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Covid-19 and Tourism in Southeast Asia

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Covid-19 and Tourism in Southeast Asia

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Victor T. King

Abstract:

During the past two decades the Southeast Asian region has experienced a range of major crises. Its substantial tourism industry has often taken the brunt of these difficult and testing events, from natural and environmental calamities, epidemics and pandemics, downturns and financial slumps in the world economy, terrorism and political conflict. The latest peril, this time on a global scale, is the ‘Novel Coronavirus’ (Covid-19/SARS-CoV-2) pandemic; it has already had serious consequences for Southeast Asia and its tourism development and will continue to do so. Since the SARS epidemic of 2002-2004 the Southeast Asian economies have become increasingly integrated into those of East Asia (China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong). China’s contribution to tourism in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has grown exponentially. This paper surveys some of the most significant literature on crises, and specifically Covid-19, to gauge their consequences for tourism in Southeast Asia. By comparing experiences across the region, we highlight the issues raised by the over-dependence of some countries on visitor arrivals from East Asia, the problems generated in certain cases by multiple, sequential or coinciding crises, and some of the responses to these. A common focus of crises research has been on dramatic and usually unpredictable natural disasters and on human-generated global economic downturns but less attention has been given to disease and contagion, which is both natural and socio-cultural in its origins and effects. In the case of Covid-19, it is a situation that evokes a pre-crisis period of normality, a liminal transition and a post-crisis ‘new normality’.

Keywords: Covid-19, Tourism, Crises, Disasters, Impacts, Responses, Southeast Asia, East Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

Crises and Disasters

“Tourism destinations in every corner of the globe face the virtual certainty of experiencing a disaster of one form or another at some point in their history.” (Faulkner, 2001: 135)

It is problematic to distinguish the term crisis from such related concepts as disaster, catastrophe and emergency. As they are closely interrelated these terms tend to be used interchangeably. However, ‘crisis’ (from the Greek ‘krisis’), usually refers to a difficult or dangerous time when a solution or resolution is urgently needed; more specifically, in its Greek meaning, it indicates ‘a turning point in a disease...[which]...could get better or worse’ (Vocabulary.com, 2020). It is also ‘a time of great disagreement, confusion or suffering’; ‘an extremely difficult or dangerous point in a situation’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Thus, it is a testing time of stress, instability, insecurity and danger which points to a breakdown in or change from what is considered to be ‘normal’ activities, behaviours and processes. In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, so dramatic has it been in its global impacts that it is referred to in war-like terms. It is the ‘hidden enemy’, a ‘destructive’, ‘merciless’, and ‘vicious’ force that has to be engaged and defeated by humankind’s combined strength, resilience, resourcefulness and spirit of survival. To address something that is complex and unpredictable in its consequences we refer to it in ‘anthropomorphic’ terms. The virus is given motivations, strategies and behaviours rather than being seen as parasitic genetic material that implants itself in the living cells of a host to reproduce itself.

In combating and destroying this assault on the very fabric of our being, both physical and socio-cultural, we also structure our cultural behaviour and social interaction. The effects of this invisible force will, in all likelihood, not enable us to return to 'the normal'. Rather, we must all pass through a period of transition, when our day-to-day lives and livelihoods have been suspended, in the now popular terms of 'lockdown', 'self-isolation', 'quarantine', 'staying at home' and 'social distancing' in order to 'flatten the curve' and achieve a 'mitigation phase' to reduce or eliminate risk and vulnerability. We are told by those who govern us that we cannot expect to return to 'the normal' but to look forward to something that is confusingly referred to as 'the new normal'. In this connection, the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) referred to a 'liminal' period, a rite of passage, and seclusion or separation from society, in which customary social and cultural expectations are set aside in order to prepare those who are undergoing transition to engage with a different set of norms and behavioural expectations.

Turner developed these ideas in his encounter with the Dutch-German-French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (Charles-Arnold Kurr van Gennep) who analysed rites of passage, transition or 'in-between' rituals using the triadic template of pre-liminal rituals of separation, liminal or transition rites and post-liminal processes of re-incorporation (1960). Edmund Leach too refers to van Gennep's work, and, in his studies of the ways in which we demarcate and symbolically express both the passage of natural and socio-cultural time (both linear and cyclical), Leach draws attention to periods when we create 'a marginal state', 'a kind of suspended animation' when '[o]rdinary social time has stopped' (1971: 134). Rituals or festivals, and specific kinds of dress and behaviour in particular, help us construct 'the named periodicities' of time in our discontinuous conceptions of passage in terms of intervals in social, cultural and economic life (Graburn, 2011: 392).

In a liminal period, different clothing may be worn; in the current pandemic, these are face-coverings, sometimes gloves; a whole armoury of special protective equipment worn by medical personnel. The transition is usually presided over by those in power, who control and monitor the process, advised or represented by ritual specialists, sometimes styled 'magicians', or those who are thought to possess particular kinds of esoteric knowledge; in the case of Covid-19, these are usually virologists, epidemiologists, behaviouralists, modellers and risk and disaster managers. They direct new behavioural forms and ritual expressions and new forms of interaction, often involving a separation from close kin and friends, and virtual encounters which do not permit bodily contact. Turner conceives these forms and expressions

as part of a dialectical relationship between ‘structure’ and ‘communitas’ (or ‘anti-structure’) which involves ‘a periodical reclassification of reality’ or ‘a deconstruction of the normative order’ (1969: 128-129). In the current pandemic we are enduring a time of ambiguity and disorientation, when politicians give us ‘mixed messages’ and when our present circumstances are a prelude to an uncertain and potentially risk-laden future.

The issues of agency, timing and consequences may also be brought into consideration in differentiating crisis and disaster in that a crisis is sometimes perceived as ‘a self-inflicted event’, for example, downturns in the world economy, or political conflict, terrorist violence and public unrest, human-induced environmental impacts such as deliberate burning of vegetation and the resultant Southeast Asian ‘haze’, or, in the case of Covid-19, SARS and MERS, the human transmission of disease. There may also be a slower build up to the realisation of a crisis. ‘Disaster’, on the other hand, is viewed as a change in human affairs that is ‘sudden’, unpredictable, and drastic or catastrophic in its consequences and over which there is very little, if any possibility of exercising control. Rather than human-generated, the term ‘disaster’ usually covers such natural events as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, storms, tsunamis, and landslides; sometimes these are also defined as catastrophes or emergencies with sudden loss of life and property (Rindrasih et al, 2019: 95-96). In this regard, the Covid-19 pandemic could be considered primarily as a ‘crisis’, though originating in nature, and, in its tragic and unpredictable outcomes, might also be referred to as a ‘disaster’.

In this paper we prefer to use the term ‘crisis’ in our discussion of the pandemic, but because we introduce a range of events and circumstances for comparative purposes which vary in their origins, agency, timing, scale, location, spread, duration and impacts, we also employ the term ‘disaster’ for those events which have catastrophic consequences. We recognise the problem that in these definitions and categorisations there is no sharp and crisp division between ‘crisis’ and ‘disaster’. It is difficult to capture these multidimensional events and dynamic processes in a static classificatory framework (see Neef and Grayman, 2019); and as we have suggested, a pandemic partakes of both the ‘natural’ and the ‘cultural’.

