

The Politics of Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand

Prasit Leepreecha¹

From 99 Things Not to Miss in Thailand

Number 10: Trek to the tribes – Once the pastime of adventurous outdoors types, trekking has become as de rigueur as going to the beach. The mountainous north of Thailand has been a melting pot of different cultures for centuries and a trek is a great way to experience its diversity. A few of the countless mix-and-match trekking options include a visit to an unspoiled hill-tribe village, a home-stay on an isolated river or a nature hike to study the history of exotic Himalayan flowers that thrive on the remote Thai mountaintops. Despite the trekking companies' glowing promises, there are not many undiscovered areas left, so it pays to do your homework. Smaller companies located in faraway towns such as Pai or Mae Hong Son, usually offer the most innovative options (Sawasdee, 2004).

Much of the discussion about ethnic tourism in Northern Thailand has concentrated on the impact of tourism on ethnic communities, the interaction between tourists and villagers, and its commoditization.² This paper approaches ethnic tourism differently, examining instead the political relationship between tourists, middlemen (businessmen and the state), and ethnic tourees (the people

¹ Researcher, Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University.

² Examples of these studies include The Effect of Tourism Development on an Akha Community: A Chiang Rai Villages Case Study (Toyota Mika, 1996); Case Study on the Effects of Tourism on Culture and the Environment: Thailand (Chupinit Kesmanee and Kulawadee Charoen Sri, 1995); Impact of Tourism Industry in Chiang Mai Province (Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and Chayan Phonpoke, 1987); Tourism and Changes in Hill Tribe Villages (Jiraporn Sriwathanakoolkit, 2001); Impact and Problem of Trekking Tourism and the Social Context: Case Studies of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Mae Hong Son (Suwit Namsaeng, 1993), Cohen (2000 and 2001), McKerron (2003).

Adam, Andrew and Mingsarn Kaosa-ard (eds.). 2008.
Mekong Tourism: Competitiveness & Opportunities.
Chiang Mai: Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University.

the tourists come to see). Viewed through this lens, it can be shown that the interaction between the three ethnic tourism stakeholders is only superficial. Tourists who eagerly desire to explore unspoiled cultures and consume authentic experiences and souvenirs tend to experience only the fake and dramatic ones, since there is only limited time for the encounter. The main purpose of the middlemen and ethnic tourees for dealing with tourists is business only. Meanwhile the state, which is comprised of different agencies, plays contradicting roles in ethnic tourism and related ethnic minority issues. Based on four decades of experience of ethnic tourism in the highlands of northern Thailand, the more tourism develops, the more the ethnic culture loses its authenticity. Instead, the encounter becomes a staged event only performed for the tourist. Highland ethnic villagers, as tourees, have gradually learned and adapted to take advantage of tourism. Their encounters with other stakeholders in the industry are still as inferiors. Nonetheless, the recent introduction of alternative forms of ethnic tourism, including ecotourism and community-based tourism, has created more equality between the three parties. This paper draws from personal observations and interviews as well as secondary sources.

Historical Context and Images of Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand

Because highland ethnic minorities have a distinctive way of life, cultural exoticism among highland ethnic groups and the surrounding natural environment in northern Thailand attract both domestic and foreign tourists. Dearden (1991) estimated that 100,000 people went trekking each year during the early 1990s.³ In addition, both the government and private sectors have played a significant role in using primitive images of highland ethnic groups as advertisements to attract foreign tourists. Highland ethnic groups or hill tribes in northern Thailand comprise ten distinctive linguistic groups with a total population of 923,257 in 2002. The communities are primarily scattered in 20 provinces of northern and northwestern Thailand.

Due to historical and environmental factors, the highlanders rarely share a common way of life with the lowlanders though they have existed in harmony for centuries. Prior to World War II, a lack of transportation and a fear of diseases, particularly the transmission of malaria during the rainy season, limited both groups movements up and down the hills. Lowlanders traveling into the hills were often limited to adult, male traders. They brought goods from the lowland markets to sell and in turn bought raw opium, cattle, and forest products from the highlanders. In the other direction, highland people traveled to lowland markets to buy basic goods, such as salt, flashlights, batteries, kerosene, nylon ropes, and fabrics.

³ According to Murfitt (2002 quoted in McKerron, 2003), between 1994 and 2000, the number of visitors to Chiang Mai increased from 2.4 to 3.4 million.

Ethnic tourism first became popular with the royal family and bourgeoisie of central Thailand. Journeys to the uplands for recreation began in the early 1930s. Princess Dara Rassamee, a princess of the Chiang Mai court who had been living in Bangkok as a consort to Chulalongkorn, King Rama V, returned to reside in Chiang Mai in 1932. She and her followers traveled to nearby famous high mountains of the region, including Doi Ang Khang and Doi Suthep (where she built a summer palace). Along the way, the blossom of the opium poppy, the local dress, and the way of life of the highland people drew her attention (Boonserm Satraphai, 1989). After the Second World War, bourgeoisie and Christian missionaries began to visit highland communities to explore their exotic culture and distribute religious materials.



Beginning in the early 1960s an increasing number of government and international officials were sent to conduct surveys and provide services to meet the basic needs of highland people. These officials played a major role in bringing the images of highlanders to the lowland public, mainly through publications.⁴ Subsequently, the media was an important means of distributing their images to the public. For example, the movies *Tai Fah Si Khram* (Under the Blue Sky), *Khon Phukhao* (Mountain People), *Sua Phukhao* (Mountain Tiger), and songs of Mida and Sao Chiang Mai were popular. Another influential form of media used to present the highland ethnic images to the outside world was photography in the form of postcards. Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell (1993) described the role of photography on ethnic tourism in Southeast Asia as follows:

⁴ Examples of those publications include "30 Nations in Chiang Rai" (Samsib chart nai Chiang Rai) by Boonchuay Srisawadi.

