Community Based Heritage Tourism (CBHT):
A Key Success Factor for Cultural Heritage Conservation or Threat?
A Case Study of Phuthai Villages in Northeast Thailand

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore issues of the authentic ethnic identity of the Phuthai people in northeast Thailand and the success of their tourism management by reference to physical evidence, historical documents and comparative study of five Phuthai villages in northeast Thailand and one Phutai village in Savannakhet, Laos. The research focused on the Phuthai as a major ethnic group settled around the Phu Phan mountain range in northeast Thailand. Their cultural heritage has been retained and passed down through time, especially in terms of the Phuthai ethnic identity as Animist-Buddhist which had become imbued with the influence of the Buddhism religion and Lan Xang culture during the time of their sheltering from Muang Thean or Sip Song Chu Tai in Vietnam to that of Muang Vang Ang Kam in Laos since 1791. Even though they had sheltered from Laos to northeast Siam on many occasions between 1824-1844 as the largest human migration beyond the Mekong river, they could still retain their beliefs, culture and patterns of everyday life as Animist-Buddhist due to the fact that these significant movements were based on their ethnic pride and the prestige of their social status. These became aspects of their interesting cultural heritage for outsiders and inspired many organizations to assist them in developing the community based heritage tourism now found in many villages of four provinces: Kalasin, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom and Mukdahan. Their tourism programs and the activities offered to visitors are patterned around products such as Palang dinners, cultural shows and home-stay accommodation. Moreover, the existing tourism management has brought them socio-cultural impacts such as economic conflict, changes to their culture and lifestyle and diminution in their locality pride. Therefore, a conclusion is that the current community-based heritage tourism revealed in the case studies indicates essential threats to cultural heritage conservation. However, the best practice for turning the threat back to a key success factor is to become concentrated on real cooperation, participation and integration between the local people and their supporters for preparing a contextualized and customized cultural heritage conservation and tourism development plan particular for each specific place and engaging the local communities to participate in each development process. This must start from the knowledge-providing step, then deal with planning, decision making, implementation, the gaining of economic advantage and well-being, and then, finally, evaluating the outcomes.

Keywords: Community Based Heritage Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Phuthai, Phu Tai, Key Success Factor, Cultural Heritage Conservation

Introduction

Heritage tourism or cultural heritage tourism is an important issue for visitors as an alternative tourism form for responsible tourists and can be used as a means for safeguarding heritage significance and creating socio-economic benefits for the local communities where heritage occurs. This type of tourism links tourism and cultural heritage. The National Trust for Historic Preservation (2008) provides the following definition:
“Cultural heritage tourism is traveling to experience the places, artifacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present.”

Even though heritage tourism can be a key concept for protecting cultural heritage, it also affects the particular life of local residents in the host communities, especially their society and culture. This is the case with tourism management in a Phuthai tourism village in northeastern Thailand which this study is examining.

Thenceforth, this research aims to study ways to balance tourism development and cultural heritage conservation of the Phuthai tourism village of Ban Pao village, Mukdahan province, using the concept of sustainable community based heritage tourism management as a key success factor for preserving their Phuthai ethnic identity, cultural heritage significance and authenticity; also for providing long-term economic benefits to stakeholders; supporting local residents’ quality of life; and being a model of sustainable tourism management, through appropriate interpretation and utilization of valuable resources, for other heritage sites.