Relationships between crises and tourism in Southeast Asia require urgent examination in the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic. Using case material on the impacts it is having on the tourism industry in Southeast Asia, we focus on Malaysia and its northern Borneo state of Sabah in particular, revealing some of the main issues raised by the pandemic and some of the responses to what is a multidimensional crisis. One major factor affecting the region is the

collapse in the East Asian market as an increasingly important source of tourists for Southeast Asia. Due attention is paid to the implications of the increasing interdependence of Southeast and East Asia, of which Sabah is a prime example. In this introduction the complex interactions between crises and tourism are addressed, the utility of adopting a comparative approach in examining a range of crises, the importance of tourism to the Southeast Asian economies, and some of the overall consequences of the current pandemic for the tourism industry and the responses to them in the Malaysian and Sabah case.

Tourism, Crises and Disasters

The global tourism industry is extremely sensitive to changes which affect human well-being, health and security. If tourists perceive undue risk, uncertainty or instability in a recreational destination (in that they are usually spending a relatively significant sum of money from their annual income for a short period of anticipated relaxation and respite), then they will very likely avoid that threat and the possibility of a loss of 'desired consumption'. However, there are two important elements in tourist decision-making, among others, on whether or not to visit a site, country or region; these are both the existence of a real and present danger to personal well-being, but also the perception, anxiety, even fear that the destination poses a potential threat. This is especially the case in terrorist incidents in that an attack in one location may give rise to the view that terrorists might strike again elsewhere in the country or in a neighbouring country (Mansfeld and Pizam, 2006; and see Breda and Costa, 2006). Tourism is also a system of interrelated processes and forces; it is affected by the local, regional and global political, economic, social and environmental context within which it is situated, and, it, in turn, has consequences for the polities, societies, cultures, economies and environments within which it is embedded (King, 2018). This is clearly reflected in the current Covid-19 pandemic. Overall tourism has a complex relationship with crises and disasters; it can trigger or amplify them; it frequently suffers from their effects; it can be used as an agent in post-crisis/disaster recovery; and because of its fragile nature it requires risk reduction and response strategies (Neef and Grayson, 2019).

An observation which is not without interest in the relationship between Covid-19 and tourism is that the pandemic has resulted in a wide-scale suspension of everyday life. It constitutes a liminal period where physical movements and socio-cultural encounters are restricted; it is a period of not only self-isolation but group-isolation. Yet tourism, which

demands travel and encounters has also been conceptualised as a liminal period in Turner's, van Gennep's and Leach's terms. Nelson Graburn has referred to it as a 'sacred journey' (a time of 'spiritual solace'), and, although it is not strictly 'a pilgrimage' in that, for him, it is a 'secular spiritual experience' away from 'the normative bonds of home', he argues that it does demonstrate a defined period where ordinary social and cultural life is suspended to be replaced by a time of renewal and self-fulfilment (Graburn, 1989, 2010, 2011; and see Turner and Turner, 1975). Graburn has revised his earlier thesis over time to take account of the ways in which tourism has been redefined, of the expansion in emerging tourisms and the range of tourism activities available, and of the conceptualisation of 'staged authenticity' and the commoditisation of culture, nature and identity (and see, for example MacCannell, 1976). However, the issue of the interactions in the liminality of tourist encounters in new environments and that of isolation and the anticipation of new normalities requires further study. With the continuation of the threat of Covid-19 the tensions between 'going on vacation' and 'staying at home' are likely to increase with profound consequences for the tourism industry.

By definition tourism requires travel, encounters with other places and people, and the facilities and infrastructures which enable the pursuit of recreation, relaxation and curiosity, and provides for new experiences and learning opportunities. Restrictions and outright bans on travel, on entering, exiting and transiting different countries, and on close social and cultural interaction with others radically undermines the purpose, rationale and the basis on which tourism functions. The major sub-sectors of the industry, including airlines and other forms of transport, accommodation, the providers of food and beverages, retail outlets, tour operators, guiding and entertainment services are placed in jeopardy. For example, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) projected in mid-April a possible global loss of jobs at 50 million in 2020 and a recovery period of almost a year after the outbreak of the Coronavirus (WTTC, 2020a, 2020b). So rapid has been the decline in tourist activity that recently the WTTC has revised its estimates upwards, and projects that job losses could be as many as 100 million in 2020, around 63% of those losses in Asia, and a projected reduction in GDP worldwide at US\$2.7 trillion, with over US\$1 trillion being lost in Asia (2020c).

The Covid-19 pandemic has already had and will continue to have an enormously disruptive effect on the global economy in growth and employment and on the monetary, fiscal and regulatory policies of many countries. The World Bank has warned that poverty levels and

inequality will almost certainly increase, with an obvious negative effect on social and economic well-being. In April it put in place a plan to suspend the debt of the world's poorest countries to enable them to deploy measures to combat Covid-19 (Express, 14 April 2020). Within a given country, faced with a crisis on the scale of Covid-19, social inequalities, deprivations, fractures and conflicts are exposed and often exacerbated, and migrant workers, those in the informal sector, daily workers, ethnic minorities, the elderly, and certain sections of the female population are especially at risk. Lee says 'Already the coronavirus is exposing the weak social protection for the urban poor and vulnerable communities, and this will exacerbate the growing inequality within certain ASEAN countries' (2020:1). Several economic stimulus packages, lower interest rates and financial assistance have been the key instruments used by governments to cushion the impact.

At the time of revising the paper (3 July 2020), 215 countries, territories and international conveyances (cruise liners) have recorded cases of Covid-19 infection. The countries of Southeast Asia have an official total of 158,325 cases, while deaths stand at 4,530 (Worldometer, 2020). These figures change day-by-day, even hour-by-hour in the Worldometer global count, and they are in any case very likely to be underestimates across the ASEAN region, particularly in such countries as Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar where together only 821 cases have been listed so far, with six deaths in these four countries (6 in Myanmar and none in Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR) which counted a total population of around 180 million in 2019. In close proximity to mainland China, with close interrelationships through tourism and economic activities, and with Vietnam, Lao PDR and Myanmar sharing land borders with China, it seems unlikely that these figures for mainland Southeast Asia give us anything like accurate recording when the level of testing per million of population is relatively low (in Myanmar [1,481], Lao PDR [2,273], Cambodia [2,293] and Vietnam [2,825]). Those countries recorded as most afflicted have more efficient and open systems of data collection (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia); and it should be noted, they also have large, well-established tourism industries.

But even there, with the exception of Singapore (44,479 cases and 26 deaths, with tests per million at 129,515), all cases and deaths have probably not been included in the statistical count because there too levels of testing are low, though above most of mainland Southeast Asia (Malaysia: cases [8,648], deaths [121] tests per million of population [24,179]; Thailand: cases [3,185], deaths [58], tests per million [8,648]; Philippines: cases [40,336], deaths [1,280],

tests [7,117]; and Indonesia with the most cases in the region [60,695], deaths [3,036] and tests[3,186]). Brunei Darussalam, as another exception like Singapore, given its small territorial and demographic base, has more accurate figures and testing, tracing and tracking systems (141 cases and three deaths, and tests totalling 68,207 per million). It is something of a success story in ‘beating’ Covid-19 and introducing stringent border control measures and a lockdown early on (The Diplomat, 2020a).

ASEAN, Tourism and East Asia

To provide some sense of the scale of the problem in the global tourism industry occasioned by the pandemic, the WTTC calculated that, in 2019, tourism contributed US\$ 8.9 trillion (10.3%) of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) worldwide (2020a). It provided 330 million jobs (1 in 10 of global employment), US\$ 1.7 trillion in visitor exports (comprising 28.3% of global services exports), and US\$ 948 billion (4.3%) in global capital investment (2020a). In collaboration with Oxford Economics the WTTC compiles a ‘Monthly Economic Impact’ report and for January 2020 it estimated that GDP growth in China in the first quarter would decrease by more than 2ppts and its impact would be felt especially in Asia. The Report states ‘A huge dependence on Chinese tourists sees many Asian countries reeling from China’s move to cancel outbound group trips indefinitely’ (2020b: 3). However, some recovery in China has been anticipated in the second quarter (WTTC, 2020c, 2020d).

