

# Liminality & Festivities Facilitating Pandemic Fatigue:

## *Songkran and the Third Wave of COVID-19 Outbreak in Thailand*

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### Abstract

Asian countries were outstanding performers in preventing COVID-19 initially, but many suffered from a new wave of the outbreak in mid-2020. These countries sealed off their borders from the possible spread of the virus from outside. For more than one year, social distancing restrictions were applied and successfully kept the infection rates at a low level. Drawing on the initial findings of Chang et al. (2020) on the spread of the infectious disease intracity and intercity during festivals, this paper examines the outbreaks, with a probe into the case of *Songkran*, or the Water Festival of Thailand. The author found that pandemic fatigue coincided with the festivities. The liminality of the festival means relaxation of norms which breaks social distancing measures. This article attempts to explain the liminality of festivals facilitating pandemic fatigue and intensifying the spread of the disease throughout the country.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Pandemic Fatigue, Liminality, Festival, Social Distancing, Thailand

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## Introduction

A festival is an event commemorating the history of a nation-state, a religious event or an annual harvest in agrarian societies. Many New Year Days of these societies overlap with these (post-)harvest seasons. Celebration and cultural performances for religious or entertainment purposes are commonly seen during the festive period. Unfortunately, many of these celebratory events were cancelled during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, *Songkran* Day, which is better known as the Water Festival, is the New Year of Thailand. It has been fixed on April 23 for 15 calendar days each year. But the public holiday was “post-poned,” and not cancelled, with two substitution holidays offered later in July and September. But the two substitute days with a festive atmosphere, celebrating activities, rituals and traditions left them no more than two non-working, public holidays.

The author argues in this paper that festivals together with pandemic fatigue intensified the infection. Pandemic fatigue is ignorance of infection threats and loss of self-discipline in daily life about taking precautions against this infectious disease over a prolonged period of the pandemic. The behavior itself is seen as a demotivation to continue seeking health-care information and adopting protective measures, and even complacency and hopelessness over time (WHO, 2020). Based on the study on the risk of mobility and epidemics in Taiwan which revealed the possibility of long holidays enhancing the spread of the virus (Chang et al., 2020), this paper overviews the new wave of the COVID-19 outbreaks in mid-2021 and in particular, examines the case of *Songkran* Water Festival of Thailand. The findings fill the knowledge gap of how a festival triggers the mobility of people, festive liminality intensifies pandemic fatigue opening loopholes for worsening the outbreak.

## Literature Review

Existing literature on the liminality of festivals and pandemic fatigue is reviewed in this section. This paper is an attempt to explore some nature of festivity contributing to a less precautionous attitude to the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Liminality of Festivals*

Festivals are historical, religious, or special events in society; usually the events are held annually and some of them are public holidays. Many festivals last for one day or a short period, but the celebration period of some festivals may extend to several months. A New Year is the end of the calendar festival. For agricultural societies, many fall at the end of the harvest season. They are nationwide events that the whole country is involved in and celebrates. These festive activities consist of primarily outdoor activities, taking the form of formal rituals and informal celebrations.

Almost all festivals and related activities stem from domestic culture and heritage; artificially created carnivals seldom draw a critical mass to sustain the events. Several factors determine whether a festival or event can gather a critical mass, such as many artists and performances involved in the event as well as the festivities being held in a place which is easy to access and over a concentrated period (Hughes, 2001). Many modern-day festivals are used as a means to attract tourists. Even religious festivals are subsequently reduced to more for celebration. These festivities and performances feature tailor-made music, dances, and costumes, together with seasonal fruits and cuisines drawing mass spectators domestically and internationally which bring along business and public revenues. For example, one of the world’s largest events, the Rio de Janeiro Carnival in Brazil, is well-

known for its Samba Dance. About two million visitors participated in the event before the pandemic. Many international tourists take the chance to visit other places in the country which increases the return. In this regard, the author views the hybridity of the traditional festivals which consist of both ceremonial and celebration nature.

The traditional festival usually consists of ceremonies and rites which can be seen explicitly, but there should be something hidden behind the scenes (DaMatta, 1983). They are the elements of festivals which constitute part of the culture of a society which governs the social system, hierarchy, and norms. The culture serves as the dominant ideology determined by the dominant classes in a society who benefit from these social norms and order (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 1980). As such, festivals can be understood as the predominant elites' mechanism of social control (Daun e Lorena, 2019).

