Disneyfying atrocities – cultures and politics of remembering the Thai-Burma Death Railway: An analysis of Thai dark tourism

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Abstract

The main aim of the present research paper is to investigate this rather new phenomenon of 'commodifying the dark' and to address the question how, why, and with which consequences certain dark places have become touristic commodities. Since the turn from the 20th to the 21st century tourism research focuses on a rather 'new' touristic phenomenon: 'dark' or 'thana tourism', which describes touristic sites that are associated with death, disaster, atrocity and other forms of tragedies. These can be battlefields, prisons, torture camps, sites of genocides, or places of natural or man-made disasters. The Kingdom of Thailand is a very special case as far as dark tourism activities are concerned. Places of war crimes committed during World War Two on Thai soil, such as the Thai-Burmese Death Railway across the river Khwae in Kanchanaburi Province, got 'touristified' since the end of the war and are increasingly commodified and associated with 'adventure, entertainment and staged horror' by the international as well as the Thai tourist industry. The Thai-Burmese 'Death Railway' in Kanchanaburi Province was selected as site for the present study since the various memorials and museums relating to it are textbook examples for the commercialization and 'touristification' of wartime atrocities and crimes committed by soldiers of the Imperial Army of Japan, supported or at least tolerated by the then Thai and Burmese governments. However, the present study focuses solely on Thailand. The example of the Thai-Burma Death Railway fits into certain politics and cultures of memory, with which different visitor groups deal and react to in different ways – probably not always as intended or claimed, since the memorial sites in and around the city of Kanchanaburi target very diverse audiences.

Keywords: Dark tourism, thana tourism, World War Two, commodification, politics of memory, cultures of remembrance

1. Introduction to the topic and current state of research

Since the onset of contemporary mass tourism in the second half of the 20th century, tourism research has developed as a new field of interest within the social sciences and the humanities. There is a growing number of studies dealing with the cultural, social, environmental and/or economic advantages and disadvantages of tourism for the host societies in the Global North as well as in the Global South (Cohen 2014; MacCannel 1973; Maoz, 2006; Urry 1990; Urry & Larsen 2011). Currently – meaning since the turn from the 20th to the 21st century – tourism research focuses on a rather 'new' touristic phenomenon: 'dark' or 'thana tourism' (Collins-Kreiner 2015; Kostanje 2017; Lennon & Foley 2000; Light 2017; Martini & Buda 2018). The terms dark tourism or thana tourism describe touristic sites that are associated with death, disaster, atrocity and other forms of tragedies: these can be battle fields, prisons, torture camps, sites of genocides, or places of natural or man-made disasters. Although the phenomenon itself is already much older than the research conducted on it, scholars did not deal with what was later called 'dark tourism' until recently. The term 'dark tourism' was introduced by John Lennon and Malcolm Foley in their book 'Dark Tourism', published in 2000. In using this label Lennon and Foley "[…] intend[ed] to signify a fundamental shift in which death, disaster and atrocity are being handled by those who offer associated tourism 'products'" (2000, 3). Within the last years a growing body of research was conducted on topics related to the umbrella term of 'dark tourism' and was carried into the scientific and (pop-)cultural mainstream (Light 2017, 276).

One part of the scientific community working on dark tourism focuses on purely theoretical questions and issues of definition, such as: What is 'dark tourism'? What can be seen as a part of 'dark tourism' studies? etc. (Collins-Kreiner 2015; Lennon & Foley 2000; Light 2017). Other studies are more interested in the 'psychological aspects' and how dark touristic sites have become more and more integrated into the field of heritage tourism and into 'touristic mainstream research' (González Vázquez 2018; Korstanje 2017; Martini & Buda 2018).

However, questions regarding the role of these sites in local memorial cultures and national politics of memories are ignored or cut out by the vast majority of researchers, with just a few recent exceptions (Houghton 2019; Lennon 2018).

Currently, there are two main focuses in dark tourism research: battlefield tourism, mostly regarding the First and Second World War and the war crimes connected to them, and 'disaster tourism'-sites of natural disasters as well as anthropogenic disasters such as the explosion of the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear power plants in 1986 and 2011 (Migoń & Pijet-Migoń 2018). Regionally speaking there is research related to dark tourism for almost every continent and world region (Cohen 2018).

As far as Southeast Asia is concerned, firstly, there are several studies on the touristic exploitation of the regions of Southeast Asia that were hit particularly hard by the December 2004 tsunami, such as some of the coastal areas of Indonesia and along the Andaman coastline. Secondly, there is also a major scientific interest in the 'touristification' of the two Indochinese wars in Vietnam and Lao PDR, or of the Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia.

