

The Role of Thai Tourism In Promoting Thai-Vietnamese Relations¹

Thuc Doan Dang Tran²

Abstract

This article argues that tourism has contributed greatly to the better relationship between Thailand and Vietnam, especially people-to-people relations. The findings show that the history of the long-standing relationship between Vietnam and Thailand has witnessed many ups and downs. In some periods, the relationship was very complicated and was governed by prejudices and suspicions. However, since the diplomatic relationship between the two countries was officially established on August 6, 1976, the Thai-Vietnamese relationship has improved significantly. A better understanding between the people of the two nations has contributed to better diplomatic relations. This is partly due to the development of Thai tourism in the Vietnam market. Thai tourism helps build a strong and beautiful image for the country. The study also reveals the contribution of Thai tourism to the development of the Thai-Vietnamese relationship and its role in changing attitudes and understandings of Vietnamese tourists toward Thailand

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² MA Student, Thai Studies, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

Introduction

Thailand and Vietnam have had long and rich relations in the regional and international arena. Historically, the relations between the two nations have witnessed many different statuses. Thailand and Vietnam used to stand on opposite sides, if one were to imply they used to see each other as enemies concerning many problems in the past. Nevertheless, a friendship has rapidly grown in time.

Thailand and Vietnam officially established diplomatic relations in 1976 and, it can be said, the relationship has flourished by leaps and bounds since the Vietnamese government opened a policy for renovation of the country called “Đổi Mới”. Thai-Vietnamese relations have moved to a different level, and never before have they been in such a good shape as they are today.

Thai-Vietnamese relations have been improving day by day through many concrete factors. A number of agreements and memoranda of understanding between the two nations have been signed and implemented – with fruitful results over the past 36 years. After Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1995, this relationship has increasingly consolidated and developed; the threads that weave the rich relations between the two countries are not only the outcome of a long history of diplomatic relations, but also of their similarity in terms of geography, tradition and culture.

Generally, the relationship has been developed and mainly based on government-to-government (G-G) relations, while people-to-people (P-P) relations have not been seen much. In recent years, some activities were implemented to promote P-P relations of Thailand and Vietnam; for example, the inauguration of the Thailand-Vietnam Friendship Village in the Northeastern province of Nakhon Phanom in February 2004 and the establishment of the “Hội Hữu Nghị Việt-Thái” (Thailand-Vietnam Friendship Association) in Ho Chi Minh City – two events of particular significance for Thai-Vietnamese relations which should be considered as a concrete platform for both governments to launch more projects for promoting people-to-people relations.

Additionally, ASEAN is in the preparation process for the ASEAN Community in 2015, with all members of ASEAN countries

moving closer together to learn about each other, this, of course, includes Thailand and Vietnam. Raising awareness among people towards their neighbors is a step to move forward the ideals of the ASEAN Community. Apart from learning about each other in various aspects and by different channels, information and experience through tourism can provide a good channel towards an increased understanding of each other.

It can be noticed that the tourism industry plays a major role in the economic and social development of the Kingdom of Thailand, with a continuous number of tourists taking advantage of the various destinations and products the Kingdom has to offer. The number of foreign visitors to Thailand has steadily increased over the last fifty years. Additionally, tourism policies in Thailand promote not only its own destinations for Thai citizens, but also for visitors from other countries in the world, especially from neighboring countries including Vietnam. Thailand has built a strong base for tourism development in the Vietnamese market in general, which has been instrumental in upholding the relations between Thailand and Vietnam and thus leading to a better position, especially in terms of people-to-people relations.

Together with awareness of the important role of people-to-people relations in enhancing bilateral cooperation and forging a relationship of mutual trust and understanding between the two countries and peoples, Thai tourism can also be considered as a new channel to promote the Thai-Vietnamese relationship.

Based on a review of academic documents, Thai-Vietnamese relations are not a novel topic for scholars to research. However, most of the works have focused on G-G relations and – apart from some research works written about overseas Vietnamese (Việt Kiều)³ in Thailand – few have probed into P-P relations between the two nations. This research will provide a new perspective on this relationship, especially concerning the attitude of the Vietnamese towards Thailand in the tourism dimension.

³ Việt Kiều is a term used to call Vietnamese who live in overseas countries. This term is not applied to Vietnamese who travel abroad for different purposes such as education, work or medical treatments.

