Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography

doi:10.1111/sjtg.12512

Dynamics of coastal tourism: drivers of spatial change in South-East Asia

Mark P. Hampton,[1] Raoul Bianchi[2] and Julia Jeyacheya[2]

[1]University of Kent, Kent Business School/School of Anthropology and Conservation, Canterbury, UK
[2]Manchester Metropolitan University, Economics, Policy and International Business Department, All Saints Campus, Manchester, UK

Correspondence: Mark P. Hampton (email: m.hampton@kent.ac.uk)

Coastal tourism has grown significantly across South-East Asia from the 1960s, particularly in three key destinations hosting large tourist numbers: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. It encompasses different scales from basic backpacker accommodation in budget enclaves to large scale capital-intensive luxury resort enclaves. Coastal tourism studies typically range from descriptive analyses of destinations' evolutionary dynamics and resort morphology to more granular ethnographic inspections of socio-economic patterns of transformation and resource conflicts. More recent critical research theorizes the spatial reorganization of coastal tourism in relation to economic restructuring processes. Although national tourism policy and economic development is often analysed, forces shaping coastal tourism development have been little examined and research typically focusses on impact case studies without analysing the underlying political economy. This paper interrogates the political-economic drivers of the historical-geographical and spatial organization of coastal tourism in these three major destinations and demonstrates how processes of tourism capital accumulation are experienced/contested via intensified commodification leading to increasingly complex and diversified coastal tourism political economies.

Keywords: political economy, coastal tourism, enclaves, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand

Accepted: 31 July 2023

Introduction

Coasts play a significant role in modern tourism, attracting sizeable flows of international visitors to the tropics resulting in the spatial concentration of tourism infrastructure. Since the 1980s, coasts in South-East Asia have absorbed international mass tourism and have experienced a fundamental transformation in both land use and tourism's spatial organization. Coastal resorts have seen changes from small-scale budget enclaves to the emergence of large, highly capitalized enclaves hosting significant numbers of tourists in internationally owned/franchised resorts.

These spatial changes can be observed in three larger ASEAN countries hosting significant coastal tourism: Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. These three destinations are useful exemplars foregrounding significant processes affecting coastal tourism. Coastal destinations are typically the largest leisure tourism centres alongside urban destinations (excluding business accommodation in capital cities). Coastal tourism's scale can be demonstrated using hotel rooms as a proxy for relative size. For example, in 2018, Bali had over 53 000 classified hotel rooms compared with Yogyakarta (Indonesia's second largest leisure destination) having 14 300 rooms (*Hotel Investment Strategies*, 2019). Thailand and Malaysia also exhibit spatial concentration at the coast and host sizable resort enclaves, with both countries also having significantly larger coastal tourism relative to their inland leisure destinations.

Research on the tourism political economy in South-East Asia typically focusses on either the national (Chheang, 2008) or sub-regional levels (Sofield, 2009). Despite increasing tourism research on low-income Global South countries, an explicit focus on its political economy still comprises a small proportion of the literature (Lee *et al*. 2015; Hampton *et al*., 2018a), particularly regarding the analysis of coastal tourism. Since the 1960s, governments in South-East Asia have seen international tourism as driving economic growth, creating income, employment, and government revenue, often facilitated by funding from international organizations including the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (Lewis & Lewis, 2009: 47).

Tourism arrivals in South-East Asia were under 250 000 in 1960, but within ten years, the number increased to 1.5 million (Wood, 1980). This trend has continued with brief disruptions: in 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) affected Malaysia and Indonesia's tourism numbers particularly (Prideaux, 1999); and the SARS outbreak saw a regional decline from 42 million visitors in 2002 to 36.2 million in 2003 (UNWTO, 2005). Whilst recovery quickly followed in these two cases, the COVID-19 pandemic from early 2020 was of a different order of magnitude with unprecedented disruption to tourism flows, revenues and livelihoods. For context, in 2019, 138.54 million international arrivals in South-East Asia spent USD 147.6 billion (UNWTO, 2020), whereas in 2020 international arrivals fell by 82 per cent and in 2021 by 95 per cent (UNWTO, 2022). Correspondingly, international visitor expenditure as a percentage of total exports fell from 8.8 per cent in 2019 to 0.6 per cent in 2021 (WTTC, 2022). In 2022, all three countries fully re-opened to international tourism and, at the time of writing, recovery is ongoing, albeit somewhat uneven in speed and scale. In 2022, Thailand had 11.15 million international arrivals (compared with 39.8 million in 2019), Malaysia 9.2 million (compared with 26.1 million) and Indonesia 5.47 million (compared with 15.5 million) (UNWTO, 2020; *Reuters*, 2023a; Ministry of Tourism Malaysia data; BPS Indonesia data).

