

Forays into the backstage: volunteer tourism and the pursuit of object authenticity

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer tourism is a form of travel that combines traditional leisure pursuits with opportunities to volunteer in an organized fashion. The popularity of volunteer tourism stems from many factors, but the one motivation that appears in virtually every study is a desire for object authenticity, defined as the authenticity of toured objects, people, and settings. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role played by object authenticity in the motivations and experiences of volunteer tourists in the province of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. Based on interviews with 62 volunteers and 15 directors, managers, and staff members from volunteer tourism organizations based in Chiang Mai, this paper argues that volunteer tourists conceive of object authenticity both as a package of cultural stereotypes focused on authentic people, and as authentic backstage settings where 'real' Thai reside. Aside from demonstrating that the desire for object authenticity is the central motivation for international volunteers in northern Thailand, this study indicates that the pursuit of object authenticity is complicated by language barriers, the potential staging of authenticity on the part of locals, and the need to balance familiarity with alterity in the carefully selected 'voluntourscapes' in which volunteer tourism takes place.

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Introduction

In response to a growing perception among consumers in high-income countries that conventional tourism experiences take place in artificial environments and carry negative repercussions for local communities in the global South, tourists are increasingly searching out alternative forms of travel, including ones that combine traditional leisure pursuits with opportunities to make a positive contribution to host societies. Volunteer tourism represents an important example of this growing demand for more meaningful and beneficial travel experiences. In one of the earliest and most frequently cited definitions of volunteer tourism, Wearing (2001, p. 1) identifies volunteer tourists as those 'who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment'.

The volunteer tourism market features great variety and diversity, and the popularity and ongoing expansion of volunteer tourism opportunities around the world stem from a wide variety of pre-trip motivations among volunteer tourists. However, although the combination of motivations for individual volunteer tourists is multidimensional, complex, and varies according to demographic variables (Coghlan, 2005; Galley & Clifton, 2004), the one motivation that appears, even if only briefly, in virtually every study of volunteer tourism is a desire for authenticity, or associated objectives such as social integration, intense interaction with locals, enhanced cultural appreciation, and intercultural exchange (Everingham, 2015; Rehberg, 2005; Wearing & Grabowski, 2011).

Theoretical approaches to authenticity have evolved over time and as a result, there now exists a great deal of depth, diversity, and at times confusion when it comes to assessing the meaning of, and function served by, authenticity in the touristic imagination (Mkono, 2012; Taylor, 2001). Hoping to overcome this potential confusion, several authors have attempted to clarify discrepant conceptualizations of authenticity. For example, Wang (1999) argues that authenticity in tourist experiences falls into one of two categories. First, object-related authenticity relies on the authenticity of material objects, whether one judges the authenticity of an object according to measurable and immutable criteria (the objectivist approach) or subjective criteria that are socially constructed and reflect the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of tourists (the constructivist approach). Second, activity-related authenticity relates to an existential form of authenticity that 'involves personal or intersubjective feelings activated by the liminal process of tourist activities' (Wang, 1999, p. 351). Whereas the achievement of object authenticity depends on particular attributes of toured objects, existential authenticity depends on whether tourism produces an existential state of being that is unconnected to the authenticity of objects. Despite the view held by some scholars (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006) that object authenticity has outlived its utility as a coherent concept – and that we should therefore focus instead on existential authenticity – object authenticity continues to inform the motivations of tourists and the marketing strategies of tourism intermediaries, and thus retains its analytical value (Belhassen & Caton, 2006; Pearce, 2012).

This paper explores the relationship between object authenticity and volunteer tourism in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai. Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Thailand attracted thousands of international volunteers hoping to alleviate the suffering of those in southern Thailand affected by the disaster. Since then, Thailand has remained on the radar of international volunteer sending organizations, and as a result, Thailand has now become the second most popular volunteer tourism destination in Asia, after India (Tomazos & Butler, 2009). Within Thailand, volunteer tourism programs operate in every part of the country, including Bangkok, but the most popular location is Chiang Mai, which attracts over one-third of all volunteers in Thailand (Keese, 2011, p. 265). Chiang Mai is one of Thailand's leading tourism destinations and is home to many national and global non-governmental organizations that utilize the services of volunteers. As one of the key centers of volunteer tourism activities in the entire Southeast Asian region, Chiang Mai represents a valuable case study for those interested in learning more about the characteristics and consequences of volunteer tourism.

Although object authenticity is not the central theme of previous studies of volunteer tourism in Thailand, it is obvious that authenticity factors significantly in the motivations of volunteer tourists in Thailand. In their comparison of volunteer tourists in Vietnam and

Thailand, Coren and Gray (2012) indicate that a desire to discover a different culture is a key motivation among volunteers in Thailand, while Mostafanezhad (2014a, p. 3) points out that 'most of the volunteer tourists the researcher encountered explicitly talked about how their experience in Thailand was more authentic than the type of experience they might otherwise have had as a tourist as well as a backpacker or traveller'. In a similar vein, Proyrungroj (2014, p. 16) claims that an overwhelming majority of volunteers working at an orphanage in southern Thailand express an interest in the 'notion of gaining an "actual" insight into Thai culture and the ways of life of Thai people'. When summarizing the views of conservation volunteers in southern Thailand, Broad (2003) states that unlike conventional tourists who often remain isolated in an 'environmental bubble', volunteer tourists enjoy significant opportunities for direct interactions with locals, thereby allowing volunteers to experience authentic Thai culture.

The purpose of this paper is to extend existing research on volunteer tourism in Thailand by highlighting the fundamental importance of object authenticity to the motivations and experiences of volunteer tourists. While authenticity is frequently mentioned in studies of volunteer tourism, it is rarely the central framework of the analysis; the desire for authenticity is usually portrayed as merely one of many equally important factors behind the popularity of volunteer tourism. This may be true in particular cases, but it is clear when considering the views and actions of volunteer tourists in Thailand that object authenticity deserves greater attention than it has received thus far. The notion that volunteer tourism represents 'travel with a purpose' (Brown, 2005; Daldeniz & Hampton, 2011) implies that the purpose is humanitarian in nature, but this paper argues that in the case of popular, middle-income countries such as Thailand, authenticity could just as easily be considered the central purpose of participation in volunteer tourism. Further, the desire for authenticity among volunteer tourists in Thailand manifests itself, on the one hand, in a search for confirmation of preexisting cultural stereotypes and, on the other, in a desire for experiences that take place in backstage 'voluntourscapes' that combine certain elements of travel such as novelty, exoticism, and adventure with aspects of everyday life that tourists normally try to escape, such as routine, predictability, and the performance of mundane tasks.

