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Forum Südostasien / Forum South-East Asia

**Exhibiting the 'Other' Then and Now:
'Human Zoos' in Southern China and Thailand**

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Introduction

From the eighteenth to the early-twentieth century, a form of public exhibition in which the objects of display were 'real people' gained worldwide popularity. These colonial expositions, taking place all around the world, from New York to London, Vienna, Moscow, or Tokyo, were exhibiting 'otherness' by emphasising physical and later politico-economic and socio-cultural differences of the displayed persons who were often 'imported' from overseas colonies. These forms of unequal representation are commonly referred to as 'human zoos' and are "exceptional in combining the functions of exhibition, performance, education and domination" (Blanchard, Bancel, Boetsch, Derdo, & Lemaire, 2008, p. 1). Even though the era of colonial human zoos ended in the 1940s, one can still observe similar developments and power relations in the context of modern 'ethnic tourism' (Cohen, 2001; Picard & Wood 1997; Trupp & Trupp, 2009). In South-East Asia and China, several 'ethnic villages' and 'ethnic theme parks' exist that put on show exotic appearing ethnic minorities to paying domestic and international tourists. While some observers deplore these tourist attractions as

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modern human zoos, others argue that they may help preserving a rare culture and provide a source of income for the displayed ethnic groups (Harding, 2008; Forsyth, 1992). This article gives a short overview of the development of these questionable attractions that were transformed from cabinets of curiosities to colonial exhibitions and ethnic theme parks/villages, and discusses present examples from Thailand and Southern China.²

Human Zoos: From the 'Monstrous' to the 'Exotic Other'

In an attempt to define the concept of colonial human zoos, Blanchard (2008) argues:

to place a man [sic], with the intention that he should be seen, in a specific reconstructed space, not because of what he 'does' (an artisan, for example), but because of what he 'is' (seen through the prism of a real or imagined difference). (p. 23)

Human zoos charge admission fees and exhibit humans (not animals) within clear defined boundaries (fences, entrance gates, barriers) that construct a physical and social separation between 'them' and 'us'. In this context the conjoined Siamese twins Chang and Eng were among the first public objects of exhibition in the development of human zoos. In 1824 they were 'discovered' by a Scottish merchant in Samut Songhkram Province in the then Kingdom of Siam (since 1941 Kingdom of Thailand) and were later brought to the United States and Europe where they were exhibited and marketed as a curiosity by the American businessman and entertainer PT Barnum.³ Displays of 'exceptions' or 'mistakes' of nature are intended to elicit a foolish sense of enjoyment in the viewer, through relatively unfamiliar traits of physical incongruence of the represented (Cohen, 1993, p. 45). Such 'freak shows' or 'cabinets of curiosities' highlighted physical 'abnormality' or 'monstrous' appearance and the displayed persons served as objects of entertainment and pseudo-scientific investigation (cf. Boetsch & Blanchard, 2008). Indeed, the tour of the Siamese twins was sponsored by Professor John Warren of Harvard Medical School (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 41). Barnum's concept was to stage his 'monsters' in an entertainment area,

2 Politically China is part of East Asia, geographically and ethno-linguistically, however, Southern China can be referred to South-East Asia (cf. Lukas, 1996, p. 16)

3 Chang and Eng managed to terminate their contract with their promoters and started to market themselves. Both of them married, had several children, and proved that conjoined twins and others with physical disabilities can lead 'normal' lives, have jobs, spouses, and families (McHugh, Kiely, & Spitz, 2006, p. 899).

