

Karl Husa, Alexander Trupp, Helmut Wohlschlägl (eds.)

# Southeast Asian Mobility Transitions: Issues and Trends in Migration and Tourism



SOUTHEAST ASIAN MOBILITY TRANSITIONS:  
ISSUES AND TRENDS IN MIGRATION AND TOURISM

ABHANDLUNGEN ZUR GEOGRAPHIE UND REGIONALFORSCHUNG  
herausgegeben von Karl Husa, Christian Vielhaber und Helmut Wohlschlägl  
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Schriftleitung: Helmut Wohlschlägl

**Band 19**



# Southeast Asian Mobility Transitions: Issues and Trends in Migration and Tourism

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Vienna 2014

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über < <http://dnb.dnb.de> > abrufbar

*Cover picture:* Advertising services for tourists in Chiang Khong, Thailand (Karl HUSA, 23.02.2013).

ISBN 978-3-900830-84-7

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1010 Vienna

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*All:* Department of Geography and Regional Research, University of Vienna

*Printing office:* Copydruck KG

1160 Vienna, Sandleitengasse

Printed in Austria

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# Southeast Asian Mobility Transitions – An Introduction

Karl HUSA, Alexander TRUPP, and Helmut WOHLISCHLÄGL

Over the past four decades, few large regions of the world have experienced such dynamic and rapid demographic, economic and social transformations as Southeast Asia. Changes in the patterns of spatial mobility of Southeast Asian populations within, into and out of the region constitute important aspects in this regard.

Since the early 1980s, the continuous and considerable rise in the level of spatial mobility, the increasing complexity of its forms and patterns, and the rapidly growing number of population groups involved have been at the centre of research interest of the Department of Geography and Regional Research at the University of Vienna – among several other topics, such as demographic change, socio-economic transformation, the impact of mega-urbanisation, and ethnic minority studies.<sup>1</sup> In those days, the so-called “*Southeast Asia Research Group*” (originally consisting of Ernest TROGER, Karl HUSA, and Helmut WOHLISCHLÄGL)<sup>2</sup> was established at the department, focusing mainly on aspects of demographic and socio-economic change, the impacts of (mass) tourism, and on the dramatic increase of all forms of spatial mobility in Southeast Asian countries, especially in Thailand.

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that in the course of these research activities numerous scientific contacts and co-operations with several university departments and research institutions in Southeast Asia have emerged over the years, in particular with universities and research institutions in Thailand (Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University in Bangkok, Suan Dusit Rajabhat University in Bangkok and Hua Hin, Chiang Mai University, Maha Sarakham University), Vietnam (Dai Hoc Hanoi University), and, more recently, also in Japan (Ritsumeikan University in Beppu and Osaka City University). The contributions collected in this volume are intended to give a brief overview of some of these collaborations’ results as well as of the current focal points of research on Southeast Asia at the Department of Geography and Regional Research at the University of Vienna.

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<sup>1</sup>) For a more comprehensive review of the activities of the *Southeast Asia Research Group* since the 1980s, see for example HUSA and TRUPP 2010; HUSA and WOHLISCHLÄGL 2011b.

<sup>2</sup>) Currently (2014), the *Southeast Asia Research Group* of the Department of Geography and Regional Research consists of Karl HUSA, Helmut WOHLISCHLÄGL, and Alexander TRUPP as permanent staff, Kosita BUTRATANA (Thailand) as PhD research fellow, as well as of several active or former Master and PhD students working on Southeast Asian topics. Moreover, the *Southeast Asia Research Group* was glad to host the following researchers from Thailand and Vietnam as visiting professors at the Department of Geography and Regional Research during the last years: Huong T. BUI, Prasit LEEPREECHA, Kwanchit SASIWONGSAROJ, Sirijit SUNANTA, and Kanvee VIWATPANICH.



Roughly speaking, the contributions in this reader can be divided into two groups – one dealing primarily with issues of human *migration*, the other rather with various aspects of *tourism* – although it should be pointed out that the scientific boundaries between migration and tourism research have recently become increasingly blurred. For instance, the mobilities and everyday life experiences of long-term tourists or international retirement migrants are situated at the intersection of tourism and migration (see also HALL and WILLIAMS 2002).

