



6

Thanatourism: A Comparative Approach

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Introduction

Philip Stone (2012) has proposed a paradigmatic approach to thana (death) tourism in contemporary secular Western, “death-denying” societies, departing from Giddens’ (1991) argument on the weakening of “ontological security” in the contemporary world (also see Chap. 8). Stone proposed that sites of dark tourism constitute what could be seen as a functional substitute for religious institutions which in the past enabled individuals to come to terms with their mortality (Stone 2012; Stone and Sharpley 2008). Dark tourism is thus conceived as a non-religious mediating institution between the living and the dead, offering an opportunity of thanatopic contemplation in face of inevitable (and meaningless) death. Stone quotes Lennon and Foley’s (2000) assertion that dark tourism is “primarily a Western phenomenon” (Stone 2006: 149). This resounds with my own conviction in the past that “tourism” is primarily a Western phenomenon. However, such Eurocentric attitudes have been recently dispelled by a revised conceptual approach, which argues that tourism is a global phenomenon, though manifested in diverse ways in various parts of the world (Cohen and Cohen 2015a). We should ask, therefore, do dark tourism phenomena exist in non-Western emergent world regions, though based on different ontological assumptions about death, than those of the secular West? Stone’s paradigmatic approach could thus be broadened into

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a comparative conceptual framework, in which Western thanatourism would be just one particular case. This procedure resembles one I have recently applied to the comparative study of roadside memorials, a phenomenon first studied in the contemporary West, but found in different disguises in many societies outside the West (Cohen 2012).

In this chapter, therefore, I seek merely to outline an approach to the comparative study of thanatourism and support it by examples taken from particular Asian countries. I have neither the resources nor the space for a systematic comparison of thanatourism in the emergent world regions.

Theoretical Approach

The crucial point of Stone's paradigmatic approach is the modern secular "theology" of life and death. For present purposes this can be concisely presented in a few basic premises:

1. Human life is a once-only event;
2. Death is an inevitable terminal point of individual life, the point of the ontological cessation of individual existence;
3. There is no afterlife, either as eternal life or as rebirth;
4. Hence, death is meaningless; there is no hope.

Under these premises, thanatouristic sites offer a potential opportunity for thanatopsis. That is, the contemplation of one's own death, and its stoical acceptance, without striving to overcome it by some act of faith or belief. However, students of thanatourism have recently stressed that not all thanatourist sites are equally dark; rather, there are various "shades of darkness," which implies that dark tourism combines degrees of both "darkness" and "lightness" (Heuermann and Chhabra 2014; Stone 2006; Sharpley 2005). Several typologies of Western thanatourism have been proposed to scale those phenomena along a dark-to-light axis (Stone 2006). Thanatourists will assumedly differ in their motivations and experiences along this axis, with the strongest thanatopic experiences at the darkest sites. Empirical studies, however, have shown that there is a wide diversity of motivations and experiences even among visitors to the same dark site (Biran et al. 2011). The darkness of sites and the depth of thanatopic experiences of visitors are possibly related, but not overlapping; these variables have therefore to be separately investigated. This is particularly important in the case of dark tourist sites in the emergent regions, which are visited by both a foreign and a domestic public.

My proposal for a comparative framework of thanasites in the West and in the emergent regions is based on four major dimensions: the kind of thanatourist sites, the respective theologies of death and soteriological teachings, the relations to and with the dead, and the motivations and experiences of domestic visitors to those sites.

Recent literature offers increasing evidence of the existence of thanatourist sites and of thanatourism in the emergent regions, for example, in Africa (Mudzanani 2014; Strange and Kempa 2003; Werdler 2012), in South America (Wyndham and Read 2012), and particularly in Asian countries, such as India (Verma and Jain 2013), China (Biran et al. 2014; Tang 2014), Singapore (Muzaini et al. 2007), Cambodia (Sofield 2009), Thailand (Rittichainuwat 2008), Vietnam (Hayward and Tran 2014), and Japan (Cooper 2006; Yoneyama 1999; Yoshida 2004). However, the motivations and experiences of thanatourists in those regions have been less studied. Researchers sought primarily to demonstrate that the phenomenon exists outside the West (Hayward and Tran 2014), but have not dealt systematically with the differences between Western thanatourism and that in other world regions. While such an enterprise is beyond the limits of this chapter, I seek to offer an approach to the comparative study of thanatourism by presenting and analyzing some selected thanatourism examples from Asian countries.

