

Child Prostitution and Sex Tourism

Thailand

A research paper

by Dr Julia O'Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor
of the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester, UK.

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BRITISH SEX TOURISTS IN THAILAND

I just get turned on very much by Orientals... They're completely different... You... take a girl from a bar, and it might be eleven or twelve at night, and you have a shower and get in bed and have sex, and then most guys go sleep till next morning. Then they'll have a bit more in the morning and then she'll go. I've had them in the morning tidy up the room, fold me clothes up, even wash me socks, stuff like that. I was quite amazed to see it. I think they might've been after an extra tip on top...

You should never fall in love, or you'll be heartbroken when you leave. They might be heartbroken too. Because quite a few of them have got cuts on their arms here. They cut themselves with a knife. They get drunk and just slash themselves. I find that terrible.

When I see a girl, when I'm looking to buy her, I always look at her arms to see what she's been doing to herself.

Bert - British sex tourist to
Thailand

The term 'sex tourism' is widely associated with organised sex tours, often conjuring up images of groups of middle aged businessmen being shepherded into state sanctioned brothels in South Korea or ago-go bars in the Philippines and Thailand. But if sex tourism is defined as consisting of people from economically developed nations travelling to underdeveloped countries 'specifically to purchase the sexual services of local women [and men]' (Enloe 1989:36), it embraces a far broader range of people, activities and locations.

Male sex tourists of all ages travel to Brazil and some African and Caribbean countries as well as to South East Asia. Bali, the Gambia and the Caribbean are popular destinations for female sex tourists. The nature and terms of the exchanges between sex tourists and local people vary enormously, as does the degree to which any third party, including the state, is involved.

A number of authors have discussed the economic, social, political, institutional and ideological factors which underpin the growth of sex tourism in South East Asia (Barry 1979,1984, Mitter 1986, Heyzer 1986, Enloe 1989, Lee 1991). This paper does not set out to contribute to debate in this area but will merely refer the reader to Truong's (1990) detailed and scholarly analysis of the phenomenon.

Instead, the primary aim of the paper is to provide some empirical data on the attitudes, motivations and activities of male British sex tourists in Thailand. For between 1980 and 1986, Britain supplied over a million of the 15.8 million tourists who visited Thailand, 73% of whom were male (Truong 1990:173-4) and it is important to ask what kind of people the hundred thousand or so British men who annually visit are, and why so many of them are prepared to travel so far in order to pay for sex.

Preliminary data from an on-going piece of research' suggests that British sex tourists are not an entirely homogeneous group; they can be subdivided into three broad types, but for all these men, sex tourism in Thailand has three main attractions which, to varying degrees, shape their decision to travel for sex. The paper begins by developing a typology of sex tourists, then goes on to look at what they get out of sex tourism.

VARIETIES OF SEX TOURISTS

Of the British tourists I interviewed and observed who had chosen Thailand as a holiday destination specifically for sexual purposes, one clearly identifiable subgroup was made up of 'Macho Lads'. These men were typically skilled, semi- and unskilled manual workers in their early twenties. Not all are package tourists. In fact, those that I interviewed had all made their own travel arrangements. For most, this was at least their second or third visit to Pattaya (Thailand's premier sex resort) and all had first travelled to Thailand on the personal recommendation of another sex tourist. Macho Lads often travel in groups of three or four and those who arrive alone seem to quickly team up with others with whom they sunbathe, drink and visit clubs.

For these young men, Pattaya is a kind of macho theme park with beer, motorbikes, ago-go bars, kick boxing, live sex shows, pool tables in English style pubs and guaranteed access to dolly birds to posture with and have sex. Most of the Macho Lads interviewed said that they use prostitutes in England either regularly or occasionally, though some claimed never to have purchased sexual services anywhere except in Thailand.

As well as the Macho Lads, there are large numbers of men to whom I shall refer as 'Mr. Average'. Though most of these men were on second or third trips to Thailand, all of those I spoke to had originally come to Pattaya on package tours, some specifically targeted at 'single men'. Mr. Average is usually, but not always, older than the Macho Lad, and he is often divorced or widowed. He may be a skilled manual worker, self-employed or in a junior or middle management position, but he prides himself on being a respectable 'ordinary bloke'. He is primarily (though not exclusively) interested in simulating some kind of emotional or romantic relationship with either one woman or a series of women, rather than pursuing large numbers of anonymous sexual encounters.

These men describe Pattaya as 'Fantasy Island' and, except for the early evening period when they tend to sit round the hotel bar engaging in manly conversation with each other, they have a Thai woman on their arm at all times. Most claim never to visit prostitutes in Britain and do not consider themselves as clients even in Thailand.

Many people would, no doubt, explain the behaviour of Mr. Average and the Macho Lads through reference to their class position and their lack of formal education. But more bourgeois men also practice sex tourism. Numerous 'Cosmopolitan Men', well off, well read and well traveled, also buy sexual services in Thailand.

These men are keen to differentiate themselves from their compatriots 'I'm not a sex tourist', 'I'm not a package tourist', 'I am spending a few months travelling South East Asia', and 'I'm here on business really'. They visit more remote and less developed spots, they spend more time in Bangkok, but they also go to Patty for a few days in order to 'relax'. They are worldly-wise but they do not see themselves as the kind of men who frequent prostitutes. Several said that they would never use a prostitute anywhere else in the world.

In short, then, sex tourists do not constitute an entirely homogeneous group. They vary in terms of age and social class, and there are differences in terms of their willingness to see themselves as sex abusers² However, to a greater or lesser degree, all the three types described above are drawn to Thailand as sex tourists for three sets of reasons. First, commodity sex is cheap in Thailand and the degree of 'consumer' choice is immense.