The paper comprises four parts, beginning with a critical review of the literature theorizing coastal tourism, before examining post-war tourism development in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. The third section discusses the political economy of tourism space on the South-East Asian littoral. The final section consolidates our argument, identifying common drivers of spatial change in these three countries' coastal tourism political economies to illustrate our argument. This paper contributes to a focussed understanding of the distinct socio-political and economic forces shaping coastal tourism in these three destinations, and more broadly, to contemporary debates related to the processes and conditions of tourism capital accumulation and its distinctive socio-territorial dynamics.

Theorizing coastal tourism

Coastal tourism research has typically focussed on mapping spatial patterns of resort development in peripheral regions (Christaller, 1963). Resort morphology models that typically applied a 'stagist' approach and exemplified by Butler's (1980) resort lifecycle model have been challenged for their limited explanatory power regarding resort development and the forces driving their growth, expansion, and transformation (see Franz, 1985a, 1985b for a threefold typology of SE Asian coastal resorts; Smith, 1992a, 1992b). To address this theoretical weakness, Agarwal (2005: 352) foregrounds the concept of economic restructuring to situate the spatial reorganization of resorts in relation to the 'deep changes in the geography of production and consumption' (2005:

352) and the dialectal relationship between global and local processes (Agarwal, 2005). Others, including Andriotis (2006: 1083) explore political factors influencing resort development in context of regional and national tourism planning but stop short of a theoretically informed analysis of the relationship between state power and the economic organization of tourism. Despite referring to the role of private and government actors in Malaysia's Tioman island, Omar *et al.* (2015) shed little light on the political-economic drivers of tourism growth. Fletcher (2011) highlights an important spatial dimension to this struggle, emphasizing how the continuous reinvention and diversification of tourism into new 'niches' (e.g. ecotourism) acts as 'spatial-temporal' fix, offsetting the over-accumulation of capital.

The paucity of political economy analyses of tourism has been noted by several scholars (Marie dit Chirot, 2021; Bianchi, 2018; Mosedale, 2011; Bianchi, 2004; Williams, 2004). Britton's (1982) application of dependency theory to the structural drivers of tourism and underdevelopment in Pacific islands pioneered tourism political economy, but its limitations have been widely noted (Harrison, 2015). Nevertheless, in a less cited paper, Britton (1980: 70) traces how the clustering of foreign-owned hotels and resorts on Viti Levu's (Fiji) south coast was influenced by the availability of freehold land. Freitag (1994) and Weaver (1988) argued that island economies often struggled to free themselves from the socio-spatial inequalities associated with enclave or 'plantation' systems of tourism development. While the contemporary global dynamics of tourism are more complex than such models allow, neoliberal capitalism has accentuated the development of fortified, private mega-resorts in some regions (Sheller, 2009).

Studies of tourism in low-income states frequently focus upon the prominence of trans-national corporations (TNC)-run resort enclaves (e.g. Sheller, 2009). In addition to large tightly-bound resort enclaves, other authors identify a range of tourist enclaves within host countries including budget tourism enclaves developed for backpackers and urban tourist enclaves, (Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019; Healy & Jamal, 2017), which, by comparison are 'relatively fussily bounded and easily penetrable' (Ek & Tesfahuney (2019: 869). That said, other academics have been more circumspect regarding foreign capital's dominance in tourism (Harrison, 2004). In their study of Indonesian resorts, Shaw and Shaw (1999) suggested that such macro-level approaches ignore linkages *and* tensions between external and local capital. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that local entrepreneurial engagement with resort enclaves remains marginal, a finding mirrored by Kermath and Thomas (1992) in the Dominican Republic and also in Malaysia where small-scale island tourism economies intersect with global capital flows (Hampton *et al.*, 2018a).