Photography has long been associated with travel and tourism in South-East Asia, and the images produced with the aid of this medium have influenced the ways in which outsiders perceive the peoples and cultures of this region. Although many of these images are ephemeral, and therefore difficult to evaluate and quantify, sufficient numbers have survived in both private and public collections for us to gain some appreciation of how attitudes to South-East Asia have changed over time. Popular images have a long shelf-life, particularly postcards, and can therefore shape the outlook and expectations of visitors over several decades. Some of the most commercially attuned images from the early days of tourism have been copied and recycled many times; in recent years they have been adapted to the needs of modern advertising. Touristic image-making is by no means unique to South-East Asia, though distinctive trends can be identified, and parallels can be drawn with other parts of the world, notably Africa and the Caribbean.

Doi Pui, a Hmong village on Doi Suthep, was one of the first highland sites to attract tourists because of its proximity to Chiang Mai as well as the tourist sites of Doi Suthep (a temple) and Phuphing Palace. Thai and foreign tourists have been visiting Doi Pui since the late-1960s. According to Hmong villagers, the first tourists had to trek to the village from Phuphing Palace because there was no road. "Tourists came to visit us and often asked whether we would like to sell our beautiful costumes, artifacts, farm products, and so on. Some tourists even asked for opium to smoke," said a villager.⁵ To develop tourist businesses, the villagers began to sell their own items and handicrafts as well as items they bought from lowland markets. The villagers were also inspired to engage in tourism by the encouragement of His Majesty the King who visited the village several times. By the early-1970s, tourism had become a secondary source of income, after farming and animal husbandry, for the Hmong villagers in Doi Pui. At first, they only sold souvenirs in their village, but soon they ventured to Phuphing Palace, Doi Suthep temple, and urban Chiang Mai to sell their products.

In the city of Chiang Mai, local businesses played a prominent role in presenting highland ethnic images to the public. Two prominent pioneer businesses dealing with highland ethnic tourist in the mid-1970s were the Chiang Mai Old Cultural Center and the Night Bazaar. The owner of the former brought different highland ethnic groups to live and perform cultural shows for tourists, while the latter provided areas free of charge for highland people to sell their souvenirs and products.

⁵ Interview with Neng (pseudonym), a Doi Pui villager, 15 December 2004.

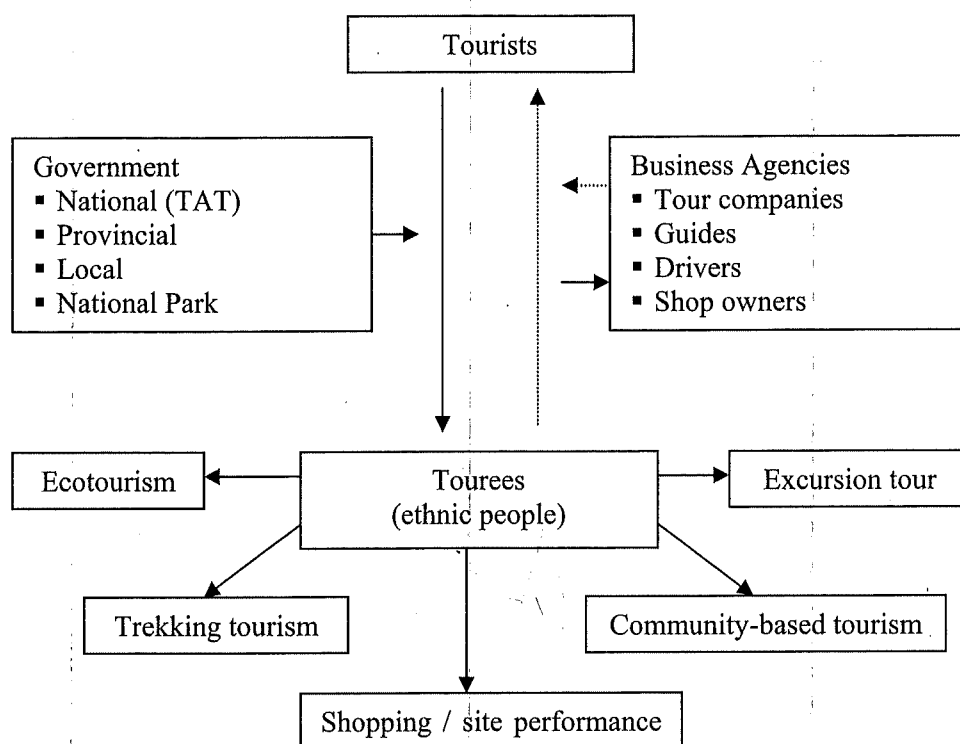
As more Hmong from Doi Pui and nearby villages became souvenir sellers, they moved beyond Chiang Mai, traveling to tourist sites and markets in Bangkok (Sanamluang, Chatuchak), Hua Hin, Phuket, and Samui to tap new markets and avoid over-competition. Through this, Hmong became increasingly well-known among lowland Thais and foreigners.

To some outsiders, the Hmong image was perceived as representative of other highland ethnic groups, given they were one of the first to take part in the tourism sector. Other highland ethnic groups, especially the Lisu, Akha, and Lahu, followed the Hmong example of taking their products and images to the tourists in cities and towns.