But, also countries like the Kingdom of Thailand 'touristify' places of war crimes committed during World War Two on Thai soil, such as the Thai-Burmese Death Railway across the river Khwae in Kanchanaburi Province, and a similar touristification is happening with the December 2004 tsunami disaster sites in the south of the country. However, when travelling to countries like Thailand, especially tourists from so called 'Western' countries – from the USA, Australia or Western Europe – tend to forget the 'dark' parts of the visited country's histories. Unlike in Vietnam or Cambodia these 'dark spots' are not part of the tourist gaze assigned to this country (Cohen 2018). E. g., in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia the presentations of 'dark sites' have an educational and/ or ideological background: they tell the story of the 'heroic' fight of the Vietnamese and Lao people for independence and intend to help legitimizing the ruling regimes; in the case of Cambodia, the 'dark tourism' industry is the country's attempt to deal with its traumatic history during the Khmer Rouge rule, with the aim to inform their own

people as well as foreign visitors about the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge rule, whereby the intention is certainly also to rebuild the Cambodian economy.

Thailand, however, is a very special case as far as dark tourism activities are concerned. Thai 'dark' or 'thana tourism' does not show any attempts to tell a however defined 'heroic' national stories of the past or try to be educational in any way. 'Dark sites' such as the Khwae River Bridge or the tsunami memorials along the Andaman coast are only partly intended to be educational, but instead increasingly commodified and associated with 'adventure, entertainment and staged horror' by the international as well as the Thai tourist industry. Thus, the main aim of the present paper is to investigate this rather new phenomenon of 'commodifying the dark' and to address the question how, why, and with which consequences certain dark places have become touristic commodities.

For several decades, Thailand has been one of the main long-standing destinations of so-called 'Third World tourism' and still shows enormous potential for growth. Thai tourism is based on a highly dispersed, diverse range of choices, highly attractive to Westerners but also domestic tourists. While in such cases as Vietnam or Cambodia the 'dark' spots are in some way part of the touristic standard program, Thailand's 'dark tourism' spots seem to be still quite little known.

For the present study the Thai-Burmese 'Death Railway' in Kanchanaburi Province was selected since the various memorials and museums relating to it are textbook examples for the commercialization and 'touristification' of wartime atrocities and crimes committed by soldiers of the Imperial Army of Japan, supported or at least tolerated by the then Thai and Burmese governments. The example of the Thai-Burmese Death Railway thus perfectly fits into certain politics and cultures of memory, with which different visitor groups deal and react to in different ways – probably not always as intended or claimed, since the memorial sites in and around the city of Kanchanaburi target very diverse audiences (Braithwaite & Leiper 2010, 315).

2. Theoretical considerations and methodological aspects

According to most tourism researchers ‘dark’ or ‘thana tourism’ as well as all its sub-categories, including natural disaster tourism, have to be seen as part of heritage tourism (Collins-Kreiner 2015; Dunkley, Morgan & Westwood 2011; Lennon & Foley 2000; Light 2017). In this context the vast majority of the theoretical approaches up to now has focused on the pilgrimage character of ‘dark’ or ‘thana tourism’. Especially in regard to Southeast Asia, Erik Cohen pointed out that as far as internal (Asian) tourism is concerned, ‘dark sites’ in Southeast Asia almost always turn into modern pilgrimage sites in order to pay respect to the ancestors and to calm their ‘restless spirits’ *–pis* – of those who were killed (2018, 3).

An important theoretical concept used in the present study is John Urry’s idea of the ‘tourist gaze’ (1990) and its various adaptions throughout the last 20 to 30 years (Larsen & Urry 2011; Maoz 2006). The central idea of the ‘gaze’ is that travelers and tourists (re-)produce ‘touristified’ images of regions and pass them on from one generation to the next – often from a (pre-)colonial past to the present (Bergmeister 2018, 15; Husa 2018, 24; Urry & Larsen 2011, 14).

The advent of modern mass tourism not only changed the sociology of travel through its “democratisation”, but also the way travellers dealt with the objects, artefacts, and sites of the destinations they visited. “Tourists present themselves at places of social, historical, and cultural importance” (MacCannell 1973, 593). Typically, tourists are photographed in front of and/or in buildings that are considered “typical” of the regions they visit. In the case of Southeast Asia, for example, these are photographs in or in front of the large temple and palace complexes, such as the old royal palace in Bangkok or the temples of Angkor in Cambodia, but also site of war or other atrocities such as Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, the Cambodian ‘Killing Fields’ or – in case of the present paper – the Thai-Burma ‘Death Railway’.

