Domestic Tourism and its spatiality in Myanmar:
a dynamic and geographical vision

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Abstract: Although little-known, domestic tourism in Myanmar widely outweighs inbound tourism. Its dynamics are a relevant lens to understand Myanmar’s fast integration into globalization. Statistical analysis, in-depth interviews and field observation in Southern Shan State show that the domestic tourism system relies on its own stakeholder network (travel agencies, sellers, boat drivers); pilgrimages and festivals generate temporary spaces (markets, pilgrim camps) and structure perennial territories (boat driver villages); and visitors have their own distinct spatiality, accommodation and itineraries. Although religion remains a major travel framework, the better access to mobility and information that has followed the 2010 political transition has transformed expectations and practices: more families travel by private cars, couples sometimes transform pilgrimages into romantic getaways; shopping, leisure and rest are becoming increasingly important. These more-individual, hedonistic practices are gaining legitimacy and hybridize traditional frameworks and modern travel modalities. They shed a new light onto the little-known domestic tourism in Myanmar.

Keywords: Myanmar, domestic tourism, tourism, globalization, Inle Lake, Shan State

Introduction

In 2004, the Myanmar author Ma Thanegi wrote The Native Tourist: A Holiday pilgrimage in Myanmar, describing her 18-day bus trip on a package tour, through 29 towns and 60 pagodas. This title reveals the ambiguities of domestic tourism: the author’s assumed position as a “native tourist” reflects how counter-intuitive it is to consider a national as a tourist. Moreover, the expression “holiday pilgrimage” is interesting: how are pilgrimage (i.e. religion) and holidays (i.e. tourism) linked to one another?
These questions are even more relevant during the deep transition that Myanmar has been undergoing since the military junta relinquished power in 2010: political, economic, and cultural changes have been reshaping the whole society (Egreteau and Robinne 2015). Our assumption is that domestic tourism is a relevant lens to understand this metamorphosis.

Our aim is to draw a dynamic geography of domestic tourism in Myanmar, compare its spatiality, temporality and practices with international tourism and highlight its specificities; to understand how Myanmar’s entry into globalization reshapes it, and how traditional religious itinerancies have evolved and hybridized into more touristic, more hedonistic, more global, but still very original forms of tourism.

Our approach is human geography, which focuses on the deployment of human activities within a certain space. This is the reason why we chose to focus on the spatiality of domestic tourism: instead of focusing on stakeholders or practices, we rather opted to start from different spaces, within which we then highlighted the significance of players and behaviors specific to domestic tourism.

Research on Domestic Tourism: A Work in Progress

The Emergence of Domestic Tourism Research on Developing Countries

In most works, the definition of domestic tourism is as wide as tourism’s generally, embracing the World Trade Organization’s stance – any mobility between 24 hours and 365 days and with no remuneration at the place visited (UNWTO n.d.) – the only difference being that domestic tourism is performed by nationals within their own countries. However, we formulate a narrower definition of tourism – and hence, of domestic tourism – which only encompasses leisure-oriented practices, aiming at the re-creation of individuals, i.e. the process by which individuals “un-routinize” their lives, and replenish their physical and mental capacities (MIT team 2002). Our choice to focus on this definition of tourism stricto sensu makes it difficult to use statistics, which are often based on very extensive definitions of tourism.
As for domestic tourism, it is a rather new and long-neglected subject (Aramberri 2004), especially for developing countries, where it remained a blind spot of research for a long time. Indeed, unconsciously, in a long-influential North-South/rich-poor vision, tourism was long considered as a wealthy people’s activity, and hence limited to foreigners (Sacareau 2006; Evrard 2006). Even now, it remains analyzed in terms of “impact” of foreigners, silently understood as Western white males, on “local populations”. A major focus shift is therefore needed to take into account the growing complexity and diversity of tourism, the significance of Asian tourism within Asia and beyond, and the massive number of domestic tourists, etc. (Winter et al. 2009). Since Graburn’s (1983) and Jafari’s (1986) landmark contributions, domestic tourism studies have gained traction, with a growing set of theses on specific countries: Berriane in Morocco (1989), Zhang in China (1997), Raymond in Latin America (1999), Cabasset-Semedo in Indonesia (2000), Sacareau in India (2006; 2013), and Peyvel (2009) and Alneng (2002) in Vietnam. A few regional studies have also been produced, such as Ghimire’s (2001) and Gladstone’s (2005) on developing countries generally and Winter et alii’s (2009), Singh’s (2009) and Cabasset-Semedo et alii’s (2010) about Asia more specifically.

Research demonstrates that domestic tourism is a massive phenomenon, which widely surpasses international circulation (Winter et al. 2009; Cabasset-Semedo et al. 2010) and features specificities. For instance, domestic tourism is organized by its own system of stakeholders: the government (in China, “golden weeks” of holidays played a pivotal role: Taunay 2010); trade unions and mass organizations (which still play a key role in Vietnam: Peyvel 2009); specialized travel agencies selling package tours (which launch and popularize travel routes and sites in India: Sacareau 2006); and generally, extended family logics still hold a pivotal role in many Southeast Asian countries (Cabasset-Semedo et al. 2010), etc.

It also features specific temporalities, due to different cultural values: on an annual timescale, peaks of domestic tourism in India are based on the religious calendar (Sacareau 2006); and on a daily timescale, Vietnamese tourists on Mui Ne beach bathe early morning and foreigners in the afternoon, because of their different relationships to sun (Peyvel 2009). Moreover, locals do not visit the same regions and towns as foreigners: the hill town of Dalat in Vietnam is widely visited by locals, who consider it exotic, while foreigners
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find it “kitsch” and boring (Alneng 2002). Even on a local scale, two different spatialities appear: in the hill region of Sapa (Vietnam), foreigners trek to remote villages, seeking adventure and authenticity, whereas locals take gentle strolls, for they are rather looking for rest and family leisure (Peyvel 2008). Finally, even when foreigners and locals do visit the very same place, they may not have the same practices: in Angkor (Cambodia), foreigners visit the site quite thoroughly, whereas locals prefer to rest and share meals in the shade (Sofield 2009). Domestic tourism also generates its own territories, with distinct organizations and temporalities (Winter et al. 2009): souvenirs shops targeting locals with a certain array of handicrafts (Winter 2009); “ethnic villages” in China (Chio 2009; Taunay 2010); and beaches developed for Vietnamese (Peyvel 2009) or Indonesian clienteles (Erb 2009), etc.