Research Methodology

The research is based on relevant historical documentary and physical evidence together with comparative analysis of Ban Pao village with five other case studies within Thailand and Laos, which have also experienced heritage tourism: Ban Phu, Ban Renu, Ban Khok Kong, Ban Non Hom in Thailand and Ban Muang Luang in Laos. The related documents reviewed are concentrated on the history of Thailand, Laos, and Thai I-san; the myths of Muang Thaen and Khun Borom, Muang Vang Ang Kam, including written and oral histories about Poo Taa ancestor spirits in those sites. Primary data were gathered: by fieldtrips; in-depth interviews with key informants and local residents in the six villages; and participant observations on tourism activities, the Phuthai animist-worship, and Buddhist religious activities. All of the primary and secondary information collected are compared based on four criteria, which relate to the Phuthai ethnic identity, their Animist-Buddhist religion, changes of the Phuthai ethnic identity, and community uniqueness and tourism development of each site. These comparisons are directed to establishing their ethnic authenticity and heritage values; and finding out whether they have experienced any socio-cultural impacts from their tourism development, which can be seen as either a threat or a key success factor of cultural heritage conservation and community based heritage tourism (CBHT) within the sites; thence proposing key success factor(s) of a sustainable CBHT management plan for Ban Pao and other heritage sites.

Research Results

1. Who are the Phuthai?

The Phuthai are one of two major ethnic groups, which are (1) the Tai Kuey or Suay, speaking the Mon-Khmer language and (2) the Tai Yhor, Tai Saek, Tai Lao, and Phuthai people speaking the Tai-Lao language, who settled down in the northeast region of Thailand. They are of the same lineage with the Black Tais in Sip Song Chu Tai as well as the Phu Tai in Muang Vang (currently in Savannakhet, Laos) and Thai Song Dam in Phet Buri (Thailand), all of whom are of an ethnic group in the Tai-Kadai language family, originating at Dien Bien Phu (in Northwestern Vietnam) which was the center of Muang Thean or Sip Song Chu Tai territory or the Twelve Tai Chiefs comprising Phong Tho, Lai Chau, Dien Bien

According to the study results, it was found that although they all are of the same lineage, because of their various migrating routes and the reasons and conditions affecting their migrations, also different social statuses and residential environments and the different religious influences in which they have been imbued in each historical period during 731-1893, critical differences have emerged between the various groups.

The Black Tai, as the origin of them all, domiciles at Muang Thean (or Muang Thanh city of Dien Bien Phu district, Dien Bien province in Northwestern Vietnam), which was the center of Sip Song Chu Tai territory, built by Khun Borom in 731 and represented in the first historical phase in the time line of Figure 1.

The distinctiveness of Black Tai society and culture has been presented through their own writing and speaking language, also their unique dressing style that is always black and has become a part of their name in the present day. Their settled locations are on low plains surrounded with mountain ranges and rivers, which are found wherever they have inhabited because of their strong relationship with their hometown, as Sip Song Chu Tai is located between the Black and the Red Rivers. Hence sometimes they were called Phu Tai or Hill Tribes. Rice farming, their original occupation, was based on those locations.

Besides that, the Black Tai also believe in ghosts and their ancestor spirits. Therefore, this belief has had an influence on their way of life for a long time such as in a feudal social system, spirit ritual and architectural style. For example, the Black Tai respect feudalism in their social system and clearly separate the aristocracies from lower classes even in death, according to the observations of Frank M. Lebar et al. (1964), to the effect that:

“the Black Tai believe that each human has 32 souls which leave the body after death. Some go ‘beyond the sky’, while others remain on the altar of the ancestors. Black Tai social stratification extends to their concept of the afterlife.”

The Black Tai in Sip Song Chu Tai have a strong ethnic sense; however, they have had weak political power which has been the reason for their status as a dependency variously of China, Vietnam, Luang Phrabang, Thailand, and France. Finally, they were brought together to be a part of Vietnam. Due to the wars and problems of water-shortage, some of
them decided to move from Sip Song Chu Tai to the southern region such as to Laos and Thailand (See Figures 2 and 3), which became significant to their ethnic identity in the second historical phase.

Since 1699, the Kingdom of Lan Xang or Laos, a big and strong kingdom of ancient Indochina, had been disunited to become two lesser kingdoms, Lan Xang - Luang Phrabang and Lan Xang - Vientiane. The boundary of the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang in northern Laos covered Muang Houaphan (or Xam Nua of Laos) and Sip Song Chu Tai (or Muang Thanh of Dien Bien Phu of Vietnam), while Vientiane administrated Muang Phuan (or Muang Xieng Khouang of Laos) and southern Laos. Until 1713, a third kingdom of Laos had occurred in the southern region, which was Champasak. Finally, in 1779, all three kingdoms of Laos, including their colonies, became dependent on the Kingdom of Thonburi (Siam or Thailand) under the control of King Taksin (1767-1782) (See Figure 2: Map of the Kingdom of Siam after 1767).

