

# (Post-) pandemic tourism resiliency: Southeast Asian lives and livelihoods in limbo

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Tourism Geographies

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## ABSTRACT

While tourism scholars have sought to problematize the unevenly distributed impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we know much less about how resilience is cultivated among tourism practitioners and communities whose lives and livelihoods are have been placed in limbo. Drawing on literature at the intersection of critical tourism studies and resilience theory as well as interviews with local tourism practitioners and academics, four historically situated and place-based trends in Southeast Asia that are reshaping tourism in the region are outlined: livelihood diversification, ecosystem regeneration, cultural revitalization, and domestic tourism development. These trends highlight how the political economy of tourism in the region has both challenged and facilitated opportunities for reshaping the industry in (post-) pandemic times. These interconnected trends should not be understood in silo but rather as historically rooted and place-based experiences. The examples of resilience among Southeast Asian residents presented in the article demonstrate that local individuals and communities are active agents in resilience. While the concept of resilience has been applied widely by scholars from multiple disciplines during the COVID-19 pandemic, a critical tourism studies approach to resilience theory accounts for the historically situated nuances of local scale dynamics and their relationship to macro-level processes. Rather than simply focusing on the pandemic's sudden transformative effects, practices of resilience in Southeast Asia reflect ongoing political-economic and cultural shifts that have often been underway in the region for several decades. The conclusion identifies several policy implications and future directions for tourism research in (post-) pandemic times.

## 摘要

虽然旅游学者试图对新冠肺炎产生影响的不均匀提出了问题,但对如何培养旅游业从业人员的恢复力以及如何培养那些生活与生计都处于不确定状态的社区旅游的恢复力,我们尚知之甚少。本文借鉴批判性旅游研究与恢复力理论的交叉学科

文献,在访谈当地旅游从业者和学者的基础上概括出四个重塑东南亚旅游业的、适应该地区历史情势与地方特色的发展趋势,即生计多样化、生态系统恢复、文化振兴与发展国内旅游。这些趋势突出表明,在后新冠疫情时期,该区域旅游业的政治经济现状如何既挑战又促进重塑该地区旅游业的机会。这些相互关联的趋势不应被孤立地理解,而应被视为植根于历史和基于地方的经验。本文中列举的东南亚居民恢复力的例子表明,当地个人和社区是区域旅游恢复力的积极推动者。尽管在新冠肺炎爆发期间,恢复力的概念已被来自多个学科的学者广泛应用,但是恢复力理论的批判性旅游研究方法解释了当地尺度旅游发展动态的历史差异及其与宏观层面过程的关系。东南亚旅游恢复力的实践反映了该地区几十年来经常发生的政治、经济和文化变化,而不是仅仅强调新冠疫情突发的变革性影响。该结论确定了后疫情时代旅游研究的若干政策影响和未来方向。

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**Keywords:** COVID-19 ; tourism ; livelihoods ; cultural revitalization ; resilience ; disaster ; Southeast Asia

**关键词:** 新冠肺炎 ; 旅游业 ; 生计方式 ; 文化振兴 ; 恢复力 ; 灾害 ; 东南亚

## Introduction

In Summer 2017, the lead author found herself chatting with Indonesia's Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Rudiantara, on a flight from Makassar to the Toraja highlands. Although the popular Toraja tourist destination had an airport perched on a levelled mountain peak, the small planes, short runway, and unpredictable flights obliged most visitors to weather an exhausting 8-hour bus ride traversing steamy lowland plains and stomach-churning, sinuous mountain roads. While in flight, Minister Rudiantara shared his hopes that improved transport and communications systems would "better serve not only locals but tourists." Over the next few days, the author's discussion with the Minister continued during chance encounters at a Toraja ritual and village tourist site where the author bases her long-term research. By then, the Minister had become enchanted with Toraja vistas and cultural riches and in the spirit of "if you build it, they will come," he shared plans to build a new, modern airport capable of receiving tourist flights directly from Bali. Earlier that year, the government had declared the Toraja highlands Indonesia's eleventh "emerging tourism location" and announced preparations for a new airport to accelerate international and domestic tourist arrivals (Susanty, 2017).

Now, three years later, during a pandemic that has strangled international tourism, the lead author's cell phone pings almost daily with social media messages from Toraja friends documenting construction of the region's new Buntu Kuni Airport and, more recently, footage of trial flights and an airport "tour" for local guides (Figure 1). While the gleaming new airport has generated a hopeful buzz amongst tourism-tethered Torajans, at present, the planes' primary passengers are government officials and wealthy Torajans: tourists constitute just a handful of those boarding the flights. Yet, a Toraja guide's recent text conveys cautious optimism about the new airport, "In the future, I think it will be better...domestic tourists will be first to come on the planes." Certainly, even if the larger planes lack the hoped-for tourists, new flights facilitate visits from government officials, who may subsequently sponsor relief aid for pandemicimpacted Toraja tourism sector workers.

Figure 1. The new Toraja Airport, September 2020. (Photo courtesy of Daud Tangjong).



