and how these policies were entrenched in and conditioned by power relations.

THE PROMOTION OF LGBTQ TOURISM

With tourism being built on human relations, motivations behind travel are gendered and sexualized (Hughes 2002). As such, Hughes's (2002) study on gay men¹ noted that gay people can travel equally as other tourists without reference to their sexual identity (non-gay holidays for gay men), but can also be consciously traveling as gay individuals. Although gay men travel frequently as other 'non-gay' tourists, many do search for gay-friendly or gay spaces during their holidays. In this case, they can either show interest only in occasionally visiting gay-friendly places (gay-related holidays) or strongly focus on gay spaces (gay-centric holidays). For many LGBTQ people living in a predominantly heterosexual world, holidays offer the possibility to be themselves and enjoy a gay social setting (Holcomb and Luongo 1996). In addition, through a survey in the United Kingdom, Clift and Forrest (1999) demonstrated that many gay respondents emphasized socializing with other gay people and accessing gay cultures and venues as important aspects of their holidays. Pritchard et al. (2000) also pointed out that there was a greater desire to escape social constraints and intolerance from gay people.

Sexual orientation can also influence not only the type of holiday but also the destination choice. Hughes (2002) noted that gay-friendliness in a destination (safety and tolerance), gay-friendly

1. Since research pieces that include the broader LGBTQ community in tourism studies are quite recent, and since previous research were mostly dedicated to gay men, a considerable part of our literature review is specific to gay men. Even though social, cultural, and political contexts have evolved and expanded to include more people of various sexual orientations and gender identities, we think that several findings on specific segments of the LGBTQ community are relevant for this research. Also, since Thailand is not promoting its destination specifically to gay men but to the broader LGBTQ community, we use this term in this article, except when the literature refers to a specific segment of the LGBTQ community.

accommodation, and gay nightlife were important elements for gay people in their choice of destination. Nevertheless, the presence of gay venues is not the only element considered by gay tourists. Many are conscientious about how local LGBTQ people are treated in their countries. The presence of LGBTQ rights and legal protections is also important. On that matter, the Spartacus Gay Travel Index takes anti-discrimination laws, marriage equality, and transgender rights as factors in ranking the gay-friendliness of different destinations, demonstrating that legal reforms could be a significant element for destinations wishing to market to this community.

Promoting to LGBTQ tourists has both political and economic benefits. Regarding the former, Liberato et al. (2018) argued that progressive policies toward LGBTQ people give a country a powerful brand image of tolerance, inclusiveness, diversity, and progress. In turn, this increases the brand image of the destination, which translates into more LGBTQ visitors. An image of tolerance also leads to loyalty and repeated visits from tourists: “For a group which has suffered and continues to suffer repression in many parts of the world, the element of social solidarity is important at the time of choosing tourism destinations and products” (UNWTO 2012, 11). Ram et al. (2019) also showed that an inclusive policy raises positive attitudes from tourists regardless of their sexual orientation.

The LGBTQ market has grown very rapidly over the past two decades, making economic incentives the second reason why a country markets to LGBTQ tourists. In the early 1990s, very few destinations and tourism suppliers targeted this market segment (CMI 2014). Companies supportive of the LGBTQ community used to put a rainbow flag in the corner of their advertisements, whether or not such advertising generated income. The aim was to support the community rather than gain any economic benefit. At the turn of the century, more and more companies became interested in the LGBTQ market as a potential tool for marketing, given their perceived value. Taylor (2012, 24) argued that in Canada, the average LGBTQ person has 22 percent more spending power than the average Canadian. Holcomb and Luongo (1996) considered LGBTQ people to be a recession-proof market. In the United States, UNWTO (2012, 8) found an overall increase in LGBTQ travels after two years of recession-induced decrease. In addition, Community Marketing, Inc. (2014) estimated that gay men were more likely to take a holiday and were also taking more holidays per year than other segments of the population. In Spain, a

gay tourist spends an average of EUR 130 daily compared to the overall tourism average of EUR 80 per day (Turespaña 2013).

Lesbians are sometimes considered a less attractive market because they have a lower average household income than gay men and heterosexual couples (Schneebaum and Lee Badgett 2019; Sender 2004). According to Sender (2004, 407), another reason for the lack of a lesbian market is that it is “also dogged by the popular image of lesbians as lacking both erotic and acquisitive desire, embodied in the stereotype of anti-consumption, parsimonious, unsexy feminists who resist marketers’ interest in them as consumers.” Some authors found that gay men have a more consumeristic lifestyle; they have dual income yet have fewer children than ‘traditional families’ and a high purchasing power (Pritchard et al. 1998).

However, other authors refute these data. For instance, Lee Badgett’s (2008, 113) review of the literature found no evidence supporting the claim that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people had a higher income. Yet, whether or not they have a more sizeable income, the perception that they have a more consumeristic lifestyle holds for many marketing companies. Therefore, many tourism destinations now brand specifically to the LGBTQ community in search of the pink dollar, a term generally used to refer to the “supposedly distinctive purchasing patterns of the gay market and its particularly lucrative prospects” (Hughes 2005, 62).

Nonetheless, marketing to LGBTQ people does not necessarily correlate with more LGBTQ rights. Puar (2002) warned that to assume that LGBTQ consumption powers are a sign of queer liberation would be a mistake. She expressed that queer tourism underpins LGBTQ rights when the visibility of LGBTQ people is dependent upon its purchasing power. As Hughes (2005, 69) would put it: “Capitalism was willing to allow gays and lesbians to find freedom through the purchase of goods and services, to buy themselves out to freedom, but only in that way.” Therefore, LGBTQ people are free to participate in the economy but do not necessarily have the same legal rights as the rest of the population. Similarly, Ingebretsen (1999, 132) stated:

Marketplace phenomena, such as gay windows advertising, reflect the extent to which the commercialization of same-sex desire permits marginalized or stigmatized forms of sexual behavior literally to sell their way into consumer culture. This reverse accommodation, economically managed, effectively

undercuts any political gain that might arguably accrue around such increasing visibility . . . Market politics, then, dangerously reconstitutes the pre-Stonewall closet.