Second, the nature and terms of exchange between prostitute and client in Thailand is very different from that between prostitute and client in Britain or any other European country. In Thailand the exchange is far less contractual and this makes it much more attractive to British men for a number of reasons. Finally, all three types of men find sex tourism affirmative of a particular 'radicalised' and sexualised masculine identity. The following sections discuss these issues in detail.

PRICE ADVANTAGES AND SOVEREIGN CONSUMERS

Any analysis of sex tourism which fails to consider its economics is doomed to provide only a partial explanation of the phenomenon, for without the obscene disparity in average per capita incomes between the countries which host sex tourists and those which supply them, sex tourism would be a marginal activity of a very different character. Feminists, socialists and policy makers may not all be entirely happy about the tourists who visit Amsterdam in order to buy sexual services from local people, for example, but because the power relations and economics involved here are of a very different order from those involved in sex tourism in underdeveloped countries, it does not excite the same moral and political repugnance.

Throughout the following discussion it must be borne in mind that whatever the complexity of British men's motivations, the bottom *line* in terms of explaining why they are in Thailand is cost. In Thailand, a prostitute can be rented for almost 24 hours for as little as 500 Baht (around £18), a sum of money that would barely secure a man a ten minute 'blow job' in Britain. The cheapness of sexual services (as well as of accommodation, food, drinks, travel and other services) furnishes a single, working class British man with a level of economic power that he could never enjoy at home or in any other European country, and all the sex tourists I interviewed commented on the fact that in Thailand they 'live like kings' or 'playboys'.

These men find themselves not only with untold economic power, they also find themselves 'spoilt for choice'. For in Thailand, the relationship between the tourist and the sex industry is so complex and multifaceted that the array of different forms of commoditised sex on offer to tourists is quite staggering. Truong (1990:199) explains that the historical roots of this diversity lie in the fact that:

The legal persecution of prostitutes occurred almost simultaneously with the legal formalisation of the entertainment industry, owing to an investment policy skewed towards capturing the 'Rest and Recreation market during the Indochina conflict.

The duality between the recognition and denial of prostitution, coupled with a massive arrival of US military servicemen, led to a proliferation of forms of prostitution disguised within the

entertainment industry. Ad-hoc practices of hosting prostitution gradually became systemic as a result of the high rate of capital accumulation. (Truong 1990:199).

Today this proliferation means that female, male and transsexual prostitutes are to be found working from a huge variety of settings - including brothels, bars, massage parlours, escort agencies, discos, hotels, streets, beaches. A range of more diffusely sexualised entertainment and personal services are also widely available in Bangkok and most major Thai resorts for example, cabarets which are mildly erotic rather than overtly sexual, beachside masseuses who caress feet, hands and backs but provide no direct genital stimulation).

Moreover, there is both a formal market for mail order brides and marriage bureaux catering almost exclusively to Western men and an informal market consisting of women who independently seek Western men for long term relationships, so that, in essence, tourists are provided with a continuum of opportunities to purchase sexual pleasure and rights of sexual access in Thailand. This continuum runs through from the mere pleasure of looking at sexually available women (and men and children) at one pole to the satisfaction of complete sexual possession at the other.

Thailand's sex industry has become a tourist attraction in itself and reputable guide books recommend a visit to red light districts (see Kusy 1992). In these areas, tourists (even those who never go on to become sex-abusers) are provided with opportunities for voyeurism and mild titillation, pleasures which are generally paid for indirectly through the inflated prices of drinks, or directly through a cover charge made upon entering or leaving bars or live sex shows. For those tourists who do go on to purchase the services of a prostitute, the extent and visibility of 'vice' in these areas doubtless enhances their pleasure, for as Hoigard and Finstad (1986:88) found in their study based in Oslo, 'some men find sexual value in peeping as a prelude to the act of prostitution'.

For tourists who want more than titillation, it is possible to purchase what is known as 'short time' with a prostitute. This service is generally on offer in massage parlours as well as at the ago-go and live sex show bars/brothels mentioned above. The tourist pays the parlour or bar owner a fee, which varies between 300 and 1,000 Baht (£10 - £25)³ then takes the prostitute of his choice to an upstairs room where he enjoys one or two hours of sexual access to her.

A variation on this arrangement is found in bars which make a cover charge of around 500 Baht in exchange for which the customer receives one drink and the sexual attentions of a woman as they consume it. In Pattaya, for example, there is a bar known as the 'No Hands Bar' where prostitutes crawl under the tables in order to fellate the customers.

Men can also rent bar prostitutes for around 24 hours at a time. The client pays what is known as a 'bar fine' of 200 to 500 Baht to the bar plus a sum that is negotiated with the prostitute directly to her. Having paid the fine, the man is free to take the prostitute back to his hotel room for the whole night and most of the following day. The formal rationale for this is as follows. Bar owners employ people to work the bar (selling drinks, cleaning up, chatting to customers) or as dancers. If a customer wants to take one of the workers away from the bar for the night, he must pay the bar owner a 'fine' in compensation for the loss of that person's labour.

In reality, however, these workers are rarely paid a regular wage by the bar owner,⁴ and there are always far more women or men attached to any one bar than is necessary to run it, so that the 'fine' system is actually a source of income for the bar owner who is effectively operating a 'take away' brothel. He gets his cut without having to support the overheads associated with providing rooms and facilities for clients who use their own hotel rooms.

Overnight deals can also be negotiated with freelance prostitutes who solicit outside bars and discos as well as from a variety of other settings, and it is worth noting that these 24 hour deals underline the extent to which the tourism and the sex industries are interwoven. Such arrangements would be impossible without the active collusion of hoteliers. Some hotels charge customers a fee for bringing a prostitute back for the night, others simply profit by the extra drinks and breakfasts sold and the custom won through not making a charge.