Cultural exoticism and authentic souvenirs of highland ethnic groups are the key attractions of ethnic tourism in northern Thailand, and both the government and private sectors have played an important role in promoting tourists to visit highland people. During the Tourism Authority of Thailand's (TAT) campaigns entitled "Amazing Thailand" and "Unseen in Thailand" a large photo of an Akha woman with a beautifully decorated headdress was posted at the international arrivals floor of the Bangkok airport. In the northern cities of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Mae Hong Son, signs posted by the local TAT have colorful photos of highland ethnic women of Akha, Mien, Hmong, and Palong ethnicity. Owing to the importance of income from the tourism industry, different organizations, including private, government, and non-government organizations (NGOs), have become involved with ethnic tourism. The Royal Project, an agrarian-based foundation that has been promoting cash crops as a replacement for opium cultivation among highland people for three decades, added tourism to its business model in the early 2000s (Royal Project Foundation, 2003).⁶ Another prominent agency involved was the Tribal Research Institute, a primary source of information for tourists, until it was dissolved in 2002. Archives, artifacts, and staff from the former Tribal Research Institute are now being used to support the government's tourism policy, especially for ethnic tourism (Technical Service Club, 2004).

Tourism has taken different forms in the four decades of ethnic tourism in the highlands of northern Thailand. They include the selling of ethnic handicrafts in both lowland and highland markets, short trips to village sites, trekking tourism, ecotourism, and community-based tourism. Regardless of the type of ethnic tourism, the stakeholders consist of tourists, middlemen (government or business agencies), and tourers or ethnic villagers. Figure 1 shows the structure of stakeholders involved in ethnic tourism.

⁶ In 2003, the Royal Project Foundation published a set of four books on tourism in the Project: *Tourism Places in the Areas of Royal Project*, *Community Culture in Royal Project*, *Flowering-Plants in Royal Project*, and *Herbal Plants of Royal Project*. Recently, a study project set up a master plan on tourism capacity building at the Ang Khang and Inthanon stations.

Figure 1 – The Structure of Ethnic Tourism

The tourist is the one who eagerly explores the “unspoiled natives” (Van den Berghe and Keyes, 1984). Tourists visit ethnic villages not only to see the tourees, but also to take pictures and buy authentic souvenirs from the tourees.

In ethnic tourism, with the exception of domestic tourists, private and government agencies become the middlemen in the industry, especially in trekking and community-based tourism, due to language barriers and other obstacles. According to Cohen (2001), tourist agencies, especially trekking agencies, advertise highland ethnic tourees with different images. Following are examples of images and details in fliers collected by Cohen (2001):

- If you plan to visit *original*... tribal villages your dream will become true (a 1982 advertisement).
- You will see *primitive* hill tribe people (a 1979 advertisement).
- ...excellent experience [of] . . . primitive hill tribe villages (a 1978 advertisement).
- You'll enjoy *exotic* wonders of nature (a 1980 advertisement).
- “Tour... some of northern Thailand's most *spectacular* jungle country” (a 1979 advertisement).

- See many *unspoilt* and remote hill tribe villages (a 1977 advertisement).
- Visit... a newly discovered *unspoilt* Meo Hill Tribe Village (40 km from the city [of Chiang Mai]) (a 1986 advertisement).

Regarding the interaction between the touree and the middleman, Van den Berghe and Keyes (1984) stated:

The touree is the native when he begins to interact with the tourist and modify his behavior accordingly. The touree is the native-turned-actor – whether consciously or unconsciously – while the tourist is the spectator. The middleman is the broker in ethnic exoticism who mediates and profits by the interaction of tourist and touree, and who, in the process, very frequently manipulates ethnicity for gain, stages “authenticity,” peddles cultural values, and thus becomes an active agent in modifying the situation in which and from which he lives.

State Policies on Ethnic Tourism

For the state, agency roles are more about promoting tourism, providing basic information, protecting tourists, and even investing in infrastructure for tourism business. The state itself does not benefit directly from income from the tourist industry but it is reflected in the overall gross domestic product (GDP) of the nation. Hence, the state's role is more in campaigning for mass tourism. At the national level, the “Visit Thailand Year,” “Amazing Thailand,” and “Unseen Thailand” raised awareness in both foreign and domestic arenas. At the local level, provincial government offices and many other agencies support ethnic tourism. Through the bureaucratic system, villagers, even in remote villages, have been asked to cooperate with the government's tourism policy.⁷

Despite the fact that the tourism industry can be risky financially, and at times can gradually destroy the traditional life of the villagers and environment, the state still plays an important role in promoting tourism as it generates about THB 62 billion for northern Thailand (TAT, 2004). Government has invested a significant amount of money in infrastructure, especially road construction, in highland areas to provide easier access for tourists.⁸ The roads to remote villages

⁷ In a Karen village in the Mae Taeng tourism area, one household head complained to the author about villagers' refusals to host tourists due to the inappropriate behavior of tourists. However, the village headman and guides, both of whom benefited from tourism, threatened and forced them to cooperate with the government's policy.

⁸ In the past, roads to highland communities were often built for national security purposes – to facilitate troop movements and government control of the jungle in an effort to defeat remote Communist bases. Roads were also built as part of an effort to stop opium production. In many remote communities today, roads are built for tourism.

such as Nam Phiang Din of the “long neck” Karen village in Mae Hong Son and the Huai Yuak Mlabri village in Nan would not have been paved if the villages were not tourist sites. Yet the more facilities are developed, the more ethnic villagers’ lives are changed and, for better or worse, the less “authentic” they become. Such evidence can be linked to the politics of state and ethnic tourism.