while simultaneously offering a program of 'scientific' lectures, magical tricks, and other performances (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 5).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the status of the exhibited had changed from monstrous to exotic. The display of 'living ethnological exhibits' in the context of world fairs and other exhibitions had the purpose of demonstrating the power of the West over its colonies and dominated regions and the "achievements of the colonial 'civilizing mission'" (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 17). The argument that empires brought technological and socio-economic advancements to their colonies should also be reflected in the exhibition of 'tamed' or 'noble savages'. Many expositions of that time put emphasis on the aesthetic or eroticised bodies on display, on the nature of cultural artefacts or the physical skills of the persons on show. For Saloni Mathur (2000), the phenomenon of 'living ethnological exhibits' represent "perhaps the most objectionable genre in the history of anthropology's signifying practices" (p. 492). Since the late nineteenth century, however, contracts between organisers and performers became more common, but economic benefits were still shared unequally, disadvantaging the performers (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 14). In Europe, Carl Hagenbeck (1844-1913) launched his successful 'peoples shows' (*Völkerschauen*) of Lapps (Sami), Nubians, Maasai, Samoans, and other groups in the 1870s under the title of 'anthropozoological exhibitions' (Thode-Arora, 2008), and also in North America and Japan, human zoos became a popular feature of an infotainment industry. This emerging taste for remote places, exoticism, and eroticism, and the representation of 'otherness' was (and still is) linked to the popularisation of travelogues and explorer's reports from imperial lands (Hall & Tucker, 2004, p. 9; Obrecht, 2009). The success story of such exhibitions at that time is also reflected in (1) the impressive sale of postcards of the exhibited people at the shows, (2) the large number of articles in national and local newspapers about such events, and (3) the constantly high number of visitors attending the venues (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 12). This boom lasted until the 1930s when the appearance of human zoos, especially in the context of world fairs, started to decline. Reasons for this decreasing interest in such shows and exhibitions include the shrinking power of colonial empires, a more critical public awareness, and the emergence of a new medium of entertainment: television. However, aspects of this phenomenon have continued to exist until the twenty-first century. Contemporary forms of representing the 'living other' can be found in documentaries, live perform-

ances, and especially in the field of the tourism industry. Throughout South-East Asia, we can find ethnic villages and ethnic theme parks that continue the tradition of human zoos and world fairs where the main objects on display (and of interest) are real people (cf. Bruner, 2004).

Exhibiting 'Living Otherness' Today

Similar to their predecessors, modern forms of human zoos charge admission fees, have entrance gates, clear defined boundaries, and exhibit 'living otherness'. Visitors are both domestic and international tourists. Ethnic theme parks or villages can be seen as part of the phenomenon of ethnic tourism, which is defined as a type of travel aimed at visiting 'alien' and 'aboriginal' cultures that posits the local inhabitants and their cultural practices as the main objects of interest. Tourists visit these attractions in order to consume seemingly exotic traditions in form of an entertaining experience. Whereas 'classical' ethnic tourism leads to rather remote areas such as forests, mountains, islands, or deserts, these tourism attractions (ethnic villages, theme parks) are mainly situated in or close to major urban areas.

While exhibitions in the Western colonial context often imported people from the colonies for their shows, nations with modern theme parks or ethnic villages recruit and employ their own citizens (Bruner, 2004, p. 212). In the context of South-East Asia, the attractions are mostly minority groups who "do not fully belong, culturally, socially, or politically to the majority (national) population of the state within whose boundaries they live" (Cohen, 2001, pp. 27-28). In the case of the 'Long-Neck-Kayan' villages in Thailand, some exhibited villagers do not even have Thai citizenship. These tourist sites (like the former colonial exhibitions) have leisure-recreational and political functions. According to Bruner (2004) who studied modern ethnic theme parks in Indonesia, China, and Kenya, these attractions are created, owned, and operated by the national government and are thus seen as vehicles for nation-building (p. 212). They foster the incorporation of different ethnicities into one mainstream-dominated but also internally diverse majority population (cf. Hitchcock & Stanley, 2010, p. 74).

Ethnic Theme Parks in Southern China

This pattern especially holds true for China where several minority parks have been constructed since the post-Mao period. China officially recognises 56 nationalities (*minzu*⁴) (including the Han majority population⁵) and claims that the central government is granting minorities a certain degree of autonomy (McCaskill, Leepreecha, & Shaoying, 2008). This autonomy varies from region to region: ethnic groups in the Southwest (Yunnan) have attained more freedom to act than the tightly controlled regions in Xinjiang, Tibet, or Inner Mongolia (Yang, Wall, & Smith, 2006, p. 753). In the context of ethnic theme parks, however, China represents stereotyped images of one



The entrance poster next to Shenzhen's ethnic theme park symbolises one big happy (multi-)national family. Note that 9 out of 12 represented persons are female.