Traditionally, when one mentions international diplomatic relations most people think about them on a macro level based on G-G relations. However, few notice that P-P relations are also a critical factor in determining the sustainability of the relationship between two countries. Paying attention to Thai-Vietnamese relations on the aspect of people-to-people contacts, this article will use tourism as a key factor to analyze the attitudes of Vietnamese towards Thailand, and investigate the extent to which tourism contributes to the development of their relationship.

Long-standing diplomatic G-G relations bring about a strong development of the tourism industry, and together with progress in a new period, it is worth delving into the research of people-to-people relations as a result of this development. As noticed, government-to-government relations are important but temporary, whereas people-to-people relations are vital since governments come and go but people remain and help develop long lasting international relations.

The Contribution of Thai Tourism in Promoting Thai-Vietnamese Relations

This part includes two main sections. Changing attitudes of Vietnamese tourists toward Thailand and their understanding of Thailand before and after their visit to Thailand will be discussed in the first part and the roles of Thai tourism in promoting Thai-Vietnamese relations are also investigated in the second section.

Changes in Vietnamese Attitudes Toward Thailand

There are many academic works dealing with Thai-Vietnamese relations, but most of them have focused on diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Thailand in different historical periods. Moreover, there are very few works dealing with people-to-people relations, apart from some research works about overseas Vietnamese (Việt Kiều) in Thailand. People-to-people relations will enhance bilateral cooperation, mutual trust and understanding between the two countries. A study of the role of Thai tourism in promoting Thai-Vietnamese relations, especially in changing the attitudes of

Vietnamese tourists toward Thailand can also be considered as a concrete factor to show that Thai tourism can contribute to the development of the Thai-Vietnamese relationship. This section will mainly employ data collected from fieldwork in Vietnam during September and October 2012 to examine the changing attitudes of Vietnamese tourists before and after their visit to Thailand.

This part of the article tries to study Vietnamese understanding of Thailand. More importantly, it also seeks to analyze the available materials to explain the factors and to develop a convincing explanation for the general understanding and attitudes of the Vietnamese towards Thailand.

It can be noticed that the popularity of Thai tourism is increasing within the ASEAN region, including Vietnam. With this increase, the older generation and younger consumer markets are also significantly growing. Moreover, the popularity of Thai tourism in the Vietnamese market has created a positive effect in changing attitudes of Vietnamese tourists toward Thailand.

The relationship between Vietnam and Thailand has significantly improved from the past to the present. Due to wartime conditions in Vietnam and many external factors, the relations between the two nations were decided at the State level. People of both nations had no chance to study, exchange and understand about their neighboring country. With economic development after the reform in 1986 in Vietnam and a better diplomatic relationship, Thailand started to put the first step to promote Thai tourism in the Vietnamese market. Hence, with the improvement of Thai tourism in Vietnam, Vietnamese people have at least one more channel to know about Thailand. That is through Thai tourism. With its development and popularity in Vietnam, Thai tourism is a very useful tool for bringing information about Thailand and Thai tourism to the Vietnamese people. More importantly, it also provides a significant change in the understanding and attitudes of Vietnamese people toward Thailand including changing attitude from negative to positive and changing viewpoint from foe to friend.

General background of informants

As shown from the data collection, the percentage of Vietnamese travelers under 25 years old is 37% and from age 25 to 35 years old is 31%. The rest is 15% (35 to 50 years old) and 17% (over 50 years old). The dominant percentage of younger travelers can also be understood in another aspect that the Vietnamese young generation has started to have an interest in Thailand, at least in terms of tourism. This figure seems to have something slightly different with the older generation who lived in the period of Vietnam War. However, 17% of the people at the age of over 50 can also be counted as a good signal for the change in mind of the older generation towards Thailand in this modern era.

| Age of informants | Percentage | | |
|--------------------|------------|--------|--------|
| | Female | Male | Total |
| Under 25 years old | 28.00% | 9.00% | 37.00% |
| 25 to 35 years old | 22.00% | 9.00% | 31.00% |
| 35 to 50 years old | 6.00% | 9.00% | 15.00% |
| Over 50 years old | 7.00% | 10.00% | 17.00% |