Although a growing number of destinations promote to LGBTQ people, few studies look “behind the scenes” of LGBTQ tourism policies. There is a serious gap in the literature as to why a destination would start to accept and/or more actively promote LGBTQ tourism. Despite possible GDP growth or an improved national branding image, it is unclear who directly benefits from this type of tourism. Carrying out a case study using a political economy approach thus allows us to take a closer look at the power relations that have led to the promotion of LGBTQ tourism. Bianchi (2002, 266) stated that “the central normative preoccupation of such an approach consists of an analysis of the social relations of power which condition the unequal and uneven processes of tourism development, which are reinforced through particular configurations of ideologies and institutions.” The central focus is thus on who—or what—is exercising power to modify the choices of others in the economy or the society, and “with what purpose, by what means and with what consequences” (Strange 1996, 42). By extension, which actors have the power to influence the policy choices regarding LGBTQ tourism in Thailand?

The political economy approach has been used in more tourism studies in the last few years when looking at the globalization of tourism and its impacts since neoliberal policies have become increasingly important in tourism development (Zhao and Li 2006; Mosedale 2016). Nevertheless, the sexuality dimension of the political economy of tourism remains understudied. An exception comes from Hartal (2018), who investigated the impact queer tourism had on Israeli LGBTQ politics by using a political economy approach. She concluded that the status of LGBTQ people changed from shameful sexuality to good urban investment, creating economic wealth for the country. However, legislation favoring LGBTQ people is still stagnant, making the value of such a community limited to an economic one. This article aims to complement Hartal’s study by offering a historical perspective on the political economy of LGBTQ tourism in Thailand, showing the instrumentalization of LGBTQ tourism in a context quite different from Hartal’s case study in Israel.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative analysis achieved methodological triangulation, which relied on varied data. This includes semi-structured interviews, participant observation, documents, and discourse analysis. First, document analysis was carried out, involving official sources from states and public organizations, and non-official sources encompassing the rest (Cloke et al. 2004). Official sources included country reports of the situation of LGBTQ people from the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and the United Nations Development Programme; the evolution of the “life partnership” law drafted in 2012, approved by the Cabinet in 2018, and considered for legislation in the 2019 election; and, the first and second National Tourism Development Plan (2012–2016 and 2017–2021). Non-official sources included local press published in English, such as the *Bangkok Post*, *Pattaya Mail*, and *Pattaya Today*. The reason for choosing an English press is that very few articles in Thai languages related to sexual diversity were published, and they usually had negative connotations (Sanders 2007).

Then, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in various sectors, such as LGBTQ tourism agencies, small hotel owners targeting LGBTQ people, promoters of high-end LGBTQ events, members of Thai civil society working on LGBTQ-related issues, Thai scholars, a representative from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), and the manager of the Thai campaign for LGBTQ tourism *Go Thai Be Free*. Interviews lasted between one to two hours. Most of them were recorded and transcribed, except for a few who wished to remain anonymous and asked not to be recorded.

The data were analyzed through content analysis using descriptive coding and thematic analysis to group certain data under broader themes (Saldaña 2013). Based on the data collected, codes have been grouped into categories related to the research questions. Some of these categories, such as “power” and “legislations,” were already defined before the interviews since they were related to IPE. However, they were malleable in terms of what emerged from the interviews.

In addition, semiotic theory was used as a data analysis method for the two promotional campaigns of *Go Thai Be Free* in 2013 and 2019. In its broader sense, semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems in language and culture (Coon 2012). The purpose of semiotics is to understand the meaning and the implicit ideological messages contained

within a specific publicity. Semiotics “move beyond the taken-for-granted surface meaning to interrogate underlying ideological meanings” (ibid., 516). Using semiotic theory to understand the message conveyed to LGBTQ people is quite important because it helps to understand the ideologies behind what is actually portrayed. Indeed, Tsai (2006) noted that advertisers have begun to target the LGBTQ market for economic incentives rather than for the social aspects of its advocacy movement. But aside from promotion to LGBTQ customers by private companies, public government agencies are also increasingly promoting their destinations to them, which sends a completely different message: “A private company represents its own interest[;] an entire city, however, is considered a public space, and when a tourism bureau, speaking on behalf of a city, invites gays and lesbians to visit, that invitation is a very public one” (ibid., 524).

LGBTQ TOURISM IN THAILAND: SKETCH AT PRESENT

The tourism industry makes a significant economic contribution to Thailand, with this sector contributing nearly 20 percent to the country’s GDP and 15.5 percent to its employment rate (Bangkok Bank 2019). Like several other countries, Thailand has been trying to increase its number of tourists for several decades. From 2009 to 2019, its number of tourists doubled and is projected to double again by 2030 to reach 79 million visitors (WTTC 2018). The government also predicted that the tourism sector will represent 30 percent of its GDP by 2030, making the country even more dependent on it. According to LGBT Capital (2018), international LGBTQ travelers in Thailand accounted for USD 5.3 billion, representing 1.15 percent of the country’s GDP, showing the importance of LGBTQ tourism for Thailand’s economy.