According to John Urry and Jonas Larsen, this so-called second gaze is the result of a paradigm shift that came about with the advent of modern mass tourism and which the two

authors describe as a "performance turn" (Larsen & Urry 2011, 1112). In this context, it should be emphasised that both practices – *gazing* and *performing* – are closely linked:

> "Gazing is not merely seeing, but involves physical movement through landscapes, cities and sights, aesthetic sensibility, connecting signs and their referents […] and embodied practices capturing places and social relations photographically but also touching, smelling, and hearing objects of the gaze; […]." (Ibid., 1115)

In this form of self-presentation, tourists interact not only with the locals but also the sites they visit (Kolland 2003, 107; Larsen & Urry 2011, 1116). Especially in the context of dark touristic and memorial sites this interaction between visitor(s) and the site were broadly discussed in what is known as the *#yolocaust-debate,* which was started by an American photographer in 2015. Its main purpose was to criticize the way especially young people act at Holocaust memorial sites and what kind of photos they post on social media platforms, using which hashtags when visiting these memorials (retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38675835 14.04.2019).

In order to answer the questions mentioned above, several phases of data collection were conducted throughout February 2020:

- Analyses of disaster representation in travel programs, guidebooks and brochures (preliminary to or after field work).
- Analysis of the commemoration policies used at the River Khwae War Memorial sites: in which ways are death, atrocities, disaster, and other tragedies represented to the visitors (objects, posters, multimedia presentations etc.), by state authorities like the Tourist Authority of Thailand ("official narratives") as well as by the local/international tourist industry.
- Data collection on the number of visitors and their countries of origin by 'on spot research' will help to answer the question which visitor groups primarily 'target' which sites.

- Analysis of the ways in which international and domestic tourists as well as the local population react or interact with the memorials.

Up to now not all of the above mentioned issues could be addressed during fieldwork due to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, fieldwork will be continued in autumn 2022.

As far as the interaction of international and domestic tourists and of the local population with the memorials is concerned it was necessary to conduct interviews with all groups of respondents in the research area of Kanchanaburi province. These interviews were semi-structured as well questionnaire based. Interviews with foreign tourists were mainly conducted at the following site in Kanchanaburi City:

- The Bridge on the River Khwae, the World War Two Museum, and JEATH-Museum (Japan, England, Australia, Thailand, Holland Museum) which are the two oldest museums founded by Buddhist monks on the area of a temple close to the bridge, focusing mainly on the suffering of the prisoners of war during the construction of the bridge, but also on the history of Kanchanaburi during World War Two. Since the bridge very often is the number one site visited by international and domestic tourists, a visit to these two museums and memorial sites is often included, although it seems like that mostly people traveling in groups with tour guides as well as those whose family histories are in some way connected to the Pacific War spend some time in the World War Two Museum and JEATH-Museum. Most tourists – those from within the region and Japan as well as individual travelers and backpackers from Western countries – tend to visit the bridge only for a photo stop in order to prove that they were 'really there'. However, since their foundation in the 1970s experts have tended to criticize World War Two Museum and JEATH-Museum for the poor quality of their exhibitions and the information provided, but also for excluding the vast majority of Burmese, Malay or

Javanese laborers, who died during the construction of the railway and the bridge (Braithwaite & Leiper 2010, 319).

- Right after the Japanese defeat in 1945 representatives of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission were sent to Burma and Thailand to collect the mortal remains of the victims of the bridge on the Khwae and to bury them in memorial cemeteries, Chung Kai Cemetery and Kanchanaburi War Cemetery in Kanchanaburi city, and a third one in Thanbyuzayat on the Burmese side of the border. For the present study I will focus on the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery due to its comparable proximity to the main train station and other important memorial sites and museums (Braithwaite & Leiper 2010, 315).
- Opposite the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery the Death Railway Museum is located. It is a privately owned institution which was opened in 2003; besides the museum there is also a research institute in the same building, the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre. In contrast to the World War Two Museum and JEATH-Museum this museum's aim is to present the history of the so-called Death Railway and the bridge in the context of Japan's colonial policy during the first half of the 20th century but especially during World War Two. Although the museum informs the visitors mainly on the prisoners of war, also information on the Asian laborers is displayed (Ibid., 319).

***Figure 1*:** Area of inquiry in Kanchanaburi (own depiction)

Forty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted at all sites (see Figure 1) mentioned above in English and partly also in Japanese, given the history of what is called the Thai-Burma Death Railway. Due to its almost iconic status in popular culture the bridge – or better said its replica – and its surrounding areas on both sides of the river were the main sites where the vast majority of interviews were conducted. A smaller number of interviews was conducted at the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery and the Death Railway Museum.

These sites were chosen as areas of inquiry due to the different kinds of audiences they attract: while especially the bridge and to some degree also the World War Two Museum and JEATH-Museum are mass touristic hotspots where tourists from all over the world go to have their photos taken, the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery and the Death Railway Museum can be considered as quite the opposite; the latter two seem to be visited first and foremost by people whose family histories are in some way connected to the railway, to the war in the Asia-Pacific, or who visit from those countries the prisoners of war mostly came from – meaning from Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Australia (Braithwaite & Leiper 2010, 314; Korff 2010, 272; Osborne 2002, 145; Reiterer 2003, 26; Wessel 2003, 60).