Additionally, 73 percent of informants coming to Thailand are first time travelers. 13% of this number are second time visitors and 10 percent are third time visitors. Perceptions, feedback and attitudes towards Thailand before and after coming to this country will be explored later. It is also evident that Thai tourism plays an important role in promoting the national images to the Vietnamese.

| Number of visits to Thailand | Percentage | | |
|------------------------------|------------|--------|--------|
| | Female | Male | Total |
| First time | 47.00% | 26.00% | 73.00% |
| Second time | 8.00% | 5.00% | 13.00% |
| Third time | 5.00% | 5.00% | 10.00% |
| More than three times | 3.00% | 1.00% | 4.00% |

Changing attitude from negative to positive

Based on the data collection from Vietnamese tourists in Vietnam for two months in October and November, 2012, there are many elements showing that the understanding of Vietnamese tourists towards Thailand has changed in a positive way. This can be seen by the percentage that answered about how much they were impressed, how they feel and how they know about the Kingdom of Thailand, Thai culture and Thai people. Most informants, who were interviewed and given a questionnaire, gave a very good feedback on Thailand. It can be said that the dominant image of Thailand generated by tourism gave Vietnamese tourists a better understanding of Thailand.

As explained in the previous part, this article could not survey Vietnamese people on a large scale at the national level. So the results of data collection are only based on the Vietnamese tourists' attitudes, feelings and understandings of Thailand. They cannot be representatives of all Vietnamese people. However, their answers can be regarded as good examples of how Vietnamese understanding and attitudes can be changed by tourism.

Professor Hoang Khac Nam, teaching at the Faculty of International Relations of Vietnam National University and an expert on the diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Thailand, spent many years doing research on Thailand-Vietnam relations. To him, the attitudes and understandings of the Vietnamese toward Thailand have dramatically changed from negative to positive for both older generation (who lived during the Vietnam War and witnessed the unfriendly relationship between Vietnam and Thailand) and the younger generation (those who were born after war). This results from the contribution of the mass media in Vietnam. It can be said that Thai tourism is successful in refreshing the image of Thailand from the past to the present, from negative to positive and from dislike to like.⁴ Mrs. Le Viet Mong Thuy, a 54 years old tourist, who had experienced the last period of Vietnam War, further explained:

⁴ Personal interview with Prof. Hoang Khac Nam, teaching at the Faculty of International Relations, Vietnam National University, Hanoi on October 16, 2012 in University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam.

Living in the time of peace, I do not forget about the past war. However, Thailand is a special case. It can be said that our generation did not like Thailand, even hated this country because they did help the U.S. to invade Vietnam. Nevertheless, the diplomatic relations between two nations, especially after traveling to Thailand have helped me understand more about the country, culture and people of Thailand. I no longer see Thailand as a dangerous enemy as ever. The development of the country and the smile of Thai people created a nice impression in me. It is worth to call Thailand-a land of smiles.⁵

Better understanding of Thailand can also be confirmed through the image of the country. Most informants, when asked how they would think about Thailand and the dominant image of Thailand in their understanding, said it is a country for tourism. 87.74% of the interviewees agreed and shared the same opinion about Thai tourism. The rest of informants showed that they thought of Thailand as ideal place for work (3.77%), and for medical treatments (2.83%). The Vietnamese did not view Thailand as a suitable place for higher study, although, there are people saying that Thailand is a country for sex tourism. However, this attitude just appears in a very small number of informants. The good image of Thai tourism still makes the majority of Vietnamese tourists think of Thailand in a positive way.

It is interesting to note that as shown through the internet, newspapers and magazines, Vietnamese tourists have a strong impression of Thailand mainly on Thai tourism and Thai culture. As Professor Hoang Khac Nam further explains:

The Vietnamese today know more about Thailand. However, it is not really based on the activities of government-to-government. Moreover, people-to-people activities such as cultural exchange, educational exchange and tourism exchange can be seen as a major channel in connecting Vietnamese and

⁵ Focus group interview with Vietnamese tourists on March 25, 2013 in Bangkok, Thailand

Thai people. On the other hand, the main channels that have brought the Vietnamese to feel closer to Thailand in general and Thai people in particular are tourism and mass media.⁶

According to focus group interviews with Vietnamese tourists who traveled to Thailand on March 25, 2013, most of the interviewees said that they liked Thailand's tourist destinations and really enjoyed the short time that they traveled to this country.