In this time the Black Tai’s migrations were separated into two routes.

1) The first migrating route occurred in 1779, when the Black Tai people of Sip Song Chu Tai and populations of Lan Xang and its colonies were forcibly moved to Siam (Thailand) as captives and refugees from wars, following King Taksin’s victory over Lan Xang. The Black Tai were sent to settle in Phet Buri Province due to the fact that the geography of Phet Buri looks like Sip Song Chu Tai and it was near the Royal Palace. Here, they were called ‘Thai Song Dam’ by the Siamese, according to their unique dressing style which was always in black, and confined to be laborers of food and weaponry in Tha Rang area (in Ban Lhaem district), which was their first settlement in Thailand.

![Figure 2 (Left): Map of the Kingdom of Siam after 1767](Source: Simulation, Vongthet, Sujit. Historic Maps of Thailand (Siam). MathichonPakkred, 2007: 47.)

![Figure 3 (Right): Map of the Phuthais’ Migration Route](Source: Simulation, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/laos_pol_2003.jpg,)
2) The second movement, in 1791, was along the sheltering route from Muang Thean to be under the rule of the Lao King in Muang Vang (currently in Vilabuly district, Savannakhet province, Laos). This movement was from their own decision, led by Tao Ka, to escape from the Yunnanese invasions and the problems of water-shortage. This Black Tai group was called Phu Tai or Tai Phu, which mean hill tribes, related to their hillside settlement location, whereas they called themselves Phu Tai which means Tai people. Moreover, their leader (Tao Ka) also was promoted as the governor and had an arranged marriage with a Lao lady; therefore, their social status was different from the first groups. They have had a positive relationship with other ethnic groups and minds were opened to them more easily, especially with the Lao people. Thenceforth, Lan Xang culture and Buddhism religion have been slowly infused into their animist life and changed to become an Animist-Buddhist worldview, finally.

Once again, the third movement occurred during 1824-1893 from Muang Vang in Laos to northeast Siam, while the most significant event was during 1826-1844, which was the largest human movement beyond the Mekong River in the history of Siam (Thailand) and Laos and followed the successful campaign of King Rama III (the Siamese King) against the rebellion of King Anuvong of Laos. The Phu Tai (the Black Tai who were settled in Laos) were persuaded and allowed to establish their own towns in the northeast region of Siam, dispersing around the Phu Phan mountain range which covers the area of four provinces: Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan, Kalasin and Sakon Nakhon (See Figure 8). Here, even though they were called Phuthai or tribal Tais in the Thai meaning, they proudly declared that, in their meaning, ‘Phuthai’ were Tai or Thai people, which became the basis of arguments about
the real meaning of the term of ‘Phuthai’. However, for the Phuthai themselves, they confirmed that ‘Phuthai’ means ‘the Tai people who live in Thailand’.

Figure 8: Map of the Phuthais’ Settlement in Northeast Thailand

2. Significant Phuthai Ethnic Identities

1) Hillside Residential Geography

The historical record states that Tao Ka led some of the Black Tai people of Sip Song Chu Tai to escape to Lan Xang-Vientiane in 1791 due to the problems of the Yunnanese invasions and water-shortage. In that time Tao Ka and the Black Tais were allowed to settle in Muang Vang where the geography was similar to that of Sip Song Chu Tai with which they were familiar, and where a hillside area is surrounded with mountains and water sources as in the Figure 9: Geography of Dien Bien Phu.

