

The Politics of Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand

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The Workshop on “Mekong Tourism : Learning Across Borders”

Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University

25 February 2005

99 things not to miss in Thailand

10 Trek to the tribes

“Once the pastime of adventurous outdoorsy 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 a unspoiled hill-tribe village, a home stay on a isolated river or a nature hike to study the history of exotic Himalayan flowers that thrive on remote Thai mountaintops. Despite the trekking companies’ glowing promises, there aren’t 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, October 2004, P.19).

1. Abstract

Much of the discussion of ethnic tourism has concentrated on the impact of tourism on ethnic communities, hosts and guests and commoditisation.¹ This paper examines ethnic tourism to the extent of political relationship between tourists, middlemen—businessmen and state—and ethnic tourees. It is my argument that, through ethnic tourism, interaction between the three stakeholders is on a surface level. Tourists who eagerly explore unspoiled cultures and consume authentic experiences and souvenirs tend to get only the fake and dramatic ones, since there is only a short time for the encounter. The main purpose of the middlemen and ethnic tourees for dealing with tourists is based only on business. Meanwhile the state, which comprises 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 less authenticity of ethnic culture exists. Instead, it is more and more a staged authenticity that is being performed for the tourist. Highland ethnic villagers, as tourees, have gradually learned and adapted to take advantage of tourism, and their encounter with other stakeholders in the industry is still as inferiors. Nonetheless, the recent existence of alternative ethnic tourism, such as ecotourism and community-based tourism, has created dignity and much equality between the three parties. Details of this paper draw from both secondary data of previous publications and primary data from personal observation and interviews.

2. Historical Context and Images of Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand

Highland ethnic groups or hill tribes in northern Thailand are comprised of ten linguistic distinctive groups, with a population of 922,975, and the communities are mainly scattered in 20 provinces of northern and northwestern Thailand.² Due to historical and environmental contexts, they rarely share a common way of life with lowlanders who have inhabited the lowland area for centuries. Because highland ethnic minorities have a distinctive way of life, cultural exoticism among highland ethnic groups and the surrounding natural resources environment in northern Thailand therefore attract both

domestic and foreign tourist. Ethnic tourism evidently became popular because of journeys for recreation of the royal family and the bourgeoisie of central Thailand. In addition, both government and private sectors have played a significant role in taking the primitive images of highland ethnic groups as advertisements to attract foreign tourists.

Despite the fact that native highland and lowland people in this region have different cultures and the majority live apart from each other, due to lack of transportation and contamination of diseases in the past, they have lived together harmoniously for centuries. Journey up and down hill before the Second World War was fearful among people of both groups, especially during the rainy season during which malaria was easily spread. Out of the rainy season, male adult lowlanders traveled to highland communities for the purpose of trade, both to sell goods from lowland markets and to buy raw opium, cattle and forest products from highlanders. Meanwhile, highland people traveled down to lowland markets to buy fundamental goods, such as salt, flashlights, batteries, kerosene, nylon ropes, fabrics, etc.

Journeys to the uplands for the purpose of recreation began in the early 1930s. Princess Dara Rassamee, a princess of the Chiang Mai court who had been living in Bangkok as consort to Chulalongkorn, King Rama V, returned to reside in Chiang Mai in 1932. As a royal family member, she and her followers traveled to nearby famous high mountains of the region, such as Doi Ang Khang and Doi Suthep.³ Along the way, the blossom of the opium poppy, the costumes and way of life of the highland people drew her attention.⁴ After the Second World War, bourgeoisie and Christian missionaries began to visit highland communities for the purpose of exploring their exotic culture and for religious propaganda. Furthermore, since the early 1960s more and more government officials and international officials were sent to conduct surveys and provide services for basic needs for highland people. These people played a major role on bringing the images of highlanders to the lowland public, mainly by publications.⁵ Moreover, later on, media was an important means of taking their images to the public. For example, the movies of *Tai Fah Si Khram* (Under the Blue Sky), *Khon Phukhao* (Mountain People), *Sua Phukhao* (Mountain Tiger), and songs of *Mida*, *Sao Chiang Mai*, etc. were popular prominent media. Another influential media used to present the highland ethnic images to the outside world was photography, in the form of postcards. Hitchcock, King and Pawnwell described the role of photography on ethnic tourism in Southeast Asia as follows:

“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” (1993:13).