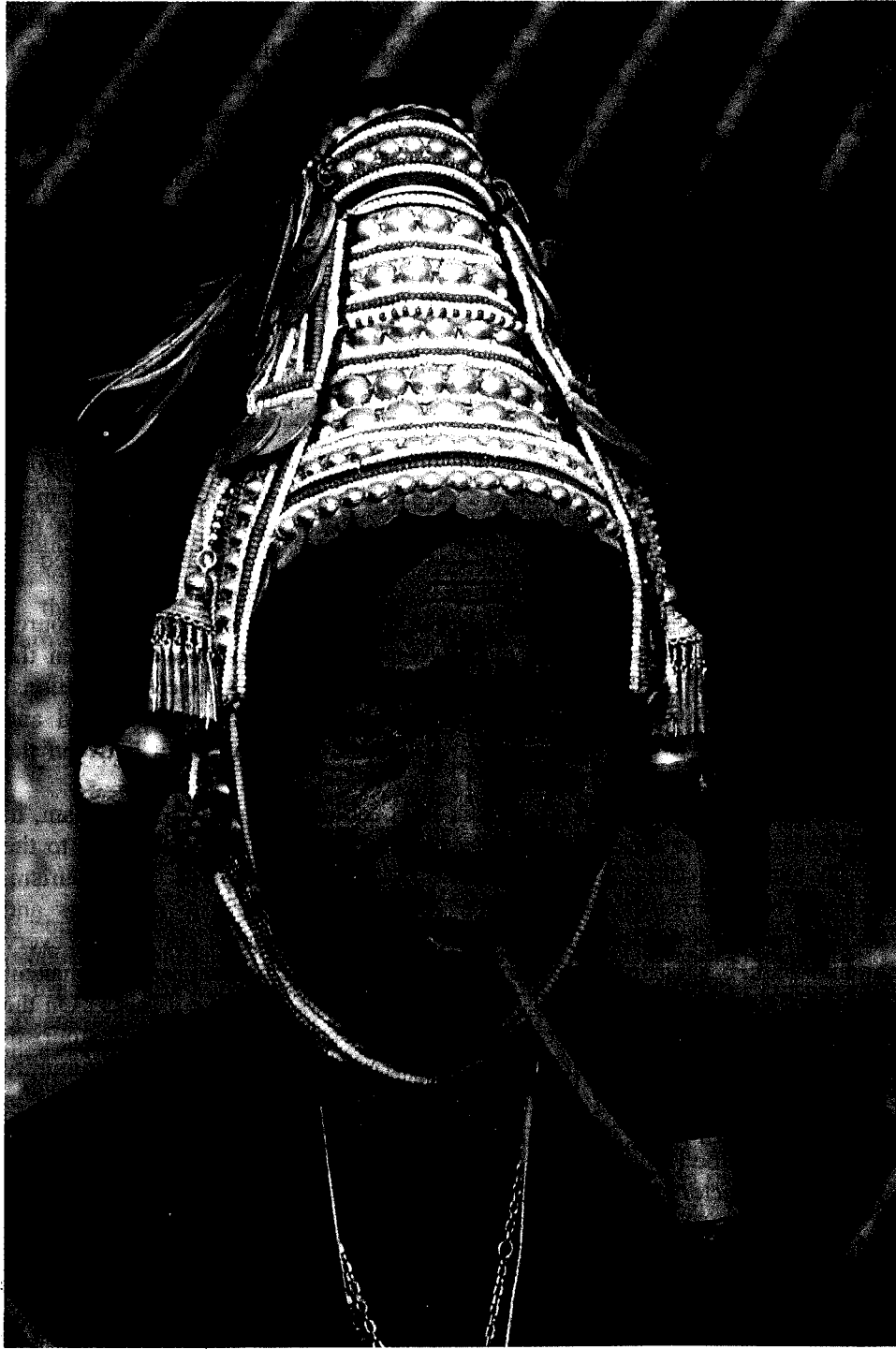
The government adheres to at least four contradictory policies on development and tourism promotion in highland ethnic communities. First, the state’s policy toward highland ethnic minorities is assimilation, even though officially it is integration with attempts to maintain their traditional ways of life. The state uses the education system, religious conversion, and registration requirements to help achieve its assimilation objectives. Schools throughout the country must follow a central Thai curriculum. Speaking ethnic languages is banned in schools and local or indigenous knowledge is not recognized in the school curriculum. In terms of religion, the Dhammacarik Buddhism Project was initiated to convert highland ethnic minorities to Buddhism (Thailand’s dominant religion). The idea behind this religious policy is for ethnic groups to give up their spiritual belief systems, which the state considers primitive. The state’s registration system aims to change ethnic identities to Thai by forcefully requiring adoption of a Thai first and family name. Registration or not, mainstream Thai society looks down upon ethnic names.

In contrast to this assimilation policy, the state’s ethnic tourism policy aims to strengthen ethnic minorities’ traditional ways of life to better attract tourists. The One Tambol One Product (OTOP) program and other state sponsored encouragement of ethnic businesses based on local and ethnic traditions are used to promote tourism and economic development.

Second, despite the government’s total ban on and suppression of opium cultivation among highland ethnic minorities, its policy simultaneously promotes the mystique of opium and tribal people for tourism-marketing purposes, as noted by Van den Berghe and Keyes (1984),

In Thailand, several government agencies (the Ministry of Agriculture, the Border Patrol Police, the King’s Project, and so on) have sought to suppress opium production by certain tribal people such as the Hmong (Meo). Tourist literature put out by the government’s Tourist Agency of Thailand has, however, made use from time to time of the image of tribal peoples among their poppy fields as an “authentic” image of hill tribes.

