

Creating Diversity:

Ethnic Tourism and Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand

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Abstract

This research aims to show that ethnic tourism has the effect of promoting diversity – or sometimes even promoting a hierarchy – in each ethnic minority group, based on field research conducted in Northern Thailand.

Previous research analyzed the effects of ethnic tourism on the relationship among local ethnic groups. However, this research focused on how formation changed within the ethnic minority groups after ethnic tourism came into the area. In the Northern Thailand, diverse populations have lived throughout history. Some of them were categorized as “Hill tribes,” in the process of the formation of the nation state. However, the mountain people considered Burmese refugees have more little chances to be admitted rights of “ethnic minority in Thailand,” than mountain people who live in Thailand since before 1950s.

However, mountain population considered Burmese refugees by Thai government represent authentic hill tribes in the context of ethnic tourism in the same time. This means that even though the image of hill tribes is simple in the tourism industry, there is a distinction between hill tribes that can positively profit from the opportunities of being hill tribes, as they have rights in Thailand, and hill tribes who cannot utilize the opportunities of being hill tribes, because they are not admitted rights in Thailand. The latter people must be passive toward hill tribal images.

This article showed that people are faced with the different roles and definitions of “ethnic minority.” The one is the definition from nation building, and the other is the definition from the globalization. This article provides an example of conflicts between two irreconcilable definitions of “ethnic minorities.” Under such circumstances, Ethnic tourism promotes the diversity of ethnic minorities but depends on their status as regulated by nation states.

要 約

本稿の目的は、エスニック・ツーリズムが、エスニック・マイノリティ内の多様性——ときには階層性さえ——を促進することがあるのを示すことである。事例としては、北タイの「山地民」と観光を扱う。

エスニック・ツーリズムに関する先行研究は、観光が、ローカル社会における主流民族とマイノリティとの関係に、どのような影響を与えるかを分析してきた。これに対して本研究では、エスニック・ツーリズムが持ちこまれたことによって、それに関わるエスニック・マイノリティ内の構造がどのように変化したかに注目する。

北タイには、歴史を通じて多様な人々が住んできた。北タイ住民のうち一部は、1950年代からのタイ国民国家形成の過程で、「山地民」として分類された。1950年代以前からタイ領内の山岳地帯にいたこれらの人々は、今日タイのエスニック・マイノリティとしての権利主張を始めている。しかし、1980年代以降にタイ領内へやってきた人々は、たとえタイの「山地民」と生活習慣や言語を共有していても、タイ政府からビルマ難民と見做され、タイのエスニック・マイノリティとしての権利を主張することが非常に難しい。しかし同時に、これらタイ政府がビルマ難民と認識する人々の中には、しばしばエスニック・ツーリズムの文脈で、「真正な山地民」の表象を担う人がいる。

言い換えれば、観光産業の文脈では、単一の「山地民」イメージが消費されているが、ナショナリズムの文脈では、タイのエスニック・マイノリティである「山地民」として公認される人と、公認してもらえない人との区別が生まれている。この山岳地帯出身者のなかの法的立場の区別は、エスニック・ツーリズムの中で「山地民らしさ」を利用する側（旅行代理店やツアーガイド・仲買人や小売業者）になれるか、利用される側（村人、踊り子、道端の物売り）に甘んじるしかないかの区別を生みだしている。

ここから、今日の北タイには異なる「山地民」の定義と役割期待が並存しているといえる。ひとつはナショナリズムの文脈で生まれた国民の周辺に位置づけられた周辺民族像であり、もうひとつはグローバリゼーションの文脈で生まれた観光資源としての秘境の民族イメージである。これら2つの異なる「山地民」の定義と役割は、常に一致するものではない。本稿では、こうした錯綜した状況が人々の生活に与える影響の一例として、北タイにおけるエスニック・ツーリズムの発展が、それに関わる山岳地帯出身者のなかの、法的「山地民」になれる者となれない者との、立場の違いを促進しているという例を示した。

Key words : Ethnic tourism, Hill Tribes, Ethnic minority, Globalization

キーワード : 観光、エスニック・ツーリズム、山地民、エスニック・マイノリティ、グローバリゼーション

Introduction

This research aims to show that ethnic tourism has the effect of promoting diversity – or sometimes even promoting a hierarchy – among ethnic minority groups.