But most often, besides some formal rituals and ceremonies, there exist reverses of social roles and relaxation of norms during the celebration, in the performance (DaMatta, 1983). The "reversal" of social roles in rites can be in the form of participants or performers interchanging their gender, people playing the role of animals, and members of subordinate ethnic groups impersonating the character of the dominant ethnic group in the ritual drama (Miller, 2010). Interestingly, the contrast between the normalcy and chaos of festivities manifests when the former is widely seen as following the normative and secular order, but the latter consists of "a carnivalesque chaos," in which the two parts form "a juncture of home with the street, of the body with the soul, of desires hidden by repressions of order with the open and uninhibited manifestation of them" (DaMatta, 1983:165). These phenomena are not limited to the carnival which is a more artificially and commercially created event for fun and tourist attraction, but are also common in traditional festivals and New Year celebrations.

New Year is more than the turning point of calendar time. Many Asian countries developed their lunar calendar during ancient times following the orbit of the moon around the Earth when some agricultural periods were highlighted. Thus, these countries have their own New Year falling on a day not the same as the solar calendar widely used in Western countries though nowadays, most Asian countries celebrate both. The new year is a special festival consisting of all sorts of rites and ceremonies with an extended period of celebration. These include the aforementioned explicit or normal part as well as the rite of passage towards a reverse and extraordinary part where implicit meanings are embedded.

Many festivals involve travelling to a destination where some events and ceremonies take place. Homecoming is common but the symbolic meanings are more than just visiting relatives and left-behind family members for internal and international migrants. Religious festivals may consist of a pilgrimage to visit a sacred destination. Muslims believe that everyone should visit the holy city of Mecca at least once in their lifetime. However, a legacy trip is secular, for the common history and "personal connection with their heritage beyond a general relationship of collective ancestry" which is a search of family bloodlines for the reconnection with ancestors and the place of origin (McCain and Ray, 2003:713). As Arel-lano (2007) puts it the phenomenon "transformational pilgrimage," a pilgrimage still goes on, but the religious core is secularized into spiritualities of a symbol embedded in secular culture (Hanegraaff, 1998). For example, people go on the Inca trail pilgrimage to Machu

Picchu for the purification of their urban self and body by the nature and spirits of the ancient civilization there (Arellano, 2007). The journey, the place and the spiritual energy there lead the people to enter a liminal state (Turner, 1969) for the transformation.

Vogt (2003:202) uses Turner's (1969) "liminal period of betwixt and between" to explain the reversal of rites during the New Year of Zinacantan in Mexico where the indigenous Tzotzil Maya people reside. The reversal rites represent a transition of the year when the performers' roles are inversed, social order is revised in the drama demonstrating the "social structure is unwired, the rewired" for the New Year (Vogt, 2003:202). The bipolarities of these New Year ritual dramas using both formal and ordinary ritual as well as reversal and masquerading in participants' acts to demonstrate the contrast between the "sensory pole" (sexual, aggressive, and antisocial symbolism) and "ideological pole" (norms and values) of society (Vogt, 2003:208). The moment is a liminal period betwixt and between the old year and the new year when the system of order undergoes "unwiring, or unstructuring[...] and then rewiring or restructuring" (Vogt, 2003:209). However, the relaxing of social norms and reversing roles may only limited within this betwixt and between moment. Some may claim or desire a permanent change or want it to be an "escape valve" but a disorder may revert to order after the festival period, thus back to the status quo (Daun e Lorena, 2019).

Festivals and their ceremonies and ritual dramas represent the rite of passage from old to new, winter to spring. The process involves ongoing dialogue and negotiation between the host and guests, predominant groups, and ethnic minorities about their identities, new norms, as well as the future of inclusion and exclusion (Duffy, 2005). It provides a relaxing space for the suppressed and subordinate groups once a year to get rid of, or even reverse the normative order and roles. For all, the relaxation and chaos are also a space for brainstorming about what to do in the new year, how to make a new start, or in Turner's (1969) term, a moment before going back to the liminal or entering a liminal.

### ***Pandemic Fatigue***

Because of the coinciding of further outbreaks in the region after these festivals, this paper is an attempt to suggest the factors of festivals and likely, pandemic fatigue as an explanation. Fatigue is not limited to a physical response to ongoing actions; it can be psychological and mental exhaustion, as a reflex to the ongoing happenings and practices, in the form of negative emotions and more obviously, an escape and ignorance (D'aurora and Fimian, 1988). Pandemic fatigue emerges gradually during an extended period of high alert and precaution against the epidemic of an infectious disease. This is the behavioral fatigue of less or failing to compile the recommendations and restrictions to prevent from COVID-19 infection (Reicher and Drury, 2021). Behavioral fatigue is a "demotivation" to act (WHO, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic has been lasting for two years since its known outbreak in early 2020 it is one of the longest pandemics after the Spanish Flu in 1918. Healthcare workers and the general public, initially cautious and enthusiastic about protecting themselves against the disease, have become exhausted, and in physiology terms, a reduction from "acute to chronic stress" (Murphy, 2020:90). These protective activities are wearing a mask, applying hand sanitizers, avoiding crowded venues, and maintaining social distancing. A survey of five cities found that respondents who had generally been highly cautious during the early stage of the outbreak became less adhered to all risk-mitigation behaviors (MacIntyre et al., 2021). But Reicher and Drury (2021) distinguish "covidiot" who choose to

break the COVID-19 restrictions, from pandemic fatigue. Covidiot are usually students and young people who are blamed for their human psychological frailties who are too weak or immoral to consider the public health consequence of not adhering to these rules.