Most of the LGBTQ tourism in Thailand takes place in its capital, Bangkok. The apparent openness of the city to diversity, the LGBTQ-friendly bars and restaurants, popular saunas, and the many drag shows and dynamic nightlife have made Bangkok the “gay capital of Asia.” It figures among the top gay-friendly cities for LGBTQ travelers in rankings, such as *HostelWorld*, *CultureTrip*, *Nomadic Boys*, *Hotel.com*, and *GayTravel*. *The Spartacus* listed more than a hundred queer and queer-friendly businesses for LGBTQ tourists, such as bars, restaurants, saunas, etc. But the LGBTQ scene is not limited to Bangkok. There is also a vibrant scene in Patong, on the island of Phuket. Phuket was

listed among the “Top 20 LGBT Destinations for 2020” according to the travel guide *GayTravel*. Moreover, the bloggers *TwoBadTourists* have characterized Phuket as a “Gay Travel Oasis.” Indeed, Phuket has many bars and events, such as the Phuket Pride Festival and Tripout, an annual festival for LGBTQ people that hosts beach and boat parties, as well as group events such as yoga and cooking classes. Another Thai city popular with LGBTQ travelers is Pattaya, known for its vibrant nightlife, parties, go-go bars, and cabarets.

The visibility of queer spaces and the openness to people of diverse sexual orientations have given Thailand a reputation as an “LGBTQ paradise” for decades. The popularity of the country for LGBTQ people has been explained by the general attitudes of Thai people regarding homosexuality. This attitude, however, has been characterized as tolerating but unaccepting (Jackson 1997; Morris 1997; USAID and UNDP 2014). Unlike the situation in other countries, taboos regarding homosexuality in Thailand are not based on legal or religious sanctions since it is neither illegal under Thai laws nor immoral according to Buddhist teachings, but on cultural norms of appropriate male behavior (Jackson 1998). In 2019, the Spartacus Gay Travel Index ranked Thailand second in Asia for LGBTQ tourism after Taiwan. The reason that it is not in the pole position is that “although homosexuality is tolerated in society, the legislation needs to be seriously updated” (Spartacus 2019).

Legal protections remain difficult as it is challenging to achieve policy reforms in the country because “lawmakers tend to be conservative, and because the constitution and country’s laws are seen as sacred” (USAID and UNDP 2014, 7). Many of those we interviewed expressed that the Thai elite is against the same-sex partnership bill, which would allow people of the same sex to marry. This could explain the very slow progression of legislation protecting LGBTQ rights in the country. The “life partnership” bill was drafted in 2012, but political instability and unsuccessful negotiations about its subtense stalled its legislation. To date, same-sex marriage legislation is still being negotiated and is stagnating. Moreover, the legislation to protect LGBTQ rights is often ineffective or unenforced. For example, the Gender Equality Act, promulgated in 2015, seeks to criminalize discrimination based on gender, including against “those persons whose gender expression does not match their sex assigned at birth.” It is the only law that protects LGBTQ people against gender-based discrimination in Thailand. However, it has received the nickname “Thailand’s Invisible Gender

Law” because it lacks enforcement and has yet to be used to criminalize entities discriminating against LGBTQ people (UNDP 2020). Many LGBTQ organizations also criticized the law since an exception for discrimination is possible for “education, religion, and the public interest” (Mitsunaga, 2014). This clause opens many loopholes that make discrimination possible. The lack of enforceable legislations protecting LGBTQ people means they are still at risk of facing discrimination. A World Bank (2018) survey showed that discrimination and exclusion against LGBTQ people were also present in seeking jobs, accessing education and healthcare services, buying or renting properties, and seeking legal protection. Such discrimination is often ignored by local Thai media to “protect the image of Thailand being a haven for LGBT individuals” (USAID and UNDP 2014, 43). Despite the stagnation of legislation on LGBTQ rights, the political and economic elite has manipulated LGBTQ tourism for their interests, which we address in the following section.

LGBTQ TOURISM AND TOURISM POLICIES IN THAILAND (1980–2020)

For forty years (1980–2020), Thai LGBTQ tourism policies and marketing strategies witnessed five major transformations. In all of these phases, LGBTQ tourism was used by those in power for political and/or economic benefits. In the end, the well-being of the local LGBTQ community is barely taken into consideration in formulating policies regarding LGBTQ tourism.

Phase 1—The Rise of an “Underground” Sex Scene through the Power of Bribery (1980–2000)

Prior to the 1980s, Bangkok only had a small queer scene with a few bars that local Thai people frequented. One of the interviewees noted that “the LGBTQ scene in Thailand in general took some time to take off, specifically in terms of tourism. There has always been an underground scene in Thailand that Westerners would never discover. They have their own clubs, bars, and saunas, and we were not welcomed there.” Gay spaces that are mostly centered around gay men started to emerge after the Vietnam War. Thailand was a major ally of the US during the war, and the US required an airbase close to Vietnam to avoid the need for air warfare. Thailand leased its air force base at U-Tapao for the use of B52 bombers, which resulted in a large

base of US airmen and their support personnel. The military base of U-Tapao was located near Pattaya, which was just a tiny fishing village at the time. Pattaya soon became a place of entertainment for American soldiers. Soldiers referred to the breaks they were having as I&I (intoxication and intercourse), where they would go to Pattaya to get drunk and have sex with Thais (Baker 2007). Inevitably, Thai entrepreneurs realized there was a market there and established many bars for commercial sex. These bars started by hiring female sex workers. The sex industry shifted its focus to cater to civilian tourists after the Vietnam War and the withdrawal of American troops from Thailand in the late 1970s.

