

‘Enclaved’ Tourism: Ethnic Tourism of Akha People Laos, Thailand, and China

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Introduction: Akha, the hill people



With a total population of 400,000, the Akha is a veritable ethnic minority group that live in southwest China, Laos, Thailand and other regions in Asia. Their settlements are at a high elevation in the mountains. Scholars have reached a common understanding that Yunnan Province in China, which is still the most populated Akha residence, is the origin of the Akha. They have been migrating south over the past few centuries, and their reasons for migration are complex and uncertain, i.e., could be escaping from wars. Anyway, they arrived in Southeast Asia in the early 20th century, developed their own local communities and culture generations after generations.

Regardless of the size of the Akha group, they are not always treated as equals in the places where they now inhabit. According to Richard Jenkins, ethnic identity is a product of being defined and categorised from the outside and constant internalisation and group identification from the inside (Jenkins, 1994). The dilemma that Akha people face now is led by each country’s nation/ethnic policy and related arenas such as education and propaganda. In China, according to the gazetteers in the late Qing Dynasty, there were over one hundred distinct communities in Yunnan province (Hansen, 1999). However, after 1949, the Chinese government started the work of identifying and categorising ethnic groups nationwide. In this process, the Akha are classified as a subgroup of the Hani, which is recognized as one of the 55 ethnic minority groups by the government. And the Akha did not agree with and refused the new identity constructed by a crude classification based on the logic of countability. In the

context of Thailand and Laos, Akha people as the highlanders also confront the political incorporation and cultural construction from local governments—the major representatives of the so-called lowlanders. In Thailand, they are classified as one of the six *chao khao* (hill tribes), which refer to tribal migration during the long history period and are considered as non-Thai by the official authorities. However, the Akha villages have elected headmen who receive government salaries and attend meetings. What's more, Tai language speakers use derogatory words like *gaw* to indicate the Akha as inferior social groups. As the 9th largest ethnic group in Laos, the Akha is a *Lao Soung* (hill tribes) that move frequently between remote areas. The intention of this is regarded as avoiding authorities. There is also a disparaging name: *kha kho* for Akha people, meaning “slaves”.

Despite the identity plights mentioned above, the wave of ethnic tourism is posing new challenges to Akha people in these countries. Websites of official and informal organisations, post contents of travellers and scholars, along with documentations, work together to complete the imagination of the audience about the mysteries and uniqueness of Akha. In the following part of the article, we will examine how ethnic tourism represents and reconstructs the Akha and the potential problems underlying different ethnic tourism practices in Laos, Thailand, and China. We will focus on how countries, capital, as well as organisations, and the Akha themselves construct the authenticity of Akha as a tourism resource and meanwhile showcase the exoticism to cater to tourist gaze—which is a concept proposed by John Urry (1990) referring to ways of seeing and travelling practices. In this paper, we use this concept to stress the selectiveness of the tourist gaze that appreciates certain things while ignoring the others. Also, we will explore gendered labour division in Akha tourism and how women perform as a crucial participant in the whole industry.

Akha's Struggles Between Tradition and Modernity in Laos



Traditional Akha village in the hills of Phongsaly Province

Most Akha live in the Northern part of Laos, mainly in Phongsali, Luang Namtha, Udomsak, and Bokeo provinces. Only later did they settle in the mountainous areas in northern Laos during the last 200 years. The total population of the Akha in Laos is 66,108 people, of whom 33,000 are women. They are 1.4 per cent of Laos' total population based on the second population census 1995. Never has the choice been so drastic for the Akha People of northern Laos. For centuries they preserved their culture in remote mountain villages. However, now the pressures of modern civilization are closing in.