Two opium museums have opened relatively recently in the Golden Triangle, the area that tourists and the general public most associate with the opium trade. In another tourist area, Phu Hin Rongkla of Phitsanuloke Province, the army attempted to demonstrate opium poppy growing as a tourist attraction while strictly watching over and cutting down the opium poppies in other Hmong



groups' fields. Furthermore, although the government of Chiang Mai Province works aggressively to control and eliminate opium farming and production, one Hmong village is permitted to grow opium poppies in its tourist garden.

Third, there are contradictory policies on citizenship and tourism. Despite the fact that the "long neck" Karen in Mae Hong Son and Chiang Rai are recent illegal immigrants, government ignores their lack of citizenship status and instead actively promotes their presence for tourism purposes, even using pictures of them as images to represent the province. Moreover, different state agencies often compete with each other in taking advantage of ethnic people. When private entrepreneurs sought to relocate "long neck" Karen for tourism development purposes, local government officials of Mae Hong Son and Chiang Rai were quick to highlight their illegal status and threaten deportation. Through this intimidation, the local government attempts to maintain its monopoly on what is viewed as a valuable tourism resource.

A similar situation also happened to the nomadic Mlabri ethnic group when the provincial governments of Nan and Phrae tried to persuade them to settle down in their respective provinces in order to attract tourists. In this regard, both the "long neck" Karen and the Mlabri people are perceived as objects for tourism which can be manipulated by different state agencies.

Lastly, the state maintains inconsistent policies for natural resource conservation and tourism. With the ending of Communist movements in the highland jungles of northern Thailand in the mid-1980s, the state created national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in many areas where ethnic groups lived and farmed. This led to conflicts over natural resource management between the ethnic villagers and forestry officials.

More recent tourism promotion, both ecotourism and ethnic tourism, in natural conservation areas has partially reduced this tension. According to the law for national parks, no construction is allowed in the parks. For tourism, however, basic infrastructure and the construction of private dwellings and concessions are permitted. According to the state's ecotourism policy, every national park has turned into a tourist site. Both temporary and permanent residences are now being built inside the national parks to serve tourists. On the other hand, villagers' attempts to preserve natural resources, whether for tourism purposes or others, are not officially recognized by the state. The Community Forestry Bill, proposed by villagers to allow them legally to have a role in managing the natural resources in their communities, has been stalled in Parliament and the House of Representatives for a decade, and is a good example of such contradictory policies (Yos Santasombat et al., 2003).

In summary, ethnic tourism in the highlands of northern Thailand has become both a political and an economic issue. Although there is obviously a contradiction between the state's legal policies and tourism, as long as ethnic people, their practices, and their community attract tourists many such policies are ignored. Even though highland ethnic people do not have Thai citizenship

and appear to violate the nation's natural resource conservation policy, they are accepted in the context of tourism. Furthermore, their way of life and stereotypes of their culture and traditions, even illegal practices such as opium growing, are often used as 'authentic' images for tourism promotion.

Authenticity and Ethnic Tourism

Although ethnic tourism can provide economic alternatives for highland people, it also creates a new paradigm of commercialism for the people, even the children. At the same time, the desire of the tourists to explore exotic cultures, take pictures of traditional costumes, and buy authentic souvenirs of highland ethnic people in northern Thailand takes place only at a superficial level as they are provided "staged authenticity" to suit the economic purposes of the villagers. Prior to the advent of tourism, highland people were mostly self-sufficient. However, when tourists visited and asked to buy the items that they used in their daily life, the villagers saw their economic value. At first, they sold the "authentic" items that they used daily to the tourists. Later on, however, they made fake items to sell to tourists and even bought items from elsewhere to sell to the tourists, as noted by Cooper (1984 quoted in Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell, 1993).

Meo crossbows made for tourists are of questionable quality since they will never be fired; productivity, therefore, is high. The input in the tourist business is modest and the output high; but because so many shops sell the same products, the individual's profit is reduced.

In Doi Pui and the Night Bazaar, from the late-1960s to mid-1980s, Hmong vendors sold both handicrafts handmade by themselves and factory products bought from Chinese wholesale stores in Kad Luang, a lowland market in urban Chiang Mai. Examples of Hmong handicrafts were pillow covers, table covers, wallets, and bags of needlework or embroidery, while factory products included bracelets, necklaces, and rings. In the second period, from the early-1980s to the mid-1990s, almost of the items sold for tourists were originally produced in Nepal, India, and Pakistan and bought from traders in Mae Sai in Chiang Rai province and Tha Chilek in Burma. From the mid-1990s to the present, most souvenirs that the Hmong sell are items made of resin, the cast molten of chemical liquid in various forms. They tell tourists that the item is crafted from elephant tusks. Tourists, who visit Doi Pui during the daytime and the Night Bazaar during the evening, see no difference between the items sold by the Hmong. They sometimes meet the same vendors in both places. Lisu people in urban Chiang Mai use chemicals to dip and boil their baskets in to make them

look more authentic. In Khun Klang, a Hmong village on the way to Doi Inthanon National Park, Hmong tourist vendors sell as their own both agricultural products they have grown as well as fresh fruit bought from Muang Mai market in Chiang Mai and pickled fruits from manufacturers in Chiang Mai. When tourists ask, they always reply, "We made it by ourselves." Since the relationship between tourist and vendor is of very short duration, the authenticity of products is of little concern to contemporary ethnic vendors. Moreover, the best selling product depends on the current favorite style or fashion, which changes from time to time.⁹