In the 1980s, tourism became more central to the Thai economy as it became the sector generating the most foreign exchange (Richter 1989). This sector gained more importance in the Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982–1986), in which the government formulated the objective to increase the number of tourists by 8.4 percent per year and the income generated by tourism by 21.5 percent. As a result, Thailand went from 630,000 visitors per year in 1970 to 7.8 million in 1998 (TAT 1999). During that time, one of the main motivations for tourists was the sex industry that was developing in Bangkok and Pattaya. In the early 1980s, nearly 90 percent of foreign tourists were male (TAT 1983). Sexual possibilities in Thailand became the subject of great reverie for tourists, both LGBTQ (mostly gay men) and straight visitors. As Morris (1994, 15) pointed out: “Few nations have been so thoroughly subject to Orientalist fantasies as has Thailand. Famed for its exquisite women and the pleasures of commodified flesh, the Thailand of the tourist literature is a veritable bordello of the Western erotic imaginary.” One interviewee also expressed that in the 1980s, many gay men were going to go-go bars, and most of the bars were for male sex workers.

Despite not promoting sex tourism openly, TAT was complicit in that it put heavy emphasis on Thai women and their friendliness in their promotional campaigns (Richter 1989). Sex tourism has become an important part of Thailand’s tourism industry and has been accepted by the government because of its importance in earning foreign currency. The importance of the sex industry on tourism and the complicity of the government is best expressed in the Thai song *Welcome to Thailand*, released in 1987 by Carabao, one of Thailand’s most popular musical groups. The song referred directly to *farang* (white foreigners) who come to Thailand to satisfy their fantasies in key

places of prostitution, which are Pattaya and Patpong (Formoso 2001):

Come quickly. Travel. Forget your problems. Let them go.
The government has really done a good job.
Everyone is satisfied.
When asked what they like about Thailand,
Tourists respond without embarrassment: "I love Pattaya!"
And in terms of Bangkok, the City of Angels,
They say, "I love Patpong."

The sex industry for gay and bisexual men was able to develop alongside its heterosexual counterpart because of Thailand's tolerant attitude towards sexuality. Homosexuality is neither illegal under Thai laws nor immoral according to Buddhist teaching (Jackson 1998). The Thai sex industry also became very popular among queer Asians, especially in countries where homosexuality was more repressed than it was in Thailand. For instance, in the 1990s, many Singaporeans chose Thailand as a tourist destination to express their sexual identity, as it was illegal in their country. Thailand was, therefore, a major LGBTQ-centric destination, as many queer tourists came to Thailand for its vibrant queer nightlife.

Notwithstanding, these bars were able to operate on a "black market" because of the bribe given to the police. These bars followed the patterns established by the heterosexual bars in bribing the police to stay open. One of the owners of a bar in Soi Twilight, a popular area for LGBTQ people in Bangkok, noted that the price of a bribe for a regular gay bar was around THB 40,000 per month (around USD 1,100) and that the amount was much higher for go-go bars. Police raids occurred occasionally in both queer and straight bars if the bribe was not paid, but customers were not targeted. This corruption allowed the nightlife business to thrive. The go-go bars only existed because the police tolerated them as they were obtaining money from them. Jackson (2011) refers to this queer nightlife as an underground phenomenon linked to a black market due to the need to bribe the police.

Therefore, LGBTQ tourism (mostly for gay men) in Thailand took off in the 1980s due to the government's desire to increase the number of tourists and the revenue generated by this sector. Sex tourism became an important tool to attract many tourists, including LGBTQ tourists. Gay bars and go-go bars were able to operate and thrive

because of the bribes given to the police. As a result, LGBTQ tourism, especially through the sex industry, could develop not only because it was benefitting those in power due to economic gains coming from bribes but also because of its importance in terms of tourists coming to Thailand and the foreign income it generated.

Phase 2—Thaksin’s Pluto-populism: The Dark Years of Gay Tourism (2001–2006)

Police raids in sex bars were part of a much broader scheme of corruption in Thailand. Economist Paul Krugman (1998) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) argued that Thailand was run by “crony capitalism,” referring to the close relationship between business and political sectors, where state power is used to favor the economic elite. Bribes were embedded within these broader schemes of crony capitalism, which allowed the nightlife business to flourish despite Thai officials publicly admitting that it was embarrassing for the country. However, when the Asian financial crisis erupted in 1997, multiple government changes occurred between that year and 2001. In the 2001 elections, Thaksin Shinawatra won a landslide victory by appealing to the resentment of the mass population after the IMF’s restructuring policies, which led to job losses. A former high-ranking police officer and one of the richest businessmen in the country, Thaksin had very close connections to many other senior police officials and businesspeople.

One of the major elements of his policies was the social order campaign led by his interior minister, Purachai Piumsoy, which targeted all nightlife establishments. Purachai was a strict family man and a religious character against the sex business. As a result of this new policy, bars were closed at 1:00 a.m., alcohol sales were prohibited after midnight, and a zoning policy controlled the night spots. Police raids were enforced to ensure respect for the policy. Generally, police raids were the same on straight and gay bars. Purachai was not known for being homophobic. On the contrary, he was in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage (Sanders 2007). However, an exception existed from July to September 2001 when gay bars were targeted specifically. Sanders believes that these targeted raids happened because, back in July 2001, *iTV* ran reports regarding live sex shows in gay host bars that were still undergoing, emphasizing the sensational character of some of them. The broadcast came right after the evening television news,

making it very visible to many Thai people. According to Sanders (2007, 20):

The police feared that this revelation could trigger a major crackdown and they would be one of the targets. It was the police, after all, who had allowed these shows to thrive for extra payments. [...] But a crackdown could threaten the larger patterns of police bribery in the sex industry. Shutting down the scandalous gay bars might be enough to protect the larger patterns of bribery.