Figure 9: Geography of Dien Bien Phu
(Source: Simulation, http://maps.google.com)

After that they needed to move again, to northeast Siam due to two significant events: the sedition in Muang Vang around 1824 (some sources stated that it was from Yunnanese invasions); and the serious campaign between King Rama III, the Siamese King, and King Anuvong, the Lao King, during 1826-1844. Even though King Anuvong was arrested on the
21st December 1828 and was about to be sent to Bangkok for punishment but died 7-8 days after his capture (Thongsavangrat, 1986), nevertheless the human movements from Laos to the northeast of Siam still went on until 1844. In this migration period there was both persuasion and offering of potential habitations. The landscape they selected was also the same as that of their previous settlement in Muang Vang and in Sip Song Chu Tai, namely a hillside landscape near natural water sources around the Phu Phan mountain range. This type of their residential landscape is not only because of familiarity but is also related to their beliefs and relationship with their origin.

Figure 10: Residential Area of the Phu Tais in Laos and the Phuthais in Thailand
(Source: Simulation, http://maps.google.com)

Figure 11 (Left): Black Tai’s Habitat in MuangThean or Dien Bien Phu

Figure 12 (Right): Vilabuly District, Savannakhet Province, Laos (Photograph 28.11.2011)

Figure 13 (Left): Khamcha-I District, Mukdahan Province, Thailand (Photograph: 14.07.2011)
Figure 14 (Right): Ban Pao Village, Nong Sung District, Mukdahan Province (Photograph: 14.07.2011)
2) Animist – Buddhist

According to the comparative analysis between Muang Vang–Muang Vay (Renu Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom province, Thailand) and all other Phuthai villages found, all of them are Animist-Buddhist as represented through their beliefs, animist-worship, and the shrines of Poo Taa spirit in every Phu Tai and Phuthai village. The new Phuthai generations still trust and respect their ancestor spirits as recounted from generation to generation with no doubt in the fact of their Poo Taa.

![Shrines of Poo Taa Spirit of the Phuthais](Source: Jinnapas Pathumporn, 2011)

At the same time, all Phu Tai and Phuthai villagers also display respect in the Lord Buddha and retain the ‘Heet Sip Song’, the Buddhist twelve-month ceremonies, the same as Laotian and Thai I-san people. However, it is also found that their Buddhist religious activities and other normal activities, such as praying in temples or making merit and virtue, differed from Thai I-san people who always cerebrate as a bigger festival.

![Buddhist Temples in the Phuthai Villages](Source: Jinnapas Pathumporn, 2011)
3) Peaceful Everyday-life and Ethnic Pride in their ‘Phuthainess’

Almost all of the Phuthai and the Phu Tai villages are agricultural and participate as a handicraft society. Their everyday activities are silk or cotton weaving and crafting for their personal use and for sales. Only in Ban Renu (well-known as the capital of the Phuthai towns), which is a growing community, has their everyday life changed to become more that of a commercial community instead of focusing on farming.

All of the Phu Tai and Phuthai villagers are so proud in their ethnicity as can be noticed from their name as ‘Phu Tai’ or ‘Phu Thai’, which they confirmed to mean ‘Tai or Thai people’. Although, some sources had argument about the real meaning of the ‘Phu’, whether it means ‘Hill’ or not, they explained that it is because of different pronunciations between them and the Thai I-san. Therefore, other people can misunderstand the meaning.

All of the Phuthai people are from the same blood families, which are represented by their family name such as the family of Nong Sung people which is Klangprapan (from Chao Chanchompoo Klangprapan’s family) or Ajvichai (from Chao Chaiyasit Ajvichai’s family); and the family of Renu Nakhon people is Kaewmaneechai (from Phra Kaewkomol or Tao Sai’s family).

The Phuthai communities in northeast Thailand are open-communities, while the Phu Tai communities in Savannakhet of Laos are closed-communities due to the fact that Thailand is more modernized and easier for social communication than Laos. In the other hand, this can account for a threat to their traditional life, culture, and social relationship retention such as in the case of Renu Nakhon.