Previous research analyzed the effects of ethnic tourism on ethnic relations among local ethnic groups. This research shall analyze the effects of ethnic tourism on the ethnic relationships within ethnic minority groups. I here define ethnic tourism as tourism utilizing the existence of ethnic minority people. The difference between cultural tourism and ethnic tourism is that cultural tourism utilizes a particular scenery, building, or way of life, which tourists consider the local features of the area, and ethnic tourism utilizes the existence of the people themselves (van den Berghe and Keyes 1984: 345-348).

This research is based on field research conducted in Northern Thailand from 1999 to 2006. The current study starts with a review of the literature, which analyzed the effects of ethnic tourism on the relationship among local ethnic groups. Then, the study will show the simplicity of the image of the hill tribes during the tourism stage and analyze the multi-layered status of the hill tribes. After that, the study will consider the status of mountain people who migrated from Burma. Through that, this research will show the creation of diversity in the situation of mountain populations.

Ethnic tourism and ethnic minorities: Overview of previous research

Effects of ethnic tourism on the status of ethnic minorities within local context

van den Verge indicated that ethnic tourism consisted of ethnic borders from his analysis of ethnic tourism in Central America. He indicated that the role of “touree,” “tourist” and “middleman” are divided and depend upon ethnic borders (van den Berghe 1994: 122).

This concept was shared by researchers for a decade; however, Kathleen Adams later indicated that ethnic tourism has effects on the relationships among local ethnic groups (Adams 2006: 17). Adams had been engaged in research on ethnic tourism in Tana Toraja, Indonesia. Adams indicated that the population of Toraja had been regarded locally as somewhat inferior to the Bugis or the Makassarese. However, the local ethnic hierarchy system began to change when tourism flourished in Tana Toraja (Adams 2006: 18). Foreign tourists traveled to Tana Toraja saying that Toraja culture is precious, though Toraja culture has been regarded locally as inferior to the cultures of the Bugis or the Makassarese. This phenomenon brought confidence to the Toraja people (Adams 2006: 15). Adams notes that tourism created a global identity and position for the Toraja (Adams 2006: 17).

The research by Adams on the effect of ethnic tourism on the relationship among local ethnic groups was interesting. The points that Adams left for later research are (1) the effects of ethnic tourism on the internal human relationships within ethnic minority groups, and (2) the effects of ethnic tourism on ethnic relationships from the standpoint of members of the local dominant people. Adams analyzed the relationship among local ethnic groups; however, they are based on the standpoint of the Toraja, as far as her journals are concerned. It is

such an interesting point that the Toraja started to take pride in their culture because of tourism; however, the transformation of the ethnic relationships from the perspective of the Bugis or the Makassarese is left for future researchers. Researchers are to analyze the transformation of local ethnic relationships due to ethnic tourism from the standpoints of dominant ethnic groups, not from ethnic minorities.

In addition, Zeng, Cheung, and Han indicated that responses to ethnic tourism and social change from ethnic tourism are diverse even within ethnic minority groups (Cheung 1999; Han 2001; Zeng 2001). As far as ethnic relationships among ethnic groups transformed by ethnic tourism, as Adams indicated, internal human relationships within ethnic minority groups supposed to transform because of ethnic tourism. It is left to other researchers to analyze the changes.

Considering those research results, this research analyzes *how* ethnic tourism affects internal human relationships within ethnic minority groups. This research analyzes ethnic tourism on the hill tribes of Northern Thailand.