4 According to Oakes (1997) *Minzu* may be translated as either 'nationality' or 'ethnic group' but has no equivalent in English (p. 67).

5 The Han constitute 92 percent of the population (Bruner, 2004, p. 213)

smiling and happy (multi-)national family. It is paradox, according to Bruner (2004), that these ethnic theme parks “display difference yet promote unity” (p. 212). It is also reported that some minority culture performers in the theme parks are actually Han: “Thus the Chinese Han tourists are, in effect, consuming themselves and, at the same time, their own romanticized image of minority peoples” (Bruner, 2004, p. 214). Another aspect that shows similarities between colonial and present representations is the image of the ‘feminised exotic other’. Many of the ethnic houses feature attractive minority women symbolising the natural, the traditional, and the erotically titillating (Schein, 2000, p. 127).

The theme park *China Folk Culture Villages*⁶ is situated within the Special Economic Zone in Shenzhen and contains an area of 22 hectares, hosting 24 villages and 22 minority nationalities. Visitors purchasing a ticket for 120 Yuan⁷ can enjoy different village shows including such diverse groups as the Tibetan, Uygur, Miao, or Dong. Symbolically, the park officially opened on 1 October 1991 – China’s National Day (Oakes, 1997, p. 42). According to the park’s tourism brochure, 50 million visitors from all over the world including “national leaders, officials, foreigners, VIPs and big names” have visited the park. The vast majority of the visitors come from mainland and urban China “in need of the ‘calming certainty’ of folk tradition” (Oakes, 1997, p. 42).

Ethnic Villages in Thailand

In twenty-first century Thailand, ethnic villages are exhibiting Kayan⁸ refugees from Myanmar. Due to the brass rings Kayan females wear around their neck, they have become a major tourist attraction for paying domestic and international visitors. In his autobiographic writing *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey*, the Burmese author Pascal Khoo Thwe from the minority of Kayan people recalls when in 1936 a white man invited two of the grandmothers and some of their friends who wore neck-rings to come to England. “They were to be taken around Europe by a circus called Bertram Mills and exhibited as freaks” (Khoo Thwe, 2002, p. 28). This

6 Adjacent to the *Folk Culture Villages* lays *Splendid China*, another theme park that comprises over 30 hectares of miniaturised national landmarks (cf. Oakes, 1997, p. 41).

7 During the time of writing 120 Yuan is equivalent to 13 Euros.

8 The term *Kayan* is an endonym, the name the ethnic group uses for self-description. The lowland Burmese call them *Padaung* and the Thai *Kariang Koo Yau* (Long-Neck Karen), a term that is also popular in the context of tourism promotion.

continuing practice in Thailand prompts some observers to criticise these ethnic villages as human zoos ("Critics decry", 1998; Harding, 2008).

In order to escape from Myanmar's military dictatorship, the Kayan refugees crossed the border to Thailand in the 1980s, a time when Thailand's Mae Hong Son (MHS) province opened its doors to tourism (Ismail, 2008, p. 4).⁹ The exotic appearance of Kayan women was at that time rather unknown and so the Kayan became the symbol of ethnic tourism in MHS, heavily promoted by external actors such as the provincial tourism administration and private agencies. One of the most popular Kayan villages, Huay Pu Keng,¹⁰ is inhabited by 122 Kayan people and receives over 32,000 tourists per year (Lacher & Nepal, 2010, p. 85). Grundy-Warr (2004) argues



'Long-neck Karen' village in Sattahip, close to the beach- and sex-tourism centre of Pattaya, Thailand

9 For a general background on the interplay of politics and tourism in Myanmar, see Henderson (2003).

10 Huay Pu Keng village was founded in the 1990s as a way to make money for the Thai residents living in the area and the Myanmar-based KNPP (Karenni National Progressive Party) which seeks their own political independence from the central government of Myanmar (Lacher & Nepal, 2010, p. 85).

