



POINTS OF VIEW

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Thailand Needs New Narratives in the Post COVID-19

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Before the pandemic wreaked havoc around the world at the beginning of 2020, a total of 40 million tourists visited Thailand. This was a barometer of how popular Thailand was to outsiders. Questions have frequently been asked as to why so many visitors choose this country over other tropical destinations.

Most would answer that they like to visit Thailand because the Thai people are friendly and compassionate. These visitors feel good when they arrive in this country. Others would say that as a tourist destination, it is a good place to visit because it is not too expensive to enjoy a short or long-term stay.

In addition, those who love Thai food can come and eat their hearts out on every street corner. With pristine beaches and beautiful scenery, tourists can sit back and relax. The more sophisticated ones can enjoy the unique cultural heritage and traditions, not to mention the

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spirituality of Buddhism. Most of all, it is the quality of *saneh* or “charm” that has made Thailand so unique. That is: love it or hate it.

But it isn't just the smiles that have made Thailand what it is today. Given the increased connectivity and globalised world, Thai pop culture is proving irresistible for young people in faraway places. This is something new. Obviously, its popularity no way matches K-pop or Japan's Kawai phenomenon. It is not an overstatement to say that Thailand's soft power is gaining traction in the most incredible way.

In addition, take a look at the Thai film industry. It received a big boost when leading streaming services like Netflix selected Thai films for their viewers. In addition, Netflix started to produce original works in Thailand with all Thai casts for its service. Several popular Thai movies have been made into series and are now available on Netflix.

Acclaimed Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who just last week won the jury prize for his film 'Memoria' at the Cannes film festival, again gave another big boost to the Thai film industry. These days, even Thai *luk tung*, Thai folk songs, are gaining popularity in neighboring countries and Latin America. Fan-clubs of Thai *luk tung* singers can be found in Vietnam, Brazil and Mexico, and that's not to mention the Thai kick boxing fan clubs on each continent. That's led to a surge of interest in learning the Thai language in various countries.

These are the new trends that have put Thailand on people's radar. It's a far cry from the past when Thailand relied on the three S's: sun, sand and sex. These days tourists choose Thailand for lots of reasons well beyond the three S's. Today, for instance, the country has become a popular destination for LGBTQ groups because of its free and open atmosphere. These visitors have increased lately due to new strict laws in some ASEAN members. Others come for health and well-being and yet others in search of spiritual enlightenment. The list is endless.

Thailand is imperfect. It has to improve on issues related to human rights, democracy and rule of law. The pandemic has also revealed the strength of the country's public health system and at the same time also exposed the lack of care among the migrant workers and disadvantaged groups. Better understanding and appreciation of the role played by local and international non-governmental organisations in all areas would certainly improve Thailand's image and enhance the civil society organisations' activities and programmes. Obviously, it would help to promote Thailand as a rule-based and multicultural nation.

As Thailand struggles to promote its international profile and image, it has to confront a lack of common discourse among its population. Public opinion at all levels has been polarised by generation gaps, political parties and right-wing groups. For the past two decades, Thailand has been plagued by conspiracy theories and hearsay, which have further caused divisions within society. Without common narratives on the current state of Thailand, the country has to rely on reports and perceptions from abroad, which have been picked up, and certainly sensationalised, by both the traditional media and social media platforms within the country.

Without common wisdom over Thailand's future, it is hard to depict forceful narratives among stakeholders. For instance, Singapore has a very clear narrative about its country, where it stands and its future direction as far ahead as the next 50 years. Nobody can question the determination of the island republic. In Thailand, however, national discourse has seldom ended with a consensus. All things considered, whatever our people would like to do is often perceived as a work in progress.

The time has come for Thais to come up with their own narratives based on indigenous culture and traditions. For too long, outsiders have defined who we are and where we are supposed

to go. We must from now on think of ourselves and understand who and what we are with confidence.

To compete and coexist with other countries in the post-pandemic world, Thailand must retain its “free and open” nature as its foundation. The country also needs a communication strategy for locals and foreigners that will increase understanding and awareness of the nature of Thai society, norms, values and institutions. The young generation of today have yet to understand their country in a holistic way. Only through truthful explanation and exposure can Thailand instill faith in the new generations. After all, we do not have anything to fear. Today, Thailand is completely naked in the eyes of the world in terms of what has transpired over the past decade. Let’s turn this turbulent time into opportunity and make the country more transparent and accountable to all.

Looking forward, all agencies within the government and private sector as well as intellectuals and opinion makers must join hands to create narratives that reflect the real Thailand, not the one dreamed up by politicians, experts or self-interested writers or opinion makers who spin half-truths. A new generation of Thai story-tellers must be nurtured. That will bring the added values that the country needs to survive and keep its historical and cultural heritage for the generations to come.