2014

Host perspectives on ethnic minority tourism in Northern Thailand

Trupp, A.

Host Perspectives on Ethnic Minority Tourism in Northern Thailand

Alexander Trupp

Abstract

In recent years tourism scholarship has increasingly recognized the role and importance of host perspectives in ethnic minority tourism. The main aim of this paper is to explicate the opinions and perceptions of ethnic minority communities in Northern Thailand. By drawing on emerging concepts of the host gaze I aim to further the understanding of how local residents in the field of ethnic tourism perceive and gaze upon the various actors and dimensions of ethnic tourism. Based on a qualitative research study employing semi-structured interviews and participant observation in two minority villages with different touristic intensity, this paper uncovers local perspectives on and gazes upon different types of tourists, tour guides and tensions in ethnic tourism such as modernization versus exoticism or the question of tourism and cultural revitalization.

Keywords: ethnic tourism, ethnic minorities, host perspectives, host gaze, Thailand

Introduction

The specific purpose of this contribution is to elucidate the opinions, images and perceptions of two selected minority communities in Northern Thailand concerning ethnic tourism, tourists and tour guides. By drawing on emerging concepts of the host gaze (Chan, 2006; Maoz, 2006; Mouffakir and Reisinger, 2013b) I aim to further the understanding of how local residents in the field of ethnic minority tourism gaze upon the various actors and dimensions of this form of tourism and ask how these gazes are constructed and reinforced. Most of the actor-oriented tourism studies focus on the tourist's motivations or the images they have on locals (Urry, 1990; MacCannell, 1999) or show the unequal power relations between guests from the global north and hosts from the global south (Cole and Morgan, 2010). The concept of the host gaze however '…expresses and manifests the agency and power of locals in Third World countries' (Maoz, 2006, p.229) and is an important extension of John Urry's tourist gaze (Urry, 1990).

For the empirical analysis two villages with different touristic intensity have been chosen which can be referred to *tribal village tours* or excursion tourism and *jungle*

tours or trekking tourism respectively (Cohen, 2001b, 69ff): First, the Akha village *Jorpakha* which receives approximately 100 tourists per day visiting this village for about 20 minutes as part of a package tour, thus showing characteristics of mass tourism.

Plate 1: Arrival of tour group at Jorpakha village

Source: Author photo

And second, the Karen village *Muang Pham* which is also touristically well-developed, but tourists reach the village either through an organized trekking tour or by their own means and mainly stay overnight in the village.

By using qualitative research methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews and informal conversation this study wants to move beyond pure descriptions and to uncover the reasons of attitudes and perceptions of local residents (Mouffakir, 2011, p.77). Moreover I show the differences that can be ascertained between these two types of touristically developed villages. In the

following sections I start with a discussion of tourist- and host-gaze concepts before outlining the regional context of ethnic minority tourism in Thailand.
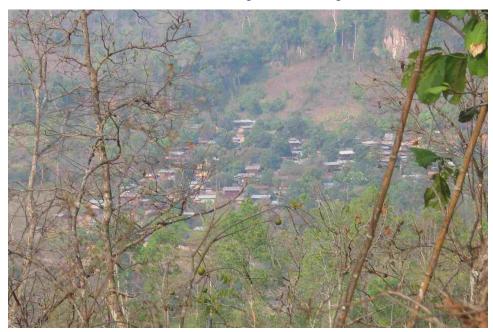
Plate 2: Muang Pham Village

Source: Author photo

The second part of the paper introduces the two village case studies and shows how local gazes are constructed upon different actors such as tourists and tour guides as well us upon various dimensions of ethnic tourism including economic and sociocultural relevance of tourism.

Perceiving and gazing tourism

Especially in the area of ethnic tourism, tourists search for seemingly exotic or strange images of the hosts ranging from constructed exotic (and erotic) beauties to noble savages. Seen from the other side, the hosts' images of their guests can also be diverse, constructed or over-simplified. Individuals take in a multitude of existing stimuli (visual images, smells, sounds), but not all stimuli are consciously registered. Perception is a selective process, wherein stimuli are selected through a so-called perception filter. What is or is not filtered out depends upon personal variables of the individual such as motivation, needs, attitudes, and values (Tzschachel, 1989, p.24). In practice, stimuli '…do not exist in their objective truth as limited and conventional triggers, since they are only effective if they reach actors that are conditioned to recognize them' (Bourdieu, 1987, p.99). In tourism studies, the concept of the gaze

has become popular in order to understand how tourists perceive places or people they visit.