In the local context, Doi Pui, a Hmong village on Doi Suthep, was one of the pioneer highland sites to draw the attention of tourists, since it is the closest highland village to the lowland vicinity of Chiang Mai. Due to the location of the village, which is next to the temple on Doi Suthep and Phuphing Palace, two famous tourist sites of Chiang Mai, both Thai and foreign tourists have been visiting Doi Pui since the late 1960s, especially after Phuphing Palace was built in 1961. According to Hmong villagers, in the beginning tourists trekked 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, etc. or not. Some tourists even asked for opium to smoke,” said a villager.⁶ Villagers then got the idea to initiate tourist business by selling both items they had and what they bought from lowland markets. The villagers were also inspired to engage in tourism by the encouragement of His Majesty the King, after he and his family made several visits to the village. In addition to crops from fields and husbandry, tourist business in Doi Pui became a second source of income for Hmong villagers since the early 1970s. At the beginning, they just sold souvenirs for tourists in their village, but later on they went further to Phuphing Palace, Doi Suthep temple, urban Chiang Mai and other provinces throughout the country to sell their souvenirs.

In the city of Chiang Mai, business sectors played a prominent role on 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 culture shows for tourists, while the later provided areas free of charge for highland people to sell their souvenirs and products. As more and more Hmong from Doi Pui and nearby villages became souvenir sellers, they later went further afield to Sanamluang, Chatuchak, Hua Hin, Phuket and Samui, respectively, due to marketing competition.

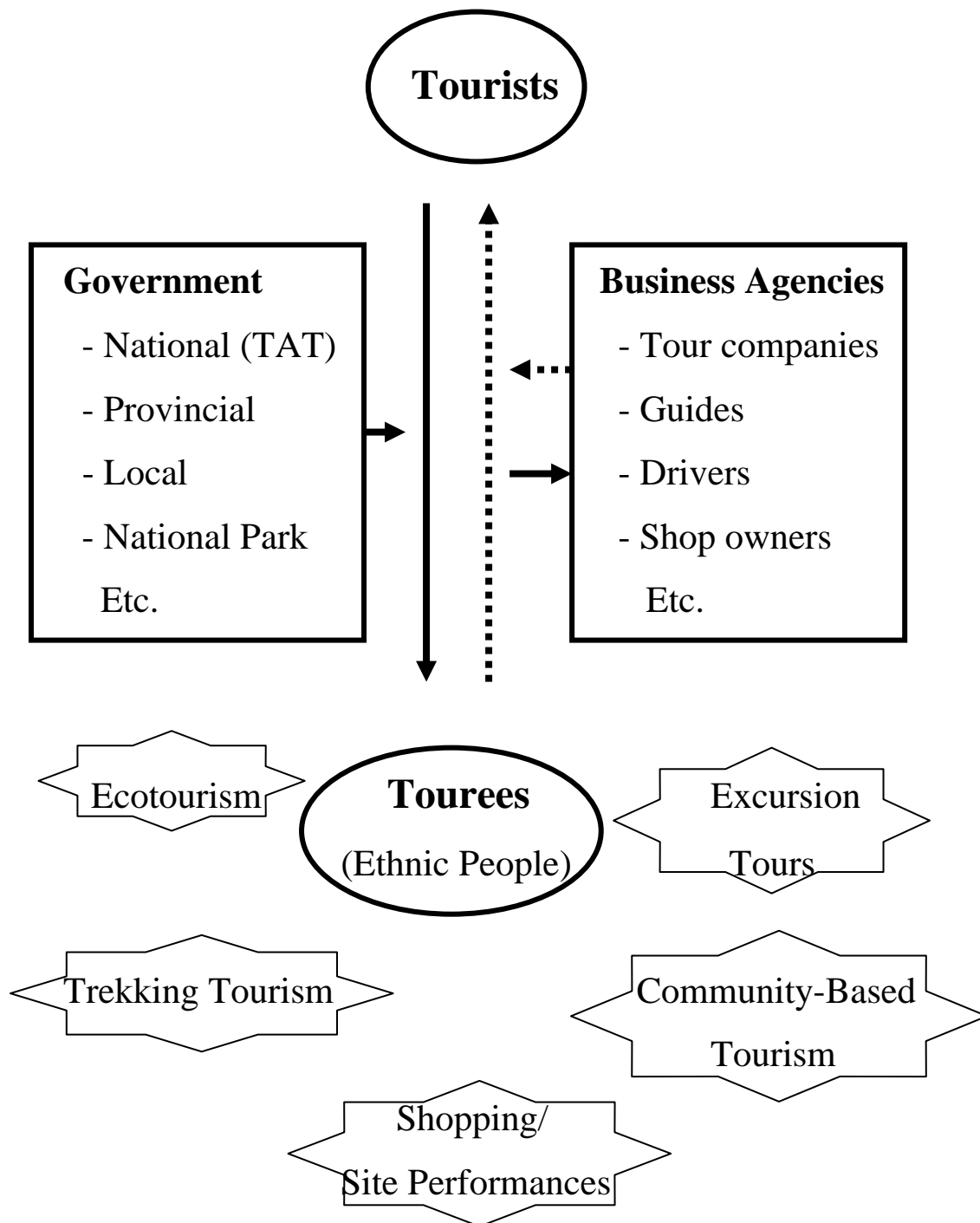
Thus Hmong became well known among lowland Thais and foreigners, due to the appearance of Hmong on tourist sites and in the lowlands. Furthermore, in some contexts, their ethnic name and images represented other highland ethnic groups, according to the perception of outside people. Other highland ethnic groups, especially the Lisu, Akha and Lahu, then later followed the Hmong in dealing with tourists in towns. Part of their ethnic images for lowland Thais and the international public is because of the tourism process. This image was gradually perceived by the way they present themselves when dealing with tourists in towns and with tourists who visit them in their villages.