3. Research goals and central research questions

Regarding Thailand's history, the country is quite an unusual case in terms of its 'dark tourism' industry: Unlike other countries in the region such as Vietnam or Laos, Thailand was never colonized by any Western country and therefore also never fought wars of independence that could be part of a story of state making or a source of national pride (Korff 2010, 65; Osborne 2002, 159). The only time when Thailand could have been considered to be a colony were the years of the Japanese occupation during World War Two. And during these years of colonization most of the Thai public were more willing collaborators of the Japanese than passionate fighters for the country's independence (Korff 2010, 65; Osborne 2002, 45) – a role that is often neglected in the official narrative.

Keeping the two key aspects mentioned above in mind, the following research questions can be deduced for the present study on dark tourism in Thailand:

- How did the sites mentioned above become tourism sites or 'touristified commodities' in the first place?
- Which governmental or non-governmental institutions initiated the commodification and 'touristification' of the Thai-Burmese Death Railway?
- Who is/ are the main audience group(s) of interest?

4. Thailand under Japanese Occupation during World War Two and the Construction of the Thai-Burma Railway

The interwar period and the Japanese occupation during World War Two meant major changes for Southeast Asia (Korff 2010, 272; Osborne 2002, 145; Reiterer 2003, 26; Wessel 2003, 60). Throughout the late 19th century up to the 1920s and 1930s nationalist, anticolonial movements with more or less strong political influence started to emerge all over the European and US colonies in the region. Also, Thailand witnessed the rise of a strong right-wing, (ultra-)nationalist movement that was fueled by anti-colonialism, despite the fact that Thailand was never under (direct) colonial rule by any European power. The Kingdom managed to remain independent throughout the 1930s and 40s until the defeat of the Imperial Army of Japan on 2 September 1945. In contrast to China and the Korean Peninsula, the Japanese advance in Southeast Asia was welcomed by the local populations for various reasons:

- It showed that the allegedly superior Europeans could be defeated by an Asian army;
- furthermore white colonial officials were suddenly treated on the same level as the Chinese and Indian coolies;
- the Japanese promised to promote economic growth throughout the region by integrating it into what was called the *Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere*, an economic and political pseudo-union of the territories in the Asia-Pacific region under Japanese rule from 1941 to 1945 (Korff 2010, 272; Osborne 2002, 145; Reiterer 2003, 26; Wessel 2003, 60; retrieved from https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095905411 20.08.2020).

The enthusiasm of nationalists and anti-colonialists was rather short lasting, when it turned out that the Japanese military officials treated the local populations the same way as the Western powers did, e.g. by recruiting civilians in the occupied countries for forced labor together with prisoners of war. Local responses to the Japanese occupation ranged from collaboration with the (new) colonial power to more or less openly active resistance. In case of

Thailand the kingdom responded in both ways: on the one hand, the back then ruling military government started to cooperate with the Empire of Japan in 1941 by allowing the Japanese Army to station troops in Thailand; after the Japanese invasion of French Indochina Thailand signed a peace contract with Japan without becoming an official colony. On the other hand, Thai diplomats and politicians supported the *Seri Thai*, an anti-Japanese movement that supported organized resistance against Japan, and the Thai government allied with them. When the defeat of Japan became more clear from 1944 on, Thailand aligned its policy to the West (Korff 2010, 272; Korff 2018, 14; Osborne 2002, 154; Wessel 2003, 60).

During the occupation of Thailand between 1941 and 1944, the Japanese committed one of the most horrendous war crimes against the local population and the mainly Western prisoners of war, known as the Thai-Burma Railway or 'Death Railway'. Already in the 19th and early 20th centuries British and American engineers had planned to connect the railroad systems of then formally not colonized Siam (today's Thailand) and of the British colony Burma, which was given up officially during the 1930s. When the Japanese army started to take over the control in various parts of Southeast Asia the fast and secure transport of raw materials between Malaya and Burma as well as of Japanese troops throughout the *Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere* should be ensured. From October 1942 onwards the construction of the railway started, designed, managed and supervised by Japanese engineers and Japanese as well as Korean guards; in total 15.000 people of whom 1.000 died.

Figure 2: Route of the Thai-Burma Railway[1]

In December 1943 the construction of a 415 km long railway link between Ban Pong (Thailand) and Thanbyuzayat (Burma) was finished (see Figure 2) (Beattie 2015, 117; Braithwaite & Leiper 2010, 313; Fisher 1947, 85; Houghton 2014, 223).

The railway was built by Asian laborers and European and Australian prisoners of war – in total 239.711 people were forced to participate in the construction, nearly half of them (97.652) died – see Figures 3 and 4 below.

[1] Retrived from https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/burma-thailand-railway-and-hellfire-pass-1942-1943/events/building-hellfire-pass/map-burma-thailand-railway 29.04.2022).