Since the 1990s the concept of the tourist gaze has broadened the understanding of how tourists perceive tourist attractions. The tourist gaze is usually constructed by Western society, especially by the media, postcards, guidebooks or travel stories from others which all direct the gaze (Urry 1990). The concept '…highlights that looking is a learned ability and that the pure and innocent eye is a myth' (Larsen and Urry, 2011, p.110). In that sense tourists arrive at their travel destinations with pre-designated images of the people and areas they visit and compare those with 'real' experiences and impressions during the trip. They thus do not assess their tourist experiences according to reality, but reality to their pre-constructed imaged (Steinbach 2002, p.42). It is highlighted that the tourist gaze is a dynamic concept and that its construction varies by society, social group and historical period, and that it is constructed in relationship to its opposite, thus non-tourist forms of daily social experience (Urry, 1990, p.2). This thoroughly used, discussed as well as criticized concept (see MacCannell, 2001) describes the power Western tourists hold and exercise over the inhabitants of the places they visit.

In recent years however scholars started to increasingly recognize that there is also a gaze of the inhabitants who are visited by tourists and that the question is not only about how we see them but also about how they see us (Pritchard, 2000; Maoz, 2006). Studies show that as soon as travellers reach a tourist destination it is not only the local inhabitants who are on display and to be scrutinized but also the tourists who '…constitute part of the visual reality of the local landscape', and are exposed to local gazes (Chan, 2006, p.194). It is argued that the local or host gaze is more complex, as it is based on a '…two-sided picture, where both the tourist and local gazes exist, affecting and feeding each other, resulting in what is termed 'the mutual gaze'" (Maoz, 2006, p.222). So there is the gaze of the gazer and the gaze of the gazee (Mouffakir and Reisinger, 2013a, p.xi). The concept of the host or local gaze focuses upon the host community in tourism destinations and how its members perceive tourism tand tourists, and moreover how the local gaze is constructed, how it has developed, how it may differ between countries or ethnic groups, and how the tourism industry can affect it (Mouffakir and Reisinger, 2013a). Similar to the tourist

gaze, the host gaze is also dynamic and thus changes depending on the type and form of tourist as well as on the characteristics of the host communities in terms of socioeconomic status, cultural traits and historical period.

Writing about the context of a study about the Indian host gaze upon Israeli backpackers, Maoz argues that '…locals construct their gaze upon previous and numerous encounters with tourists' (Maoz, 2006, p.229). Therefore the local gaze differs from the one of Western tourists whose gaze is pre-designated by media and other information before the encounter between hosts and guests takes place. Still, their gaze is based on images and stereotypes often connected to the colonial past, and many locals perceive tourism as a source of money and tend to overlook perceived social misbehaviours in return for monetary benefits (Maoz, 2006, p.224).

Chan, who studied Chinese tourists in Vietnam, found out that Vietnamese tourism workers perceive Chinese visitors as stingy, arrogant and chauvinistic (Chan, 2006). Both Maoz' and Chan's study found the gaze of the tourism workers towards Israeli and Chinese tourists rather negative, while that of the rest of the local residents was rather positive. Moreover, there are different gazes from the same gazer upon different gazes/ tourists and thus speaking of a general host gaze would be misleading (Moufakkir and Reisinger, 2013a, p. xi). Mouffakir criticizes that most of the studies on local residents' perspectives remain descriptive as attitudes surveys simply quantify locals' perceptions. It is thus necessary to deconstruct the host gaze by deepening the understanding of the whys of those attitudes and perceptions (2011, p.77f). This article relates to the emerging literature of host perspectives and host gazes and shows that the hosts in ethnic tourism are not passive objects but are active agents who construct their own gazes upon various actors of the tourism industry including different types of tourists, tour guides or travel agents.

Ethnic tourism and the Thai context

Thailand, receiving more than 20 million international tourists and around 35 billion USD revenue in 2012 is one of the leading tourism destinations in Asia. The main destinations are the capital of Bangkok, the SSS areas (sun, sea, and sex) in the south, and the mountainous northern region including the provinces of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. The hilly to mountainous northern landscape is home to nine

officially recognized ethnic minorities called *chao khao* in the Thai language, or hilltribes in English. The attractiveness of ethnic minorities to international tourists was discovered early on by backpackers and somewhat later by the tourism industry that have presented the ethnic groups as exotic as possible in order to fulfil the tourist's quest for authenticity (MacCannell, 1999; Cohen, 2001b).

Ethnic tourism is defined as a type of travel aimed at visiting alien and aboriginal cultures and highlights the local inhabitants and their cultural practices as main objects of interest. Wood, in his definition of ethnic tourism (1984, p.361), points to the cultural uniqueness that is marketed for tourists. A further criteria refers to the underlying and often unequal power relations between hosts, guests and the tourism industry as ethnic tourists are led to groups that do not fully belong culturally, socially, or politically to the majority (national) population of the state within whose boundaries they live (Cohen, 2001a, p.27; Trupp and Trupp, 2009). Ethnic tourism in the mountain areas of Southeast Asia is also referred to as hilltribe tourism, although the visited ethnic groups are no longer the sole object of touristic interest. Cohen (2001a, p.27) views this form as a '…variety of site-seeing tourism' and Dearden (1996, p.211) confirms that '…in such tourism, ethnic people are no longer the prime focus of interest, but constitute just one item of interest within a broader landscape.' This shift becomes clearly evident when examining current posters and advertising brochures for travel agencies. There are almost no organized excursions or trekking tours that offer a visit to the hilltribes alone. Instead, the visits are one of many attractions consumed between lunchtime and a waterfall.