Image of hill tribes in tourism industry

Process of making the hill tribes a tourist attraction

Thailand has promoted the tourism industry since after the U. S. intervention in the Indochinese incidents.ⁱ Thousands of U. S. soldiers were stationed in Thailand during the war in Vietnam (Meyer 1988; Truong 1994) because (1) the northeastern part of Thailand was the base for the U. S. bombers targeting North Vietnam (Suehiro 1993: 55). Reportedly, 80% of bombers striking North Vietnam left from Northeastern Thailand (Suehiro 1993: 55). (2) Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, was the destination for U. S. soldiers on rest and recreation before returning to the front (Truong 1990: 300). The U.S. army designated several

cities – Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Sidney, and Tokyo – as rest and recreation sites for U.S. soldiers. Bangkok hosted the largest number of soldiers at that time (Meyer 1988: 72).

Under these circumstances, a large number of foreign businesses invested in hotel and recreation infrastructures in Bangkok (Truong 1990: 298-299). After the U. S. army retreated from Indochina, the OECD suggested that Thailand accept foreign tourists instead of U.S. soldiers for the sake of the investment (Truong 1990: 301). Therefore, Thailand started to attract foreign tourists while other Indochinese countries were still battlefields.

Thailand succeeded with this policy, and tourism became one of the major industry that brought foreign currency into Thailand. Jumbo jets were in practical use for passengers by the early 1980s. Those jumbo jets carried Western tourists from Europe or the United States to Thailand (United Nations 1996: 28). Asian countries had become richer since after 1980s. Every time an Asian country expanded its economy, Thailand received a new tourist supplier. The number of foreign tourists entering Thailand increased more than 100 times between 1960 to 2000. The foreign currency brought to Thailand by tourism increased 900 times from 1960 to the year 2003 (Tourism Authority of Thailand 1997, National Statistics of Thailand 2004).

In the process, Thailand created tourist attractions in the country. There were numerous potential tourist attractions in Thailand, such as the coast, beaches, and the historical heritage from the modern and medieval eras. They could be utilized as tourist attractions for modern mass tourism; however, the potential tourist attractions were scattered throughout Thailand. For the sake of bringing foreign tourists to the beaches and historical towns, Thailand expanded the infrastructure and furnished the villages and towns to make them attractive for foreign tourists (Meyer 1988: 65). Phuket used to be a small fishing village, but

the village became a major resort beach as a result of those endeavors.

In the process, the hill tribes of Northern Thailand were found to be a major tourist attraction for Western tourists, although Thai officials and the Thai tourism industry had not predicted it (Leepreecha 1997: 272). Chiang Mai Airport was upgraded to an international airport because Thai officials and Thai businessmen supposed that the historical heritage and natural scenery of Northern Thailand could be a major tourist attraction. To the surprise of Thai officials and businessmen, Western tourists preferred to visit mountain villages as an attractive destination.

To the surprise of Thai officials and Thai businessmen, Western tourists hired private guides to visit mountainous areas and hike mountain trails saying, "Hill tribal traditions are typical of the noble savage" (Cohen 2001: 38; Dearden 1992: 221). Some local tour agents started to offer trekking tours to hill tribe villages to satisfy Western tourists, and the number of such tours expanded quickly (Cohen 2000: 14, 38, 146; Harron 1991: 30-1; Maneeprasert 1994: 17-20).

Image of hill tribes as tourist attraction

In the tourism context, the image of hill tribes consisted of (1) Orientalism, (2) exoticism, and (3) naturism, which Western tourists believe (Cohen 2001: 68; Harron 1991: 56-57; Toyota 1993: 40). Western tourists were fond of visiting mountain villages because they were appropriate to project those images on. As many researchers pointed out, Western tourists tend to say that "Hill tribe villagers have hidden themselves in secluded districts" or "Hill tribe villagers have preserved their ancestors' traditions since time immemorial," although those villagers have never isolated. The villagers live in remote mountainous regions as a result of continual conflicts among numerous ethnic groups on the

Asian continent. Tourists seldom care about historical incidents, but they simply cast their Oriental image onto mountain residents.

Western tourists also projected their image of exoticism onto mountain residents, saying, “tribal people with colorful costumes on” or “tribal people with different sexual norms,” which were just images Westerners had. Sometimes, tourists even show an interest in narcotics or prostitution under the excuse of “experiencing the different culture of tribal people” or “experiencing traditional customs that are not civilized yet,” when such “traditions” have certainly not existed. Western tourists who regard themselves as “conscientious tourists” started to seek ecological tours. They started to seek more natural areas or well-preserved nature, and they went deeper and deeper into the forests. For such “conscientious tourists,” naturism itself was a tourist attraction.