There has usually been a cultural collision and fusion between civilisations in the process of nationalisation. The Ahka people are still living a traditional lifestyle ever since they immigrated to Laos. Cut off from the rest of the world without a paved road. They seem to live in a different time: Their language isn't even written down. Their everyday life is defined by the laws and rituals handed down from their ancestors such as animal sacrifices to ward off bad luck. Like many mountain tribes in Laos, the Akha are facing a difficult choice: between a move down into the valley, which would mean they would have electricity, running water and better

medical care - but also abandoning their ancient rituals. The Akha are often viewed as relatively new, illegitimate immigrants to Laos. Due to the problems left over from history, jade, drugs, and underground smuggling have become one of the sources of income for these border immigrants. In the 1990s, the resettlement policy of the hill tribes to the low land area made by the government of Muang Sing County in Luang Namtha province of Laos aimed at strengthening the of government’s management of the hill tribes and the attempting to discipline the ‘savage’ by the ‘civilisation’ in plain area. Unfortunately, failure due to the refusal of hill tribes to go downhill. Mengxin County, Luang Namtha Province in northern Laos is a border county in the northern part of Laos dominated by Akha, Daile, and Lao people. They have lived far away from the management centre of the country for a long time in the mountains and lived by growing opium poppies—difficulties in national management and implementation of anti-drug work. Moving the mountain people to the dam area can keep them away from the opium poppy planting land to achieve the purpose of banning poppy planting and regulating management. Whereafter, the government carried out the work on drug control in the mountain area and promoted the “shifting cultivation” industry and development of the job market. This made the hill tribe Akha who lost their economic sources go downhill to find a new solution. After 2002, the excellent development opportunities in the labour market, rubber market and sugar cane market in the dam area and surrounding areas powerfully drove many Aka people from mountainous regions to break through the existing habits and flood into the dam area. The Akha who migrated to the lowland area kept seeking to improve economic life and, in the meantime, to actively carry out cultural adjustment to merge into the “civilisation” course.



Sugar cane farmers in Laos

Utilising Traditional Handicrafts to Develop Special Tourism Products



Ock Pop Tok Village Weavers Project

The Akha was used to group together with many subgroups and clans with strong identities and ways of life. Women in these tribes are known for their silver headdresses adorned with coins and beads. They traditionally work in indigo dyeing, embroidery and appliqué. Non-governmental organisations have also established small businesses that sell traditional handicrafts to foreign countries in order to better improve the employment situation of local women and strive for more income for them. For example, Ock Pop Tok (East meets West in Lao) was founded by women and is run by women for the women of Laos. They started working with Akha artisans for the first time in 2003 and started the Akha Biladjo project, collectively stitching children's toys and books using fabrics on hand. The designs took off, and local markets were found. It becomes an autonomous way to generate a steady income using traditional skills. The project is self-operated and is one of the successful cases of handicraft development in Laos. In 2010, the organisation was also invited to design a product development training program at the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) request. This activity was also supported by the ECL project funded by the Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF). It is an aid for trade partnership that takes action for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Since 2009, EIF has been a multi-donor program that supports least-developed countries to become more active participants in the global trading system by helping them address supply-side trade constraints.

Thailand's identity and tourism policy: promoting "non-legal citizens"

The Akha moved into Thailand in 1903 and settled down in northern provinces. Despite their long-time existence, the Akha are not recognized as Thai citizens by the Thai government or mainstream society (Bhruksasri, 1989). Research by Toyota in 2006 found that 40-60% of Thailand's ethnic minorities met the requirements for legal citizenship, but still lacked citizenship (Mika, 2006). This lack of citizenship has left Thailand's ethnic minorities prohibited from leaving their provinces, losing the right to vote, and unable to own their own lands. At the same time, these minorities are excluded from social security, health care, and higher education.

The Displaced Akha Tribe of Northern Thailand is a video posted on Youtube that features journalists travelling to the Akha tribe of Thailand to document the Thai government's relocation of many northern hill tribes to small villages. When interviewed, many Akha said they had to obey the government because they could not legally own their own land. In addition, they are unable to live the same self-sufficient life in small villages as they used to live in the mountains.