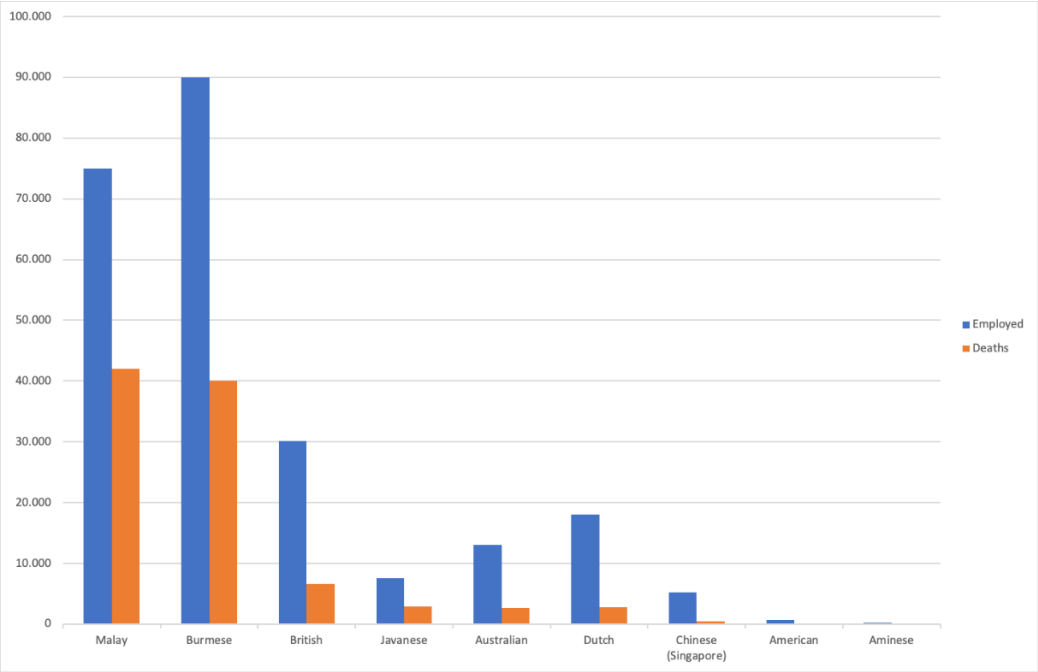

Figure 3: Deaths of the Thai-Burma Railway by Nationalities in absolute Numbers (own depiction cf. Beattie 2015, p. 117)

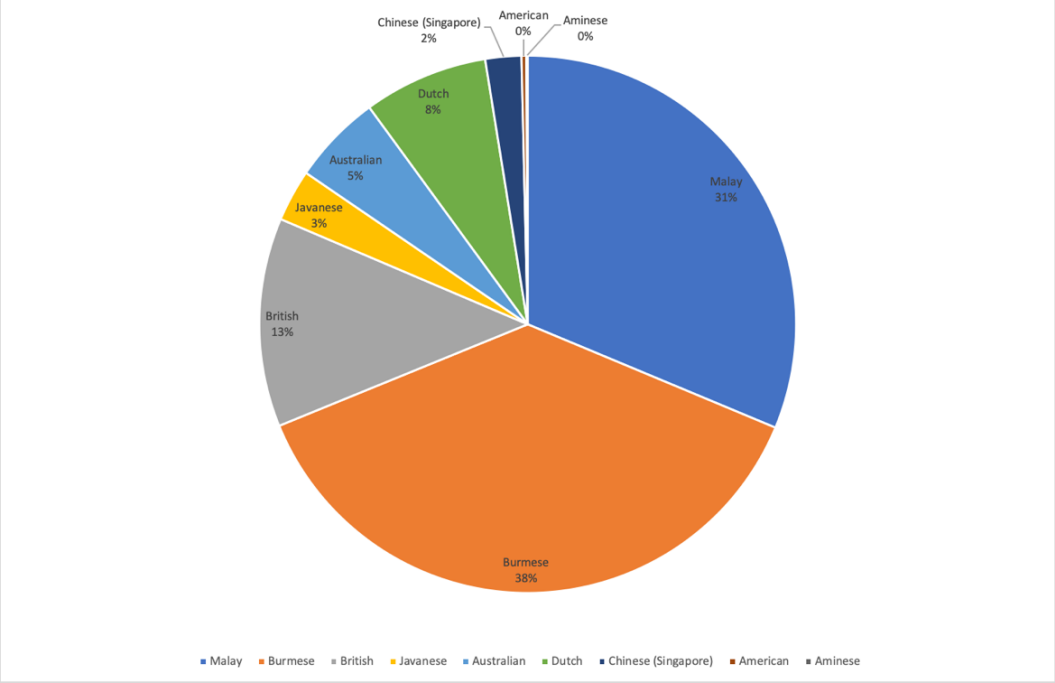

Figure 4: Deaths of the Thai-Burma Railway by Nationalities in Percent (own depiction cf. Ibid., p. 117)