As a result, a six-week campaign specifically targeted gay bars, and many of them ended up closing temporarily. Shows did not fully return to business for several weeks. According to Sanders (2007, 6), “six of the fifteen or more gay bars in central Surawong-Patpong area were closed as well as thirteen bars in the more distant Saphan Khwai area. Sex shows involving nudity ended. Even go-go dancing in briefs stopped at certain bars.” This campaign affected not only international tourists but also Thai LGBTQ people to a more significant extent. It was widely publicized, and some people we interviewed expressed that many Thai customers felt they could not be seen in these bars anymore.

These policies allowed Thaksin’s government to remain very popular among Thais, especially to those living in the countryside. Polls conducted by various Thai universities showed an average of 75 percent support from the population for Purachai’s social order campaign, which allowed Thaksin to keep substantial electoral support (Aglionby 2001). Thaksin’s political party was the primary beneficiary of the changing policies regarding tourism, to the detriment of local bar owners. In addition, the social order campaign repositioned Thailand’s tourism image. Thaksin’s tourism policy aimed at repositioning Thailand’s image as a world heritage destination rather than a sex destination. In other words, they were escaping from the image of a sex destination and promoting non-gay holidays. Purachai maintained that tourists did not come to see exotic dancers but Thailand’s natural beauty (Sanders 2002).

As a result, other Asian destinations were looking to replace Bangkok as the region’s hub for entertainment. Destinations such as Singapore and Hong Kong started to develop offers for LGBTQ tourists. Therefore, during Thaksin’s government, the gay area slowed down significantly, especially when it came to Asian tourists, who preferred to travel to other newly developed LGBTQ destinations such

as Singapore and Hong Kong, which were now competing against Thailand's queer scene (Jackson 2011).

Phase 3—The Comeback of LGBTQ Tourism: The Legitimation of a Military Coup d'état (2007–2012)

With growing electoral support, Thaksin Shinawatra's party won another election in March 2005, receiving more than 60 percent of the votes. However, mass mobilization against his government started a few months following his election. On February 4, 2006, popular indignation following the tax-free sale of Thaksin's stake in the Shin Corporation led to a major rally and the creation of a coalition called People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) (Tejapira 2006). The anti-Thaksin movement grew in March 2006, with PAD organizing demonstrations of 50,000 to 300,000 people (Pye and Schaffar 2007). In September 2006, the Royal Thai Army staged a bloodless coup d'état against Thaksin on the grounds of corruption, nepotism, abuse of power, human rights violations, and suppression of press freedom (Prasirtsuk 2007). The military took power and declared martial law, dissolved the parliament, and suspended the 1997 constitution.

The reactions to the coup were mixed. It was criticized by human rights groups such as the Human Rights Watch and the Asian Human Rights Commission, while Amnesty International warned the military to respect human rights. It was also criticized by countries such as the United States, which suspended almost USD 24 million worth of military aid to the Thai government. Therefore, since they were not elected democratically, the military lacked legitimacy despite taking power. To seek legitimacy, the military reasoned that they did the coup to further protect human rights. Thus, concessions granted to the LGBTQ community would allow the military government to gain legitimacy with international and local organizations and convey an image of a protector of human rights to foreign governments. As such, they used LGBTQ rights for political gain (Sanders 2011). One of the interviewees who works closely with local LGBTQ groups stated that some LGBTQ rights organizations worked with the Ministry of Justice under the military government to draft the Life Partnership Bill and the Gender Equality Act and that many sensitive laws were passed under the military government.

The military's search for legitimacy has thus enabled many LGBTQ businesses to flourish since 2007. Unlike previous years, these businesses were not limited to the sex industry or to gay men only. They included

commercial venues and magazines, queer-themed Thai films, etc. Because the military in Thailand has always been pro-capitalist and pro-market (Jackson 2011), the military government allowed LGBTQ businesses to thrive and develop, which was not only beneficial for the Thai economy but also gave more legitimacy to the non-elected military government as a protector of human rights.

The military's legitimation strategy has protected the tourism industry from a shock caused by the coup d'état. Many studies have shown the negative impact coup d'états and political instability can have on tourism (Musavengane and Zhou 2021; Poirier 1997; Teye 1988). However, tourist arrivals in Thailand grew annually from 2005 to 2011, except in 2009 because of a global recession (TAT 2012). The travel agencies we interviewed reported very few cancellations and a continuous rise in tourist arrivals in 2010 despite a series of political protests against Vejjajiva's government, which has been referred to by Human Rights Watch (2011) as "the most prolific censor in recent Thai history."

However, there is a difference between the government allowing queer spaces to further develop to increase their legitimacy and promoting them specifically. As such, there was no public policy explicitly targeting LGBTQ tourists. In 1999, Phuket had its first Pride Parade. One owner of an LGBTQ hotel in Phuket stated that he and other activists contacted TAT, a state-owned enterprise responsible for promoting tourism, to get support from them in vain. A decade ago, the travel agency Purple Dragon tried to convince the government tourism agency to target LGBTQ tourists, but TAT objected. It is one thing to accept and tolerate LGBTQ people, but another to openly promote LGBTQ tourism. Many respondents expressed that TAT feared that promoting specifically to LGBTQ people would not be welcomed by Thai people, whose society was still quite conservative. As stated before, Thailand is tolerant but not necessarily accepting of homosexuality. But as tourists visiting the country see many *Kathoey*s,² observe the acceptance of LGBTQ people in many businesses within the tourist areas, and witness no apparent discrimination, they may be left with the false impression that Thailand accepts homosexuality—an impression amplified by the fact that Thais are not confrontational, leading foreigners to believe that there is no discrimination.