It can be said that the attitudes of the Vietnamese have changed to be more positive in the present day. Before traveling to Thailand, the attitudes and understandings of Vietnamese tourists mainly were based on information from mass media, friends and relatives. However, after traveling to Thailand, they have more chance to experience this country by themselves. They have contact with the culture, cuisine and people of Thailand. They touch the Thai life by their own senses. There is nothing "right or wrong" about personal viewpoints. It is just about the different feelings of each individual. Their attitudes, feelings and understandings of Thailand can, to some extent, be regarded as essential evaluations of the Vietnamese towards Thailand as indicated in the scope of this research.

Moreover, the Vietnamese tourists began to open and explore in order to understand about their neighboring country. It can be said that the short way to connect people-to-people relation between two nations is culture.⁷ As shown in the following chart:

| Thailand has a very rich culture | Percentage |
|---|-------------------|
| Totally agree | 36.00% |
| Agree | 58.00% |
| Not sure | 4.00% |
| Disagree | 1.00% |
| Totally disagree | 1.00% |

⁶ Personal interview with Prof. Hoang Khac Nam, teaching at the Faculty of International Relations, Vietnam National University, Hanoi on October 16, 2012 in University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam.

⁷ Personal interview with Mrs. Natthakarn Sriyaphan, Consul, Royal Thai Consulate General on October 8, 2012 in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam.

Another positive feedback of Vietnamese tourists towards Thailand after traveling to this country is their satisfaction. This satisfaction can be seen in the finding that tourists agreed (52%) and totally agreed (28%) that traveling to Thailand is good value for their money.

| Travelling to Thailand is value for money | Percentage |
|--|-------------------|
| Totally agree | 28.00% |
| Agree | 52.00% |
| Not sure | 16.00% |
| Disagree | 3.00% |
| Totally disagree | 1.00% |

In addition, it is important to note that, after traveling to Thailand, 95% of Vietnamese tourists felt that they knew and understood more about the country and people of Thailand. Moreover, 36% of informants totally agreed and 59% agreed that they liked Thai culture, Thai people and Thailand more after their trips to the Kingdom of Thailand. Still, there are Vietnamese travelers who disagree (1%) and totally disagree (1%) that traveling to Thailand could help them know and understand more about Thailand. About 2% of visitors totally disagree that they admire Thai culture, Thai people and Thailand more after their trips. However, that figure is not worth considering in comparison with a large number of Vietnamese tourists who have good attitudes towards Thailand after their trips ended. As it is evident in the following charts:

| | Vietnamese know and understand more about Thailand and Thai people | Vietnamese love Thai culture, people and the country more |
|------------------|---|--|
| Totally agree | 40.00% | 36.00% |
| Agree | 55.00% | 59.00% |
| Not sure | 3.00% | 3.00% |
| Disagree | 1.00% | 0.00% |
| Totally disagree | 1.00% | 2.00% |

Last but not least, positive change in the attitude of the Vietnamese toward Thailand can be seen in their desire to go back to Thailand. Most Vietnamese tourists said that they would return to Thailand if given the opportunity. The figure of 89% is not a small number. The positive feedback of Vietnamese visitors after their journey to Thailand has brought a significant signal to the development of Thai tourism in Vietnam market, as well as the formulation of people-to-people relation.

Together with activities at the governmental level, the activities at the scale of people-to-people cooperation of both nations has also created a vital tie in building the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam. It is worth mentioning that Thai tourism can be regarded as a connecting bridge. As Professor Nguyen Tuong Lai emphasized:

Although the Vietnamese had biases against Thailand, but it can be said that Thai tourism has changed the attitude of the Vietnamese people toward Thailand gradually in positive way. In the 1970s, Vietnamese people never even thought that they would come to Thailand. However, nowadays, thanks to the traveling between two countries, the Vietnamese have a chance to visit and witness Thailand by themselves. It helps erase the negative attitudes in the past and develop better understanding and more positive attitude toward each other.⁸

Changing viewpoint from foes to friends

As discussed in the previous section, relations between Thailand and Vietnam which once broke down, Vietnamese people used to see Thailand as a foe. Time passed and social context changed. A new atmosphere has contributed to the development of relations between the two countries. As for the development of Thai tourism in Vietnam and its role in changing attitude of Vietnamese tourist toward Thailand, it can be said that Thai tourism has an impact to change the

⁸ Personal interview with Professor Nguyen Tuong Lai, teaching at the department of Thai studies, faculty of oriental studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam on January 17, 2013 in Bangkok, Thailand

viewpoint and perception of the Vietnamese toward Thailand, from foes to friends, from competitor to strategic partner.