Of Thailand’s international tourist arrivals in 2019, for example, 30% were Chinese, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) estimated potential losses of US\$ 1.6 billion for 2020; this figure may well rise, given uncertainties about the duration and extent of travel restrictions and lockdowns. The annual growth in Chinese tourist arrivals calculated variously from 2018 through to the end of 2019 (either in October, November or December) in selected ASEAN countries, which have become increasingly tied to the Chinese market, ranged from 40% in Myanmar, through to 16.2% in Vietnam, 15.1% in the Philippines down to 11.5% in Lao PDR to 9.7% in Cambodia (2020b: 4). The established destinations like Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia, which had already attracted large numbers of Chinese visitors, showed smaller percentage increases (from 2 to 4%). In addition, WTTC data for Asia-Pacific, including ASEAN, indicates that ForwardKeys air travel bookings statistics for March-May 2020 in comparison with the same period in 2019 were down 42.4% (international inbound), 41.6% (international outbound) and 9.9% (domestic). Hotel occupancy rates for

February 2020 (year-to-date) had decreased by 23.8% (WTTC, 2020d). A major element in these decreases is the decline in activity within East Asia and ASEAN, and outbound travel from East to Southeast Asia.

In the context of Southeast Asia, the tourism industry is of particular significance to the economies of its constituent states, with the exception of Brunei Darussalam. It is an important vehicle for regional cooperation supporting and promoting, among other things, cultural and environmental heritage and diversity. It is also a major force for economic growth and regional development in marginal areas (Chheang, 2013). The WTTC provided a figure for 2019 of US\$380 billion generated by tourism in ASEAN contributing 12.1% to overall regional GDP (WTTC, 2020a).

Total number of visitor arrivals to ASEAN increased significantly during 2005-2018, reaching 135.3 million in 2018 – or an increase of 263.7% from 2005. The highest visitor arrivals in 2018 were achieved by Thailand (38.3 million), followed by Malaysia (25.8 million), Singapore (18.5 million), Indonesia (15.8 million), and Vietnam (15.5 million). Then some way behind came the Philippines (7.1 million), Cambodia (6.2 million), Lao PDR (4.2 million) and Myanmar (3.55 million). It should be noted that Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar have developed their tourism industries from a very low base since the 1990s, and these industries play an increasingly substantial role in their respective economies. Given its oil and gas wealth, tourism in Brunei Darussalam contributes a very small percentage to GDP and its arrivals only reached 278,000 in 2018. Nevertheless, this figure only includes arrivals at the international airport and not by land, ferry or cruise ship; when all visitors are counted, the total comes to over 4 million (Tourism Development Department [Brunei], 2019). Of the overall total visitors to ASEAN, 49.7 million (36.7%) in 2018 came from within ASEAN, an increase of 212.2% from 15.9 million arrivals recorded in 2005 (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2019a, 2019b: 163-179).

The more remarkable statistics are those which provide the country of origin of international visitor arrivals. Of the 85.6 million non-ASEAN arrivals in 2018, 47.9 million were generated in East Asia (China [29.1 million]; South Korea [9 million], Japan [5.2 million], Taiwan [2.8 million] and Hong Kong [1.8 million]). The other main markets were Europe (especially France, Germany and the UK, followed by Italy and the Netherlands), the USA and Canada, and Australia and New Zealand (2019b: 168). Some ASEAN countries are more dependent than others on East Asian visitors, with Thailand receiving approximately 15.5 million visitors in 2018, two-thirds of those from China (2019b: 178). Malaysia is less

dependent but still received 4.3 million visitors from East Asia (2.9 million from China) (2019b: 174). However, dependence also varies within countries; the Malaysian state of Sabah, for example, is much more reliant on East Asian tourists. Of 4,195,903 visitors in 2019, 2,726,428 came from other parts of Malaysia, but of 1,469,475 international visitors, East Asia provided over one million: 598,566 (China); 396,660 (South Korea), 45,550 (Taiwan) and 24,435 (Japan) (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020a, 2020b).

Every ASEAN country has a government body or bodies responsible for the administration and promotion of tourism development (ministries, departments, boards); in some cases tourism is combined with culture (Lao PDR); or culture and sports (Vietnam), or sports (Thailand), or arts and culture (Malaysia), or the creative economy (Indonesia); in others it is located within trade, industry or primary resources (Brunei, Singapore) or an economic sector like hotels (Myanmar); in the remaining two countries, tourism comprises a free-standing Ministry (Cambodia) and an Executive Department of Tourism (Philippines). Moreover, at the 46th meeting of the ASEAN Tourism Ministers and National Tourism Organisations in January 2017, four ASEAN committees were established to coordinate regional tourism: Tourism Competitiveness; Sustainable and Inclusive Tourism Development; Tourism Resourcing, Monitoring and Evaluation; and Tourism Professional Monitoring. More importantly ASEAN plans tourism on a regional basis expressed in two important documents which contain a wealth of statistical material: the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan, the first one operated between 2011 and 2015, and the current plan runs for a ten-year period, 2016-2025 (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2015a); and the ASEAN Tourism Marketing Strategy, launched in 2012-2015 with the current plan operating from 2017 until 2020 (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2017). In addition, the first Visit ASEAN Year was held in 1992 and Visit ASEAN@50 Golden Celebration was organised in 2017 to mark 50 years since the founding of the Association in 1967. The ASEAN Tourism Ministers held their first meeting in Surabaya in 1996.

There are also other regional organisations, some public, some private, some mixed, which focus on tourism development: the ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF), launched in Kuala Lumpur in 1981 with its most recent meeting in Brunei in January 2020; it represents the major stakeholders in the tourism industry. The ASEAN National Tourism Organisations (ANTO) which also held their 49th meeting in Brunei in 2020; and the ASEAN Tourism Association, representing travel businesses, airlines, hotels and restaurants which was formed in 1971.

Apart from sun, sea, sand, shopping, sight-seeing and, in some countries, sex, in all countries of the region culture and heritage are seen as important elements in tourism activities, for both domestic and international tourists (museums, artistic productions, and the creative economy, material culture, archaeological sites, monuments, historic urban areas, natural and cultural landscapes, religious sites and pilgrimages, and living cultures [performance, dance, music, theatre, ritual, ceremony, folklore, sports and games]). Another major set of activities focuses on landscapes, wildlife and ecotourism (parks, reserves, conservation areas, animal sanctuaries, rivers, coral reefs, beaches, lakes, mountains, islands, and forests). In a 1984 Declaration the ASEAN Ministers responsible for the environment created the ASEAN Heritage Parks programme. The ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity administers the programme and in 2019 there were 49 parks devoted to conservation and the protection of biodiversity and unique natural environments. Seven of these parks are also UNESCO World Heritage Sites. ASEAN also inscribes Biosphere Reserves of which there are now 35 main sites and 82 tentative sites, including many national parks (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2018, 2019c, 2020).

It is worth noting too that, although ASEAN sees tourism as a vehicle for regional cooperation, and its main objective is to promote the region as a single tourist destination, there is competition between the Association's constituent members, and, in some cases, a failure to coordinate activities and policies. There are established players in the field (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore), conscious of the need to maintain their advantage. In addition, there are those countries which have lost ground; Indonesia over recent years has not achieved the visitor arrival targets that it has set, particularly as a result of natural disasters, and the Philippines for many years, beset by typhoons, floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions has failed to keep pace with some of its neighbours. In 2018 Indonesia and the Philippines were within the top five countries in Asia Pacific which were most at risk from multiple hazards (UN ESCAP, 2019). Increasingly within ASEAN in 2018 international visitors (over 29 million of them) went to the emerging markets of Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar (this trend continued into 2019). Again, the proximity of mainland Southeast Asia to the East Asian markets is a factor. But the exploration of new tourist destinations, ease of access, and value for money must also play a role in tourist decision-making. On the other hand, Singapore, Bangkok and to some extent Kuala Lumpur have increasingly served as regional hubs for these newer markets and their stopover traffic has increased.