Domestic forms of tourism in Northern Thailand already started in the early 1930s when the royal family and the bourgeoisie of central Thailand visited the highlands for recreations purposes (Leepreecha, 2014). The first international tourists to Thailand's mountainous areas in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, were adventurers, backpackers, and young alternative tourists who discovered the hilltribes and the surrounding trekking trails through word of mouth and later through unconventional travel guides and agencies (Meyer 1988, p.411). With the increase of tourists in the 1970s, a low cost tourism establishment arose first in Chiang Mai and then to a lesser degree in Chiang Rai (Cohen 2001b). In the late 1970s, the tourist sector interested in the seemingly exotic hilltribes began to grow, a fact rapidly

recognized by the tourism industry. Large tour operators began including hilltribe excursions in their programme. At the same time, a multitude of new travel agencies sprang up in Chiang Mai, and competition kept prices low (Cohen 2001b, p.39). Because of growing tourist demand for unspoiled and authentic regions, new hilltribe areas were constantly being developed. Once a mountain village no longer provided the desired grade of authenticity, it was taken out of the tour programme and replaced by a new back region (Dearden and Harron, 1994, p.88). It was calculated that already in the 1990s 100,000 trekkers spend an average of four days and three nights in the hill area annually (Dearden and Harron, 1994, p.85). Today, ethnic minority tourism in Thailand exists in the form of one or more lasting trekking tours (Cohen 2001b, pp.70f), one day excursions to easily reachable minority villages (Cohen 2001b, p.69f) including the highly controversial Long-Neck-Karen villages often criticized as human zoos (Trupp, 2011) and urban ethnic minority souvenir selling at markets (Fuengfasakul 2008; Ishii 2012), urban or beach-side tourist destinations (Trupp 2014a, b). The development of minority tourism in the highlands occurred alongside a plethora of national and international development programmes targeted to control and integrate the minority population into Thai mainstream society (Manndorff, 1967; Laungaramsri, 2003).

Initially however, the Thai government showed no great interest in hilltribe affairs, but this changed drastically in the 1950s and 1960s when they gained attention due to their strategically and politically important position in the context of the East-West-Conflict and alleged communist insurgency. Two decades later, they became under scrutiny because of their farming practices related to shifting cultivation which in some cases was linked to the opium cultivation in the golden triangle. Even the logging industry as well as lowland farmers who have moved into the mountains in search for land, are mainly responsible for the deforestation, the problem has been blamed on the minority groups. So in 1989 the logging ban was enacted by the Thai government. This law enacted a general ban on felling timber for the commercial timber industry as well as for the 'simple' farmers of the hilltribes. Theoretically turning their primary agricultural method of slash and burn into a punishable crime, the law wrenched away an integral part of the hilltribes' livelihood (McKinnon, 1997, p.131). Furthermore, the state largely expanded protected forest areas since the early 1990s which impeded many minority people in maintaining their livelihoods

which depend on natural resources (Buadeng, Boonyarasanai and Leepreecha, 2002). Therefore, the assumption that the touristic development of the mountain areas was also a political tool in the integration and assimilation of the Hilltribes into Thai mainstream society is thoroughly plausible (Michaud, 1997, p.131).

Fieldwork

The research was based on fieldwork of four months and follow-up visits in the two villages. The main research methods used to gather information were qualitative interviews and participant observation. A problem accompanying me throughout the entire fieldwork was the language barrier. Being able to basically communicate in Thai language and speaking a few phrases of Akha and Sgaw-Karen was not sufficient in order to carry out in-depth interviews on my own. I was thus accompanied by an interpreter in each village. My research assistants and translators khun Wisoot, Mai und Kosita were very important in order to establish contact to the communities and very committed to providing exact English translations. I also attempted to minimize misunderstandings by frequent questioning and discussion of the translations. However, the process of translation always includes the possibility of losing or skewing information. The disadvantages of this language filter were unavoidable due to my insufficient language proficiency. Some interviews could not be recorded because requests were either resisted by the interviewees or led to an overly artificial and forced atmosphere, meaning that this measure had to be dropped. Interviews which could not be taped therefore had to be scrutinised immediately. I chose to give priority to the creation of a familiar everyday conversation over the exact documentation of each and every word.

A total of 28 qualitative interviews with 23 different interview partners were conducted. While the qualitative interviews served to ascertain opinions, attitudes, expectation, and intentions, I also used participant observation to determine actions and behaviour. The entirety of the material can therefore be seen as text in the broad sense, including in this case transcribed interviews, observation protocols, essays of villagers about tourism in their village, drawings by villagers on the theme of tourism in my village, field notes, and photos. The analysis for this data is based above all on grounded theory principles (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Data analysis was done in a

modified manner aiming at breaking down the broad range of data gathered into categories that shed light upon local gazed in the context of ethnic minority tourism.