Ancestor Worship as Background to Asian Thanatourism

I distinguish two main varieties of thanatourist phenomena in contemporary Asia, both drawing on long-established religious traditions, particularly ancestor worship. The first expands the customs of ancestor worship unto sites of deceased non-kin persons, especially celebrities, attracting mainly domestic visitors. The other applies those traditions more loosely and selectively to the commemoration and worship on recent historical sites of massive death, such as battlefields and places where atrocities were committed or disasters occurred. These are often visited by both domestic and international visitors. All major Asian religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese folk religion, or Shinto, believe in the survival of the soul/spirit after death, but differ in their soteriological teachings. I shall focus here mainly on the Hindu-Buddhist traditions, and the ancestor worship rituals based on them.

Matthew Sayers (2013) states in his study of ancient Indian ancestor worship an opening question: “What is the ultimate goal of the individual in Hinduism? Liberation from rebirth? An eternal place in heaven? The tension between the ascetically oriented soteriology of liberation and that of the

ritualistic tradition that aims at heaven is at the core of Hindu practices relevant to the ultimate end of the religious life” (ibid: 1). The Brahmins advocate the “renunciation of rituals and worldly life for the attainment of salvation. The ritualists endorse ritual activity as the way to the ultimate goal, an eternal stay in heaven”; the latter have created a “long tradition of ancestor worship” (ibid: 1). Sayers points out that “the centrality of reincarnation to the contemporary conception of Hinduism...belies a long and rich history of ancestor worship in South Asia. The funerary offerings made to one’s dead parents in contemporary India are the survival of a tradition that stretches back to the Vedas... [which] revolves around the translation of the deceased to the next world” where “the ancestors live on the food offered to them in ritual” (ibid: 1). This ritual has “persisted for more than two thousand years after the development of the concept of transmigration” (ibid: 1).

Buddhism has similarly condoned ancestor worship, even though it denied permanence to the self: the Buddhist doctrine of conditioned origination “describes a world in which nothing is permanent, including the self” (Sayers 2013: 10). But, while Buddha had taught that the ultimate goal is nirvana, the extinction of the self, “the Buddhist authors did not reject the ubiquitous ritual practices of the householder (hospitality, divine rites and ancestral rites); they have merely reinterpreted them in various ways, for example, reconceptualizing their underpinning assumptions or offering a moral interpretation” (ibid: 11).

Extension of Ancestor Rituals to Popular Non-kin Deceased Persons

Ancestor worship, involving the practice of feeding the ancestors or even transferring objects to them, is found in all major Asian religions, notwithstanding theological or soteriological differences. In contemporary folk Buddhism, for example, the Buddhist monks may be taken recourse to as mediators with the spirits of the dead and serve to transfer objects from laymen to the ancestors. Ladwig (2011: 19) reports that in Laos, “the ritual transfer of objects to the spirits of the deceased... plays a crucial role in large rituals that are part of the Lao ritual cycle.” Ladwig (2011: 19) points out that “the transfer of objects to non-human beings plays a crucial role in establishing a link between humans and the spirits of the dead.” However, some critics see this belief as [erroneous] “folk Buddhism” and claim that only merit (*boun*) is transferred to the deceased, while the objects stay with the monks (ibid: 19).

I shall restrict the discussion of the extension of ancestor rituals to non-kin deceased to Thailand, since it renders the best examples of this process which I am familiar with. Ancestor worship is a principal form of the ritual system of spirit veneration, a major component of Thai folk religion. Adjoining most spirit houses for the Earth spirit (*phra phum*) at Thai dwellings, there is a lower shrine for the spirits of the ancestors (*taa-yaay*). Shrines are also put up for the spirits of mountains or semi-mythical heroes, local potentates, or notables, referred to, in terms of an adapted kinship terminology, by the honorifics *chao pho* (Lord Father) or *chao mae* (Lady Mother). Such shrines are locally venerated and mostly do not have a wider audience or appeal to domestic or foreign tourists.