However, unlike the forced migration to small villages, Akha women have become the main commodities for tourism promotion in Thailand. Akha women in traditional costumes often appear in Thai tourism media, advertisements and postcards. Through tourism promotion, Akha people become one of the most visible highland minority groups and bring considerable economic benefits to Thai tourism. Thus, on the one hand, the Akha in Thailand are in a politically and economically marginalised position; on the other hand, they are promoted as a tourist attraction.



Akha girls in Chiang Mai

Commercialization of nations and peoples: Ethnic villages, Branded coffee, and Handicrafts

Green Trails is a travel agency that specialises in designing tours to Thailand. In cooperation with Baan Apha Ethnic Village, Green Trails has designed a "private tour" for foreign customers, including activities such as learning the Akha language, experiencing Akha Americana, and trying on traditional Akha costumes. As a "private tour", this kind of promotion is based on tourists' vlogs. On Youtube, there are many videos posted by foreign travel vloggers who live in Akha ethnic villages and live with Akha people. The accommodations in these ethnic villages also adjust to the needs of consumers. Although there is no air conditioning, there are basic sanitary facilities such as toilets and showers. It is not as "primitive" as the local Akha people.



Cooking the Akha Way

The commercialization of the Akha seems to be minimised in the "private tour", but the real business is often not found in the northern hill tribes. The tourist journals sharing Akha trips in Thailand, apart from the in-depth experience of the ethnic village, more often recommend the Akha Café and its coffee brand, Akha AMA Coffee. The café was first made famous in Chiang Mai with the head picture of an Akha woman (the founder's mother) scrawled on the walls of the store and used as the brand logo. The coffee beans used in the café are grown and harvested by the Akha people in northern Thailand, and Akha AMA Coffee is now a global chain with a branch in Tokyo.



Akha AMA Coffee Logo

As Thailand is a tourist country, the Akha living in it are not immune to the tendency of commercialization. The Akha, who are unable to obtain legal citizenship, have begun to actively engage into and accept commercialised practices, such as promoting ethnic village tourism and making commercial brands. Selling handicrafts has also become one of the ways for Akha people to gain economic resources. For example, at street fairs, Akha women can often be seen weaving or selling ethnic clothing and handicrafts. On Youtube videos, Akha women in traditional costumes are touting their handicrafts.

However, it is worth noting that it is mainly Akha women who make and sell handicrafts, while Akha men are "invisible".



Akha woman head gear

Akha women: traditional identity under commercialization

As mentioned earlier, the Akha's performance in commercialization mostly revolves around women's labour, such as life experience in ethnic villages (food, performance, traditional costumes), handicraft making and selling, etc. It is undeniable that tourism

commercialization is more focused on entertainment. Besides, women are considered more suitable and capable in handicraft making. As a result, Akha women have become the main providers of household income in ethnic tourism.

It is reasonable that Akha women should have a say in the household, but it is not the case. In *Gendered practices in urban ethnic tourism in Thailand*, Alexander Trupp and Sirijit Sunanta (2017) have mentioned that when a Thai film crew wanted to film an Akha woman selling souvenirs, she had to call her husband in the village and ask for his permission to participate.

Although Akha women are capable of supporting themselves and their families economically, gender inequality in terms of traditional gender roles has not been improved so much. Furthermore, because women are more involved in self-employment, they have to be wary of possible harassment by male counterparts and carry both economic and domestic burdens at the same time, which in turn exacerbates women's marginalised status.

Akha People in China: Top-Down Representation

Based on short videos on Tiktok uploaded by tourists, local tour guides and local news broadcasts, we can get a panoramic view of how Akha identity is represented by the Chinese government and how authenticity is consumed by the Han majority.