Based on the fieldwork data, apart from Thai cuisine, culture and infrastructure, in the eyes of Vietnamese tourists, Thai people are very kind, enthusiastic and hospitable. Traveling to Thailand, staying in this country, tasting Thai cuisine, enjoying the life here and experiencing the surrounding atmosphere in the Kingdom has help created more close feelings and better understanding towards Thailand and Thai people. Almost 90% of the informants conclude that Thai people are friendly. As it is more evidently shown below:

| Thai people are very kind, enthusiastic and hospitable | Percentage | | |
|--|------------|--------|--------|
| | Female | Male | Total |
| Totally agree | 26.00% | 14.00% | 40.00% |
| Agree | 29.00% | 20.00% | 49.00% |
| Not sure | 4.00% | 2.00% | 6.00% |
| Disagree | 1.00% | 1.00% | 2.00% |
| Totally disagree | 3.00% | 0.00% | 3.00% |

The Vietnamese have better feelings and attitudes towards Thai people than what they had in the past. Through tourism, the Kingdom of Thailand is seen as lively and beautiful, and Thai people being warm and friendly in the eyes of Vietnamese tourists. Seeing Thailand by their own eyes, enjoying Thai food by their own dishes, feelings Thai culture by their own approach and touching Thai people by their own hearts, Vietnamese can experience more and understand more about this country and its people through their trips. The figure of 92 percent at Vietnamese tourists would like to return to Thailand in the future can imply that they see Thailand as a neighboring country and Thai people as their friends. The terms of “Thailand is a strategic base for U.S imperialism”, “Thailand is American’s backyard” or “Thailand is an enemy No. 2 of Vietnam after American” in the past does not seem to exist or has a direct impact on the thinking of

Vietnamese people anymore. From the focus group interviews with Vietnamese students in Bangkok and older generation Vietnamese tourists, it can be asserted that both the younger generation who live far from the war and the older generation who lived in the war period have the same attitude that at the present, they view Thailand as a neighboring friend and a partner in ASEAN more than an enemy need to be kept the distance away.⁹ As the explanation of Mrs. Phan Thi Kim Dung:

War has gone away long time ago. If we still sit in the memory of the past, we would hardly continue step forward to the beautiful future. On the other hand, the previous government and the present government are not the same. The Thai soldiers participated in the Vietnam War were not all Thai population at this time. Shaking hand and stepping forward together to the future will be the best choice for both of our nations.¹⁰

According to Professor Nguyen Tuong Lai:

If it is forced to forget, the Vietnamese perhaps could not forget the pain that they or their ancestor suffered during the war. If it is requested to forgive, they will have no right to forgive. It is about history. However, Thai tourism has brought something to the Vietnamese and heals the wounds that Thailand used to help America in the Vietnam War. Vietnamese people nowadays view Thailand as a developed country that they should follow and study it. Moreover, Vietnam views Thailand as an integral member under one roof of one family - ASEAN Community.¹¹

⁹ Focus group interview with Vietnamese tourists on March 25, 2013 in Bangkok, Thailand and focus group interview with Vietnamese students in Bangkok on November 16, 2012.

¹⁰ Focus group interview with Vietnamese tourists on March 25, 2013 in Bangkok, Thailand.

¹¹ Personal interview with Professor Nguyen Tuong Lai, teaching at the department of Thai Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam on January 17, 2013 in Bangkok, Thailand.