When speaking of the Thai-Burma Railway the bridge on the River Khwae in the central Thai city of Kanchanaburi became a synonymous for the war crimes connected to its construction. The Khwae River itself was originally called Mae Khlong which confluences with the Khwae Noi River a few kilometers outside of the town Kanchanaburi. Due to the popularity of the 1957 Hollywood movie "The Bridge over the River Khwae" the bridge as well as the railway tracks "[…] became irrevocably associated with the Khwae Noi […]" (Houghton 2014, 225) so the Thai government decided to change the name Mae Khlong to *Khwae Yai* during the 1960s. Unlike depicted in the 1957 movie and in the 1952 French novel of the same name 'The Bridge on the River Khwae' also did not exist in this way. According to photographs and reports of witnesses and survivors there were in fact two bridges crossing the river constructed in 1943, a wooden one and a second one made from iron and concrete. Due to their strategic importance both bridges were destroyed and rebuilt several times; in June 1945, right before the Japanese surrender and the end of World War Two in Asia Pacific, both bridges were severely damaged by British bombs. While the remains of the wooden bridge were removed right after the war ended, the iron bridge was rebuilt in 1949 and it is still used as a railway bridge, but also the central tourist attraction in the town of Kanchanaburi (Braithwaite & Leiper 2010, 313; Houghton 2014, 224).

5. The Thai-Burma Railway in the Age of (Mass) Tourism – A 'dark' Disneyland(?)

Based on the information above forty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted in the city of Kanchanaburi in January and February of 2020. The interviewees mostly visited one of the two graveyards managed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, especially the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery due to its location in the west of the city, which is also the first site, coming from the direction to Bangkok. In the following the visitors are mostly brought to the JEATH-Museum and as a last stop, to the iconic bridge (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Stops in Kanchanaburi as offered by most tour providers

(L. Husa, February 5 2020)

There they walk along the train tracks across the bridge for various photo stops before leaving the city either by bus or by train, in case of the latter the train takes the tourists across the bridge. Some tour providers even advertise that the trip to Kanchanaburi also includes "[…] a ride with the famous death railway" (retrieved from https://pro.eva-neos.de/tipi/view/trip/7fe4103b-1ea5-430d-8f39-42a85f5a78b1/my-trip 31.03.2022) as the example of a German tour provider shows (see Figure 6).

Nach einer kleinen Mittagspause geht es nun mit dem Bus weiter nach Kanchanaburi.

Hier warten viele Besichtigungs-Highlights darauf, entdeckt zu werden. Zuerst besuchen Sie die Don-Rak Kriegsgräber Gedenkstätte. Auf diesem Friedhof ruhen die Überreste von fast 7.000 Kriegsgefangenen, die Ihre Leben beim Bau der legendären Strecke der Todeseisenbahn im Zweiten Weltkrieg verloren haben.

Danach unternehmen Sie einen kleinen Spaziergang über die weltbekannte Brücke am Kwai gefolgt von einer Fahrt mit der Todeseisenbahn. Genießen Sie die interessante Fahrt durch eine zerklüftete Felsenlandschaft, entlang steiler Abgründe und auf wackeligen Holzviadukten. Die kleine Tour endet an der Tha Kilen Station.

***Figure 6*:** Kanchanaburi tour program of a German tour provider[2]

Other museums like the Death Railway Museum right across the street from the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery are visited by comparably smaller number of tourists who do not travel as members of a group.

As previous research and the information given above have shown the Bridge on the River Khwae is *the* main tourist site in Kanchanaburi (Braithwaite & Leiper 2010, 313; Houghton 2014, 224). One of the most notable things about this site is the lack of information on the bridge itself, its construction context; instead a high degree of commercialization around the bridge can be observed. On the opposite bank of the river there is the "Prisoner of War Camp" with food stalls but also with souvenir shops, where tourists can buy T-Shirts connected to the bridge and its history (see Figures 7 and 8).

[2] "After a short lunch break we continue by bus to Kanchanaburi. Many sightseeing highlights are waiting to be discovered here. First, visit the Don-Rak War Graves Memorial. This cemetery contains the remains of almost 7,000 prisoners of war who lost their lives building the legendary route of the Death Railway during World War II. Afterwards, take a short walk across the world famous Bridge over the River Khwae followed by a ride on the Death Railway." (own translation).