Several studies foreground the role of the state and regulatory environments as key factors shaping the political-economic organization and spatial patterns of tourism capital accumulation (Clancy, 1998; Hazbun, 2008; Steiner, 2006). Bramwell's (2011) writings on governance indicate the involvement of a wider constellation of actors within/beyond the state in the conflict over land and other resources for tourism (Bowen *et al.*, 2017; Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015), while Russo and Segre (2009) posit a relationship between property regimes and destination structure. Given the 'kaleidoscopic character of tourism capitalism' (Gibson, 2009: 529) and poorly demarcated boundaries between diverse tourist 'commodities', competition for space and resources is often fierce. The difficulty of exerting 'property rights over tourism experiences' (Williams, 2004: 62), facilitates free riding on nature and culture, and exacerbates tourism-related land-grabs (Neef, 2021). Socio-spatial patterns of coastal tourism development are thus frequently marked by 'conflict between different interest groups contesting the ownership and control of the foreshore and its resources' (Selwyn & Boissevain, 2004: 11). Therefore, it is important to note the differentiated forms of commodification folded within processes of tourism capital accumulation, and the new class antagonisms and alliances that emerge through the spatial (re)organization of places for tourism (Young & Markham, 2019).

The political economy of tourism encompasses diverse theoretical traditions which for space reasons cannot be fully addressed here (see Bianchi, 2018). The analytical perspective adopted here draws partly from historical-geographic institutionalist perspectives advanced by Clancy (1998), Steiner (2006) and Hazbun (2008) as well as Payne's (2005: 26) blending of actor-oriented insights from development studies and structural international political economy to examine locally and regionally differentiated processes and patterns of coastal tourism development.

The next section provides the historical context for analysing coastal tourism development in South-East Asia, before discussing its political-economic characteristics in detail. Our analysis adopts the heuristic methodological approach of historical political economy, drawing inferences from a range of sources providing the platform for further interrogation of the political-economic forces shaping the region's coastal tourism. In addition, the paper builds upon enduring familiarity with the region. Two authors of this paper have extensive qualitative fieldwork experience in the region over a period of twenty years and in multiple projects, and this informs our narrative of coastal tourism development.

Coastal tourism in South-East Asia

Post-war coastal tourism: modernization and entrepreneurship 1945–mid 1980s.

Although small-scale coastal resorts emerged in all three countries from the 1920s onwards, major coastal developments took place in the post-war period. Nevertheless, these small, early resorts reveal a template that was followed at significantly larger scale in later years.

After World War Two, South-East Asia was then further impacted by independence struggles in French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies and the 'Malayan Emergency' guerrilla war. This instability and the cost/difficulties of transportation meant that international tourism took time to return. However, by the 1960s, tourism saw significant growth, albeit with a distinctly uneven regional distribution.

The largest, most significant conflict—the American/Vietnam War—had unexpected effects on tourism development across South-East Asia. During the war, US troops had a respite from combat with short 'R&R' breaks and many relaxed at Vietnamese beaches, significantly boosting those resorts and acting as foundations for their later development after Vietnam's Doi Moi liberalization. Space precludes further discussion of Vietnam's trajectory here, however, for the three non-Communist, free market-based political economies examined here, the war had a major impact on their own resort development.

In Thailand, US military personnel leisure spend became highly significant. Between 1966–9, US troops on R&R in Thailand numbered between 30 000–70 000 per year, and in 1966 and 1967 accounted for 14 per cent of Thailand's tourists (Suntikul, 2013: 95). This resulted in the rapid growth of coastal tourism in Pattaya. Once a small fishing village, Pattaya became a large-scale tourist infrastructure of hotels, restaurants and bars funded by a USD 4 million loan from the Industrial Finance Corporation of Thailand (a development finance consortium comprising a World Bank affiliate plus other investors including US banks) (Chang, 2001: 628).

Malaysian and Indonesian coastal resorts also benefited from R&R expenditure including budget enclaves in Batu Ferringhi (Penang), and Kuta beach (Bali) where GIs could surf alongside the growing number of hippy travellers. Although space precludes further discussion here, there is a useful new line of enquiry being opened, linking geopolitics and tourism, exemplified by Gillen and Mostafanezhad (2019: 76) who use the notion of the mundane/everyday tourism encounters as a lens to analyse wider processes arguing that 'tourism places geopolitical power in the hands of the supposedly apolitical spaces of leisure'. The emergence of South-East Asia's sizeable sex tourism industry—discussed in Thanh-Dam's (1983) classic paper, occurring most notably in Pattaya—was the product of both the economic injustices which propelled poor 'Third World' women into a plethora of low-paid and exploitative jobs including commoditized sexual services, and a wider international political landscape sustained by patriarchal social relations (Enloe, 1990).