Sharing the same opinion, Professor Hoang Khac Nam pointed out:

Vietnam no longer sees Thailand as an enemy as it was in the past, or a competitor in the marketplace. Moreover, the Vietnamese people today have been looking at Thailand as a friend. We shake hands for the benefits of both nations and walk the same steps to move forward to ASEAN Community in the near future.”¹²

From interviews and questionnaire, it is indicated that Vietnamese tourists have a better understanding towards Thailand and Thai people after their trips to the Kingdom of Thailand. A better understanding by Vietnamese tourists can lead to better feelings as well as better attitudes towards Thailand. Hence, they think of each other more favorably. The relations of people also develop in a good way. From the battlefield to the marketplace, from foe to friend and from opposite combatant in war to comrade in developing era, Thailand and Vietnam have witnessed the most flourishing period of their relationship both at government and people level. As Mrs. Natthakarn Sriyaphan, Consul, Royal Thai Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh city revealed:

It is sure and fair to say that Thai tourism is a key channel to promote the images of Thailand in Vietnam. Tourism is a very important channel to help Vietnamese people know and understand more about Thailand, Thai culture and Thai people. Thai tourism has done very well its duty in tourism promotion. Moreover, with the aim of attracting Vietnamese tourists to Thailand, Thai tourism also pays attention to make Vietnamese tourists more comfortable and love Thailand more including

¹² Personal interview with Prof. Hoang Khac Nam, teaching at the Faculty of International Relations, Vietnam National University, Hanoi on October 16, 2012 in University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam.

removing negative images and building positive images for the nation.¹³

Role of Thai tourism in Promoting Thai-Vietnamese Relations ***Role of Thai tourism in promoting national images of Thailand***

As implemented in the 41st meeting, on April 20, 1979, the National Legislative Council acting as the Parliament approved and it was later announced in the special issue of the Government Gazette, Vol. 96, Section 72 on May 4, 1979, that the Tourist Organization of Thailand (former name of Tourism Authority of Thailand) would now be known as the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Its main objectives include: 1) promoting tourism and industrial tourism; 2) propagating Thailand's natural beauty, archaeological sites, antiquities, history, art, culture, sports, and evolution of technology to others for traveling; 3) providing convenience and safety to travelers; 4) promoting good understanding and friendliness between people and countries through travel; 5) initiating tourism development and evolving basic factors and facilitations to travelers.¹⁴ It can be noticed from No. 4 that from its very early establishment, TAT was assigned to promote good understanding and friendliness between people and countries through travel in general.

In accordance with that target, Thai tourism launched many activities in the Vietnam market to attract Vietnamese tourists to travel to Thailand as well as to make Thailand become a popular tourist destination in Vietnam. Advertisements to promote national images of Thailand can be seen through billboards on important roads in the main cities of Vietnam such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Da Nang. In addition, culture, tradition and the cuisine of Thailand have also been introduced to Vietnamese people in many occasions such as Thailand Cultural Day in March 2009 and 2010 in Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, World Food Festival in Ba Ria-Vung

¹³ Personal interview with Mrs. Natthakarn Sriyaphan, Consul, Royal Thai Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh city on October 8, 2012 in Vietnam.

¹⁴ Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). *The Golden Jubilee of the Tourism Authority of Thailand*. Bangkok: Special printing of TAT in occasion to celebrate 50 years of establishment, 2010.

Tau province in 2010 and Thai Night with different themes of each year like “Thainess” in 2009, “Loy Krathong” in 2010 and “Muay Thai” in 2011. Thai tourism has also promoted Thai dance as a cultural tradition to the Vietnamese in many occasions. For example, Hue Festival in Hue ancient city in 2008 and 2012, Ha Long tourism week in Quang Ninh province in 2011 and Mekong-Japan Cultural Tourism Fair in Can Tho City in 2009. These activities can be counted as good examples of Thai tourism in building images of Thailand in Vietnam.

As an organization, TAT, cooperating with many other Thai organizations such as Royal Thai Embassy in Hanoi, Royal Thai Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh city and Thai Trade Center (Department of Export Promotion, Ministry of Commerce), has worked hard to promote national images of Thailand to Vietnamese people. As Mrs. Natthakarn Sriyaphan explained:

Thai tourism did very well in its role in promoting the national images of the country, especially Thailand’s tourism image. Through activities to promote tourism image, Thai tourism tries to make the Vietnamese and foreigners staying in Vietnam know more about Thailand. More specifically, the Thai tourism has developed and built a positive picture in the heart of Vietnam tourists after so many political conflicts that happened and have been happening in Thailand...diplomatic relations is not only for the government-to-government level. However, the relations of its people can be seen as key element to make the relationship between the two countries better. Therefore, Thai tourism should be recorded and honored for its efforts in contributing a significant role in building good image for the country through its specific tourism activities, especially in bringing people of both nations to come closer to each other.¹⁵

¹⁵ Personal interview with Mrs. Natthakarn Sriyaphan, Consul, Royal Thai Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh city on October 8, 2012 in Vietnam.