The role of object authenticity in the volunteer tourism experience

As many scholars have noted (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008; Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Lau, 2010; Olsen, 2002), authenticity is a contested and often ambiguous concept, especially when applied to tourism. Nevertheless, whether one defines authenticity in a material sense to connote the originality of objects, or in an existential sense related to the internal feelings and emotions triggered by touristic experiences, it is clear that the demand for volunteer tourism is fuelled by a belief in the value and importance of authenticity. Further, proponents of volunteer tourism (Lyons & Wearing, 2008b; Zahra & McGehee, 2013) argue that the activities undertaken by volunteer tourists lend themselves naturally to the creation of more insightful, respectful, and genuine experiences for volunteers, and in many cases for locals as well. Due to its provision of authentic experiences, and the expectation that it leads to social and cultural benefits for visitors and hosts, volunteer tourism is considered by many to be an emblematic example of alternative tourism (Halpenny & Caissie, 2003; Wearing & Ponting, 2009).

When it comes to object authenticity specifically, several studies (Brown, 2005; Lo & Lee, 2011; Ooi & Laing, 2010; Pan, 2012) indicate that a desire for cultural immersion, integration, or participation is among the most salient motivations cited by volunteer tourists in interviews or surveys. For example, in their examination of international volunteer tourists in China, Chen and Chen (2011, p. 439) state that a 'desire for interaction with new people and cultures' and a 'desire for authentic experiences' are the two items most frequently mentioned by volunteers as reasons for participating in the trip. Similarly, after pointing out that 'engagement' is the key component of volunteer tourism in the opinions of subjects surveyed online, Alexander and Bakir (2011, p. 15) break down the engagement category into several themes related closely to the search for authenticity, including integration ('mixing with other people or ethnic groups'), involvement ('to become connected or associated with'), and immersion ('to engross yourself and get absorbed in').

An important component of the volunteer tourist conceptualization of authenticity is the widespread belief that it can only be found within backstage settings far removed from the scripted, predictable, and commercialized spaces associated with other forms of tourism. In one of the earliest explorations of the role of authenticity in tourism, MacCannell (1973) argues that due to the alienation that is thought to derive from inauthentic modern life, tourists seek out opportunities to catch glimpses of life in the 'back regions' of host societies; these back regions not only possess the truth and intimacy craved by modern tourists, but also enable 'a sharing which allows one to see behind the others' mere performances, to perceive and accept the others for what they really are' (MacCannell, 1973, p. 592).

The conflation of backstage settings with cultural authenticity is a fundamental tenet of volunteer tourism discourse. By requiring that visitors live and work alongside locals, even if for short periods of time, volunteer programs enable tourists to enter physical and conceptual spaces that largely exist independent of the dictates, demands, and tastes of the 'typical tourism platform' (Brown, 2005, p. 488). The seemingly unstaged nature of volunteer tourism settings is, therefore, what allows volunteer tourists to overcome the circumscribed and supposedly superficial nature of social interactions found in typical tourist landscapes (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Ong, Lockstone-Binney, King, & Smith, 2014).

The penetration of staged front regions is a dominant theme in the volunteer tourism literature. In the case of Singaporean volunteer tourists in South Africa, Sin (2009, p. 497) points out that her respondents believe that volunteering in the local community represents a means of travelling that allows them to 'go beyond superficial tour packages' that normally prevent them from seeing how locals truly live. This positioning of volunteer tourism as a pathway to the everyday, lived realities of locals is also echoed by volunteer tourists in Nepal, who are 'attracted to the fact that whereas tourists are confined to the tourist route of hotels, tour guides and the tourist bubble, volunteers get a genuine experience of what it is like to live in and around Kathmandu' (Wickens, 2011, p. 42). Along the same lines, several authors believe that volunteer tourism does not merely allow tourists to observe the unstaged lives of 'real' locals (Brown, 2005), but more importantly facilitates actual volunteer participation in those lives so that volunteer tourists can experience what it feels like to live in, rather than just visit, another society (McIntosh & Zahra, 2008).

Several authors disagree with the popular notion that volunteer tourism yields greater opportunities for authentic interactions and experiences. Rather than allowing volunteers to penetrate the backstage, everyday spaces of destination societies, volunteer tourism

programs are structured in a way that largely prevents anything but superficial encounters with a foreign culture (Mostafanezhad, 2014b; Mustonen, 2006). As a result of the superficiality of interactions between tourists and hosts, preexisting cultural stereotypes held by volunteer tourists towards the locals they encounter are reinforced and thus remain unchallenged (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Zeddies & Millei, 2015). Moreover, the flow of volunteer tourists from North to South – and representations of destination societies as helpless, exotic, and more ‘real’ than wealthy, industrialized countries – perpetuates a static, romantic, and overly simplistic view of the developing world (Snee, 2013; Vrsti & Montsion, 2014).

According to critics of volunteer tourism, a key trope in this static depiction of host societies is the idea that poverty itself is a symbol of cultural authenticity (Cole, 2007). According to Vodopivec and Jaffe (2011, p. 124), the ways in which volunteer tourists construct notions of cultural difference lead naturally to the belief that ‘authentic Others are found only when they are not contaminated by Western ideas and lifestyles: when they are rural, underdeveloped and poor’. The problem with positioning poverty as authentic, not to mention portraying locals as ‘poor but happy’ (Crossley, 2012), is that it absolves volunteer tourists of any responsibility to reflect upon, and attempt to alter, the structural inequalities that lead to this poverty in the first place (Simpson, 2004; Tiessen, 2012). In other words, volunteer tourism promotes an apolitical response to underdevelopment (Butcher & Smith, 2015; Conran, 2011), and this derives partly from the importance and discursive construction of authenticity on the part of volunteer tourists and the organizations that mediate their experiences.