As time goes by, people become less sensitive to the threat and risk of COVID-19. The ignorance leads to the general public seeking a return to normalcy, or business as usual. According to the COM-B model (Michie, Watkins and West, 2014), individual motivation (automatic and reflective), individual capability (physical and psychological), and contextual opportunity (social and physical) are drivers and/or barriers of behavioral change. In the context of pandemic fatigue, reducing fear and rising opportunity cost contribute to the demotivation in adherence. First of all, people have become used to the disease over time leading to the weakening of initial fear. They get used to the happenings and begin to ignore the threat, or find no immediate harm upon violated some restrictions, hence resulting in complacency. “[E]ven the most outrageous circumstances become normal when experienced over long periods of time” (WHO, 2020:8).

Also, some rules are higher in compliance while others are lower. For example, some stringent behavioral regulations, especially those based on related laws remained high in compliance, such as the shutdown of premises, reducing business hours of restaurants and restrictions on the number of restaurant customers per table, and the like. But those asymptomatic individuals confirmed of infection, or those who have a contact history with infected persons who required self-isolation, are both low in adherence (Smith et al., 2021). There are also structural barriers for some vulnerable groups, including those living in overcrowded workers’ quarters, home offices not an option for the work types, and traveling from home to work relying on public transport (Reicher and Drury, 2021). Last but not least, rational choice suggests the calculation of cost and benefit before taking action. Here the preservation risk of infection reduces over time but the economic cost of lockdowns or self-isolation persist. For some people, the economic consequences of restrictions override the motive to adhere to the restrictions. “The balance may shift, and the perceived costs of the response may start to outweigh the perceived risks related to the virus” (WHO, 2020:7).

### ***Human Mobility and Epidemics***

During the outbreak of COVID-19, many countries in the Asia region rapidly sealed off their borders. Similar to many countries around the world road travel is highly reduced (Nurse and Dunning, 2020). Social distancing measures were applied within cities but not enough focused on physical, spatial, or geographical distancing (Hartt, 2020) since fewer restrictions have been enforced in intercity travel. Existing literature covers the process of epidemic transmission of various infectious diseases. Some of these studies develop a mathematical model to describe how the viruses are spread among humans (Anderson and May, 1992), while others are concerned about long-distance movement and its effects on the infection (Colizza et al., 2007). These movements, no doubt help to bring humans and the virus from place to place through contact. However, population movement varies in its frequency, speed, cause, direction and purpose. There has been a call for healthcare provision for nomadic populations, refugees, displaced persons, and migrant workers who are vulnerable during the mobility and settle down in new destinations. But these movers all bring pathogens to different places where there are less prepared (Aagaard-Hansen et

al., 2010). Also, the size of the mobile population matters; the higher the volume of mobility, the higher the probability of epidemic transmission (Brockmann and Helbing, 2013). In daily life, people contact each other in different locations within a city which facilitate the spread of viruses. Studies on mobility and epidemic focus more on intracity movement than intercity because the former was seven times more frequent than the latter (Chang et al., 2020). But intercity travel for business, sightseeing and relative-visit purpose also intensify the epidemic of infectious diseases. Loopholes in detecting the infected persons, especially those nonsyndromic, in the center of an outbreak and delaying the discovery of an outbreak or a cluster infection may result in a divergence of the epidemic to other cities and provinces. A study on the Wuhan City of China, the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, using the exponential growth model and stochastic model of human mobility estimated that 130 cities in China have over 50 percent chance of having an infection case imported from Wuhan in the first three weeks (Du et al., 2020). Wei et al. (2021) suggest a polycentric model of epidemics may help to explain the risk model of the aforementioned intercity mobility which is more interactive and concerns multiple locations, instead of the monocentric way of spreading disease from the epicenter city (Brockmann and Helbing, 2013).

The study of Chang et al. (2020) on people's mobility and the COVID-19 pandemic situation of Taiwan is enlightening. The research employed Facebook co-location data and Facebook movement data to build metapopulation models to identify the high-risk areas of disease spread. The study distinguishes between intracity and intercity movements. The study did not measure what was happening on the ground but proxied co-location to more interpersonal contacts. For locations with a higher risk of infection, such as the capital city and major city centers, "the disease transmission rate is expected to be higher." For intercity mobility, the mobility pattern is consistent with the infection pattern of Taiwan territory-wide. Well-connected cities spread the virus to other cities faster and wider. Although movement during a holiday is not the main purpose of the study of Chang et al. (2021), the study examined several popular Taiwanese festivals, namely Lunar New Year, Chung Yeung Festival and Dragon Boat Festival.