The success of tourism has brought Thailand much recognition in Vietnam. The existence of TAT in Vietnam reflects that tourism has played a vital role in the development of Thailand including building positive images for the Kingdom. As shown in His Majesty the King's royal address to the executives and staff of TAT about the benefits that Thailand has received from promoting tourism: "All projects device many benefits: tourism promotion is most beneficial in promoting the country, it's history, culture, traditions, places of interest, people and food to name a few. The result is to promote Thailand to the world".¹⁶

The fact that Thai tourism has contributed to the national image of the country can be seen in the documentary film series titled "Amazing Thailand - Amazing Country" which was produced by TAT in cooperation with Ho Chi Minh Television (HTV) and TST tourist in December 2009. This short documentary film series broadcasted in HTV in many episodes. This documentary film does not directly promote tourism. Instead, the film series tried to give the Vietnamese a better overview of the country with its traditional culture, people and places where the crew had visited. Good relations between Vietnamese and Thai people are also mentioned in the film. In sum, it is not exaggerating to say that Thai tourism has done very well in bringing Thailand's national image to Vietnamese people.

Role of Thai tourism in developing Thai-Vietnamese relations

The "Amazing Thailand" theme gained worldwide recognition, including in the Vietnam market. It built up a very strong brand for Thailand as a destination that offers value-for-money trip, a unique culture, and a wide variety of experiences for travelers. This theme is complemented with "Thai smiles" to create a very warm image of the country to tourists from all over the world and to make the Kingdom a truly exceptional destination. Also, this campaign helped differentiate Thailand from other countries.

¹⁶ (TAT, 2010: 193). Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). 2010. The Golden Jubilee of the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Bangkok: Special printing of TAT in occasion to celebrate 50 years of establishment.

According to Professor Hoang Khac Nam: “Nowadays, Vietnamese people perceive Thailand as a friend in the ASEAN Community rather than a competitor like what happened in the past. The attitudes towards Thailand have changed in a more positive direction. Thai tourism is a very important factor in accelerating the cooperation among people of both nations.”¹⁷

There are many programs and activities in which Thai tourism has cooperated with agencies and organizations of Vietnam to promote tourism cooperation and the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam. Several agreements were assigned to enhance the development in terms of tourism cooperation between the two countries. It is worth mentioning an Agreement on Tourism and Cooperation between Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) signed in Hanoi, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on 16 March 1994.

The governments of Thailand and Vietnam have treated tourism as one of the most important fields of the State’s economy. They, therefore, have worked hand in hand to speed up tourism development. The latest MOU signed by TAT and VNAT was to enhance the international relation between the two countries on the occasion of one thousand years of Thăng Long-Hà Nội in 2010. At the meeting, TAT and VNAT agreed to accelerate the development of tourism and broaden the cooperation in bringing new areas for tourists of both countries.

In December, 2011, the delegation of People Committee of Hai Phong City, Vietnam, led by Deputy Governor of Hai Phong city, visited Thailand and had a meeting with the tourism business sector to discuss the cooperation between Thailand and Hai Phong City. In addition, they had a meeting with TAT in Bangkok. An interesting conclusion of this meeting was the agreement to facilitate a new direct flight between Hai Phong City and Bangkok city in order to welcome more tourists in the near future.

¹⁷ Personal interview with Professor Hoang Khac Nam, Lecturer at Vietnam National University, Hanoi on October 16, 2012.

It can be concluded that more co-operation, more tourism agreements, and more understanding between the two countries will create more chances for people of both nations to step forward to a better relationship. Through activities at both governmental and local level, Thai tourism plays an important role in accelerating the relationship of Thailand and Vietnam, particularly at the people to people level.

Role of Thai tourism in connecting people to people

Apart from the fact that Thai tourism still plays an important role in the Thai economy, it is also a key channel to advertise, to introduce and to bring the images of the country to the world. Thai tourism is a bridge to connect Thai culture with outsiders. Development of tourism is not just for economic purpose. It can also be understood that the development of tourism will bring a better national image to the outsider, especially the tourists.