Since cultural exoticism and authentic souvenirs of highland ethnic groups are the key attraction of ethnic tourism in northern Thailand, both the government and private sectors have played an important role in promoting tourists to visit highland people. In Bangkok, during the “Amazing Thailand” and “Unseen in Thailand” tourism promotion of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), a big photo of an Akha lady with a beautifully decorated headdress was posted on the arrival floor of the International Building of Don Muang 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 or NGO based, have become involved with ethnic tourism. For instance, the Royal Project, which is an agrarian

based foundation that has been promoting cash crops as replacement for opium cultivation among highland people for three decades, has added tourism to its business since early 2000s (Royal Project 2003).⁷ Another prominent agency is the Tribal Research Institute, in which has been lasted since the restructure of government under Prime Minister Taksin Shinawatra in 2002, had been a primary source of information for tourists. Presently, archives, artifacts and staff from the former Tribal Research Institute are mainly 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 that has taken place 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, presently, community-based tourism. No matter which kind of ethnic tourism, in general the stakeholders consist of tourists, middleman – government and/or business agencies - and tourees or ethnic villagers.

The Structure of Ethnic Tourism



This diagram shows the structure or stakeholders involved in ethnic tourism. The tourist is the one who eagerly explores the “unspoiled natives,” (van den Berghe and Keyes 1984:346). It is not just to see the tourees that the tourist visits an ethnic village, but the tourist also wants to take pictures and buy authentic souvenirs from the tourees as well. Regarding the interaction between the touree and the middleman, van den Berghe and Keyes 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 (1984: 347).

In ethnic tourism, with an 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 limitations. According to Cohen (2001), tourist agencies, especially trekking agencies, advertise highland ethnic tourees with different images. The following are example images and details in flyers collected by Cohen (2001:44-52).

- “Original”: “If you plan to visit original . . . tribal villages your dream will become true” (a 1982 ad.).
- “Primitive”: “You will see primitive hill tribe people” (a 1979 ad.), “. . . excellent experience [of] . . . primitive hilltribe villages” (a 1978 ad).
- “Exotic”: “You’ll enjoy exotic wonders of nature” (a 1980 ad).
- “Spectacular”: “Tour . . . some of northern Thailand’s most spectacular jungle country” (a 1979 ad.).
- “Unspoilt”: SEE MANY UNSPOILT AND REMOTE HILLTRIBE VILLAGES” (a 1977 ad.) “visit . . . a newly discovered unspoilt Meo Hill Tribe Village (40 km from the city [of Chiang Mai])” (a 1986 ad.).