The prevailing “mobility turn” (CRESSWELL and MERRIMAN 2011b) and the “mobilities paradigm” (SHELLER and URRY 2006) criticise the notion of sedentarism, which locates bounded places, regions, or nations as the fundamental basis of human identity and experience, and thus, the main unit of social research analysis. In contrast, the mobilities paradigm “emphasises that all places are tied into at least thin networks of connections that stretch beyond each such place and mean that nowhere can be an ‘island’ ” (SHELLER and URRY 2006, p. 209). The mobilities perspective also sheds light on everyday mobile practices such as walking or driving (EDENSOR 2007; CRESSWELL and MERRIMAN 2011a) and thus helps to deal with the increasingly blurred boundaries between tourism, migration and other categories of movements (COHEN and COHEN 2014).

As far as the analysis of human migration in Southeast Asia is concerned, migration research did not take off before the late 1960s, when the notion that the region’s populations consisted largely of sedentary individuals with only little propensity and possibilities to move was gradually abandoned. At the time, migration was primarily seen as a permanent change in the place of residence and population censuses were the main source of data for the analysis of spatial mobility, resulting in studies which found “generally low levels of such movement in Asian countries”, reinforcing “the well-worn stereotypes of the populations [...] as being composed of largely sedentary people engaged solely in a peasant and semi-peasant mode of production” (HUGO 1984, pp. 63f). It must be acknowledged that for several population groups in Southeast Asia, especially for ethnic minority groups, sedentarism is a rather new concept brought upon by new central powers after the Second World War in the context of “modern” nation building (TRUPP 2014).

During the last decades, however, the study of internal migration, and especially rural-urban migration, has come a long way, discarding the notion of low levels of migration consisting primarily of permanent migrants from rural to urban areas. Generally, it can be noted that in the current age of time and space compression, one finds all kinds of people (e.g. tourists, migrants, refugees) increasingly on the move, leading to the idea that we are living in an “age of mobility [which] has replaced the sedentary age” (ROLSHOVEN 2007, p. 17), which is also true for contemporary Southeast Asia.

Rioji SODA’s contribution in the present volume also takes up the necessity to question common basic concepts of analysis of internal migration flows in Asia and the need to take account of the increasing complexity of rural-urban mobility patterns. In his paper on “*Approaches to Rethinking Rural-Urban Migration in Southeast Asia: The Case of the Iban in Sarawak, Malaysia*” he suggests three approaches to better understand the intricate mobility patterns between rural and urban areas, taking the Iban as an example: choosing a local town and its hinterland as a study area, analysing the continuous move-

ments of people between rural and urban areas which make it increasingly difficult to classify the Iban as rural or urban dwellers as the rural-urban distinction becomes more and more blurred, and finally, critically reconsidering the “sedentarism bias”, which has forced migration researchers for so long to consider rural communities as predominantly immobile. Indeed, livelihoods in Southeast Asia have perhaps never been quite as simple as the rural-urban dichotomy would have one believe (RIGG 1998, p. 500).

Another aspect of intra-urban mobility in regard to barriers of everyday mobilities is dealt with by Michelle PROYER and Siriparn SRIWANYONG in their paper “*Detour to School – Access to School for Thai Children with Disabilities*”, demonstrating that mobility barriers not only refer to lack of infrastructure, time, distance or cost factors, but also to physical problems resulting in social exclusion and mobility barriers. Despite educational legislature emphasising inclusion in Thailand and global developments towards equality for persons with disabilities (e.g. UNCRPD), reality is less favourable. The results of an international research project described in the paper show that in fact the parents of children with disabilities have big problems in finding adequate local schools. Quite often, the result is a time-consuming search for a suitable educational facility or sometimes even forced mobility of affected families, when a change of residence, for example from a rural area of another province to Bangkok, is inevitable. In some cases the only (but costly) possibility to avoid, or at least reduce, unwanted everyday mobility is to send children with disabilities to special boarding schools.

With the onset of the economic boom of the so-called “Asian miracle economies” in the 1980s, studies dealing with mobilities in Asia have increasingly begun to focus on international movements. Important research areas in this context are international labour migration as well as transnational migration flows (HUGO and YOUNG 2008; HUSA and WOHLISCHLÄGL 2011a). In addition to major migration flows from rural and peripheral areas to major cities and economic centres, the international, predominantly temporary migration of labour swelled from a phenomenon of only minor significance to an important factor of economic, social, political, and demographic development of the region. Labour migration and the employment of foreign workers are therefore highly controversial and volatile topics in Southeast Asia, both within government circles and among the general public – as has long been the case in the industrialised nations of Western and Central Europe.

