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# Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand: The Paradox of Authentic Tourism Experience

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## Abstract

Ethnicity and the exotic are the two concepts Thailand has exploited in intimate details to create the cultural tourism experience. The Cultural tourists' is in search of the authentic intact native. The uniqueness of the physical features of the local inhabitants, cultural dress and performances are capitalized upon. An ethnic community fits into the two concepts containing the objects of touristic desire. Despite the fact that authenticity is of great importance for cultural tourists, the very presence of the tourists is the construction of manifestations of tourism. Cultural tourism is then the reification process of the remote village life into the touristic attraction. The process illustrates the encounters of tourism hospitality practices. The social negotiation between tourists and hosts results in the transformation of self-less exotic of ethnic groups. An experience of ethnic tourism is akin to a fabricated heritage. When ethnicity and tourism are the core of economic development, the question of cultural change within the community also alters the attractiveness of the tourism location. This paper advances our understanding of the connection between ethnicity and tourism as a space of local hospitality performance and fabricated heritage creation. By discussing the author's ethno-touristic experience in a Northern Thailand village, the analysis creates meaningful understandings of the complexity surrounding the hospitality phenomenon and the experience of ethnic culture.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Tourism, Authenticity, Tourism Experience, Long-Neck Karen

## Introduction

According to Richards and Wilson (2007), tourism and culture has long been interaction in tourism development. Tourist destinations have turned to their culture as tourism marketing strategies. At the same time, cultural tourists travel to the remote village in searching of the authentic intact native. The uniqueness of the physical features of the ethnic groups, their cultural dress and performance are capitalized upon. Despite the fact that authenticity is of great importance for cultural tourists, the very presence of the tourists is the construction of manifestations of tourism. Cultural tourism is then the reification process of the remote village life into the touristic attraction.

This paper is based on my ethno-touristic experience in order to explain the complexity of the connection between ethnicity and tourism as a space of local hospitality performance and fabricated heritage creation. The paper discusses my ethno-touristic experience as the key to understand what happened in Hauy Pu Kang, the Long Neck

Karen village in Northern Thailand. This ethnographic data is constructed through an active participation processes between Long Neck Karen and I. The analysis creates meaningful understandings of the complexity surrounding the hospitality phenomenon and the experience of ethnic culture.

Particularly, the paper discusses the changing of Hauy Pu Kang in association with tourism development and their hospitality performance. Moreover, the paper attempts to clarify root causes of tourism dependent in order to make a positive understanding of the integration of tourism and ethnicity. In fact, this paper interprets the author's experience in order to see what implications could be formed from that experience that can contribute to a more sustainable tourism development.

### **Long Neck Karen villages and the ethno-touristic experience**

Hauy Pu Kang, a Karen village situated in an isolated area along the Pai River in Mae Hong Son. The village take about seven hours to drive from Chiang Mai. The village is located in the slopes of mountains surrounded with abundant forest. The village has been permanent settlement for Long-Necked Karen since 1996. Hauy Pu Kang villagers belongs almost exclusively to two of the Karen subgroups: the Long-Necked Karen and the Big-Eared Karen. The Big-Eared Karen wear large, heavy earrings in their ears to enlarge their earlobes. Villager predominantly speak Kayan or Kayaw Languages. Some villagers speak Thai, however, Burmese is the village's official language. The livelihood of the villagers is associated with the forest in forms of food supply including bamboo shoots, mushrooms, and other edible plants. They raise pigs and chickens for their diets as well as their religious and social ceremonies.

The infertile soil and low quality of forest resources causes ineffective agriculture. This problem leads to low life quality among Karen in Hauy Pu Kang. The villagers need to cope with economic pressure from globalization and capital world. This difficulty leads to the introduction of tourism into the village. However, with the location of Hauy Pu Kang and there are other Long-Necked Karen elsewhere, the village depending on tour guides for its tourism economy. In other words, Hauy Pu Kang could not have been completed their tourism system (see Chatkaewnapanon 2016) without the heavily involving of travel agents and tour guides.