There are many favorable conditions building to the development of people-to-people relations between Vietnam and Thailand. However, it cannot be denied that the development of Thai tourism has brought direct contact between the people of both nations. It has opened a new channel to advertise what is Thai to the Vietnamese. Moreover, data collected from interviews and questionnaire shows that Vietnamese tourists have very good attitudes towards Thailand after their travel to this country. Through tourism channels, Vietnamese tourists have the occasion to know and understand more about Thailand and Thai people. By using the gateway of tourism, Vietnamese travelers can directly approach Thai culture, Thai cuisine and Thai life. Thai tourism is like an invisible cord to connect the people of the two countries. Good feedback, positive attitudes, and better understanding by Vietnamese tourists towards Thailand found from data collection firmly indicate that Thai tourism has a positive contribution in bringing the image of Thailand to Vietnam and connecting the people of two countries.

Conclusions

Historically, the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam has witnessed many periods, both positive and negative. Additionally, it has experienced many conflicts and misunderstandings between the people of the two nations. Both Thai and Vietnamese people used to see each other with negative attitudes and feelings. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two countries has seen a better turn after the establishment of diplomatic relations on August 6, 1976. Soon after that, relations improved both at government-to-government and people-to-people levels. Hence, Thailand and Vietnam have cooperated in many areas including tourism.

Thai tourism, after officially coming to Vietnam in 2008, has had a significant development in promoting the tourism industry of Thailand, particularly the national images to Vietnamese people. Tourism development has widely promoted Thailand's images in Vietnam. Its popularity has gradually brought Thailand closer to the Vietnamese. It can be said that Thailand is successful in using tourism as a channel to promote its national image and accelerate its relations with Vietnam.

Advertisements of Thai tourism in Vietnamese press and mass media with various tourist attractions and cultural aspects, as well as Thai cultural activities carried out in Vietnam, not only promote positive Thai images, but also build up knowledge about Thailand and Thai culture for Vietnamese people. With impressions from sightseeing trips to Thailand, interaction with Thai culture and people, and information about the country provided by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Vietnamese attitudes towards Thailand have gradually changed in recent years.

On the other hand, through Thai tourism, Vietnamese attitudes towards Thailand and their understandings of Thailand have significant changed from negative to positive, from foe to friend and from competitor to neighbor. However, from the field observation and focus group interviews, it can be concluded that the changing attitudes mentioned in this study is just only in the group of middle class, educated tourists. It cannot be presented for the changing attitude of the Vietnamese people in the whole country. Moreover, the group of

interviewees is mostly from the younger generation and questionnaires were conducted with a very large number of Vietnamese tourists under 35 years old. Therefore, the changing attitudes of older generation are not positioned much in the research.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Thai tourism has done very well in its duty in promoting tourism. Thai tourism is a very important channel to help Vietnamese people know and understand more about Thailand, Thai culture and Thai people. Moreover, with the aim of attracting Vietnamese tourists to Thailand, Thai tourism also pays attention to provide Vietnamese tourists with better images about Thailand, including adjusting bad images and building beautiful images for the nation. Compared with other dimensions such as government cooperation and business cooperation, it can be clearly seen that tourism is more dominant than other aspects in terms of promoting a positive image of the country and accelerating the relationship of both nations.

More importantly, the study shows that the improvement of Thai-Vietnamese relations has benefited from the contribution of Thai tourism in Vietnam. Thai tourism has played a vital role in promoting national images of Thailand to Vietnamese people through many concrete activities both at government and people levels. Furthermore, it also contributes to the development of Thai-Vietnamese relations, especially in connecting people to people of both nations.

Professor Nguyen Tuong Lai, who has worked for more than 30 years on Thai Studies, confirmed that Thai tourism has done well in its role in the effort to eliminate the negative image and to build positive images for Thailand in Vietnam as well as to invite Vietnamese tourists travel to the Kingdom of Thailand.¹⁸ In other words, it can be said that Thai tourism provides the Vietnamese with a better understanding of Thailand and more positive attitudes towards Thai people.

¹⁸ Personal interview with Professor Nguyen Tuong Lai, teaching at the department of Thai studies, faculty of oriental studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam on January 17, 2013 in Bangkok, Thailand.