By the late 1960s, the overland hippy trail from Europe to India extended to South-East Asia. Previously, coastal tourism was small-scale with modest hotels and isolated examples of colonial luxury (e.g. Singapore's Raffles Hotel). In parallel, the mid-1960s also saw a substantial growth of resorts with large 300–400 room hotels exemplified by the nine storey Bali Beach Hotel opening in Sanur in 1966. By the 1970s, high rise, international standard hotels opened in Batu Ferringhi (Shangri-La), Sanur (Hyatt) and Pattaya (Royal Cliff hotel) (RA Smith, 1992b; Franz, 1985b). This rising trend of ever-developing larger resorts with sizeable hotels run by hotel TNCs such as Inter-Continental, also saw the rise of a significant new initiative: integrated resorts.

Integrated resorts—unlike some destinations that typically grew around a settlement such as a fishing village—were large, purpose-built, capital-intensive resort enclave developments often constructed in sparsely populated areas. Unlike bottom-up, or demand-led developments, integrated resorts were driven by governments and developers and explicitly designed for mass tourism, sometimes with significant funding from international development organizations (Andriotis, 2008). For example, Indonesia's Suharto's government in the 1970s constructed the Nusa Dua integrated resort in southern Bali, with USD 16 million UNDP and World Bank financing to 'foster properly planned tourism development' (World Bank archives, memo from Robert McNamara, WB President, 10 November 1978, IDA/R78-117).

However, paralleling the rise of highly planned integrated luxury resort enclaves, the 1970s–early 1980s also saw the emergence of (broadly unplanned) coastal destinations, typically serving small-scale tourism such as the hippy overlanders and later, backpackers. Kuta beach, Bali, and Koh Samui, Thailand, exemplified budget enclaves in this period where small-scale tourism was concentrated spatially at the coast.

By the 1980s, significant numbers of backpackers were travelling in a circuit comprising several coastal/island resorts in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia (Hampton & Hamzah, 2016). This backpacker circuit facilitated the emergence of more widespread entrepreneurial responses from local communities, including opportunities for women entrepreneurs). However, in some cases, the scale/composition of tourism entrepreneurship was mediated by existing socio-ethnic divides often favouring regional business elites with superior business knowledge or access to capital. These differentiated entrepreneurial responses underpinned tourism's uneven territorial distribution and character with a spatially concentrated 'formal' sector in cities and historic resorts (arguably urban tourism enclaves within larger cities) and a more 'informal' coastal infrastructure (beach bungalows, restaurants) of small budget enclaves owned by small-scale, indigenous entrepreneurs, particularly on Malaysia's east coast (Oppermann, 1992).

Growth, consolidation and regionalization of tourism

The 1980s/90s saw increased growth and geographical expansion in large resort enclave development. Following a lack of private investors' interest in the 1970s, the Malay-led government spearheaded the development of a USD 1 billion mega-resort on Langkawi Island in 1984 (Omar *et al.*, 2014). Elsewhere, domestic private investment flowed to other islands exemplified by the Chinese-Malaysian owned Berjaya Group's developments on Tioman.

The early 1990s was a turning point as the region experienced increasing tourist arrivals and the consolidation of large-scale international tourism-related investments in the context of accelerating globalization, market integration and FDI from Japan, US, EU and increasingly China (*Financial Times*, 2018), combined with regional trade liberalization. Prior to the 1997 AFC, Indonesia alone experienced 15 per cent growth per annum in tourist arrivals (Sugiyarto *et al.*, 2003: 685). In Indonesia in the early 1990s, significant private investment from a Singaporean-Indonesian joint venture constructed the large-scale Bintan Beach Island Resort enclave along 100 kilometres of the island's coast near Singapore, arguably influenced by the success of Bali's Nusa Dua model in Bali (Lee, 2022). By 2008, more than USD 800 million had been invested, resulting in the development of seven hotels and Indonesia's first privately-owned international airport (Bunnell *et al.* 2006).

The 1990s also witnessed tourism's further territorial expansion into new destinations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos) competing with existing resorts in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. However, despite increasing competition and more resorts, coastal tourism remains unevenly distributed. Table 1 illustrates the relative sizes of resorts before the COVID-19 pandemic, based on hotel rooms. It highlights Thailand's dominance and shows Bali (all resorts) as third largest, albeit with fewer rooms than one single Thai destination, Phuket.

Although the AFC's impact on tourism was less severe than expected, it temporarily slowed tourism's growth and resulted in rising unemployment and loss of business (Henderson, 1999). Indonesia was particularly affected, hastening the Suharto regime's demise, and accelerating democratization. Leading up to, and subsequent to the crisis, South-East Asian political economies had become increasingly integrated into regional and global supply chains and capital flows. Increasingly, FDI in manufacturing gave way to a rising inflow of foreign capital into portfolio investment in real estate and capital-intensive resorts (Wade, 2004: xxix). Between 2003 and 2017, hotels/tourism accounted for USD 37 billion out of nearly USD one trillion in total FDI (*Financial Times*, 2018).