Two hilltribe villages - a brief description

The two villages chosen for this study, the Akha village *Jorpakha* and the Karen village *Muang Pham* have very different characteristics: They differ in terms of location, accessibility, ethnicity, economic starting position, and in terms of the type, intensity, and infrastructure of their tourism.

The Akha village Jorpakha

Jorpakha lies 800 m above sea level in the Chiang Rai province and is can be accessed quickly and easily on a paved road from the Main Highway. During the time of research 108 households and approximately 650 inhabitants were in the village, all members of the ethnic sub-group Akha-Ulo. In 1997, some sections of the village were provided with electricity. About 10 percent of the villagers do not have Thai citizenship. Within the last decades local political and religious leaders have lost their status and power as the highland area became increasingly incorporated into Thai administrative-bureaucratic systems such as land registration, formal schooling, national identity card system and so on, a development that also pertains to other highland villages (see Tooker 2004, p.261). Moreover, about two thirds of the villagers have converted to some form of Christianity and therefore have new religious leaders. There are currently three churches in the village; Evangelical, Catholic, and Baptist. The spread of Christianity and other developments such as increased urban migration, Thailand's laws, etc. are contributing factors to the dwindling of the *Akhazang*, the Akha's traditional way of life. The villagers' main problem is that they have almost no economic earning opportunities, since the surrounding fields and woods are either owned by Thais or under the control of the Royal Forest Department in charge of the country's natural resources. As a result, many villagers are forced to work either on fields or in the city at gas stations, construction sites, restaurants, and bars, earning no more or even less than the official minimum wage.

Touristic conditions

The most noticeable manifestations of tourism are the more than 20 souvenir stands, lined up in a row like beads on a necklace. The bags, pillows, and headscarves sold

are handmade, but for the most part ordered from companies in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, or in Tachilek (Burma/Myanmar). The main attraction are the exotic Akha themselves, in particular the women, who wear imposing head decorations. Akha-specific "cultural goods" and tourist attractions such as the village gates and guard statues at the entrance of the village or the nearby swing, (only used during the Swing Ceremony) can be seen as objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986).

Plate 3: Tour group at the entrance gate

Source: Author photo

The adjacent informational plaques briefly explain the functions of these attractions in Thai and English. All tourists begin village sightseeing at the Akha village gates. Most tourists follow their guide down a marked path following selected attractions and souvenir stands. The touristic situation and actions are limited to a very small area, a front stage in Goffman's terms, meaning that a strong segregation between tourist and non-tourist activities can be determined (see Figure 1). This protection mechanism keeps the tourist economy spatially confined to the main street of the village; a spatial structure that can also be observed at other hilltribe village tour sites (Evrard and Leepreecha, 2009, p.249).

Plates 4 & 5: Souvenir selling

Source: Author photo

The type of hilltribe tourism occurring in Jorpakha can be seen as excursion tourism or as a "tribal village tour" as described by Cohen (2001b). The village is visited mainly by groups of tourists consisting almost entirely of foreigners as part of a round trip tour of Thailand. The groups are generally made up of 15 to 25 people, though
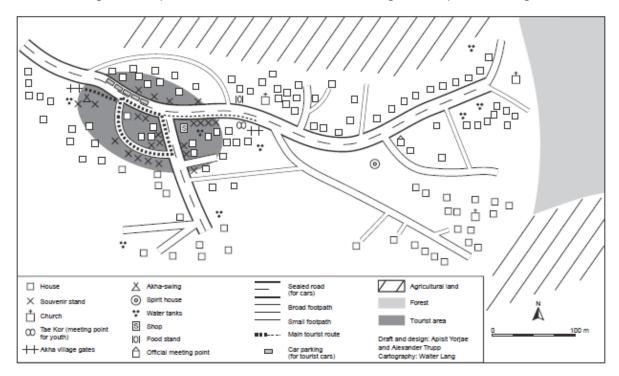
Figure 1: Spatial structure and tourist settings in Jorpakha village

smaller groups of up to nine people who have booked a one-day tour in Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai also visit the village. A tour guide from the country of origin and an additional Thai guide usually accompany the large tour groups, while the smaller groups are led by a single guide. The price for a one-day excursion from Chiang Mai is about 1,400 Baht, no portion of which goes directly to the villagers.

The tourists are driven to the easily accessible village in minivans and small busses. Their length of stay varies from 10 to 40 minutes. While touring the hilltribe village it is possible to take photographs and to purchase souvenirs. The tourists spend the majority of their day in an air-conditioned vehicle since it is often important to see as much as possible within a short period of time and the hilltribe visit is only one of several stops on the program. An average of 100 visitors reach the village each day. Since the village can also be easily reached during the rainy season, fluctuations in the number of tourist arrivals are minimal. The organized tour is pared down to a brief visit, taking place sometime between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. depending on the agency. It is therefore not even theoretically possible to go beyond brief intercultural contact.