2. The term is similar but much broader than the notion of transgender, and has changed significantly over time, but there is no specific English word to translate this term (see Jackson 2000).

Phase 4—The Government Slowly Gets Out of the Closet (2013–2017)

In the last few years, other Asian destinations, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, have become more tolerant towards LGBTQ people. Other destinations, such as Singapore, have a rapidly developing queer nightlife. The island of Boracay in the Philippines also became very popular among LGBTQ people. Since 2015, the Jungle Circuit Party regularly organizes queer parties on the island, gradually increasing its reputation among LGBTQ tourists. As these other Asian destinations were blossoming for LGBTQ tourists, the Thai government slowly started to promote its destination to this niche market to avoid losing it.

TAT started to promote Thailand to LGBTQ tourists in 2013. It created the website *GoThaiBeFree.com*, which specifically targets members of the LGBTQ community worldwide. The website of this campaign proposes travel ideas in seven different cities based on different themes such as adventure, art, culture, honeymoon, local experiences, luxury, nature, and nightlife. On their website, they market themselves as “the most LGBTQ-welcoming country in Asia,” wishing people of the LGBTQ community to feel free when traveling in Thailand. Not only do they propose queer-centric events but also “regular” attractions such as culture, food, and local experiences, so that LGBTQ tourists can visit the same things as everyone else. By doing this, the emphasis is less on LGBTQ-centric holidays centered around sex but rather on an overall LGBTQ-friendly tourism scene. As such, the presence of queer-specific spaces is quite limited on their website, as straight tourists could enjoy the same attractions.

TAT released its first campaign, mainly targeting LGBTQ people, in 2013. The promotional video was mainly broadcasted in Western countries, where there was a strong presence of LGBTQ communities and are generally accepted. Characters presented in this campaign also show lesbian or bisexual women, thus encompassing a broader segment than what was previously mostly articulated around gay men. The campaign was run by the TAT office in New York and started by the then director of the New York City office, Srisuda Wanipanvosak, who saw how the LGBTQ community in the United States had made significant gains with the acceptance of equal LGBTQ marriage in many states. However, the TAT headquarters in Thailand did not push this campaign; instead, it was done outside the country. Another interviewee stated: “You don’t see much of the promotion from the Thai head

office. It is pushed by the TAT office outside of Thailand.” Many Western expats denounced this contradiction between the promotion that they witnessed in their country of origin as opposed to the lack of attention towards LGBTQ tourism businesses in Thailand.

As such, economic incentives seemed to have been the main reason for targeting LGBTQ tourists in 2013. From his New York office, a marketing manager of the campaign explained that they were targeting LGBTQ people since they often have high levels of income (Fuller 2013). Another member of the campaign stated during an interview that:

The program “Go Thai Be Free” recognized that LGBTQ tourism could bring strong economic and social interest to the country, particularly with a strong LGBTQ community like North America. Economic interest was the primary driver—LGBTQ travelers are likely to spend more, be more brand loyal, and travel with greater frequency than their mainstream/straight counterparts. Particularly for North America, audience segmenting needed to focus on those with the greatest propensity and ability to travel. The LGBTQ market was an obvious target.

Therefore, the objectives of TAT were twofold: benefiting from the pink dollar without shocking the conservative Thai population. In addition to promoting the campaign mostly in Western countries from the New York office, the video is very cautious in the way it shows affectionate scenes between people of the same sex. When the images are taken out of context, the pictures do not seem to be queer anymore. Indeed, same-sex couples are rarely shown in highly affectionate poses. They are vague enough that these people could be perceived as relatives or friends. Most of the images can only be perceived as queer when it is specifically known that the promotional video is for same-sex couples. Indeed, only two scenes showed intimacy between people of the same sex, and this contact was only holding hands, and one of these scenes does not make it very visible (see figure 1). In other words, the pictures are not too sexualized in a way that could shock the more conservative Thai society. This campaign shows that TAT was interested in the economic benefits associated with LGBTQ tourism but would not risk offending the Thai population nor adopt any concrete policies supporting local LGBTQ organizations. In fact, “organizations working on LGBT human rights were vastly underfunded and understaffed [...]

This can be attributed to the lack of attention and importance paid to LGBT human rights until very recently” (USAID and UNDP 2014, 44). Civil society organizations further expressed that most of their funding comes from foreign donors and that very little support comes from the Thai government.

Phase 5—Targeting the Rich, Targeting the Queer (2017–2020)

In recent years, tourism in Thailand kept growing at a very high rate. The number of tourists doubled in a decade, from 15.94 million in 2010 to 39.8 million in 2019. This rapid growth had major negative impacts on the environment and the population. The latest Thailand Tourism Confidence Index of TAT, TCT, and Chulalongkorn University (2019) estimated that Chiang Mai and Bangkok were facing overtourism issues. Aware of these problems, the government has taken actions inscribed within a broader context of sustainable tourism. The Second National Tourism Development Plan 2017–2021 defined a long-term vision for tourism in the country, stipulating that “[b]y 2036, Thailand will be a World’s [sic] leading quality destination” (Ministry of Tourism and Sports of Thailand 2017, 13). The Ministry adopted many initiatives to achieve this vision, such as supporting “the development of tourism that targets quality tourist segments” (ibid., 20). In other words, Thailand has turned away from mass tourism to encourage revenue-generating quality tourists.