Methods

Although a dozen or so global booking agents advertise volunteering opportunities in northern Thailand, most volunteer tourists in the province of Chiang Mai are handled by local ground operators that not only arrange accommodation, meals, and airport transfers on behalf of volunteers, but also coordinate individual volunteer placements with partner institutions located in Chiang Mai’s eponymous capital city and the surrounding districts of southern Chiang Mai province (Figure 1).

In order to assess the meaning, importance, and role of object authenticity in the motivations and on-the-ground experiences of volunteer tourists, research was conducted over a total period of seven months between 2012 and 2015 with seven of Chiang Mai’s eight volunteer tourism ground operators. In addition to interviewing 62 short-term international volunteers, defined as those who volunteer for a period of eight weeks or less (Lough, McBride, Sherraden, & O’Hara, 2011), the author also interviewed 15 directors, managers, and staff members from volunteer tourism ground operators based in Chiang Mai. These interviews, coupled with participant observation and analysis of online marketing materials and volunteer tourist testimonials, yielded the data upon which this study is based. It should be noted that the author’s position as a researcher was always made clear to respondents, and the author never paid to participate in a volunteer program. This facilitated the collection of data in an environment free of group expectations or pressures, but may also admittedly have compromised the depth of information that comes from being a member of the group being studied.

Volunteer tourists in Chiang Mai perform short-term community service in numerous locations, including hospitals and health clinics, public elementary and secondary

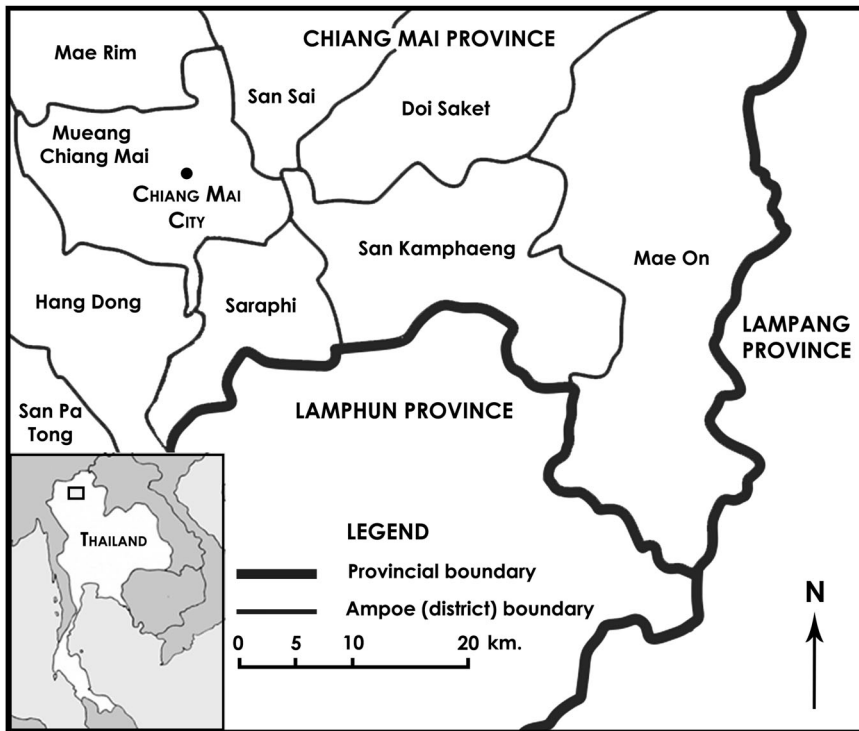


Figure 1. Southern Chiang Mai province, Thailand.

schools, Buddhist temples, wildlife parks, rural conservation projects, and social welfare institutions that offer services to disadvantaged groups such as orphans, disabled children, refugees, and abused women. In order to gain access to research subjects, directors of volunteer tourism organizations were approached and asked whether they would be interested in participating in the research. After receiving approval, the author attended and participated in the orientation programs of several organizations, or visited volunteer placements with ground operator coordinators. Using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method that targets a particular population, subjects were then selected for semi-structured interviews that lasted between 45 min and 3 h. By interviewing volunteers at various stages of their experiences, from the day of their arrival to the final day of their eight-week stay, it was possible to compare how pre-trip motivations related to authenticity shaped or expressed themselves in the ways in which volunteer tourists reflected on their experiences.

Volunteers were interviewed both one-on-one as well as in groups of two. One-on-one interviews facilitated a focused, and at times deep, exchange of ideas between respondent and interviewer, particularly because they offered the volunteers being interviewed the opportunity to reflect on their experiences free of any influence or peer pressure to perform any particular role. At the same time, however, interviewing volunteers in pairs also brought advantages, such as the ability of one subject to spur a thought or reaction from the other, whereby conversations flowed naturally and ideas were bounced around because of the group dynamic of the interview setting (Gibbs, 2012). Further, though the

depth or at least the length of each person's narrative may have been extended in the one-on-one format, interviewing some volunteers in pairs also allowed a greater number of voices to be heard as part of this research.

During interviews, volunteers reflected on a range of topics, and were asked to answer several questions related either directly or indirectly to the theme of authenticity, including the following: What do you hope to get out of the volunteering experience? Has this volunteering experience met your expectations? What is the greatest value of volunteering in another country? What is authentic Thai culture, in your opinion? Has this volunteer experience been authentic for you? What is the most important benefit of travel generally? Why did you decide to volunteer in Thailand specifically? How would you characterize your interactions with Thais? Conversations with directors, managers, and staff members covered similar themes, but focused more on how the expectations and behaviors of volunteers presented opportunities and challenges for organizations hoping to balance the desires of paying customers against the wishes and needs of local partner institutions. Interviews were recorded with the consent of respondents, and then transcribed manually. The names of all respondents were changed for the sake of anonymity. After transcription, Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to code and analyze interview transcripts and field notes according to several themes, one of which was object authenticity.