Figure 7: "Prisoner of War Camp" at the bridge (L. Husa February, 4 2020)

Figure 8: Souvenirs sold by vendors at the River Khwae bridge (L. Husa, February 2 2020)

The degree of commercialization in the context of the River Khwae bridge seems to be especially offensive to tourists of all ages from Germany, due to different approaches in politics and cultures regarding war crimes:

> "I wanted to come here already when planning the trip to see the bridge. […]. Up to now the bridge was the only thing me and my girlfriend have seen; we still didn't decide whether to visit the museums or not. […]. It is part of [Thailand's] history what happened here in this place. […]. [But] [the] way of how the history is represented is quite a culture shock, especially if your German. But it is the Thais' business how they want to deal with their history and how they want to represent it. […]. What is way more appalling to me is the fact that the bar over there is called *Prisoner of War Camp*, […]." (*Interview 17 with a German tourist at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 3, 2020*)

But also many of the non-German visitors seem to be less worried by the levels of commercialization and more by the amount of people who only seem to come to the bridge in order to take a photo:

> "[…] this place […] is […] a reminder to remember the history as it actually occurred. Without idealizing it and just to remember that war is ugly no matter what nationality or no matter where you are from… it is an awful thing. And it does seem a bit strange that there was so much suffering and now that we are here there is so much photographing… that's a bit surreal… it is weird." (*Interview 18 with a US tourist couple at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 3, 2020*)

> "The main reason to come to Kanchanaburi obviously is the Death Railway as they call it; the Bridge over the River Khwae. We wanted, actually I wanted to see it for myself. I don't know a lot about the history, but I work for the railway in England. Many years ago I also saw the movie from 1957. We

> didn't go to any of the museums yet but we will visit the cemetery after here. I don't know where the museum is. It seems rather strange to me actually that so many people come here to take pictures with the bridge, because I don't know if people actually appreciate the history connected to it. I have taken photos today myself, but… all these selfies that people take… I don't know. I don't really think it commemorates, it doesn't show what happened, the significances. It is a lot of market stalls. I don't like the camp on the other side, I think it is quite disrespectful. The Thais could have done a way better job." (*Interview 33 with a British tourist at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 4, 2020*)

On the other side Western visitors also seem to appreciate that the bridge is maintained as a monument and warning for future generations:

> "This suffering on all sides, hopefully it will help to prevent that anything like that happens again. It is important that this monument is maintained. The war in the East seems to be separated in people's mind from that in the West; it wasn't. It was a world conflict. And I think it is important that the young people, youngsters are shown that war is never a good thing." (*Interview 30 with a British tourist at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 4, 2020*)

> "It is interesting that it became a tourist hot spot, but on the other side it is important to commemorate the history; people need to talk about it. And these guys should do anything they can to get us Westerners to this place. They don't make too much money of it but it is another view on the history of the country. I wouldn't say it is too bad. Because if they would not do this I wouldn't know about it. I have learned something today because they told me. We see the tracks and trains and learn how they were built. And also how

long ago all this is, this is almost 80 years ago. The graveyard is from 1946 or so and see how beautiful it still is." (*Interview 34 with a British tourist at the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, Date of record February 5, 2020*)

"This site is of course very important, especially for Thailand and the Thai people, and I think it is important to keep up the memory. It is a rather striking contrast from what you expect to see; […]." (*Interview 35 with a Finnish tourist at the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, Date of record February 5, 2020*)

However, the selling of other "dark souvenirs" connected to the bridge and the "Death Railway" such as postcards showing the historic iron bridge or the destroyed bridge at the end of the war does not seem to bother most of the visitors (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 9: Postcard stands at a shop close to the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery

(L. Husa, February 5 2020)

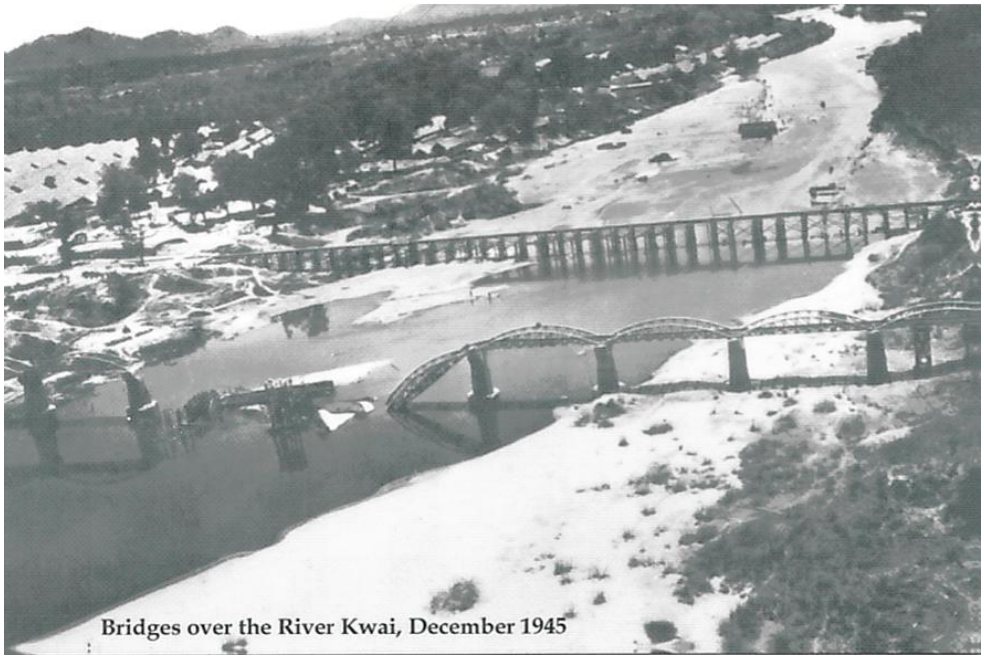

***Figure 10*:** Postcard showing the bridge

(Thailand-Burma Railway Centre Kanchanaburi Thailand)