For the state, agency roles are more about promoting tourism, providing basic information, protecting tourists and even investing infrastructure for tourism business. The state itself doesn’t benefit with income directly from the tourist industry but in the overall GDP of the nation. Hence, its concern is more in campaigning for mass tourism. At the national level, the promotion of “Visit Thailand Year,” “Amazing Thailand,” “Unseen in Thailand,” etc. caused attention in both domestic and foreign tourists. At the local level, it is not only provincial government offices but also many other agencies that support ethnic tourism. One prominent agency is the Tourist Police. Through the bureaucratic system, villagers, even in remote villages, have been asked to cooperate with the government’s tourism policy.⁸

3. State Policies on Ethnic Tourism Business

Despite the fact that the tourism industry is risky financially, and as previously mentioned gradually destroys the traditional life of the villagers and environment, the state still plays a important role in promoting tourism, since it generates about 62,203 million Baht for northern Thailand (TAT 2004). The state government has invested a lot of money in infrastructure, especially road construction in highland areas, in order to provide convenience for tourists.⁹ The road to such remote villages such as Nam Phiang Din of the Karen long neck 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. Consequently, the more facilities developed, the more ethnic villagers' lives are changed, or the less "authentic" they are. Such evidence could be linked to the politics of state and ethnic tourism. As far as I have observed, there are at least three phenomena of such contradictory policies. Firstly, 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's assimilation policies toward highland ethnic minorities have been implemented through the mechanisms of education, religious conversion and the registration system. Speaking ethnic languages are banned in schools. Local or indigenous knowledge is not recognized in the school curriculum. Instead, only central Thai and curriculum is officially used in schools throughout the country. Specifically for highland ethnic minorities, the Dhammacarik Buddhism Project has been initiated and imposed on them in order to convert them to be Buddhist, the same as the majority of the country. The idea behind this policy is for ethnic groups to give up their spiritual belief systems, which are considered by the state as primitive religious beliefs. Moreover, the state's registration system aims at changing ethnic identities into Thai. Having a Thai first name and family name is part of the empirical implementation of this policy, while having an ethnic name and surname is considered ridiculous in mainstream society. In contrast to this assimilation policy, the state's ethnic tourism policy aims at strengthening ethnic minorities' traditional ways of life in order to attract tourists. According to national economic purpose, it is not only tourism promotion but also the One Tambol One Product (OTOP) and SME businesses that should simultaneously encourage ethnic villagers to create their business, which should be based on their local and ethnic backgrounds.

Secondly, despite the government total ban on and suppression of opium cultivation among highland ethnic minorities, its policy simultaneously promotes opium for tourism purpose, as pointed out by van den Berghe and Keyes,

"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" (1984:348).

Two opium museums have been recently set up in the area of the Golden Triangle representing the image of that geographical area which is intrinsically connected to opium. In another tourist area, Phu Hin Rongkla of Phitsanuloke Province, the army attempted to demonstrate opium poppy growing a few years ago, as a tourist attraction, while strictly watching over and cutting down the opium poppies in Hmong other groups' fields. Also, although the government of Chiang Mai Province severely controls the growing of opium poppies, it is allowed in the tourist gardens of one Hmong village.

Thirdly, there are contradictory policies on citizenship and tourism. Despite the fact that 'long neck' Karen in Mae Hong Son and Chiang Rai are recent illegal immigrants, their lack of citizenship status is simply ignored by the government. The government, however, pays more attention on promoting them for tourism, 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. As illegal immigrants, they are often intimidated by the local government officials of Mae Hong Son and Chiang Rai who

highlight their illegal status when they are threatened with relocation for tourism purposes. This situation also happened to the Mlabri ethnic group when the provincial governments of Nan and Phrae tried to persuade them to settle down in the respective provinces in order to attract tourists. In this aspect, 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 has inconsistent policies for natural resource conservation and tourism. Prior to the boom of ethnic tourism in the highlands of northern Thailand, the state had declared national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in many areas where ethnic groups lived and had their fields. Conflict between its implementation had occurred during the past decade. However, the tension has been released on a certain level, partially because of tourism promotion in natural conservation areas, either ecotourism or ethnic tourism. According to the law for national parks, no construction is allowed. But for tourism, basic infrastructure and private constructions are allowed in national parks.¹⁰ Nevertheless, villagers' attempts to preserve natural resources, whether for tourism purposes or others, are not officially recognized by the state. The Community Forestry Bill, which has been prolonged for a decade in Parliament and the House of Representatives, is a good example of such contradicting policies and implementations (Yos, 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, other legal 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 acceptable under the context of tourism. Furthermore, their way of life and stereotypes of their culture and traditions, even illegal practices such as opium growers, are often used as 'authentic' images for tourism promotion.