The COVID-19 pandemic has brought tourism to a grinding halt throughout the world. While tourism scholars have highlighted the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, this scholarship is often based on theoretical rather than empirical experience. Additionally, we still know much less about what factors contribute to resilience among tourism practitioners, businesses, and communities whose livelihoods are now on hold. Thus, we begin with this story of a newly opened airport (operational since September 2020) envisioned as a tourism panacea because it touches on several of the themes advanced in this article.

Drawing on literature at the intersection of critical tourism studies and resilience theory, as well as conversations with local tourism practitioners and academics, this paper accounts for how the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed millions of tourism practitioners' lives and livelihoods into limbo as they wait for tourists to return, and yet, despite being in a state of limbo, many are demonstrating extraordinary resilience. We home in on this resilience and identify four ongoing tourism resiliency trends in Southeast Asia: livelihood diversification, ecosystem regeneration, cultural revitalization, and domestic tourism. Via this examination, we argue that resilience theory would benefit from an accounting of the historically situated nuances of local scale dynamics and macro-level processes. Rather than simply spotlighting the pandemic's sudden transformative effects, we argue that current practices of resilience in Southeast Asia reflect ongoing political-economic and cultural shifts that have often been underway in the region for several decades. These shifts, we further contend, will be critical to the reshaping of Southeast Asia's (post-) pandemic tourism industry. After a brief review of resilience theory in tourism studies, we examine the COVID-19 crisis vis-à-vis tourism in Southeast Asia and outline our methodology. Subsequent sections highlight current regional trends and their historical and socio-economic contexts. We conclude with a series of placebased policy implications and suggestions for future research addressing the intersection of tourism, COVID-19, and socio-economic change in Southeast Asia.

## Resilience theory in tourism studies

Originating from the Latin term, *resilire*, 'to leap back' (Bec et al., 2015), resilience is commonly understood as the ability to build capacity (Gallopín, 2006) and the capacity to rebound from adverse events (Ledesma, 2014). With deep roots in medicine, psychology, engineering and education (Masten & Obradovic, 2006), resilience theory was developed by an ecologist, C. S. Holling (1973) [AQ3], and introduced into ecological literature to explain the non-linear dynamics observed in ecological systems. Resiliency theory has since been linked to socialecological systems which recognize the role of human action in resiliency and accounts for social contexts such as a community (Bec et al. 2015). Due to its diverse academic origins, multiple definitions of resilience exist, yet all share a view of systems as dynamic and constantly adapting to changes (Masten & Obradovic, 2006). Resilience is defined here as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks" (Walker et al. 2004, p. 6).

Within tourism studies, resilience research has largely focused on economic resilience (Lew, 2014), short-term disasters and hazards (Bec et al. 2015), highly vulnerable systems (Coaffee & Wood, 2006; Larsen, et al. 2011), or long-

term climate change (Dogru et al. 2019). Groundbreaking research on tourism resiliency tends to be either predominantly conceptual (Bec et al. 2015) or case study-oriented, while broader theoretical constructs are rarer (Lew, 2014). Additional significant areas of resilience-oriented research include communities, policy and planning, and sustainable development (Hall, 2018). More recently, scholars have sought to understand how community resilience can be used as a tool for responding to and managing long-term structural change and environmental change, through changes in regulations, policy, and laws (Moyle et al. 2010). Its intuitive appeal suggests the urgent need for new frameworks and applications to meet immediate life-saving and sustaining needs (Hall, 2018; Lew 2017).

Given its relevance for analyzing how systems deal with and overcome crisis, the concept of resilience has been applied widely by scholars from multiple disciplines during this global pandemic. In their systematic review of 35 recently published papers about tourism in the wake of this pandemic, Sharma et al., (2021) identified resilience as one of the most prominent themes. Their analysis and subsequent proposal of a resilience-based framework for the global tourism industry post-COVID 19 has a broader focus on business/industry resilience within the context of organizational studies. Building on this scholarship, we propose a framework that accounts for the nuances of experiences of resilience among local tourism practitioners. Our approach is rooted in grounded qualitative research and envisions local individuals and communities, not as passive victims, but as active agents in resilience.

## Methods

This article draws from critical tourism studies (CTS), which distinguishes itself from positivistic tourism research by highlighting tourism's entanglement with neoliberal development, socio-political inequities, and classic paradigms' privileging of some voices over others (Atelievic et al., 2007; Bianchi, 2009; Tribe, 2007). Scholars of CTS work to decolonize tourism scholarship and foster social justice. We also combined several qualitative research methods of data collection. As Bernard (2006) notes, participant observation research entails spending lengthy periods of time conducting on-site research, engaging in daily activities, observing, and documenting mundane and extraordinary events, all while taking extensive research notes. While the pandemic hinders our ability to plant ourselves in our respective field sites in Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, we incorporated our long-term research experience and drew on our ongoing personal communications with collaborators in once heavily-toured Southeast Asian communities.