The Ambiguities of Research on Domestic Tourism

However, beyond these findings, studying domestic tourism raises deep theoretical issues, such as the relationship between locals’ and foreigners’ ways of travelling: how do their specific practices circulate from one group to another? Which kind of transference takes place? Peyvel (2008) and Sacareau (2015) demonstrated that the new success of beaches in Vietnam and India (respectively) are inspired by Western tourism, but that locals re-appropriate this habitus according to their own identities. However, this transference is often viewed as unidirectional, from foreigners to locals, whereas the reverse movement is also possible, as one can note in Myanmar. In this dialectic, Singh (2009, p. 24) distinguished three different forms of domestic tourism: “endemic” tourism, which is constructed by locals only; “embedded” tourism, when locals appropriate places designed for foreigners; and “bricolage”, which encompasses all the intermediate situations. However, we consider that this model, though simple, lacks nuances. That is why we have chosen to embrace the five-point relational model between locals’ and foreigners’ places, offered by Peyvel (2009): ignorance (places known by locals alone), avoidance (popular places for locals, but avoided by foreigners), juxtaposition (construction of two distinct territorialities in the same region), overlapping (territorialities with some common spaces) and integration (same territorialities and same practices).
If one goes one step further into such a perspective change, another major debate appears: non-Western domestic tourism is often still analyzed using Western categories, and with a major, though untold and self-explanatory presupposition that “tourism is essentially a modern western phenomenon” (Cohen 1995, quoted in Alneng 2002, p. 126). This Western-centric perspective tends to dismiss some non-Western practices as non-touristic (Winter et al. 2009). This unconscious bias is challenged by Alneng (2002) all the more forcefully as research has showed that significant domestic tourism existed in Japan (Graburn 1996, in Alneng 2002), Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia (Parnwell 1993, in Gladstone 2005) long before tourism was “invented” in Europe. The focus on modernity, industrialized societies, and urban middle classes tends to downplay already-existing pre-modern practices performed by the poorest and/or by rural families in non-industrialized environments, for instance in Pushkar, India (Gladstone 2005). In Myanmar, we show that a large share of domestic tourists comprises very modest families who could tuck away money after the harvest, and who charter a pick-up or take a bus for a few days’ trip. Of course, religious piety is a major motivator to travel, but not the only one, which raises one last theoretical issue.

Indeed, Westerners – tourists, but sometimes researchers as well – tend to distinguish domestic tourism in developing countries from its international counterpart by its so-called religious dimension. However, such a vision relegates those travelers to the role of “pilgrims”, while Westerners seem to be the only genuine “tourists” (Alneng 2009). Of course, it cannot be denied that religion is important in Southeast Asia’s tourism (Singh 2009), but does it mean that people engaged in such trips can be exclusively considered as pilgrims? Their itinerancies include several stops in different places, bringing into play successive – or even simultaneous - different registers and attitudes (Gladstone 2005). Generally, the opposition between pilgrimage (religion) and tourism (pleasure) is questionable: “in what kind of symbolic order is duty as a means of self-realization radically opposed to the enjoyment of recreation?” (Alneng 2009).

Some researchers are also reluctant to consider pilgrimage as tourism, because its spatiality and temporality are reportedly set by outside factors (i.e. religion), whereas tourists reportedly have their own free choice (Sacareau 2006). However, we challenge such an objection. Of course, many people in Asia travel during the time of religious festivities, and they often state
religion as the reason for their trip... But why would it necessarily exclude more hedonistic, trivial reasons? Moreover, pilgrims/tourists have multiple pilgrimage sites to choose from, and their final choice might not be made only on religious grounds. If we reverse the perspective, it seems quite wrong to say that “genuine vacationers” are free from such constraints: skiers only go to ski resorts they can afford, when and where there is snow, and when they have holidays. Do the crowds of sun-lovers on beaches have more flexible itinerancies than pilgrims in Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim shrines, or do they also follow their own set of constraints?

In other words, the distinction between tourism and pilgrimage seems relevant only in very clear, straightforward cases, but appears to be less so in many other situations, especially in the current context of globalization, which has deeply reshaped Asian societies: better transportation, emergence of a middle class, valuing of leisure, and new relationship to time, space, culture, Self and/or even body, etc. Therefore, it has modified the spatiality of Asian tourism: cities, shopping malls, and theme parks have gained significant attraction, because they symbolize the upward trajectory of a whole country and its insertion into a globalized and developed world (Winter et al. 2009; Cabasset-Semedo et al. 2010). It has also reformulated tourism practices: structuration and systematization of all-inclusive pilgrimage tours by travel agencies or mass organizations, as well as increasing contact with foreign cultures and tourists’ practices, have led to a “touristification of religious practices” and a progressive initiation to tourism by Asians. More and more are now willing to travel by themselves, with new expectations and new practices (Sacareau 2006).

With all those simultaneous changes, Asian tourism is becoming more and more secularized. Although religion often remains a marked background of itinerancies, other mobility purposes have gained legitimacy, including pleasure, entertainment, hedonism, and romance (Gladstone 2005; Singh 2009). About Nepal, Bleie (2003, in Sacareau 2006, p. 252) notes: “Recreational practices also take on new forms of sociability, realized in a commercial context of public eating and drinking in hotels and restaurants on the way to and from the pilgrimage site and in the temple village. Indeed, to a greater extent than earlier, the travels of such pilgrims share a ‘getting out’ character, where social codes are relawed and daily routines abandoned”. Our findings show that even in long-closed Myanmar, domestic tourism is also going through such deep changes.
Domestic tourism was studied quite thoroughly in Vietnam (Peyvel 2009; 2016) and explored in Thailand (Evrard 2006; Kaosa-ard, Bezic, and White 2001) and in Cambodia (Sofield 2009). However, along with Laos, Myanmar (Figure 1) remains a blank on the map of domestic tourism in Southeast Asia (Winter et al. 2009). Indeed, international tourism – which analysis is usually a prelude to domestic tourism’s – is itself quite recent in Myanmar. In spite of a slight growth after the state-sponsored 1996 Visit Myanmar Year, tourism only took off after the 2010 political transition. Before that, due to the mediatization of Aung San Suu Kyi’s fight in Western countries and many NGOs’ calls to boycott tourism, political and ethical issues overshadowed the other dimensions of tourism in the “Golden Land” – and research surrounding this topic (Michalon 2017). In such a context, domestic tourism went completely unreported. Tourism is usually associated with leisure and relative freedom (of mind, of movement): it was barely conceivable that people under such a brutal dictatorship could go on a trip, and “enjoy their time”.

As for Myanmar academics, they seem to be widely influenced by the Western mind set and its focus on international tourism. While Aye Myint paid lip service to domestic visitors in his PhD about Inle Lake (2007), the first signs of these elements appeared in the early 2010s: theses about tourism in Bago, Ngapali, Bagan and Dawei feature the findings of some questionnaires with pilgrims and draw their profiles (Khin Khin Moe 2012; Ni Ni Aung 2010; Soe Tint 2007; unknown author 2011; respectively), while Thein Htoo’s thesis about Southern Shan State (2015) goes one step further. In the consultancy literature, one survey was done in 2014 on 1700 visitors to the Inle Lake region, among whom were more than 600 Myanmar nationals (Valentin 2014). However, this kind of research is often satisfied (though sometimes purposefully) with just drawing visitors’ profiles and evaluating their trip satisfaction, the quality of roads, hotels, and food; their spatial and social practices are not mentioned, nor the stakeholder system structuring domestic tourism discussed, nor a dynamic or national perspective offered.
Figure 1. General map of Myanmar. Source: Adapted by the author.
Methodology

In order to draw a sketch of domestic tourism on a national scale, we used some unpublished sets of statistics. The Ministry of Hotels and Tourism (MoHT) provided us figures about frequentation by foreigners and locals in 20 cities for 2015 (Figure 3). However, these data feature a double bias: they do not include all the cities of the country and they only enumerate the number of people sleeping in official commercial accommodation. We complemented these data with statistics from the Domestic Pilgrimage Tour Operator Association (DPTOA) about the number of tourists in the whole country. Lastly, we had in-depth, semi-structured interviews with owners or managers in five of the main historical travel agencies in Yangon, as well as with the chairman and the treasurer of the DPTOA.

