



**“Lost in Thailand”: The Popular Geopolitics of Film Tourism in Northern Thailand**

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Keywords:	popular geopolitics, film tourism, northern Thailand
Abstract:	<p>The recent blockbuster hit “Lost in Thailand” sold more than USD \$200 million in ticket sales in China in 2012, and quickly became the nation’s highest grossing film to date. Set in northern Thailand, the film has since contributed to the prodigious growth of Chinese tourism in the region. Film tourists from China are now regularly observed re-enacting scenes from the film on university campuses, in temples and around the city of Chiang Mai. These intertextual re-enactments have canvassed national and international media for how they represent various articulations of cultural dissonance. This paper draws on structured interviews among Thai residents and Chinese tourists, together with a discourse analysis of English and Thai media reports to argue that popular responses to the impact of film tourism in the region are strongly embedded in historical and contemporary Sino-Thai political-economic relations and corollary geopolitical imaginaries of place. Such imaginaries are frequently reconstituted through the inherently affect-oriented and ambivalent economies of tourism encounter. This paper contributes to emerging research on how geopolitical assemblages are co-constituted by a range of popular discourses, tourism practices, film, images and political-economic relations, among others, as well as how they inform popular geopolitical experience.</p>

## ***“Lost in Thailand”: The Popular Geopolitics of Film Tourism in Northern Thailand***

### **Introduction**

*The bucolic, once laid-back campus of one of Thailand's top universities is under a security clampdown. Not against a terrorist threat, but against Chinese tourists. Thousands have clambered aboard student buses at Chiang Mai University, made a mess in cafeterias and sneaked into classes to attend lectures. Someone even pitched a tent by a picturesque lake. The reason: “Lost in Thailand,” a 2012 slapstick comedy partly shot on campus that is China's highest-grossing homegrown movie ever<sup>i</sup>.*

The Chinese blockbuster hit, *Lost in Thailand* depicts two Chinese business rivals who compete for the rights to Supergas, a renewable energy solution for which they need a shareholder's approval. The shareholder happens to be staying in remote monastery in northern Thailand. Together, the two businessmen, Gao Bo (played by Huang Bo) and Xu Lang (played by Xu Zheng—who is also the co-writer and director of the film) as well as a professional pancake maker, Wang Bao (played by Wang Baoqing), travel throughout the region in a humorous series of touristic encounters. In slapstick comedy fashion, computers are broken, phones are lost, massages are exchanged and other comical mishaps materialize along the way<sup>ii</sup>. A recent *New York Times* article describes how the character Xu represents a familiar experience among urban Chinese business men of a highly competitive work environment and concomitant strained family dynamics<sup>iii</sup>. As an explanatory narrative of widespread yearning for human connection as well as a social critique of the unrelenting drive for economic success, *Lost in Thailand* drew large-scale popular appeal throughout China. It also—at least in part—helped to seduce four and a half million tourists to visit Thailand in 2014.

This paper extends popular geopolitical thought into new interdisciplinary terrain through the examination of Chinese film tourism in northern Thailand as part of a broader geopolitical assemblage. Geopolitical assemblages are the relational conjuncture of elements and complex interactions that include, among other elements, geopolitical and tourism imaginaries and everyday tourism encounters (Dittmer 2013a). While tourism is certainly of geopolitical significance, it has rarely been examined as such (Hannam, 2013; Hazbun, 2004, 2008; Weaver, 2010). Additionally, while the relationship between film and geopolitics has been substantively examined (Carter & McCormack, 2006; Dodds, 2005), how this relationship translates to tourism encounters has yet to be fully addressed in the literature. Geopolitical imaginaries—or the ways in which space is imagined (e.g. maps, images, media), embedded in, and co-constitutive of place making and its corollary practices that inform, reinforce or contest its very constitution (Agnew, 2010)—are integral to tourism imaginaries or the “socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and that are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices” (Salazar & Graburn, 2014, p. 1). Geopolitical imaginaries in film, like tourism imaginaries, are part of a broader “social cartography (Bruno, 2002, 1997) of meaning creation and identity formation... [where] distinctions between reality and

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3 representation, primary and secondary experiences, first-hand and second-hand observations  
4 change hands endlessly” (Lukinbeal, 2004, p. 247). An investigation of geopolitical and tourism  
5 imaginaries through the analysis of film tourism encounters provides new opportunities to think  
6 through the constitution of geopolitical assemblages. Assemblages include the heterogeneous  
7 combination of human and non-human actors and material components that mediate and are  
8 mediated by discourses of people, place and experience (Anderson, 2012; Legg, 2011; Li, 2007;  
9 Colin McFarlane, 2009). Thus, geopolitical assemblages of tourism imaginaries may include,  
10 among other possibilities, film, photos, websites, conversations, governmental discourses,  
11 Facebook profiles, newspaper articles, guidebooks, and personal experience. Furthermore,  
12 scholars of popular geopolitics note how the relationship between the geopolitics of affect and  
13 geopolitical outcomes is a critical focus for cultural and political geographers (Carter &  
14 McCormack, 2006; Dittmer & Dodds, 2013; ÓTuathail, 2003). Discourses as well as bodies,  
15 objects and affects are co-constitutive of assemblages.