International LGBTQ travelers, because of their important purchasing power, are one of the market segments considered as “quality tourists” (Liang-Pholsena 2018). TAT even participated in more LGBTQ events worldwide, such as Pride Parades in New York and Tel Aviv, and had a booth at the International Tourism Fair in Madrid to promote specifically to LGBTQ travelers. Moreover, in 2019, TAT set to market Thailand as an LGBTQ-friendly destination in Latin America. As expressed by TAT representative to South America Jefferson Santos in an interview with *Bangkok Post*: “We aim to promote Thailand as an LGBT-friendly destination and show them a safe tourism space by participating in the LGBT travel forum in São Paulo, Brazil this June [2019]” (Worrachaddejchai 2019). The government and the travel industry also united for the first LGBTQ Travel Symposium in 2018, organized in partnership with TAT to promote diversity and inclusion in the Thai travel industry and forge links between Thailand’s travel providers and the rest of the world. The



FIGURE 1. Images from the 2013 *GoThaiBeFree* campaign showing very few affectionate poses.

event welcomed LGBTQ buyers and media from North America, Europe, Israel, Australia, and Southeast Asia.

In addition, *GoThaiBeFree* released a new promotional video in 2019, indicating a striking difference in how LGBTQ tourism was promoted in 2013 (figure 1). In their new campaign, it is clear that they specifically target the richest segment of the LGBTQ community (figure 2). At the 2019 LGBTQ travel symposium, it was shown that



FIGURE 2. The luxury behind the 2019 *GoThaiBeFree* campaign.

the second spending priority of LGBTQ travelers was high-quality hotels, following food and drink as the top priority. This could explain why their promotional website mostly showcased high-end hotels and resorts. There are no small LGBTQ guesthouses or cheaper hotels targeted directly to LGBTQ people, showing that TAT is rather promoting big LGBTQ-friendly businesses than small LGBTQ-specific spaces. As such, the website promotes hotels like Sofitel, Le Méridien, Hyatt, and the Hype Luxury Boat Club. The *GoThaiBeFree* website states that “from luxurious superbrands, to intimate high-end villas, to designer boutiques, to experiential resorts, to unforgettable budget options, Thailand has something for every taste and budget.” However, this budget seems to be between the expensive and very expensive range. This is seen in their promotional videos, which showed well-dressed people in suits and ties shopping in expensive shops, swimming

in rooftop pools, getting a massage in luxurious hotels, ordering room service, and drinking champagne by the beach. No backpackers or cheaper hotels were shown. The emphasis on luxury was not as present in the 2013 promotional video (figure 1), where people were dressed much more simply, with casual t-shirts and shorts. This also clearly shows that they are marketing to a very specific segment of the LGBTQ community, namely, the wealthy and good-looking LGBTQ people, thus reinforcing the fantasy of the ideal queer consumer.

As a result, many small queer-owned businesses are pushed off the market to make place for new luxurious development projects. Many small hotel owners expressed frustration, and several long-time tourists were disappointed that some businesses had to close their doors. In Bangkok, many new development projects have emerged on Rama IV Road since 2017, including luxury hotels, retail outlets, offices, and luxury condominiums, turning it into a finance and commerce hub catering to more high-end tourists. Some small-scale business owners operating in the Soi Twilight district, a popular area for queer nightlife, reported that in 2019, they had been informed that their leases were not going to be renewed, buildings would be destroyed, and some bars would be forced to relocate elsewhere. A luxury hotel and a shopping mall, which would be developed by Dusit Thani Group (a Thai multinational hospitality company) and Central Group (a conglomerate holding company whose CEO is among the richest families in Thailand), would replace the small-scale businesses along the Soi Twilight district (Kongcheep 2018). A similar pattern of removing small-scale LGBTQ businesses to make space for luxury hotels and condominiums is happening in Pattaya. *Pattaya Today* (2017) reports that “[t]he former red-light districts have either been bulldozed for redevelopment or have been toned down [...] Night-time districts such as Walking Street and Sunee Plaza are nowhere near as popular as they once were and both have vacant properties for rent and lease.” The city now has five-star hotels, condominiums, water parks, and fine dining. Local LGBTQ businesses are, therefore, declining to give place to new industrial estates.

Promotion to the wealthier segment of the LGBTQ community goes in line with the latest National Tourism Development Plan (2017–2021), in which the Ministry of Tourism and Sports has shifted its focus from the quantity of tourists to the quality of tourists with higher incomes (Ministry of Tourism and Sports of Thailand 2017). In addition, TAT wants to downplay sex tourism and prostitution,

which was very popular among travelers, both queer and straight, for many decades. By downplaying overt displays of sexuality and promoting hotels that are LGBTQ-friendly rather than specifically queer, the materials minimize the difference between LGBTQ and heterosexual travelers. TAT now expects LGBTQ travelers to visit the same attractions as everyone else. As such, Thailand is positioning itself as an LGBTQ-related destination, downsizing LGBTQ-specific bars and businesses, where queer space is not the main component sought after by LGBTQ people, but a pre-requisite for other tourism features, be it sun, culture, or heritage. Indeed, most of what is promoted could be enjoyed by both LGBTQ and heterosexual travelers. It shows a clear difference from the previous decades, where LGBTQ people were coming to Thailand for LGBTQ-centric holidays when LGBTQ tourists were focusing on queer spaces.

This trend has been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Luxury tourism was part of the government's strategy to revive post-Covid-19 tourism. To this end, the country started by reopening its borders specifically to more high-end travelers. Minister of Tourism and Sports Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn reported that "the government will initially allow a small number of arrivals, such as some business executives and medical tourists. It is also working with the travel industry to identify and invite individuals in target demographics, which will probably include previous visitors to luxury resorts" (Chuwiruch 2020).