Collectively, the authors have conducted over 66 years of field research in various Southeast Asian nations. Each of us draws from earlier participant observation and in-field interviews on tourism-related themes to inform our understanding of long-term trends that extend well beyond the current COVID-19 era. As qualitative researchers widely note, ethnographic methods (participant observation, casual spontaneous conversations, etc.) require a level of rapport and trust typically cultivated over years rather than weeks. In this sense, the authors are particularly well-positioned to follow-up with personal contacts—many of whom we consider to be friends—to elicit candid perspectives on pandemic-induced challenges and changes. Such insights might not be possible with short-term or survey-based methods (Adams, 2012; Cole, 2004; Peltó, 2017). While all “data” are subjective, in qualitative research in the CTS tradition, positionality and reflexivity mediate both the data collection and analysis processes. Thus, we use the term, “friends” to indicate our long-term, close relationships with our research collaborators.

Our primary data collection included informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with 16 purposefully chosen research participants between June and September of 2020. We primarily used video and audio calls via WhatsApp, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger to communicate with our participants who are represented here using pseudonyms to protect privacy. Our research participants include tour guides, tour operators, artisans, homestay owners, local hotel managers, tourism consultants, NGO practitioners, and tourism academics in Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Singapore. We asked participants a series of similar, semi-structured questions such as “what are the long and short-term implications of COVID-19 on tourism?” and “what are some of the ways people in your community are dealing with the loss of tourism revenue?” This method enabled us to learn about local community-level initiatives. Significantly, these local initiatives are not typically covered by regional, national, or international media nor visible on news media beyond those communities. The primary data were further triangulated with secondary data including news media, NGOs reports, webinars, and academic publications. We analyzed materials collected using thematic analysis, identifying recurrent and notable themes in our data (Bernard, 2006). Through this process, we identified livelihood diversification, ecosystem regeneration, cultural revitalization, and domestic tourism development as core themes (Figure 2).

Figure 2. COVID-19 pandemic-accentuated place-based trends in Southeast Asian tourism. (source: authors).

COVID-19 PANDEMIC-ACCENTUATED PLACE-BASED TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN TOURISM			
Livelihood Diversification	Ecosystem Regeneration	Cultural Revitalization	Domestic Tourism
Souvenir crafters reorient to local markets	Catalyzation of political support for new limits on carrying capacity at National Parks	Development of minority cultural products and performances	Government-funded domestic tourism stimulus plans
Tourism businesses shift develop e-commerce	Development of environmental policy that is more appropriate to local religious and spiritual beliefs	Tourism labor migrants' return to rural homelands and reinvigorate ancestral subsistence patterns and cultural practices	Local community enjoyment of previously foreign-oriented tourism facilities
Development of virtual tours and experiences	Public recognition of ecological limits of overemphasis on growth-oriented tourism	Revitalization of grassroots cultural initiatives	Rural tourism sites serve citizens' needs for socially-distanced leisure

## COVID-19, tourism, and crises in Southeast Asia

Home to some of the most popular tourism destinations in the world, the Southeast Asian region welcomed 129 million arrivals in 2018 and the tourism sector constituted 12.6% of GDP and approximately 1 out of every 10 jobs in the region (UNESCO, 2020). By early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic slowed tourism to a trickle, resulting in numerous challenges for those whose livelihoods depend on the industry. Within 2019, the industry's 4.6 percent annual growth rate outpaced the global average of 3.5 percent (WTTC, 2020). Today, restricted movement, quarantines, and travel anxiety have paralyzed the industry. Scholars have documented some of the specific health and community impacts of COVID in the region (Foo et. al., 2020 [AQ4]; Schmidt-San et. al. 2020; Yuniti et. al. 2020), and a remarkable number of articles have addressed the potential for COVID-19 to reset tourism for a more sustainable future (e.g. Brouder, 2020; Galvani et al., 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Nepal, 2020; Romagosa, 2020). Yet, in Southeast Asia, there is still much to be learned by attending to how place-based trends influence post-pandemic tourism (Fauzi & Paiman, 2020).

Southeast Asia boasts numerous celebrated tourism destinations. Bangkok, with over 22 million international tourists per year, was recognized as the most visited city in the world for the last four consecutive years. Bali's fame as the quintessential exotic island destination dates back to the Dutch colonial era (Kodhyat, 1996) and the island has enjoyed such magnetism as a vacation destination that, by the 1970s, consultants warned of mass tourism's threats to local cultural "vitality" (Adams, 2018a; Picard, 1996). Likewise, the region's profusion of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (i.e. Cambodia's Angkor, Java's Borobudur, and the rice terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras) have drawn ever-growing numbers of domestic and international tourists, boosting revenue possibilities for local entrepreneurs. Today, tourism plays a significant role in the economies of most countries in the region, presenting numerous challenges as well as opportunities for post-crisis recovery.

Southeast Asia is no stranger to disasters. In the past two decades alone, it has been affected by several epidemics such as the 2002-2004 SARS outbreak and the 2014-2015 Avian influenza (Chan & King, 2019). Similarly, disasters including the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, 2017s eruptions of Mount Agung on Bali and the 2008 Cyclone Nargis that struck Myanmar's Irrawaddy delta region have disrupted local lives. Despite some inroads in containing the current virus in certain Southeast Asian nations (Beech & Dean, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented crisis for the region's tourism industry with an estimated loss of US\$34.6 billion in 2020 (PATA, 2020). (Figure 3)

Figure 3. Empty streets at tourist hot spot, a Tuk Tuk driver is waiting for customers. If he is lucky, he could earn some money for the day, Chiang Mai, Thailand, March 23, 2020. (Photo courtesy of Jitrapon Kiacom).