Volunteering in the 'land of smiles': the search for authentic people

Tourists and scholars tend to evaluate object authenticity according to the perceived features of tangible toured objects such as 'works of art, festivals, rituals, cuisine, dress, housing, and so on' (Wang, 1999, p. 350). However, people themselves can also become toured objects, in which case authenticity rests on whether or not hosts conform to the stereotypical and socially constructed expectations of tourists (Bruner, 1991). Though there exist important exceptions, most volunteer tourists interviewed for this research define authenticity in cultural terms that are narrowly conceived and predictable. In particular, like all types of tourists in Thailand (Johnson, 2007), volunteer tourists possess stereotypes of Thailand that exist prior to any actual experience in Thailand, and thereafter become enhanced by volunteer tourist activities. Further, the discursive separation of 'real' Thais from those that are presumably less authentic forms an important trope in volunteer portrayals of object authenticity.

The suite of cultural stereotypes that informs expectations of cultural authenticity, and by extension the characteristics of 'real' Thais, comprises several themes. First, the slogan 'The Land of Smiles', which is frequently used in tourism marketing to describe Thailand, clearly influences notions of Thai authenticity on the part of volunteer tourists. Thais are routinely described by volunteers as welcoming, open, warm, and kind, especially compared to people from tourist-sending countries in North America, Europe, and Oceania. For example, when asked to comment on what she has enjoyed most about volunteering in Thailand, Brie from the United States stated the following:

I love the fact that there seems to be no anger or hatred here. Back in the States, people are so violent and people can be mean-spirited, and um, you know do things for the wrong reasons, and I get the feeling that with Thai people, it's just not part of their culture, you know. It's not like they're suppressing all this anger and being all nice, they're, they just don't feel it. They

don't have that like we have back in the States. Um, so that's one thing I really like about this country. People just seem kind of really laidback and just kind of go with the flow.

This sentiment is echoed by Sabrina from Germany:

I must say even though people have said to me that Thai people are very friendly, I was really surprised and I was very happy to see that Thai people are as a friendly as everybody says and they're just really open and warm towards foreigners.

Because most volunteers fail to arrive at any significant understanding of the versatile and complex role played by facial expressions such as the smile in Thai interpersonal communication (Knutson, 2004) – not to mention the paramount importance of 'saving face' and maintaining harmonious relations – Thais appear genuinely, innately graceful and welcoming in spirit and disposition. This is not to imply that hospitality and grace are not cultural attributes of Thai society; the point is that volunteer tourists uncritically accept the notion that Thailand is a Land of Smiles, thereby representing the authenticity of 'real' Thais in a manner that often lacks nuance and depth.

Second, just as MacCannell (1976, p. 3) argues that modern tourists search for authenticity 'in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles', there is a discernible feeling among most volunteer tourists that 'real' Thais are rural, traditional, and simple in their aspirations and values. In valuing the authenticity of those Thais who seemingly reject the trappings of modernity, volunteer tourists are unwitting accomplices in the ongoing effort by Thai political and economic elites to promote an 'agrarian myth' based on the idea that authentic Thai society is intrinsically rural, and that Thais should eschew modern consumerist temptations (Dayley, 2011). Consequently, there is a certain nostalgia expressed by some volunteer tourists for a past time when life was supposedly more simple for locals. This view also manifests itself in expressions of concern that host communities will succumb to Western influences:

I really, really, really love the village. I think in terms of Western versus how Westernized things are, I think I'm more worried about how Westernized the village is going to become if the project continues to expand and more people come. I know the villagers really like the money that the project brings in, but I really like the village the way it is and I really like the level of Westernization it has, which is to say pretty minimal. We have a squat toilet and we eat only their food pretty much. I don't want the village to all of a sudden start putting in Western toilets for the Westerners that are coming in or start catering to our desires. (Janelle, Australia)

Third, a pervasive element of the pre-modern conception of authenticity held by many volunteer tourists is the belief that Thais are inherently more spiritual than Westerners and, as a result, are more grounded and less materially aspirational. The spirituality of 'real' Thais, coupled with the perceived grace, simplicity, and modesty of the essential Thai character, is what allows locals, in the opinions of volunteers, to tolerate difficult living conditions and remain cheerful in the face of adversity. In this way, volunteer tourists in northern Thailand often express the 'poor but happy' stereotype found among volunteer tourists elsewhere (Cole, 2007; Crossley, 2012). For example, Leslie from England argues that Thais care more about happiness than the status that comes from the acquisition of material goods:

It's not like they need to have a job that they don't want to because they need lots of money to buy a big house with a lifestyle like we live, like people in Europe live, people in America live,

like they work their asses off for something they don't even like. Like having a job with no point at all, just to have money, just so you can show to other people that you're rich and you have money. I don't think people here care too much about that, so that's what I like about it. People do their thing and they make their lives happy. And that's all that matters.

Whether this portrayal of locals as 'poor but happy' represents an effort to avoid appearing judgmental and ethnocentric, or a way to rationalize and overcome anxiety about global inequality (Mostafanezhad, 2013a), this study confirms that volunteer tourism reproduces a static representation of authentic Others based on a predictable array of stereotypes.

The particular locals with whom volunteer tourists interact embody many of the stereotypes associated with the cultural authenticity of 'real' Thais, including tradition (villagers), warmth (children), spirituality (monks), and resilient happiness (members of disadvantaged communities). However, it is important to point out that there is a minority of volunteers who challenge this approach to object authenticity and question the narrow conceptualization of the term as it applies to the Thai context. In particular, despite having their expectations of welcoming, easygoing locals almost universally met, most volunteers betray a lack of concern that Thailand, and Chiang Mai in particular, are more wealthy, modern, and 'Westernized' than expected. While most volunteers in northern Thailand may believe that some of the locals with whom they interact are 'poor but happy', few seem primarily inspired to volunteer out of a desire to encounter the poverty of a 'Third World' country, unlike volunteer tourists in other parts of the developing world (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Vrasti, 2012). It is therefore possible for some volunteers to move beyond the idea that cultural authenticity rests exclusively on tradition, poverty, and rural life.