To bring China towards a great modern socialist country, the Chinese government launched the rural revitalization project in the hope that China can be one step further towards modernity. The Laga village where Akha people live needs to be advanced for its “backwardness” which then was utilised by the government as something that is authentic. In this context, the paired assistance program between the state-owned enterprise (China Tourism Group) and Laga village was launched, turning the rural village into Jiadianlan scenic spot. The local news broadcasts reported that Hani Akha people wearing ethnic costumes were dancing and singing to welcome tourists (picture 1); tourists were having a lot of fun by experiencing ethnic culture. The whole scenic spot is similar to a “human zoo” where those “backward”, “indigenous” and “exotic” others are marketed as authenticity to be consumed by the Han majority. (Picture 2) In other words, the cultural aspect identified as backward is marketed as “untainted” and “unspoiled” attractions used by the government for ethnic tourism (Xie, 2011). Tourism planning can reflect the power dynamics in the society. (Wood, 1984). In China, ethnic tourism is utilised as a political tool for the socialist modernity project. Since ethnic minority is an indicator of a modern China, to civilise the backward minority by tourism is a way toward “Hanification” through which Akha culture can be “advanced”. This touristic village is claimed by the government as beneficial in the sense that both rural revitalization and cultural preservation can be achieved. However, it is more of a sugar-coated alibi than cultural preservation. First, the government determines what should be preserved and presented, which means the presented cultural elements should be consistent with the leitmotif of national unity and the leadership of the Communist Party (Li,

2007). Second, although the government supports cultural diversity, it suppresses true autonomous rights by controlling the ethnic resources.



Picture 1 & 2

To be more specific, by analysing the Tiktok short videos uploaded by tourists and tour guides, we can see exactly how Akha identity is represented. The most prominent feature is that Akha folklore customs are commodified as cultural capital. Crossbow-shooting and swinging are marketed as quaint customs for tourists, mainly the Han tourists, to have an immersive experience of authenticity (Picture 3&4). These activities focus on the ‘authentic’ vibe instead of customs. The dance performance is also commodified mainly for entertainment. Ethnicity is infused with inauthentic elements as long as it focuses on entertaining the tourists. The bamboo tube dance is initially performed for certain religious purposes, with Akha people hitting the ground with bamboo tubes in the hope of getting away with evil spirits. However, this dance is endowed with new meaning in the process of government promotion to showcase the new life under the leadership of the CCP. When the dance is commodified, it is performed every single day based on the show schedules. The government involvement in the ethnic dance has changed the original meaning of the bamboo tube dance to a ‘just-for-fun’ activity (Picture 5). Thus, while the symbolic aspect of customs remains, the cultural meaning has lost. In addition to traditional customs, the cultural wall is used to present Akha culture. The selected cultural elements are carved on the wall, being subject to the Han-gaze (Picture 6). For example, their traditions such as patrilineal names, marital traditions and totem culture offer a narrative of “real” things. Museumification gives credence to the authenticity. The wall is also a declaration of Han majorities’ superiority over the “primitive” Akha because it symbolises an earlier stage of the modern Han society. Lastly, the short videos reflect the eroticized and feminised ethnic tourism. Women with colourful ethnic costumes, embroidered bodily adornments and silver coins stand at the gate to greet tourists (Picture 7). Besides, women's images are used in dancing and singing performances as well as making a toast. (Picture 8) Anyway, there is a disproportionate amount of women engaging in ethnic tourism. Through their dress and performances, females become ethnic signifiers so that the ethnic minority is assigned an exotic feminine status. As Swain (1995) points out, “Ethnic tourism is commonly viewed as a process of feminising Other and selling stereotyped images of cultural exoticism.” Tourists coming to Jiadianlan scenic spot with a stereotyped image reinforce this image by sitting on boats enjoying the

ethnic women singing folk songs on the bamboo rafts. (Picture 9) Consequently, the gendered construction and consumption of ethnic tourism leads to the reinforced hierarchical relationship between Han majority and Akha minority.

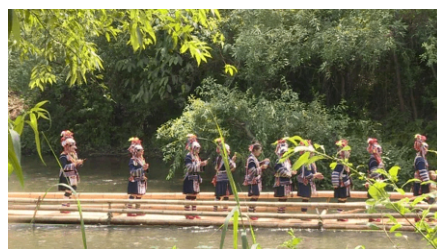
To conclude, Akha identity is remoulded by the Chinese government in two ways: one is the pursuit of national modernity helped by commercial involvement into ethnic tourism; the other one is the top-down representation and governance of heritage preservation. Besides, feminised ethnic tourism reflects the narrative of hierarchy. In this context, ethnic authenticity is reproduced and reimagined.