While both the bridge as well as the JEATH-Museum are visited by a broad international audience, the cemetery and the Death Railway Museum are visited by people who have some kind of connection to the railway due to their family histories.

Since the Museum and the cemetery are close to each other visitors who visit the one will also visit the other. When asked about how satisfied or unsatisfied they are with the representation of the history of the railway, most interviewees seemed to overall agree that the country and the city of Kanchanaburi did a good job in maintaining the sites and keeping the memory of victims alive:

> "The visit to Kanchanaburi is actually very easy explained: for the bridge and Hell Fire Pass and the Death Railway; I've also seen the movie from 1957 of course. But it was also part of my lessons during my school time, so I first heard about it in school and then I saw the movie. As far as the bridge in the Second World War is concerned, I think Thailand does a very good job in keeping the past in memory." (*Interview 32 with an Australian tourist couple at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 4, 2020*)

> "[…] I came to Kanchanaburi because my grandfather is buried in the war cemetery. So we came to visit his grave, he had a part in the Death Railway building, so we wanted to come and see where he was. I also visited the museums around and the Thais are very sensitive in their way of dealing with the history of this place, towards the past. They did it really well. And it is nice for visitors like us to come and to see the sensitivity with which they keep the memory… very grateful." (*Interview 27 with an Australian tourist couple at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 4, 2020*)

Besides some exceptions most of the tourists visiting the bridge already have some knowledge on the bridge and its history; both because of watching the 1957 movie as well as from school, especially in regard to visitors from the Netherlands, United States, Great Britain and Australia. Even though the numbers of victims from Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Myanmar exceed the number of those from the involved Western countries (see Figures 3 and 4), the target audiences of the analyzed museums and the bridge are mainly the latter ones (Braithwaite & Leiper 2010, 313; Houghton 2014, 224).

Nonetheless there are also many domestic tourists from Thailand as well as from other (South-)East Asian countries visiting Kanchanaburi, especially Japanese. During the fieldwork in Kanchanaburi also Thai domestic and Japanese tourists were interviewed:

> "Honestly, we only came here for one night to get a photo with the bridge. Also, we did not know before what happened here, the only thing we know is the beautiful view." (*Interview 8 with a Thai student at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 5, 2020)*

> "Me and my friend are studying here in Kanchanaburi, and we actually only came here to visit the bridge and have some photos. We heard a bit about the history of the war in school but not about the history of the bridge; for that we got our information from a YouTube documentary and we also visited

> "River Khwae Bridge Week" form November 23rd to December 2nd." (*Interview 4 with a Thai student at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 3, 2020)*
>
> "I worked in Thailand for a Japanese company for many years and now I am retired and travelling the country. I heard a bit about World War Two in school but not too much and I also never heard anything about Kanchanaburi, now I start getting more into it." (*Interview 7 with a Japanese retiree at the River Khwae Bridge, Date of record February 4, 2020*)

Quite often tourists are mainly interested in the natural park surrounding the city of Kanchanaburi and its waterfalls. This may also be since in the history curricula of both countries the topic of World War Two and the atrocities committed during this time are simply not taught on an in-depth-level, even though a basic and superficial knowledge of this period is present. Heated discussions on how the interwar and World War Two periods should be taught in schools regularly occur especially in the public discourse in Japan.

6. Conclusion

As the examples above show the city of Kanchanaburi and the historic sites located there seem to be mainly attractive to international "Western" tourists, while domestic and international (South-)East Asian tourists are mostly interested in recreational or nature-related tourism.

The sites connected to the Thai-Burma Death Railway have become some kind of 'Dark Disneyland' as it is called in the present paper. In this context history is commemorated in an 'alternative way' so to speak. Even though there is this large entertainment character the educational character should not be underestimated given that the history of World War Two in Asia-Pacific is often a blind spot in historic education.

As far as further research is concerned there are four points or questions that seem to be of interest:

- What are the main differences of the ‘Western’ point of view on the ways in which the history of the Death Railway is presented in comparison to a (South-)East Asian point of view?
- In addition to the interviews conducted analyses of guidebooks and internet entries on Kanchanaburi but also of guest book entries in museums may provide answers to this question.

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