Table 1. Hotel rooms, selected resorts in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand pre-COVID.

Resort	Hotel rooms†
Bali, Indonesia	69,000 (2019)
Bintan, Indonesia	1,775‡ (2019)
Batu Ferringhi, Malaysia	12,800§ (2017)
Langkawi, Malaysia	6,100 (2017)
Pattaya, Thailand	80,000 (2018)
Phuket, Thailand	84,700 (2019)

Sources: Data from *C9 Hotelworks*, 2019; HVS, 2017; Colliers International, 2018.
Note: † = Data for 'classified' rooms only. Unclassified room numbers unknown.
‡ = Bintan Resorts only (around 1000 rooms elsewhere in Bintan Island).
§ = Data for Penang Island.

The AFC also exposed the three countries' underlying economic vulnerabilities. Although not 'dependent', in the classic sense used by dependency theorists Gunder Frank (1967) nor Britton (1982), the crisis exposed the weak foundations of economies whose principal assets were held by closely intertwined economic and political elites supported by high volumes of external financing. South-East Asia was becoming increasingly integrated into Chinese trade and FDI flows even prior to the crisis. Between 1993–2001, Chinese trade with the region grew by 75 per cent per year precisely when Japanese investment was waning, although Japan accounts for 20 per cent of regional FDI and China 14 per cent (*Financial Times*, 2018). Chinese influence continues with massive investments in the Belt and Road Initiative across Asia and elsewhere (Lin *et al.*, 2019). Such investment now drives the development of large-scale coastal resort enclaves and luxury residential condominiums, as evidenced by Chinese investment interest in constructing a large resort of seven hotels with 1800 rooms, 5000 condominium units, marinas and golf courses in Sabah, Malaysia (*Malay Mail*, 2021).

Discussion: a political economy of tourism space on the South-East Asian littoral

Tourism and the developmental state in the early post-independence period

Coastal tourism first developed largely outside state patronage. Later, however, as tourism expanded, governments from the 1970s–80s took a closer interest in its potential, cultivating alliances with elite domestic capital. Examples abound, such as the sizeable Bintan resort enclave where Chinese-Indonesian investment interests close to the influential Salim group intersected with those of Chinese-Singaporeans seeking investment opportunities, all within the context of Singapore's regional growth strategy (Ford & Lyons, 2006). In Thailand, although the political class was initially disinterested in tourism, from the 1980s, the Bangkok elites became major shareholders in the large 'industrial scale' hotels in Pattaya (Wahnschafft, 1982).

From the 1980s, the growth of backpackers was significant, propelling the socio-economic transformation of many peripheral coastal areas. Specifically, marginal and relatively poor communities rooted in traditional agrarian/fishing economies and disconnected from the state-led industrial and agri-export sectors, could prosper in the expanding tourism economy through family-run and informal sector businesses. At the same time, policies such as Malaysia's 'New Economic Policy' aimed to ensure that indigenous Malays could secure a foothold in a tourism economy hitherto dominated by Chinese-Malaysian capital (Din, 1992).

International tourism was fully embraced as a strategic export sector by developmental states until the late 1970s–early 1980s, once they had begun to lose their competitive advantage in manufacturing to emergent 'transition' states: Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Initially, the construction of hotels, both state-run and those backed by foreign investment, commenced during the 1970s. These were mainly located in urban areas and historic colonial era resorts (e.g. the Cameron Highlands) rather than on the coast. The construction of luxury hotels consolidated 'class relations of dependency' (Wood, 1979: 282). Notwithstanding the dominance of urban Chinese investors (exemplified in Penang and Melaka), this enabled small-scale, local entrepreneurs elsewhere to gain an early foothold in local lodging businesses.

Globalization, transnational capital and supra-national organizations

The most significant contemporary influences on tourism development patterns in the region are the interconnections between globalization, geopolitics, transnational capital and supra-national development organizations such as the IMF and World Bank (and increasingly, the Chinese-backed New Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). Early on, the World Bank played a key role in introducing liberalization and market-orientated reforms as well as encouraging/funding the tourism sector as exemplified by their pivotal role in Indonesia by awarding major loans for Bali's Nusa Dua integrated resort and the Tourism Master Plan in the 1970s, and loans for Pattaya's infrastructure in the 1960s (Lewis & Lewis, 2009; Chang, 2001).