In order to have a more territorialized vision of domestic tourism, its stakeholder networks and a deeper insight into the sociology of the tourists, we focused on the slightly better-known Southern Shan State region, which is the research area of our PhD thesis. We centered on a narrow range of scientific literature, either by local researchers (Thein Htoo 2015) or by international consultancy organizations (Valentin 2014). We also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with more than one hundred local tourism players (boat drivers, souvenir sellers, hotel managers, village leaders), and with foreign and local travelers. Indeed, although McCannell’s (1976) or Urry’s (1990) universalist approaches may be very useful as heuristic tools, we consider it necessary to embrace another perspective, giving more space to subjectivities (Winter et al. 2009). Such interviews allowed us to very closely study domestic tourism, “from the inside”, and to cast a first light on very little-known places (such as Lwe Nyein village or souvenir shops on Inle Lake), itineraries (such as the domestic tourists’ trips in Shan State and on Inle Lake), or practices. We also did participant observation by following three groups of domestic tourists on Inle Lake, observing their actions, reactions and behaviors, on May 12, October 19 and November 25, 2016. Finally, we constituted our own statistical set: on April 3, 10, 21, 29 and on May 10, 20 and 30, 2016, we had pilgrims counted, either on Khaung Taing road (April 3 and May 30) or Shwe Nyaung road (May 10 and May 20), or on both (April 10, 21 and 29) (Figure 9). From 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., we enumerated buses, light trucks and individual cars which were seemingly occupied by domestic tourists, and their approximate number of passengers. Just during these seven days, we counted more than 24400 domestic tourists.
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Travelling Within Myanmar: Old, Massive Itinerancies on the Edge of Tourism

A Religious Voyage Before All?

The geography of tourism in Myanmar has been shaped by pilgrimages for centuries. In 1900, four main pilgrimage spots could be identified in Burma: Shwedagon in Rangoon, Mahamuni in Mandalay, Shwesattaw near Mandalay and Kyaihtiyoe near Bago (Ferrars 1900), and they still organize the contemporary religious geography, as seen below. The spiritual component of travel is all the more important as religion is not only about Buddhism, but also about the cult of nat (spirits). Although it is difficult to accurately anchor nat festivals in time, spirit worship on the top of Mount Popa, or during Taungbyon nat festivals, appear to be deeply-rooted in time (Brac de la Perrière 1998; Spiro 1967).

In Southern Shan State, near Inle Lake, pilgrimages have been an old and significant tradition. The British Museum even devoted a whole exhibition to these journeys in the 18th century (“Pilgrims, healers and wizards: Buddhism and religious practices in Burma and Thailand” at the end of 2014). This period also corresponds to the first offerings of Buddha statues in Pindaya caves (Thein Htoo 2015), while the five holy images in Phaung Daw Oo pagoda, on Inle Lake, have been widely known and worshipped for at least two centuries (Robinne 2000).

Although the geography of travels in Myanmar has been shaped by religion for centuries, it does not mean that more touristic practices could not appear within this framework. Indeed, the boundary between pilgrimage stricto sensu and tourism has never been very clear, in 1882 already, J.G Scott mentions that:

The greatest of all the pagoda feasts is, of course, that of the Shwedagon in Rangoon, with its pilgrims, not only from the farthest parts of Burma and far away Shan hills, but also from over the seas. But the vastness of the gathering and the proximity of the great town spoil the national character of the festival, and introduce too many elements of 19th century civilization in the shape of merry-go-rounds and hack carriages (Scott 1882, p. 212).
Since then, the confusion has increased:

What, in a pagoda festival, attracts most the pilgrims-visitors […]: religious festival, commercial fair, or amusements available? [Whether in town or in the countryside], the purely religious pagoda festival is nothing but a very secondary aspect of the festival (Lubeigt 2000, p. 203).

Even Myanmar intellectuals acknowledge this fusion of religion and leisure:

When my countrymen go on a pilgrimage, it is never a wholly religious and solemn trip: it is part holiday, part sightseeing, and even part trade (Ma Thanegi 2004, p. ix).

The boundary between pilgrimage and tourism therefore looks rather like a complex continuum.

These days, four main, whole-year travel regions appear on the map of Myanmar (Figure 3), drawing a geography of domestic tourism structured by religious highlights: Mandalay and Pyin-Oo-Lwin region; Bagan and Magway region; Southern Shan State; Mon State and its surroundings (Kyaikhtiyo, Mawlamyine, Bago). Yangon might also be added: as Taunay (2009) emphasizes, research usually considers capital cities only as the origin of visitors, whereas it is also the destination of many rural travelers.

A multi-scalar approach reveals that each touristic region is made of a lattice of sub-destinations, often travelled on tours that highlight how important itinerancy and space are to the travel experience. For example, for Southern Shan State package tours, Shwe Oe Si Travel Agency’s flyers mentions 14 stops; Than Htay Company offers 17, and Sein Win not less than 30, including pagodas, (holy) caves, markets, boat ride on Inle Lake or sacred trees.

Religion also shapes time. In every travel agency, “high season” is not defined in terms of months, but in terms of religious events, spanning the Taungbyon festival, near Mandalay (in August) to the Kazon full moon day (in May), and encompassing two main highlights: The first one, mid-October to mid-
Domestic tourism used to be structured by religious events, but within the last decade, with a sharp increase these last years, some new destinations have appeared, such as beaches. While Ngapali (Rakhine State), appears as “the foreigners’ beach”, Chaung Thar (Ayeyarwaddy division) is the “locals’ beach” (Figure 3). Such a contrast was also observed in Vietnam by Peyvel (2008).

**Figure 2.** Seasonality of domestic and inbound tourism in 2015 in Myanmar. These data were produced from MoHT data about the 20 highlights of tourism, whether international or domestic, and do not account for the whole country. Although we acknowledge a potential bias, these statistics were the only ones available on a monthly basis. Source: Adapted from MoHT 2016.
Domestic Tourism: A Massive Phenomenon

Even though statistics are very rare and confusing, it appears that locally, a single pagoda can attract crowds of pilgrims. During Shwesattaw festival, near Mandalay (mid-February to mid-April), Shwe Kyay Si Travel Agency alone sends 41 of its 48 daily buses (more than 1400 people) there, according to its owner.

The lack of data poses a huge obstacle when it comes to mapping out the main highlights of Myanmar tourism. The MoHT provided us with the tourist frequentation of 20 major towns (Figure 3), but the data only take into account people sleeping in formal accommodation whereas, according to Soe Tint (2007), two-thirds of pilgrims in Bagan sleep in informal structures; in Southern Shan State, Valentin (2014) reported the same findings (63%). If we take the risk in assuming that this informal/formal ratio is the same for other regions and for the whole year, we suggest a 2.8 correction factor to estimate the real numbers of visitors in most vacation places. However, we chose to keep the official figures for beaches (where people generally use commercial structures), and for Kyaihtiyoe (for which official figures are already far above other estimates).

If you try to go beyond this specific data and calculate the total number of visitors flow, you can use statistics from local travel agencies selling package tours: in 2011, 189 out of 600 of them formed the Domestic Pilgrimage and Tour Operator Association. According to its 2015-2016 activity report, domestic tourism has massively increased in the last few years (+18%/year on average) to reach 6.1 million customers in 2015. In 2016, it reached 7.1 million (Ei Ei Thu 2017). Purportedly, not only do those data include locals travelling with commercial package tours (which account for 20% of the domestic tourist flows, according to our enumerations: Valentin 2014; Thein Htoo 2015), but also individual travelers, who account for 80% of the flows, and who are said to be enumerated by DPTOA at the main touristic destinations. However, some regions are not included in this statistical network, methodology used is far from clear, and we could feel confusion and malaise during our interviews when dealing with figures. Those data are therefore to be taken as minimal figures. Compared to foreign inbound tourism, domestic tourism appears to be at least ten times more significant (Figure 4).
Figure 3. Touristic spaces in Myanmar. Source: Adapted from MoHT 2016.
This massive increase of domestic tourism can be tightly linked to the (r) evolution of the economic and political situation of Myanmar. Indeed, after five decades of brutal rule since 1962, the military junta self-dissolved in 2010 and yielded power to a so-called civilian government, which took significant steps towards democracy and opened up the country to foreign investment, cultural influence and tourism. In the wake of those reforms, the country’s per capita income increased from USD 800 in 2010 to USD 1200 in 2014 (Oxford Business Group 2017). With import rules easing, the number of private vehicles soared by 58% between 2012 and 2013 (Solidiance 2015). With the opening of the telecom market to private companies, the number of SIM cards skyrocketed from 2 million in 2014 to 39 million in 2016 (Aung Kyaw Nyunt 2016). Those changes have made travel – especially independent travel – much easier than before, and deeply transformed practices and expectations.