"When initial infections occurred in or around Lunar New Year, the speed of disease spread was enhanced. Because mobility during Ching Ming Festival and Dragon Boat Festival differed less from regular days and these two holidays only lasted four days, it only led to minor differences in the geographic range of infections" (Chang et al., 2021).

The risk estimation is based on the length of the holiday, for Lunar New Year it was ten days, but only four days for the rest two festivals (long weekends). Chang et al. (2020) suggested that travel restrictions could be an effective measure to curb the COVID-19 from spreading from the source of the outbreak to other cities. The findings of Chang et al. (2020) using Facebook's aggregated and anonymized movement and co-location data, provide a base for this research. In this research, the author focused on the risk areas of disease spread, people's mobility and assess the potential impacts, but not an investigation of the details of the mobility process in contributing to the spread of the virus. This paper attempts to fill the knowledge gap of how human mobility for festivals enhances the infection rate from a behavioral perspective.

## Methodology

This study uses documentary research with a minor section of key informant interviews. It starts with a review of the mid-2021 outbreak of COVID-19 in South Asia and the South-east Asia region. Daily infection date and news reporting on this wave of an outbreak are reviewed. The chronology of outbreaks and festivities is briefly examined to draw a whole picture of the pandemic in the region. It then narrows down to investigate the critical event of *Songkran* Festival of Thailand. *Songkran* is the New Year of Thailand which is also known as the Water Festival. Similar New Years in the same period based on the lunar calendar are found in Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. *Songkran* of Thailand was chosen for this study because it coincided with the third wave of COVID-19 in the country and also the Thai government's inconsistent approaches to the restrictions on *Songkran* Festival in 2020 and 2021 demonstrating not the same result in the spread of the infectious disease.

The case of the *Songkran* Festival in 2021 amid another wave of COVID-19 outbreak is identified as a critical event. The purpose of this research is not to blame the festivals for triggering or at least worsening another wave of COVID-19 in the whole region for which a survey may be more suitable to draw this correlation. Rather, the author aimed to look at the details of the process, how the festival, its nature (liminality), and celebratory activities contributed to pandemic fatigue, which subsequently facilitated the spread of the disease geographically. The consequence was an immediate rise in the daily infection rate after the festival. As such, the case study method was an appropriate tool for this study. The in-depth examination of a particular event helps to extract the complexity of the process and relationship which also catches the whole process that happened over an extended period (Lichtman, 2014). News on Thai English newspaper websites related to *Songkran* and government announcements are reviewed; the period covers March to May 2021, one month before and after the festival.

The first infected case was detected in January 2020. The infection gradually triggered the first wave of outbreak in March to May 2020 which was caused by a gathering for a sports event at a stadium in Bangkok. The second wave was around December 2020 to March 2021, happening outside the capital city but in Samut Sakhon among migrant workers. The third wave originated at nightlife venues of Thong Lo District in Bangkok, lasting from April to May 2021, throughout the post-*Songkran* period (Kunno et al., 2021). Regardless of the complete cancellation of the *Songkran* Festival and all celebrating events in 2020 (Rocha, Pelayo and Sammatid, 2021), the public holiday usually April 13-15 annually, was spread over two shorter periods which put the infection situation under control, the government allowed the *Songkran* holiday to continue without official celebration (Phoonphongphiphat, 2021). The daily new cases rose from hundreds before *Songkran* to 1,335 cases on April 14, 2021, just a day after the Thai New Year (CNA, 2021). The number of new cases peaked at 2,839 by April 24, 2021 (Rocha, Pelayo and Sammatid, 2021). The following graph shows the rapid rise in infection cases in mid-2021 during the third wave of the outbreak in Thailand, with the *Songkran* Festival (April 13-15) taken into account (Figure 1).

With the contrast in government measures on *Songkran* in 2020 and 2021 as well as the recorded post-festival increase in new cases, it is worthwhile to investigate the details of the infection situation during the third wave of the outbreak and explore its connection to socio-cultural factors of the festival.