Many Western package tour operators negotiate with hoteliers over these fees, for their absence is a major selling point; indeed, seasoned sex tourists state that this is the one real advantage of buying a package holiday rather than travelling independently.

Sex tourists can also enter into transactions of more extended duration with prostitutes, keeping the same woman with them for several days or weeks. This kind of arrangement is generally made with bar or freelance prostitutes

following a 24 hour deal which has proved satisfactory to the sex client but can also sometimes be made with women who do not work full time as prostitutes.

For those white men who want more than just this kind of 'long haul' deal, there is often the option of complete sexual possession through marriage. This can be arranged through one of the many agencies operating in Bangkok, or informally with the woman and/or her relatives.

Thailand thus offers an abundance of choice and diversity in terms of the sexual pleasures that can be bought and the kind of transactions involved, all at knock-down prices. The sheer number of prostitutes working in Bangkok and Pattaya means that it also offers choice in terms of the prostitutes themselves. As one man put it, 'You can go with a different girl every night. It's every man's dream come true'. It is also possible for men to 'experiment' with troilism and, for those who are so inclined, with transsexuals and/or underage girls and boys.⁵

Finally, it should be noted (and this overlaps with points that will be made in the following section) that British men believe their money buys them sexual access to a 'better class' of women in Thailand - 'You can take your pick of thousands of the most beautiful women in the world and they're nice girls too. A lot of them are very respectable'.

THE NON-CONTRACTUAL NATURE OF TRANSACTIONS

Although it is the low price of sexual services in Thailand which makes sex tourism a viable activity for so many British men, there is more to their motivation than simply cost considerations. No doubt £200 would buy sexual access to almost as many junkies and homeless teenagers in Kings Cross as it does to Thai women but few British sex tourists would consider spending a fortnight in London for that purpose. This is partly because the setting would be colder and not the least 'exotic' and the accommodation and food more expensive, and partly because British street prostitutes are considered to be 'low life' by these men. But it is also because transactions between clients and prostitutes in Britain and in Thailand have a very different character.

In Britain, sexual services are generally sold by the piece and the transaction is modelled on the lines of other commercial exchanges. Like contractual labour in modern, capitalist societies (Littler 1985), the exchange normally involves an explicit agreement to perform a specified and limited service or task. Obviously, formal contracts are not drawn up, but each party's rights and duties are implicitly defined and generally speaking, in Britain the exchange is so highly focused that the prostitute has fulfilled her side of the contract once the client has ejaculated. An important skill is therefore to be able to bring men to orgasm as quickly as possible (see O'Connell Davidson 1994, Hoigard and Finstad 1992). The narrow and commercial nature of the exchange is more than evident to clients as well as prostitutes and a man would no more expect a prostitute to cuddle or stroke him or act as his companion after sex than he would expect a plumber to do so after fixing a leaking pipe.

There are men who find sexual value in such anonymous and instrumental encounters, but one of the more curious findings of research on prostitution (at least for those who are surprised by the extent of human hypocrisy and capacity for self deceit) is that many sex clients in European countries bemoan the impersonal approach of prostitutes.

De Graaf *et al* (1992:9), for example, quote some clients in Amsterdam as saying that they really want comfort, contact and a 'nice chat' from prostitutes and complaining that 'you don't get the warmth and attention that you are looking for'. Hoistad and Fingard (1992:95) found that although a majority of clients in their Oslo study 'say that they go to a prostitute among other reasons because it is non-committal, they also say that they want warm girls, increased intimacy, and understanding'.

In other words, many men want to buy sex as a commodity but do not want the exchange to be simply a contractual market one. Just as capitalist employers would ideally like employees who are disposable at will, yet wholly devoted, bound to them by pre-market codes of loyalty and allegiance and willing to do more than just stick rigidly to a job description, nirvana for many sex clients would be access on demand to the full range of sexual, emotional and other services from women in exchange for nothing more than a pre-set sum of money.

That European prostitutes are often able to use the rational, economic principles of a free market society to limit and control how much of their sexual and other labour is alienated in exchange for a given fee is a sign of their relative social and economic strength and this becomes clear when their experience is compared to that of most Thai prostitutes.

In Thailand, transactions between clients and prostitutes are far less explicitly contractual. Although men can and do buy 'short time' with prostitutes, giving a predetermined sum of money for a more or less set period of time, the exchange between prostitutes and clients is typically far more diffuse and open ended than that which takes place in Britain.

So far as overnight deals are concerned, the sum of money which the man will pay directly to the prostitute is not always negotiated in advance and the services which the prostitute will provide are rarely explicitly stated.

Moreover, these deals are seldom a simple, focused exchange of *sexual* services for money. Prostitutes also provide other forms of labour. They often act as companion and interpreter, shop, carry luggage, tidy and clean the client's room, wash and fold his clothes, for example, as well as providing personal services such as massages and manicures. With 'long haul' deals, women are likewise expected to provide both sexual and non-sexual services but the terms of the exchange are usually even more varied, vague and ill specified than those associated with 24 hour deals. One sex tourist described his three week arrangement as follows:

I started off going a bit crazy, but then I thought I'd just settle with this one girl. I liked her so I told her how much money I'd got left for me holiday and I said to her I could give her 350 Baht a day, and she could do all my shopping, sort out the hotels and laundry and that, and then any money I've

got left over at the end of my stay, she can keep it. She was dead pleased with that, and she's really got some bargains, so I'll be able to leave her quite a bit extra.

Another man explained how he had spent two weeks with a woman the previous year, during which time he covered all expenses, bought her several gifts and gave her 'pocket money'. Once back in England, he sent her £50. She then wrote to tell him that she had given up bar prostitution and moved back to the countryside, and asked him to pay for a buffalo for her family.