Even though systemic reforms have had a decisive impact on domestic tourism, it was a mere, involuntary side-effect. For decades, the government has had neither specific vision, nor strategy, nor goal on this topic, and domestic tourism has remained a policy blind-spot within the tourism ministry (Daw Khin Than Win, director general at the MoHT, oral communication). Such little awareness from the government is very common in Asia:

**Figure 4.** Domestic tourism, a sector that outweighs inbound flows. Source: Adapted from DPOTA 2016 [for domestic tourism]; Adapted from MoHT 2016 [for inbound tourism].
Certain countries [such as Myanmar] that apparently have very informal (or pre-capitalistic) sacred and secular systems of travelling and holidaying scarcely interpret these travels and leisure holidays as tourism. Hence, […] ‘domestic tourism’ is (mis) construed as being non-existent (Singh 2009, p. 14).

Domestic Tourism as the Driving Force of Spatial Change

Religious Festivals and their Temporary Spatial Configurations

Domestic tourism in Myanmar is very closely linked to periodic religious events, which produce a temporary universe, with its own geography. In Southern Shan State, Phaung Daw Oo pagoda festival in Inle region (in Thadingyut/October) and Taunggyi Fire Balloon Festival (full moon of Tazaungmon, mid-November) bring together more than 100 000 devotees each (Thein Htoo 2015). These massive festivals create very specific spatial configurations ex nihilo, such as massive temporary markets. The latter are run by merchants from the whole country, whose networks and itinerancies link the hills and the lowlands, and shape domestic tourism and its landscapes.

These markets’ popularity among pilgrims and the massive revenue earned by shopkeepers clearly show that festivals are out-of-routine moments, during which much of visitors’ savings are spent. It also emphasizes that pilgrimage is not only about sacred; it also has a profane dimension and, like G. Lubeig (2000), one may wonder to what extent religion is the main reason for travelling.

Even in a touristic city such as Nyaungshwe, on the edge of Inle Lake, which is a highlight of international tourism, it is interesting to notice that foreigners are expected and welcomed in the festival market, but nothing is directed towards them: no souvenir shop and no touts. Considering the massive flows of pilgrims and their high level of consumption, targeting foreigners is not worthwhile. Reciprocally, our interview showed that foreigners have little interest in the festival and the market: they do not feel comfortable in these spaces, designed after Myanmar codes, with crowds in narrow spaces, language barriers, unfamiliar (and quite unhygienic) food, unsafe merry-go-rounds, and items for sale considered as “tacky” and of “bad taste”.

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As a consequence, it seems that this festival constructs a temporary configuration of space and time. Some foreigners may touch it and venture into this ephemeral territory, but there is little “overlapping” (Peyvel 2009) with the Western tourism spaces. It should be noted that those spaces are utterly created by a network of players very specific to domestic tourism: travelling merchants, suppliers, transporters, and local promoters, etc.

**Domestic Tourism and the Perennial Structuration of Village life in Lwe Nyein**

Lwe Nyein, on the West Bank of Inle Lake, illustrates how domestic tourism can shape its own places, totally autonomous from the international tourism system, offer an attractive alternative to a declining economic system and eventually contribute to local development.

This 140-household, amphibious hamlet is one kilometer south of the Khaung Taing Hot Springs (Figure 9), which have been a long-time attraction for domestic tourists. In 2015, according to the hot springs’ accountancy department, 80,000 locals bathed there (even though some are day-trippers from neighboring Taunggyi city), versus 9,000 foreigners. Because of that proximity, some early flows of pilgrims reached Lwe Nyein village to rent boats and sail to Phaung Daw Oo pagoda, on the lake. According to U San Htun, the village leader, in 2000, 16 boatmen in the village reportedly shuttled pilgrims quite regularly to the lake. However, this activity remained marginal compared to floating gardens, a quite iconic local way of farming (Bernot and Bruneau 1972; Michalon 2014; 2016).

However, according to the village leader, the deforestation of the surrounding hills and siltation stranded every floating garden between 2006 and 2010. While surrounding villages switched to other crops, poor soil quality in Lwe Nyein and pre-existing tourism experiences made it more logical to focus on pilgrim services. First, a progressive increase took place in the 2000s and the early 2010s. In 2010, there were 80 boats in the village, and some families still tended floating gardens; very few accommodations were available apart from the local monastery. In a second stage, a very sharp increase took place from 2013 onwards. Nowadays, there are 160 boats in the village, and from the approximate the village leader gave us, we could calculate that the local boatmen handled more than 100,000 people in 2015.
Such an activity has deeply transformed the village (Figure 5). A few permanent restaurants have opened nearby and houses now feature cement walls and corrugated steel roofs. It has also shaped the community into a complex network: some enterprising villagers have asserted themselves as brokers, in close contact with travel agencies across the whole country; most men drive pilgrims; some others tout the pilgrims’ vehicles at a crossroad fifteen kilometers away; young girls sell hats, betel, snacks and water bottles; and women set up small stalls in front of their houses. Lastly, according to the village leader, 100 out of 140 families now offer a free-of-charge homestay service for their passengers in basic dormitories which can accommodate up to 50 people. Around 30 houses were full during the Taunggyi Fire Balloon festival in October 2015, and more than 50 during the Water Festival in April 2016. Two villagers have even built rentable guesthouses in the village.

Lwe Nyein hamlet illustrates the existence of a dual touristic system, where domestic tourism is almost totally distinct from the international one: it has its own centrality, temporality, and it is structured by a whole set of stakeholders (boatmen, brokers, touts, sellers) who have very little to do with international tourism.

Figure 5. The new, more modern face of Lwe Nyein village; in the background, one of the two guesthouses of the village. Source: the author.
Domestic and International Visitors Itinerancies: Specific Spatiality, Dual Practices

The Domestic Visitors’ Trip Within Southern Shan State: A Multi-Focus Itinerancy

From a quantitative point of view, Southern Shan State is a highlight of domestic itinerancies, and the latter appears to be a more massive phenomenon than international tourism (Table 1): 560,000 versus 284,000 people in 2016, according to official MoHT statistics (MoHT 2008; 2012; 2016). However, the gap is actually much larger, as most domestic visitors stay in unregistered accommodation, such as monasteries, relatives’ places and, during festivals, in their cars. In spring 2014, these statistically invisible visitors accounted for 63% of all domestic tourists interviewed (Valentin 2014). It is therefore quite safe to assume that more than one million domestic visitors travelled through Southern Shan State in 2016, i.e. approximately four times more numerous than foreigners.