Tourism industries, either local or global, utilized and expanded the image tourists had of the hill tribes. Trekking tour guides often emphasized the hill

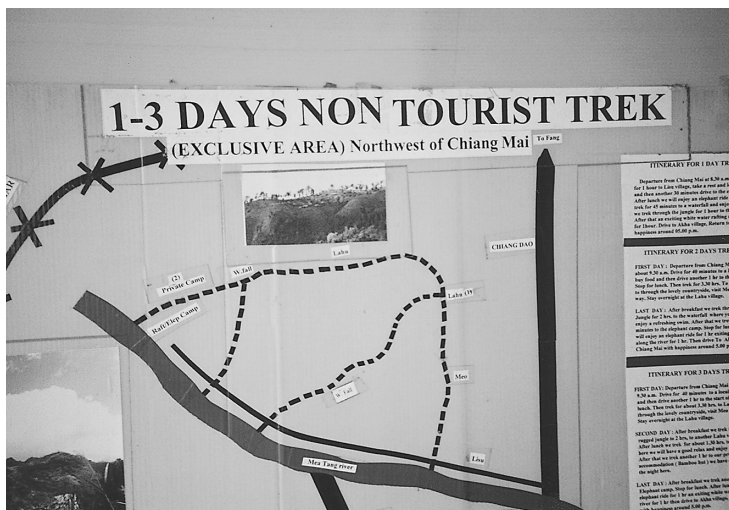


Figure 1 Tourist signboard emphasising “non touristy” (Ishii 2004)

tribes' traditional simple way of life or the preservation the hill tribes' unique culture. Guides repeated the "Hill tribes' ideal way of life to coexist with nature." Tourists were eager for either of the images. In this process, tour guides tend to hide the modernized and commercialized part of the villages. The guides took the tourists to the hill tribe villages on foot through trails through the forest, although villagers usually used motorized vehicles on roads. The guides tend to tell the tourists that the hill tribe villages are estranged from the civilized world. This is to satisfy the tourists' desire for "authentic ethnic minorities." (Cohen 2001: 60) Tourists consume the services offered by the tourism industry; the service was to offer settings to satisfy their desire "to see authentic hill tribes" – the more authentic the experience, the greater the tourist satisfaction.

After a couple of decades, the Thai government institutionalized the image of the hill tribes as a tourist attraction. The Thai government stipulated that both tour guides and tour agencies must be authorized by the government. After enactment of a tourism law in 1992, university professors' lectures about "authentic hill tribal culture" had to abide by official manuals for certification as trekking tour guides [from interview to Mr. Apichartakul, Tourism Authority of Thailand: 2003]. The tourist image of hill tribes became a common tourist attraction in Thailand.

Following such phenomena, some mountain dwellers – or former mountain dwellers now living in the cities – started to strategically represent the tourist image of hill tribes as their own image. City residents who were originally from mountainous areas started to wear "ethnic costumes" when selling souvenirs in tourist areas. Those souvenir venders told tourists that their merchandise was authentic "hill tribe commodities" produced in "hill tribe villages." Other village leaders made contracts to accept tourists in their villages.

The most important point of the "hill tribe image" is that the tourist image of

hill tribes is a simple image. When the image of hill tribes was represented and consumed in the context of tourism, it was as if the simple hill tribes culture or way of life actually existed.

There have been diverse languages, customs, and norms in the mountain populations; however, the tourist image discards the diversity of mountain people and simplifies the image according to tourists' taste (Cohen 2001: 146).

Hill tribe category in the context of nation building

Nation building and creation of ethnic categories as hill tribes

Throughout history, diverse populations have lived in Northern Thailand (Ishii 1998: 146). Northern Thailand was located by a trade artery connecting Yunnan to the Gulf of Martaban, Andaman Sea (Motooka 1967: 7). The local population shaped the small towns with each lords, and such towns were loosely united (Mischung 1995: 97). Before modernization, there was no clear distinction between the dominant ethnic group of Northern Thailand and the minority ethnic groups, though there had been a hierarchy within each group.

