Conceptualizing Authenticity through the Spatial Analysis of Culture, History, Mobility, and Commodification of Thalang Road, Old Phuket Town

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze how the authenticity of space is formed in the locality. The authenticity is a ramification of interaction among people rather than the continuity of traditional culture. Hence, space, history, and culture are indistinguishable in a process of authentication. In order to study such concept, the participant observations and in-depth interviews are utilized to gather ethnographic data. *Thalang* road, located in oldtown area of Phuket, is chosen to be a main case because the interaction between tourists and community's members has occurred every day. Phuket is a province where social mobilities of people are high, and various culture are integrated. The dynamic domains of histories and cultures have been overlaid resulted in a production of contemporary culture and authenticity. The data reveals that mode of interaction among participants becomes main mechanism in the spatializing process.

Keywords: Spatializing Culture; Authenticity; Cultural Tourism; Mode of Interaction; Old Phuket Town

1. Introduction

The term authenticity in tourism generally relates to traditional culture and practices of local people which has been continually inherited. However, this concept can no longer describe an emergence of particular urban space where a practice of people is globally intermingled. Such urban space still has an aura which potentially induces a mass of tourists to visit. This phenomenon possibly provides an alternative meaning of authenticity which can support an analysis of various contemporary urban areas.

There has been a discussion which scrutinize a purpose of tourists who desire to experience a journey during their vacation time. An authentic culture of destination area is central to such discussion. Regarding dichotomous arguments, one claims that a tour activity is a pseudo-event (Uriely, 1997, p.982, as cite in Barthes, 1972; Boorstin, 1964) in which authenticity of local culture is not important while another one asserts that the authentic experience is a core reason motivating tourist to accept a trip (MacCannell, 1973, p. 602). Phuket local government agree with the latter since the province has a long history of Chinese migration and a settlement of local people.

Phuket Old Town – located at the center of Phuket island – has been developed into a central area of cultural tourism in accordance with its potential with the historical building owned by Chinese families. By a purpose to revitalize this historical area to be a nostalgic place, local government supports Thalang community

members to preserve their traditions and to undergo a process of commercialization. Therefore, a traditional culture has been promoted through a conduct of cultural events, such as baba wedding, traditional costume fashion show, and exhibitions of historical photography.

However, a transformation of space and a change of culture has never ceased. Chinese shophouses with a particular term of architecture, *Chino-Portuguese*, are renovated as café, modern clothe shops, souvenir shops, spas, bars, restaurants, grocery stores, and hostels. Graffiti are painted on empty walls and functions as backgrounds of photography. Gentrification also occurs when outsiders opt to invest in tourist related business and local people move to other areas of Phuket in order to escape congestion.

To analyze this contemporary phenomenon, the anthropological information had been gathered through the participant observations and the ethnographic methodology. The next sections will be theoretical framework and ethnographic data respectively. The result of study will be discussed at the end of this paper aiming at scrutinizing the meaning of authenticity in contemporary society which reveal a prospective of urban development in tourism district.

2. Research Objectives

This paper aims to analyze a meaning of authenticity within a domain of contemporary tourism industry.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Tourism and Authenticity

There has been a discussion about the authenticity of touristic place. On one hand, a tour could be "pseudo-event" (Boorstin, 1964) – creating fictitious and spectacular experience– which take a tourist from their day-to-day life in hometown. On another hand, many tourists strive to understand authentic practices of people in a society they visit (MacCannell, 1973, p. 602). The spectrum ranged from the former to the latter could be called a "mode of tourist" (Cohen, 1979, p.193) which is a result of tourists' need – variegated by their education, social class, personal needs, and economic resources. This gives rise to various localities to be touristic places where different activities, lifestyles, experiences are signified. Some tourists may want to experience their familiar cultures while some are open to new exotic experiences. They are dichotomous views of tourists which produce global phenomena, McDonaldization and Disneyization (Urry, 2011 [1990], p. 54). The former signifies homogeneity of touristic places around the word influenced by mass productions and franchise company. Tourists can purchase foods, services, and products similar to those in their home countries although they travel to distant areas. The latter becomes apparent since an idea of romanticism have circulated among tourists who want to refuse mass tourism and want an outstanding experience.

The meaning of authenticity becomes ambiguous since it relates to personal experiences which give a value to places. The authenticity means neither places nor practices of participants in a tourism domain, but rather a distance between tourists and spaces. Such distance conveys the subjective meanings, such as nostalgic memory, exotic experience, and colonialist ideas. The spaces are open to new interpretation when touristic activities occur. In such distance, there are perceptions towards culture and history of host and guest which will be intertwined and transformed into an authenticity of touristic places.