Table 1. Touristic frequentation of Southern Shan State in 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For the whole Southern Shan State…</th>
<th>Foreigners</th>
<th>Domestic visitors</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stays in hotels</td>
<td>252 500</td>
<td>380 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stays in Bed &amp; Breakfast</td>
<td>32 000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stays in municipal guesthouses</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>180 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>284 000</td>
<td>560 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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From a spatial point of view, foreign and local tourists have structurally different practices in Southern Shan State. Surveys (Valentin 2014) and in-depth interviews with foreigners show two “juxtaposed”, and sometimes “overlapping” territorialities (Peyvel 2009), shaped by divergent expectations: foreigners come to see grand landscapes and “traditional” ways of life, while locals mainly cover a network of religious sites.

Indeed, foreigners mostly stay in Nyaungshwe town, by the Inle Lake, (179,000 stays in 2016: MoHT 2017), and have a limited mobility. Inle Lake is the main focus of foreigners’ itineraries, as one of the highlights in
guidebooks, hence the center of Westerners’ expectations and representations, who come to see the local floating gardens, handicraft workshops, stilt villages and local fishermen. That is why Nyaungshwe holds such a prominence - it is a key gateway to the lake. Kalaw, as a trail-head to Inle, is also quite popular.

Foreigners may also embark on occasional excursions to Kakku pagodas and Pindaya caves, but those sites remain secondary (Kakku had only 10,800 visits in 2016) (MoHT 2017), because they are religious highlights. Indeed, after a few days or weeks in Myanmar, most foreign interviewees confess feeling bored of pagodas, and are rather seeking impressive landscapes and traditional ways of life. Moreover, foreign visitors cannot travel independently to those places: they have to hire a taxi for the day for 50-odd dollars, which acts as an additional obstacle.

On the other hand, domestic tourists mainly stay in Taunggyi (134,500 people in 2016) (MoHT 2017), because this big town – which is also the capital of Shan State – offers many cheap guesthouses and numerous monasteries wherein to sleep. From Taunggyi, travel agencies’ flyers and interviews show that they deploy a network of day trips within the whole Southern Shan State, travelled by private or hired truck: Pindaya caves and Kone Lone pagodas, Kalaw Hnee Pagoda, Myin Ma Htee caves, Inle Lake, Taunggyi market and Sulamani Pagoda, Htam Sam caves and Kakku pagodas (Figure 6). All of these places share a common feature: they are religious sites - even caves are sacred. This clearly emphasizes the religious dimension of domestic tourism. Even though obviously-religious time – i.e prayer – may be very marginal, the permanence of that mesh of religious highlights indicates that religion remains a chief structure of local itinerancies.

Near Pindaya, a small pond with strikingly blue water has become a new attraction for locals in the last three years, mainly through social media and word-of-mouth. However, this “blue lake” is becoming increasingly more popular for foreigners as well, which shows that innovation does not necessarily flow from foreigners to locals: it can go the other way around.
Figure 6. Foreigners’ and pilgrims’ routes in Southern Shan State: Nyaungshwe versus Taunggyi, specific versus extensive itineraries. Source: Adapted from MoHT 2017.
Sailing to the Sacred: Pagodas as an attraction

At a regional scale, the gap between foreigners’ and Burmese’ expectations is translated into different practices... but this gap can also be identified at a very local scale, on Inle Lake alone (Figures 8 and 9). Indeed, in their quest for “authenticity” and discovery of local ways of life, foreigners usually have an extensive, all-day trip on the lake, which includes an early visit to the day market, a glimpse at “traditional Intha fishermen” posing for pictures on the lake (Michalon 2017), a dash through floating gardens, a hop off at Ywama’s, Nampan’s and Inn Paw Khone’s handicraft showrooms, and a lunch at a stilt restaurant on the lake (Table 2).

The main circuit for pilgrims, focused on religious highlights, is quite different: according to our interviews and observations, it is structured by three pagodas and a few shopping centers. The main and most famous stop is Phaung Daw Oo pagoda, on the lake itself, where five holy Buddha images are enshrined (Robinne 2000). This place is included in many tours for foreigners, but most of those we met on the ground showed tepid enthusiasm for that place, and usually spent very little time there. Domestic tourists remain the main visitors: from mid-June to mid-July 2015 (low season), an average of 637 pilgrims reportedly came daily to visit the pagoda versus 114 foreigners, and the gap must be even more significant during festival season (Phaung Daw Oo Board of Trustees 2016).

The other highlight for Burmese is Nga Phe Kyaung monastery, whose attraction is not the same for locals as it is for foreigners. Tourists used to visit it in the 1990s and 2000s, when monks trained cats to jump through hoops. However, this “jumping cat monastery” has lost popularity since the cats stopped jumping in the early 2010s. As for pilgrims, they are much more interested in the 72 ancient Buddha statues, of many kinds and styles, which enhance the prayer hall (Aye Myint 2007).

Lastly, pilgrims head to Alodaw Pauk Pagoda, near Nampan village. According to U Myint Aung, its board of trustees’ chairman, this pagoda lay in disrepair until its lavish renovation by General Khin Nyunt in 2000; its emergence is linked to the downfall of Wet Thar Kin Monastery, on the east bank of the lake, after its highly-respected abbot left the region in 2007. Since then, Alodaw
Pauk Pagoda has become increasingly popular, which shows that pilgrimage circuits are dynamic and evolutionary. Alodaw Pauk is virtually a Burmese-only place: in high season, more than 1000 pilgrims can be counted daily, versus only 50 foreigners.

The only pagoda more popular with Westerners than with locals is Indein Pagoda, on a hillock on the west bank of the lake, which matches the expectations of foreigners. Its summit is crowned with a picturesque collection of slender gilded pagodas and offers a beautiful view of the lake, while the lower slopes are dotted with ruined and foliage-covered pagodas, which match the preconceptions of Myanmar as “a place where time stopped” (Michalon 2016). Reversely, domestic visitors may account for only 10% of the visitors (Ye Win Nyunt, entrance fee controller, oral communication), because those pagodas are not really prominent from a religious point of view. Moreover, they are slightly off the main circuit, which involves extra cost and extra time to visit.

Therefore, it seems that the logic of religious visits widely differs between foreign and local visitors. The former favor authentic, photogenic pagodas, and lifestyles which exceptionality is clearly and quickly comprehensible, whereas the latter favor the sacred features and the legendary significance of a place.

“Looking for Turtle Eggs”: Shopping as a Pillar of Domestic Itinerancies

Beyond the mere geography of their itinerancies, foreigners and Burmese visitors also display very different purchasing habits. Indeed, foreigners often buy their souvenirs from local day markets, where souvenir shops sometimes outnumber vegetable, fish, meat and spice stalls. However, the chief shopping places are massive “showrooms”, which are concentrated in Ywama (silver jewelry), Nampan (cigar and boat-making workshops) and Inn Paw Khone (textile). The first ones opened in 1996, for the Visit Myanmar Year and according to Ma Yadanar Htun, an influential shop owner, there are several dozen now. When visitors step in, English-speaking young girls explain the manufacturing process, show a weaving loom or a man hammering silver, before a final halt at the shop.
As for domestic tourists, they exhibit very different habits. According to a souvenir seller, domestic tourists rarely visit local markets (in spite of a relative increase since 2010): only during festival times do they amount to around 20% of the clientele. Contrary to foreigners, who walk around without buying much, who have an extensive but casual shopping experience, domestic tourists have a much more localized, specific, and intensive way of purchasing.