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17 The intertextuality of film and geopolitics has been substantively examined by political  
18 geographers (Carter & McCormack, 2006; Dodds, 2005), frequently in the Euro-American  
19 context of national identity, ethnic identification, the construction of gender, the significance of  
20 borders and territories (Power & Crampton, 2005, p. 194), as well as the role of film in garnering  
21 national support for military invasion (Carter & McCormack, 2006; Dittmer, 2013c; ÓTuathail,  
22 2003; Power & Crampton, 2005). Power and Crampton note how “[I]n many ways Hollywood  
23 movies provided a language and imagery that commenters drew upon in making sense of the  
24 attacks and their geopolitical implications and many Hollywood producers, directors and writers  
25 later explained that they too believed many Hollywood films had seemed to ‘predict’ the  
26 atrocities of 9/11” (Power & Crampton, 2005, p. 193). Cinematic geopolitics that address film as  
27 a major genre through which tourism imaginaries map out the geopolitical world (Lukinbeal,  
28 2004, 2005; Shapiro, 2008). This relationship is highlighted by Žižek, who explains how images  
29 of 9/11 were familiar narratives of catastrophe in Hollywood disaster films well before the actual  
30 event (2002). Žižek suggests that “the question we should have asked ourselves as we stared at  
31 the TV screens on September 11 is simply: where have we seen the same thing over and over  
32 again?” (Žižek, 2002, p. 17). Thus, film frames popular understandings of events and  
33 experiences in a changing political-economic world order by mapping out geopolitical  
34 assemblages that mediate touristic imaginaries of place. This theoretical positioning opens up  
35 new questions regarding the role of popular geopolitics in film tourism encounters, while  
36 breaking down simple dualisms between text and audience. Thus, among other components,  
37 popular geopolitical discourses mediate tourists’ experiences in northern Thailand and  
38 rearticulate geopolitical assemblages from the ground up, as it were.

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40 Building on these insights, we examine how geopolitical assemblages articulate with  
41 tourism imaginaries in Chinese film tourism in northern Thailand through an examination of the  
42 touristic encounter between Chinese tourists and Thai residents.

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44 The primary questions this paper examines is 1) how, and with what political-economic  
45 and cultural implications do film tourism encounters and the responses they engender among  
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3 film tourists/toured as well as in popular media, rearticulate geopolitical imaginaries of place?; 2)  
4 how do historical and contemporary political economic relations mediate tourism imaginaries  
5 and in what ways can these imaginaries be reassembled in and through tourism encounters?; and  
6 3) how can assemblage thinking help us make sense of the popular geopolitics of film tourism?  
7 We address these questions, in part, through our framing of film tourism—a relational,  
8 processual, unequal and mobile practice (McFarlane, 2011, p. 649)—as part of a broader  
9 aggregation of actors that co-construct tourism imaginaries. We examine these imaginaries  
10 through Thai residents and Chinese independent tourists as well as Thai and English language  
11 media reports on the role *Lost in Thailand* has played in the growth of Chinese tourism in  
12 northern Thailand, in order to examine the relationship between geopolitical imaginaries, tourism  
13 and popular geopolitical experience. We address how responses evoked in popular media and  
14 among Chinese tourists and Thai residents articulate with affective connections through the  
15 circulation of geopolitical and tourism imaginaries. Additionally, we illustrate how Sino-Thai  
16 relations are experienced and (re)imagined through everyday tourism encounters. Thus, this  
17 paper contributes to emerging research on cinematic geographies through an investigation of  
18 how an understanding of film tourism as part of a broader geopolitical assemblage can provide a  
19 more nuanced theoretical lens through which to examine the complex relationship between film,  
20 tourism, and popular geopolitical experience and the broader geopolitical assemblage that they  
21 co-constitute.  
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30 To expand on these theoretical arguments, this paper is organized as follows. First, we  
31 examine literature at the intersection of popular geopolitics, cinematic geographies and  
32 assemblage theory. We then introduce our case study by contextualizing popular responses to  
33 *Lost in Thailand* within the broader expansion of the middle class in China and the growth of  
34 Chinese tourism in northern Thailand, as well as provide an outline of our research methodology.  
35 Drawing on a discourse analysis of structured interviews with Thai residents and Chinese tourists  
36 as well as online Thai and English language reports on the relationship between *Lost in Thailand*  
37 and Chinese tourism to northern Thailand, we then consider the role of popular media in the  
38 enactment of geopolitical imaginaries in film tourism in the region. Next, we consider the affect  
39 driven and ambivalent economies of the Sino-Thai tourism encounter. We also address how  
40 thinking through film tourism as part of a broader geopolitical assemblage can contribute to more  
41 nuanced understandings of the ways in which popular geopolitical discourses articulate with  
42 tourism experience in northern Thailand and beyond. Finally, we resituate geopolitical  
43 imaginaries, as they articulate with film tourism within popular media and everyday tourism  
44 experience as well as historical and contemporary political-economic contexts of Sino-Thai  
45 relations. By way of conclusion, we call for the reconsideration of how circuits of affect work to  
46 reassemble geopolitical assemblages through film, tourism, and everyday encounters.  
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## The Popular Geopolitics of Film Tourism