However, a recent, though still rare, phenomenon is the erection of memorial shrines for notables or celebrities who have died in road accidents (a variety of Western “roadside memorials” [Cohen 2012]), or in mishaps, or who suffered a premature death from other causes. In contrast to the standardized *taa-yaay*, and even *chao pho-chao mae* shrines, such sites are devoted to widely known personalities and potentially appeal to a wider audience; they are thus potential thanatouristic attractions. I shall offer three examples of sites devoted to deceased celebrities in Thailand:

The shrine of Hanni [Honey] Sri Isan, a *mo-lam* (a form of folk song [Champadeang 2010]) songstress from the northeastern (Isan) region of Thailand, who was killed at an early age in a road accident. A shrine in the form of an enlarged spirit house was established at the site, with a large photograph of the deceased on a billboard in front of it and one of her costumes displayed inside. People pray at the shrine and leave votive objects, particularly figurines of children (Hanni died childless) and ask the spirit of the songstress for good luck. (Cohen 2012: 353–357)

Another notable example is the shrine of Mitr Chaibancha, a popular Thai actor of the 1960s (Jaiser 2012: 37), who died in 1970 after a helicopter accident in Chonburi Province. A shrine in his memory was established in Thailand’s leading seaside resort city, Pattaya, located in the same province. From humble beginnings, the shrine has been upgraded and embellished several times, most recently in 2012. It displays a life-size metal sculpture of the actor holding a pistol, photographs from his motion pictures, and other memorabilia (*Wikipedia* n.d.). The shrine acts as a memorial, but it also serves as a place of worship of the spirit of the actor, resembling the worship of a *chao pho* (Lord Father) (Cohen 2012: 349). These two sites, though commemorating deceased celebrities, have not (yet) achieved the level of popularity to be

called a thanatourist attraction. However, though the dividing line is fuzzy, the third site commemorating the songstress Pumpuang Duangjan (1961–1992), who had enjoyed nation-wide popularity, appears to qualify as a thanatourist attraction (Cohen 2012: 347–349).

Pumpuang Duangjan was the most popular Thai *Luk Thung* (a popular vocal music style [Jaiser 2012: 43–51]) songstress and actress of her generation. Born to very poor villagers in the central province of Suphanburi, she was an illiterate prodigy, who started performing at the age of 15 and was soon propelled to stardom with her innovative style and daring appearance (Siriyuvasak 1998: 192–194). However, exploited by her managers and exhausted from being overworked, Pumpuang died from a blood illness at the age of 31. Her funeral rites took place in Wat (temple) Thap Kradan in Song Phi Nong district in her native Suphanburi, and her ashes were deposited in an urn at the temple. Soon after her death, the temple turned the main hall on its ground floor into a commemorative site for the deceased songstress. Her life-size likenesses, dressed in her outfits and holding a microphone, were placed at several locations within the temple, accompanied by continuous broadcasts of her songs. In the temple hall, her personal belongings, dresses, shoes, and even some intimate articles were displayed in glass cases, resembling the display of personal belongings of a deceased abbot in some other temples.

Wat Thap Kradan has attracted vast numbers of visitors who worshipped the spirit of the songstress and presented her with objects to use in her after-life, just as such objects are “transferred” to deceased ancestors. These included not only dresses and other personal objects but also a large number of toilet chests, which had filled the space around the display of her personal belongings (author’s observations). The donations by devotees made the temple prosperous. In the early 2000s, for instance, it was able to initiate a major renovation and expansion, whereby in addition to a display of the songstress’ likenesses and photos in the main hall, several small shrines devoted to her were constructed within the temple’s premises—one containing her gilded funerary urn and the others her likenesses. Additionally, an open shrine, with the image of the songstress dressed in white, was placed under an old banyan tree. Like the shrines to the spirits of prominent local women, marked by the honorific *chao mae* (Lady mother), an altar in front of the image was loaded with votive objects, its access flanked by a pair of animal figures. Moreover, hundreds of dresses donated to the dead songstress were hung on the branches of the banyan tree (author’s observations).