While the COVID-19 pandemic situation is rapidly changing, as of October 2020, a few (though not all) countries in Southeast Asia such as Vietnam (1,177 cases) and Thailand (3,775 cases) were described as COVID-19 successes (Beech & Dean, 2020; Jones, 2020). However, this success was tentative and the potential for an additional wave of transmissions has created fear and anxiety, both of contagion and travel (Paddock, 2020). Notably, testing capacities vary by countries and population sizes are relatively disparate (rendering the case totals difficult to compare). For example, the World Health Organization and medical experts in Indonesia noted that low-cost test kits and false rapid testing used to screen domestic tourists have surged COVID cases in Bali (Aljazeera, 2020).

Thus, while the accuracy of testing numbers may be questionable, currently, Myanmar has identified 1,518 cases, Cambodia has 274, Brunei has under 150 and East Timor and Laos each reported under 30 cases (Dong et al., 2020). However, despite these relatively low official counts, Malaysia (9,459 cases) and Singapore (57,044 cases) have fared less well and Indonesia and the Philippines (with 197,000 and 239,000 cases respectively) (Dong et al., 2020), have been hard hit by the pandemic. In what follows, we address several popular tourism destinations in Southeast Asia. We recognize that given the region's extraordinary diversity, ongoing shifts in COVID-19 situations, uneven testing abilities and reporting, and variations in respondents' abilities to speak candidly, there are inherent gaps in our portrait of current dynamics in the region. Nevertheless, we offer an initial review of the relationship between historically rooted trends in Southeast Asia and the experience of disaster as well as resilience (Dayley, 2019).

## Findings and discussion

### Livelihood diversification

The concept of 'diversified livelihoods' is frequently used by development studies scholars to emphasize the complex economic realities of people living in rural areas. Ellis identifies livelihood diversification "as the process by which rural families construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in order to survive and to improve their standards of living" (1998, p.1). For many rural communities throughout Southeast Asia, tourism is a key activity in this portfolio, as it encourages the creation of diverse inter-sectoral linkages such as agriculture and artisan production to support the tourism value chain (Phi & Whitford, 2017). In Southeast Asia, individuals as well as communities with histories of diversified livelihood strategies demonstrate resilience relative to their less-diversified counterparts. Never having become fully dependent on tourism (Phi, 2020) or reorienting tourism-honed skills to non-tourist markets (Adams 2018b), some individuals and communities across the region are tapping into alternative income streams such as cattle rearing, weaving, and field plantations (Ha, 2020).

In the cultural tourism destination of Toraja (Sulawesi), Indonesia, where one of the author's research has been based for several decades, souvenir-makers faced with the COVID-19 induced evaporation of tourist customers have shifted to crafting goods for local markets. Returning to an adaptive strategy initiated in the early 2000s when political instability, Avian influenza, and SARs outbreaks prompted dramatic decreases in tourism, carvers who previously

earned livelihoods sculpting souvenir statues and decorative trinkets are now crafting new-genre coffins incised with Toraja designs (Adams 2018b). Likewise, weavers, painters and batikers who once sold their products in tourist shops are now producing protective masks embellished with Toraja motifs: their chief clients are other Torajans (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Masks designed by F. Pongsamma, with Toraja motifs. (Photo courtesy of F. Pongsamma).



Significantly, some of these livelihood diversification strategies entail new non-face-to-face approaches to business practices. Along with the rise of technological innovations and the widespread adoption of internet/mobile phone services, many rural communities have embraced e-Commerce to sell local products both to others residing locally as well as to cyber-tourists in distant countries. For instance, in Myanmar, Gawa, a 26-year-old Karen community-based tourism consultant explained to one of the authors how, since COVID-19, many former tourism practitioners have left the industry and founded new small businesses such as translation services and social media marketing firms in Yangon. Additionally, many struggling tourism entrepreneurs and Airbnb hosts now make use of Airbnb's Southeast Asian "online/virtual experiences" platform. Virtual tourists can experience batik painting with Malaysian artisans, explore the "trail of *Crazy Rich Asians*" in Singapore, enjoy "peaceful temple life" in Bangkok, undergo "spiritual awakening" via a Balinese blessing ritual, and gain a "cultural appreciation" of Vietnam via coffee-making lessons. Soon after COVID-19's arrival, the Indonesian travel company Jakarta Good Guide began staging virtual tours of central Javanese cities (Wira, 2020). Likewise, the Singapore-based tour operator Monster Day Tours shifted its focus to interactive virtual gaming tours for Singaporeans and foreign groups. As an employee explained, "we knew young people were interested in gaming and tours, and were exploring this... [COVID-19] could be a new beginning... where less privileged, elderly and disabled people from all over the world can visit Singapore virtually". Online and

virtual experiences are partially orchestrated by government and tourism authorities. For instance, the Singapore Tourism Board curates and/or funds an array of online tourism experiences featuring local sites and characters. Some of these were initiated in pre-pandemic times but have since blossomed into stand-alone online experiences.