4. Authenticity and the Ethnic Tourism Business

Ethnic tourism, on the surface level, is likely to provide economic alternatives for highland people. At the same time it creates a new paradigm of commercialism for the people, even the children. 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 reaches only the surface level and gets only "staged authenticity," due to the economic purpose of the villagers. Prior to the advent of tourism, the life of the highland people was mainly self-sufficient. But when tourists visited them and asked to buy items that they used in their daily life, the villagers saw the economic value of those items. In the beginning, they sold the "authentic" items they used daily to the tourists. Later on, they made fake items for the purpose of tourism, or even bought items from elsewhere to sell to the tourists, as noted by Cooper (1984),

"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," (cited in Hitchcock, King and Parnwell 1993:11).

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 2 days to finish.” In Doi Pui and the Night Bazaar, since the beginning of the late 1960s to mid 1980s Hmong vendors have sold both handicrafts hand-made 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, wallet and bags of needlework or embroidery, while factory products are bracelets, necklaces, rings, etc. In the second period, around the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, almost of the items sold for tourists were bought from Mae Sai in Chiang Rai province and Tha Chilek in Burma. Those items were originally produced in Nepal, India and Pakistan. Presently, from the mid 1990s on, the main souvenirs they sell are items made of resin, the cast molten of chemical liquid in various forms. They tell tourist that the item is crafted from elephant tusks. Tourists who visit both 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 authentic. In Khunklang, a Hmong village on the way to Doi Inthanon, in addition to agricultural products that they grow themselves, Hmong vendors buy fresh fruit from Muang Mai market and elsewhere and pickled fruits from manufacturers in Chiang Mai to sell to tourists. They always respond to the tourist’s question: “We made it by ourselves.” Therefore, with the exception of wholesaling, doing business with tourists for contemporary highland tourees don’t necessarily pay much attention to the authenticity of products, since the relationships between tourist and vendor is of very short duration. Moreover, the best selling product depends on the current favorite style or fashion, which changes from time to time.

Cultural performance of highland ethnic people, both in highland communities and lowland tourist places, is just for show. In this sense, tourists are seen as consumers, and the owner of the business and performers can benefit economically. They don’t care much about presenting authentic culture or even the correct culture for tourists. For instance, in one Khantoke restaurant in Chiang Mai, a group of performers for 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 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. Furthermore, in the case of Mlabri ethnic group in Nan province, tourist guides delude tourists by creating a performance of the hunter-gatherer lifestyles. 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, build a temporary house of banana leaves and gives them a pig. Soon after the tourist group arrives, the Mlabri men pretend to come out from the jungle and use spears to kill the pig which has been tied up at the performance site. All these phenomena are explained to tourists, by the guide, as the real life of the Mlabri people. Indeed, the life of Mlabri people is no longer this way, but is still being presented to the tourists as such by the guide, as a middleman, in order for business purposes. Hence, in this case, touree and middleman perform the game of touristic make-believe or “staged authenticity,” in order to fulfill the tourist’s expectations, which are based on images of the life of the tourees that they have previously seen.¹¹

In terms of income, in general outsiders may see that the tourism industry benefits highland tourees in tourist sites. However, if compared to other stakeholders, the villagers gain is very low. For example for a trekking tour, according to a study of Michaud (1997:144), "..., the share that reaches Hmong villagers in Ban Suay from what is spent by tourists climbs to about 2.3 percent (206 out of 11,400 Baht), a minuscule share that cannot stand comparison with that of the Thai middlemen, the real winners with 97.7 percent." He also pointed out that among the villagers at a tourist site, only a few households, mainly those of the village headman and clan leaders who have close relationship with the guides, are hosts for trekking groups to stay overnight. In the studies of Yos (2003:287-8) and his team, it was also found that it was only the village headmen in the tourist sites who owned guesthouses, others becoming mere handicraft vendors and porters. The majority of villagers were not involved with the tourist business. Tourism, which comes from outside, then creates different classes and conflicts among local villagers. Such phenomena was also confirmed and highlighted by Pleumarom

"Tourism offers jobs and income for local people, but it also needs to be noted that, of course, not all local people benefit or are willing to abandon their customary rights and way of life in exchange for more cash income. This is likely to create a division between those who participate in tourism activities and those who do not – within as well as among communities in destination areas" (1997:32).