Figure 17: Silk-Weaving Lifestyle
(Source: Jinnapas Pathumporn, 2011)

4) Phuthai Language

Due to the history of the Phuthais’ movement from various towns in Laos, there are different accents in their Phuthai speaking language. Referring to the in-depth interviews with local people in the study sites, it was found that they normally separate their origins by the groupings from their residential area such as:
- The Phu Tai people in Muang Vang are called the Phuthai in Thailand, as Phuthai Muang Vay (Renu Nakhon) or Phuthai Muang Muk (Mukdahan province);
- The Phuthai villagers in Ban Non Hom are called Phuthai Katak (that is, those who moved from Muang Katak or Phabang, currently in Khammouan province, Laos) and are called the Phuthai in other villages such as Phuthai Vang (who migrated from Muang Vang and its vicinities).

All of these Phu Tai and Phuthai groups use the same speaking language and have no writing language. But the accent of the Phuthai Katak is louder and shorter than Phuthai Vang’s, which is softer and longer with the voice dragging. However, it is very hard for other people to separate their different accents.

![Figure 18: Various Phuthai Groups Separation](Source: Simulation, ThinkNet Software by Jinnapas Pathumporn, 2011)

3. Threats from the Existing Tourism Management System

The study results have indicated that the Phuthai people in Ban Pao and other villages surrounded by the Phu Phan mountain range are of the same ethnicity with the Phu Tais in Muang Vang of Laos. This minority group can be seen as representing a unique ethnicity which has been imbued by the Lan Xang culture and Buddhist influence for almost 220 years, as the present Animist-Buddhist Phuthai. Moreover, the route of their movement is also historical evidence of great, significant events that have affected their life in each historical phase, especially in the ways of their immigrating to Siam in 1824 which represented the establishing of the second Phuthai capital called Muang Vang Vay, with the twin town of Muang Vang in Laos. Especially significant was their movement at the ‘persuasion’ of the Siamese King during the campaign of King Anuvong in 1826, by which they could retain their ethnic pride and social status to stand now as an indicator of the regional history of the largest human movement beyond the Mekhong River. Furthermore, their residential geography is also representing their strong relationship with their historical hometown in Sip Song Chu Tai, which is typically a hillside area surrounded with mountains and water sources, and also with their original belief of habitation selecting and worshiping.
As regards to the beginning of this new unique ethnic identity based on their origin and on their pride in their myths and their strong relationship with their historical hometown, it is this potentially valuable heritage which should be conserved and passed down to the next generation as well as its potential for tourism development, which can be an effective tool for interpreting their cultural significance and gaining socio-economic benefit under the conditions of sustainability.

However, at the current stage of the heritage tourism villages in northeast Thailand, community-based tourism management is likely to be leading them to changes and socio-cultural impacts such as change of culture and lifestyle, diminishing local pride, causes of future conflict, and social relationships that are retreating. In Ban Pao Phuthai village, for example: outside organizations, which are principally Tourism Authority of Thailand and Mukdahan Tourism Industry Association, invited the villagers to promote their community to be a conservation tourism village. Their tourism village had been popular for a short time and then declined due to the fact that they were not ready for the development without an adequate knowledge base. The second supporter organisation, which is the Department of Agricultural Extension, was established the year after. This department helps them to redevelop their village and the landscape by changing from conservation tourism to agro-tourism, including Phuthai culture and handicrafts, with the budget supporting such activity, knowledge provision and a training program. Therefore, the villages pay all attention to this tourism development.

Tourism activities, which they offered to all types of tourists, included visiting their sufficiency career groups, like mushroom planting, a rice mill, a cricket farm and hand towel doll group, enjoying the scenery and the natural attractions at Phu Pha Khao mountain and to have Palang dinners with Phuthai cultural shows, which are not what cultural tourists need. Therefore, the type and purpose of visiting Ban Pao village are changed to field trip visiting. Due to the fact that their Phuthai culture is not interpreted in the right way, there are a lot of change to their cultural heritage, related to tourism impacts, such as the meaning of their rituals, change of culture and lifestyle, and loss of pride in their locale. There are also signs of social relationship breakdown and the threat of future conflict. The beginning of all the problems is coming from the mis-direction of the development plan, which does not concern itself with the authentic cultural heritage and its utilization, and from the inconsistent, poorly directed and discontinuous activity of the supporting organizations themselves, which are the significant threats to sustainable tourism development and conservation.