Beyond the private and governmental tourism sectors, online experiences are also utilized by social enterprises to support their missions. For instance, Friends in Bali (a Balinese-based tourism social enterprise that uses tourism revenue to cross-subsidy local charities) now offers an assortment of online Balinese experiences (e.g., cooking classes and batik making), and donates US\$2 from each purchase to local families thereby supporting the collective resilience of Balinese communities.

Thus, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, diverse economic practices have contributed to resilience among former tourism actors. This includes many established yet largely overlooked practices that, in pre-COVID-19 times, formed part of the emerging array of economies of the region (especially in indigenous communities). These practices highlight a diversity of income creation beyond the capitalist, industrialised structures of direct tourism-based employment (Cave & Dredge, 2020). They also highlight the robust community development networks that have operated for several decades in most areas of the region. In times of crisis, these organizations have served as an important buoy in an otherwise turbulent sea.

## Ecosystem regeneration

Historically, numerous Southeast Asian destinations have been hotspots of ‘overtourism’ such as Thailand’s now infamous Maya Bay, Indonesia’s Komodo Island, and the Philippines’ Boracay (Erb, 2015; Koh & Fakfare, 2019). Journalists and academics alike have widely noted how the COVID-19 triggered tourism pause has provided opportunities for ecosystems to recuperate from decades of uninterrupted tourist flows (Crossley, 2020). For instance, unhindered by tourist boats, marine ecosystems are flourishing in Phuket, Thailand where rarely seen species of sharks, dolphins and whales are now being spotted with increasing frequency. Inland national parks have also reported the return of tigers and leopards, while elephants are beginning to thrive in destinations like Khao Yai National Park (Regan & Olarn, 2020). In many places, the pandemic catalyzed political support for new policies that reduce ‘overtourism’ and its corollary ecological impacts. Yet, in numerous countries this support was already growing for decades (Forsyth, 2002). The Thai Minister of National Resources and Environment, for example, had announced the closure of national parks for two months each year, a decision largely derived from evidence of ecological regeneration following park closures.

In Buddhist regions of Southeast Asia (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam), religious philosophy reminds populations of the importance of living mindfully in alignment with Nature and developing compassion for human and non-human beings (Gross, 1997). Similarly, in predominantly-Hindu Bali, efforts are underway to reimagine tourism not as “an industrial production line but a living, networked system embedded in a natural system called Nature and subject to Nature’s operating rules and principles” (Pollock, 2019, p. 7).<sup>1</sup> Hinduism’s key belief ‘Ahimsa’ (‘the principle of non-violence’) encourages humans to respect the natural world as all life forms are sacred parts of God, while ‘Karma’ (‘consequences resulting from one’s actions’) further encourages individual responsibilities towards ethical conduct and environmental protection (Mittal & Thursby, 2009). Bali’s recently-proposed \$10 tax on foreign tourists to fund environmental and cultural programs (Regan & Olarn, 2020) embraces local perspectives of the destinations’ ecosystems (Cheer, 2020). In this way,

Crossley’s contention that the COVID-19 pandemic may reveal “expressions of environmental hope” (2020, p. 542) materializes in a decidedly Southeast Asian form.

Yet, tourism site closures often go hand-in-hand with layoffs and, as desperation mounts, closures may trigger a return to historically reliable livelihoods such as illegal logging and, fishing thereby threatening the environmental gains seen in the initial months of the pandemic

(Fabro 2020; Poole, 2020). In the Philippines, the pandemic has “hit the reset button” for Palawan, impacting thousands of families who had shifted from fishing and farming to tourism sector work (Fabro, 2020). Boat-operators who once carried tourists to the island’s UNESCO World Heritage sites have experienced some of the greatest revenue losses forcing many to return to other resource-depleting income generating activities. Additionally, national parks throughout the region now face significant funding gaps because of lost ecotourism revenue which in many



areas has contributed to illicit activities such as animal poaching and logging in protected areas. These controversial impacts of COVID-19 on Southeast Asian ecosystems reflect both the ecological limits of growth-oriented tourism (Cheer et al., 2019, p. 554) and the risks of tourism-financed conservation (Fletcher et al., 2020). Moving from conventional support for “trickle-down environmentalism,” where conservation follows income generation, the ‘political ecology of tourism’ paradigm demonstrates local communities’ tacit knowledge of traditional livelihoods enabling them live symbiotically with the ecosystem (Broad & Cavanagh, 2015; Mostafanezhad et al, 2016). These examples illustrate how pandemic-triggered ecosystem regeneration exists within a broader historical and place-based context of livelihood diversification and bubbling political support for more sustainable forms of tourism recreation.

Further, many communities have long practiced a range of indigenous environmental conservation strategies that are now being reprioritized in the face of the current pause on tourism flows.

