CrossMark

Thailand through travel writings in English: An evaluation and representation

Soranat Tailanga [a,*], Thongrob Ruenbanthoeng [a], Kulapa Kuldilok [b], Natthanai Prasannam [a]

[a] Department of Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, Bangkok 10900, Thailand
[b] Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Faculty of Economics, Kasetsart University, Bangkok 10900, Thailand

A B S T R A C T

This paper studied the impact and influence of travel writings on tourist decision making regarding traveling to Thailand, tourist conceptualizations of Thailand before traveling and their satisfaction after traveling. The research comprised two projects involving quantitative research and analytical research. The former studied the impact and influence of travel writings and the differences between the tourists' attitudes before and after traveling to Thailand and found that, among the top-five guidebooks, *Lonely Planet* is the most popular among tourists. It is also found that, before they came to Thailand, what attracted the tourists the most were Thai hospitality, the breathtakingly beautiful and exotic natural scenery, and the myriad tourist attractions. After the trip, they found that Thailand's transportation, food, political stability, and safety were better than described in the books; whereas its uniqueness, value worthiness, and weather were worse.

The analytical research studied representation of Thailand in travel writings in English through a stylistic approach, discourse analysis, and conceptions of Orientalism. It found that the writings provide a socio-cultural overview of Thailand and details of tourist attractions. The otherness of "Thainess" is constructed through Thailand's exotic beauty, dangers, social problems, political instability, inadequate freedom of expression, and 'other habitus' of Thais. These conceptualizations construct the readers' or tourists' identities as quality travelers and highly knowledgeable and moral individuals.

Introduction

The tourism industry is a major economic factor in Thailand. According to the UN World Tourism Organization, in 2012 Thailand was ranked the fifteenth most popular tourist destination with 22.4 million visitors (BBC News Magazine, 2012). In 2013, Bangkok was the number one destination for tourists (Mastercard's New Global Destination Cities Index, 2013). From a global perspective, the tourism industry has been increasingly commercialized. Along with the growth of

the tourism industry, travel writings are flourishing. Tourists usually get information about a particular destination from travel guidebooks and/or websites. These travel writings not only provide necessary and interesting information, but also lure the readers with persuasive language and narration. Ngampornchai (2008) examines three Western web sites: sites produced by the U.S. Department of State, *Fodor's*, and *Lonely Planet*. Three Thai sites produced by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Web *Sawasdee*, and *Thaiways Magazine* are also studied. The research finds that the above mentioned websites have the common subjects in presenting of Thailand as follows: rich cultural heritage, the Thai monarchy, natural beauty, a peace-loving nation, a nature-loving people and a culture of food, fun, and collectivism. However, as the reproduction of the colonial discourse, the Western websites tend to represent Thailand as having unstable political system, anarchic society, and untrustworthy people, all of which foster the idea that the West is superior, while Thailand is considered as exotic, different, or more exactly, "the other." The research also shows that Thai websites express the process of internal colonization, where the representation of Thailand, especially of the rural, was viewed through the Thai elites.

Although there have been various studies on tourists' decision making regarding traveling to Thailand, none has studied the importance of travel writings of Thailand in English. Thus, the objectives of this research were to determine: 1) the impact and influence of travel writings on tourist decision making on traveling to Thailand; 2) tourist conceptualizations of Thailand before traveling and their satisfaction after traveling; and 3) the representation of Thailand in travel writings through a stylistic approach and discourse analysis.

Methodology

The research was divided into two parts: quantitative research on 'A Study of the Effect and Influence of English Travel Writings of Thailand on Travelers' Decision Making' and analytical research on 'Representation of Thailand in Travel Writings in English: A Study of Style and Discourse'.

Quantitative research data collection

The quantitative research: 'A Study of the Effect and Influence of English Travel Writings of Thailand on Travelers' Decision Making' examined the pivotal factors and vital supporting information that attract travelers to Thailand. The questionnaire employed for data collection focused on the expectations of Thailand's tourists after reading travel writing texts and tourists' views after traveling (200 subjects).

Analytical research methodology

The analytical research studied the representation of Thailand in travel writings in English through a stylistic approach, discourse analysis, and conceptions of Orientalism in the three most read travel writings in the survey:

Williams et al., (2009). *Lonely Planet: Thailand*. (13th ed.). Melbourne, VIC, Australia: Lonely Planet.
Gray and Ridout. (2009). *The Rough Guide to Thailand*. (7th ed.). London: Rough Guides.
Cornwel-Smith, Forbes, Forsyth, Harrison, Henley, Hoskin, Pattison, Rigg, Rooney and Scott. (2010). *Eyewitness Travel: Thailand*. London: DK Publishing.

Results

From the survey of 200 tourists visiting Thailand, it was found that, of the top five bestseller Travel Writings, namely *Lonely Planet, The Rough Guide, Eyewitness Travel Guide, Frommer's Travel Guide,* and *Fodor's, Lonely Planet* is the most popular among tourists (Table 1) because of its availability, price, and reliability. The number of tourists crediting *Lonely Planet* with reliability was noticeably high; they commented that *Lonely Planet* provided informative and instructive knowledge and was written by people who had actual experience in Thailand.

Interesting features of Thailand

The typical tourists visiting Thailand are interested in culture and religion, natural sites, food, shopping, history, and entertainment (Table 2). These correspond with the favorite topics given in the travel writings they read, which are culture and religion, food, natural sites, history, entertainment, and shopping, respectively.

Expectations and conceptions of Thailand after reading travel writings and before traveling

After reading travel writings, the tourists' expectations and conceptions of Thailand were high in the items corresponding to those they had found of interest before reading travel writings. However, the tourist expectations on hospitality, the diversity of tourist attractions, uniqueness and exoticism, and economical value were rather high (Table 3).

Expectations, points of interest and conceptions of Thailand after traveling

The survey of tourist expectations and conceptions of Thailand after traveling in Thailand shows that tourists were

Table 1 — Travel writings read by tourists visiting Thailand		
Travel writings	Number	(n = 200) %
Lonely Planet	133	66.5
The Rough Guide	19	9.5
Eyewitness Travel Guide	13	6.5
Frommer's Travel Guide	6	3.0
Fodor's	5	2.5
Others	24	12.0
Total	200	100