The notion of Hauy Pu Kang Community has been a central interest to tourists to investigate social phenomena occurring in tourism-encounter activities, such as village trekking, cultural ceremonies, and homestay for example. The village's landscape is space and place of tourism practice among tourists, tour guides, and most importantly the community's members. According to Omholt (2013), places have become under-organized social system. In this respect, tourism creates the complexity of place in Hauy Pu Kang. Similar to Miles (2010) in which emphasizes on the perspective of consumption in any place, Hauy Pu Kang is a place of significantly tourism consumption. However, the framework to economic considerations of tourism activities as the village economy development is relied heavily on tour guides.

My first experience of personal encountering with Long-Necked Karen was at Baan Tong Luang in 2017. Baan Tong Luang is a famous cultural attraction in Chiang Mai. It is a set up cultural village about 40 kilometers away from Chiang Mai City. The village is designed and managed to serve tourists, which gazing of them weaving scarves and bags is a main tourist activity. There is a 500 baht charged to each tourist for the village entrance fee. The villagers receive monthly income for their performance of running and living in souvenir shops as their houses. Moreover, their extra income is in a form of sale of scarves and bags to visitors. In this fabricated village, Long-Neck Karen is the primacy form of the tourist gaze (Urry 1990). They are physical objects of tourism production and consumption.

After the tip, I could not stop wondering of what the authenticity of those ethnic people living in such a village would be. It seemed to me that the role for Long-Neck Karen in Baan Tong Luang illustrated the growth of cultural symbolic as a factor to only motivate business activity. The issues of cultural village, and the exploitation of ethnicity for tourism had been continued. Therefore, I took a suggested idea of a tour guide to visit a genuine

Long-Neck Karen village. Hauy Pu Kang is a recommended village. It is about seven hours drive from Chiang Mai city. I have visited Hauy Pu Kang several times in 2018 and 2019.

On my several visitations, I stayed with Mapang, a Long-Neck Karen, at her homestay. Staying with her in the village was not only allowing me to familiarize with the village, but also letting the village to tolerate with me being in there. After cruising quite freely in the community coupled with Mapang's guidance, I developed an understanding of the community's customs and culture. According to Parsons (1951), 'a community is collectivity the members share in a common territorial area as a base of operations for daily activities' (cited in Delanty 2010: 24). When community is conceptualized into a domain of place where people have something in common, then the studies of community have been widely focused on the examining a geographical area, observing a group of people, and studying a practice of traditional way of life in a community. My participant observation involves my immersion into the lives of those Karen. Therefore, my ethnographic text came out of my ethno-touristic experience which involving semi-constructed conversations and cultural activity participation (Herbert 2000; Kearns 2000).

Throughout my several visits at the village, I witnessed tourism implications on the village's development of the experience of local geography as well as the local livelihood. In other words, I witnessed both the 'touristization' (Young 1983; Chatkaewnapanon 2012) and the 'touristification' (Picard 1996) of Hauy Pu Kang. It is the process of transformation of the community not only into a tourist attraction but also into a tourist destination. It is the transformation of the whole community as 'the touristic transformation' (Cohen 2001) in which the process of tourism transmuting Hauy Pu Kang into a tourism and tour guide dependency community.

Moreover, the implications of tourism on the village is not only transforming the physical setting of a rural community of creating the village into a showroom for souvenirs but also altering social landscape of forming the conflict of the traditional sociocultural economic activities. Tourism is the creation of linkages of tourist complains and the community livelihood. Specifically, visitors, through tour guides' words, complained about domestic animals in the village. Specifically, chickens making noise and pigs being not hygiene. It is an ironic comment that they had an issue of what make the community *unique* and *attractiveness* (Chatkaewnapanon, Leelapattan, Trakansiriwanich, and Ek-Iem 2017) as cultural tourism of ethnicity. The tourists complain had resulted in a call for the village meetings. This matter became the central of my attention.