## Cultural revitalization

Cultural revitalization is on the rise throughout Southeast Asia. In many cases, this growth was spearheaded by tourism practitioners who returned to their rural homelands and, in others, cultural tourism enterprises have been replaced—at least temporarily—by creative grassroot initiatives. This section highlights three dynamics pertaining to cultural revitalization in the COVID-19 era. First, throughout the region, cultural revitalization goes hand-in-hand with domestic cultural tourism and is often prompted by direct government interventions. In

Myanmar, the first phase of the COVID-19 Tourism Relief Plan is strongly focused on reopening the country’s pagodas and cultural sites for domestic tourists (UNESCO, 2020). While for Western tourists these sites may simply be “attractions,” domestic tourists tend to view these as pilgrimage destinations and sites for reconnecting with heritage (Singh, 2009). These contrasting visions of are noteworthy, underscoring the continuation and revitalization of historic sociospiritual mobility patterns.

In Bali, cultural revitalization is being encouraged by Governor Wayan Koster, whose plans for economic diversification entail developing new traditional and creative products. One product on the roster is *arak*, Bali’s traditional liquor. Although the sale and marketing of *arak* within Bali was recently legalized, a local community group had worked for several years the tradition to be consumed and respected. As a representative of this group lamented to one of the authors, “[*arak*] is our Balinese traditional drink, yet these Bali hotels only serve foreign alcoholic beverages like Heineken and Vodka, and that is wrong.” COVID-19-accelerated government efforts to jump-start the economy by promoting heritage products are apparently reviving pride in Balinese products that once held second-class status vis á vis foreign prestige brands.

Second, the pandemic has reversed historical trends of rural-to-urban migration. The shuttering of tourism businesses prompted thousands of tourism migrant workers to return to their ancestral farms and fishing villages. In tandem with this reverse migration, we observe a notable revitalization of cultural practices, particularly those related to subsistence activities (Laula & Paddock, 2020). In Indonesia’s Toraja highlands, for example, former tourism-sector workers now not only grow and harvest traditional foods on ancestral plots, but post social media of themselves learning to paint and batik Toraja scenes and symbols in their leisure time.

Southeast Asian countries are ethnically diverse with a myriad of languages and cultures

(e.g., Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar have 54, 70 and 135 different groups respectively, and Indonesia and the Philippines officially recognize 633 and 175 ethnic groups, respectively) (Wijeyewardene, 1990). However, most ethnic minority groups with homelands in remote areas, have long experienced cultural domination and been targeted for cultural assimilation via schooling and economic development projects in their homelands (Croissant & Trinn, 2009; Winichakul, 1994). This reverse migration pattern is particularly important in the Southeast Asian context because it facilitates new pathways for revitalizing minority ethnic cultures.

Third, many grassroot cultural revitalization initiatives have emerged, albeit with contemporary twists. In Malaysia, a theatre group that enjoyed past support from the nation’s Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture is now producing online traditional shadow puppet performances to warn Malaysians about COVID-19 (Maganathan, 2020). Likewise, a small business representative in Ubud, Bali reports that the parking lot of Ubud’s Monkey Forest (a major tourist attraction) has been partially re-purposed to host entertainment events for locals, such as the ‘Bali Revival Festival.’ As he explained to one of the authors, “this is good for keeping livelihoods going and to keep people motivated. Even small initiatives and events all count!”

These examples reveal the potential for local cultural revitalization through new practices that challenge centralized planning norms and defy neoliberal, corporate models (Carr, 2020). Southeast Asia's (except Thailand) broader historical context entails a long history of colonialism, through which tourism was initially introduced and local identities and ethnic relations were constructed (Hitchcock, 2009). Contemporary tourism continues to see both national and ethnic minority cultures negotiated via globalization processes, often commodified by powerful actors ranging from transnational tourism corporations and the media to state-directed policies (Picard & Wood, 1997). As such, these sprouting grassroots cultural initiatives should be viewed as part of a long history of local efforts to reclaim and protect cultural identities and lifeways. As various scholars have demonstrated, such efforts by minority cultures to rearticulate and reframe touristic representations of their cultural identities pre-date COVID19 (Adams 2006; Kahn 2011), yet the pandemic has provided a new framework for these efforts.

## Domestic tourism development

While domestic tourists have long outnumbered international tourists in Southeast Asia (c.f. Adams, 1998), governments have disproportionately focused on international tourism and tourist facilities are often geared toward foreign tourists (Singh, 2009). Today, many Southeast Asian governments have refocused their efforts on growing domestic tourism. Hilda (a German tourism NGO founder and long-time Yangon resident) notes that some popular destinations are already experiencing domestic tourist fueled 'overtourism', especially during holidays and long weekends. Similarly, Gewa, a community-based tourism consultant, describes how "There is now domestic tourism and a lot of local people are enjoying it at the moment surprisingly!! ...

Tourism now seems to focus and rely on domestic ones so far". Dayu, (a homestay association representative in Ubud, Bali) echoed these sentiments noting how many hotels and resorts that previously catered to tourists now promote dining and entertainment (e.g. pool use) programs for Balinese residents. Another Balinese respondent who is enjoying staycations said, "To be honest, I love this situation so much. There are no traffic jams, and things are much cheaper now!"