that the touristic villages of the 'Long-Neck-Kayan' are "deliberately located at some distance from the main refugee camp populations, who mostly remain hidden from the tourist gaze" (p. 250). While minorities in the refugee camps are not allowed to leave the camp, 'Long-neck-Kayan' are permitted to move within their district or within MHS province, depending on their identity card status (Ismail, 2008, pp. 55-57). Most of them, however, do not obtain Thai citizenship and are therefore not allowed to leave MHS province or to accept other formal jobs. This situation reveals the government's contradictory policy on citizenship and tourism. In spite of the fact that the 'Long-Neck-Kayan' are recent illegal immigrants in Thailand, the government ignores their status and takes advantage of them by actively promoting them for tourism purposes (Evrard & Leepreecha, 2009, p. 250). While most of the Kayan engaged in tourism live in MHS as well as in staged ethnic villages in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai province, some Kayan villagers were recently moved to Sattahip, close to the famous beach- and sex-tourism hotspot Pattaya (cf. Trupp, 2009, p. 103). When private tourism operators sought to relocate the Kayan people from one province to another, local government officials were quick to point to their illegal status and threatened them with prison or deportation (Leepreecha, 2008, p. 232).

Compared to their situation in Myanmar, where they fear the violence of the Myanmar military and other paramilitary units, the Kayan people might agree that life in Thailand is better, but this often just means that "their existence is more peaceful and not that they are necessarily materially better off" (Ismail, 2008, p. 57). The main sources of income for villagers are the selling of souvenirs and the entrance fees. Concerning admission charges, the Kayan in Thailand's ethnic villages are economically dependent on international tourists, as Thai tourists (in MHS province) do not need to pay entrance fees. Admission fees, however, have to be shared with Thai residents as the Kayan with their insecure political status are also dependent on the benevolence of the mainstream society. "If the Kayan were not in an uncertain political position they would have been able to keep even more of the entrance fees" (Lacher & Nepal, 2010, p. 92). In the years 2006-2008 a severe conflict between some Kayan women and the Thai authorities emerged as New Zealand offered them asylum, but the Thai authorities did not let the women leave. An MHS deputy district officer argued that "the Kayans [*sic*] are in fact registered as a Thai hill tribe and so do not have the right to seek asylum" (Ismail, 2008, p. 58). The UNHCR criticised the

'Long-Neck-Kayan' villages as human zoos and called for a tourism boycott (Harding, 2008). The accusation was that the women were not allowed to leave Thailand because of the central role they played in tourism. After months of struggling, the Kayan women (who even took off their brass rings as a form of protest) were finally granted permission to leave for New Zealand in August 2008 (Zember, 2008).

Kayan ethnic tourism has certainly played an important role in preserving the 'long-neck' tradition and in providing a basic income for the refugees (Ismail, 2008, p. 54). Despite the fact that only those women who wear the rings receive an income, several women decided not to wear them anymore as they prefer to dress in a 'modern' or Western style. Other Kayan women refused wearing the rings because they are upset about being portrayed as exhibits in a human zoo. Economic needs, however, often lead Kayan women to put their neck rings back on again (Ismail, 2008, p. 59). The influx of tourism may keep the custom alive, yet economic dependency and political concerns remain unsolved.

Conclusion

Even though the colonial forms of display, where people were exhibited in cages or frankly advertised as 'freaks', have disappeared, the staging and the external representation of the 'other' have continued. Also, certain features of the former human zoo, such as entrance fees, clearly defined boundaries, and commercial exploitation, for example through postcards or tourism brochures, have persisted. While in Southern China ethnic theme parks are mainly managed and represented by government agencies, Thailand's ethnic villages are in the hands of private business people and the provincial tourism administrations. In both of the cases examined above, economic and political inequalities between the exhibited persons and external agents of the tourism industry prevail, often leading to the accusation of internal colonialism (Bruner, 2004, p. 216). Blanchard et al. (2008), referring to colonial exhibitions, note that it is difficult from today's perspective to uncover the opinions, interests, and motivations of the groups involved, be they the visitors, promoters, or the persons on display. As this article has shown, the phenomenon of consuming the 'other' in exchange for money is still a relevant one and therefore it is necessary to further study these contemporary forms of representation including underlying power relations between the relevant actors.

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