Another observation on the more problematic side of ASEAN's role in addressing transnational crises in the region is in regard to the regular occurrence of forest fires and the burning off of vegetation for planting oil palm and other commercial crops in Indonesia. The Association has been unable to solve this problem over many years, and one effect of the 'haze' and burning in Sumatra and Borneo has been the disruption of air travel and the more general impact of air pollution on tourist sites in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore (Cotton, 1999; Varkkey, 2016). From February to September 2019 the problem even spread as far as Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Before going on to examine some of the literature on crisis, disasters and tourism, we should indicate that the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan in considering constraints, challenges and threats to the tourism industry mentions in passing, and without elaboration or any policy statements to address the issue, 'possible pandemics with resultant negative travel advisories' (2015a: 26). The ASEAN Secretariat does have a Crisis Communications Manual which provides a standardised 'Communications Toolkit' to address the ways in which media messages and communications strategies can be handled, devised and delivered, reputations and images sustained and stakeholders and the general public reassured (2015b; and see Wilks and Moore, 2004). However, it is not a particularly useful aid to respond to a region-wide and global crisis such as Covid-19 in which each country is forced to impose its own solutions to the crisis. In a rather delayed response to nation-state-based responses, the ASEAN Tourism Ministers conducted a video conference, reported on 4 May 2020, to deepen cooperation. This was to avoid projections that the ASEAN tourism industry might take five years to recover from the pandemic if the region did not coordinate its actions and share information on such matters as travel restrictions, entry and transit through airports and passage across land borders (TTG Asia, 2020). Not only is there an information and communication problem within ASEAN at the present time but also a need to address the operation of transnational tourism supply chains (and see Breiling, 2016).

Contributions to research on crises and disasters in Southeast Asia

Crises affecting the tourism industry in Southeast Asia are nothing new, but given the increasing regional integration within ASEAN and its incorporation into the economically advanced nations in East Asia, then their impacts tend to spread transnationally, escalate, 'spill-over' and generate 'secondary impacts' (Scott, 2020; Rindrasih et al., 2019). Ahmad Puad Mat

Som and Benjamin Aguenza categorise crises into: health crises (SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome], HPAI [Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza] [H5N1, H1N1]); natural events or 'disasters' (tsunami, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, climate change); terrorism and political instability (Bali bombings, Jakarta bombings); and global economic downturns and financial crises (1997-1998, 2008-2009) (2013: 4). ASEAN, in its policy documents, categorises them as environmental; societal/political; health-related; extreme weather; technological; and environmental human-included events (2015b: 5). Indeed, Southeast Asia is one of the regions of the world at most risk from natural disasters; aside from Indonesia and the Philippines located on the 'Ring of Fire' and prone to earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis, Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar (and the Philippines) are subject to extreme weather conditions including flooding and cyclones (UN ESCAP, 2020; Arslan and Bibigul, 2018).

There is a considerable literature on crises and disasters and the consequences for the tourism industry in Southeast Asia as well as more general publications on managing tourism crises in the Asia Pacific region and beyond, and government responses to these (see, for example, Henderson, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007; Henderson and Tran Hai Linh, 2007; Ritchie and Campiranon, 2015). In this paper we do not focus on strategies and management issues, but we do address some of the major, often disparate responses on the part of government and the tourist industry. One matter is very clear in the current Covid-19 pandemic, and that is that the planning for a crisis of such magnitude and extent, and the devising of measures to counter the effects of a disease that has the property to spread with such speed and severity, are fraught with all kinds of difficulties including informed decision-making and its timing, choice between such issues as economic well-being and public health, strategy and short- medium- and long-term planning, the availability of resources in both the public and private sector, national interest as against international cooperation, and a lack of knowledge of the virus and its mutations, and the ways in which it interacts with the human body.

In the studies of management in relation to disasters much is made of forward-planning, the formulation of strategies, ensuring that resources and funds can be mobilised quickly and efficiently, a well-crafted communications strategy, the coordination between the private and public sectors involving both tourism and non-tourism stakeholders, and close cooperation between national government bodies and transnational tourism, relief and aid organisations

(Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004, 2008). The literature falls within what might be referred to as normative social science; the tools of management are deployed with an emphasis on rational or operational decision-making and the ability to translate the models devised from one case to another (see, for example, Deverell, 2012; Holla et al., 2018). Very often this approach assumes the ability and capacity to use a standard template and does not address in sufficient measure contextual issues and transnational cultural variation between cases. It is very clear that nation-state-based responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have varied; schedules of decision-making and the decisions taken by governments and stakeholders have differed considerably in detail, though overall the strategies have been based on the restriction of movement and contact. Comparative analysis is essential. Furthermore, in the case of the pandemic, even the kind of measured management-science-based, forward-looking approach might not have been sufficient to address the consequences of the rapid way in which the disease has spread and mutated, and its highly infectious nature which has overwhelmed health services and social care facilities. The fact that there is currently no vaccine to counter the virus, and there is uncertainty if and when a vaccine will be available, presents a further weakness in any strategic planning and management in responding to the disease.

The focus on regional integration in the tourism industry also inevitably leads to the need to undertake comparative analyses of different disasters and the varied consequences of the same disaster in different places. This comparative approach has been pursued within as well as across countries. For example, in the context of Thailand, Erik Cohen made the distinction between crises which are exogenous to a given country or region and whose effects are more widespread and those which are endogenous and are primarily confined to one country (though again the effects might be felt in certain neighbouring countries) (2010: 281-296; 2012). Cohen examined the impacts on the tourism industry in Thailand from the 2004 tsunami which affected a ring of countries around the Indian Ocean, including Indonesia (which was worst hit), and Malaysia. He compared this with the civil conflict in Thailand surrounding the then Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, and the occupation of Bangkok airports in 2008. He argues that the aftermath of the tsunami could be controlled and better managed because it did not affect the political centre and the political elite of the country in Bangkok. Relatively quickly the tourism industry and the country responded to the challenges. On the other hand, though the Bangkok crisis of 2008 was less severe in terms of loss of life and physical damage, it went to the heart of Thai politics and the conflict was unable to be

resolved in the short term, and it was to continue until the military coup of May 2014 and beyond.

Kontogeorgopoulos says of the 2014 coup ‘The curfew, international publicity about the coup, and the sight of military personnel in popular tourist sites scared off potential tourists and temporarily halted the rapid growth of tourism in Thailand’ (2016: 161). It was estimated that GDP declined by 6.6% in 2014, mainly as result of the decrease in tourism activities. However, Kontogeorgopoulos qualifies this by suggesting that the Thai tourism industry is resilient and did bounce back, as it has done since 1970.

Nevertheless, what is interesting about the current pandemic is that it coincides with yet another episode of political tensions in Thailand. The elections in 2019, which were hardly transparent, appropriately administered or monitored, brought back Prime Minister Prayut[h], who had led the military junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), from 2014 to 2019; he returned as a ‘civilian’ Prime Minister in 2019. In late March 2020, his imposition of emergency rule, the introduction of a curfew from 10pm to 4am, the further restrictions on movement and the censorship of the media, when coupled with the economic downturn occasioned by the pandemic, might be part of another occurrence of ‘coincidental’ crises (involving public health, the economy and political life), which leads to further political turmoil in the country (Asia Times, 2020).