Plates 6 & 7: Souvenir stands in Jorpakha

Source: Author photo

The Karen village Muang Pham

The second village, is located in Mae Hong Son province in the Pang Ma Pha district. Up into the 1980s, this region was not subject to the Thai state, but to the opium king Khun Sa and his Shan United Army (SUA), which controlled the drug traffic along the Burmese-Thai border. Because of this, numerous development programmes meant

to integrate dwellers of the region into Thai society were launched in this area. The village was founded in 1961 and is now home to about 100 households and 500 inhabitants. Most of the villagers are Sgaw-Karen and have Thai citizenship. Nine families have converted to Christian Baptism, a church of which is in the village. The majority of the villagers are officially Buddhists, but it can be said that Buddhist ideologies are compatible with those of the Karen. Since 2005, households have access to solar-powered electricity, a development that brought about great changes for the villagers. Unlike the Akha village Jorpakha, more than half of the villagers here have land use rights for wet rice fields or for wet and mountain rice fields. Some households also cultivate cash crops such as garlic, chili, ginger, or corn. Animal husbandry is another important economic base of the village. Most households have chickens and pigs. Some families have buffalo and cows, one family has horses, and another has two elephants used for tourism.

Touristic conditions

Tourists arriving from Tamlod or Soppong are greeted at the village entrance by a welcome board and an information sign about tourist attractions. The village

Plate 8: Muang Pham tourist information sign

Source: Author photo

attractions are on the one hand the natural landscape and nearby cultural sites, and on the other hand tourist activities such as elephant riding and bamboo rafting. The Karen women play a central role in the tourism of Muang Pham and can be observed weaving products which are also sold to tourists. Included in the price of the trekking tour is an overnight stay in the village and meals, which are carried in and cooked by the guide. Since experience has shown that the Karen cuisine does not agree with the tourists, the Muang Pham villagers provide only rice, soft drinks, and beer. Muang Pham has a wide variety of tourist activities that go beyond the few square meters of Jorpakha's offerings. Nonetheless a definite segregation of tourists and native Karen can be observed. The main tourist activities such as elephant riding, bamboo rafting, and visiting the caves take place outside of the village. The guided tour of the village generally lasts from 30 to 60 minutes. In the homestay, the tourists are lodged in an area separate from the occupants or operators.

Plate 9: Muang Pham village sightseeing

Source: Author photo

The type of tourism found in the Karen village Muang Pham can be defined as trekking tourism or jungle tours (Cohen, 2001b). Single or multiple day trekking tours including a guide are available at guesthouses in the nearby towns Tamlod and

Plate 10: Muang Pham village sightseeing with trekking guide

Source: Author photo

Soppong as well as in numerous agencies in Pai, Mae Hong Son, and Chiang Mai. Muang Pham is also visited by tourists who have booked a several-week-long voyage with a high adventure and culture factor in their home country, part of which includes a several-day trek to the Hilltribes. At least 90 percent of the tourists stay overnight in one of the nine homestays. Unlike Jorpakha, trekking tourism in Muang Pham is highly seasonal. Busy periods include the high season and dry season (December to February) and the part of the rainy season that overlaps the main vacation time for most travellers (July to September). During these periods, tourist groups arrive in the village almost daily. When several groups stay in the village at the same time, the guides try to avoid interaction.

Tourism from the perspective of the Akha and the Karen

Given the brief characterization of the two villages and the visible manifestations of tourism present in each, the host gazes of the Akha and the Karen can now be discussed. How do the Akha and Karen perceive the ethnic tourism phenomenon and how are host gazes constructed and reinforced? While analysing the research

data, the following classifications emerged: Perception and evaluation of (1) ethnic tourism, (2) tourists, (3) guides.

Ethnic tourism: Relativization of tourism

Interview data shows that the Eurocentric perspective often overestimates the importance of tourism as an agent of cultural and social change. This overestimation is especially clear when tourism is compared with other processes and developments. Lüem (1985) sees tourism in developing countries as a acculturation process, wherein tourists demonstrate their Western culture to their hosts. This demonstrative effect arouses identification, imitation, and acculturation effects on the side of the host culture. When looking at the situation in Thailand, it becomes clear that there are many other (sometimes more meaningful) processes that contribute to transformations. The non-Christian Akha of Jorpakha see Christianity as the most dangerous threat to their culture. Another factor is Thai legislation (i.e. logging ban, citizenship), which has a strong influence upon the lifestyle and culture of the Akha.

The influence of mainstream Thai society is also very meaningful and strongly felt in both villages. Lack of employment and educational facilities in both villages force many villagers to temporarily migrate to the city. Finally, there is the influence of the mass media, which has become stronger since the villages acquired electricity. None of this is to say that tourism has no effect on the hilltribes. However, seen in comparison with the other processes of change, tourism plays a relatively small role. Platz (1995) arrived at a similar conclusion regarding the Lisu in northern Thailand finding that the self-confidence of ethnic minorities is often underestimated and that the acquisition of Western cultural patterns does not have to be directly connected to tourism.