Wat Thap Kradan is often visited by excursionists as a specific attraction, within a broader weekend trip to the area; the visitors often venerate and

make presentations to the deceased songstress. However, closer observation reveals a personal motive behind this veneration: people beseech the spirit of the songstress to bestow them with luck—particularly, to reveal winning numbers in a forthcoming lottery draw. This, rather than commemoration, seems to be often the worshippers' principal motivation to visit Wat Thap Kradan (Cohen 2012: 347–349).

The only other Asian example I was able to find resembling such a site comes from Malaysia, the Bai Guang Memorial. A musical tomb in the shape of a piano for the remembrance of the late legendary Bai Guang songstress is the first musical tomb in Malaysia. The musical tomb plays one of her famous songs “If Without You” when one approaches the piano. Today, the Bai Guang Memorial tomb is well known and has become a key visitor attraction within the Nirvana Memorial Park [a private cemetery with branches in several Asian countries] (*Celebrity memorial* <http://www.nirvana-asia-ltd.com/malaysia/branches/nirvana-memorial-park-semenyih/celebrity-memorial/>). But, in contrast to Pumpuang's memorial site, this songstress' spirit does not inhabit the tomb nor are supplications to it made by visitors.

An intensive search of the literature and the Internet failed to locate much information on other Asian examples of memorial sites for celebrities, but this might be due to the fact that this is as yet an emergent phenomenon. Thus, in the communist states of Asia, China, Vietnam, and Laos, public commemoration has in the past been restricted to monuments and other edifices devoted to revolutionary heroes, so memory sites for celebrities and other private persons could not be erected. However, things seem to be changing, with one study pointing out that in post-communist China, “state-led projects of patriotic education... ensured coexistence in commercial pop-culture of revolutionary idols and contemporary celebrities, via memory sites associated with... historical locations, museums and monuments of ‘red tourism’” (Jeffreys 2012). However, I was unable to find any studies of memory sites associated with contemporary Chinese celebrities. I suggest that if such sites emerge, in China or elsewhere in Asia, they will be built upon, and expand, existing traditions rather than contrast with them, as Elvis Presley's Graceland in Memphis, Kentucky, contrasts, as a new kind of sacred place, with modern Western secularism (Rigby 2001).

Memorials of War, Atrocities, and Disasters

Many thanatourist sites have been established in Asia for the commemoration of the fallen in the Second World War as well as the Vietnam War, for the

victims of atrocities in Cambodia, and for the casualties of major disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Some of these have been created by the Western powers for their war dead and are outside the scope of this chapter. Other sites have been established by the initiative of the authorities of Asian countries and attract both a foreign and a local public. However, the literature on these sites remains scarce and uneven, dealing primarily with their history and structure and much less with the customs and conduct associated with them. I shall in this section discuss three examples of Asian thanatourist sites found in the literature. Firstly, a Buddhist temple devoted to the commemoration of the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. Secondly, a notorious prison in Vietnam, and lastly, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in Japan. I shall dwell upon the extent to which the customs associated with those sites deploy elements of prevailing religious traditions, especially ancestor worship, on sites of death on a massive scale.

Trevor Sofield (2009: 176) offers a detailed description of the Khmer New Year commemoration of relatives killed by the Pol Pot regime, conducted at a Buddhist temple on the holy Sampau mountain, close to the city of Battambang in Cambodia. The temple was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, and its site has been deliberately desecrated. Indeed, its sacred cave was used as a torture prison and the ravines of the mountain for mass killings by hurling “enemies of the state” to their death. After the fall of the regime, the temple was rebuilt. At the temple:

...a small group of nuns and monks [are] praying 24 hours a day in perpetuity trying to rescue the souls of those killed who, in Buddhist theology, are ‘lost and hungry ghosts’ because they were denied a proper burial... These dark places today experience a Cambodian form of thanatourism at the Khmer New Year when more than 30,000 pilgrims each day of the New Year holiday provide offerings for the monks and nuns to recite continuous prayers for their ‘lost’ relatives. Many pilgrims detour from the temple to the killing sites and caves to burn incense and recite prayers. Temporarily, however, not enough time has elapsed since the horrors of the democide to fade for most Cambodians; and the ‘Cambodian thana- tourism’ to the so-called Killing Fields of Pol Pot that may be found in many parts of Cambodia is not a form of visitation for most Cambodians. Such sites are shunned by most Cambodians. (Sofield 2009: 176)

Sofield goes on to report:

In 2007, for example, 140,978 international visitors toured the Choeung Ek Killing Fields...where...mass graves containing the remains of 27,000 victims have been exhumed: but only 8569 Cambodians...entered the site. (ibid: 176)

The Cambodians do not neglect those sites; rather, it seems that they are unable to bear the intensity of the thanatopic experience at those sites of recent large-scale atrocities.

A similar thanatourist site has been described by Hayward and Tran (2014) in their study of tourism to Vietnam's Con Dao archipelago. The authors found that visits to the sites and memorials of the prisons on Con Son Island, in which dissidents have been incarcerated during successive French, South Vietnamese, and US administrations, constituted "the cornerstone of tourism in the archipelago since 1975 and the fundamental to the area's contemporary brand identity" (ibid: 117). According to the authors, domestic tourists began to visit the prisons in the late 1970s, initially in the form of self-organized visits to sites of imprisonment and/or demise of relatives, friends, and inspirational figures in Vietnam's extended struggle for self-determination. The physical remnants of the prisons and their associated grave sites became a key attraction for tourists, and the displays subsequently installed within them provided a chilling and vivid representation of the barbaric conditions in which dissidents were held and in which many perished (Hayward and Tran 2014).

Hayward and Tran (2014: 117) quote from Bodnar's (2001: x) foreword to Ho Tai's edited volume the observation that "successful memorialisation of War dead in Vietnam has to combine 'predictable tropes of patriotism' with the acknowledgment that there is a deep social attachment to 'rituals that signified that the dead would be reborn in an 'otherworld' where they would join a community of ancestors,' with the latter aspect providing as powerful a point of connection to the past and inspiration for the future as the former." The authors argue that "Con Son's only Buddhist pagoda... combines [these] two aspects in its daily chants" (ibid: 117). As an example, they quote a line from a chant, sung during a requiem mass by the pagoda's senior monk: "we believe that the fallen will watch over and provide guidance toward peace and happiness of present people and future generations" (ibid: 117).

The presentation of the prison sites consisted initially of "a simple opening-up of the former closed prison facilities to public visitation... revealing the horrors of incarceration" under previous regimes. However, with growing numbers of visitors and a rise in awareness of the prisons' significance, steps were taken toward "the maintenance and organization of prison sites for visitors and the provision of signage and documentation to enhance visitor experience." The latter involved "the installation of sculptures of shackled and emaciated prisoners in old prison buildings," providing, in the authors' view, "one of the 'darkest' imaginable thanatouristic experiences" (Hayward and Tran 2014; 118). At a large cemetery on the island, "20,000 deceased prisoners

have been buried, 712 of whom have been identified and are commemorated with individually named headstones” (Hayward and Tran 2014: 118). The authors point out that individual graves of particularly revered patriots are also major centers of attraction and visitation.

Among the most visited graves is that of “Vietnam’s most celebrated female revolutionary patriot, Vo Thi Sau [who] was executed by firing squad on Con Son in 1952 after two years of imprisonment during which she actively defied prison rules. Her revolutionary zeal and early death, aged 19, have contributed to a cult-status for her – akin to that of [a] secular revolutionary ‘saint.’ There are two distinct pilgrimage sites associated with her. While visitors to patriots’ graves routinely bring bouquets of flowers, offerings of rice, meals, fruit or wine, Sau’s memorials are also subject to gifts of materials that reflect her youth and femininity (such as lipstick, mirrors, combs etc.). The visitors’ gifts are both marks of respect and also offerings that are made in anticipation of inspiration, guidance and/or good fortune deriving from the secular pilgrimage” (Hayward and Tran 2014: 118). The spirit of the communist heroine Vo Thi Sau in Vietnam is thus venerated and supplicated in a similar manner as the celebrity songstress Pumpuang in Thailand.