Similarly, the beginning of tourism development in the other four tourism villages is quite similar. It has been started from outside organizations that planned to utilize the diversity and interesting aspects of their cultural resources. However, it can be found that the Phuthai villages are not succeeding in their tourism development, in part due to their quiet atmosphere and their same-pattern of cultural activities offered to tourists. Furthermore, the support offered to their tourism development is a considerable issue due to the fact that three of the five villages were supported by the Community Development Department (CDD), while Ban Pao village is supported by the Department of Agricultural Extention and Phuthai Renu is not promoted as cultural tourism village although it is well-known as the central Phutai town.

Referring to the National Trust definition about ‘cultural heritage tourism’, that it is travelling to experience the places, artifacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and the present, the question of whether the current tourism management in the Phuthai cultural tourism villages in Thailand can reach this goal needs to be considered.

For the existing tourism management of Ban Pao and other four tourism villages in northeast Thailand, it was found that they have adopted a wrong way of cultural significance
interpretation and an inappropriate tourism management, which are the causes of socio-cultural impacts from tourism management such as loss of pride in one’s locale and serious economic conflict within and outside the community.

Regarding the study results, the problems faced by tourism development and cultural heritage conservation in the sites are because of inappropriate utilization of their valuable authentic heritage resources; there are wrong ways interpretation of the cultural significance of the places; there is no effective tourism development plan; nor is there readiness for tourism development; knowledge is lacking in the supporting organizations; there are different goals and development policies of each supporting organization; there is wrong target tourist selecting; no cooperation and participation from local people is in evidence; and there is competition rather than cooperation between the tourism villages.

4. Key Success Factor of a Sustainable CBHT Management Plan

The conclusion from the study is that the present pattern of management plan and tourism product are threats to sustainable community based heritage tourism. Hence, the key solution for sustaining the CBHT sites and turning back the present threat is a plan concentrated on the real cooperation, participation and integration between the six groups of stakeholders: cultural heritage and natural resources (the people themselves), local communities, tourists, site managers or conservationists, the tourism business sector and the government sector.

As the key players, they should all focus on: development of tourism products from the potential authentic identity and culturally significant aspects of the people; local community participation; targeting of the right tourism groups; site managers’ or conservationists’ involvement; sharing of marketing ideas with the tourism business sector; and working as an integrated network with the government sector. Consequently, the stakeholders are needed to equally weigh three significant P’s: People, Planning and Process as follow:

1. **People:** The decision-makers of the tourism development plan should engage all stakeholders to participate in the decision-making step and all other following steps. Moreover, the government sector also should train and truly empower the local people in this step of participation. The top level decision-makers should provide more correct knowledge and training programs about cultural heritage conservation and tourism development for the sustainable planning and implementation of the program. Furthermore, the government sector should engage the powerful private sector to become integrated into the community development plan with economic development as a goal.

2. **Planning:** The planning step should be based on local communities’ participation in creating integrated plans for cultural heritage protection planning, a sustainable tourism development plan and a tourism marketing plan. These will come from networking and will be developed as contextualized and customized plans particular for specific sites.

3. **Process:** The implementation of these three development plans should be knowledge-based, appropriate in their utilization and with all stakeholders participating in their evaluation.

Finally, the research results indicate that the best practice for turning the threat back to a key success factor is to concentrate on real cooperation, participation and integration between the local people and their supporters for preparing a contextualized and customized cultural heritage conservation and tourism development plan particular for each specific place
and engaging the local communities to participate in each development process, starting from the knowledge-providing step, thence the planning, decision making, implementation, the gaining of economic advantage and well-being and then, lastly, evaluating the outcomes.

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