The first shopping place is pagodas, which highlights the connection between religion and consumption. In Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda, not only has the ground floor been occupied for decades by approximately 30 boutiques, but the tiled square around the temple has also been more and more busy with shops. According to the pagoda’s board of trustees accountant, there were 50-odd stalls in 2011, and 80 nowadays; in Alodaw Pauk Pagoda, the local board of trustees chairman reports there were 16 shops in 2001, and 58 now; and Nga Phe Kyaung monastery’s is full with 55 stalls (U Myo Myint, Inn-Chan village leader, oral communication). The chief clientele comprises Myanmar tourists, buying textiles or fancy jewelry. Sacred and profane are therefore contiguous, and one may wonder which one dominates. We can notice that the time spent purchasing gifts is much longer than the time inside the pagoda (Table 2).

This shopping system has quite recently been brought to a higher level: one new key stop in the last ten years has been “weaving centers”, massive shopping centers which strongly remind of showrooms for foreigners. However, those places’ respective clienteles’ expectations widely differ. In foreigners’ showrooms, tourists come to observe the production process, touch tools, fibers and raw metals, and pay attention to the staff explanations about manufacturing. Indeed, for them, observing such demonstrations is witnessing a highly-valued “authenticity” and being part of it. Conversely, pilgrims are not chasing authenticity or past: their purpose is to buy souvenirs. Therefore, in “weaving centers”, they show so little interest in the manufacturing process that several shop owners decided to halt the handicraft demonstrations they had set up in the first place.
Table 2. Comparative schedules of two groups: domestic tourists (May 2016) and foreigners (March 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Boat trip with a group of pilgrims</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Boat trip with a group of foreigners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.25 am</td>
<td>Departure from Nyaungshwe by boat</td>
<td>7.30 am</td>
<td>Departure from Nyaungshwe by boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.15-8.45 am</td>
<td>Shopping at Sein Ngwe Shan shop</td>
<td>8.15-9.45 am</td>
<td>Visit of Maing Thauk Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.50-9.20 am</td>
<td>Shopping at Sein Thamadi Shop</td>
<td>9.45-10.20 am</td>
<td>Sailing through floating gardens and explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.35-9.45 am</td>
<td>Prayers in Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda</td>
<td>10.20-11.30 am</td>
<td>Visit of Ywama village, silversmith showroom and “long-neck women” weaving shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.45-10.20 am</td>
<td>Shopping in Phaung Daw Oo market</td>
<td>11.30 to 1 pm</td>
<td>Lunch at a restaurant in Ywama village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.20-11.40 am</td>
<td>Lunch at the market</td>
<td>1.20 to 1.50 pm</td>
<td>Visit of a cheroot workshop in Nampan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.55-11.58 am</td>
<td>Short prayers at Alodaw Pauk Pagoda</td>
<td>2 to 3.10 pm</td>
<td>Visit of a textile showroom in Inn Paw Khone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.58-12.30 pm</td>
<td>Shopping around Alodaw Pauk Pagoda</td>
<td>3.10 to 4.15 pm</td>
<td>Boat trip back to Nyaungshwe, enjoying the sunset on the boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.30-1.30 pm</td>
<td>Boat trip back to Nyaungshwe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: the author’s field survey

Another major difference is the kind of products locals and foreigners purchase, which is illustrated by the double Sein Thamadi shop. According to its general manager, Ma Ei Sandar Htun, one opened in 1996 in Heyar Ywama village, catering mostly to foreigners; while one opened in 2009, only for pilgrims. Although the two shops are ten meters apart, their clienteles and their products are utterly different. Indeed, in the foreigner-aimed shop, the best-sellers are pure silver jewelry and antiques, whether genuine or fake. Here, the emphasis is put on authenticity: real silver, locally-made products, purportedly real antiques are metonymies of the much-boasted, but reportedly fast-disappearing “authenticity” of Myanmar. Those souvenirs are therefore a kind of “badge of honor” that foreigners can bring back home.
As for the shops catering to locals, they offer very different products. They mainly feature piles of locally-made *longgyi* (the local sarong), shoulder bags and traditional snacks, but also plenty of China- or Thailand-made hats, fancy jewelry, purses and/or wooden items. All those items, which cost a maximum USD 5, are indeed much more affordable than foreigner-aimed souvenirs. This aspect is all the more important as those goods are offered to a very wide range - relatives and friends. Furthermore, considering the amount of souvenirs involved, they had better be cheap.

However, beyond price, the other difference between those two clienteles is the cultural reference of the souvenirs. For foreigners, what matters most is the national identity of their purchases: they want to buy something from Myanmar. For locals, the differentiation level is not national, but regional: their gifts have to feature a more local identity, to visibly come from Inle, or, at least, Shan State. According to shops owners, the best-sellers are Shan trousers, Shan shirts and shoulder bags, often embroidered with a leg-rowing fisherman – the symbol of Inle Lake – or a Shan flag.

As for the success of foreign-made, modern-looking souvenirs, it brings into play the specificities and the different expectations of Asian tourism. As in China (Chan 2009), modernity is a potent attraction factor; modernity, change, novelty are important. In this context, modern gifts made of colorful plastic are no less attractive than “authentic”, weathered ones as they inscribe the traveler into modernity.

The latter may be symbolized not only by the new-looking aspect of the items, but also by their non-Burmese design. Indeed, as in Cambodia (Winter 2009), China- or Thailand-made generic souvenirs without any local feature are very popular. Instead of pointing to a local or national context (such as Shan State or Myanmar), those items rather point to a wider Asian identity, to a regional belonging, hence exceeding the Myanmar scale and anchoring the country, and hence the recipient into wider scales.

Those massive shops specifically targeting locals have grown numerous – only two in the late 1990s, seven now (Ko Thar Gyi, passenger boat broker in Lwe Nyein, oral communication) – and more and more massive in size: Sein Thamadi moved into a new, 400 square-meter building (Figure 7), while Sein Ngwe Shan features several buildings connected by bridges.
Figure 7. Sein Thamadi shop, at Heyar Ywama: a shopping mall for pilgrims? Source: the author.

From Package Tour to Romantic Getaway: Sketch of the Evolutionary Sociology of Domestic Tourists in Myanmar

Only Pagodas? Motivations behind Itinerancies

Foreigners and domestic tourists have widely different touristic expectations, and hence practices. In Southern Shan State, 35% of foreigners declare they seek a cultural experience, 25% relaxation and 24% authenticity, (Valentin 2014), while 64% of Myanmar nationals declare that they engage in a pilgrimage/spiritual merit trip (ibid.). However, more intentions can be found. In the autumn, locals are mainly drawn to Southern Shan State by the religious festivals in Inle and Taunggyi, but in the dry season, weather comes on top of piety. Located at 1000 meters, the Shan plateau is much cooler than the drought-stricken lowlands. Generally, “the name Inle connotes a trip of great pleasure” (Thein Htoo 2015, p. 49), it is associated with quality of life, cool air, slow pace, and romanticism.
Figure 8. Inle Lake for foreigners: diversity of highlights and activities centered on the local culture. Source: Adapted from travel agencies’ flyers and the author’s field survey.
Figure 9. Inle Lake for domestic tourists: a tour focused on pagodas and shopping. Source: Adapted from travel agencies’ flyers and the author’s field survey.
Another factor that attracts people is sometimes under-estimated in the perception of domestic tourism: exoticism (Sacareau 2006). Indeed, one often takes for granted that a family from Yangon, the country’s economic capital city, feels comfortable in the Shan hills. However, our interviews revealed that many visitors can feel disoriented in this area. Several families shared their excitement in seeing so many mountains and having the opportunity to ride a boat. The local population is also a source of astonishment; several interviewees commented about “the local people’s strange accent we can’t understand”, gaped at the leg-rowing fishermen and floating gardens, while another one lamented there is “no mountain, no hill tribes” in Yangon. Visitors were aware that they were visiting a place different from home, and several even felt “like in a different country”.