Tourism, cultural change and revitalization

The minority villages are undergoing processes of change that are perceived very differently by tourists and local residents. The shift in building materials from bamboo and grass to cement, bricks, and corrugated sheet metal is quickly recognized by most tourists. The switch from wearing traditional dress to pants and shirts is similarly visible. Infrastructure developments mean that some villagers have access to paved roads, and the expansion of the electrical network allows radio and

television voices to echo through the homes. These obvious observations cause experienced tourists to identify the village as unauthentic or even spoiled. Villagers are aware of the tourist's quest for cultural exoticism and in some cases they make use of this when wearing the traditional clothing and impressive jewellery in order to fulfil the desired authenticity and to make a better sell.

Plate 11: Weaving for tourists in Muang Pham

Source: Author photo

But they also understand that the expected stereotype of "traditionalism" or "primitivism" as a problem:

> The tourists don't want development in our village. For example they don't want to see modern roofs but modern roofs are better for us in the rainy season. Tourists always want to see the old style. They complain about modernization but don't understand the problems. (Interview with headman, Jorpakha)

The different action contexts, interests, motives, and attitudes here make the differences between internal and external apperception very apparent. Yang and Wall (2009) identified similar tensions between the tourist's desire for cultural

exoticism and resident's quest for modernity in ethnic tourism development in Xishuangbanna, southern China.

This issue is also related to the question whether tourism commercializes, destroys, benefits, or even saves the culture of the hosts. This question cannot lead to any generally valid statements as its answer depends upon a multitude of factors including the type and intensity of tourism, the economic background of the country, etc. In the following, I show the diverse gazes upon tourism and tourists in respect to cultural revitalization. Much of the population sees tourism as being neither destructive nor – aside from economic profit – constructive.

Looking at the perceptions and statements of the villagers, it becomes evident that the question of whether tourism destroys or rejuvenates traditional cultures cannot be generally answered even within one village. Some villagers repeatedly emphasize their joy and pride in having people interested in their culture, and see it as strengthening self-awareness of being Akha or Karen. In a study on authenticity and commodification in a village in Flores, Eastern Indonesia, Cole found out that villagers predominantly believe that tourism reinforces the importance of tradition (Cole, 2007). The host perspective in the studied village in Northern Thailand however does not indicate a homogenous host perspective as parts of the villagers don't attribute any significance to tourists in the context by for instance stating: *"*No, tourists cannot help at all. It is up to us Akha People to keep our Akha culture*"* (Interview with traditional leader, Jorpakha).

Non-economic interests: language and cultural exchange
The predominant interest in and intention behind the hosts' touristic actions is without a doubt economic (Bartsch, 2000). Beyond this, the younger generation also has a significant interest in accumulating incorporated cultural capital in the form of language skills.

> I like to learn language very much, I like to learn many languages. Now I learn English and French in high school, but this is the last year for me. So I am very happy and so glad to see tourists coming to visit our village. (Essay of pupil, Jorpakha)

An interest in exchanging culture and information can also be determined, whereby the intentions of telling about oneself and of learning about the guests are both present. According to Max Weber (1984) instrumental rational actions such as the sales strategies can be differentiated from value rational actions., Ate, a Jorpakha villager enjoys explaining Akha traditions, demonstrating traditional hunting weapons and music instruments, and readily answers the tourists' questions. His primary interest is not of an economic nature, but can be designated as value rational, since it is not the financial value that is the deciding factor for him, but cultural and religious values: "For me it is alright even if I get no money because it is good what I am doing and the spirits will bless me for my actions." (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

Ethnic tourists: Generalized images The over-simplified images that predominate among both travellers and villagers can be attributed to the brevity of intercultural contact and the physical and social segregation of both groups. The day tourists in Jorpakha stay an average of 15 minutes. In Muang Pham, the average stay is several hours, but tourists remain spatially and socially segregated from the villagers. The verbal communication skills necessary to bridge this gap are absent, since tourists generally don't speak Thai, Akha, or Karen. This language barrier can only be overcome with the help of the guide:

> As I do not speak English my only way to communicate with tourists is sign language. I would often like to talk to tourists but we do not understand each other. So we usually look at each other and smile. (Interview with member of weaving group, Jorpakha)

In Jorpakha, as soon as red or green pick-ups (the common local form of transport, also used by many tourists), air-conditioned minivans, or rental cars are seen driving up the road, it is assumed that tourists are inside. The tourists are immediately credited with certain attributes and characteristics. Of course tourists are not recognized solely by their means of transport, but also by their appearance (skin colour, hairstyle, clothing), their cameras, their behaviour, and their guide. The tourists, who are recognized as such at the latest upon leaving their car, have specific significances for the locals. Werlen (1998, p.332) speaks of a '…relational orientation criterion', which serves to:

…apply a specific meaning to the physical elements of a specific action and in relation to specific norms and cultural values. In this way, the subject creates a significance relation between the goal of an action and the physical objects of the situation.