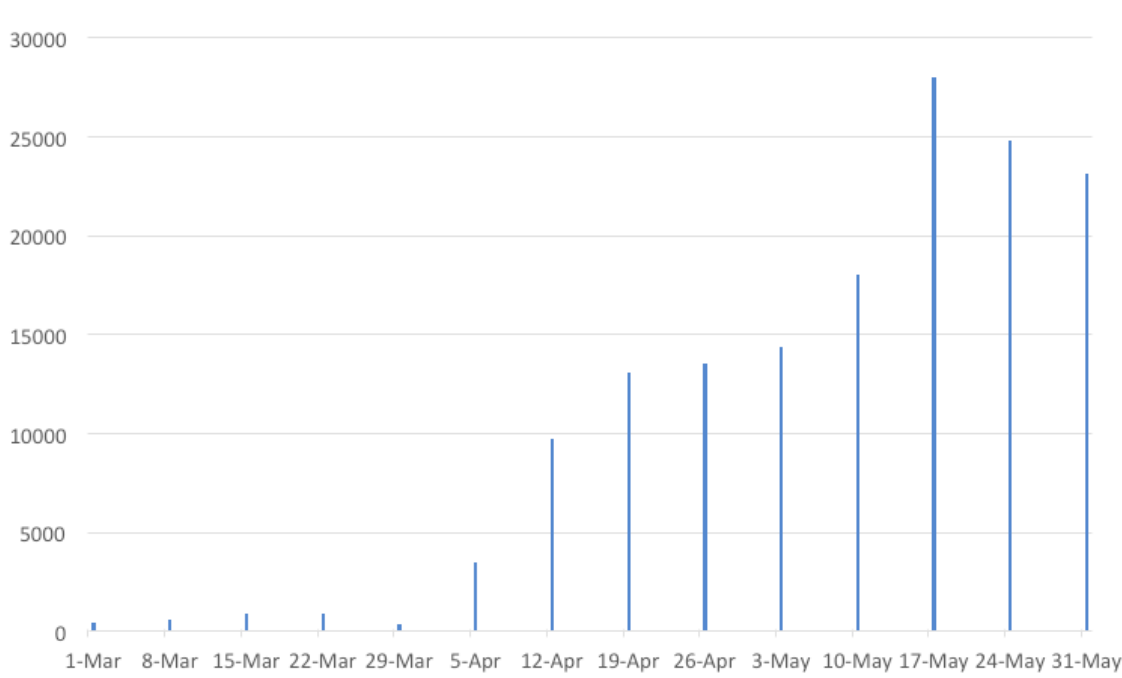


Figure 1. COVID-19 weekly confirmed cases, Thailand (Mar 1 - May 31, 2021). Source: Plotted by the author based on the data from World Health Organization, <https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/th>.

A complimentary informant interview was conducted to clarify the facts, share their observation, and gather relevant information. They are NGO leaders, laborers, migrant NGOs, and a *Songkran* event organizer. The author contacted them via email and SNS, without face-to-face interviews during the pandemic. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to deconstruct the *Songkran* festivities. Several themes are examined, namely home visits, rites, and ceremonies as well as informal gatherings.

### Songkran in Thailand 2021

The findings in this paper are presented following the selected nature of the festivities of *Songkran*.

#### *The Rite Of Rot Nam Dam Hua*

*Songkran* is highly visible with its water gun fight everywhere on the streets with numerous Thai youths and international tourists participating. *Songkran* celebration is rich in heritage and symbolic traditions. Formal ceremonial rites include Buddhist temple visits and offering food to monks as well as home visits for family gatherings and paying respects to elderly family members. The water splashing is an example of the traditional rite of performing water pouring on Buddha statues as well as the parents and children at home. The rite is known as *rot nam dam hua* in Thai, where sons and daughters pour scented water onto the shoulders, palms, and feet of their parents and other respected elders. It represents purification and washing away sins and bad luck; the elderly gives their children blessings in return. The implicit meaning of sprinkling a bit of water on each other's shoulders is to develop a relationship with each other (Porananond and Robinson, 2008). A *Songkran* event organizer in Chiang Rai told the author:



“I visited my family’s home in Chiang Rai. At home, people follow the rite of *rot nam dam hua* to splash some water onto the senior members of the family. We all wore masks and maintained social distancing during the trip and stayed outdoors[...] but for a family gathering at home with relatives, many people might ease these precautions.”

The rite of *rot nam dam hua* and related ceremonies serve to strengthen the social hierarchy and family system of Thailand. As such, a home visit is inevitable during *Songkran*. Although public celebrations were cancelled, the government hesitated to prohibit people from traveling back home.

### **Extended Holiday**

The official celebration of *Songkran* lasts for three days. The first day, April 13 is the last day of the existing lunar year, called *Wan Sungkan Long*, which implies the “passing of the year.” Thais clean their houses on that day, set off firecrackers to drive away bad luck and disease, and new clothes are worn. The second day, April 14, is known as *Wan Nao* which lies between the old and the new year. People go to the market to buy food prepared for religious activities on the third day. In the afternoon many people bring sand from the riverside to make pagodas in temples, representing to “replace the sand which carried out inadvertently on the soles of shoes throughout the year.” The third day, April 15, is *Wan Thaloeng Sok* marking the beginning of a new year; people generally go to temples to offer food, celebrate, and pray (Porananond and Robinson, 2008:312-313). The three days of *Songkran* are a rite of passage from old to new. The event organizer said:

“*Songkran* is both the New Year of Thailand and a Buddhist festival. People visit temples, bathe Buddha images, and offer food to monks. As people go to the temple on the same day, many temples are crowded with visitors. But we all wore masks and entry into the temples required a body temperature check.”