Cohen and Mark Neal (2010) then went on to examine in more detail ‘coinciding crises’ in Thailand. These comprised the 2008-2009 global economic meltdown, which was generated in the US housing and loan market, and the escalating political crisis in Thailand. The interaction between the two arenas worked to form a ‘mega-crisis’. Its expression was in ‘the spectacular occupation of Bangkok’s two airports by the opposition to the government in November 2008’. It resulted in a prolonged drop in tourist arrivals which took some time to recover (2010: 455-475).

Thailand provides an appropriate case in Southeast Asia of the interactions between crises and their effects on the important tourism industry in the country. This is for the simple reason that there have been several crises during the past two decades or so, some sequential, some coincidental; the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis which began in Thailand and then spread to other Asian countries (King, 2001; Henderson, 2002); the tsunami of 2004 with a death toll in Thailand of 5,395, and 2,845 missing (Athukorala and Resosudarmo, 2005; Calgaro and Lloyd, 2008; Falk, 2015; Ozer and de Longueville, 2011); the SARS epidemic in

the same year which, although not serious in terms of death-rates in Thailand, gave rise to the perception that several countries in Southeast Asia were part of a ‘SARS zone’ (Curley and Thomas, 2004); the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005 also gave rise to fears on the part of some tourists that Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines ran the risk of further terrorist attacks within a perceived ‘terrorist zone’; the ongoing political crises commencing in 2005 generated especially by the military coup against Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, the open conflicts and political protests of 2008-2010, the military coup against Thaksin’s sister, Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014, and currently the political tensions surrounding Prayut[h] Chan-ocha’s government and his recent declaration of a state of emergency (Asia Times, 2020; Reuters, 2019; The Diplomat, 2020b); other events include the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 (Helleiner, 2011); and the Bangkok floods which occur regularly, but were particularly severe in 2011, and led to the inundation of 28 provinces in the central plains region, and a significant loss of life and damage to extensive areas of agricultural land and property and the disruption of several prominent tourist sites in and around the capital city (Ghaderi et al., 2011; Cohen, 2012).

Other countries in Southeast Asia also experienced some of these disasters, and others internal to the country. Generally, they were not so frequent or prolonged as in Thailand, though Indonesia comes close in this respect and has also had serial and coinciding crises. The Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 was a major factor in the downfall of President Suharto and the political turmoil that was generated at that time, followed soon after by the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005 (Suparwoko, 2012). Serious setbacks in the tourism industry were experienced in Bali following the terrorist bombings. There was a consequent dramatic decrease in tourist visitors to Indonesia, especially from established source areas like Australia and other Western countries (I Nyoman Darma Putra and Hitchcock, 2006, 2009; Hitchcock and I Nyoman Darma Putra, 2005, 2007; Henderson, 2003). Yet these did not interact with other crises at the time, although Indonesia, but more particularly the island of Sumatra, suffered badly from the tsunami in 2004. The December 2017 eruption of Mount Agung also led to a brief downturn in tourism with hotel occupancy rates falling by between 20-30% in Bali’s peak season; tourism industry workers also suffered a significant decrease in income. But this did not have a significant ‘spill-over’ effect (Rahmawati et al., 2019).

Again, in further contrast to Thailand and Indonesia, the Federation of Malaysia has experienced political turmoil with the resignation of the Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir

Mohamad on 24 February just as the Coronavirus began to emerge. However, the succession of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as Prime Minister and his Perikatan Nasional (PN) government does not appear to amount to the kind of ongoing political crisis experienced in Thailand, significant enough to escalate the effects of the pandemic, nor the effects of the 1997-1998 financial crisis in Indonesia which contributed to President Suharto's demise. Malaysia is also less prone to natural disasters. Nevertheless, in introducing a stringent lockdown from 13 March under the Movement Control Order (MCO) and three economic stimulus packages in March and April (in addition to the first package agreed during Mahathir's premiership), it represents a testing time for the new Prime Minister in his attempts to establish his legitimacy and hold together a recently formed and rather precarious coalition. The pandemic has also occasioned the introduction of a degree of political authoritarianism in Malaysia (Wong, 2020). Given the internal political instability that Malaysia is experiencing and the social and economic pressures generated by Covid-19 the future shape of government in Malaysia remains uncertain (Oswald, 2020).

Responses to Contagion in Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Sabah

Southeast Asia

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the regional context in which Malaysia is situated in regard to the recent pandemic. However, as with other parts of the world the predictions for the economies of Southeast Asia, particularly in the tourism industry, are bleak. Regular live updates on the pandemic and its effects are posted in ASEAN Briefing (2020) and in such a fast-moving contagion it is impossible to capture day-to-day events and developments, the ever-increasing record of new cases, deaths and the spread of the infection, and the measures that governments and the tourism industry are taking to address a deteriorating situation. Some countries in the region are reporting more cases and deaths than others, but it must be emphasised that, without widespread testing, tracking, tracing, diagnosis and recording it is impossible to calculate the real extent of the pandemic nor its likely duration.

Reports from the press, expert opinion and regional commentators on Southeast Asian affairs and on the tourism industry have leaned heavily to the pessimistic about outcomes over the next few months with such headlines as 'Coronavirus exposes cracks in south-east Asian economies' (Reed and Palma, Financial Times, 2020), 'Coronavirus and Southeast Asia: Can

catastrophe be avoided? (Maude, Asia Society Policy Institute, 2020), ‘Coronavirus: effect on Asian tourism will carry into 2021, experts say’ (South China Morning Post, 2020), and ‘Southeast Asian tourism likely to be worst hit due to Coronavirus, says Global Data’ (Global Data, 2020). The ASEAN Briefing service has documented the increasing strengthening of restrictions and bans on international and domestic travel, and on the conduct of everyday life, gatherings, and shopping and recreation. As an example of this tightening of controls, the Briefing, in the case of Thailand, records the curfew introduced by the Prime Minister for April, and, in the Philippines and Malaysia, the increasing role of the police and military in ensuring that government orders and regulations on ‘lockdowns’ are followed. Michael Vatikiotis has also drawn attention to the intervention of the military in the Covid-19 crisis in Indonesia, through the appointment of Lieutenant-General Doni Monardo to head the special Covid-19 task force, and similar evidence of a military coordination to the response in Myanmar (2020). He suggests that this might be the prelude to the return of military rule in certain countries in Southeast Asia where the political role of the military has been prominent, or, at least, in those countries where there has been a separation between the military and politics, it might still signal a move towards increasing political authoritarianism.

Malaysia

Tourism has become one of the major sectors of the economy and provides a large component of Malaysia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board calculates the contribution of tourist expenditure to the GDP in 2018 as RM84.1 billion (US\$19.3 billion), a 2.4% increase from 2017, which amounted to 13.3% of GDP. Employment in the industry also reached 2.217 million, 14.7% of the working population. International visitors totalled 25.8 million; the top ten source countries were all Asian (Singapore, 10.6 million; Indonesia, 3.28 million; China, 2.9 million; Thailand, 1.9 million; Brunei, 1.38 million; South Korea, 616,783; India, 600,311; Philippines, 396,062; Japan, 394,540 and Taiwan 383,922 [some figures are rounded up]). ASEAN countries provided 70.1% of all visitors with East Asia providing a further 8.7% (Tourism Malaysia, 2019a). From January to September 2019 as compared with the same period in 2018 tourist expenditure was up 6.9% and visitor arrivals 3.7% (Tourism Malaysia, 2019b).