Before parting with the necessary £200, the man asked a friend of his who was about to visit Pattaya to check that she had really left the Pattaya bar and was no longer working as prostitute. When his friend confirmed her story, he paid for the buffalo and arranged to spend the whole three weeks of his next holiday with her, again on terms that were essentially left to his discretion rather than negotiated in advance. Walker's (1992) collection of 'love' letters to Bangkok bar prostitutes from Western men reveal that such stories are by no means uncommon.

Three points need to be made about all this. First of all, the fact that sex tourists exercise so much control over how much they pay a prostitute and get so much more for what they do pay than they would from British prostitutes is obviously, in itself, very pleasing to them. A Macho Lad commented:

It's up to you what you give the girl; I've give 300, I've give a 1,000. It's up to you. It depends how much you've had to drink... They say 'you give me what you want'. I don't think there's ever a set price for it.

His friend also observed that 'getting the girl' for a whole night made the experience very different from 'going with English prostitutes':

There's no pressure, you can take your time, you don't have to do it straight away and you can do it as much as you like. With some of the girls anyway. It depends a bit. But they're all much more friendly, they really want to please you.

Second, the client experiences his power over the prostitute in a different way in Thailand. The reality is that in Thailand as much as in Britain, the sex client, like all individuals in capitalist societies, 'carries his social power, as also his connection with society, in his pocket' (Marx 1973:94). But because he does not have to explicitly agree a price for every service the Thai prostitute provides, she appears to him as acquiescent and subordinate to his whims and desires in a way that a British prostitute never could.

The third point follows from this, and it is that the non-contractual nature of the prostitute-client exchange in Thailand serves to conceal its commercial nature from the man. This aspect of Thai prostitution is absolutely central to most sex tourists, for it makes it possible for them to pay for sexual services without having to see themselves as the kind of men who use prostitutes.

I have no empirical data to support this claim, but I would suggest that though hundreds of thousands of men do use prostitutes, very few willingly and happily embrace the identity of a purchaser-of-sex. To visit a prostitute on occasion may be a sign of machismo but to be dependent on the services of prostitutes because you are unable to 'pull' women is a sign of failure, and the line between the two is a dangerously fine one, especially for men who do not conform to their society's ideals of physical attractiveness.

Certainly, the Mr. Average type does not wish to see himself as a purchaser of sex. Pattaya is 'fantasy island' precisely because when a 22 year old woman approaches him and puts a slim arm around the rolls of fat bulging over the waistband of his trousers or strokes his balding head and tells him that he is 'a sexy man', he can convince himself that it is true. He can suspend his disbelief. In the mirror of the 'beautiful Oriental girl' he sees himself reflected back as half his size and half his age.

But it is not just Mr. Average who is keen to avoid acknowledging the commercial nature of his transactions. Macho Lads and Cosmopolitan Men also stress the fact that Thai prostitutes are not like prostitutes and therefore it follows that they themselves are not like purchasers-of-sex: Over here they're not low life like English prostitutes... You don't really think of them as prostitutes.

You don't feel as if you're going with a prostitute, it's not like that. They're more like girlfriends really. You do everything with them. It isn't just sex, they're not like prostitutes.

They really look after you. They make you feel special. You don't feel like a, I don't know how to put it, you don't feel like a customer. They're very natural, very genuine, you can tell that they do really like you.

Because sex tourists do not have to enter into explicit agreements on the terms and conditions of the exchange and because Thai prostitutes make gestures and provide services which are interpreted as demonstrations of genuine affection, it is relatively easy for men to forget that they are engaged in an economic transaction. This in turn helps them to delude themselves into thinking that they have really 'scored', that their personal charms and not their wallets have attracted the woman in question.

Given that the vast majority of British (in fact of all European) sex tourists are less than appealing in terms of European cultural norms of male beauty, it is not difficult to see that sex tourism can do something more for these men's self image than simply make them feel all right about using prostitutes.

The following sections examine the ways in which sex tourism helps British men to reinforce and construct a powerful and positive image of themselves as a particular kind of white heterosexual man.

SEX TOURISM AND MASCULINITY

Segal (1990:123) has observed that 'masculinity is not some type of single essence, innate or acquired', rather there are competing and contradictory representations of masculinity in Western culture. She continues:

'masculinity' is a quality of being which is always incomplete, and which is equally based on a social as on a psychic reality. It exists in the various forms of power men ideally possess: the power to assert control over women, over other men, over their own bodies, over machines and technology

I want to argue that if the words 'machines and technology' are substituted with 'material objects', then British sex tourists find in their sex tourism the opportunity to become truly 'masculine'. Because the economic power of British men of all social classes is far greater in Thailand than it is in Britain, sex tourists (like all tourists) obtain control over the material world in ways that are not open to them at home.

They can buy rounds of drinks carelessly, eat in smart restaurants and stay in smart hotels, they can indulge in Dallas and Dynasty fantasies as they sit by swimming pools, waited on hand and foot, they can rent big motorbikes, travel to and from the airport in air conditioned limousines, they can buy cheap silk shirts and fancy leather boots. The life style that at home is reserved only for rich and powerful men is temporarily within their grasp, and as a British observer, one cannot help but be struck by the strutting and swaggering confidence of men who, in their own country, exhibit so little of it.

Obviously these men obtain power over women as well as over the material world (because, of course, women have been reduced to material objects). As one sex tourist put it:

There's no pressure on you there, you don't have to worry about going out and getting someone, because you know any time, day or night, you can have anyone you want within seconds. You feel so powerful, you feel you're in control of your sex life.