Official ceremonies were mostly suspended in 2021. As the three-day public holiday is still in place, and April 13 to 15 in 2021 was from Tuesday to Thursday, employees requested extended leave a day before and after to easily make it a nine-day-long weekend. An NGO leader explained the mass flow of people during the period:

“The holiday is around one week. But April is the term break of schools, and many people take this chance to go away on vacation. From the beginning, April till the third week is a period of travel [...] Family members and middle-class office workers travel in their cars; lower-income laborers from rural areas travel back home on public buses, trains, or pick-up trucks shared with a group of friends from the same village or nearby.”

### **Water Splashing and Parade**

In modern times, *Songkran* has undergone some transformation. The big change is modernization towards commercialization and tourism (Porananond and Robinson, 2008). The Tourism Authority of Thailand is keen on promoting *Songkran* for sustainable festival tourism in Thailand (Yoopetch, 2022). Parades are widely organized in major cities of Thailand. Participants dress in Thai costumes, parading, dancing, and playing classical musical instruments along the main streets of Thai cities. Some places have *Miss Songkran* beauty contests too. There were even foam parties on Khaosan Road and Silom Road in Bangkok

to attract young people and tourists to join in. The scene of participants in costumes and some playing classical musical instruments on the streets is a crossover of tradition and modernity. Commercialization and tourism are the ways to sustain the festival. Processions are conducted in a tidy manner apart from some water splashing. As the third wave happened before *Songkran* in 2021, all parades were suspended to avoid the drawing of a big crowd.

*Songkran* is unique in its water-splashing activities. It distinguishes the festival from other New Year celebrations elsewhere. The act of *rot nam dam hua* of pouring a bit of water over friends and neighbors on the street has become splashing every stranger passing by with water from buckets to water hoses. Modern water canon toys from small to mega-sized ones are played with making the main streets of cities the water-splashing war zones. The “carnavalesque chaos” of water splashing temporarily relaxes the social hierarchy emphasized at home, temples, and official venues. Everyone is equal when water is splashed at each other. People who participate in the water game set themselves free, laughing, shouting, running back and forth as well as jumping up and down at the scene. Secular norms are slightly relaxed to open a space for chaos and mess. Large-scale water splashing parties were banned in Bangkok and all major cities, but some kids still held their water fights. Pictures of very small-scale “private” water wars were shared on social media secretly. It is hard to estimate how much this chaotic and rule-breaking festive atmosphere remained as the celebration was downsized.

#### *Internal and Transnational Migrant Workers*

Thailand heavily relies on the importation of migrant workers for its fishing, manufacture, and service sectors. The vast majority come from Myanmar, with some others from Cambodia and Laos. The NGO leader elaborated on the importance of *Songkran* back home for many migrant workers:

“*Songkran* is a long holiday when people who are working far away from their home can return and meet family members, party, offer things to the elderly, visit a place with friends or family[...] and for some, it’s their only break back home throughout the year.”

A labor NGO worker told the author:

“Many migrant workers left before *Songkran* along with the Thai workers who wanted to reach their home before the lockdown/restrictions during *Songkran*[...] Some were afraid of Covid-19 but some were concerned about their economic situation during the coming lockdown. Most workers went back on buses and privately hired vans.”

The second and third waves of COVID-19 in Thailand did involve migrant workers. The second wave happened in Samut Sakhon Province in December 2020. The third wave likely originated in Central Bangkok before spreading all over the country. Many migrant workers in construction sites were infected. The government sealed them off in dormitories. The distorted development biased toward Bangkok as well as some industrial zones and tourist destinations in Central and Southern regions also draws internal workers to sojourn from their home provinces to these places. The event organizer from Chiang Rai Province said:

“Most of the Lenna (northern) and Issan (northeastern) Thais work in Bangkok, and some in Phuket and Pattaya. That may have caused more infection cases of COVID-19 afterwards.”

An NGO leader from Sangklaburi said that the flow also included returning former rural-urban migrants:

“There were no tourists visiting Sangklaburi or other tourism places. The agricultural sector is less affected than urban wage workers. Many young people return to their homes in the province from Bangkok and big cities because they have lost their job.”