In such tourist sites as Doi Pui and Khunklang, less than a half of the total village households own shops or stalls. Villagers with a little capital or less ideas, but who also want to deal with tourists, becomes mobile vendors, dressing up for picture-taking, or even beggars. Due to high competition in local tourist sites, many of them who depend on income from tourism travel farther to other tourist sites throughout the country. However, in some villages it is normal that highland tourist vendors also have alternative sources of income, in addition to tourism. What is of concern to them is the risk of tourism itself which is out of their control, such as changing routes to other more unspoiled sites, political factor like terrorism and the war in Iraq, the spread of SARS and bird flu, etc.

5. Social and Cultural Encounters through Ethnic Tourism

Based on existing levels of inferiority and superiority between highland ethnic groups and lowland people, power relationships between domestic tourists and highland ethnic tourees is unequal. Domestic tourists treat highland ethnic tourees as peoples of lower social and cultural status, still primitive or backward. During a short visit and minimal interaction between the two groups, Thai tourists doesn't pay much attention on exploring the real life of ethnic tourees but are satisfied with just a surface level encounter, especially those exotic stereotypes tourists have perceived before. Ethnic tourees, in many cases, become just tourism objects for tourist to visit, as stated by Cohen,

"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” (Cohen 2001:75).

In terms of economy, ethnic tourees view tourists, both domestic and foreign, as rich people who have both higher economic and social status when compared to themselves. As far as I have observed, highland ethnic vendors deal humbly with tourist, while tourist often act offensively. Once I observed a long bargaining conversation between a Thai female tourist and a ‘long neck’ Karen female vendor. The tourist said with affront: “I want to buy [the postcards] because of my compassion on you. If you cannot discount, I won’t buy them.” The same situation can also be observed among the Akha mobile vendors in the Night Bazaar of Chiang Mai and Khaosan Road in Bangkok. Although such inequality of economic relations between the two groups doesn’t occur in every case, it is often seen in general interactions, especially in the case of new vendor from a small ethnic group.¹² Inequality from tourism also happens between villagers and guides as middlemen. In 1990, while carrying out fieldwork in a Hmong village of Kaeng Hom, in Pai District, a village headman who hosted trekking tour groups asked me “Do those Thai guides get any payment for taking groups of westerners to visit us?” Since he didn’t know about the tourist business, but generously provided a place for groups to stay overnight according to Hmong tradition, he had never asked for any payment from Thai guides. It was the guides who offered to give him only 20 Baht per tourist, for staying one night in his house. In this case, to the Hmong headman’s understanding, the money was a kindness of the Thai guide rather than a business deal.¹³

Due to inferiority and less power for bargaining between ethnic tourees and tourists, and also the middlemen, villagers are reluctant to refuse to perform their cultural dances and ceremonies for tourists. Some of their ritual ceremonies and objects are sacred, so its shouldn’t being asked to perform and touch or beat over and over again, according to the requests of tourists and guides. Such performances could devalue their traditional meaning and insult villagers’ feelings. There are at least three evidences I would like to present here, the swinging ceremony of the Akha, the Hmong drumming and the Mien Shaman ritual. The swinging ceremony among the Akha is performed just once a year, during the time of waiting for agricultural products to be harvested, around late August to early September. The main purposes are 1) to use the free time while waiting to harvest crops, 2) to thank their own ancestors and local deities for protecting their crops in the fields, and 3) for the women to celebrate their skillful of dressmaking. Therefore, before the celebration, the village spiritual leader performs a ceremony while setting up the swing. The ceremony is four days long. In one Akha tourism village in Chiang Rai however, swinging is performed time after time during the day, whenever a new tourist group comes and the guide asks the villagers to do it, mainly for the purpose of taking photographs. Swinging in this village has then become just an ordinary activity and play for Akha children who are involved with tourists. In such a context, tourists perceive none of those social functions related to Akha’s way of life. To the villagers, especially the elders and the performer of rituals, the cultural value of this ceremony has been decreased.

The next case is the drumming of the Hmong. According to Hmong tradition, a drum could be beaten when performing rituals, such as funerals, to release the soul, and cow spirit rituals. The sound of the drum, therefore, signifies to only death related rituals in Hmong society. It is the Hmong belief that beating a drum without a corresponding ritual

would cause death or disaster for villagers. Hence, very rare ritual performers in Hmong society keep the drum after it has been used. Mostly a drum is built for a certain ritual purpose, then immediately destroyed. However, in a Hmong tourism village, a drum is kept with other artifacts in a small museum run by a Christian and Buddhist Hmong group. The man who takes care of the museum often beats it to show it to the tourists. Such behavior has caused complaints from other Hmong neighbors who still follow traditional Hmong beliefs. However, due to the power of the group that own the museum and the government's tourism policy, the people who disagree cannot do anything about this matter.