Unless it is assumed that all men have some kind of biological drive to sexually possess as many women as possible (a view which sex tourists, along with sociobiologists, adhere to) then it is necessary to explain why these particular men have such a strong desire for this kind of control. Almost all the sex tourists interviewed spoke with great bitterness about white women's power to deny them sexual access.

Macho Lads complained that English women are 'hard work', that going to discos in England is 'a waste of time', Mr. Average bemoaned the fact that 'pretty' English women know they are pretty and demand the world (they want to marry you then soak you for every penny when they divorce you) and a Cosmopolitan Man told me that:

I'm forty-eight, I'm balding, I'm not as trim as I was. Would a charming, beautiful, young woman want me in England? No. I'd have to accept a big, fat, ugly woman. That's all I could get.

In short, sex tourists express a kind of misogynous rage against women who have the power to demand anything at all -whether it is the right to have a say over who they have sex with and when or the right to maintenance payments for their children. Psychodynamic theories which view all eroticism as an expression of infantile rage, revenge and hostility (see, for example, Stoller 1979) might explain these men's particular passion for women who are perceived as powerless and sexually available through reference to childhood experiences of rejection and humiliation.

However, one could equally well argue that there is nothing very individual or distinctive about these particular men's attitudes and desires; it is just that they are less well equipped (in terms of economic power, physical appearance and/or social skills) to achieve the degree of access to British women that they would like.

As well as attaining power over the material world and over women, these men experience a greater sense of power over their own bodies in Thailand, certainly so far as their sexuality is concerned. The sex tourist quoted above said that he was 'in control of his sex life', and told me he needed penetrative sex to 'get me sex drive out for the night'. In fact, all the sex tourists I interviewed imagined themselves to be at the mercy of a biological imperative to regularly ejaculate inside a woman's vagina, and the fact that they enjoy sexual access on demand in Thailand is thus interpreted as a form of power over their own bodies. Sex tourism also frees men from other aspects of the body's control over them.

Cultural definitions of beauty turn many people's bodies into prisons, making their sexual desires unattainable, and it is certainly the case that large numbers of sex tourists are either physically repellent by European standards (I have never seen so many enormously overweight men together in one place before), or disfigured or disabled in some way, or too old to be considered sexually attractive.

Finally, sex tourism gives sex tourists a sense of power over other men. The fact that they are in a position to have sex with as many 'beautiful' women as they want makes them feel 'one up' on the men who stay at home. They also engage in a kind of 'ranking' process in relation to other male sex tourists, one which, as the following section shows, allows them to place themselves on the top of a sexualised and 'racialised' scale.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A WHITE HETEROSEXUAL IDENTITY

One of the more unexpected characteristics of the sex tourist is that he appears to be obsessed by the morality of other sex tourists. At first this appears to be simply an extreme form of hypocrisy. It is acceptable for them, as heterosexual men, to exploit the economic misfortunes of Thai women, but homosexual men who do the same thing to Thai men are 'sick'.

It is acceptable for them to pay a bar fine and take a 16 year old girl back to their hotel for the night, but they expressed a desire to do physical violence to men who pay pimps to take 14 or 15 year old boys back to their rooms. Their own observations of paedophiles, 'gays' and 'perverts' forms an endlessly diverting topic for conversation between themselves and serves as a platform from which to assert their own moral superiority.

In practice this obsession with morality is, I would argue, an obsession with defining and preserving a particular masculine, heterosexual identity, for the moral issue at the heart of their conversations is not whether there can be genuine consent between people who are unequal in terms of age or economic power but whether sex tourists' actions transgress rules about 'normal' male sexuality. This is well illustrated by the following story told to me by a sex tourist from Newcastle:

When I was in Ko Chang there was this old Austrian bloke, must have been 70 at least, and he was enticing the dogs into his beach hut, tempting stray dogs in there with food. It was fucking disgusting. Anyway, someone told the police and they had words with him, but I was telling this bloke at the bar one night and I pointed the bloke out to him and he just walked over to the Austrian bloke and punched him in the face. He said 'You dirty fucking poofster' and he floored him. He says to me after, 'He comes to paradise and what does he do? Fucks dogs'.

The 'natural' and morally proper thing to do in 'paradise' is, of course, to have sex with a debt-bonded sixteen year old girl in a room above the bar where night after night she must pull strings of razor blades from her vagina in front of an audience of leering men.

But the construction of moral hierarchies by British sex tourists is not only about reinforcing a particular kind of male heterosexual identity. It is also about reinforcing and constructing a specifically white identity. The most powerful venom and moral condemnation is directed towards sex tourists from the Gulf States.

Every sex tourist I spoke to, with the exception of a couple of 'Cosmopolitan Men', told me that Thai women hate 'the Arabs' and avoid 'going with them'. This is because 'Arabs', unlike European men, rape them, cheat them, refuse to pay them, do 'depraved things' to them, insist on anal intercourse, and because 'Arabs' are 'dirty', 'smelly', 'do it with boys and girls', 'hold hands with each other in the streets' and are unattractive to Thai women because they are not white skinned.

In Pattaya, I was even confronted by the extraordinary sight of a British skinhead sitting at a bar with one arm around a Thai woman and the other raised in a Sieg Heil salute at a passing citizen of the Arab Emirates. There is also a British owned bar which proudly displays a poster of a pig wearing a yashmak above which is written 'We respect your religion that's why we refuse to serve you'.

Colonial ideologies did and still do express complex and variable forms of racism (see Thomas 1994), and British sex tourists construct a positive image of themselves as white men not only through the denigration of 'Arabs', but also through their exoticisation and idealisation of Thai women. For these men, Thai women are definitely 'Other', but not the same kind of Other as 'Arab' men or even African Caribbean women (see Collins 1990, Hooks 1981, Kovel 1984, Beckles 1989).