The increasing importance and complexity of the international migration of labour is commonly viewed as the result of the rapidly advancing process of globalisation, which has affected the countries of Southeast Asia in an especially dynamic way since the 1980s. However, the current patterns of regional migration and the emergence of an independent, transregional migration system cannot be explained by the developments of recent years alone. The paper by Karl HUSA and Helmut WOHLISCHLÄGL titled “*Global Markets – Local Consequences: The Migration of Labour in Southeast Asia Since the Mid-Nineteenth Century*” therefore attempts to examine the dynamics and spatial patterns of migration flows in Southeast Asia over the long term as well as to analyse these processes in light of the profound socio-economic transformations that have increasingly changed and shaped the region since the late nineteenth century. The second focus of the paper is an analysis of the volume, the spatial pattern, and the various forms of international labour migration

in contemporary Southeast Asia. Finally, the question is discussed as to what extent the “Asian Crisis”, which started in 1997, has influenced the volume and direction of labour migration flows within the region as well as its effects on national migration policies.

The impact of decades of economic boom on the labour market and on the migration system of Southeast Asian countries is also the focus of the paper by Kwanchit SASIWONG-SAROJ on “*Irregular Migrant Workers from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar in Thailand: Trends, Policies, and the Difficulties They Face*”. She demonstrates how economically more developed countries in the region, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, have become prime destinations for low and semiskilled workers from poorer countries. Moreover, taking the influx of irregular migrant workers from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar into Thailand as an example, she analyses the difficulties they face there as well as Thai government policies they are confronted with. However, we should not forget that despite a seemingly interconnected world without borders, constraints on people’s mobilities continue to exist, mainly through the presence and impact of states aiming at controlling or preventing migration (CARLING 2002; HORSTMANN 2011).

A second large and, until most recently, irregular migration flow into Thailand is trans-border mobility between Myanmar and Thailand, which is analysed in the paper by Petra DANNECKER and Wolfram SCHAFFAR titled “*The Construction of Migrant Workers and Refugees in Mae Sot, in Light of the Political Change in Myanmar*”. The authors discuss how the current political, social, and economic transformations in Burma may influence regional developments. The focus of the study lies on the borderland between Myanmar and Thailand, which is conceived as a transnational space constituted by labour migrants, refugees, and various organisations that have challenged national borders and national identities for decades. On the one hand, the authors show how the Burmese refugees in the camps perceive return migration and how the humanitarian non-governmental bodies and Thai state organisations position themselves within the current situation, while on the other hand the important economic impacts of the increasing influx of Burmese refugees and labour migrants into Thailand on the local and regional economy are discussed.

Another much discussed aspect in the research on international labour migration is the impact of remittances on the economic development of migrants’ areas of origin. The economy of the Philippines has been constantly growing over the past few years despite the country’s difficult political and social situation. Remittances of Filipino migrant workers constitute one of the main reasons for this development. In his paper “*Migrants, Remittances and the ‘Left Behind’: A Case Study from the Philippines*” Philip WENINGER analyses the relations of migration, remittances, and socio-economic development, taking the Central Visayas as an example. The main focus of his empirical study was the island of Cebu, the traditional heart of the densely populated Central Visayas region and homeland of many overseas Filipinos.

In addition to classical spatial mobility patterns, such as internal and international labour migration, mobilities connected to or resulting from tourism have recently become increasingly dynamic. As a consequence, various forms of multi-local household arrangements, transnational communities or long-term tourism have developed. Based on this argument, several authors have called for “a broader investigation of mobile livelihoods

and the fluid fields of social, economic and political relations and cultural values that these livelihoods imply” (OLWIG and SORENSEN 2002, p. 2).