It would also be easy to assume based on a quick glance at the online marketing materials of volunteer tourism organizations that the directors and managers of ground operators in Thailand also believe in hackneyed stereotypes and static notions of cultural authenticity. However, the directors, managers, and staff interviewed for this research readily acknowledge that some of their volunteers possess puerile or inaccurate ideas about Thai society, but admit that these stereotypes are not only difficult to correct in a short period of time, but also serve to attract volunteers to Thailand in the first place. Additionally, while the backstage settings in which volunteer tourism takes place provide some volunteers with the opportunity to find stereotypically authentic locals, it simultaneously allows others to expand their understanding of Thai culture in ways that enhance, and even disrupt, preexisting ideas. The best example of this comes from those volunteers who teach English to monks in Buddhist temple schools. Such volunteers are initially attracted to monks and temples because they are seen as esoteric embodiments of essential Thai culture, but direct interactions with monks ultimately shatter these stereotypes and produce a less ethereal image of monks. Laura from the United States, for example, points out that:

The most different thing you can get by coming to Thailand is teaching a monk and it raises people's curiosity. Everybody at home has been asking me, 'Oh, how is it to teach a monk?' I talked to my mom, 'They're normal; they skip classes and they don't care.' And sometimes people are so shocked, like 'ah monks! No way!' There's a TV and it's connected to Thai channels, so sometimes they go and turn on the TV and then they just watch whatever. I mean, Western video clips, Lady Gaga shaking her booty, or the other day, I was there and they

were watching this sexy fashion program, which were women, literally women in underwear that I'm pretty sure a monk is not allowed to watch!

Even in those cases when cultural stereotypes are indeed confirmed, as is the case with most volunteer tourists, the end result is not necessarily always a verification of the superiority of Western cultures; for some volunteers, experience with Thai cultural norms provides an opportunity to reflect on what Thai culture supposedly has to teach volunteers about features of social life increasingly missing from their own societies, including patience, grace, serenity, kindness, and spirituality.

'Living here, just like a Thai': the search for authentic settings

Although volunteer tourists in Chiang Mai, like other tourists in Thailand, possess 'objectivist views that equate cultural authenticity in Thailand with primitive, poor, and pure natives' (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2003, p. 186), an even more important feature of volunteer conceptions of authenticity is a desire for experiences and encounters in backstage settings, where 'real' Thais are thought to reside. However, Thais inhabiting backstage settings are 'real' in ways that are sometimes different than the stereotypical ways in which Thai are judged to be culturally authentic. In particular, although backstage settings can expose volunteer tourists to Thais that conform to preexisting stereotypes, they can also create opportunities to interact with Thais that are 'real' in that they are not behaving in ways prescribed by the typical tourist–host encounter. Since most volunteers reject the tourist label (Mostafanezhad, 2014a), it stands to reason that volunteer tourists prefer settings not associated with conventional tourism or the inauthentic locals thought to occupy touristic spaces.

Rather than focusing their gaze merely on people and material objects that can be deemed authentic or inauthentic according to some established yardstick, volunteer tourists instead wish to bear witness to the real lives of locals unfolding in backstage settings. The desire of tourists to penetrate the front regions of host societies and glance at the 'real' lives of locals is by now a well-established observation in the study of tourism. However, what distinguishes volunteer tourism from other forms of travel is that volunteer tourists simultaneously move between two worlds, one related to leisure in manufactured front regions, and the other related to work in genuine backstage settings (Tomazos & Butler, 2012). Volunteer tourists in Chiang Mai often live together in a shared house or in dormitory-style accommodations, and therefore occupy a space that some would describe as an environmental bubble (Cohen, 1988). Moreover, volunteer tourists spend much of their free time in the evenings and on weekends travelling to, and spending time in, clearly marked tourist environments. At many other times during their stay in Thailand, however, volunteer tourists must engage in routine work-related tasks that are unrelated to tourism and take place in backstage environments. This dualistic identity of volunteer tourists is captured in the following comment made by Tim from Australia:

I feel a little bit like a tourist in some parts where we go to the night market and the night bazaar and Thai boxing and do tourists things, but then whenever I'm walking down the street in these clothes, to work, it feels like I'm a local. Like I'm going to work. So between the hours of 9 and 5, I feel like a local doing local stuff, but then other than that, I sort of feel like a tourist.

Whereas some volunteers believe that they fulfil two roles at once, depending on the time of day, for Kristine from Germany, volunteers undergo a transition from tourist to local over time:

At the beginning, of course, the first few weeks, you are a tourist because you aren't living here, but after a month, you start living here, and you don't go to all the tourist attractions. You're having your membership at the gym and living here, just like a Thai, so I think now, I'm not a tourist anymore.

By spending more time in Thailand than other tourists, most volunteer tourists are able, in principle, to gain a greater insight Thai culture and society. But what makes the greatest difference in distinguishing volunteer tourists from other kinds of tourists in Thailand is the opportunity to be inserted, or dropped, into the everyday, backstage lives of locals. Insertion into the back regions of Thai social life is precisely what enables volunteer tourists to achieve what is almost universally communicated during interviews as a central objective and benefit of volunteering: the feeling that one is *living in* Thailand rather than merely *traveling through* it like an itinerant passerby or spectator. The statements below are just a few of the many comments made by volunteer tourists that highlight the importance of 'living here' and blending into local life:

I think just working with the students made me love Chiang Mai. I wouldn't wish anything different. I just kind of feel like I live here. I know all of us feel this way. It's only been 3 weeks, but we feel like it's part of our lifestyle, being teachers, coming home. I love that for some reason. (Shannon, United States)

I prefer an untouristic moment with people because I think it's more ... it's just life. And I'm here for one month in the country, it's not to do all the touristy things. It's for living in the country. So I try to live as people live here. (Camille, France)

Working is not something that you would do if you were just traveling around. You wouldn't work. When you're working it does give you this, I wouldn't say illusion but the impression of permanence. Because you have a job, you are specifically doing something in this place, you're living there. You're interacting with wherever you are at that moment. (Peggy, Canada)

As the interview comments in this section indicate, it is not enough for volunteer tourists to simply observe, or even share in, snippets of daily life that are normally hidden away from the gaze of conventional tourists. Rather, what volunteer tourists seek more than anything is the feeling – however illusory it might be in the opinions of volunteer tourism critics – that they are just another local going about their business in backstage settings. Consequently, in attempting to distinguish themselves from ordinary tourists, volunteer tourists seek out and cherish the structure and predictability afforded by a daily routine:

Well, I work every day. It's basically living in everyday life. It's not that I'm traveling or, I never – I mean, I guess I feel like a tourist because there are times when I'm bringing my planner around with me. I have a ton around my shoulder and I've got that weird tourist look to me. Uh, but basically, everybody's always like, did you go to the bars or are you having fun? And I'm like I wake up at 6 o'clock in the morning and shower. I go to work, I come home, I read a little, and I go to sleep, like every day. It's just a daily routine, like waking up, eating breakfast, going to work, going home, doing whatever you want to do after work, then going to bed. So it's just kind of like I've taken my life and lived it over here temporarily and then I'll bring it back. (Lorrie, Australia)

What is it specifically about backstage settings that makes them authentic in the minds of volunteer tourists? Other than offering the kinds of predictability, routine, security, and sense of belonging associated with living somewhere, what makes backstage settings authentic is the relative absence of 'frontstage people', defined by Pearce and Moscardo (1986, p. 125) as those who are 'conscious they are creating a display for the interest of

tourism'. Conversely, 'backstage people' are either those who 'make frontstage scenes work (e.g. cleaners, mechanics, catering staff, gardeners, etc.) or people actively pursuing roles not connected with tourism (e.g. workers, professionals, peasants, etc.)' (Pearce & Moscardo, 1986, p. 125). Although the backstage settings in which volunteer tourism takes place are undoubtedly influenced by the presence of volunteers, the settings themselves do not exist *because* of the volunteers. Further, Thais in such settings perform everyday roles and routines that usually have nothing to do with tourism or tourists. This is true not only in volunteer settings such as schools, temples, and hospitals, which are everyday, integrated elements of Thai society, but also in volunteer tourism settings such as orphanages, nursing homes, refugee centers, and women's shelters, which symbolize the underbelly of Thai society and hence are largely invisible to ordinary tourists moving about in frontstage settings.

The chief characteristic of backstage settings and people that makes them authentic in the opinions of volunteer tourists in northern Thailand is the perceived lack of staging and commercialization. Volunteer tourists frequently decry tourist zones because they are staged solely for the benefit of tourists, while typical tourist encounters with locals are described as tainted because the interaction is motivated by commercial concerns, and therefore scripted according to the dictates of the service industry. As Gary from England explains,

Maybe there are places you can go to have an authentic Thai experience, but they have kind of been manipulated for tourists. Do you know what I mean? Like the hill tribe thing is a perfect example, like, 'Oh, have an authentic Thai experience,' but that's not what the hill tribes are like. That's for tourists only. But when you're actually in places, like living there, like with locals, you're getting so much more because no one's making any money out of it. No one's just doing it for their job – it's their life.

Staging and commercialization are thus related in that one begets the other in normal tourist spaces; by contrast, the unscripted locals that volunteer tourists encounter in backstage settings are portrayed as sincere and authentic because their actions are not guided by ulterior commercial motives. Nevertheless, as discussed later, the backstage regions that host volunteer tourists possess a particular set of traits that often complicate the pursuit of object authenticity, despite what appears to be a lack of staging and commercialization.

Home and away in the backstage voluntourscapes of Thailand

The nature of volunteer tourist experiences in the apparent back regions of Thai society differs markedly from the episodic and superficial quality of most conventional tourist observations of 'real' Thai life. The principal reason for this difference – and the defining characteristic of volunteer tourism experiences – is the combination of seemingly discrepant elements such as work and play, familiarity and alterity, and home and away. Like all travelers, volunteer tourists crave novelty, adventure, excitement, and fun. Alterity, as symbolized by exotic Others, also factors into the desires of volunteer tourists who often seek confirmation of preexisting cultural stereotypes of authentic Thais. It would appear, therefore, that volunteer tourists share familiar tourist motivations related to being 'away', particularly the wish to cultivate experiences, feelings, and emotions that differ from those associated with normal daily life.

At the same time, rather than trying like most tourists to escape from 'conventional social norms and regulations that structure everyday life' (Kim & Jamal, 2007, p. 184), volunteer tourists instead depend on the foundations of everyday life to provide the object authenticity they so keenly desire. There are many aspects of everyday life that characterize volunteer tourism; these ultimately provide the ingredients necessary for volunteer tourists to feel like they are living in Thailand as momentary locals. Most importantly, as discussed in the previous section, volunteering provides a daily routine, which in turn reproduces certain fundamental components of everyday life, including order, predictability, responsibility, and a spatial and temporal distinction between the spheres of work and leisure.

Another feature of familiar, everyday life back home is the existence of a support network that can provide care and a sense of safety and security. Volunteer tourism ground operators create this desired support network and allow volunteers to spend a long time in Thailand without having to worry about being alone in the case of an emergency. This is especially important for the many female volunteers travelling to Thailand on their own. Overall, 85% of all volunteers interviewed for this research are female, and roughly three-quarters of these are solo travelers. Although this preponderance of women is correctly linked to a 'cultural politics of gendered generosity in volunteer tourism' (Mostafanezhad, 2013b, p. 485), an additional explanation relates to the safety concerns of young women spending a prolonged period of time away from home. In comments that reflect the views of many female volunteers, Lindsey from Australia highlights the importance of the safety net provided by the volunteer tourism experience:

As a female traveling abroad, I wanted some sort of safety net working with a group. And that isn't necessarily as important to young guys. I think that's why volunteering is so appealing because you can go and see a place but then, at the same time, you kind of have that safety net, that security, and you feel like you can experience it without constantly worrying about all the little details and all of the safety issues and all of that.

Volunteer tourism represents more than just the replication of the everyday lives of volunteers back home. Rather, what volunteer tourism does successfully is enable novelty, spontaneity, and adventure *within* a quotidian framework that is safe, familiar, and predictable. In other words, volunteer tourists are not escaping from the everyday; instead, they seek the benefits of everyday life, but in a different cultural context. Consequently, volunteers attempt to recreate certain aspects of home, like routine, purpose, predictability, and security, while also avoiding aspects of home that are unsatisfying, such as monotony, financial pressure, family obligations, restlessness, or cold weather, to name just a few.