3.2 Place, Spatializing Culture, and Commodification

A city consists of spaces which are geographically demarcated by physical body such as roads, buildings, mountains, rivers, bridges, and so on. Nevertheless, such city could be simultaneously analyzed as an integration of abstract domains distinguished by subjective perception, activities, history, culture, socio-economic and social structure of inhabitants. By studying such concept, a dynamic process of development and a complexity of city's components have been revealed.

A space – where buildings are constructed and people reside in – is not totally managed by a top-down process carried out by a government, but it is also occupied, modified, transformed, interpreted, and utilized through a bottom-up process. In practice, inhabitants transform their community into a space that they actually live and conduct day-to-day activities. Thus, the community is not just an administrative location, but it become a lived space (Lefebvre, 1991) where each of individuals create their ways of living on a physical space and even extend the form of space to something meaningful to them. To extend the concept of lived space, inhabitants always create their own place-identity (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 58), as notice from how they frame memories and attachment on the place they reside through ideas, emotions, attitudes, values, and notions. Thus, the lived space is not just a physical dimension, but contains the human spirituality inside it. The relationship among community members play the significant roles on constructing the social meaning of space and creating the sense of belonging. Low (2017, p. 70) explains the similar situation through the notion of "spatializing culture" as to study the ways people form lifestyle and sociality on the space for example, the interactions between members and economic exchange.

To study tourism space, the symbolic meanings of spaces become a resource for an exchange in the monetary system. The space and place are transformed into commodity. In general, a commoditization is a process in which things are priced in monetary system. The things then are transformed into commodities which could be widely sold in the market. Appadurai elucidated that commoditization is rather a temporal condition occurred when the things enter a state of commodity – being valued and exchanged (Appadurai, 1986, p. 13). In this state, the biography of thing is modified, and its value is increased as a result (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 70). In drastic case, some commodities, especially art and antique, possibly enters a singularity state – being only one object in the system – whose monetary value may not be limited. Differently, some objects become myth in which historical means tend to be weak (Barthes, 1972, p.142). Such object still has monetary value, but its value is from the connotative meaning rather than its biography. This could be seen in a case of modern commodity which signifies buyers a social class, lifestyle, education, and social network.

The value of space can be perceived through visual communication. In public space, architectures become public arts in which tourists are able to personally enjoy the aesthetic although there is no provided information (Frost et al., 2015, p. 70). The experience when observing the conspicuous space is significant for visitors. Personal experiences – romantic, beautiful, exotic, energetic, and so on – have been constructed through a participation in tours and observation of such spaces (Urry, 1992, pp. 183-184). The place has its own distinct characteristics or "genius locus" which could be perceived through experiencing the local culture (Long, 2017, p.338). Thus, a diversity of subculture, contestation between local and global phenomenon, bottom-up management become main topic in tourism industry (Richards, 2007). A misunderstanding in these concepts may lead to the deterioration of cultural capital (Richards, 2018, pp. 15-16). In order to analyze the concepts of space and commodification, the ethnographic data written in the next section will be discussed.

4. Research Methodology

The participant observations and in-depth interviews have been periodically conducted from 2016 to 2019 in order to gather ethnographic data. In order to discuss three main concepts – history and culture, mobility of participants, and commodification, researchers opted to communicate with tourists and local people while they were participating in the public space of Thalang Road. It was a temporal space-time where the influences of such three concepts could be discerned.

5. Results

5.1 Thalang Road: Phuket Tourism Industry and a Transformation of the Old Town Area

This paper selected *Thalang* road to be a main case by two reasons: 1) a place of mobility to people. People who was born in this place have tendency to leave for opportunity in finding job and earning higher

education while outsiders can migrate to the oldtown in order to start their business. This mobility makes the ties between community's members vague. The old buildings become a symbol reminding that *Thalang* road community is still exist; 2) a contestation between community and government within a context of tourism industry. Tourism industry do not only provide community's members a chance to receive a high money profit, but also influence an authentication process in which only specific practices are certified. Tourists come to the touristic place with their expectations to experience an authentic culture although such culture is possibly representational subjects promoted and circulated through media. In order to maintain an urban space as a place where the needs of tourists and local people meet, many community's members opt to perform particular activities regarding the expectations of tourists and resulting in a change of local way of life.

Since the demand of tin in the global market increased in the 19ᵗʰ century, Phuket had successfully become one of the main tin producers in Southeast Asian region. The growth of tin industry transformed Phuket to be a developing city of Thailand (Siam), which attracted different people around the world to partake in employment, business, and trading. The significant player of tin industry was an oversea Chinese group called *Hokkien*. They emigrated from the Southern part of Mainland China (Fujian province) due to the brutal famine and plaque during Qing Dynasty, to many major cities in Southeast Asia including Phuket and neighboring regions. Some Chinese clans operated businesses in both Phuket and Penang (a state in Malaysia), then it occurred the transnational businesses through the family connection.