International tourism fitted well into the neoclassical economics narrative of the World Bank and other institutions as a practicable way for low-income countries to generate economic growth and employment. Development strategies were often guided by the assertions of 'trickle-down' economics, assuming that benefits would accrue to the poorest once international tourism was established. Despite this dominant orthodoxy, an ideology that incidentally, continues to guide the World Bank's 'inclusive growth' model (Hampton *et al*. 2018b), there is increasing evidence that tourism, particularly highly capitalized and foreign-owned resort enclaves, manifests weak economic linkages to the local economy and high economic leakages (Saarinen & Wall-Reinus, 2019; Scheyvens, 2011).

This narrative of tourism as driving growth also suited part of the state in many countries as governments looked to diversify from reliance on primary products. In some countries, powerful authoritarian leaders supported plans for international resort enclaves exemplified by Indonesia's President Suharto attracting World Bank funding to promote Bali as the centrepiece of a modern tourism industry. As noted earlier, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir took a close personal interest in Langkawi's tourism developments to the extent of planning buildings there (*Time Asia*, 1996).

Where an indigenous capitalist class was weak or restrained by politico-bureaucratic power as in Indonesia (Robison, 1997), 'top down' tourism planning from the developmental state, and often associated with authoritarian leaders and their 'cronies', was at the centre of a network of politico-business interests, commonly operating with World Bank encouragement (and crucially, funding for Master Plans and infrastructure). Once the infrastructure was built, TNC hotels and tour operators arrived, benefiting from minimal investment risks. This helped consolidate, then quicken the pace/scale of resort construction. This process of the developmental state interacting with supra-national institutions can be seen in Nusa Dua, Langkawi and Pattaya, and contrasts with the 'bottom up' gradualist trajectory seen elsewhere when entry-barriers were minimal, and locals could easily start family-run businesses and homestays (e.g. Kuta in the 1960s or Batu Ferringhi in the 1970s).

Despite rising GDP per capita in the three countries, a combination of inherited colonial economic structures (excluding Thailand); authoritarian state developmental policies; and integration into an increasingly liberalized global economy (particularly post-AFC and with IMF restructuring) hindered the emergence of more robust, diversified economies. This seems to refute the classic dependency model but also shows the limits of state-led development, particularly where it is closely intertwined with economic and political elites. The tourism industry (or more accurately, group of industries) is highly competitive, and often accelerates resource exploitation in host countries. In addition, tourism typically experiences low productivity and therefore, on its own, appears unable to overturn this scenario but remains a major conduit for speculative real estate investment, luxury development and low levels of local entrepreneurship. This seems to be the trend in recent World Bank and wider academic interest in tourism and 'inclusive growth' (Jeyacheya & Hampton, 2020). Despite the rapid rise of dynamic capitalist classes and improving standards of living, evidence suggests that tourism-led development is not resulting in inclusive growth for host communities and may in fact exacerbate rural-urban and socio-ethnic inequalities at the coast (see Kanbur *et al.*, 2014).

The growth of large-scale luxury coastal resort enclaves also signals a profound shift from the earlier, more gradualist development phase between the 1960s and early 1990s. Where the post-war phase of coastal tourism was typically driven by small-scale domestic entrepreneurs (including Overseas Chinese) alongside a few scattered beach resorts linked to hotel TNCs, the 1990s saw another turning point. Specifically, the massive expansion of global tourism—combined with regional trade liberalization and rising disposable incomes in the region—all stimulated further FDI and intra-regional investment into large-scale, luxury tourism installations previously not seen at the coast. We would argue that this development and replication of sizeable resort enclaves across the region was a major driver of significant change at the littoral and would echo Sidaway (2007: 336) that the (re)production of enclaves 'casts these reworkings and entanglements into sharp analytical relief'.

Further developments include shopping centres, condominiums, golf courses, luxury marinas, spa/wellness resorts and casinos and they have proliferated. This seems to be part of a trend towards building resort enclaves reflecting a 'pan-Asia-Pacific beach resort experience' for wealthy regional tourists (Ford & Lyons, 2006: 266), especially the growing gambling tourism sub-sector (Lee, 2022). Investment in coastal areas provided an important 'spatio-temporal' fix providing a profitable outlet for new sources of regional and global finance in the AFC's aftermath.

Such strategies also suggest a step change in the pace/scale of land annexation to facilitate these tourism-related infrastructures, the construction of which often involves the exploitation of cheap migrant labour with minimal protections (Chok, 2009).

Annexation and land grabs were also illustrated in the USD 3 billion Mandalika coastal resort development in south Lombok where the Indonesian government and the Indonesia Tourism Development Corporation were criticized by the UN Human Rights Council (2021) over evictions and land grabs of indigenous Sasak peoples.