Drawing from the above findings on *Songkran*, the author distinguished between formal and informal festivities of *Songkran* in Thailand. The two categories of festivities were then tabulated with their explicit and implicit values (DaMatta, 1983). They are ceremonies and rituals with socio-cultural meanings embedded. The following table shows the matrix of the four items.

|                 | Explicit                                                                                                                  | Implicit                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Formal</b>   | Official speeches, ceremonies, and inaugurations by the King and Prime Minister<br><br>The rite of <i>rot nam dam hua</i> | Reinforce Thai-ness<br><br>Strengthen hierarchy and monarchy<br><br>Maintain harmonized relationships with relatives and neighbors |
| <b>Informal</b> | Family gatherings<br><br>Temple visits<br><br>Water splashing parties<br><br>Drinking, partying, and gatherings           | Sustain family system<br><br>Buddhism domination<br><br>Relaxing, fun, chaos<br><br>Commercial & tourism                           |

Figure 3 Table showing the deconstruction of the *Songkran* Festival. Source: developed by the author.

### Discussion and Concluding Remarks

There had been a rapid increase in confirmed cases during the third wave of COVID-19 outbreak in Thailand, as shown in the data in Figure 1. The Government did not follow the precautionary measure in 2020 to cancel the *Songkran* Festival and spread the public holiday but only official and commercial celebrations, such as the water gun fighting and foam parties. The consequence was many Thais especially internal migrant workers in Bangkok and adjacent provinces (the Greater Bangkok) travelled away to visit family members in their home provinces. Some might have utilized the Saturday and Sunday making it a six- or nine-day long weekend. Some festivals involve people’s mobility. *Songkran* Festival certainly consists of no pilgrimage trip. Many followed the New Year tradition of homecoming which is more than a family gathering and relative visit. It is part of the rite for Thais to perform *rot nam dam hua*, temple visits and food offerings. These festivities both sacred and secular, are necessary steps to proceed with the rite of passage in *Songkran*. It is not a “transformational pilgrimage” but people’s self and body should reconnect to the nature and spirits of the place, which is their home to achieve transformation and purification (Arellano, 2007).

Drawn from the general model of the intercity epidemic, monocentric model (Brockmann and Helbing, 2013) and polycentric model (Wei et al., 2021), the author suggests the one-destination sojourn, divergence and convergence of festival mobility. Festival mobility becomes the flow of internal migrant workers en masse leaving the workplace, back to home towns. They stay and travel around and interact within their hometowns. At the end of the long festival holiday, they go back to their workplaces. Inter-second-tier cities or within-province movement possible for home visits to relatives is, but the frequency is negligible. The former represents a diverse flow; the latter represents a converse move. Epidemic happens in the capital which is the hub of domestic and international transportation, as well as several other first-tier cities with high population density and intensive economic activities, hence more human contacts. The author hypothesizes the festival mobility model explaining the one-destination sojourn intensity of the epidemic. The following figure shows the comparison of different models of epidemic and mobility.

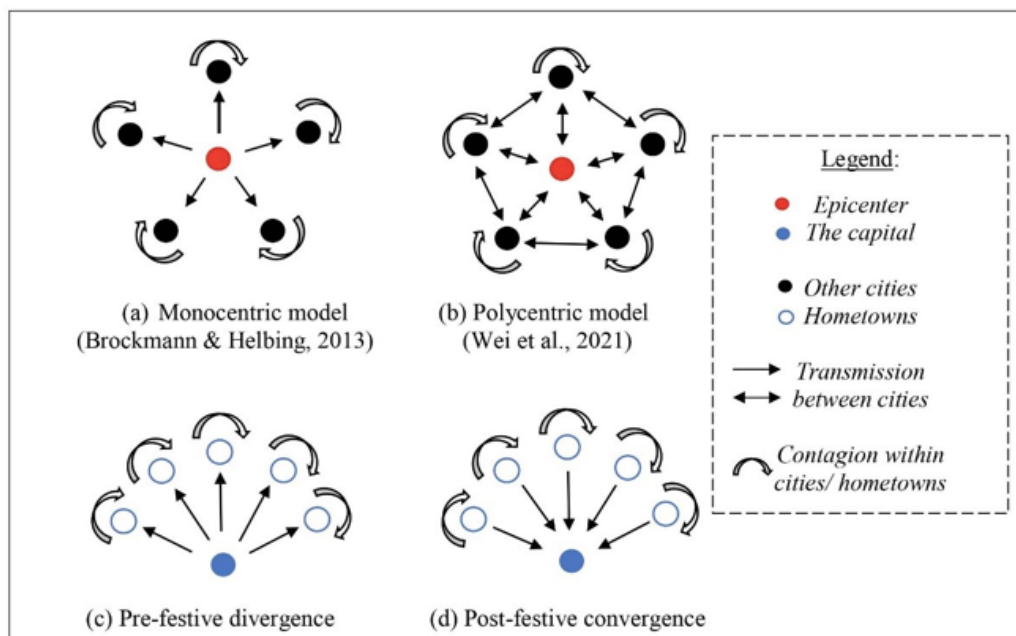


Figure 3. Festival sojourn model of mobility and epidemics. Source: Developed by the author. Note: Monocentric and polycentric models are reproduced by the authors from Wei et al. (2021:3).