Following the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, from January 2020 the Chinese began to cancel group packages to Malaysia, and the Malaysian government suspended visas for

Chinese tourists from Hubei on 27 January and then extended this to other provinces in February. Malaysia also imposed the Movement Control Order (MCO), with a combination of quarantine, closures of non-essential shops and businesses, work-from-home, social distancing and internal and external travel restrictions from 18 March. Companies producing essential products now have to obtain approval from relevant government agencies to operate during the MCO. Above all, the financial status and closure of non-essential businesses have affected the GDP and stock market substantially. The Malaysia Central Bank (Bank Negara Malaysia) cut its Overnight Policy Rate (ORP) by 50 basis points to 2% to complement other monetary and fiscal measures (The Edge Markets, 2020). The Bank also forecasted that the economy could shrink by as much as 2% or grow at a limited rate of 0.5%, in what would be its worst economic performance in more than a decade.

More generally the organisation of businesses, including the tourism industry will have to change. According to a report by KPMG Malaysia, the ‘new normal’ business environment will probably see a shift towards more localisation; digitalisation and a greater use of technology; labour replacement and cost-cutting; more efficient data management; and an emphasis on financial and supply chain resilience (April 2020).

Visitor numbers and tourist expenditure have slumped dramatically. The planned ‘Visit Malaysia Year 2020’ was cancelled on 18 March which was expected to generate 30 million visitors and US\$21.5 billion in revenue (Deutsche Welle [DW], 2020). Further restrictions were introduced and then various measures were introduced to support the rapidly declining economy (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). Global Data projects a loss of revenue in each of the largest tourist destinations of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore of between US\$3 and 6 billion this year (2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 has already hit Malaysia’s tourism sector hard, with an expected loss of RM3.37 billion (US\$773.8 million) within the first two months of the year (Dzulkifly, 2020). For the full year the estimated income of US\$ 21.5 billion for ‘Visit Malaysia Year 2020’ could well be reduced by 60% (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

The Malaysian Economic Stimulus Package

The first stimulus package provided RM2 billion (US\$453 million) towards the Special Relief Fund (SRF) scheme with the interest rate capped at 3.75% per annum. Each eligible small and medium-sized business (SME) can receive between RM20,000 (US\$4,500) and RM1 million

(US\$226,000) with a tenure of 5.5 years (including a 6-months payment moratorium). On 27 March 2020, the Malaysian government issued its second stimulus package of RM250 billion (US\$57 billion), to enhance the financing facilities issued in the first package. It is also aimed to support businesses, especially SMEs, assist low- and middle-income households, and provide fiscal injections to strengthen the national economy. The government made available an additional RM4.5 billion (US\$1 billion) to assist SMEs. In addition, RM3 billion (US\$688 million) was allocated to help SMEs in the form of low-interest loans through the SRF. RM1 billion (US\$229 million) was also allocated for the All Economic Sectors (AES) facility. The AES programme provides financing for SMEs that can be used for working capital to support growth or for capital expenditure. The interest rate is set at 7 % per annum, with a tenure of five years. Qualified SMEs can receive up to RM5 million (US\$1.1 million). Thus, a total RM6.8 billion (US\$ 1.5 billion) has been directed to help support SMEs. A considerable level of support has focused on tourism, consumption, and investment aimed at stimulating domestic tourism (Rahim, 2020).

The packages assisting the reduction of major business overhead expenses included discounts for electricity bills; lowering the minimum contribution to the Employees Provident Fund; exemption from the Human Resource Development Fund; provision by banks of financial relief with payment moratoriums comprising restructuring and rescheduling loans; special loans for SMEs for working capital; lowering rents by property-owners; matching grants for tourism personnel training; enhancing digital skills and marketing through subsidies; and introducing personal income tax relief of up to RM1,000 (US\$ 232) on expenditure related to domestic tourism (MATTA [Malaysian Association of Travel and Tour Agents], 2020). On 4 May 2020, the government further implemented the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) to allow most businesses to resume operations subject to government-directed standard operating procedures (SOP).

On the other hand, a review by the Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA) indicated that MATTA, the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) and the Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition Organisers and Suppliers (MACEOS) were unhappy with the economic stimulus package. Simply, the RM250 billion provided relief to individuals and businesses; and the additional RM20 billion was aimed at fiscal stimulation. According to Tourism Associations and SMEs, both packages fail to address the issue of job retention, event business cancellations and the fundamental needs of SMEs. Consequently, they may result in

companies having to lay off employees in order to stay in business which will have long-term ripple effects on other industries. Indeed, the event business industry has already accumulated an estimated loss of RM1.5 billion (US\$ 345.2 million) in the last two months, with 53 business events cancelled, while another 57 events have been postponed indefinitely. With the extension of the restriction on organising large gatherings and events, then this sector of tourism will continue to experience problems into 2021 (TTG Asia, 2020). A further two ‘topping up’ support packages were announced by the government on 27 March and 6 April (Wong, 2020).

Moreover, there are several operational issues raised in the implementation of stimulus packages. Firstly, the Federal Government has to optimise the resources available and coordinate with the State Governments in implementing the packages effectively, the efficient delivery of funds, the delivery medium, and identifying target groups. Several assistance programmes in the stimulus packages such as deferment of EPF contributions and staff retention subsidies are also subject to meeting criteria and approval which delays the whole process through unnecessary bureaucracy. Furthermore, it was found that the existing data system recorded the specific category of low-income people, and excluded groups such as freelance tour guides, self-employed small rural businesses and daily workers who need immediate financial assistance.

Sabah and tourism

Tourism is Sabah’s third largest economic sector in terms of revenue and employment behind oil and gas production and agriculture. Directly and indirectly it employs 23% of the labour force and generated over RM8 billion (US\$1.85 billion) in 2018 (Sabah Tourism, 2019, 2020a).

Visitor arrivals to Sabah and the growth in tourism, particularly generated by the East Asian market, have shown significant increases since 2010. Then, total arrivals were 2,504,669; of these 1,708,716 were from West Malaysia and Sarawak whilst 795,954 were international visitors. Of the latter, 227,751 came from East Asia (43% of these from China and 25% from South Korea, and the remainder from Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong [32%]) (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020a). By 2019 overall visitor arrivals were 4,195,903 with domestic Malaysian visits comprising 2,726,428. But the dominance of East Asia in the international visits of 1,469,475, had increased by more than four times the 2010 figure to 1,065,211 (China, 598,566; South Korea, 396,660, Japan, 24,435, Taiwan, 45,550 [Hong Kong not recorded]) (Sabah Tourism

Board, 2020b). In addition, 95% of arrivals come by air, and though there are scheduled flights by national airlines (Malaysian and East Asian) and several budget flights run by such carriers as Air Asia, most are chartered flights, particularly from China and South Korea.

In terms of tourist profile, the 2019 data show that tourists visit Sabah mainly for recreation (86%) followed by visits to friends and relatives (VFR) 5%, then business/work (3%), and the remainder for other reasons. The majority prefer hotels and resorts for accommodation and there is a range of good quality hotels in Sabah from budget to five-star (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020a). Since 2015, the state government also recognised rural and community-based tourism as crucial components in the extension of tourism development outside the main centres of Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, Tawau and Lahad Datu. Rural areas on the West Coast of Sabah and offshore islands provided new tourism sites including the Mantanani islands to the north-west of Kota Belud, and Gaya Island and Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park, eight kilometres by boat from Kota Kinabalu. Two of the popular resorts for ‘sun, sea and sand tourism’, a short distance onshore from Kota Kinabalu, are the Shangri-La Tanjung Aru and Sutera Harbour complexes.