Picture 3&4&5



Picture 6&7&8



Picture 9

New Possibility in China: Bottom-Up representation

If the top-down representation remoulds Akha identity for certain political and economic purposes, the bottom-up representation aims to present Akha identity properly. Authenticity is negotiable if ethnic tourism is based on the ethnic community and autonomy. The

“community-based ethnic tourism” (Zeppel, 2006) controlled by ethnic groups differentiates itself from ethnic tourism which over-consumes ethnicity.

A short documentary titled *Preserving a Fading Culture in the Mountains of Yunnan* delineates how Akha Artist Shuosan preserves Akha culture by building Dianhangcao Cultural Center (Picture 10), a roughly one-acre centre used to preserve Akha culture. The tension between economic development and cultural heritage is huge. “Children only learn Mandarin Chinese and can’t speak their ethnic language. Valuable traditions are being cast aside or forgotten. Everybody follows the mainstream. We model ourselves on the Han Chinese, Westerners, Americans, while our own unique culture fades.” (Columbia, 2020) Besides, lots of Akha people are ashamed of their ethnic identity. “I was too shy to tell anyone I was Akha. I was even embarrassed by my own name. I felt ashamed and inferior to everyone around me.” (Columbia, 2020) To preserve the fading culture, Shuosan retired early and returned to the village. His goal is to draw young Akha people back, to let tourists have a deep understanding of Akha culture and to boast Akha identity. In this context, the ethnic tourism should be renamed as cultural tourism, because ethnic tourism focuses more on the ethnic uniqueness which are marketable whereas cultural tourism aims more on shaping tourists’ experience of a situation in general without focusing on a specific cultural identity (Wood, 1984). Based on the differences between ethnic tourism and cultural tourism, tourists transform into visitors who’d like to experience and learn, instead of just having fun.

Different from the top-down representation, the Dianhangcao Cultural Center is independent from the government and tourism industry. It was built on Shuosan’s own money and run by his friends and neighbours. The centre has art galleries, libraries, exhibits which show traditional embroidered clothing, guest houses in Akha style, gardens, a tea house and a performance stage (Picture 11). Visitors here can learn how to search for edible plants, cook Akha food, participate in musical performances and study traditional instruments and folk songs (Picture 12). Dianhangcao focuses on cultural dialogues with touristic activities designed for learning and preservation. Although these exhibits and activities are also selected from their culture, they are authentic in the sense that they are not reduced to segmented parts for entertainment purposes. Besides, most guests, be they Akha or non-Akha, can participate in activities for free. They only need to pay for hotels if they want to stay for several days.



Picture 10



Picture 11



Picture 12

Conclusion

By examining Akha ethnic tourism in Laos, Thailand and China in a transnational Asian context, we attempt to analyse different representation practices of Akha people by various social groups and the underlying power relations concerning how this ethnic group is represented and commodified, gendered and marginalised in consuming of ethnic tourism. The ethnic tourism industries in these three countries are at different stages and vary in sources of investment due to socio-economic and political factors: with China being more policy-driven, Thailand being more commercialised and Laos at an initial stage. However, wherever the Akha are located, they are ‘othered’ in ethnic tourism and perform the seemingly permanent exoticism and backwardness. Time for the Akha ethnic cultural features has stopped. Yet, we notice that the ethnicity of the Akha has become a monolith consisting of colliding parts of their own culture as well as governmental and commercial intervention. Just as Hall (1990: 222) once suggested that identity should be thought of as a ‘production’. Akha ethnicity is under negotiation among different stakeholders in ethnic tourism. Maybe proper representations exist, or maybe they are incorporated and changed. However, the production and reproduction will continue as long as ethnic tourism of Akha people proceeds.

Padlet link :

<https://padlet.com/893684844/culs5226-enclaved-tourism-padlet-g89u0z1bcpuupcma>

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