Of all Asian countries, Japan has by far the greatest number of memorial sites devoted to those killed in the Second World War. According to Yoshida (2004), the country features at least 85 memorial museums and memorials. I shall here limit myself to the most prominent and best known memorial site, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park.

I have argued above that the customs of the veneration of the dead on thanatourist sites in Asian Buddhist countries constitute an extension and adaptation of the prevailing traditional ancestor worship. In Japan, however, ancestor worship came to be merged with state Shinto rituals. According to Smith (1974: 2), “following the Meiji Restoration in 1868... official efforts to link Shinto emperor worship with ‘Buddhist’... ancestor worship... proved dazzlingly successful.” Consequently, “up to 1945 ancestor worship was tied... to the politics and objectives of the State.” However, though the link has been formally broken after Japan’s defeat in the Second World War, it has left its traces in the establishment and structure of the Peace Memorial Park, as Yoneyama’s (1999) detailed study clearly demonstrates:

In tracing the development of Japan’s architectural modernism from the 1920s to the 1940s, the historian Inoue Shōichi offers an interesting account of the possible aesthetic origins of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. Situated at the heart of the city, close to the site of the atomic bomb’s detonation, the park was built on a vast open field of ashes created by the explosion. The park’s location

was once the city's downtown commercial and residential district, crowded with shops, residences, inns and theaters. Today, the commemorative space accommodates a number of memorials and monuments, museums and lecture halls, and draws over a million visitors annually. It also provides the ritual space for the annual 6 August Peace Memorial ceremony, which is sponsored by the city of Hiroshima. The design for the Peace Memorial Park was selected following a public competition that took place in 1949, while Japan was still under Allied Occupation. According to Inoue, the park's stylistic origin can be traced back to a nearly identical ground plan that has been adopted three years before Japan's surrender as part of a grand imperial vision, the Commemorative Building Project for the Construction of Greater East Asia.

Both designs were the creation of the world-renowned architect Tange Kenzō. For the 1942 competition Tange proposed a grandiose Shintoist memorial zone to be built on an open plain at the foot of Mount Fuji. With the collapse of Japan's empire that followed defeat by the Allied Forces and, more important, by anti-imperialist resistance against Japan in Asia and the Pacific, Tange's 1942 plan was forever aborted. Yet the majestic space that he envisioned as monumentalizing the concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity [Sphere] appears to have been revived in his 1949 postwar design; it was subsequently realized in 1954, albeit at [a] much reduced scale, with the completion of Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park.

Nothing epitomizes the Heideggerian irony of Japan's imperial modernity more solemnly than the incorporation of the monumentalized ruins of what is called the Atom Bomb Dome into the park. As in Tange's earlier plan, the central worshipping axis extends from the entrance, through the central cenotaph, to the ruins. This commemorative site is the artificially preserved remains of what used to be the Industry Promotion Hall, a quintessential sign of Japan's early-twentieth-century imperial modernity. Designed by an architect from Czechoslovakia, this continental Secession-style building, crowned with a distinctive dome-shaped roof, was completed in 1915. [In 1945] the atomic blast caused extensive damage to the building, leaving only some brick walls and the exposed iron frame of the dome-shaped canopy: hence the name of the ruin the Atom Bomb Dome.

In the postwar plan, the earlier concept of a sixty-meter Shintoist-style commemorative structure was scaled down and transfigured into the more human-sized, arch-shaped design of the central cenotaph that is now officially named the Hiroshima Peace City Commemorative Monument. In this newly recrafted public space, people congregate – not to celebrate the modernity, enlightenment, civilization, and dreams promised by the pan-Asian co-prosperity sphere, but rather to remember the inaugural moment of the nuclear age and to imagine possible self-annihilation of civilization.