Popular geopolitics departs from formal and practical geopolitics through its focus on how geopolitical discourses materialize in popular media such as film, television, magazines and the internet. Popular geopolitical analyses have typically been concerned with how geopolitical discourses are used in the media rather than audience reception. Dittmer and Gray highlight how “[c]entral to the development of critical geopolitics has been the recognition of geopolitics as something everyday that occurs outside of academic and policymaking discourse” (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, p. 1667). In a similar vein, Carter and McCormack call for the further examination of the relationship between affect, film and popular geopolitics as well as geopolitical and cinematic intervention in order to address “how the matter of affect is implicated in the emergence and popular enactment of geopolitical cultures” (Carter & McCormack, 2006, p. 230). As a result, emerging work in popular geopolitics calls for a focus on audience interpretations of popular texts (Benwell, Dodds, & Pinkerton, 2012; Dittmer & Dodds, 2013; Dodds, 2005). It is noted that popular geopolitics “has typically abstracted away the pleasure, thrills, and tragedy from people’s experiences of popular culture and media; the media-centric work that has traditionally been done in popular geopolitics could surely stand to have emotions incorporated” (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, p. 1667). Tourism landscapes in particular are co-constructed through popular geopolitical discourses that connect translocal and co-constitutive social realities (DeLanda, 2005, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). Films are embedded in popular geopolitical discourses and the connections and *orderings* between the global and the local and vice versa (Franklin, 2004). Power and Crompton note how films can be “intimately connected to the formation of new geographical imaginations and in this sense their imagery formed a kind of geopolitical world” (Power & Crompton, 2005, p. 194). Film is widely used to promote hegemonic geopolitical discourses that support national security interests, where, for example, in post 9/11 America, “Pentagon officials began a series of meetings with Hollywood directors, screenwriters, scenarists and specialists in disaster movies to ‘solicit the help of Hollywood in the war against terrorism’ and imagine possible future scenarios and responses to them” (Power & Crompton, 2005, p. 193). In China there is widespread censorship of film deemed to be contra to national interests. For example, scenes from *Mission: Impossible III* and the *007 Skyfall* were excluded from the film because they showed undergarments hanging on a clothesline in Shanghai and an assassin who shoots a Chinese security guard in Shanghai’s financial district, respectively. These scenes were reportedly cut because they signified China as a developing country and indicated weak security forces<sup>iv</sup>.

Building on emerging work in popular geopolitics, the analysis of film tourism as part of a broader geopolitical assemblage sheds analytical light on how film can simultaneously constitute and reflect tourism practices (Law, Bunnell, & Ong, 2007), as well as co-produce tourists’ affective experience of/in place. Like Dittmer’s Model United Nations simulation, if tourism “is understood as an assemblage, emergent from the active participation of role players with material objects [in tourism this may include, for example, cameras, food, hotel beds, selfie sticks, etc...]... then their embodied participation in the assemblage can be understood as productive of

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3 affects, attitudes, and memories that shape future geopolitical action” (Dittmer, 2013c, p. 495).  
4 Thus, assemblage thinking is useful here because it “embeds a relational ontology that dissolves  
5 the macro/micro scalar tensions at the heart of geopolitics” (Dittmer, 2014, p. 386). Like film, in  
6 the context of literature, Deleuze and Guattari explain how:  
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9 ...all we know are assemblages... There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of  
10 reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the  
11 author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn  
12 from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or  
13 several authors as its subject. In short, we think that one cannot write sufficiently in the name  
14 of an outside. The outside has no image, no signification, no subjectivity (Deleuze & Guattari,  
15 1988, p. 22-3).  
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18 The analytic of geopolitical assemblage allows us to conceptualize how film tourism is part of a  
19 broader set of complex interactions that are constantly morphing rather than fixed and produce  
20 emergent effects which reshape the assemblage itself (Dittmer, 2013c). Tourism as geopolitical  
21 assemblage is not a totalizing or reductionist plan, but is a series of cultural practices that  
22 intersect at various nodes of experience and operates at interconnected and always shifting  
23 spatial scales. Assemblage components include a range of actors that create “place” from “space”  
24 as well as respatialize geographic imaginations through geopolitical re-presentations of peoples  
25 and places. The analysis of film tourism as geopolitical assemblage can help us better  
26 conceptualize how and with what implications various sites—for example—in New Zealand via  
27 *Lord of the Rings*, Mumbai via *Slum Dog Millionaire* and Hawai‘i via *Aloha*—come to represent  
28 geopolitical imaginaries of place for touristic consumption. Thus, for example, the juxtaposition  
29 of ostensibly “global” imaginaries such as the film *Slumdog Millionaire* with the “reality tours”  
30 of the slums of Mumbai serve as assemblage components of broader popular geopolitical  
31 discourses around tourism and/in India (Diekmann and Hannam, 2012). In this way, political and  
32 social realities renegotiate tourism imaginaries of peoples and places (Salazar 2012, p. 15). Thus,  
33 popular media and tourists (including virtual tourists) “talk geopolitics” (Dittmer, 2014) in that  
34 both tourist and local resident subjectivities are reconstituted through ongoing intertextual  
35 encounters. It is to the case study of the popular geopolitics of film tourism in northern Thailand  
36 that we now turn.  
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#### 46 **“Lost in Thailand” and the Growth of Chinese Tourism in Northern Thailand**

47 Commenting on the growth of Chinese film tourism to northern Thailand, a recent article in  
48 *Chiang Mai City Life*, a popular English language magazine in the region, reports how:  
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51 *Following the promotional (if not artistic) success of Lost in Thailand, Chiang Mai –*  
52 *whose airport has seen a 28% increase in passengers since May 2012, according to the*  
53 *ACI (Airports Counsel International) – has become a novel destination for Chinese*  
54 *tourists, whilst Thailand as a whole has welcomed a 100 percent increase in the number of*  
55 *Chinese coming to visit the kingdom since this time last year... Those who were tempted*  
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into visiting Thailand after watching the film might recommend a Chiang Mai-bound trip to their friends and families. As such... a serious case of keeping up with the Joneses has probably coaxed Chinese tourists out of their Yuan and towards Thailand's so-called Rose of the North<sup>v</sup>.



Figure 1. Source: Iszatt, R. (2013, March 1). From East to East: The Chinese Tourist Boom in Chiang Mai. Chiang Mai City Life. Retrieved from <http://www.chiangmaicitylife.com/citylife-articles/from-east-to-east-the-chinese-tourist-boom-in-chiang-mai/>.