### **Tourism Performance and Fabricated Livelihood**

Similar to other studies, as being trained as a tourism ethnographer, my orientation of the villages has been conceptualized around the examining of tourism development and its implications on Karen's villages (Chatkaewnapanon 2012: Hall 2008; Mason 2008, Tucker 2003). When first I arrived in Hauy Pu Kang, it reminded me immediately of Baan Tong Luang. Creating tourism in Hauy Pu Kang is about developing the image of Long-Neck Karen women as tourism products. Their images are tourism outstanding of cultural resources. Tourism conceptualizes Karen' women images as the ethnic identity in which becoming tourism 'objectives reality' (Kalandides 2011) in association with the community context.

Moreover, here was not much different between the two villages in their of their physical appearances. Souvenir shops as of their houses on both villages are situated on both sides of the main street. More importantly, souvenirs for tourists were exactly the same products and designs. There are the modified bodies of Long-Neck Karen women that have been duplicated into colorful wooden dolls for the consumption of tourists. In both places, similar to Picard (1996), there was the commoditization of Karen culture and identity, particularly the figure of Long Neck Karen women. In this respect, images of Karen women are the significant quality of the village attractions as its potential of tourism to be developed (McKercher and Ho2006; Graci 2008). There is no distinction of both places in this respect.

Tourism has transformed ethnic groups into commodities for tourism consumption. It is of what Picard (1996) discusses in the process of touristification of local culture. The commoditization of ethnicity is the process of selling many aspects of local customs to tourists. In the case of Long-Neck Karen, touristification process create economic value to Karen's costumes of women wearing coils. This touristification process had the same implications on both authentic and fabricated villages. Then my question was what 'the attraction power and uniqueness of a destination' (Formica 2000: 22; Chatkaewnapanon 2012) that can attract the potential tourists to come to Hanyu Pu Kang rather than Baan Tong Luang.

The observation of the village meeting to address of what tourists complain gives me an awareness of how Long-Neck Karen took tourism very seriously. However, if we are to understand how Karen ethnicity hospitality performance, it is important to emphasize that the seriousness is not only the reflection of the village is tourism-dependent economy, but also hospitality is part of their culture and society. It cannot be denied that the expansion of tourist numbers is a result of the organization of either travel agents or tour guides. Thus to comply with those complains is important to both their economy and hospitality.

Hanyu Pu Kang has associated with tourism since 1990s due to the images of Long-Neck Karen. Then the village has become the focal point of examining the implications of the encountering between tourists and locals. If tourism is not totally transforming the village completely into a contemporary tourism based society (Chatkaewnapanon 2012; Huang 2013, Tucker 2003), tourism is a significant mechanism in additional income to the village. Similar to other places, tourism has become a main factor for the village's livelihood, stimulating SMEs in hope of reducing the village's poverty (Okazaki 2008, Simpson 2008).

Tourism industry has the potential to create both negative and positive impacts on any given destination (Singh, Timothy and Dowling 2003). In the case of Hanyu Pu Kang, tourism has threatened Long-Neck Karen village. The main message at the meeting was about their traditional animals in which these animals are not only economic values but also social and cultural capital characteristics to the villagers. To address to the criticizes of tourists on those animals is not an easy task. The community meeting has helped me to realize the important of pigs and chickens in their traditional way of life as well as tourism in their economy. Moreover, it helps me to understand the inclusive of all community participation as a key to success of tourism development (Garcia-Rosell and Makinen 2013; Tosun 2000). Instead of ordering of what to do by the village's leaders, the community allowed very voices to be heard.

According to the villager, if they eliminated those animals, it would affect their livelihood as animals are source of their food, and traditional belief and cultural activities. However, if they did not do anything with those animals as well then their worry was not only about to effect the attitude of their hospitality, but also the numbers of visitation of the future tourists.