The structural continuity between the two ritual spaces and, more crucially, the widespread failure to recognize their analogies alert us to the conventional

status of Hiroshima memories, both nationally and in global contexts. The unproblematic transition of Hiroshima's central commemorative space from celebrating imperial Japan to honoring the postwar peaceful nation, suggests the persistence of pre-war social and cultural elements, even at the iconic site that supposedly symbolizes the nation's rebirth and departure from the past. (Yoneyama 1999: 1–3)

The Hiroshima Monument is ostensibly at one with other thanatourist sites, serving as monuments to mass death and destruction, such as Ground Zero in New York or Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, which seem to respond to “a deep human need to understand human tragedy and violence” (Neuberger 2014: 67). Beneath the surface, however, lurks a Shintoist memorial to the dead that is devoted to the victims of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima rather than the celebration of Japan's imperialist dreams (as intended in the original 1942 project, of which the Monument is a postwar permutation).

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that, in contrast to some claims, thanatourism, conceived as visits to places of death and suffering, is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. Indeed, thanatourist sites and visitations are found in non-Western regions of the globe and attract significant numbers of visitors. However, as my discussion of several examples from Asia indicates, they do not necessarily elicit the same thanatopic motivations and experiences of contemplation of death that are deemed iconic in Western thanatourism. Rather, on the basis of these examples, I argue that non-Western thanatourism differs from its Western counterpart with regard to most of the dimensions listed in the introduction.

I have distinguished between two major kinds of thanatourist sites in Asia. Firstly, memorial sites to popular non-kin deceased persons and, secondly, memorials of war, atrocities, and disasters. The former is devoted to famous individuals who suffered an early or unnatural death and is comparable to such celebrity memorial sites in the West as Graceland—the former home and resting place of Elvis Presley. The latter are sites of massive death of mostly anonymous individuals, which resemble Western war memorials.

However, despite these similarities, the conduct, motivations, and experiences of visitors to these sites might differ considerably, mainly owing to a fundamental difference in the theology of death and soteriology of the main Asian religious traditions. Asian countries have not been secularized, contrary

to the Western secular “theology” of death as a terminal point of life in which the individual ceases to exist. The theologies of Asian religions teach survival after death and diverse ways of salvation. This softens the “darkness” of death as an ontological cessation of existence and opens the way for potential interaction with the dead at thanatouristic sites.

The case examples from several Asian countries indicate that visitors’ interaction with the dead at thanatourist sites is generally patterned on traditional customs of ancestor worship, more closely at memorial sites of popular individuals and less so at sites of mass death. Visitors seek to access the spirits of the dead in various ways: by praying to or for them, rendering them assistance by feeding them, or transferring objects to them, but also by beseeching them for assistance and good luck. The latter is particularly common in Thailand but was also found at a memorial for a communist heroine in Vietnam.

Consequently, this leads to three principal conclusions:

1. Thanatourist sites in Asia emerged as an extension from prevailing traditions, particularly ancestor worship, and are not a novel phenomenon. Moreover, the spirits of the individual dead tend to be gradually incorporated into the pantheon of divinities and other mythical beings of the respective Asian religions.
2. Visitors to thanatourist sites in Asia may mourn for the dead, pay homage to them, desire to assist them, and make merit for themselves by worshipping at the sites, or even supplicate the deceased for personal benefits. But I have not found any evidence of the thanatopic motivation or experience presumed by theoreticians to be the crucial mark of (Western) thanatourism: the contemplation of their own mortality. This may well be the basic difference between Western and Asian thanatourism, derived from differences between the secular Western “theology” of death and its Asian religious counterparts.
3. It therefore follows from the above, that the concept of “mediation” of thanatourist sites, helping individuals to come to terms with inevitable and meaningless death, which is deemed central to the approach to (Western) thanatourism, should be broadened to include different kinds of mediation. In turn, this may release the study of thanatourism from its current Eurocentric bias. While thanatourist sites certainly play a mediating role in Asian thanatourism, the nature of that role varies between cultures and religions. In order to be globally applicable, the study of thanatourism needs to undergo a similar transformation as the Eurocentric paradigmatic approaches to tourism in general are presently undergoing (Cohen and Cohen 2015b).

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