Examples of these rather new forms of spatial mobility in Southeast Asia are retirement migration and long-stay tourism, although the boundaries between them have recently become increasingly ambiguous. Retirement migration is a phenomenon that has become extremely dynamic in Western societies in recent years. A decisive role for the dramatic increase of elderly migrants is played by their endeavour to spend their “sunset years” somewhere abroad, where they can enjoy a better life, in a more pleasant surrounding, for less money. Until recently, these forms of migration have almost exclusively occurred as north-to-south directed movements of elderly people within the Western world. They used to move seasonally or semi-permanently, within Europe or the US, mainly for climatic or cultural reasons. One of the most prominent flows of retirement migrants within the more developed world is known as the seasonal movement of the so-called “snow birds”, for example from cold Scandinavia or Great Britain to the warmer coastal areas of the Mediterranean. While this phenomenon has already been discussed quite extensively in migration and tourism literature, the most recent development shows spillover effects of retirement migration towards new destinations in less developed countries. However, this rather new migration flow has not yet found adequate attention among scientists.

Within Southeast Asia, the Kingdom of Thailand has become one of the most prominent “hotspots” of international retirement migration as well as of various forms of long-stay tourism. In this volume, the authors of two papers critically discuss the nexus between (long-term) tourism and (semi-permanent) migration, and provide empirical evidence on these types of mobility in Thailand: “*Searching for Paradise? International Retirement Migration to Thailand – A Case Study of Hua Hin and Cha-am*” by Karl HUSA, Christian VIELHABER, Julia JÖSTL, Krisztina VERESS and Birgit WIESER and “*Paradise Found? Experiences of Farang Retirement Migrants in Hua Hin and Cha-am, Thailand*” by Christian VIELHABER and the same group of authors.

However, highly selective migration flows such as retirement migration, predominantly consisting of elderly males from Western countries to Thailand, form only one side of the coin. As with every migration flow, male retirement migration to Thailand also has a counterflow with converse selectivity: an increasing number of younger female migrants migrating to Western countries, most of them so-called marriage migrants. Existing research on Thai female marriage migration abroad mainly focuses either on the aspects of sex work or human trafficking, or on the economic impacts of such cross-cultural relationships. Most of these studies claim that Thai female migrants mainly come from a poor socio-economic background and try to marry up by finding a foreign husband. However, many questions concerning the relationship between Thai female migrants and their new occupations and status, their husbands, and their life in a foreign country remain unanswered.

In order to overcome the existing gaps of knowledge two papers in the present volume deal with the process of marriage migration from two different perspectives: Kosita BUTRATANA and Alexander TRUPP’s paper takes “*Thai Female Migration to Austria*” as an example. Their study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture – beyond com-

mon stereotypes – about the migration of Thai women to and their life circumstances in Austria, as well as several other aspects such as their socio-economic backgrounds and the role of family.

The second paper on marriage migration by Claudia ZIMMERMANN titled “*‘Love Me. Love Me Forever’ – Thai Women’s Pre-Migrational Hopes, Dreams, and Images of Love and Marriages with Western Men*” focuses on the personal, social, and cultural shifts that take place in cross-cultural marriages. Presenting the results of interviews with Thai women in the rural area around Khorat, Northeastern Thailand, and of three in-depth interviews with female clients of a marriage agency focusing on cross-cultural marriages in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, the author analyses the personal convictions and images as well as stereotypes, idealistic conceptions, and inherited cultural ideas about marriage with a Western male.

While the importance of Asian migration has been recognised and acknowledged for some decades now, international and domestic tourism has been primarily considered a Western phenomenon until very recently. However, studies and statistics from emerging world regions have shown that tourism ceased to be a purely Western playground, whereas especially a rise in Asian tourism can be identified (COHEN and COHEN 2014). Nevertheless popular concepts and aspects of international tourism such as the tourist’s quest for authenticity (MACCANNELL 1999), host-guest relationships (SMITH 1977) or the tourist gaze (URRY 1990) were developed by Western scholars in the context of Western travel experiences and may not necessarily be applicable to the analysis of travel motivations of Asian tourists (ALNENG 2002; COHEN and COHEN 2012).

The question as to whether current (Western) theories of tourism can deal with the rising importance of tourism from emerging (non-Western) world regions is taken up by Erik COHEN in this volume. By examining “*The Permutations of Thai Tourism*” he identifies a rich diversity of forms of tourism within the “domestic-international” range, which has often been overlooked in existing literature and which mitigates the image of a unidirectional west-to-east (or north-to-south) tourism flow as for example border tourism and regional Asian travel play a major role in the case of Thailand. Moreover, COHEN highlights differences in terms of travel style and interests between Western and Thai domestic tourists while the latter involve a strong hedonistic perspective, expressed in a quest for fun (*sanuk*) and superficially pleasant activities, rather than a quest for authenticity or profound individual experiences. Diverging travel styles, interests and diverse spatial and temporal travel patterns also explain the socio-spatial segregation between Thai and Western tourists. Such differences could serve as a starting point for developing new concepts and theories in the context of rapidly rising non-Western tourism.