Actions within the touristic context are influenced primarily by economic determinants, which is why the image persists that tourists have money. The fact that tourists mean income and money is repeated in almost every conversation. I was often asked about my income, the price of my flight ticket, and the price of my digital camera. The image of the Golden West arises and is reinforced from the openly displayed riches combined with an apparent lack of need to work.

In both villages, tourists have lost their status as exciting new occurrences and attractions. Their daily appearances have become too common to incite curiosity or an urge to discover in the natives. The most important aspect of tourists remains the economic capital, but they do also provide entertainment and diversion. In the Akha village, touristic activities take place between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. at the latest. After the last tourists have gone away, the women leave their souvenir stands and return to their houses. In conversation, it is often repeated that the times where there are no tourists are very calm. The fact that tourists break this calm is sometimes seen as positive:

And it is exciting and interesting to meet different people every day. They have different skin, different language, and different hairstyles. That's exciting. When the tourists leave the village it is very quiet. (Interview with souvenir seller, Jorpakha)

Domestic tourists

In the classic ethnic tourism provinces Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Mae Hong Son, there are more domestic than foreign tourists. The number of Thai tourists rose together with the Thai economic boom in the 1980s but ethnic tourism plays a relatively insignificant role in domestic tourism. Most domestic tourists are urban upper- and middle-class, traveling north to visit natural, religious, and historic attractions (Kaosa-ard, Bezic and White 2001; Cohen 2014). Domestic Thai tourists usually visit hilltribe villages in the context of one-day excursion from Chiang Mai or

Chiang Rai but don't book trekking tours. Two ambiguous characteristics of domestic tourists can be identified (Cohen, 2003). First, domestic tourists have similar cultural background like local people so they could share more social and cultural values such as religion, language, beliefs and attitudes with each other than with foreigners or Western tourists. Second, the middle class domestic tourists in less developed area mostly judge local people as uncivilized or primitive, especially tribal or ethnic groups.

How Thai tourists from urban areas perceive the hilltribes of the mountain regions and how the Akha and the Karen assess the Thai tourists, must be seen in terms of history and the development of negative stereotypes projected upon members of ethnic minority groups in the context of the east-west conflict, shifting cultivation in combination with opium production and immigration issues (see Laungaramsri 2003). The members of the hilltribes are aware that their culture is seen by urban Thai society as having a very low status. Akha or Karen who openly wear their traditional dress in the city are often confronted with negative attitudes. My observations in Bangkok and narratives of the villagers support this view (also see Trupp 2014a). The image of hilltribes as being drug-riddled and a threat to security is perpetuated even in academic circles. While foreign tourists are particularly interested in the traditional, authentic, and typical hilltribe dress, Thai tourists tend to express surprise at such peculiarities:

> Thai tourists often wonder and ask me why I wear this burdensome clothing. They say that it would be much more comfortable without it. Foreigners on the other hand encourage me to wear it. They say it is so beautiful and special. (Interview with souvenir seller, Jorpakha)

Evrard and Leepreecha (2009, p. 250) argue that domestic tourists favour 'sanuk' (fun) over authenticity. In addition to the disinterest of Thai tourists for the hilltribe cultures, the economic factor also reappears. Thai tourists spend less money and bargain harder. The Akha and Karen accept this since the dominant perception among villagers is that foreign tourists have more money than Thai tourists.

Negative perceptions

> Many people have already asked me about tourism. I always answered good, good and so on but I am not 100 percent sure about that. (Interview with headman, Muang Pham)

This statement by a villager shows how difficult it is to elicit critical statements about tourism, since many villagers are dependent upon it. At the same time, the statement reveals a kind of insecurity about the effects of tourism developments, which was often noticed in my interviews. Tourism and tourists are phenomena that are seen for the most part positively, above all because they enable many villagers to improve their living standards. I stated above that the effects of tourism must be seen in relation to other developments and processes. Despite this, the Akha and Karen that I studied criticized some clearly negative aspects of tourism developments. The younger generation in particular criticizes the negative ecological effects, since above average amounts of trash gather at tourist attraction sites in the villages. The hilltribes also see a certain immorality and breach of social norms in the tourists' clothing style when tourists arrive in shorts or tank tops or when they go swimming in the river next to the village without permission.