Thai women are believed to think differently and to have different values and expectations to white women. 'They' are also held to be more affectionate, loyal, innocent and natural than white women. Thai women are also uniformly held to be great beauties. 'They're all like film stars or models, aren't they? It's the hair and the skin, and they're mostly always petite, you know, slim and small'.

The destructive consequences of 'racist' constructions of Thai women as Other are most immediate and most terrifying around issues of safer sex. 6

All the men I interviewed commented on how clean Thai women are, noting things like the frequency with which 'They' wash, 'Their' neat and tidy appearance, 'Their' scrupulously clean and manicured nails and so on. The implications of this were spelled out clearly by one man:

I don't know why people always go on about AIDs in Thailand. Thai women are the cleanest women in the world. They don't shower once a day, they don't shower twice a day. They shower four times a day

His friend, who also appeared to believe that frequent washing is a prophylactic against AIDS, told me that 'most of the girls will do it without a condom if you pay them enough', but that he would never have unprotected sex with a bar girl, only with freelancers who seemed new to the work.

Romanticised views of Thai women as 'innocent', 'natural', 'clean' and so on exist alongside an implicit denigration of Thai men, for British sex tourists are convinced that, despite their own 'exotic' charm and beauty, Thai women recognise the superiority of whites. Sex tourists continually assert that Thai women prefer white men (white skin "turns them on", white men "treat them better than Arabs and their own kind") and that Thai women would actually like to be white themselves ('They admire white skin', 'They won't sunbathe because they want to be white', 'Basically, they all want to get married to a European').

There are some interesting parallels between contemporary British sex tourists' beliefs about Thai women and nineteenth century Britons' beliefs about Black women in the Caribbean. Beckles (1989:148) quotes a visitor to Barbados in the 1820s:

Generally speaking, the [coloured women] look down... with a feeling of contempt on men of their own color... and rather than live with them a virtuous and inoffensive life, they prefer dwelling with a white man in a state of moral degradation.

So far as sex tourists today are concerned, such beliefs help them to explain to themselves why young and beautiful Thai women find them so irresistible without having to refer to the commercial side of their relationship, and thus to further deflect attention from their identity as purchasers of sex. But they also link into other self serving stereotypes, especially those surrounding the supposed subservient, passive and accommodating nature of Thai and other 'oriental' women.

For as well as attributing the characteristics already mentioned to Thai women, sex tourists are of the opinion that Thai women are genetically and culturally predisposed towards subordination and self-denial.

Through the lens of their 'racism', these men interpret virtually everything that Thai women do as a mark of their desire to serve. If a British man holds a door open for a British woman, it is not interpreted as a mark of his subjugation to her. But when Thai women observe certain formal codes governing respect for and the care of others (for instance, speaking in a low voice, paying attention to a companion's physical comfort and so on), it is taken to be a mark of her willing subjection. British sex tourists tell you that 'it's in their nature to be subservient' or that 'it's part of their culture', and this is why prostitutes will carry their bags and suitcases, clean their combs, pour their drinks, plump up their pillows and so on.

They also view Thai women as sexually passive, using terms like 'innocent' and 'natural' to describe their sexuality. 'They aren't into anything kinky' one man told me, and those who use prostitutes in Britain claim that Thai prostitutes seem inexperienced; 'English prostitutes know all the tricks, they take the lead, they suggest things. But Thai girls are very innocent, they're very natural and affectionate'. These qualities are described as 'a big turn on to British men, and it is also conveniently assumed that 'innocent' Thai women thoroughly enjoy straight, penetrative sex with them (which is, of course, partly why they don't like 'perverted Arabs').

All variants of 'racism' serve to deny the subjectivity and humanity of those defined as Other, and Ward (1988:xxviii) points out that this denial can 'be constituted through a process of idealisation' as much as through one of denigration. Certainly the idealised 'innocence' of Thai women appears to serve the same purpose as the attribution of 'voracious' sexual appetites to Brazilian women by sex tourists in San Paulo (and the attribution of 'libidinous' and 'animalistic' sexuality to Black women by whites in slave societies of the Caribbean). For whether she is constructed as passive and innocent or active and depraved, the Other is imagined to relish the white man's sexual attentions.

But it is also important to note that, even so far as any one 'racialised' group is concerned, there is a certain plasticity about these processes of denial, and the 'racialised' world view of British sex tourists in Thailand can

serve ends other than those described so far. For although a majority of the sex tourists I interviewed were primarily interested in penetrating the vaginas of 'beautiful' and subservient women, there were some, particularly Macho Lads, whose sexual interests were more wide ranging.

Again, their 'racism' helped them to feel all right about their desires and activities. It has already been observed that sex tourists draw very sharp boundaries between the 'natural' and 'unnatural', the 'normal' and the 'perverse', and that these boundaries also mark off masculinity. Men who transgress them are not 'real men'. Yet several Macho Lads admitted to engaging in sexual practices in Thailand that they would normally define as 'perverse', for example, 'sharing' a Thai prostitute with male friends, allowing male friends to video them having sex with a prostitute, and having sexual contact with transsexual prostitutes.

Patterson (1982:51) has observed that where caste relations 'demarcate impassable boundaries', the essence of slavery is that 'the slave, in his social death, lives on the margins between... life and death, the sacred and the secular. Already dead, he lives outside the manna of the gods and can cross the boundaries with social and supernatural impunity' and for some British sex tourists, it appears that Thai sex workers, as 'racialised' Others, have this kind of liminal status. They have so little social worth that it is possible for the sex tourist to transgress boundaries and do things which, if done with a white person, would bring dishonour. As one Macho Lad said:

I was in this bar, a no-hands bar, and this girl, well except she was a fella, a Lady Boy, come up and did a blow job... I knew she was a he, you can always tell by the Adam's apple. But I didn't really care. It's all right here. But I'd slit my throat if that happened in England.