Indeed, the significance of what Sorapop Chuaedamrong, vice president of the Chiang Mai Chamber of Commerce, referred to as “*Lost in Thailand fever*” can perhaps not be overestimated<sup>vi</sup>. While the recent establishment of additional budget airlines that link China and Thailand as well as the growing middle class in China have facilitated the growth of Chinese tourism in Thailand and beyond, what perhaps could not have been predicted is the significance *Lost in Thailand* would have on tourism to northern Thailand<sup>vii</sup>. With more than 80 percent of the film shot in the region, the film is widely seen as a catalyst for new tourism to Chiang Mai, the largest city in the North. According to a recent report by the UNWTO, between 2011 and 2014, Chinese tourism to Thailand more than doubled from 1.7 million to 4.6 million<sup>viii</sup>. The president of the Chiang Mai Tourism Business Association, Sarawut Saetiao explained that the estimated 80 to 90 percent occupancy rate for the 40,000 hotel rooms in the city is at least in part thanks to *Lost in Thailand*<sup>ix</sup>. Thus, as Patrick Brzeski from *The Hollywood Reporter* explains, while the extent to which *Lost in Thailand* has contributed to the surge in Chinese tourists to Thailand and particularly the northern region, is perhaps impossible to accurately quantify, “The scale of *Lost in Thailand*’s success in the world’s most populous country... makes a direct influence hard to deny<sup>x</sup>.” In Thailand, which hosted 25 million international tourists in 2014 and where up to 20 percent of the country’s GDP is dependent on tourism (the largest percentage of any Asian country), and Chinese tourism in particular is a critical growth area for the Thai economy.

A recent CNN report explains how “It might be the biggest phenomenon to hit the global travel industry since the invention of commercial flight—Chinese tourism.<sup>xi</sup>” Indeed, China has emerged as “a tourism superpower generating 129 million inbound, 3.2 billion domestic and 98

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3 million outbound tourists in 2013 (CNTA 2014)” (Weaver, 2015, p. 54). Chinese travelers’  
4 spending increased 40 percent between 2011 and 2012 from US \$73 billion to US \$102 billion  
5 with an average of U.S. \$1,230 per trip<sup>xii</sup>. By 2014, Chinese international tourists spent a record  
6 U.S. \$164 billion, up 28 percent since 2013<sup>xiii</sup>. Now the world’s largest population of  
7 international tourists, in 2012 China’s tourism potential overtook Americans and Germans in as  
8 the top international spenders. A recent *New York Times* article similarly reports how “[I]n Asia,  
9 alarm has centered on Chinese tourists; there are more of them than from any other nation. China  
10 began loosening severe travel restrictions only about 25 years ago, and the rapid rise of the  
11 middle class has sent curious... visitors throughout Southeast Asia.<sup>xiv</sup>” The growth of Chinese  
12 tourism derives from the broader growth of the middle class in China (Agnew, 2010; Barton,  
13 Chen, & Jin, 2013; Tomba, 2009; Tsang, 2014; Zhang, 2012). In 2012 the Chinese middle class  
14 population was estimated to be more than 400 million people and growing. By 2022 that number  
15 is expected to be as high as 630 million or 75 percent of urban Chinese households and 45  
16 percent of the population<sup>xv</sup>. As one Thai university staff member explained “Chinese people have  
17 more purchasing power now. They can focus on small things and many start with international  
18 travel.” According to the UNWTO, relaxation of foreign restrictions on travel, rapid urbanization  
19 and rising incomes are credited for the growing outbound Chinese tourism market<sup>xvi</sup>. Thus, the  
20 widespread reception of *Lost in Thailand*, among popular Chinese independent tourists in Chiang  
21 Mai is reflective of the changing geopolitical climate including the rise of China as an emerging  
22 superpower and the corollary growing economic significance of Chinese tourism in Southeast  
23 Asia and beyond (Otmazgin & Ben-Ari, 2013; Reilly, 2013). In what follows, we situate Thai  
24 residents’ and Chinese tourists’ reaction to the impact of *Lost in Thailand* within these broader  
25 geopolitical contexts.  
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### 36 **Methodology**

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38 This paper is based on 40 structured interviews with Chinese tourists and Thai residents as  
39 well as a discourse analysis of Thai and English language media that report on the relationship  
40 between *Lost in Thailand* and the growth of Chinese film tourism in Thailand. Media include  
41 online magazines, newspapers and websites as well as virtual communities such as YouTube,  
42 Facebook and Twitter. Structured interviews were conducted with 10 Thai university staff, 10  
43 Thai university students and 20 young (18-35 years) Chinese independent (i.e. not group tour  
44 participants) tourists. Chinese tourists are generally divided into two categories in Thailand  
45 including the high end tourists between 40 and 50 years of age and the Free and Independent  
46 Travellers (FITs) who tend to be around 30 years of age and do not rely on tour operators<sup>xvii</sup>.  
47 Interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes and addressed several themes including  
48 motivations for travel to Chiang Mai, tourist-resident encounters and the perceived impact of  
49 *Lost in Thailand* on Chinese tourism to Chiang Mai.  
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54 This research was carried out, in part, with Thai and Chinese research assistants who  
55 helped locate Chinese tourists, as well as conduct and translate interviews from Mandarin to  
56 English. Interviews with Thai research participants were conducted by the authors in Thai. As a  
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result, Mandarin, Thai and English were used to collect data. All interviews were digitally recorded, translated into English and transcribed for analysis purposes. Throughout the duration of the project, data analysis was an ongoing recursive process (Cresswell, 2013; Willen, 2007). As a discourse analysis, we focused on the recurrent themes that emerged from the data. As such, transcripts were coded into overarching themes and significant statements made by research collaborators about their perceptions of film tourism and/or motivations to participate in film tourism were identified (Cresswell, 2013). Pseudonyms of persons and places are used in all cases to protect the privacy of our research collaborators.