The growing importance of Asian tourism is further explored by Huong T. BUI who focuses on a specific form of tourism, i.e. backpacker tourism, which has hitherto mainly been ascribed to young Westerners. Backpacker tourism is a global trend with increasing numbers not just for the traditional generating countries in Europe, but also for the emerging countries in Asia, such as Korea, Japan, Singapore or Thailand. In her contribution “*The Impact of International Travel on Personal Development – The Case of Asian Backpackers*” BUI discusses how the Asian home culture shapes the away-from-home trans-

formative travel experience for backpackers from East and Southeast Asian countries and seeks to enhance the understanding of Asian alternative travel as a social phenomenon in its early stages of development. She concludes that backpacking contributes to symbolic capital in the form of prestige of young Asians and reflects a social transition trend in contemporary Asia towards a multicultural society that embraces diversity and differences.

Since the gradual opening of international borders accompanied by improvements of infrastructure, regional Asian tourism (as well as international travel in general) has been further promoted by supranational organisations such as the ASEAN and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) who view travel and leisure activities as impetuses for regional development. In the context of mainland Southeast Asia, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) fosters tourism strategies and projects related to management of natural and cultural heritage, social impact, tourism marketing, and cross-border tourism. One of GMS' popular projects is the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) connecting cities, centres of commerce, and tourist attractions between Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. The paper by Thitirat PANBAMRUNGKIJ "*Tourist Expectations of Wartime Heritage Tourism: A Case Study of Lao PDR and Vietnam*" focuses on wartime heritage sites along the EWEC in Lao PDR and Vietnam. The remaining relics of war within this region, such as bomb craters, parts of the Ho Chi Minh trail, or airbase shelters, provide ample potential for tourism in general, but many of these places are still relatively unknown. In order to facilitate tourism development, the author surveyed and mapped wartime heritage sites using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and investigated tourist expectations regarding the four major motivational components attraction, infrastructure, marketing, and tourist staff. The research applied a quantitative approach using the SERVQUAL technique to measure tourist expectations and experiences.

The theme of tourism and regional development in the Greater Mekong Subregion is also taken up by Vivien LUNDA who introduces an example of cultural tourism from North-eastern Thailand (Isaan) on the basis of a case study of the archaeological excavation site Ban Chiang, which has been listed as a UNESCO world heritage since 1992. LUNDA's chapter "*Cultural Tourism: A Regional Development Impetus in the Isaan, Thailand?*" assesses visitor profiles and regional tourism structures and asks if the heritage attraction can enable cultural tourism as a development impetus for Ban Chiang and the region of Isaan. Results show that mainly domestic tourists visit the heritage site and that a great potential in cross-border, regional Asian, and Western tourism remains untapped. Cultural tourism as explicated by Vivien LUNDA puts its primary focus on the role of material cultural artefacts and the general bustle of everyday life (e.g. the sights and smells of street food) (WOOD 1984).

One such cultural and religious artefact almost every traveller to Thailand notices consists of the ubiquitous miniature shrines also referred to as "spirit houses". In his paper "*From Phra Phum to Phra Prom: The Cosmisation of the Thai Spirit House*" Erik COHEN focuses on the symbolic aspects of spirit houses and the question as to whether miniature shrines reflect any fundamental symbols and cosmological representations of the world's religions.

Another specific type of tourism that has developed since the 1960s is ethnic tourism, which can be seen as a type of travel aimed at visiting seemingly exotic and authentic

ethnic groups where the local inhabitants and their cultural practices are considered as the main objects of interest. Two papers in this volume deal with the phenomenon of ethnic minority tourism in the highlands of Northern Thailand. In his paper “*Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand: Viewpoints of the Akha and the Karen*” Alexander TRUPP examines ethnic tourism as seen from the points of view of two specific minority groups living in two distinct villages featuring different forms and intensities of tourism. By doing so, he emphasises that URRY’s concept of the tourist gaze needs to be expanded. There is also a gaze of the hosts and the question is not only about how “we” (the tourists) see them, but also about how “they” (the hosts) see us (PRITCHARD 2000; MAOZ 2006). In TRUPP’s study, tourists have a positive if rather limited image in both villages, which is related to income opportunities but also to non-economic interests such as language acquisition or experiencing diversion through interaction with international tourists. The paper shows that local residents are not passive objects, but active agents who develop their own perspectives and construct their own gazes upon various aspects of ethnic minority tourism including international and domestic travellers, tour guides, and questions of modernisation.