When examining the regional political economy of tourism, care must be taken not to oversimplify the distinctions between local, regional and foreign capital. Not only did many large-scale international tourism enterprises in the region begin as small-scale family concerns (e.g. Shangri-La hotel group), domestic and foreign capital of different compositions are deeply intertwined (Hitchcock, 2000: 205). Moreover, despite considerable FDI channelled into luxury resort enclave development since the 1990s, all three South-East Asian governments appear to remain firmly in control of the pace/scale of development through a combination of direct equity holdings, subsidized investments and strict regulations.

The spatial politics of coastal tourism

Despite the region's democratic reforms and civil society's growing strength (Ford, 2013), the legacy of repressive labour regimes combined with competitive pressures from market liberalization has limited organized labour's ability to enhance its strength relative to capital and the state (Deyo, 1997). Although examples exist of labour protests against luxury hotel chains in Indonesia (Brookes, 2018), horizontal class solidarities are often crosscut by strong ethnic and religious affiliations. Also, since most coastal tourism operates in rural, peripheral areas inhabited by peasant and fisher communities, this further limits the scope for mobilization.

However, given traditionally high poverty levels in many coastal areas, resistance to tourism's destruction of coastal ecologies has been weak although not altogether absent. Indeed, in 1982, Bangkok saw the establishment of the Ecumenical Coalition against Third World Tourism that pioneered regional campaigns against sex tourism and other exploitative tourism forms (Srisang, 1992). There has also been popular protest against the despoliation of coastal habitats as well as against land grabs and the eviction of farming and fishing communities for coastal tourism, golf courses and other infrastructures in Langkawi, Redang island and Sarawak in Malaysia (Ling, 1995). The temporal aspect of spatial change has been mapped in some studies (see Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015 for Gili Trawangan, Lombok, Indonesia, and for historical changes from the 1960s–1980s see Franz, 1985b for Penang, Pattaya and Sanur).

Historically, high levels of rural poverty, particularly in peripheral coastal regions, together with a lack of organized resistance to aggressive state-directed capitalist tourism development amongst agrarian/fishing communities, has resulted in an accelerated development of large-scale tourism infrastructures in a number of formerly peripheral coastal locations; what Fabinyi (2019: 36) dubs the 'spatial squeeze'. These areas have traditionally been populated by minority ethnic groups, who along with little political representation are economically marginal. Previously the gradualist, small-scale nature of much coastal tourism development created a foothold in the tourism economy; however, since the 1997 crisis, the expanded accumulation of capital (associated with wider global trends of liberalization and neoliberal reforms), often combined with weak land tenure, has exacerbated the economically precarious position of traditional agrarian and fishing communities in coastal areas (*The Guardian*, 2018a).

The local community often played a major role in small-scale resorts with high levels of local ownership/participation. However, as resorts increase in scale with higher capitalization (exemplified by larger hotels), this typically attracts external regional, national and transnational investors. This sequence was observed in Gili Trawangan island which, through investment from wealthier parts of Indonesia (Bali, Java) and FDI, progressed from locally owned small resorts primarily for backpackers to boutique hotels and upmarket restaurants (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015). In an early collection on South-East Asian tourism, Hitchcock *et al*. (1992: 24) noted the lack of local participation in tourism planning. More recently Bui and Dolezal (2020) suggest that despite considerable national and local variance in tourism governance and planning, little seems to have changed.

Conclusion

This paper argues that a critical political economy approach can contribute a helpful perspective in analysing socio-political and economic drivers shaping coastal tourism resort development as exemplified through a focussed study on Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Our analysis echoes Young and Markham (2019: 16) that the 'spatial concentration of tourism development tends to produce new class antagonisms that are sharply revealed in particular places'. Despite tourism's contribution to the significant social and economic advancement of these countries, the literature on the political economy of these developmental states has tended to ignore this sector. Nevertheless, socio-economic progress has been accompanied by rising inequalities and the displacement of indigenous and peasant communities in some coastal areas to make way for large-scale resort enclave development (Chheang, 2008). Such tourism-led socio-spatial changes can intensify conflict and lead to increased inequality due to the commodification of scarce coastal land. Arguably, the geographies of the littoral mean that inequality and land grabs are partly derived from coastal land scarcity combined with typically weak land tenure.

Our research agenda differs from most earlier work on resort enclaves that typically emphasizes economic aspects—particularly economic linkages and leakages etc—rather than spatial aspects. The spatial aspects of resort enclaves and their changes over time are little discussed in the extant literature with a resultant need for more longitudinal studies.