### Enacting Geopolitical Imaginaries

*They come here looking for a shorter break than one which involves an intercontinental trip across the ocean, but certainly not a cheaper or less exhaustive one. Schedules matching those of the film's main characters (businessman Xu Lang and his unlikely travel partner Wang Bao) – which include fleeting trips between temples and Muay Thai rings – mean that the average Chinese “high-end” tourist spends around 4,500 baht per day in Chiang Mai, according to figures given by Songvit. This new swell of tourism – dubbed by those in the know as a “state of influx” – comes in anticipation of a more ordered holiday than the bucket-swilling type sought by the Farang backpacker tidal wave which has already converged on the city<sup>xviii</sup>.*

In this section we examine enactments of geopolitical imaginaries of film tourism and the popular media representations they evoked, as well as Thai university students' and staff members' perceptions of these enactments and the broader impact of the growth of Chinese film tourism in Chiang Mai. Widespread reports of Chinese film tourists “invasion” of Chiang Mai University, one of the most prestigious universities in the country, is well documented in popular media as well as is a widespread topic of conversation among residents. A *Bangkok Post* article, for instance, reports that *Lost in Thailand* has turned Chiang Mai University into a “must see destination” and encouraged more than 500 Chinese film tourists per day to visit the campus, thus inundating faculty and staff with a reportedly uncontrollable tourist population. As a result of the influx of Chinese film tourists, the university established 30 minute bus tours of the campus with Chinese speaking guides for 50 baht, as well as started charging tourists an entry fee of 50-100 baht for a four hour- day long visit<sup>xix</sup>. As one Thai university staff member explained to us, “There were so many tourists in the campus that Chiang Mai University had to provide the trams for them.” Associate Professor Rome Chiranukrom in the international relations office explained how Chinese film tourists are roaming the campus, entering classrooms, sitting in on classes and disrupting the functioning of the campus. Additionally, they have also been witnessed “sneaking into classrooms to take photos of teachers and students, causing car accidents, leaving a mess in the canteen, and pitching a tent near the lake and writing ‘we are here’ in paint on the ground”<sup>xx</sup>. The owner of Chiang Mai Paradise a major operator of Chinese tours in Chiang Mai, Anchalee Vittayanuntapornkul, angrily asked, “Are they trying to

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3 turn the university into a zoo?... Instead of collecting fees, why don't they enforce stronger rules  
4 to control crowds? I've never heard of any university in the world collecting a fee just to go  
5 inside ....<sup>xxi</sup>  
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Figure 2. Chinese tourists on bus tour at Chiang Mai University. Photo courtesy of the authors.

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Among the most commonly reported behaviour among Chinese film tourists is the widespread practice of cosplay in which Chinese tourists buy university uniforms—which consist of white collared tops, dark slacks or skirt and a purple tie for men—and pose for photos on campus, attend class and eat at the canteen. According to reports, this practice is “widely encouraged on Chinese travel websites.... Many of these visitors also sneak into classrooms in school uniforms and attend lessons<sup>xxii</sup>.” University students have complained about Chinese tourists distributing their classes and taking up seats on buses, in the canteen and in classrooms. As one university staff member explained to us: “Some tourists wore the... university uniform to take photos. They also did something that seems like inappropriate behavior at the reservoir. They also don't get on the tram in queue.” Indeed, images of Chinese couples wearing university uniforms and displaying public affection on campus were met with outrage by some students who, as a Thai-based newspaper reporter explains, left messages on tourists' blogs such as ““You're too loud and disturbing,” “CMU is a campus, a place for study. Not a tourism site! And learn some traffic rules. You are blocking the way!,” “School uniforms in Thailand are considered sacred,” and “It's not for cosplay purpose. This shows how disrespectful you are. Next time, do a bit of research when you visit another country. Never come back to Thailand.<sup>xxiii</sup>”

Despite these widespread critiques of Chinese tourists' behavior were also commonly discussed in the context of traffic safety. One Thai student, for instance, explained how: “Chinese tourists drive very dangerously. They don't know the international traffic rules. Local people have to be aware of them when they are driving, especially the Chinese tourists who drive their own cars from China in a caravan.” Thus, most students and staff were concerned by what they perceived to be Chinese tourists' lack of traffic safety behaviors. “They drive against the flow of traffic, drive very slow, drive in the middle of the two-way road, and sometimes suddenly stop the car or motorbike without paying any attention,” commented another Thai student. Representative comments also include statements such as: “they don't follow the traffic