Cultural performances put on by highland ethnic people, both in highland communities and lowland tourist venues, are just for show. Tourists are seen as consumers with both the business owner and performers benefiting economically from the performances. They care little about presenting authentic culture for tourists. For example, in one *khantoke* restaurant in Chiang Mai, performers of an Akha dance wear Akha hats and shirts but Hmong skirts. A lowland resort owner in Mae Rim district offers various dresses of highland ethnic groups for tourists to rent and wear for taking photographs. Pieces of traditional costumes of different ethnic groups are often mixed. In the north of Thailand, in Mae Sai in the province of Chiang Rai, lowland Thai children dress in colorful outfits and tell tourists that they are 'hill tribes,' in order to offer photo opportunities and make money from the tourists.

In the case of the Mlabri ethnic group in Nan province, tourist guides deceive tourists by creating a performance of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Before the guide arrives with a group of tourists, his assistant goes to the site and asks the Mlabri to dress up in the traditional way and build a temporary house of banana leaves. He also gives them a pig. At a pre-arranged time soon after the tourist group arrives, the Mlabri men come out from the jungle and kill the pig with spears. The guide tells the tourists that they have witnessed the real life of the Mlabri. Not only is the performance staged, but also the Mlabri no longer live this way. The touree and middleman provide "staged authenticity" to make money and fulfill the tourist's expectations that are based on images of the life of the tourees that they learned before coming to the village.¹⁰

In contemporary studies of ethnic tourism, the debate about tourists' expectation of authenticity continues. Based on the findings of Bruner (1996) and McKerron (2003), tourists no longer expect to see authentic ethnic people

⁹ In one tourist site, a Hmong woman generously told me in Hmong while I was looking for a traditional Hmong dress for my daughter, "Brother, since we are Hmong, I don't want you to buy this dress for your family use. If you really want a real one of good quality, I can make one for you, but it will take about two days to finish."

¹⁰ A good example of a performance of "staged authenticity" is the floating market in Bangkok. The floating market is organized by the Tourism Authority of Thailand in cooperation with the local people for the purpose of tourism. The contemporary life of the local people is no longer practiced this way (Maneewan Phiewnim, 2004).

given the rapid pace of change and development in the world. On the other hand, tourists remain attracted to authenticity or perceived authenticity. In the case of Doi Pui, the Hmong village near Doi Suthep, modernization brought decreasing authenticity, which led to a decline in tourism. To counter this decline, the village reintroduced traditional ways of life in order to portray a more authentic image and continue to attract tourists.



In terms of income, outsiders generally think that the tourism industry benefits the highland tourees in tourist sites. However, if compared to other stakeholders in the ethnic tourism trade, the villagers' gain is very small. For example, according to a study by Michaud (1997), the Hmong villagers' share of tourist spending for a trekking tour in Ban Suay is only two percent (THB 206 out of THB 11,400), a minuscule share that cannot compare with that of the Thai middlemen, who capture the other 98 percent. He also pointed out that among the villagers at a tourist site, only a few households, usually those of the village headman and clan leaders who have a close relationship with the guides, host overnight trekking groups. In the studies of Yos Santasonbat et al. (2003), only the village headmen in the tourist sites owned guesthouses. A few other villagers were handicraft vendors and porters. The majority of villagers, however, were not involved in tourism. Tourism, which comes from outside, thus creates different classes and conflicts among local villagers.

In such tourist sites as Doi Pui and Khun Klang, less than one-half of households own shops or stalls. Villagers with little capital or fewer ideas, but who also want to deal with tourists, become mobile vendors, dress up for

photographs, or even resort to begging. Due to heavy competition at local tourist sites, many ethnic people who depend on tourism income travel great distances to other tourist sites throughout the country. In some tourist villages, highland tourist vendors also have alternative sources of income. They worry about the unpredictability of tourism income. Not only do tours change routes in search of more unspoiled areas, but also unforeseen factors like terrorism or SARS can disrupt tourism income.

Social and Cultural Encounters through Ethnic Tourism

With many lowland Thais perceiving highland ethnic groups as inferior, power relationships between domestic Thai tourists and highland ethnic tourees are unequal. Domestic tourists treat highland ethnic tourees as people of lower social and cultural status, still primitive or backward. During a short visit with minimal interaction between the two groups, Thai tourists do not pay much attention to exploring the real life of ethnic tourees but are satisfied with just a superficial encounter, especially with those exotic stereotypes tourists have formed beforehand.

In many cases, for both domestic and foreign tourists ethnic tourees become just tourism objects to visit, as stated by Cohen (2001):

Hill tribe tourism has not been initiated by the villagers themselves nor do the villagers have a say in its organization and the direction or regulation of its development. Tourism amongst highlanders is not conducted primarily with a view to furthering the economic or other interests of the villagers. Rather, as we have seen, hill tribes are an attraction, and tourists are brought to view them as they would view any other natural or historical sight. This fact is fundamental to any understanding of the interaction – or better, lack of interaction – between locals and their visitors.