CONTRADICTIONS IN THE WORLD VIEW OF THE SEX TOURIST

It should be evident from the above discussion that the world view of the British sex tourist is not wholly internally consistent, and that his desires are often self contradictory. He wants Thai women to be both sexually available and sexually innocent, and although sex tourists say that they like the 'subservience' of Thai women, they also complain about their 'passivity'. Several men told me that they often 'got sick of the compliance of the women whose bodies and labour they purchase. As one said:

It gets on your nerves after a while, whatever you ask, they say 'It's up to you'. 'Do you want the telly on?', 'Up to you'. 'Do you want something to eat?', 'Up to you'. 'Shall we stop at this bar?', 'Up to you'. 'Do you want to make love?', 'Up to you'. It drives you mad.

Meanwhile, a general complaint about 'long haul' deals is that it is very difficult to build a relationship with the woman because of language problems and the absence of a shared culture. In fact, many sex tourists say that they get lonely for their 'own kind' whilst on holiday in Thailand. As one Cosmopolitan Man explained:

I could never be happy in a relationship with a Thai woman. They aren't intellectual, they don't read, they've nothing to say. Life's always a compromise. You can talk to Western women, but they don't look good. With Thai girls it's the other way round, so you always have to take the rough with the smooth. Life's never perfect.

Oddly enough, many sex tourists are actually also troubled by moral issues surrounding consent. These men generally know that Thailand is a 'poor country' and that many women are forced to prostitute themselves in order to support their families. On the one hand, this helps them to sustain the notion that Thai prostitutes are not really prostitutes (and thus that they are not really buyers of sex). These women do not conform to their stereotypes of prostitutes and can be considered as 'decent' and 'respectable' women who just unfortunately happen to live in a country where poverty drives them to sell their bodies. But in recognising this, their own actions come to seem morally reprehensible.

It looks dangerously as though they are taking advantage of the misfortunes of these damsels in distress. Now Macho Lads are not much troubled by this. They tend to view sex tourism almost as a form of welfare provision by the West for an economically 'backward' nation - 'If these blokes stopped coming out here, I'd hate to think what would happen to these girls', as one remarked. But for Mr. Average, who wants so much to see himself as a 'decent' bloke, it is a real dilemma.

The easiest way to resolve it is to tell himself that the 'beautiful girl' in his bed is there because she finds him so desirable, not because her poverty has forced her there. But such a fiction is hard to maintain when Mr. Average is daily confronted by the sight of 'beautiful girls', perhaps his own former sexual partners, telling other, often still less attractive Europeans that they too are 'sexy men'.

There is always a tension for Mr. Average between seeing himself as truly desired and so feeling good about himself, and seeing himself as exploiting 'nice, respectable girls' and feeling bad about himself. Some men become defensive in response to this.

A number of Mr. Averages expressed great ambivalence towards prostitutes, lurching irrationally from paternalistic sympathy - 'They do it for their families' - to malevolent hostility - 'They're hard bitches really' in the space of only a few minutes conversation.

I was assured that despite all appearances to the contrary, most of the bar girls in Pattaya were actually earning huge sums of money and frittering it away instead of 'saving for a rainy day'. 'You buy them gold and the moment you leave, they just sell it and spend the money', one complained. 'You must never fall in love, or they'll skin you alive' another warned.

Perhaps the most unpleasant Mr. Average of all was the one who sat down with me in the hotel lobby one morning, still drunk from the night before, three days growth of stubble on his face, his shirt and trousers stained with food and said:

It's all changed here.

You never saw a girl drink or smoke when I first came to Thailand. All the business with whisky and cigarettes is totally new.

They were nice girls then. They were soft, very soft. Now it's all changed. It's commercialism.

They're hard and they're after money.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to provide some empirical data on the attitudes, motivations and activities of male British sex tourists, rather than to develop a theoretical analysis either of these men or of the phenomenon of sex tourism. However, I will end with some brief comments on theoretical issues.

In particular, I wish to take issue with those analyses which give primacy to the concept of patriarchy in discussions of sex tourism and prostitution, for it seems to me that this concept alone is not enough to explain the attitudes, motivations and activities of British male sex tourists.

Radical feminists hold that 'sexuality is gendered as gender sexualised... the eroticisation of dominance and submission creates gender... Thus, the sex difference and the dominance-submission dynamic define each other.' (MacKinnon 1988:107, see also Jeffreys 1990)

Although I believe that British sex tourists provide a very clear example of how a masculine identity can be expressed, reinforced and constructed through a given sexual practice, I think it would be wrong to conclude that the power these men exercise is simply or even primarily patriarchal. Their power is also 'racialised' and its currency is economic, and it is only if we recognise this that we can develop analyses of sex tourism that can accommodate the unpalatable fact that not all sex tourists are heterosexual and not all sex tourists are men.

It is also clear that male sex tourists are not the only group of people to derive benefits from sex tourism. Its economic benefits for national and international capital are equally, if not more, striking. As well as being part of the planned economic development of a number of South East Asian countries, providing a vital source of foreign exchange and substantial profits for local entrepreneurs, national and international travel, tourist and leisure companies, I would argue that sex tourism plays a broader economic role, contributing to an on-going process of primitive accumulation.

A number of Marxist theorists have argued that non-capitalist modes of production have been artificially preserved in under-developed countries, and that these household economies supply cheap labour to the capitalist system. Potts (1990:188) summarises as follows:

According to the requirements of capitalism, [the worker] is either incorporated - in various ways - into the capitalist productive process or thrown back into the household. This household feeds the worker during unproductive periods and thus reproduces the worker's labour power.