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3 rules, for example, they drive against the flow of traffic. They are also careless while driving on  
4 the road,” and “They ride motorcycles, bicycles, and drive cars against the flow of traffic. For  
5 example, they stop the vehicles wherever they want regardless of circumstance or place such as  
6 at the center of the road or at the roundabout.”  
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9 Thai university students’ and staff members’ comments were frequently qualified by  
10 statements regarding the cross-cultural challenges that Chinese tourists face in Thailand. Thus,  
11 Thai university students and staff members noted how Chinese tourists were not entirely  
12 responsible for their behavior because of cross-cultural misunderstandings. As one staff member  
13 put it: “They do many things; both good and not good behaviors.” Additionally, staff members  
14 explained: “First of all, I’ve heard that they [Chinese tourists] cause some problems because  
15 they have a different culture, not on purpose,” and “...maybe we have a different culture. Most  
16 Chinese are not familiar with foreigners or engage with foreigners.” A Thai student similarly  
17 noted how while “sometimes they intrude and act inappropriately and do inappropriate things”  
18 this was perhaps “because of their different culture and language challenges.”  
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22 Thus, Thai students and staff had a similar attitude towards widespread cultural  
23 misunderstandings between themselves and Chinese tourists. They frequently explained how  
24 inappropriate behavior was a matter of cross-cultural misunderstanding and miscommunication  
25 rather than purposeful contempt. A university staff member further noted:  
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28 *Chinese tourists have taken a shower and defecated in a public places, broken traffic rules,*  
29 *parked in no parking areas and set up tents in the Chiang Mai University campus. They*  
30 *might not know about Thai culture. These things might be allowed in their country, but not*  
31 *in Thailand. This may be because we do not have good communication. We should have*  
32 *signs, media, and symbols to communicate with them. Most media are in the Thai*  
33 *language. Most local people cannot communicate in Chinese or English and Chinese*  
34 *[tourists] cannot speak English.*  
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38 Another university staff member similarly noted: “Maybe they don’t know or learn about Thai  
39 culture before they come. For example at a hot springs, they put their feet in the hot springs  
40 while Thais use it to boil eggs.”  
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42 While it was common for Thai students and staff to be more understanding about what  
43 they perceived as independent Chinese tourists’ inappropriate behavior, they were often quick to  
44 blame Thai tour guides when Chinese group tour participants acted out in culturally  
45 inappropriate ways. For example, one staff member explained: “The independent Chinese  
46 tourists might do something because they don’t know. As for the group tour Chinese tourists,  
47 tour guides might advise them in the wrong way in order to sell a tour program and save on their  
48 costs.” Another Thai university student explained, “Chinese who come with a group tour have a  
49 tour guide who can explain things but guides have to inform them, especially the aging tourists.  
50 They might inform them with brochures or by making other media such as having pictures.” As  
51 these comments suggest, while what is commonly viewed as culturally dissonance among  
52 Chinese tourists is critiqued, there is a simultaneous, if ambivalent acknowledgement that this  
53 behavior can and has been tolerated because of the economic incentives it spawns.  
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### Ambivalent Economies of Tourism Encounter

In this section we situate popular reactions to Chinese film tourism in northern Thailand within the broader historical political economy in which they operate. The complex relationship between Thai citizens and Chinese tourists is mediated by a longer history of Sino-Thai relations. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Siamese nationalism grew and assimilation policies intensified, while Chinese economic power became an increasingly significant focus of national attention (Keyes, 1987; Keyes & Tanabe, 2013; Morita, 2003; Wyatt, 1982). Morita observes that “By the 1930s, the Chinese constituted 85% of the commercial class and held in their hands 90% of Siam’s commerce and trade... Pro-assimilation policies made sense in the face of such dominance over the Siamese economy” (Morita, 2003, p. 487). Today, approximately 15 percent of the population of Thailand claims Chinese descent and, according to de Pablos and Lytras, Thai citizens of Chinese descent control an estimated 90 percent of all investments in the industry sector and 50 percent of all investments in banking and finance (de Pablos & Lytras, 2009, p. 206; Morita, 2003). Thus, the meaning of recent headlines such as “Thailand slips deeper into China’s embrace<sup>xxiv</sup>” that canvass newspapers throughout the region have historical resonance.

In northern Thailand, the market-based tourism encounter is mediated by historical political economic relations, the economic value of the Chinese tourism market as well as ongoing Chinese investment in the region and has resulted in contradictory feelings among Thai residents. It is in this context that the frequent characterization in popular media of contemporary Sino-Thai relations as a “big brother” relationship exists. One Thai blogger summarizes how: “Thai people... generally favor Chinese and China... [as] one of the country [sic] that [is] most friendly... but there are some complicate[d] issues about this deep down in it... *Thai people generally considered Chinese as their Asian big brothers* which was source of technology and development... [for] life of ordinary people which transfer[s] from people-to-people relation[s] (not for elites which preferred monopoliable [sic] imported technology from Indian and later from the West)<sup>xxv</sup> (italics added).” Indeed, a discourse analysis of social media and blogs suggests that this sentiment is widespread throughout Thailand.

Large scale cultural change due to intensified economic influence of Chinese tourists is commonly observed by both Chinese tourists and Thai residents. Many Chinese tourists commented on how impressed they are that Thai hotel and guesthouse staff as well as market vendors speak Mandarin. A Thai university student explained, “[Chinese tourism] affects Thai economy in a positive way because tourism is a kind of investment. More revenue comes into the country. Plus, Thailand is aware of the expansion of the Chinese economy which has resulted in the growing number of people who speak Mandarin in Thailand.” Thus, cultural shifts in both the political economy as well as cultural transitions towards Chinese culture and language are a frequent conversation among Thai residents in the region.

Significantly, recent property investment in Chiang Mai is widely attributed, at least in part, to the popularity of *Lost in Thailand*. For instance, *The Nation: Thailand’s Independent Newspaper* reports how: “Demand for both condominiums and detached housing in Chiang Mai is strong, especially from investors from China, many of whom snapped up residences after

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visiting the Northern Province following the popularity of the Chinese-language movie *Lost in Thailand*.” Furthermore, the article noted how “some male foreign investors buying detached housing in Chiang Mai will bypass purchasing a home in a joint venture with a Thai and instead marry a local woman, as Thai women can buy property.<sup>xxvi</sup>” Significantly, this practice has long been associated with Euromerican men (Cohen, 2003; Loos, 2006). Thus, these observations highlight how the gendered political economy of foreign investment in Thailand has undergone a rapid transition that echoes broader political economic shifts in the global economy (Mangan & Jinxia, 2013; Scott, 2008; Shenkar, 2006).