Coastal tourism has increased significantly in these three countries since the 1980s, with resort enclaves being the physical embodiment of spatial concentration on the littoral. Although individual resorts demonstrate certain specificities (partly from their particular histories and circumstances), a political economy perspective suggests that certain common drivers (historical and contemporary) that shaped the organization and character of coastal tourism can be identified. The political economy of tourism development in the littoral has also been influenced by their interventionist states and varied relationships with different external actors. The World Bank, in particular, had a key role as a source of funding—and arguably, indebtedness—for the construction of key infrastructure from which tourism TNCs could then benefit.

We have argued that the roles of intertwined corporate and political elites within the developmental state as well as different socio-ethnic groups (notably the Overseas Chinese) in the early post-independence years were significant factors leading to coastal resorts' emergence. The form and spatial organization of coastal resorts in South-East Asia has undergone significant changes since its emergence in the 1960s. It has been transformed from *ad hoc*, predominantly small-scale tourism in budget enclaves involving minimal socio-spatial disruption, to increasingly being driven by highly capitalized resort enclaves for international mass tourism. The more easily penetrable tourism spaces of backpacker and urban enclaves have transformed into 'exclusive spaces and spaces of exclusion' (Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019; Ek & Tesfahuney, 2019).

The 1980s saw a key turning point as governments in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia developed international tourism infrastructures and adopted policies to attract FDI resulting in luxury hotels and large new resort enclaves. This was a marked transformation in the territorial configuration and economic organization of coastal tourism. Tourism at the littoral shifted from a more gradualist type of coastal tourism development towards an expansive phase of tourism capital accumulation resulting in highly capitalized, enclavic mega-resorts.

As the pace/scale of tourism development in coastal areas across the region intensified, widespread land reclamation and large-scale construction projects remain a significant threat to marine ecosystems and what remains of traditional coastal societies and their economies. The expanded development of capital-intensive luxury resort enclaves along the coast threatens to accentuate socio-territorial inequalities, creating fewer opportunities for local business and employment than that which occurred during previous tourism phases. While there have been moves by the Thai government to impose temporary tourism bans in Koh Phi Phi Leh due to surging unregulated tourist arrivals (*TTG Asia*, 2018), little suggests that future growth will be restrained to facilitate 'inclusive' or 'green' tourism (see ASEAN, 2015). Indeed, the Thai government gave permission for two new airports to be developed, one of which is on Phuket island (*South China Morning Post*, 2018), while the powerful Berjaya Group has proposed constructing a new larger airport on Malaysia's Tioman island (*The Edge Markets*, 2022).

Chinese investment is also affecting coastal tourism in the region. Whilst many South-East Asian coastal resorts primarily cater for western and domestic tourists, Chinese tourism increased significantly pre-COVID with particular growth in resorts offering upmarket shopping and/or gambling such as Ha Long Bay, Vietnam or Marina Bay, Singapore. In 2019, Chinese tourists accounted for 30–35 per cent of Thailand and Vietnam's international arrivals and 25 per cent in the Philippines (*Reuters*, 2023b). In Cambodia, the once low-key Sihanoukville beach resort saw sizeable Chinese investment in hotel, resort and especially casino development, displacing small-scale, family-owned tourism lodgings (*The Guardian*, 2018b). However, Sihanoukville experienced a major downturn resulting from the 2019 Cambodian government ban on online and arcade gambling, and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on outbound Chinese tourism (*ThinkChina*, 2022). The resort is now a 'ghost town' as evidenced by over 1100 empty building projects where 'unchecked development turned what was a seaside destination popular with backpackers into a jumble of under-construction casinos, condos, hotels and shopping malls' (*Financial Times*, 2022).

Recently, the Asian Development Bank's support for a post-COVID-19 recovery prioritizes 'restoring demand', but with policy responses that overcome significant pre-COVID tourism challenges, notably, an overreliance on foreign visitors. However, this 'business as usual' approach does not address the precarious and informal nature of most tourism employment, nor spatially concentrated enclavic infrastructure (ADB, 2022: 11). Post-COVID tourism in the region could harness this opportunity to re-imagine tourism and fundamentally reassess its social and environmental impacts, provided that the push for economic recovery is fundamentally inclusive—not just in its planning, but crucially, with effective and more equitable implementation.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to David Harrison, now sadly departed; Chin Ee Ong and Jonathan Rokem Rock for their helpful comments on earlier versions of the paper. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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