Economically, ethnic tourees view tourists, both domestic and foreign, as rich people who possess a higher economic and social status than they do. Highland ethnic vendors often deal humbly with tourists, while tourists often act offensively. In a long bargaining conversation between a Thai female tourist and a “long neck” Karen female vendor, one tourist insultingly said, “I want to buy [the postcards] because of my compassion for you. If you cannot discount, I won’t buy them.” The same situation can also be observed among the Akha vendors in the Night Bazaar of Chiang Mai and Khaosan Road in Bangkok. Although such inequality of economic relations between the two groups does not

occur in every case, it is often seen in general interactions, especially in the case of new vendors from a small ethnic group.¹¹

Inequality from tourism is also evident between villagers and guides as middlemen. In 1990, a village headman who hosted trekking tour groups in the Hmong village of Kaeng Hom in Pai District asked the author, "Do those Thai guides get any payment for bringing groups of westerners to visit us?" Not understanding the tourism business, he had been generously providing a free place for groups to stay overnight according to Hmong tradition. He never asked for payment from the Thai guides. The guides offered him THB 20 (less than USD 1) per tourist for staying one night in his house. The Hmong headman thought this money was out of kindness on the part of the Thai guide rather than a business transaction.¹²

Due to their inferiority and limited bargaining power, villagers are reluctant to refuse to perform their cultural dances and ceremonies for tourists. Yet repeated staged performances devalue the traditional meaning of their rituals and sacred objects and may insult villagers' feelings. Three examples of this include the Akha swinging ceremony, Hmong drumming, and the Mien shaman ritual.

The Akha perform their swinging ceremony once a year while waiting to harvest crops, usually in late-August or early-September. The ceremony serves three functions: to occupy the free time while they wait to harvest crops, to thank their ancestors and local deities for protecting their crops in the fields, and to celebrate the women's dressmaking skills. Before the celebration, the village spiritual leader performs a ceremony while setting up the swing. The traditional ceremony itself is four days long. However, in one Akha tourism village in Chiang Rai, at the request of tour guides, swinging is performed repeatedly throughout the year, and sometimes several times per day so that each new tour group can take photographs. For this village, swinging has become an ordinary activity and little more than playtime for the Akha children who interact with the tourists. In this context, the cultural value of the ceremony is reduced for the Akha villagers, especially the elders and ritual performers. Nor do the tourists understand any of the social functions the ceremony serves in the Akha way of life.

A second example is the drumming of the Hmong. According to Hmong tradition, a drum is beaten only during funerals, rituals to release the soul, and cow spirit rituals. The sound of the drum, therefore, signifies only death-related rituals in Hmong society. The Hmong believe that beating a drum other than on

¹¹ The more highland ethnic vendors deal with tourists, the more they become self-confident and learn how to treat tourists of different backgrounds. It is not only the tourist that perceives ethnic images, but also the ethnic touree perceives tourist images, especially concerning business negotiations.

¹² In Hmong tradition, taking care of the guest is the hospitality of the host for distant relatives or people on journeys.

those occasions can bring about death or disaster for the villagers. As a result, drums are only built for a given ritual, then immediately destroyed. Only very rarely would a ritual performer in Hmong society keep a drum after it has been used. However, in one Hmong tourism village, a drum is kept with other artifacts in a small museum run by a Christian and Buddhist Hmong group. The museum curator often beats the drum when showing it to the tourists. Such behavior has caused complaints from other Hmong neighbors who still follow traditional Hmong beliefs. Yet due to the power of the group that owns the museum and the government's tourism policy, the people who disagree with the drumming cannot do anything about this matter.

A third example is the performing of Mien shaman rituals for tourism purposes in town. In one private tourist location in urban Chiang Mai where several highland ethnic groups have been brought to perform their cultural activities for tourists, a Mien man pretends to perform a shaman ritual every night. In real shaman rituals, the shaman enters a trance in order to communicate with both human and spirit worlds. To do so, the shaman calls upon the shaman spirits, especially the souls of his dead teachers, for help. It is not customary for a Mien elder to imitate a trance or such a ritual.

Alternative and Dignified Ethnic Tourism

Highland ethnic groups who are tourees in northern Thailand vary in how quickly or slowly they adapt to tourism. Those highland ethnic groups exposed to commercialism before, tended to easily adapt to and take advantage of the tourism business that appeared in their communities. In general, they adapted to tourism step-by-step, as portrayed by Cohen (2001):

Though highlanders are generally hospitable to strangers, those in more remote areas appear to have experienced considerable fear and consternation when the first tourists arrived in their villages; for many, these were the first whites they had ever seen. Often, through the mediation of guides, villagers saw quickly that the strange-looking visitors meant no harm. A variety of attitudes developed in response, their relative preponderance depending upon the frequency of visits. In the more remote places tourists are still offered traditional hospitality; indeed payments are often refused or only reluctantly accepted. In such situations, the tourists are no less an object of curiosity for the native than vice versa. As visits become more numerous, tourists come to be treated with benevolent but passive indulgence. This may turn into an exploitative attitude – mostly expressed in aggressive begging or hawking of souvenirs – when the natives

find that they can derive benefits from the visitors. Finally, where tourism becomes a regular phenomenon, as in Meo Doi Pui, villagers start to engage full-time in tourism-related economic activities, particularly in the sale of handicrafts; tourism then becomes an important branch of the local economy. This stage, however, has been reached only in a very few villages.

Ethnic groups who have successfully dealt with this pattern of tourism have fallen into the mainstream of the world tourism business. As many other communities in the lowlands, they see their culture and artifacts as valuable commodities that can be sold. While the tourism businesses started in the local community, soon the Hmong, Lisu, Lahu, and Akha became vendors in urban and tourist sites, including the Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai night bazaars; cultural performance venues such as restaurants, fairs, and resorts; and at beaches throughout the country. The most successful ethnic vendors from these groups then become wholesale dealers, not only among ethnic communities in Thailand but also in neighboring countries. With this exposure, self-confidence and power relationships with tourists, middlemen, and other non-ethnic people have improved. Through tourism, some ethnic groups have gradually introduced their identity and images to the public.