Tourists can gaze Long-Neck Karen in Baan Tong Luang, a fabricated village near Chiang Mai. Although Hanyu Pu Kang is a Long-Neck Karen authentic livelihood, the village is not significant enough to attract tourists to visit. Hanyu Pu Kang is totally dependent to tour guides to bring visitors. To attract tourists, tour guides provide information to raise tourists' awareness of the attractive and uniqueness of Long-Neck Karen in Hanyu Pu Kang. In this respect, the authenticity of Long-Neck Karen, their life and the livelihood that become the attractiveness for tourism, has been built around tour guide information. In other words, Hanyu Pu Kang as tourist destination is the process of making *place* unique through the construction of travel agents and tour guides. I also have been drawn into the village due to its attractiveness power and uniqueness of Hanyu Pu Kang as a tour guide suggested.

My concerns throughout the meeting was what the authenticity of Hanyu Pu Kang would be without having those animals around anymore. In fact, having those animals in the village is the process of making the community unique in its constructing Karen cultural geographical content for tourism consumption. Hanyu Pu Kang has become increasingly significant in the production of rurality through those domestic animals. Specifically, the scene of animals moving around the village making Hanyu Pu Kang different from Baan Tong Luang. The animals are the

means of local people and their relationships to Karen traditional social system. If tourists did not want these animals in their tourism experience, then what the points of going to genuine villages. If the community complied to what tourists needed, then the village would operate a fabricated landscape within the authentic livelihood.

The process of managing the complexity of the village's environment and livelihood creates the paradox of the authentic tourism experience in Hauy Pu Kang. The complain of those tourists will effect on the production of the village space. It will change the 'representation space', in which 'the space of everyday experience' (Lefebvre 1991 cited in Cloke 2007: 38) of those tourists. The significance of tourism, tourists complains in particular, can impact on the representation of publishing a new turn in the touristic transformation of Hauy Pu Kang. It set against the idea about the production of cultural tourism and authenticity of ethnicity. Therefore, tourism has been actively involved in the fabricated livelihood construction of Hauy Pu Kang space.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper discusses the changing of Hauy Pu Kang in association with tourism development and their hospitality performance. It attempts to clarify root causes of tourism dependent in order to make a positive understanding of the integration of tourism and ethnicity. This paper interprets the author's experience in order to see what implications could be formed from that experience that can contribute to a more sustainable tourism development in ethnicity in Thailand.

This paper is based on my ethno-touristic experience in order to explain the complexity of the connection between ethnicity and tourism as a space of local hospitality performance and fabricated heritage creation. The paper discusses tourism and ethnicity in relation to the reification process of the remote village life into the tourist destination. The process illustrates the encounters of tourism hospitality practices. My ethno-touristic experience is the key to understand what happened in Hauy Pu Kang, the Long-Neck Karen village in Northern Thailand. This ethnographic data is constructed through an active participation processes between Long-Neck Karen and I. The analysis creates meaningful understandings of the complexity surrounding the hospitality phenomenon and the experience of ethnic culture.

Despite cultural tourists' is in search of the authentic intact, the very presence of them is the construction of manifestations of tourism in Hauy Pu Kang. Tour guides support and encourage tourists to engage in local livelihood and cultural activities. Then, the process illustrates the encounters of tourism hospitality practices. The uniqueness of the physical features of the village and local hospitality are changed upon. The social negotiation between tourists and hosts results in the transformation of self-less exotic of Hauy Pu Kang, both landscape and livelihood. An experience of ethnic tourism is akin to a fabricated heritage.

Attempting to eliminate dogs, pigs, and chicken is a very good example in this essence. Tourists unintentional would cause the loss of local authenticity. In the case of Hauy Pu Kang, touristic hospitality performance does pretense serious questions about the production of ethnic cultural space. Clearly, tourists push the locals to transform the genuine village into fabricated livelihood. Then the question of cultural change within the community also alters the attractiveness of the ethnic location. In essence, a tour guide as a gate keeper to the village should provide important knowledge to tourists of what genius experience to them as well as to maintain authenticity of cultural tourism development in an ethnic community.

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