These observations reflect the rapid impacts of multiple pandemic-prompted state policies and initiatives to support domestic tourism. For instance, while Indonesia reopened popular tourist destinations such as Bali for domestic tourists in July, 2020 (Juniarta, 2020), its doors are now closed to foreign tourists. Similarly, the Singapore Tourism Board, invested S\$45 million to encourage residents to take local holidays through the 'Singapoliday campaign' (Min, 2020), while the Thai government committed 22.4 billion-baht (US\$723 million) to a similar domestic tourism stimulus plan. These funds subsidize accommodations, transport, food, and attractions to support domestic tourist hotspots.

Indeed, many areas of Southeast Asia are experiencing a rise in domestic rural and community-based tourism as operators shift towards catering to demands for socially distanced leisure and recovery from pandemic anxiety (Glusac, 2020; Saengmanee, 2020). A Vietnamese respondent noted that even Hop Thanh, a remote commune in Vietnam's Northern mountains, still receives steady flows of tourists during the pandemic from the adjunct city of Lao Cai. He believed that "there is unlimited potential to develop rural and community-based tourism targeting the urban citizens of Vietnam's 87 cities." Domestic tourism has long been envisioned as both an antidote to dependence on foreign tourists and a nation-building strategy (Picard & Wood, 1997; Werry, 2011). Indonesia's focus on domestic tourism dates back to the 1970s when

President Suharto promoted it as an avenue for cultivating citizen's love of country (Adams, 1998) and critiques arose regarding the exclusive focus on foreigners as Bali's economic lifeblood (Picard, 1997). Similarly, James Guild recently critiqued news reports bemoaning COVID19's potentially devastating impact on Bali as foreign tourists vanished. Guild notes that, "this idea that Bali will die without tourists comes uncomfortably close to a White Saviour narrative, implying that local people have no choice but to hunker down and endure this crisis until foreigners start showing up again to rescue them" (2020). As he argues, this framing "strips Indonesians of their agency in rising to meet this challenge, something they are quite capable of doing and have done many times before" (2020). Indeed, previous studies have shown that during the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, domestic tourism in Southeast Asia grew faster than in North America and Europe (Singh, 2011). This reflects the broader shift in leisure mobility due to the expansion of the middle-class in the region. Relatedly, proximity tourism encourages people to become 'tourists' in their own 'backyards,' exploring or reconnecting with places closer to home (Romagosa, 2020). Such 'staycations'

can help both reduce tourists' risks and channel pent-up travel demands towards supporting tourism businesses at home (Phi, 2020).

While domestic tourism is seen as a viable path to partial recovery in many countries, Singaporean tourism academic, Tian, explained to one of the authors that "For a country with a resident population of only 5.8 million, it would be hard pressed to imagine that domestic tourism can fill the gap in Singapore for what used to be 19.11 million international visitor arrivals in 2019." On the other hand, Tian further notes how "Perhaps never before have this many middle and upper income Singaporeans remained within the country for such an extended period of time": COVID-19 has challenged what was once a long-held perception that leisure is something you do outside of Singapore (Cheong & Sin, 2019). In short, while domestic tourism has a long history in Southeast Asia, dating to at least the 1970s (Hitchcock, 2009), the pandemic has prompted some Southeast Asian governments to refocus their efforts on growing this sector as an antidote to the lost revenues from international tourism.

Overall, this section has demonstrated a wide range of resilience strategies utilised by Southeast Asian tourism practitioners, communities, and governments throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst some are grassroots and organic, others are top-down and led by the governments' funding and policies. Regardless of their nature, these resilience strategies flourished because of (1) stakeholders' capability to recognise opportunities within crises, (2) comprehensive existing/emerging networks that enable the flow of knowledge exchange and (3) coordination/collaboration among the diverse stakeholders involved (Sharma et al., 2021). These factors reflect the protective factor model of resilience which contributes to fostering positive outcomes for individuals and/or systems despite adverse external circumstances (Ledesma, 2014).

The emergence of these resilience strategies also reflects the ongoing political-economic and cultural shifts that have been underway in the region for several decades. While the COVID19 pandemic has shed light on vulnerabilities, we recognize that local scale-communities and individuals are active agents in resilience. To better understand the broader issues and multiple dimensions such as livelihood diversification, ecosystem regeneration, cultural revitalization, and domestic tourism development, as well as small-scale resilience, our findings call for a placebased resilience framework. We believe such an approach expands current understandings of the interactions between local scale dynamics and macro level processes.

## Place-based policy implications of COVID-19 for Southeast Asia

Significantly, the four trends outlined above reveal how the seemingly-novel resilience responses to COVID-19 are, in actuality, historically rooted and place-based. By attending to the nuances of how resilience to the pandemic is enacted and experienced, we can develop more appropriate and effective post-disaster tourism recovery plans. For example, while tourism is often prescribed as a panacea for local/regional development and poverty alleviation, local communities often face challenges integrating tourism markets and depend on maintaining diversified livelihoods practices (Phi, 2020). The rise of social entrepreneurship in the region may offer opportunities to strengthen links with organizations that have long supported local livelihoods (Biddulph, 2018; Laeis & Lemke, 2016). When further supported by government policies, these types of initiatives can help foster the emerging generation of tourism social entrepreneurs (Phi & Whitford, 2017).