Aside from recreational tourism the other major attractions for eco-tourists comprise the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mount Kinabalu National Park, the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre and the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre near Sandakan as well as the wildlife and forest reserves on the Kinabatangan River area and the Danum Valley Conservation Area in eastern Sabah.

Sabah tourism and crisis

In comparison with other areas in Malaysia and more widely in Southeast Asia, Sabah has not suffered unduly from the pandemic itself, with official records of cases of infection at 348, the first recorded on 12 March, and with 5 deaths as of 1 June 2020 (Wikipedia, 2020). However, the state has become the victim of the nation-wide, regional and global effects of the contagion. The additional factor is that it is much more exposed than the neighbouring Malaysian state of Sarawak to the dramatic decline in East Asians travelling abroad. With over one million visitors to Sabah from East Asia in 2019 the impact of their loss to the local tourism industry is already substantial. In the first two months of 2020 international tourist arrivals had decreased by 161,586 (a 35.4% decline), largely due to the collapse of the East Asian market, and all visitor

arrivals, including domestic tourists, declined by 567,108 (comprising an overall 16.4% decrease) (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020b). As a result, employees across all tourism sectors were asked or forced to take annual, unpaid or half-paid leave or have been made redundant as businesses retrench or close. Some tourism businesses have already declared bankruptcies; some others that are closed have declared that they are unlikely to reopen.

Prior to the pandemic, the Sabah tourism industry had been affected regularly by air pollution (the 'haze') from fires and burning in Kalimantan, the criminal activities of illegal immigrants, and sporadic abductions, shootings and murders by militant Islamic groups operating along Sabah's east coast and the offshore islands (Yang et al., 2015; Hashim et al., 2018). Studies had also been undertaken of rural homestays in Sabah following the earthquake of magnitude 6.0 in the Ranau area near Mount Kinabalu in June, 2015. As concluded in the research, there was a relatively rapid response to disaster in government support and rescue packages and in the positive attitudes of local populations towards recovery and self-support (Kamarudin et al., 2019; Kamarudin et al., 2020). But these crises have paled into insignificance in their impacts on tourism in comparison with the Covid-19 pandemic. To place these crises in context it should be emphasised that Sabah is generally seen as a relatively safe tourist destination (Kuilis-Bosimin and Chan, 2018).

Not only has Sabah had to face the almost complete disappearance of East Asian visitors, but domestic tourism in Sabah was then affected by the government's MCO from 18 to 31 March, including travel restrictions both within and between East and West Malaysia. As the spread of the virus became more serious the MCO was then extended in Phase 2 (1-14 April); Phase 3 (15-28 April); Phase 4 (29 April-3 May); and the most recent Conditional MCO phase 5 (4-May-9 June).

The response

In early February 2020, Sabah's State Government developed a strategy and, in addition to federal support, it put in place its own economic stimulus package to assist tourism. Initially, several actions were taken to target domestic tourism and tourists from neighbouring countries, and to reduce hotel rates and rentals at shopping malls. This ultimately made little difference due to the MCO which started from 18 March 2020. The Sabah State Government also cancelled major cultural events and tourist attractions: the Kadazan Dusun festival Kaamatan

and the Murut festival Kalimantan, weekend markets (tamu) and farmers' markets (pasar tani). It sealed off Covid-19 'hotspots' in Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan and Tawau with police roadblocks. Its stimulus package worth RM670 million (US\$15.8 million) was directed to support various communities, including frontline workers, District Disaster Committees and those in rural areas who had lost their sources of income and were in dire need of aid and food supplies. A follow-up package of a further RM553 million (US\$12.2 million) aimed to target and save existing business sectors like tourism, agriculture, fisheries, food, construction and forestry in Sabah (Borneo Post, 2020).

Measures by Rural Tourism Communities

At the micro-level, several tourism associations at district took initiatives to assist their members such as homestay owners and local guides to prevent the virus from spreading through rural tourism areas. Rural tourism operators together with district tourism associations outlined procedures to restrict rural tourism activities and businesses at all rural sites. Local village communities worked as a team to monitor the travelling activities of their villagers. Banners, created with a clear message for people, 'Outsiders are prohibited to visit the village', 'Foreigners are prohibited from entering' were placed at several village road junction points, for example in Tuaran District (Gonzales, 2020). The closure of tourism businesses in rural areas such as homestays, has had a great impact on the sources of income for rural tourism operators. The district tourism associations therefore allocated special funds for the purchase of essential products such as rice and sugar to be distributed among their respective members during the outbreak.

Impacts of Covid-19 on accommodation and airlines

Accommodation is one of the top three tourist expenditures in Malaysia. Hotels, lodgings, inns and motels are among the sectors which have been most affected by the pandemic and experts predict its impact to last for up to 12 months. Although hotels are part of the essential services that are allowed to operate during the MCO, they have been prohibited from accepting new guests, and they can only provide services to those who had already checked-in before 18 March 2020.

Up to February 2020, 2,041 employees in the hospitality industry were laid off, while 9,773 went on unpaid leave and another 5,054 were forced to take pay cuts, according to the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). The number has continued to increase through to May due to travel restrictions, the MCO and the cancelling of group packages. Popular hotels in Kota Kinabalu like Le Meridien, Shangri-La at Tanjung Aru and the Sutera Harbour complex which enjoyed occupancy rates of 90% or more in 2019 dropped to around 10 to 12% by March this year.

The Malaysian Budget Hotel Association (MBHA) has estimated a loss of almost RM370 million (US\$ 85 million) until 14 May 2020 (Thien, 2020a). In Malaysia, many hotels have been listed for sale, though not in Sabah. The reason for the low number in Sabah may be attributed to the fact that most hotel buildings there are owned by landlords with a sound financial status. In the case of budget hotels, many owners have signed up with Oyo Homes and Hotels, which are leased and franchised businesses. Since the MCO was enforced on 18 March the MBHA recorded 1,722 out of 2,231 (71.19 percent) of Malaysian hotels (rated three stars and above) were forced to halt operations. Despite the easing of the MCO from 4 May 2020, a survey conducted by the MBHA has shown that a majority of the hotels prefer to remain closed and about 20% have planned to remain closed permanently or will cease operations after the MCO is lifted. It indicates that, in this event, Sabah would lose 3,640 out of 6,860 rooms sought by budget travellers. 104 out of 196 hotels in the sector in Sabah are reported to be ‘in limbo’ (Thien, 2020b).

On the slightly more positive side, hotel management developed several strategies to cope with the downturn of their business. For example, the Hilton and Shangri-La hotel chain, both of which have a presence in Sabah, introduced flexibility into their hotel reservation systems in terms of room cancellation, extension, rebooking and non-cancellation fees for existing bookings. According to Hotel Magazine (2020), most of the hotels in Asia, including Sabah are also actively involving employees in activities related to maintenance, repairing furniture and housewares, renovation, cleaning of hotel facilities and rooms, and training for new skills and jobs in other sectors, and in employee retention activities such as redeployment. Furthermore, according to the MAH (2020), a total of 11,993 hotel rooms were converted as quarantine centres in Malaysia from February-March 2020. These are situated mainly in Selangor, Penang, Johor, Kedah, Sarawak and Sabah. In Sabah, the Pan Borneo Hotel, Ming

Garden, Hotel Sixty3, Oyo Hotel and Monaco Boutique Hotel are listed to target quarantine ‘guests’ as an alternative source of income.