In another vein, Thai residents almost invariably noted that in addition to the scenic beauty and cultural heritage of northern Thailand, Chinese tourists were drawn to Thailand because of the relatively low cost of food and accommodation. As one Thai student explained, “I think they come for a cheap tour program and cheap Thai currency. Chinese have more income. TAT [Tourism Authority of Thailand] promoted how the government will not collect a tourism tax which then means Chiang Mai no longer has a low [tourist] season.” These observations by Thai staff and students were echoed by Chinese tourists, whom, when describing their motivations for travelling to Chiang Mai explained how the low prices (as well as the good food) were among their primary motivations. Comments such as, “The lower prices and culture,” “The things in Thailand are cheap but high quality,” and “Food price is low and people are nice” were frequently noted by Chinese tourists.

This emphasis on cost and its role in the Sino-Thai tourism encounter can be explained within the context of what Illouz (2007) terms emotional capitalism. Illouz’s analytic of emotional capitalism refers to “a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing... a broad sweeping movement in which affect is an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life—especially that of the middle classes—follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (Illouz, 2007, p. 5). Thus, the tourism, the encounter is always, already mediated by market-based logics which, as Illouz notes, “shape and inform interpersonal and emotional relationships, while interpersonal relationships are at the epicenter of economic relationships (Illouz, 2007, p. 5). Mass media mediated interpersonal encounters are also rearticulated through interpersonal encounters where overdetermined stereotypes are reinforced or challenged, and is the topic of the following section.

### Re-Assembling Geopolitical Imaginaries

*For the longest time Americans have held the mantle and stereotype of being the most obnoxious tourists on the face of the Earth. Some of us were too loud, others were too tacky, many were too fat, others were too demanding, and an unfortunate few were all of the above — basically people around the world found the American tourists they met offensive. But lately that caricature has been fading...More Chinese tourists traveling make Chinese tourists more visible, and that gives people around the world the templates to start*

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4 *a stereotype. And just like the Americans who were rude and demanding when the dollar*  
5 *was strong, so too are the Chinese*<sup>xxvii</sup>.

6 As the quote above indicates, tourism imaginaries are not fixed, but rather indicative of the  
7 broader cultural and political economic climate in which they operate. Indeed, linked as they are  
8 to geopolitical imaginaries, it is significant that tourism imaginaries have shifted with the  
9 transition from the American Century of the 1900s to the contemporary Chinese Century of  
10 political economic power (Luce, 1999; Scott, 2008; Shenkar, 2006). For example, the phrase “the  
11 ugly American,” which first appeared in the 1958 bestselling novel based in Southeast Asia of  
12 the same title, has been overshadowed by emerging tourist sending economies. Frequently used  
13 to describe the arrogance and cultural insensitivity of American tourists, the term continues to be  
14 widely used today. For instance, a New York Times author explains how the “Ugly American”  
15 today stands for “our compatriots who wear tube tops to the Vatican or shout for Big Macs in  
16 Beijing.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Yet, increasingly, the term has taken on new meanings in the context of Chinese  
17 international tourism, where headlines such as “Bad Chinese Tourists Are Earning A Reputation  
18 as The New 'Ugly Americans'”<sup>xxix</sup> and “How Chinese Tourists Usurped the Ugly Americans”<sup>xxx</sup>  
19 abound.  
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25 Despite the widespread growth of stereotypes among Thai residents, ambivalent and co-  
26 existing feelings of irritation and understanding were often rearticulated through interpersonal  
27 encounters with Chinese tourists. A Thai student, for example, explained how after personally  
28 meeting a Chinese tourist, her perceptions quickly changed: “They ride motorcycles without  
29 knowing any traffic rules, then they cause the accidents. They sometimes walk on the street  
30 without paying attention to the vehicles. One day, A Chinese riding a motorcycle had an accident  
31 around my neighborhood. Then, they came to ask for help. I now think they [Chinese tourists]  
32 are lovely and they also said thank you.” What this comment indicates is the perhaps understated  
33 possibility for tourist encounters to provide space for the rearticulation of geopolitical  
34 imaginaries. This is in part, because as “tourist experiences—and the extent to which tourists  
35 might find them to be authentic—are often constituted by a ‘collusion’ between ‘objects’, places,  
36 others and a tourist’s embodied interaction with these” (Buchmann, Moore, & Fisher, 2010, p.  
37 230). Additionally, it is significant that authenticity among tourists is often dependent on  
38 intimate interpersonal interaction (Conran, 2005). This observation may be relevant to residents  
39 of tourism locations as well. Thus, while it appears that Thai residents and Chinese tourists had,  
40 in many ways, overdetermined views of each other, these views were often punctuated by  
41 interpersonal exchange, where new tourism imaginaries were co-constructed.  
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48 In a similar vein, Chinese tourists’ stereotype of the “Thai smile,” which has long been a  
49 powerful marketing campaign in Thailand, is reiterated among Chinese tourists throughout the  
50 region. This may be especially the case in northern Thailand where the “Thai smile” continues to  
51 be an important cultural touchstone. It is notable that in our research, Chinese tourists invariably  
52 rearticulated this discourse in their descriptions of the most enjoyable part of their travel  
53 experience. For example, one Chinese tourist explained “Before coming to Thailand, I thought  
54 Thai people were very friendly.” This perception was reinforced in most Chinese tourists’ travel  
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3 experiences: “Before I came I had a really good impression of Chiang Mai. People are very  
4 kind,” and “Before I came I didn’t have a special impression, after my trip I now think that Thai  
5 people are very friendly.” Additionally, most Chinese tourists commented on how Thailand was  
6 significantly more “modern” than they had anticipated. One tourist explained, “Thailand  
7 produces many fruits and rice. It is an agricultural country, yet it is more modern than I  
8 imagined.” These comments, we argue, are reflective of the ways in which tourism encounters  
9 become spaces where geopolitical imaginaries of cultural difference are mediated by political-  
10 economic realities and can be reinforced, contested or maintained.  
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15 The Sino-Thai tourism encounter has also worked to reassemble geopolitical identities  
16 through distinctions between Thai, Chinese and Farang (western) tourists. As the number of  
17 Chinese tourists continues outpace western tourist arrivals to the country, the cultural politics of  
18 Thainess are rearticulated within the ethnic landscape of tourism. For example, Thongchai  
19 observes how Thainess is defined, in part, through what he calls “negative identification,”  
20 whereby he points to how “If the domain of what is Thainess is hard to define clearly, the  
21 domain of what is not Thai – that is, un-Thai—is defined from time to time” (Thongchai, 1994,  
22 p. 5). Forms of negative identification seem to be playing out in Sino-Thai tourism encounters  
23 where distinctions between Thai residents and Chinese tourists are increasingly visible.  
24 Additionally, cultural critiques of the European and American tourist are being overshadowed by  
25 the growing numbers of Chinese tourists. In this way, imaginaries of self and nation are similarly  
26 reassembled through the tourism encounter, where, for example, Thainess is defined against,  
27 among others, the Farang and Chinese other.  
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33 Thus, the reassembling of geopolitical imaginaries in tourism is mediated at multiple scales  
34 such as global political economic discourse, photographs, tourism operators, local and national  
35 governments, historical experience, community member re-presentations, travel websites, social  
36 media, blogs, and film, among others. As a university staff member explained, “I think tourists  
37 come to Chiang Mai University because of social media, they take photos and share beautiful  
38 pictures of Chiang Mai University.” Similarly, several university students explained that they  
39 believed that Chinese tourist numbers were growing, “...because of the movie [Lost in  
40 Thailand], word of mouth, photos, and business opportunities” and that “the movie presents  
41 beautiful sides of Thailand which is of interest to the tourist.” These imaginative reconstructions  
42 (Leite, 2005) mediate physical encounters in tourism and invariably evoke affective responses,  
43 which “often propagate historically inherited stereotypes that are based on the myths and  
44 fantasies that form part of an imaginary” (Salazar & Graburn, 2014, p. 7-8). Like film, tourism  
45 imaginaries are a component of broader geopolitical assemblages which can be rearticulated  
46 through tourism encounters (Dodds, 2008).  
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52 In these ways, the immediate and personal sources of tourism imaginaries are recursively  
53 articulated and contribute to ongoing narratives between touristic and non-touristic experience  
54 where worldviews are continuously negotiated through the accumulation of new experiences  
55 (Bruner, 2005; Salazar & Graburn, 2014). The relationship between geopolitics and film are  
56 further entangled in tourism where representations of place articulate with lived experience and  
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3 are mediated by market repertoires which are “intertwined with the language of psychology and,  
4 combined together, offer new techniques and meanings to forge new forms of sociability”  
5 (Illouz, 2007, p. 5). Thus, cultural sensibilities of place are produced through multi-scalar and  
6 historically situated popular discourses such as film tourism, which has the potential to open up  
7 space for the reassembling of geopolitical imaginaries.  
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## 10 11 12 **Conclusion**