The pandemic has reopened debates about the meaning and politics of sustainable tourism. As Southeast Asian governments and tourism authorities reassess industry priorities, local voices may come to the fore demonstrating the potential of domestic tourism to foster social entrepreneurship and diversified livelihoods for rural residents (Phi & Dredge, 2019). Frameworks for these policies can be drawn from emerging literature on inclusive tourism, which focuses on supporting economic and social inclusions of marginalized populations through practices such as improving access to tourism as producers and consumers, facilitating self-presentations, and challenging dominant power relations (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

The replacement of voluntary measures with governmental environmental policies that mitigate overtourism can dramatically improve the region's ecosystems (Cheer, 2020). Similarly, these policies should limit reliance on tourism as the key source to fund environmental conservation. Instead, redistributive mechanisms like a conservation basic income can be funded through direct taxation of extractive economic activities, including tourism (Fletcher et al., 2020). For example, long before the pandemic, the government of Bhutan introduced the 'high value, low impact' policy in which tourists are charged US \$250 daily while in the country, \$65 of which funds education, health and environmental care (Phi, 2019).

Finally, in the (post)-pandemic period, many destinations would benefit from developing domestic tourism in order to enhance community resilience in the face of future disasters and border closures. By adjusting pricing strategies and diversifying tourism products, these policies will not only support destinations' resilience but also contribute towards reducing the social inequity inherent in the current global political economy of tourism. In a similar vein, these efforts may help mitigate the further development of neo- or post-colonial tourism experiences (Hitchcock, 2009). Such moves articulate with recent trends towards local governance in some

Southeast Asian countries. For instance, Indonesia's efforts to decentralize governance (including aspects of tourism planning) by giving outlying provinces and regencies more autonomous decision-making authority means that community members can potentially secure new opportunities to shape tourism planning in their own locales.

## **Conclusion: future research directions on (post-) pandemic tourism in Southeast Asia**

Over five decades ago, American anthropologist Marshal Sahlins (1972) described how crisis tends to reveal the structural contradictions of the modes of production. In this article, we outlined four trends that have proliferated throughout Southeast Asia in the wake of the COVID19 crisis including livelihood diversification, ecosystem regeneration, cultural revitalization, and domestic tourism development. We contend that these trends highlight how the political economy/ecology of tourism in the region has both challenged as well as facilitated opportunities for reshaping tourism in (post-) pandemic times. These interconnected trends—we further argue—should not be understood in silo but rather as historically rooted and place-based experiences. For instance, shifting to emphasize domestic tourism can potentially support the revitalization of minority ethnic cultures and solidarity movements. It may also enable future cultural exchanges between domestic ethnic groups.

In a region that just a year ago welcomed 129 million international arrivals, the COVID19 pandemic has unquestionably triggered catastrophic impacts for millions of residents. In our communications with tourism practitioners in the region, many described being laid off, filing bankruptcy, and ongoing searches for new livelihoods amid economic crises. Yet, we caution that reportage of these effects may inadvertently condone a “theatre or pornography of violence” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p 1), or what we term pandemic porn. That is, by focussing exclusively on clinically chronicling the COVID-19 era's economic violence to the tourism sector, we may obscure the numerous examples of agency that are also present. In this vein, alongside tragedy, we have highlighted examples of resilience among Southeast Asian residents and argued that understandings of the implications of COVID-19 on tourism, lives and livelihoods requires a place-based account of local experiences and contexts. Though resilience theory in tourism studies is still in its infancy, our article helps validate resilience theory's application to tourism studies.

To conclude, we offer several departure points for future research concerning COVID19's implications for increasingly precarious Southeast Asian tourism sector lives and livelihoods. First, scholars may consider how COVID-19 prompted urban to rural migration contributes to the revitalization of cultural practices as well as how it reshapes rural demographics. Scholars may investigate creative initiatives undertaken by these return-migrants, whose prior involvement in tourism lends them insights into potential new products with regional, national, and global market appeal, should the pandemic travel-dampening effects linger. Also, given demand for social distancing and psychological recuperation, scholars may consider the role of rural villages in tourism recovery efforts. Additionally, scholars may address how the heightened focus on domestic rather than international tourism departs from but also echoes dynamics chronicled in pre-pandemic ethnographies of tourism destinations, a theme largely overlooked by tourism officials, planners and with some notable exceptions, academics. The socio-economic implications of livelihood diversification in the region and the extent to which it is a mechanism for economic and ecological resilience in disaster times is another topic of critical importance. Scholars may also investigate how former tourism sector workers returning to rural homelands may carry tourism knowledge that can foster successful new domestic tourism ventures in rural areas, ranging from palm wine brewing tours to indigenous dance lessons. Additionally, more research is needed on residents' perspectives on rejuvenated ecosystems and how they may challenge and/or reinforce their understandings of the ecological limits of tourism development. Finally, future research on COVID-19 would benefit from diversification of scholarship and literature beyond the Western-centric interpretations and methods (Adams, 2020; Chang, 2019; Sin et al, 2020; Tucker & Hayes, 2019). In the midst and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, this

will provide more culturally relevant tourism knowledge(s) and practices for Southeast Asia in what is now widely dubbed the Asian Century.

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<sup>1</sup>. Although spirituality's political deployment merits further scrutiny (Roth & Sedana, 2015).

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