For those ethnic groups who responded more slowly to tourism, they now have a more equitable and dignified way to deal with tourists – ecotourism and community-based tourism. The Karen did not respond to tourism in the same way as other groups. Instead, community-based tourism has now offered them a way to turn their simple way of life in which they live harmoniously with nature and the environment into a tourist attraction.¹³ Ideally, in this case, the tourists and middlemen pay more respect to nature and ethnic people's life and culture, because all are explained as related to one another. Interaction between local villagers and tourists in these kinds of alternative tourism situations is longer, and the role of middlemen, guides especially, becomes less important than in other forms of ethnic tourism.

Consequently, in these kinds of tourist sites, tourism has encouraged highland ethnic villagers to revive their local knowledge and historical sites, preserve their community forest, and redefine ecological meanings for ecotourism purposes. In general, these new ethnic tourism trends create more equal interactions between ethnic tourees, tourists, and middlemen, especially guides. Ethnic tourism, in the form of ecotourism and community-based tourism, has the potential to raise the social and cultural status of ethnic tourees when dealing with outsiders. Yet, in practice, according to the study of Murfitt (2002),

¹³ For examples, see the works of Yos Santasombat et al. (2003); Sinth Sarobon (2003); and Bornemeier, Victor, and Durst (1997).

very few tour companies offering ecotours are genuinely following the precepts of ecotourism, and the few that remain are at the lower end of the scale of economic returns. She further notes that all the literature and information available to tourists romanticize the highland people as primitive and unsophisticated, and that this often leads to tourist disappointment (cited by McKerron 2003). Regarding community-based tourism, Potjana Suansri (2003) has drawn a diagram as a tool for community development.

Figure 2 – The Structure of Community-Based Tourism



Source: Potjana Suansri, 2003.

With this new paradigm shift in ethnic tourism, community-based tourism was discussed among ethnic minorities during a conference in November 2004 in Chiang Mai.¹⁴ According to highland ethnic villagers, community-based tourism should:

- be created by villagers and based on villagers' willingness to participate,

¹⁴ The conference on "Impact of Globalization, Regionalism and Nationalism on Ethnic Minorities in Southeast Asia," organized by Chiang Mai University.

- be controlled by villagers (the whole community, both rules and incomes),
- be based on self-awareness and respect,
- recover the local people's knowledge,
- conserve the forest and environment,
- preserve local traditions,
- be based on villagers' real life or authentic traditions and food, and
- be only an alternative source of income for the community.

Although most of the components of an ideal community-based tourism plan have not been attained in contemporary ethnic communities, such criteria have empowered villagers, as tourees, in their relations with tourists and middlemen. Importantly, in the context of community-based tourism, local villagers can screen out guides and tourists who misbehave in their communities. Power relationships between stakeholders have the potential to be more equitable. To work, this type of tourism needs the cooperation of state agencies and the media.

Conclusion

Ethnic or hill tribe tourism in northern Thailand is peripheral tourism, in terms of both its economic benefit and socio-cultural relations to other stakeholders. Ethnic tourism became popular among domestic and foreign tourists because of the primitive, authentic, unspoiled, and colorful images of the highland ethnic minorities. Tourists have been attracted to the region for more than 40 years because of the distinctive way of life of the ethnic minorities and the natural environment.

"Tourism is like fire – it can cook your food or burn your house down," as stated by Fox (1976 quoted in Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell, 1993). The growth of the ethnic tourism industry, on the one hand can provide economic opportunities for the state, middlemen, and villagers. In certain contexts, it can become a means for ethnic minorities, as peripheral people, to gain some recognition by the state, such as for those without citizenship avoiding expulsion because of their popularity with tourists or for those living in national parks. On the other hand, it gradually creates disharmony among villagers due to unequal economic gains, leads to artificial interactions between stakeholders, and harms natural resources. The more ethnic communities deal with tourism, the faster their traditional ways of life are being eroded.

The dilemma is that the ethnic minorities want their communities to be developed but the tourists want their life to remain "primitive." In order to reconcile this contradiction, ethnic tourees' way of life is then split into two parts. The preserved part, typically staged, fulfills tourist's expectations, while



the changed part is for their contemporary real life. Museums, cultural performances, and artificial souvenirs thus exist in tourist sites throughout northern Thailand as “staged authenticity.” Based on four decades of experience in Thailand, ethnic tourism has dramatically eroded the exotic culture of tourees and of necessity increasingly moved farther afield in search of more unspoiled sites. Tourists are not only moving farther from the tourist centers of Thailand, but also to the less-visited neighboring countries of the Greater Mekong Subregion in search of the more “unspoiled” life and culture of ethnic groups in Lao PDR, Vietnam, or Yunnan.

Fortunately, the recent emergence of ecotourism and community-based tourism in the highland ethnic communities of northern Thailand provides a more positive and equal framework for tourism development. Through these new forms of tourism, local villagers play a key role in managing tourism based on their willingness, participation, and dignity. This new paradigm shift in ethnic tourism entails a mutual understanding between tourist and touree, since both sides spend more time together for discussion and information exchange. Moreover, these forms of ethnic tourism should lead to more sustainable tourism, as local villagers do not rely entirely on tourism for their income, and an awareness of preserving ethnic culture and the environment is developed by all stakeholders.

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