While TRUPP’s contribution focuses on the perspective and the gaze of the hosts, Prasit LEEPREECHA looks at the politics of ethnic tourism in mountainous communities. In his paper “*Tourism in Mountainous Communities: The Politics of Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand*” he outlines the historical development of ethnic minority tourism in Thailand and discusses contradictory state policies regarding highland development and tourism promotion. Even though ethnic people are identified as weaker players of the ethnic tourism system, recent developments in the context of national park tourism indicate transformations in existing power relations between hosts, guests, and state officials and institutions. In addition, LEEPREECHA found a rise in Thai domestic tourists visiting the highland areas although, in contrast to Western ethnic tourists, they are more interested in cold temperatures and scenic views rather than local heritage sites or ethnic minority culture.

Another topic that has remained relevant since the development of tourism in many parts of Southeast Asia is the perennial role of the informal sector. Bianca GANTNER’s paper “*Informal Entrepreneurism in the Life Cycle of a Destination – Have Beach Vendors in Patong Come to Stay?*” illustrates the development of the informal tourism sector as well as of its network of actors and its supply structure, and analyses the interdependencies between formal and informal sectors on the basis of a case study in Patong, Phuket Island. For more than 50 percent of all Thais working in the informal sector, the tourism industry, which has been booming since the 1960s, represents an important source of income, but also leads to co-operation and conflict with state authorities and other vendors. Products and services offered by actors of the informal sector are manifold and informal businesses move into niches that formal sector enterprises cannot enter. Despite several impediments through law enforcement, neither a formalisation of informal enterprises occurs, nor does the informal sector disappear.

One of the perhaps most famous products of the informal sector throughout Southeast Asia is street food. Southeast Asian cuisine such as Thai and Vietnamese food has undergone increasing popularity around the world and has become well known to tourists visiting the respective countries. Linh L. D. PHAM, Huyen T. TRAN, and Huong L. DO do not examine the street vendors who produce and supply the products, but instead look at the

tourist consumers of street food. Their contribution “*The Perception of Vietnamese Street Food Among Foreigners – An Exploratory Study*” is based on a questionnaire survey carried out among 200 foreigners in Hanoi’s tourist places. The authors aimed to find out to what extent tourists were aware of street food in Vietnam, how satisfied they were with the culinary offers, and what concerned them about it. The most important factors that affected the respondents’ street food experience were taste, hygiene, and safety.

These diverse studies introduced in this volume reflect trends, continuations, and frictions of mobilities in Southeast Asia. In tourism-related contexts, international travel motivations in the name of the “exotic other” remain, but travel groups from Asia are increasingly dominating the Southeast Asian tourist landscape, as several of the papers collected in this volume emphasise. In a similar way, the papers compiled in the “migration section” of the present reader highlight the long way that migration research in Southeast Asia has come in recent decades. Whereas a few decades ago the focus of migration research in the region was almost entirely on “classical” migration patterns such as rural-urban migration or international out-migration of labour from Southeast Asia, today much more complex patterns of spatial mobility characterise the current migration system of Southeast Asia. Several new forms of spatial mobility within the region have emerged recently, such as in-migration of the highly skilled, international retirement migration or long-stay tourism, impressively demonstrating the blurring of the more or less arbitrary distinction between the “traditional” disciplines of tourism and migration research.

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Finally, we would like to express particular thanks to those people and institutions who supported this publication project in various ways. We are grateful to Karin MAYER for laying out this volume, supervising the preparation of figures, and crosschecking references and citations. Moreover, we would like to thank Iris O’ROURKE for proofreading. Eventually, we would like to thank ASEA-UNINET and the University of Vienna that have regularly supported the academic exchange between the Department of Geography and Regional Research and our partner institutions and universities in Asia.

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