In the process of modernization of the Indochinese peninsula, Northern Thailand was incorporated into the kingdom of Thailand (Wilson 1996: 76-77). Then, the kingdom of Thailand experienced a revolution, and Thailand became a constitutional monarchy. The constitutional monarchy required a "Thai nation" as a body of the state (Keyes 1990; Wyatt 1992). Until the 1950s, Thai governmental officials were busy integrating city dwellers of the territory into the Thai national system. The officials could not reach the remote villages because of the lack of an infrastructure (Manndorff 1967: 527).

After the 1950s, "international politics" demanded that the Thai government secure dominion over its territory. In the mid-twentieth century, the communist

party was powerful in many countries on the Indochinese peninsula. Thailand was the only country close to the United States at that time. When the United States intervened in the war in Vietnam, the United States tried to keep Thailand, the only friendly country in the region, as a member of the democratic countries. Thailand was also important for the United States' strategy. At this time, the United States was afraid of communist penetration to Thailand through the mountainous borders (Hill 1972: 2). To cope with that fear, the United States created the border patrol police of Thailand in cooperation with the Thai government (Kesmanee 1994: 680; Kunstadter 1967: 281; Manndorff 1967: 526; Tapp 1990: 154). The mission of the border patrol police was to incorporate mountain residents under the control of the Thai government (Manndorff 1967: 531; Sutthi 1995: 5).

This process divided the population in Northern Thailand into two categories: one was dominant and the other was the ethnic minority. The population in the border area was defined as the "ethnic minorities" who were inferior to the civilized dominant Thai population. The mountain population was regarded as a people whom the civilized Thai citizens should support to become civilized citizens (Kesmanee 1994: 680). This explanation rationalized the interference of governments in the border area (Kampe 1996: 155; Vienne 1989: 49).

Hill tribe category in the context of Thai citizenship

Creation of the category of hill tribes needing support to become civilized citizens meant the start of domestic and international development projects in the mountainous areas. Since the mid-1960s, more than 30 development projects were implemented in Thai mountainous areas (Kampe 1996: 157; Vienne 1989: 35). This caused subsumption of village societies in the border area into the Thai nation-state. It also began the process of marginalization of the village societies.

The more the development projects progressed, the greater the number of people left the villages for higher education or a better income (Cohen 2001: 66). The villages were enthralled with the monetary system and marginalized in the national economic system (Cohen 2001: 64).

It was 50 years since the national government intervened in the villages. The number of mountain residents – or former mountain residents now living in the cities – who could gain Thai citizenship or any kind of semi-citizenship has increased;iii however, there are groups of mountain residents (originated) who could not gain legal status in Thailand.

Mountain people emigrated from Burma in recent years

Burmese refugee and hill tribes

A group of mountain people who seldom gain Thai citizenship is the mountain (originated) people who migrated from Burmese territory to Thai territory after the 1980s. Many of the mountain people immigrated to Thai territory before the 1950s, and they were the targets of development projects to become “proper citizens.” However, a number of mountain people still migrated from Burmese territory to Thai territory, just like the Burmese population that evacuated to Thai territory to avoid the difficult situation in Burma (Smith 1994). There are several refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border; however, many migrants went to the towns and cities. Many of the emigrants from Burma share a common language and customs with the mountain population in Thailand.

In many cases, the mountain population who were already in the Thai mountainous area by the 1950s had an easier time gaining legal status than those who arrived in Thailand after the 1980s and were regarded as Burmese refugees. Many of the mountain people as Burmese refugees do not have strong ties with

the mountain villages in Thailand, unlike those who were there since before the 1950s.