Another case is the performing of Mien shaman rituals for tourism purposes in town. In one private tourism 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, since this group does not have many activities that can be seen as entertainment like the other groups. Traditionally, the shaman ritual can be performed in real situations, because the shaman has to enter a trance and communicate with both human and spirit worlds. To gain power and be in the trance, the shaman calls for help from the shaman spirits, especially the souls of his dead teachers. In the village, it is not a customary for any elder to imitate such a ritual, though sometimes children do so but with innocent.

6. Alternative and Dignified Ethnic Tourism

Among various highland ethnic groups who are tourees in northern Thailand, adjustments have been made to ethnic tourism in two ways: either quick or slow responses to tourism. Highland ethnic groups who have been exposed to commercialism before, easily adapted to and take advantage of the tourism business that has appeared in their communities. In general they adapt to tourism step by step, as portrayed by Cohen,

“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 village” (Cohen 2001:75).

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 lowlands, they see their culture and artifacts as valuable things that can be sold. Tourism business was initiated in local communities. Later on, such ethnic groups as the Hmong, Lisu, Lahu and Akha rapidly became vendors in urban and tourist sites. Those include the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar, the Chiang Rai Night Bazaar, places for cultural performances such as restaurants and others, fairs, resorts and beaches throughout the country, due to the initiative of new market. Successful ethnic vendors from these groups then become wholesale dealers, not only among ethnic communities in Thailand but also in neighboring countries. Self-confidence and power relationships with tourists and with relevant people who are not ethnic, are better than in the past. Hence, it is through the tourism channel that they have gradually negotiated their ethnic identity or images into the public arena.

For those ethnic groups who responded slowly to tourism, they have finally found a more equal and dignified way to deal with tourism. For example, the Karen who did not respond to tourism in the same way as other groups have taken their simple way of life in which they live harmoniously with nature and the environment as a tourism attraction, and this has evolved into ecotourism and community-based tourism.¹⁴ In this case, the tourists and middlemen pay more respect to nature and ethnic people's life and culture, because all are explained as congruently related to one another. Also, interaction between local villagers and tourists in these kinds of alternative tourism situations is longer, the role of middlemen, especially guides, becomes less than in other forms of ethnic tourism. Consequently, in these kinds of tourist sites, tourism has strengthened highland ethnic villagers to revive their local knowledge and historical sites, preserve their community forest and redefine ecological meanings for ecotourism purposes. Hence, in general, these new trends of ethnic tourism create more equal interactions between ethnic tourists and tourists and middlemen, especially guides. Ethnic tourism, to the extent of ecotourism and community-based tourism, becomes a new phenomenon to raise the social and cultural status of ethnic tourists, in terms of dealing with outsiders. Potjana (2003:21) has drawn a diagram of community-based tourism as a tool for community development.



Source: Potjana (2003:21)

Due to the movement of this new paradigm shift of ethnic tourism, community-based tourism was raised among other major issues and discussed among ethnic minorities during a conference in November 2004, in Chiang Mai.¹⁵ According to highland ethnic villagers, community-based tourism should be a tourism which is

- created by villagers, based on villagers' willingness
- controlled by villagers, the whole community, both rules and incomes
- based on self awareness and respect
- recovers the local people's knowledge
- conserves the forest and environment
- preserves local traditions
- based on villagers' real life or authentic traditions and food
- is only an alternative source of income for the community

Although most the components of an ideal community-based tourism haven't been attained in contemporary ethnic communities, such criteria have empowered villagers, as tourees, in their relation to tourists and middlemen. Importantly, under the context of community-based tourism, local villagers can screen out guides and tourists who conduct misbehavior in their community territory. Power relationships between different groups of

stake holders then should be more equal. Moreover, such an ideal type of tourism won't be accomplished without cooperation and dissemination of state agencies and media.

7. Conclusion

Ethnic or hill tribe tourism in northern Thailand is peripheral tourism, in terms of both economic benefit and socio-cultural relation to other stakeholders. Ethnic tourism became popular among both domestic and foreign tourists because of the "primitive," "authentic," "unspoiled," "colorful," etc. images of the highland ethnic minorities. It is because of their distinctive ways of life and the natural circumstances that tourists have been attracted to the region for almost half a century.