Also, some of the tourists approach the hilltribes disrespectfully and with a lack of esteem. In a few cases, villagers were even cursed at by tourists or had souvenirs stolen. Tourists can misbehave or even steal in the villages with no risk of legal consequences. During my stay in Jorpakha, I experienced one such case. According to an Akha woman, a tourist stole a souvenir. An argument ensued between the tourist and the Akha woman over an amount equal to two euros, whereby both sides accused the other of swindling. At some point, the souvenir salesperson involved turned her back on the tourist and returned cursing to her stand, and the pick-up with the visitor drove on to the next attraction. While this conflict was a one-time situation for the tourist (who can quickly forget the village and the problem) the hilltribes are repeatedly confronted with conflict situations in which they are the weaker actors. Going to the officials would be an option, but mostly hilltribe members avoid it because of its difficulty and because of the tendency of officials to believe the tourists instead of the hilltribes. Despite these occurrences, the negative images produced are not generalized or projected upon other tourists: "We don't blame

these people. There are good and bad people all over the world." (Interview with headman, Jorpakha)

Tourist guides

The tourist guides play an important intermediary role between hosts and guests. The central role of the guides has previously been discussed in hilltribe tourism literature (Meyer 1988; Toyota 1993; Cohen 2001b), and is reconfirmed by the results of my study. The tourist guide is recognized as having a position of power, which arises from their ability to determine the actions of the tourists. Guides decide which sites will be visited and can also influence when and where tourists buy souvenirs or handicrafts. When visiting a village, tourist guides often assume multiple roles, including translator, cultural intermediary, shopping guide, and orientation point. The findings in this study show that the Karen and Akha consider the tourists to be the responsibility of the guides. Therefore, the blame for disrespect of cultural and social norms is placed more on the guides than on the tourists. This is also the reason that the role of guide is often seen more critically than that of the tourist. For the tourists in Jorpakha and Muang Pham, the guide is the primary source of information about the Akha and the Karen's lifestyle and culture. Each arriving tourist group goes on a tour of the village accompanied by a guide who provides some general information about the villages and their inhabitants. The jungle guides in Muang Pham generally have a more personal relationship with the villagers and a deeper knowledge of hilltribes than the "town guides" in Jorpakha. Since most tourists speak neither Thai nor Akha nor Karen, one of the most important responsibilities of a guide is to facilitate communication between the hilltribe members and the tourists, especially the translation of information related to the traditions. Sometimes interested tourists ask many questions about the culture and lifestyle of the Akha or about myths and old stories.

> Our culture is complex and our ceremonies are not explained in a few sentences. The guides have a superficial knowledge about us. So they produce many misunderstandings. […] If I explain a ceremony in a few minutes and the guide translates it in a few sentences I know without understanding his language that the translation is incomplete or wrong. (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

The guide is not only an important mouthpiece and translator, but also forms the tourists' basic understanding and impressions of the Akha and Karen through his or her explanations and interpretations. Toyota (1993, p.52) states in her studies that the guide is the person "who directly constructs and exposes the image of the hill tribe people to the wider outside world. Thus it is essential to realize the importance of the role of the guides in order to demonstrate the mechanism of the image production system in the tourism setting."

Conclusion

This paper shows that the phenomenon of ethnic tourism – compared to other processes of change in region – plays a relative minor role in the minds of the Akha and Karen. Although tourism is an almost daily occurrence in both villages, other processes and events such as agricultural problems, citizenship, migration, and missionary activity are much more strongly perceived.

Yet, for many villagers tourism has become a daily life experience. The Akha and Karen implement cultural capital within the tourism context to transform it into economic profit. In the Akha village, tourism is the sole source of financial income for approximately 100 people while in the Karen village, tourism serves as a supplementary source of income. Due to its poor economic starting position arising primarily from the lack of land use rights, Jorpakha is heavily dependent upon tourist spending for its income. Due to this stronger dependency, stronger negative perceptions about tourism and tourists can be identified in the Akha village. Overall however, locals gaze upon tourists in a positive way even if the images about tourists are rather limited. The material possessions apparent among tourists are perceived by the hilltribes as evidence of the belief that the visitors have large amounts of money available. In addition to economic interests, the younger generation is eager for the accumulation of cultural capital in the form of language skills. The perception and attitudinal schemas of the visited Akha and Karen differ, especially between older villagers and a younger generation increasingly influenced by mainstream society. These findings have shown that there is no single homogenous local gaze, not even within one community as the gaze depends on the individuals' experiences, backgrounds and personal interests.

Moreover differences between Western und domestic tourists were identified. The way domestic Thai tourists and ethnic minority members are gazing upon each other is embedded in historical and political developments and the thereby negatively constructed stereotypes. Finally the tourist guide plays the most important role during intercultural contact and is principally responsible for exported images of the hilltribes. The guide's tips and advice influence the tourists' behaviour in the village (including their purchasing tendencies), leading to the guides being more critically perceived and judged than the tourists.

The paper has shown that visited local residents are not passive objects but are active agents who develop their own perspectives and construct their own gazes upon various aspects of the ethnic tourism phenomenon including different types of tourists, tour guides or the questions of modernization versus cultural exoticism.

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Author details: Alexander Trupp is Assistant Professor at the Department of Geography and Regional Research at the University of Vienna, Austria, and editor-in-chief of the Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies (ASEAS). His research interests include tourism, migration, and qualitative research methods, especially in the context of Southeast Asian Studies.
Email: alexander.trupp@univie.ac.at