Many authors have argued that tourism is an escape from everyday life (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Cohen & Taylor, 1992; Rojek, 1993), but the blending of home and away in volunteer tourism confirms instead the argument made by Edensor (2007, p. 211) that 'tourism should not be conceived as that which is antithetical to the everyday, but rather that it is imbricated with the mundane and quotidian'. Much like the 'serial touristscapes' described by Edensor (2007), volunteer tourism environments involve everyday routines, habits, roles, and performances. The term 'voluntoursapes' captures such similarities, but also acknowledges that backstage volunteer tourism settings are not quite the same as other serial touristscapes. Not only are everyday processes much more integral, rather than coincidental, to the function and purpose of voluntoursapes, but volunteers

rely on the rhythm of locals' lives to create routine and order for themselves. Another key difference, of course, is that touristscapes are quintessential front regions, whereas voluntourscapes largely encompass backstage settings.

Barriers to the pursuit of object authenticity

Volunteers in Chiang Mai uniformly believe that their experience has given them an authentic understanding of Thailand, but the achievement of object authenticity, not to mention its delivery on the part of ground operators, is complicated by four problems. First, a significant language barrier between volunteers and locals thwarts efforts to get to know one another in any meaningful way. Volunteers encounter 'real' Thais in backstage settings, but then find it almost impossible to communicate with them. Due to the high degree of difficulty associated with learning a tonal language like Thai, and the dearth of English language skills among most Thais, the very brief and cursory Thai language training received by volunteers during orientation programs proves insufficient for significant intercultural communication.

It is ironic that in preferring to interact with Thais who are either exotic or 'real' in the sense that they are backstage people, volunteer tourists actually diminish the likelihood of being able to communicate at a level that would build a genuine understanding of the actual lives of locals. To get around this problem, a majority of volunteer tourists prefer to work with Thai children since the language barrier matters far less when interacting with children. In light of what at times feels like an insurmountable language barrier, volunteers find it much easier to break the ice with children, and are able to interact in ways that would otherwise be awkward or embarrassing. This point is illustrated by Morgan, an American ground operator manager:

I think it's easier to interact with kids when you don't have language skills. I know for myself learning Thai, when I started off, I felt totally comfortable speaking in my horrible, horrific Thai to kids because they aren't going to laugh, and they use simple language themselves. With kids, it's really, 'ah! Fun stuff. I don't have to know all the rules, if I make a mistake it's not a big issue.' So cultural barriers I think are broken down more quickly.

The second problem that potentially restricts the authenticity of voluntourscapes is possible staging on the part of locals and volunteer tourism organizations. According to MacCannell (1973, p. 602), tourists attempt to progress towards the true back regions of destination societies, but are 'greeted everywhere by the obliging hosts' who stage their authenticity, and thereby create false back regions. MacCannell is especially suspicious and dismissive of these false back regions: '[t]he idea here is that a false back is more insidious and dangerous than a false front, or an inauthentic demystification of social life is not merely a lie but a superlie, the kind that drips with sincerity' (MacCannell, 1973, p. 599).

From an objectivist perspective, which assesses authenticity according to impartial criteria, voluntourscapes lack true authenticity because the very presence of volunteer tourists changes the dynamics of these backstage settings. Voluntourscapes are also staged in the sense that volunteer tourists do not find themselves in these everyday settings by accident, but rather because of the deliberate efforts of Chiang Mai's eight volunteer tourism ground operators. Ground operators heavily mediate the experiences of volunteer tourists,

and therefore play a role in shaping the conditions under which volunteers interact with locals within voluntoursapes. The interactions themselves may be less scripted and performative than interactions between conventional tourists and Thais working in the tourism industry, but they are certainly influenced by the involvement of the volunteer tourism organizations that organize, mediate, and promote volunteer forays into the backstage lives of Thais. While virtually no volunteer interviewed for this research doubted the material authenticity of the settings in which they interacted with Thais, at least one person acknowledged that the perceived authenticity of their placement location might be staged, or at least influenced by the presence of volunteers:

The classroom that I teach in is real Thailand where kids just go to school every day. It isn't some cheesy tourist hotel or some backpacker street where lots of Westerners hang out eating banana pancakes and haggling with Thais trying to rip them off. But I sometimes do wonder if the teachers and students act different when we are here because we are such an obvious distraction for them. I wonder how things work when we are not here. I wish I could be a fly on the wall and see the teachers interacting with the students when they aren't trying to show off for us or act all nervous or excited or whatever. Yeah, but I wouldn't be able to understand what they are saying to each other anyway because I don't speak Thai! (JoEllen, United States)

Third, voluntoursapes represent unrepresentative and narrowly conceived locations. While it is true that volunteers enter spaces and meet locals that exist beyond the front regions of conventional tourism, voluntoursapes are carefully chosen backstage settings that represent only a small slice of local life. In response to the demands and expectations of volunteers for a certain degree of alterity and excitement, ground operators largely limit their activities to settings such as schools, temples, wildlife parks, and social welfare institutions. These settings promise exotic sights, sounds, and people, and that is precisely the reason why voluntoursapes do not include more prosaic locals like middle-aged factory workers, white collar professionals, bus drivers, or shopping mall employees, all of whom live in the backstage but unlike orphans, schoolchildren, monks, or refugees, are 'real' in ways that are perhaps too familiar and mundane for volunteer tourists.

Fourth, the greatest challenge faced by ground operators hoping to deliver object authenticity to their volunteers relates to the difficulty of finding the optimal balance between the everyday and the extraordinary. The principal goal of every ground operator in Chiang Mai is to make a positive contribution to the local community, but as mostly commercial enterprises, they must also cater to the desire of volunteers for authentic experiences. What this means in practice is providing the overall structure of everyday life while also enabling those things that are missing for many volunteers at home, like novelty, excitement, creativity, and otherness.

