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Summary

This dissertation examines the manifold mobility dynamics and social transformations in which the development of domestic tourism in Thailand is embedded. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Chiang Khan, a small town in the Northeast of Thailand, which has only recently been 'discovered' as a popular destination for Thai tourists. Instead of reproducing traditional dichotomies of international/ domestic and western/ non-western tourism or tourism/ migration, the author analyses the entanglement of various mobilities and contextualizes them against the background of politicized urban-rural relations in contemporary Thailand.

The rise of domestic tourism is related to nostalgic longings for the countryside of Bangkok's middle and upper classes. They no longer imagine rural places such as Chiang Khan as underdeveloped hinterlands but romanticize them as lands before time. These idealizing projections and the critical judgements of the 'hosts' about their city-counterparts complicate narrow interpretations that examine tourism merely as a reflection of North - South power relations and global/ local clashes. They show that domestic touristic encounters are similarly shaped by power differences and constructions of the other.

Such 'we-they' distinctions between urban Bangkok and the rural provinces, especially of the Northeast (the Isan region), cannot be separated from the political conflict of the last decade between the 'red shirts' and the 'yellow shirts.' This ethnography therefore sheds light on an unequal country that seems to be divided between city and country in the struggle over social hierarchies, economic distributive justice and political power. It paints a picture of a country in transition in which the progress of urbanization and the dominance of the urban middle and upper classes are increasingly called into question.