However, it needs to be clarified how such a policy will help small-scale and LGBTQ-owned businesses. The United Nations's (2020) *Social Impact Assessment of Covid-19 in Thailand* noted that LGBTQ people were at an increased risk due to Covid-19 measures, with the main impact being the job loss since many people of this community work in industries most affected by the virus. The Stranger Bar, one of the most famous LGBTQ bars in Bangkok, had to launch a *GoFundMe* to stay in business, as it received no financial support from the government. Similarly, in Pattaya, several LGBTQ bars and restaurants have closed for good. Some of the most popular bars in the Boyztown district had to open only on Fridays and Saturdays due to the plummeting number of customers. Moreover, many workers in these bars could not benefit from the government's emergency aid because they operate in the informal economy.

There is, therefore, a strange dichotomy between the growing promotion to LGBTQ tourists by TAT and an increasing closure of

LGBTQ tourist businesses. Many LGBTQ businesses do not have the financial capacity to compete against economic giants promoted on the *GoThaiBeFree* website. It seems that the government does not mind washing away local LGBTQ businesses as long as large LGBTQ-friendly businesses are present to avoid losing this niche market to neighboring countries. It shows that bringing tourists to the country is the most important factor for TAT, not the well-being of small-scale local entrepreneurs. When LGBTQ businesses were profitable to the elite, they were undisturbed. It was when an opportunity for more profits opened that LGBTQ businesses became endangered.

Closing LGBTQ businesses could have negative consequences not only for tourism but also for local LGBTQ workers. The International Labor Organization (ILO) report *Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in Thailand* highlighted that many LGBTQ Thais face discrimination and stigma in the workplace (Suriyasarn 2014). There are barriers in recruitment, fewer prospects for job advancement, sometimes hostile working environments, and a greater risk of being unfairly laid off. The ILO report also stressed that most transgender people are left with stereotypical jobs in the informal sector, especially in the entertainment industry or as sex workers. Therefore, by tossing aside these small-scale queer businesses, the government could be removing an important source of employment for LGBTQ people. As such, the way LGBTQ tourism was promoted in recent years has ended up being detrimental to local LGBTQ workers.

CONCLUSION: WHO LOSES? WHO BENEFITS?

I come from quite a small village in Thailand's countryside. I always knew that I liked men. So I decided to move to Bangkok some 20–30 years ago. I started working as a bartender at one of Bangkok's famous gay bars that was catering mostly to Western tourists. I've seen so much there... that's when my gay life really opened up (personal communication 2019).

This story shows the benefits that an LGBTQ tourist space can have on the local LGBTQ population, especially in a country where LGBTQ issues were not, at the time, a public subject of discussion. For many years, the development of LGBTQ tourism in Thailand was somewhat beneficial for small owners and workers. They were able to do business quite freely, provided they paid bribes.

However, the main objective of LGBTQ tourism development in Thailand has never been the well-being of local communities. As such, these stakeholders were never consulted for the promulgation of LGBTQ tourism policies. Indeed, the decision whether or not to promote LGBTQ tourism—to whom and how—has been influenced by economic and/or political agendas benefiting those already in power rather than showing any real concern for LGBTQ people. For decades, LGBTQ tourism was instrumentalized by political and economic groups to generate more money for the state and the economic elite, or as a way to gain more legitimacy. In the 1980s, LGBTQ tourism was tolerated underground because of the money that it was generating for the police through a system of bribery. Later on, LGBTQ tourism was targeted to promote a conservative political agenda by the Thaksin government in 2001, which appealed to the rural masses. It was tolerated again in 2007 to provide further legitimacy to a military government that had not been democratically elected. LGBTQ tourism finally started to be officially promoted by TAT in 2013, when the government realized this market's economic potential and started to face competition from neighboring countries that were rapidly developing their destinations for the LGBTQ market.

However, TAT has recently begun to promote a luxurious form of tourism for this niche market, perceived as a wealthier demographic (dual income, no kids) with a consumeristic lifestyle. As such, promotions to this community mostly showcase high-end hotels and luxury experiences. This shows that the promotion of LGBTQ tourism is not as much a tool to help the local LGBTQ community as it is about economic and political benefits. As shown by the cases of Pattaya and Soi Twilight in Bangkok, many small-scale businesses are forced out to make space for high-end development and luxury resorts, further concentrating the profit in the hands of the elite. The promotion of LGBTQ tourism is beneficial to the country in the sense that it gives Thailand a more liberal image regarding LGBTQ rights while increasing its tourism income. Promoting luxurious holidays for LGBTQ people also serves to veer the image of Thailand away from an LGBTQ-centric destination known for its sex industry. All of this is a perfect outcome for the Thai government and the elite: smaller, locally-owned queer businesses are disappearing to expand the market controlled by the economic elite, while the government keeps its destination popular among LGBTQ tourists.

In the end, the promotion and policies surrounding LGBTQ tourism in Thailand are not a sign of social progress per se. Rather, it is developing within the lines of capitalism, economic gains, and a political agenda. The findings of this research go in the same line with Hartal's (2018) case study of queer tourism in Tel-Aviv, showing the similarities in how those in power exploit LGBTQ tourism for their own benefit. When queer businesses are profitable to the elite, they remain undisturbed. It is when the opportunity for more profit surges that LGBTQ businesses become endangered, putting LGBTQ establishments at the mercy of the elite's interests. It shows how LGBTQ tourism has been and still is used by those in power to organize who controls the development of queer tourism space and who decides who has access to it. A wealthy LGBTQ foreigner might enjoy this opportunity to travel openly to Thailand, but for the local LGBTQ person, whose voice is rarely heard, the outcome is not quite as **beneficial**. ❀

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