

Chiangkhan: Cultural Commodification for Tourism and its Impact on Local Community

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Abstract. This paper concerns the dynamics of cultural commodification for tourism, and its impact on local communities. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach. The research area scopes a community that is a famous tourism destination in the Chaingkhan District, Loei province, Thailand. Research results show that when tourism in Chiangkhan is at its peak, changes occur in the community. Local cultures have been used as commodity to serve tourism. The famous cultural products in Chiangkhan consist of quilt production, home-stays, giving food to monk ceremonies, and the old wooden buildings. These cultural products have been commoditized through production, distribution, and consumerism to serve the tourism industry, which spread rapidly to the local community. Commodification of culture also affects the community in economic, social, and cultural ways. These impacts can be both negative and positive.

Keywords: tourism, cultural product, commodification, impacts

1. Introduction

Tourism is now considered an important aspect of Thai society, especially cultural tourism. Cultural tourism is arguably the oldest of the new tourism phenomena, and some argue that all travel, indeed, involves a cultural element (McKercher & du Cros, 2002). In Thailand, cultural tourism has been widely applied as a process of developing local tourism by displaying cultural heritages in communities for visitors. This culture has been produced as a commodity for economic consumption and exchange. Nowadays, it has been found that local communities in Thailand have tried to use tourism as a strategy for sustainable locality development. In order to use tourism as a selling point in developing locality, the community must rely on culture and its cultural symbols as a selling point to attract tourists; for instance, folk tales, arts, traditions, heritages, and even local geography can be tourist draws (George, 2004). These resources play important roles in local tourism development. The commodification of Thai culture has been extremely successful, as shown by countless tourists who are enthusiastic to have new cultural experiences

Chiangkhan district, Loei Province is considered an important tourism destination in Northeast Thailand, and is currently a very popular tourist Destination. Chiangkhan District is idea for tourists seeking relaxation as well as a cultural experience. The selling point of Chiangkhan nowadays is its simple lifestyle as well as its evocation of the past from over 100-year-old towns along the Mekong River. The old wooden buildings that line the river, especially in the community of Chai Khong Road (Mekong Riverside Road) are considered highlights in the Chiangkhan district. Chiangkhan now is rich with cultural heritage. Local culture is a worthy resource for a community to promote, as it allows for sustainable development in locality. Local culture is presented through different lifestyles of the locals in multiple areas, and through their traditions, inventions, and cultural displays. When tourism in Thailand boomed in popularity, the antiquity and historical aspects of Chiangkhan were deserted, resulting in rapid development to satisfy the needs of the increasing number of tourists. Facilities such as convenient stores, hotels, restaurants, and public utility systems were constructed to handle the burgeoning industry.

The unique locality, culture, customs, and lifestyle of the Chiangkhan townsfolk and the architecture of the town are simple, but the historical feeling appeals to outsiders. These aspects of the culture have been commoditized in response to the needs of tourists at the same time, and have greatly benefited entrepreneurs. Local culture has also become a product for sale. Still, the evocation of the past, which is a significant identity of Chiangkhan, has been revived by both tourists and locals who are fond of consuming antiquities.

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Local people do not produce objects for their need of household use as in they once did; rather, they are able to take advantage of the tourism industry by producing items specifically to sell. Those products are produced not with the intention of usefulness, but to illustrate culture and satisfy tourists' consumption. Accordingly, these factors have hastened the already rapid changes in Chiangkhan. Consequently, this study focuses on the dynamics of cultural commodification through the trend of tourism in Chiangkhan, including the effect on the community caused by using culture for profit.

2. Research Objectives

- Investigated the patterns of cultural commodification for the benefit of tourism, and impacts on the community due to cultural commodification in the Chiangkhan District.

3. Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach by focusing on the dynamic of cultural commodification for tourism to understand the origin and describe phenomenon in the area, and understand the economic, social, and cultural impacts on the community. The specific research area was a community located on Chai Khong Road inside Chiangkhan District, Loei province, an important tourism destination of Chiangkhan District with the most tourism activities. This study collected data from academic and semi-academic documents, semi-structured interview, participatory and non-participatory observations, and group discussion. The informants were community residents nearby Mekong riverside, government and private officers related to tourism, tourism entrepreneurs in the area, and tourists. The data was examined by triangulation process, and was categorized as the issue studied. After that, the data was analyzed and compared in each issue to find the conclusion. Then content analysis was done to interpret and inductive conclusion was created based on the theoretical framework.

4. Findings

4.1. Cultural commodification for tourism in Chiang Khan

Cultural products of Chiangkhan communities were made available for sale to tourists, including home stays, quilt production, sticky rice alms giving, and the old wooden houses alongside Mekong. Each activity is considered to be in production mode, production relation, and product distribution for tourists, and aimed at tourists' consumption.