Achieving a balance between home and away is tricky for ground operators because going too far in either direction is problematic. On the one hand, if the volunteer experience comes to resemble everyday life at home too closely, then it can quickly become tedious. The key, then, is for volunteers to retain certain features of home while escaping those less appealing aspects of everyday life that emerge when doing the same thing, in the same place, for a long time. On the other hand, too deep or prolonged an immersion into the backstage lives of 'real' Thais can backfire, because rather than fostering a nuanced appreciation of the complexities and intricacies of Thai social life, heightened familiarity with Thai culture beyond the 'Land of Smiles' stereotype can potentially lead

to disillusionment with certain disagreeable dimensions of Thai society normally concealed from short-term visitors. Whether it is the rigid class and status divisions, or the lack of frankness in Thai social interactions, familiarity can breed disappointment with Thai culture. For example, after teaching English to monks for six months, David from the United States stated that:

Thais on the surface are very kind, but maybe not quite frank enough for my tastes, they're not quite ... there always seems to be something unsaid. Maybe a little overly modest, you know, but uh ... and the whole like, lying thing. I don't like the idea of treating someone differently depending on their social hierarchy. On the surface, it's a very nice country. It has an image of being relaxed and very peaceful, but our [American] culture, which is maybe a little bit more, a little bit more in a hurry, maybe a little more violent, it just, I don't know, it feels more real to me.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the desire for object authenticity is a central motivation for international volunteers in northern Thailand, and also symbolizes the clearest benefit and measure of success among individual volunteers. When given the opportunity to reflect openly and without prompting about the most rewarding aspects of their experiences, their reasons for volunteering, and the ways in which volunteer tourism is different than other forms of tourism, volunteers in northern Thailand almost unanimously invoke the theme of object authenticity. In general, volunteer tourists in Chiang Mai conceive of object authenticity in one of two ways: first, as a preexisting package of static cultural stereotypes focused on authentic people, and second, as authentic backstage settings where 'real' Thais reside.

In addition to bringing to the forefront the central role played by authenticity in the volunteer tourism experience in northern Thailand, this paper introduces the concept of 'voluntourscapes' to describe backstage settings that blend certain features of everyday life such as routine, order, predictability, and security with elements normally associated with travel such as adventure, novelty, excitement, and alterity. Like other serial touristscapes (Edensor, 2007), voluntourscapes are clearly marked locations that combine the quotidian and the unusual, but unlike typical tourist environments, voluntourscapes expose tourists to a particular subset of 'real' Thais considered to be unscripted, enchanting, and authentic.

The arguments put forth in this paper confirm the findings of some studies while challenging others. Most obviously, this study provides further corroboration of the importance of authenticity in volunteer tourism (Brown, 2005; Lepp, 2008; Pan, 2012). It also confirms the point made by Edensor (2007) that tourism is infused with everyday habits, performances, and routines. The findings of this research therefore clearly contradict the point made by many authors (Crompton, 1979; Maoz, 2007; Riley, 1988; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006) that tourism is an escape from everyday life. To be fair, such authors center their attention on mass tourists or backpackers rather than volunteer tourists, but at the very least, this study highlights the possibility of reproducing everyday forces while spending time away from home. Further, while it is true that volunteers represent a particular kind of tourist, this study illustrates that it is indeed possible to visit Thailand as a foreigner and spend significant time away from front stage tourist regions.

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on volunteer tourism by demonstrating that despite its complexity, variability, and ambiguity, the concept of

authenticity provides an essential lens for examining the motivations, expectations, and actions of volunteer tourists. The findings discussed in this paper also illuminate the importance of approaching object authenticity from a subjectivist perspective, which prioritizes the views of tourists over the objectivist judgments of outside observers. In particular, critics of volunteer tourism would likely mock delusional volunteers for thinking that they are really living in Thailand like a local, and postmodern critics such as Baudrillard (1983) and Eco (1986) would even question the very notion of authenticity in a world filled with simulations and 'hyperreality'. However, such negative judgments fail to acknowledge volunteer satisfaction with the authenticity of their experiences; as Wang (1999, p. 353) correctly states, 'that which is judged as inauthentic or staged authenticity by experts, intellectuals, or elite may be experienced as authentic and real from an emic perspective'.

Another lesson offered by this study is that the achievement of object authenticity is hindered by several factors, the most important of which is a language barrier between volunteers and locals that seriously limits cross-cultural understanding. If authenticity entails getting to know 'real' Thais, then the inability to communicate surely complicates this effort. Moreover, volunteers do not randomly stumble upon a wide range of true backstage settings, but are instead brought to carefully selected voluntoursapes by ground operators that mediate the entire experience. The greatest challenge faced by volunteer tourism organizations in delivering object authenticity is creating for volunteers the semblance of everyday life without going too far in that direction, lest the experience become too 'real' or mundane for the volunteers. Thus, in addition to indicating a need for some effective language training for volunteers, this study also leads to several practical implications for volunteer tourism organizations, including the need to find the best balance between novelty and familiarity, and the ability to fulfill volunteer expectations of authenticity while at the same time correcting those expectations or creating space for volunteers to reflect on how those expectations might be shaping their experiences.

It is important to note several limitations that suggest future avenues of research. First, as Keese (2011) points out, place matters when it comes to volunteer tourism. This paper has focused on northern Thailand, but its findings regarding authenticity may not necessarily apply to other volunteer tourism destinations in developing countries. Thailand is a popular middle-income tourism destination that likely attracts volunteers who have different motivations and expectations than those who volunteer in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa that are perceived by Westerners to be impoverished, inconvenient, or dangerous (Mathers, 2010). Second, the research on which this paper is based draws on interviews with mostly volunteers from Europe, North America, and Oceania who go through ground operators. It would be interesting to compare the experiences of Western volunteers to those from other parts of the world, as well as to volunteers from Thailand itself. Although most foreign volunteers in Thailand are handled by ground operators, there are also volunteers who make arrangements independently. Authenticity likely plays a role in the motivations of such independent volunteers as well, but the degree may differ and it would be useful to assess how the absence of ground operator mediation shapes the experiences of independent volunteers.

Lastly, the heavy emphasis on object authenticity in this paper is not meant to diminish the importance of other volunteer tourist motivations. As others have noted, volunteer tourism in northern Thailand relates to many issues aside from authenticity, including

career development (Broad, 2003), adventure (Coren & Gray, 2012), a desire to contribute positively to local communities (Proyrungroj, 2014), and commoditized humanitarianism (Mostafanezhad, 2014c). It is beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues, but they nevertheless remain pertinent to volunteer tourism in northern Thailand and should not be overlooked.

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