The Coronavirus pandemic has also crippled the airline industry. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) projects that globally airlines might incur up to US\$250 billion in lost passenger revenue 2020, a reduction of 44% from 2019 (WTTC, 2020d). It is estimated that passenger revenue of airlines in the Asia Pacific region could be reduced by a similar percentage (IATA, 2020). In Malaysia, major airlines like Malaysia Airlines (MAS), Malindo Air and Air Asia, all of which service Sabah, have been affected severely, which, among other things, has placed in doubt the viability of MAS. The Malaysian government favours a merger between its national carrier and the budget carrier, Air Asia Group. With the demands of social distancing and other costs associated with health and safety, some airlines will not survive, airfares will have to increase and preferences for travel, including direct flights rather than transits, will change.

Airlines servicing Sabah have developed mitigation strategies by either reducing flight frequencies and routes, temporary or indefinite suspension of international routes, especially to China and other East Asian countries, capacity management, carrying more cargo instead of passengers, and phasing in domestic flights as a first stage (Anna Aero, 2020).

Recent developments

A Sabah Tourism Recovery Plan was introduced by the Deputy Chief Minister of Sabah, Datuk Christina Liew on 5 May 2020, involving six state agencies related to tourism (The Star, 2020). The plan requires a strong partnership between government agencies and stakeholders in the tourism industry. Ideas such as contactless experiences, digital initiatives, and seeking new tourism sites or products are part of the initiative.

Key actions include:

1. Financial allocations to upgrade and improve existing tourism products, including infrastructure and maintenance of all facilities, domestic and international;
2. Improvement of the Sabah Cultural Centre building, Poring Hot Spring chalets, Petagas Memorial Hall and Tawau Hills Park;

3. A shift from mass tourism to high-yielding upmarket activities for maximum returns; increasing reliance on digital marketing because the international travel roadshows have come to a halt;
4. Encouraging domestic tourists to ‘hotspots’ with discounted prices of 50% on entrance fees for Lok Kawi Wildlife Park, State Museum and Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park; maintenance of Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre in Sandakan and the development of the proposed Elephant Food Corridor, in a yet-to-be-identified area within the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary;
5. Coral reef re-generation, as well as coral planting project at Simpang Mengayau (Tip of Borneo); a natural history museum as a new tourism product;

From these deliberations, domestic tourism has been identified as the key to initial recovery and the Sabah state government has announced initial operations within Sabah only, including accommodation deals, short-stay adventure and recreational vacations, food and beverage sales, ticketing services and transportation, and the reopening of hotels, except their facilities which do not meet social distancing requirements. There are also plans to increase the number of domestic flights within Malaysia including those to and from Sabah. In Phase 5 of the MCO with effect from 9 May, 2020, domestic tourism has been allowed to resume operations but must comply with the health and safety ‘standards of operating procedures’ (SOP) set by the Ministry of Health and related authorities (Dzulkifli, 2020).

Conclusions

Given the uncertainties surrounding the future development of the Covid-19 pandemic and its socio-economic, political and health consequences, it is difficult to make any firm predictions about the future of the Southeast Asian tourism industry. Suffice to say, there will be significant changes. The seriousness of the pandemic, its rapid spread across some 213 countries, currently with 6.45 million cases and 382,479 deaths (Worldometer, 2020), and the lack of knowledge about the virus itself and how to combat it suggest that the social and economic repercussions will continue well into 2021, if not beyond. In writing this paper it has been enormously difficult to provide information on the scale of the problem and the direction in which it is heading. New cases and deaths, impacts on economies and counter-measures, specifically as these affect the tourism industry, change by the day.

Certainly, we need to know more about the changes in travel behaviour and perceptions of risk and decision-making occasioned by the pandemic. More specifically in the Malaysian tourism industry and the wider Southeast Asia, ultimately the effectiveness and impact of stimulus packages, cross-sectional financial loss analysis, and new measures and business strategies, which includes business resilience and crisis management issues, will need to be addressed. In addition, social distancing measures are likely to continue for some time to influence the way tourism businesses operate, how humans behave and respond to the contraction of the tourism industry and their adjustment to the continuing threat that the virus poses when people resume travelling and enter into contact with others. The tourism industry is one of the most affected by the Coronavirus outbreak and the cancellation of the 'Visit Malaysia 2020' campaign has been a major economic blow to the country. What is more, the Malaysian government has indicated that a ban on Malaysians travelling abroad for leisure and major public events has to be extended after the MCO/CMCO is lifted to prevent a spike in infection in Malaysia (Arumugam, 2020). A survey carried out by the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism on 7-13 April, 2020 on the willingness of Malaysians to travel for leisure and their perceptions of leisure travel also suggests an increasing preference for domestic vacations (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). At the same time, there will be new requirements when it comes to travelling, for example an enhanced emphasis on safety, health and hygiene practices and a preference for clean and less crowded environments.

What is also of significance in a Southeast Asian context are the ways in which the consequences of the pandemic play out and interrelate with other areas of life and behaviour. For example, in some parts of Southeast Asia, it may turn out to have a profound effect on the future direction of political life (Vatikiotis, 2020). As we have seen Erik Cohen has examined the coincidence, antecedence, interaction and dynamics of crises in the context of Thailand (2010; Cohen and Neal, 2010). Clearly as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, the tourism industry may never be the same again; some businesses will inevitably disappear; some destinations may well be avoided for some time to come; people may also continue to be wary of the close contact entailed in airline, train, river and bus travel and on cruise liners. What is of interest will be the factor of risk-aversion among physically vulnerable tourists such as senior citizens, pregnant women and those with underlying medical conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory problems and obesity. Some forms of tourism such as cruise holidays, which have been especially attractive to older people, may be affected in more extreme ways. There may well be, and all the signs point in this direction, that there will be an increasing shift

to vacations at home, travelling shorter distances and a reluctance to travel to countries which are seen as high-risk, given that the pandemic has exposed some parts of the world as particularly prone to the spread of infection and to have insufficient health-care systems and other measures to reduce risk. Preferences for small or individual group travel in less crowded tourist sites rather than large group packages and mass tourist sites may increase. Small and medium-sized hotels, with high quality standards in safety, sanitation, and comfort may be in higher demand. High-end hotels and boutique properties may also be favoured. The convention and exhibitions sector will most certainly decrease in popularity.

The overdependence on the East Asian market of states like Sabah, and countries such as Thailand has already given rise to calls for the diversification of tourist source countries, for encouraging more domestic tourism, and, in certain sites, to move away from low-revenue East Asian mass tourism, which is also raising issues about the cultural and environmental sustainability of certain tourist activities. However, the influence of China and East Asia and the revenue and employment that they generate in Southeast Asia may be too significant to resist and may already be too embedded in Chinese regional supply chains across a range of industries to encourage more radical changes in tourism plans and strategies and to attempt a significant reduction in the numbers of Chinese tourists. But clearly some rethinking is required when this crisis ends (though it is suggested that now the virus has established itself it will not disappear) about the kinds of tourism which Southeast Asia, including Sabah and Malaysia more generally, intend to promote and the relationship between package tourism directed to East Asia and other more environmentally and culturally sustainable forms of tourism activity supported by a wider spread of visitor source countries.

Returning to Turner, van Gennep and Leach, we are currently in a global transition expressed in the social and cultural changes which we have embraced. We have adopted behaviours that are ‘abnormal’, and, in doing so, we look forward to a future which is ‘new’ normal but which will still require adaptation. Unfortunately, the weight of the evidence and opinion presented in this paper suggests that the transition will lead to something decidedly different within which the livelihoods and lifestyles of some of humankind will survive and perhaps flourish and others will suffer and succumb. Moreover, tourism as relaxation and rejuvenation in ‘new places’ and as a ‘liminal period’ and ‘a sacred journey’ may also turn out to be something rather different in the future, given its risks and uncertainties.

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