In this way, they are no less curious than foreigners. Many go and visit the shops in Heyar Ywama where Padaung “long-neck” women weave and pose for the cameras. They pose with traditionally-dressed people they meet, and sometimes even borrow a blouse to dress like them for a picture (Figure 10). They may be as curious as foreigners, but it is not expressed in the same way. While the foreigners take pictures of the local populations as “outsiders”, Myanmar tourists appropriate these local identities, slip into the role of the “local” and make it visible through pictures, which plays a key role in providing evidence of their itinerancies on social media.

![Figure 10. Two young ladies from Yangon posing in Lahu dress on a Facebook post (left) and with an old Pa-O woman in Inle region (right). Source: the author.](image-url)
Domestic Visitors at a Glance

Myanmar researchers or consultancy companies have cast a light on the original average profile of domestic tourists. First, while foreigners have a balanced gender distribution and a rather high average age, domestic visitors are mainly women: in Southern Shan State, 55% of them are women; they are also mainly young: 53% are less than 35 years old, versus 36% for foreigners (Valentin 2014).

From a spatial point of view, one can notice that although a proximity logic dominates, some visitors can come from far away. In 2012, 43% of Bago visitors came from Yangon division, 22% from Bago division, and 12% from Ayeyarwaddy division, i.e. 77% from the immediate surroundings, with 23% of people coming from the rest of the country (Khin Khin Moe 2012). Similarly, Thein Htoo (2015) found that 35% of visitors in Southern Shan State were not from Shan State, and we assume that during festival time, the proportion of outsiders is even higher.

Lastly, it appears that most Burmese tourists are repeaters: only 40% of local visitors to Bago region are first-timers (Khin Khin Moe 2012). In Valentin’s (2014) and Thein Htoo’s (2015) surveys in Southern Shan State, the proportion is 45% and 46% respectively; in Bagan, it amounts to 48% (Soe Tint 2007). While foreigners’ concern is to find new, original destinations, locals rather seem more interested in paying homage to the few main pagodas in the country, whether they have already been there or not: the spiritual value of the visit widely outweighs the lack of novelty. Such revisits might also show that they do not hesitate to embark on a trip, but prefer to remain within a certain range of places they have already visited, and where alterity is easier to cope with.

However, this very general profile should not hide the specificities and dynamics. The profile and practices of customers have changed quite profoundly these last few decades, with three main types of travel that are not exclusive. They rather cumulate, resulting in different practices in the same place.
The “Ideal Type” of Domestic Tourism: Proximity Pilgrimages

The oldest form is the practice described by J.G. Scott (1882), a family-centered voyage, undertaken with traditional, slow means of transportation such as ox carts and, nowadays, motorbikes and tractors. It has a limited, regionally only spatial extent, but numerically speaking, it is a massive phenomenon. In March 2015, for the Pindaya Pagoda festival – whose magnitude is essentially regional – roads were jammed for a week with carts, pick-ups, and trucks gathered by a family or a village. Most of them came from Southern Shan State, having left for two or three days and slowly headed to Pindaya, sleeping out in the open or in monasteries, praying in the pagoda, and going shopping at the temporary market.

Travel Agencies and their Tours: Early Days and New Features

A more modern form emerged in the late 1970s: commercial pilgrimage tours, organized by specialized travel agencies. According to U Than Htay, a pioneer in the industry and Chairman of the DPTOA, it was initiated by some Yangon employers who organized trips for their staff; in the early 1980s, a few of them opened fully-fledged travel agencies in town. Nowadays there are purportedly 30 to 40 main ones, running year-round and chartering their own buses, and several hundred smaller offices that resell packages or run seasonally. Currently, travel agencies number approximately 650 nationwide, mostly in Yangon.

Those stakeholders have played a key role in the development of domestic tourism in Myanmar. Indeed, until the early 2010s, phones – let even mobile phones – were scarce; booking a bus, a train ticket or a hotel room was a challenge; and transportation was slow and notoriously unreliable. Therefore, preparing a long trip through the country, involving nights in different places and transportation between several towns was extremely complicated. In such a context, all-inclusive packages could save much struggle. The passengers kept the same bus and the same crew for the whole trip, creating a familiar environment that helped when dealing with new atmospheres. They were dropped in guesthouses or monasteries arranged beforehand, and ate in restaurants deemed good. In other words, the travel agency could flatten out all the uncertainties and all the struggles of travel, opening up Myanmar territory to its inhabitants. Even though data are missing, DPTOA as well as
local hoteliers and monastery abbots, confirm that package tours remained the dominant way of travelling within Myanmar until 2010. The emergence of these travel agencies has been a key stage of domestic tourism, which transformed from innate, untold, spontaneous itinerancies to a coherent sector, a market organized by a network of stakeholders, structured into an association and more visible.

However, since 2009-2010, the opening of the country, its insertion into globalization and the increasing standards of life have transformed customers’ expectations. According to Sein Win Travel Company’s manager, pilgrims have grown more demanding, and accommodation in monasteries has lost popularity because of its constraints: lack of privacy, long queues for toilets, and the cumbersome luggage of blankets. Agencies had to adapt. Until 2010, Sein Win Company offered a four-day Southern Shan State tour for 35,000 Kyats/person (USD 26), with accommodation in monasteries and meals cooked by the crew. Between 2010 and 2012, they added a new offer: 70,000 Kyats/person (USD 52) with accommodation in cheap motels and meals prepared by the crew. Since 2012, they have given up on the monastery-only package, kept the motel formula, and added a new one: 150,000 Kyats/person (USD 111), with accommodation in simple hotels and meals in restaurants.

Clientele has also changed. According to Shwe Kyay Si Travel Agency’s owner, tours used to be booked mainly by extended families. In the last few years, customers have been quite often urban youth, travelling in couples or with friends, and for whom having a “nice time” is at least as important as the religious experience. The secularization of practices noted by Singh (2009) is on its way within Myanmar. These youth reportedly have a more casual approach to religion, and even prefer the guide provides fewer religious explanations. Quite paradoxically, it appears that some young couples use pilgrimages as a socially-admitted pretext for a romantic getaway, or even for a night together. Buses en route to pagodas may therefore be an unexpected space of freedom, and religion may be a useful justification for more leisure-oriented practices.

Even itineraries have to adapt to the new expectations: “tour leaders need to mention that they will finish the trip at a beach or a waterfall… It will attract more people, because pagodas only will be boring… especially for young people” (Khin Nandar, tour guide, written communication). Now, pagodas
Domestic Tourism and its spatiality in Myanmar

are considered as one point of interest among other, more hedonistic ones. For instance, according to Shwe Kyay Si Travel Agency’s owner, the trip to Kyaihtiyoe’s famous “Golden Rock” has significantly changed. On the way back to Yangon, instead of stopping in Bago to visit pagodas, visitors now stop in Sein Le Tin Park, where they can enjoy waterfalls and an amusement park. Karen State is also gaining popularity, not only because of the improved security situation, but also thanks to its numerous waterfalls, where people “pray for three minutes and play for three hours” (Ko Min Marn Kha, oral communication).

Our interviews also emphasized that package tours are initiatory journeys, a stepping stone towards independent travel. According to Shwe Oe Si Travel Agency’s manager, the spatial, touristic capital of travelers is so deeply shaped by their experiences of organized tours that even when travelling by themselves, they very often stick to the same routes, stops and hotels as buses. This learning and discovery process of independent, more touristic, leisure-oriented practices through religious package tours was also highlighted in India by Sacareau (2015).