There was not enough land to cultivate in Thai mountains by the 1980s because of the growth in the village population and governmental regulations to preserve the forests. In the 1980s, the Thai mountain population have started to migrate to the towns and cities for employment. Under such circumstances, the mountain people who immigrated from Burma to Thailand after the 1980s tend to be divided from the mountain people who had been on Thai mountains since before 1950s and who can claim a connection to their mountainous homeland. The modern international system accepts claims for the rights of ethnic minorities in a nation-state (Mackerras 2003: 5), but the rights of refugees are different. Mountain people who are an acknowledged ethnic minority in Thailand are able to gain some affirmative actions, such as educational opportunity but mountain people being “Burmese refugee” can not. As far as mountain people acquiring Thai citizenship and obtaining an education, the possibility exists to improve their status in Thai society. Some people work in occupations that Thai people regard as higher status, such as government officials or police officers. Others become wealthy by operating their own businesses. If the mountain people can trace their origins to the Thai mountains, they can claim their rights as an ethnic minority in Thailand, but if not, they are not an ethnic minority of Thailand but a Burmese refugee by legal status.

Ethnic tourism and mountain people as Burmese refugees

At the same time, the mountain people considered Burmese refugees also represent authentic hill tribes in the context of ethnic tourism in Northern Thailand. Many hill tribe souvenir vendors in the tourist areas are Burmese refugees. Some hill tribe villages located on trekking tour routes are villages of Burmese



Figure 2 “Souvenirs’ shop” by Burmese refugees (Ishii 2004)

refugees. In other words, the Burmese refugees are “hill tribes” in the context of ethnic tourism but are not “hill tribes of Thailand” in the legal context. The people are on the border between hill tribes and non-hill tribes, when non-hill tribes does not correspond to the dominant group in local society.

As Burmese refugees and the “touree” of ethnic tourism, those mountain people are in the most vulnerable situation. Seldom able to acquire Thai citizenship, they cannot be the middlemen of ethnic tourism selling the ethnic minority-ness, but are always the ones whose ethnic minority-ness is sold. Of course, there are some mountain (originated) people who profit from ethnic tourism by being merchants, guides, or tour agents, but they are the mountain (originated) people who have acquired Thai citizenship, which means they could trace their origins to the Thai mountainous areas.

This means that the opportunity to raise the status of minorities through ethnic tourism is not open to all hill tribes. Even though the image of hill tribes is

simple in the tourism industry, there is a distinction between hill tribes that can positively profit from the opportunities of being hill tribes, and hill tribes who cannot utilize the opportunities of being hill tribes but must be passive.

Conclusion

Previous research analyzed the effects of ethnic tourism on the relationship among local ethnic groups. The focus of previous research was on how the relationship between the dominant group and the minority group changed after ethnic tourism. However, this research focused on how formation changed within the ethnic minority groups after ethnic tourism came into the area. Needless to say, every ethnic category is changeable (Barth 1965). Precisely, many ethnic minorities were categorized in the process of the formation of nation states. This article showed that the category of ethnic minority, which formed in the process of nationalism, was affected by the process of globalization.

In the process of globalization, the category of ethnic minority is assigned a different role from the role of ethnic minority in the process of nationalism. As the nation state system is still valid, when the effects of globalization are expanding into every local society in the world, the different roles and definitions of “ethnic minority” conflict with each other. This article provided an example of conflicts between two irreconcilable categories of “ethnic minorities.” Even though the image of an ethnic minority is simple in ethnic tourism, ethnic tourism also promotes the diversity of ethnic minorities but depends on their status as regulated by nation states.

Notes

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1. Research was mainly conducted in Chiang Mai Province since between July-August 2006.
2. See Meyer 1988 for details on the development of the tourism policy of Thailand in the early stage.
3. Reference: for the 1965-1997: Kantongthiaw Heng Prathet Thai. 1997, "Raykansthi-tiphracampi 2540." For the 1998-2000: "Samnakgan Sitit Heng Prathet Thai Samnak Nairatmontrii." Samutsithitiraypi 46, 47, 48.
4. See Keyes 1990 for details of the creation of the dominant population of Thailand.
5. The United Nations is now doing research on the proper portion of the mountain population with any residential certification. The results would be released in the near future.
6. In this article, the term "touree" is used to indicate people who are watched by the tourists, as touristic attraction.

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