Home Stay: Tourists are given an alternative to hotels with the option to stay in refurbished old houses. This is just one example of how tourism has affected local people's lifestyle, especially in production mode. In the past, most villagers spent their time in their cultivated areas. After night stay activities became popular, villagers opened their houses to tourists and managed accommodations themselves. In production relation, activity duties were divided; for instance, accommodation care and bedding cleanliness. Aside from the unique selling point of home stay, the friendliness and warm hospitality of the local people in Chiangkhan add a more personal element to overnight stays, Tourists' positive impressions of home stays advanced the popularity of the lodging option through wide-spread recommendations both among tourists and in travel magazines.

Quilt Production: Thai quilts are made from cotton, which historically was planted primarily in Chiangkhan District; however, there is no longer enough cotton to support demand for quilts, and so the fabric must be imported, often at the expense of quality. Quilts were made by gatherings of housewives and by single households, and produced using looms and industrial sewing machines. Currently, quilt production still relies on skilled laborers, but production technology has also been put to use in order to speed up production to meet the demand from tourists. Because of this, the quilt designs now lack the diverse designs of the past and quality has been compromised.

Sticky Rice Alms Giving: The tradition of sticky rice alms giving in Chiangkhan District came by way of Luang Prabang, Lao PDR. At first, alms giving meant only putting a pinch of sticky rice in the begging bowl, and the foods and flowers were delivered to monks at a temple in the late-morning. But when tourism came to the area, the pattern of almsgiving changed. The purpose of alms giving became commercial. The

activity's value was reduced to serving the desires of tourists. Some tour operators and home stay owners offer packages for sticky rice alms giving for tourists consisting of sticky rice, other foods, and flowers. The availability of sticky rice alms giving packages from home stay owners and hotels has diminished the meaning and worth of the ceremony, turning it into yet another commodity for tourism.

Chiangkhan's Old Wooden Houses: The hundred-year-old wooden houses located on the Mekong riverside are regarded as one of the most valuable selling points of Chiangkhan. The style of the houses and buildings are a mix of Thai, Laos, and China due to cultural integration from the past. Chiangkhan was once the commercial center of its region. Because of their popularity with tourists, the houses have been conserved thanks to efforts made by both government and private sector agencies. New houses have also been constructed in the tradition of the old wooden houses, using the same patterns of their predecessors to appeal to nostalgia. The community collaborated with the government to maintain the town's historic image, with the community responsible for the upkeep of old houses, and the agencies responsible for giving advice and information to tourists.

4.2. Impacts on the community due to cultural commodification

Economic: Commodification of local culture is the primary byproduct of tourism. Tourism was a gold mine for the Chiangkhan community because most of its cultural products were still in the possession of people in the community, bringing money to the community. In addition, mass production of cultural products, such as quilts, has begun to meet the demand of tourists. Reproduction of historical artifacts has also become prevalent, such as constructing new buildings in the old style. This has resulted in better economic conditions for the people in the community; villagers now have a significantly higher incomes thank to tourism.

However, the result from rapidly progressive economic system in Chiangkhan District has caused a scramble to meet the demand for tourism resources and services, including the appearance of 24-hour convenience stores, and the rush-purchases of land on the Mekong riverside to construct new hotels. At this point, it is easier to earn money from the tourists instead of falling back on the community, but it was shared to the outside investors, and resulted in the locals finally becoming employees of their own community.

Social: Due to the rapid growth of tourism, it was necessary to develop public utilities to support increasing number of visitors. This resulted in the continuous development of the Chiangkhan Community; however, it was found that the problems in tourism policies and operations at the community level were inconsistent. Furthermore, the progression of tourism also had an effect on the community production system. The tourism industry has brought a far greater economic success to the community than agriculture, which was relied upon in the past.

It has been found that the form of industrial production has had an effect on the relationships among people in the community, causing high competition for consumers, which has led to conflicts labor employment in the community, in the form of employer and employee, has also created more formal relationships among people, replacing tradition casual relationships of the past.

Cultural: It was found that commodification of culture resulted in value of local culture products. The values of culture products developed due to the tourist industry that blossomed along the Mekong River, and resulted in local culture becoming a tangible and saleable product. In addition to the economic benefits, cultural commodification has spread more Chiangkhan culture to other societies around the world. It has also encouraged people to learn about the culture and identities of the Chiangkhan people.

5. Conclusions

The cultural products and services of Chiangkhan, including home stays, quilt production, sticky rice alms giving, and old wooden houses along the Mekong River, have different production processes, distribution, and consumption patterns, but the production modes have changed for all of them, from traditional production to manufacturing using modern technology. As a result of cultural tourism, Chiangkhan's economy has experienced a boom, and the Chiangkhan culture has been dispersed to the other societies around the world. However, if you have looked to the negative side, tourism has reduced the value of Chiangkhan's traditional culture. It is now simply a commodity for tourists' consumption

(Adorno & Horkheimerr, 2002; Sawangchot, 1995; Cohen, 1988; Kelly, 1986). Although the manufacturing industry can create socioeconomic progression, the change in cultural procession has become more quantitative and less qualitative, reduced to a commodity (Kaewthep & Hinwiman, 2008), and the cultural commodification caused by tourism has both positive and negative impacts on communities. So, the sustainable guideline for cultural product development should be researched in the next study to find out the way to keep local culture along community valuably and permanently, and the finding can be used as a tool in applying for community development.

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