The Affirmation of Independent Travel

The latest form of travel is long-distance, but independent voyage. It has probably existed for a long time, but its recent boom was made possible by the democratization of automobiles since 2010. It features two main components: the first one is a variant of the “historical” form of pilgrimage described above, with light trucks chartered by ten to twenty people (extended family, neighborhood community). The difference, in this case, is the spatial extent: with better roads and cheaper vehicles, the mobility potential has increased. Now, light trucks from Yangon, Mon or Ayeyarwaddy States, and Magway or Mandalay divisions ply Shan State roads. According to our enumerations in April - May 2016, 47% of pilgrims travelled in such collective vehicles.

The second component is individual cars, carrying a single nuclear family or a group of four to six friends only. While they used to be marginal, they now account for a significant part of vacationers. According to our estimates, 30% of visitors Inle Lake travelled this way. For them, travel is a family (or friends) experience, a moment of leisure and even romance. Therefore, those small groups of families and friends now travel quite differently.
For instance, instead of sharing the cost with other visitors, they systematically privatize boats to tour Inle Lake, because they value their privacy, their freedom, and because they want to manage their time (especially for shopping) as they wish. Nowadays, 60% of boats are reportedly privatized, versus 40% in 2010 (Ko Thar Gyi, passenger boat broker, oral communication).

When sailing, these well-off youths or families have distinctive attitudes. Instead of sitting on a mat on the floor, they often use wooden seats, exactly as foreigners do (Figure 11, left). Moreover, while very few people in Myanmar can swim and so carefully sit still on a boat so as to not fall out, some of those “new” travelers boast daring attitudes. They may stand to make selfies or lean forward over the boat (Figure 11, right). Such behaviors show their capacity to deal in a fluid and seamless way with a new environment.

![Figure 11. The new travelling codes of domestic tourists on Inle Lake. Source: the author.](image)

The other change has to do with accommodation preferences. Indeed, monasteries, with their cold and noisy prayer halls that may accommodate 500 people, are losing popularity to homestays, which offer more privacy. The demand is rising quickly: in Lwe Nyein village, the boatman Ko Soe Min hosted 14 groups of pilgrims in 2015… and 30 for January-April 2016 alone. Within homestays themselves, privacy is in high demand. According to U San Htun, the village leader, 10 to 15% of pilgrims even ask for private rooms, or curtain-partitioned dormitories for their families.

Moreover, another major change is the recent arrival of Myanmar tourists into foreigner-aimed spaces, i.e. hotels. Indeed, in Myanmar, distinction has always been stark between guesthouses – with basic comfort and licences
that only allow them to cater to locals – and hotels, explicitly targeting foreigners. However, in the last few years, one could notice an increasing porosity between both, and an “integration” (Peyvel 2009) of domestic and international tourism spaces. In some middle-range hotels, domestic visitors can amount to 80% of the clientele at festival times (Sandi Aung Cho, hotel owner, oral communication). They can afford 30-40,000 Kyat-rooms (USD 24-32), and some hoteliers even confessed that they sometimes charge them more than foreigners. “During holiday time, they spend carelessly; whatever the price of the room, they will pay” (hotel owner, anonymity requested). High-end hotels are no exception, especially during the water festival in April, which is the low season for foreigners and the peak season for locals. The luxurious Ananta Hotel, and the iconic Pristine Lotus Resort, where rooms cost more than USD 100 a night, had 80% of their rooms booked by locals – mainly couples – in April 2016 (Hlaing Thet Aung and Alexis Savigny, hotel managers, oral communications). The Pristine Lotus marketing team even designed a romantic, all-inclusive package from Yangon demonstrating that domestic tourists are now increasingly included in marketing strategies.

Beyond merely spatial integration, locals and foreigners’ practices in hotels may also converge, depending on the customers’ profiles. On the one hand, in low- or middle-range hotels, Burmese customers still display behaviors borrowed from travel in the older days: a five or six-person family, laden with bundles of luggage, sometimes rents only one room and shares the bed or sleeps on the ground. On the other hand, higher-range hotels see more affluent customers, most often young, educated couples, who are accustomed to travel and hotel habitus: those people are keener on spending time in the hotel, enjoying the romance of the atmosphere by the swimming pool or in the lobby, often asking for Western-style meals, and usually blending in with the foreign clientele.

All these elements show that some visitors have reformulated their position towards the territory and the sacred/profane dialectic. Through their accommodation and transportation choices, and through the new predominance of image and selfies, we can assume that the Self has gained importance. Beside (or beyond?) religion, being an itinerant is now also a way to quench one’s curiosity; to have a romantic getaway; to spoil oneself with souvenirs; to use space and landscapes (including the sacred ones) as a background for self-staging. This new space, given to the Self and hedonism, may show that
the “traditional pilgrimage” has hybridized with more “touristic” elements, sometimes borrowed from Western habitus, and reformulated to form original practices.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to outline domestic tourism in Southern Shan State and, to a certain extent, in Myanmar. It appears that domestic tourism is a very specific form of tourism, very distinct from international tourism. Its temporality is aligned with religious calendar, but also with public holidays and climate differentials between lowlands and highlands. It has its own spatial highlights: pagodas, religious festival markets, monasteries and guest houses, specific boat jetties, and dedicated souvenir shops. It features its own specific network of stakeholders. The government opening-up policy has been a dramatic, though unintended, driving power and travel agencies have had a pivotal role in the development of domestic itineraries and the initiation of Burmese people to tourism. In addition, local entrepreneurs, boat drivers, souvenir sellers and hawkers have managed to carve out their share.

Domestic tourism in Myanmar features its own set of practices and behaviors quite close to the “pray, pay and play” already highlighted by Graburn (1983), but in swift evolution. Ever-shorter prayer halts in pagodas, ever-longer shopping sessions. New activities in new environments, including bathing in lakes, at waterfalls, or even beaching. All in all, domestic tourism appears as a relevant lens to envision the spectacular transition of the country. Whole swathes of the society have gained better access to mobility and information, and reformulated their relation to time, space, work, and religion. Even though religion remains an important motivation for travel, other purposes have gained some legitimacy. Although tourism often remains a collective experience, it is also a frame within which individuals assert themselves, where Self and hedonism can be deployed. Therefore, it appears that the opening of the country has accelerated the transition from “religious tourism” to “touristic tourism”.

Another analogy with the country’s transition is its heterogeneity. Domestic tourism is neither linear nor uniform: it is a multi-layered process. While some former practices remain - with some minor alterations - radically new habits have appeared, such as romantic getaways. In between there is a range of
configurations, with various levels of religiosity, leisure and independence, depending on the “touristic capitals” of the visitors. It must be noted that these attitudes are not exclusive. Travelers can exhibit very different behaviors depending on the context and the intentionality, for example, a couple can embark on a pilgrimage tour to have their union under the best auspices, then take their private car and go to the beach to relax.

Although it might be enticing to conclude that the new Myanmar tourism models are converging towards a Western model, field reality shows it would be too simplistic. Although domestic itineraries, in their materiality, seem to be based on foreigners’ (package tours, hotels, interest in beaches, shopping), they are implemented in a distinctive way. When domestic visitors go to Inle Lake, they have very specific travel patterns, to the extent of generating a dual touristic system and stakeholder network. Therefore, we can conclude that the globalization of domestic tourism in Myanmar does not generate a mere model transfer: local travelers do some “bricolage” (Singh 2009), hybridize some global practices, re-appropriate them, and reformulate them with their local identities and values.

Notes

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Domestic Tourism and its spatiality in Myanmar