As pointed out by Fox: "Tourism is like fire. It can cook your food or burn your house down" (1976:44, cited by Hitchcock, King and Parnwell 1993:16). 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 recognition by the state, such those as living in national parks and those without citizenship not being expelled out of the country. On the other hand, it gradually creates disharmonious relationships among villagers due to unequal economic gains, creates only 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 local people want their community to be developed but the tourists want their life to remain 'primitive.' In order to compromise this contradiction, ethnic tourists' way of life is then evidently split into two parts. The preserved part fulfills tourist's expectations, but the changed part is for their contemporary real life. Museums, cultural performances and artificial souvenirs, therefore exist in tourist sites throughout northern Thailand, as "staged authenticity." Based on four decades of experience, at the local level, the route of ethnic tourism has dramatically eroded the exotic culture of tourists. In the Greater Mekong Sub-region, the same situation is occurring in all countries. Hence, there are more and more tourists wanting to explore more "unspoiled" life and culture of ethnic groups in other neighboring countries such as Laos, Vietnam and China.

However, the emergence of ecotourism and community-based tourism in contemporary highland ethnic communities of northern Thailand has become a positive and more equal trend of tourism. Through these new forms of tourism, local villagers play a key role in managing tourism based on their willingness, participation and dignity. Such a new paradigm shift for ethnic tourism entails a mutual understanding between tourist and tourist, since both sides spend much more time together for discussion and information exchange. Moreover, these forms of ethnic tourism should lead to sustainable tourism, as local villagers do not entirely rely on tourism business for their income, and consciousness for preserving ethnic culture and the environment is also perceived by all stakeholders.

Endnotes

¹ Examples of those studies include *The Effect of Tourism Development on an Akha Community: A Chiang Rai Villages Case Study* (Toyota 1996), *Case Study on the Effects of Tourism on Culture and the Environment: Thailand* (Chupinit Kesmanee and Kulawadee Charoensri 1995), *Impact of Tourism Industry in Chiang Mai Province* (Chayan and Chayan 1987), *Tourism and Changes in Hill Tribe Villages* (Jiraporn 2001), *Impact and Problem of Trekking Tourism and the Social Context: Case Studies of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son* (Suwit 1993).

² *The Hill Tribes of Thailand* (2004), by Technical Service Club, Tribal Museum, Chiang Mai.

³ She built a summer palace on Doi Suthep, just 200 meters below the temple (Boonserm 1989).

⁴ *Sadet Lanna I* (1989), by Boonserm Satraphai.

⁵ Examples of those publications include “30 Nations in Chiang Rai” (Samsib chart nai Chiang Rai) by Boonchuay Srisawadi,

⁶ Interviewed with Neng (pseudoname), a villager of Doi Pui, in 15 December 2004.

⁷ In 2003, the Royal Project Foundation published a set of four books regarding 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, there was a study project to set up a master plan on tourism building capacity in Ang Khang and Inthanon stations.

⁸ In a Karen village in a Mae Taeng tourism area, one household head complained to me about villagers’ refusal to host tourists, due to the misbehavior of tourists. However, the village headman, who benefited from tourism, and the guides, threatened and forced them to cooperate with the government’s policy.

⁹ In the past, one of the reasons for road construction to reach highland communities was based on the national security purposes for sending troops to defeat Communist bases and take control over the jungle area. Presently, as occurred in many remote communities, it is for the purpose of tourism.

¹⁰ According to the state’s ecotourism policy, every national park has turned into a tourist site. Both temporary and permanent resident places are set inside the national park, in order to serve tourists.

¹¹ A good example of a performance of “staged authenticity” is the floating market in Bangkok. According to Maneewan (2004), the floating market is organized by the cooperation of local people and TAT for the purpose of tourism, though the contemporary real life of local people is no longer practiced in such a way.

¹² It should be noted that the more highland ethnic vendors deal with tourist, 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 the ethnic touree also perceives tourist images, especially via business negotiations.

¹³ In Hmong tradition, taking care of guest is the hospitality of the host for distant relatives or people on journeys.

¹⁴ See for examples the works of Yos (2003) and Sinth (2003) and Bornemeier, Victor and Durst (1997).

¹⁵ The conference on “Impact of Globalization, Regionalism and Nationalism on Ethnic Minorities in Southeast Asia,” was organized by Chiang Mai University and NGOs during 15-17 November 2004, at Amity Green Hill Hotel, Chiang Mai.

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