In this way, reproduction takes place at no cost to capital. In Thailand, it seems that a prostitution economy serves precisely this same function, for not only are women thrown into this economy whenever their labour is surplus to capital's requirements, but also women's sexual labour often wholly or partly supports the households that furnish both national and international capital with a cheap, disposable workforce.

To argue that sex tourism, or indeed any other form of prostitution, exists in order to ensure that men can buy 'the sex act' and so exercise patriarchal rights of access to women's bodies (see Pateman 1988:199) deflects attention from these economic and social relations, yet it is precisely upon these relations that the power men like Bert (quoted at the start of this paper) exercise over Thai prostitutes rests upon.

Analyses which view patriarchy as *the locus* of social power also create political problems when applied to sex tourism. If prostitution is seen as a form of sexual oppression rather than of economic exploitation, it follows that 'Free prostitution does not exist, whatever the means of exercising it... prostitution of women [is] always by force... it is a violation of human rights and an outrage to the dignity of women (Barry 1991, quoted in van der Gaag 1994).

As well as drawing radical feminists into direct conflict with most grassroots prostitute organisations campaigning to develop, extend and protect the rights of sex workers (a project which necessarily involves a view of prostitution as a form of paid work and also, therefore, a recognition of women's individual freedom to choose this route to economic survival), such a position obscures all distinctions between prostitutes and the very different social relations which govern their work (see Truong 1990).

In reality, the term 'prostitution embraces an enormous range of activities undertaken on very different terms and under very different conditions, and for reasons of political strategy it is vital to distinguish between them.

My own view is that while sex tourism must be recognised as first and foremost a form of economic exploitation, it should also be seen as a unique and distinctive form of exploitation. There are fundamental differences between capitalist employers and purchasers of sex which must be borne in mind in any programme of political resistance.

The relationship between capital and labour is characterised by a mutual dependence as well as antagonism. Without a class of wage workers, capital accumulation cannot take place. But though sex tourists exercise economic power over prostitutes, there is no mutual economic dependency between the two groups. Thai prostitutes need sex tourists in order to subsist but sex tourists would not actually starve, wither or die without Thai prostitutes.

Since sex tourists as a collective group are not locked into a dialectical relationship with these women, it would be extremely difficult for prostitutes to win concessions through struggle with these men, who can simply move their custom elsewhere.

It is not sex tourists but governments, international travel companies, hoteliers, local business people and so on who have an economic interest in maintaining the flow of sex tourists, so to engage in direct action against sex tourists (as some feminist and guerrilla organisations do - see Lee 1991), satisfying as it may be, will not necessarily improve the lot of the women who sell their sexual labour.

The phenomenon of sex tourism reveals all too graphically the nature of the relationship between underdeveloped countries at the periphery of 'regional political economies' (Cohen 1987) and those at their centre. It also rests upon the articulation of structures, ideologies and sexualities that are simultaneously gendered and 'racialised'. Sex tourism represents an immense theoretical challenge for both feminists and Marxists, as well as an urgent political one.

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Footnotes:

'So far, this research has involved interviews with a snowball sample of sex tourists to Thailand and the manager of a travel company specialising in sex tours to Pattaya; in January 1994, twenty five sex tourists in Thailand were interviewed and hundreds more observed on a field trip to Bangkok and Pattaya funded by the research board of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Leicester University. Documentary evidence in the form of publicity and advertising material from travel companies and mail order bride agencies is also being collected.

2 It should also be noted that sex tourists vary in terms of sex (although uncommon, it is not unknown for women to engage in commercial sex with Thai women and men) and in terms of sexual orientation. There are male homosexual sex tourists and a distinct group of paedophiles, both hetero and homosexual. Since none of these groups formed the focus of my research, I am unable to enter into any analysis of them.

3 For male prostitutes it is generally at the upper end of this scale.

4 This paper focusses on sex tourists, not sex workers, but it is important to note that the social relations which govern the work of prostitutes who supply these services vary enormously. Some bar/brothel prostitutes are debt bonded, some are directly employed by the owner, but many women and men work from bars or brothels on a self-employed basis, paying the owner a portion of their takings.

There are also freelance prostitutes who solicit on beaches and street corners, or from hotel bars. Clearly, the amount of money (if any) that a prostitute who works for a third party receives in exchange for providing 'short time' or 24 hour deals will depend upon the terms that have been negotiated with that party.

5 It is estimated that there are around 200,000 prostitutes under the age of 16 in Thailand (Anderson 1991), many of whom are debt bonded. Children aged between 9 and 14 in the Chiang Mai region have been identified as at the greatest risk from the brothel owners and pimps who will offer their parents between 20,000 and 30,000 Baht (US \$800 -1,200) as a loan to be paid off through the forced prostitution of the child (DEP 1993).

6 Thailand has a population of 59 million. Of those people who had been tested by 1990, half a million were HIV positive, and this figure is currently rising by 1,400 per day (Illman 1993).

7 I use the term primitive accumulation to refer to any process through which capital acquires something (whether raw materials or labour power) without covering the cost of its reproduction.

8 Indeed, a number of sex tourists told me that they would be visiting Vietnam next year, where the 'girls' are reputed to be 'less commercial' than Thai prostitutes now are - 'They're like the Thai girls used to be, a few years back'. Some British travel agents are currently setting up sex tours to Vietnam. Meanwhile, for the hardened sex tourist in search of real bargains, in Cuba, the economic situation is so bad that women are presently offering oral sex for \$1 and penetrative sex for \$2 (Gerard 1994).

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