Since many Chinese businessmen were the key player who had an influence on the development of Phuket in terms of socioeconomics and governance, many areas were transformed into towns in order to serve the tin industry. *Tungkha* was one of the significant towns emerged from the growth tin export, presently known as Old Phuket Town. The route planning was designed as the grid system, influenced by the western Chinese from Penang and Malacca. An important road named *Thalang*, was constructed at the center of Phuket and was considered as one of the urban development projects to serve the tin industry in 1889. It is evidently located nearby the old canal where was accessible to Andaman Sea, indicating the strategic location for transport of import and export goods. Along the road, there were commercial buildings in Chinese shophouse style that influenced from colonial architecture in Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. The road was known as the most bustling area in Phuket with the tin trading activities and foreign goods shopping.

In 1990s it was the declining remark of tin-mining industry and tourism has been the significant source of income for Phuket residents. Since then, many old shops and restaurants, that have been opened for at least three generations, were transformed into the new business conforming the modern and contemporary lifestyle of current generation. And some transformations are created to serve the visit of tourists. However, some shophouses still maintain their career tradition, for instance, gold and jewelry shops, construction material shops, Chinese traditional pharmacy, and fabric shops. In 2017, Old Phuket Town was demarcated by the Committee of the Conservation of Krung Rattanakosin and Old City as the protected zone for area conservation and sustainable development. The size of total area is 2.76 square kilometers, comprising of 10 commercial roads (including *Thalang Road*), a Buddhist temple, and Chinese shrines. Inside Thalang Road, there are 146 households categorizing into different types of living purposes; permanent residents, shop and restaurant occupants, tourist-related business owners, and religious places.

The road is recognized as the multicultural communities, which can be found the harmonious living of Hokkien Chinese, Indian, and Muslim owned shophouses, a Hainanese shrine, and a small Protestant church. As the characteristics of community has been close-knit, one of the members started to share an interesting narrative that reminisces about his childhood life and the monitoring of community members, as stated:

"Back in 30 years ago, I used to walk with my relatives to *Chalerm Tan Theater* (a former famous theater in Phuket). While we were walking there as usual, we were also chasing each other on the road and were making loud noise. After got back home, my parent found out that we were too naughty

outside the house and probably disturbed our neighbor. I had a feeling that my parent's acquaintance who lived around there told this story to them. You see, everyone knew each other and knew whose are the kids' parent. It is a system of community surveillance." (a shophouse owner, personal communication, July 14, 2016)

Moreover, a mobility of *Thalang* community members make this case more complex. On one hand, outsiders may identify themselves as community members if they have migrated and stayed in Thalang road for over years, but they may simultaneously bring the distinctive practices from their hometown. On the other hand, the insiders may accept a global trend and transform their house into places for servicing tourists. Modern-fashion shops, western-style café, and international restaurants thus could be found in the vicinity of *Thalang* road. The characteristics of the place, however, is unstable. Local people strive to develop their conspicuous identity by combining a local tradition with a universal lifestyle.

5.2 Mode of Interaction and Transformation of Space-time

Since *Thalang* is central to a mobility of various groups of people, the practices of such people are variegated regarding their cultural and social backgrounds. Not only mode of tourist – the practices of tourists in relation to their aims of travel – could be observed, but also different local practices could be found. Participants such as, street-food sellers, clothe-stall owners, shopkeepers, elderly residents, younger generations who have lived in this area, street artists, domestic and international tourists have their own perspective in participating in the public space of *Thalang*. The common achievement of everyone is an exchange of resources economically, socially, and culturally. In this regard, the concept of gentrification has undergone all along the road in order to conform with the growth of tourism. Many shophouses were taken over by new owners because of financial reason, as narrated.

"My family sold 2 blocks of shophouse to a foreign investor last year. They cost 24 million baht. We think the maintenance of old building would require a high expense. Local government is trying to encourage us to preserve the old building in this road, but their budget is only adequate for the staged front renovation of the shophouse. We cannot afford for the long term." - (a former shophouse owner, personal communication, July 26, 2016)

It shows that some shophouses used to belong to many extended Chinese clans and the offspring, when they grew up, would transfer to other areas in order to build their own family. Thus, the shophouses, after the parent generation, were left and not being used for tourism purpose. To possess a hundred-year-old building, it is challenging for the owner to burden a lot of finances for maintenance and renovation every decade, as narrated:

"I really want to own these shophouses. I know I am a newcomer but I try to understand people here and learn about history of Old Phuket Town. I will keep everything as it used to be. I don't want it to be cafe or restaurant. Last month, I bought a block of former-opium shophouse that still has 2 old ladies living inside. I know it must be difficult for them to leave this house. So, I gave them 5 months of preparation to move out. During the extension, I hired 2 photographers to collect the photos of the 2 ladies' everyday activities by not disturb their comfort of stay. I want them to have a great memory of the house." (a shophouse owner, personal communication, July 27, 2016)

The people who participate in the space of *Thalang* road perform their day-to-day activities with expectations and perceptions in accordance with their position and a mode of interaction. The outsiders may feel an attachment to the place regarding their memory. An employee of tourist information center, who constantly come to work at day time, said that:

"I know everyone here. I am new but I like to talk with people in this community. I started interact with them from a municipality's project 'local food for local life'. There was a group of students

learning how to make the Phuket food and then I have to distribute it to people in the community. How would I miss a single one? I know all 146 households living here. Once, I met an old lady of Krisna shophouse and saw that she was carrying so many things. I helped her and we walked to her house. She let me in her house for a rest and having a sip of drink in return. I can feel some families here are nice, but some are not really socialized with others. Maybe because I am just a staff you know I don't live here." (a staff, personal communication, March 13, 2017)

The tourists may have an expectation to perceive the real practices which is authentic and is not promoted by the government. However, they are still in a tourist mode in which the real practices of local people are not embraced. One tourist who came to visit the road on holidays said:

"I came here to see what is going on here, but all shops close on Sunday. It is so disappointed. There is only walking street after 4 o'clock. Why these shops close the other days. I want to see their life here, not to see this kind of performance." (a foreign tourist, personal communication, March 15, 2017)

Simultaneously, local people seem to adjust themselves to the need of tourists since the tour considerably transforms physical space and local culture. Aon, 30-year-old, resident of *Thalang* community, provided an information implying the change of commercial activities.

"Tourism have a significant effect on people activities. Previously, *Thalang* road was a place where Phuket people could find products for their day-to-day life, especially materials for a building construction. Nowadays, people do not want to visit *Thalang* road for such things because they cannot find parking lots and the road is crowded with tourists. The construction material shops have been closed as a result. Only shops which conform to tourism industry can survive." (Aon, personal communication, July 26, 2018)

It could be seen that the interaction among people have transformed a space of the road. Although the participants do not directly communicate their needs to one another, the practices of both insiders and outsiders influence the way people perform in the space of the road.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The authenticity is based on a cultural and historical background of space, and mode of interaction is a substantial component of spatializing-culture mechanism. An urban space does not only contain three-dimensional spaces comprised of physical features like width, height, and depth, but also convey the fourth dimensional space in which a number of histories and cultures are connoted. However, the space creation process is dynamic pertaining to three factors: 1) a superimposition of multiple cultures and histories; 2) a mobility of people; 3) a production process which proliferates human society socially, politically, and economically. The study of interaction among societal members reveals that such three factors are transformed and interwoven into a contemporary urban space.

According to its location and historical background, Phuket is central to migration of Chinese, Muslim, Southern Indians, and Southern Thai people. The province becomes a place where contestation among groups is occurred. Then tourism industry provokes a drastic transformation of local culture since the 1990s. A space of *Thalang* road symbolizes authenticity of locality in various aspects. In other words, the community members are expected to live, eat, and have a leisure time authentically. Nonetheless, propelled by economic factors, a commodification is chief in a spatializing process. Dealing with needs and wants of tourists, *Thalang* community's members have to learn how to act and perform their daily life in the tourism space without losing of authenticity of locality. At the same time, tourists may feel that the local traditions are invented and deceased. The tourists tend to perceive that a contemporary way of life, integrated into globalizing culture, is more appropriate. A negotiation between local people and tourists initiates a mode of interaction in which cultural value and means of authenticity are evaluated.

7. Conclusion

In a spatializing-culture process, the interaction among people has three functions: 1) The connotative meanings of cultures and histories are reinterpreted; 2) cultural means are reproduced when such interaction occurs; 3) A continuity of space is maintained. Since space is temporal, everyday interaction of people reconstructs a connection between a past and a present time. This continuity insists the existence of traditions although local culture could be transformed, and architectures are reprogrammable.

For the future research, the study in spatializing-culture process should include the phenomenon when authority powers of hegemonic group and sub group are contested in the management process. The former possibly promote particular culture for tourism while the latter needs to negotiate their diverse practices. The diversity of sub cultures is a resource for developing the spirit of place, but it may not conform to a formal identity of the province proposed by hegemonic groups. In this regard, all the minor voices could be included in the tourism management which shows the more efficient way to develop cultural tourism.

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