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14 In this paper we have sought to illustrate how tourism, film and circuits of affect  
15 rearticulate geopolitical imaginaries of place in northern Thailand. We contextualized Thai  
16 residents’ responses and Chinese tourists’ motivations to *Lost in Thailand* within the broader  
17 expansion of Chinese outbound tourism, the rising middle class in China and the emergence of  
18 China as a global economic superpower. As Thailand’s largest trading partner and source of  
19 tourists as well as the country’s fourth biggest investor, relations between China and Thailand  
20 play a significant role in the overall economic growth of the region. Thus, by investigating the  
21 political-economic and cultural implications of film tourism encounters and the affective  
22 responses they engender, this paper contributes to emerging work that examines the co-  
23 constitution of geopolitical imaginaries of place.  
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27 Film tourism is a novel site from which to examine geopolitical imaginaries in tourism and  
28 the role they play as a component part of relational, processual, unequal and mobile geopolitical  
29 assemblages. The film tourism encounter provides space for the crafting of new geopolitical  
30 imaginaries through the recursive process of representation and embodied experience. Carter and  
31 McCormack “argue that the relation between cinematic and geopolitical intervention must be  
32 understood not only in terms of the way one reproduces or subverts the discursively framed  
33 codes and scripts of the other, but also through the ways in which each serves to amplify and  
34 modulate the affects of the other” (Carter & McCormack, 2006, p. 230). This reproduction and  
35 subversion of discursively framed scripts in cinematic and geopolitical interventions can be  
36 extended to the analysis of film tourism encounters. Additionally, the circulation of geopolitical  
37 imaginaries in film tourism is driven by media, online communities as well as tourists and  
38 residents and the affective encounters between them. We have examined how the reimagining of  
39 Sino-Thai relations through everyday tourism encounters can provide a more nuanced critique.  
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47 Finally, this analysis of the relationship between *Lost in Thailand*, the growth of Chinese  
48 film tourism to Chiang Mai and the ways in which they mediate the affective encounter between  
49 Chinese tourists and Chiang Mai residents sheds analytical light on how popular geopolitical  
50 discourses in film articulate with geopolitical imaginaries. Yet, while popular geopolitical  
51 discourses in film, print and online media mediate the tourism encounter in northern Thailand, it  
52 is important to not exaggerate the coherence or stability of these discourses as, like all  
53 assemblages, they are constantly reworked through everyday personal experience. Significantly,  
54 tourism imaginaries play into the resilience of the geopolitical discourses through which they are  
55 constructed. Thus, geopolitical assemblages are articulated through the inherently affect driven  
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3 film tourism encounter as well as historical and contemporary political-economic relations that  
4 link geopolitical imaginaries of place with tourist experiences in place.  
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