This paper focuses on the contribution of cultural and behavioral factors of festivities during *Songkran* and its relation to pandemic fatigue. The author argues that the liminality of the festival is the reason. The festival is a liminal period (DaMatta, 1983; Lewis, 2013; Vogt, 2003), the urban-rural sojourners are liminal beings. The few days of the *Songkran* New Year holiday provide a break not just from work duty, but an escape from daily life, with some norms, rules, and social order being relaxed temporarily. The liminality has implications for both the government and society. For the government, festivals and especially the New Year are occasional events throughout the year when a temporary relaxation of restrictions seems to have no harm for the overall prevention and control (which was found to be a mistake later). Also, the celebration of the festival including the New Year helps to restore social norms and order for the maintaining of status quo (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1980, Daun e Lorena, 2019). Since the coup seven years ago, underperformed of the pro-jun-

ta party in the election in 2019, and the rise of the student movement in 2020, the junta-turned-non-elected Prime Minister desperately needs stabilizing elements. Unfortunately, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 forced the Thai government to suspend *Songkran* that year. As such, after the easing of the second wave of the pandemic in February 2021, the government boldly gave a green light to the celebration of *Songkran* in April 2021. All of a sudden, an infection cluster happened in Bangkok's nightclub scene triggering the third wave of outbreak a week before *Songkran*. The government this time hesitated to ban the whole festival as last year. The author argues that the liminality of *Songkran* enables tolerance of some unofficial and informal festivities to proceed, including home visits and private celebrations. Before the pandemic, water gun wars, foam parties, and drinking parties were widely organized. Roads were closed with traffic rules suspended and turned into liminal spaces temporarily for festivities and celebration. In the streets and many outdoor venues, many young people threw water towards passers-by, and rubbed white powder on other's faces. Although these festivities were banned or became less visible. In the meantime, norms and hierarchy remain not changed indoors, and rites like *rot nam dam hua* were proceeded in a proper manner.

At the societal level, the happy-go-lucky festive attitude matched the prolonged personal hygiene and social distancing harsh measures meaning that a break during the New Year is no big deal. There were no large-scale water splashing parties during *Songkran* in 2021 but home visits and gatherings, drinking, and eating went on as usual. Social distancing was temporarily reduced to the lowest level forming a point of weakness against the infection. Bear in mind that Bangkok was the epicenter of this round of outbreaks and sojourning back to provinces means spreading the disease throughout the country. Soon after *Songkran*, all 76 provinces reported some infection cases.

New Year's Day is a rite of passage between the past year and the new one. As a liminal being, a sojourner finds himself or herself in a transition state of betwixt and between (Turner, 1974). Within these few festive days, existing social structures and norms were temporarily eased so that a window was opened for carnivalesque chaos, though no official celebration and water guns not allowed, human contact still went on. For individuals, it is a liminal moment of normlessness where confusion arises including the precautions against infection such as human contact, wearing a mask and personal hygiene. Festivities during New Year should be wild and limits are supposed to be tolerated. After all, a sojourner travels out of the city, the workplace, and back home, a liminal space to celebrate *Songkran*. Home or hometown as a liminal space is actually "out of space" (Nash, 1981), away from Bangkok. Out of space implies an escape from Bangkok, the high population density city and epicenter of the third wave outbreak of COVID-19. Some degree of less adherence to prevention was expected which reinforced the pandemic fatigue.

Medical and psychological explanations of pandemic fatigue refer more to the gradual demotivation and ignorance of the risk of infection. The author provides an anthropological discourse on pandemic fatigue during a festival. The liminality of festivals and in this case, *Songkran*, the New Year of Thailand in 2021, after the extended period of harsh prevention of COVID-19, the tolerance, chaos, and easing opened a liminal moment for fatigue. No matter whether the government, society, and especially individuals, who are migrants from the provinces sojourning back home and celebrating informally, all spread the virus and

break former precautions of social distancing. The causes of the third wave of the outbreak in Thailand are complicated. The nightclub cluster, confined prisons, more infectious variants, and certainly slow vaccination process all contributed to the spread of the disease and its subsequent spiral out of control. But the author argues that festivals or *Songkran* to be exact, should be accepted as a factor that intensifies epidemics and widens the spread to all provinces during this wave of the outbreak. Given the Thai government's decisive suspension of the entire *Songkran* in 2020, there was no ceremony, no celebration, and no water splashing. The traffic away from Bangkok to other provinces was minimized. Compensation holidays for *Songkran* were offered later in July and September 2020. The festival was ruined and the compensated holidays were no more than a day off. The hesitation and partial downsizing of *Songkran* left a space for the festival to continue, and hence the liminality.

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