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MANAGING TOURISM IN THE GREATER MEKONG REGION (GMS): A CASE STUDY OF CHIANG KHAN COMMUNITY, NORTHEAST THAILAND[†]

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Abstract

This study aims to examine complex 'sustainability' aspects of the Community-based tourism concept in tourism and destination management in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). This research is conceptualized in assessing the potential for Community-Based Tourism (CBT) development in Chiang Khan, a small village by the Mekong River in the Northeast of Thailand. For collecting data, semi-interviews questions are designed. Focus-group discussion and in-depth interviews are carried to include tourism stakeholders of the destination. This study argues that although a community may contain many tourism assets, it is not the only factor necessary for a 'sustainable' tourism to be developed in that community. Through a case study, its natural features, cultural activities, local lifestyle and the serene landscape of its location are exemplified as the important community-based tourism assets. However, a number of complex components and holistic approaches that worked well together Chiang Khan becoming a sustainable tourism destination. There elements and approaches that contribute to starting up Chiang Khan as a sustainable tourist destination include: its unique features of recreational activities and local businesses, knowledge and skills of the locals to develop tourism related businesses, and direct proper marketing strategies.

Keywords: Community-based Tourism, Tourist Destination, Sustainability, Greater Mekong Sub-region

1. Introduction

A booming of Chiang Khan as a tourist destination especially for Thai tourists is the center of this paper's attention. Chiang Khan is a small village by Mekong River, located about 50 km up to the north of Loei city and about 568 km from Bangkok (see Figure 1). First-time visitors would usually have a very positive 'sense of place' impression due to its charming scenery of many old wooden houses along narrow streets. Those traditional-style wooden houses are local shop-houses with a tranquil riverside backdrop. The area offers easy-going lifestyle activities with several Buddhist temples. Chiang Khan is a place representing its own cultural values with the diversity of the 'Isan' (Northeast Thailand) and 'Mekong' cultures.

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Figure 1. Map indicates where Chiang Khan from Bangkok

There was a sign of tourism development since 2009 with new accommodation planned and developed every few months. The village's tourism opportunity was benefiting from the publicity created from Thai television news channels, particularly, the Channel Three – 3 Dimension News Program on July 19, 2010. Although the news reported on the possibilities of tourism impacts on the local heritage, it also presented the area as impressive because of its local architecture, tranquil landscape of Mekong riverside and unique local lifestyle. It presented it as a once abandoned lifestyle but regenerated into an active historical shopping village. After the news, several other Thai television programs came to film the location mainly for tourism purposes.



Figure 2. Chiang Khan touristic area

Images of Chiang Khan have drawn on the characteristics associated with natural and cultural heritages. Chiang Khan has been presented in several tourist attractions but the main place where tourists visit is the historical structure of the first settlement dated at over a hundred years old. The touristic area is an area between two main roads. The first one is officially called Chai Khong road (lower road) about two km long. The second road is Sri Chiang Khan Road (upper road). The area consists of a group of form, style, and unique wooden structures (See

Figure 2). As Chiang Khan became seriously presented on Thai TV, tourism significantly boomed within a short period. The architectural attributes of wooden houses coupled with aesthetically pleasing location have drawn numbers of people to visit the village (See Figure 3). About one hundred thousand tourists visited Chiang Khan in the last week of 2010 alone (Chiang Khan Municipality, 2011).



Figure 3. Wooden style shop-houses

Although tourism is widely recognized as a process that creates changes in value and system, traditional lifestyle, individual behavior and community structure, it is impossible to categorize the tourism phenomenon as purely a positive or negative (Chatkaewnapanon, 2012; Macleod, 2004). Tourism is a way of stimulating the local economy, with creating tourism-related business community (Tucker, 2003). In response, major concerns have arisen about the potentially disastrous effects of tourism on the social and cultural aspects of the affected areas. These concerns focus on an increasing awareness of the dynamics, development processes and consequences for tourist destinations and their populations (Butler 2006; Cohen, 1996; Smith, 1991; Tosun, 2002; Tucker, 2003). Consequently, this has called into focus the need to study tourism processes and tourist destinations with the issues of sustainability. This includes the idea that communities are to profit from tourism activities and maintain their social, cultural and environmental integrity (Simpson, 2008).

With growing national interest in Chiang Khan, the issue of maintaining cultural and environmental integrity in this small community has been more considered. This paper recognizes tourism as a major force in Chiang Khan economic development. It also recognizes the importance of carefully planning and management of the location in order to achieve sustainable tourism development in Chiang Khan. This paper is based on three different research fieldworks from 2010-2013 with data collection through participating observation, focus-group discussion and in-depth interviews. The fieldworks were initially carried out to assist the community improve their already established tourism as a cultural tourism destination. Working primarily with the local community, this research examines the issue on how to capture economic development that will not destroy a destination's social, cultural and environmental heritage. While the research is about tourism and sustainability, it discusses within the aspects of community-based tourism (CBT). CBT is introduced as an option towards achieving a sustainable tourism development (UNWTO, 2008). Therefore, if a local community develops, manages and maintains their tourism industry in accordance with the CBT concept, the community is then moving towards sustainable tourism. The research focuses on conceptualizing the CBT concept in assessing the potential to create sustainable tourism development in Chiang Khan.

2. CBT Concepts: Opportunity and Success

Tourism and communities development are closely linked in many tourism studies research. However, they are all problematic because of different interpretation of the concepts. Not to mention they have varied degrees of relevance to different locations. Due to the rapid growth of tourism and its often, negative effects, the United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has developed sustainable tourism and community-based tourism (CBT) as key concepts for communities to achieve sustainable development (UNWTO, 2008).

On the one hand, tourism acts as a catalyst for a destination development, especially in rural areas (Okazaki, 2008). The development creates economic activities that often benefit local people (Cole, 2008; Cooper, 2004). As tourism is mostly about the local community selling outstanding natural and cultural resources to tourists, a long-term concern for tourism research as it mainly occurs with escalating environmental and social cultural impacts (Chatkaewnapanon, 2012; Tucker, 2003). On the other hand, CBT is introduced as an option towards achieving a sustainable tourism development (UNWTO, 2008). CBT focuses on how local community may be involved in tourism projects by actively participating in their development (Simpson, 2008). CBT development strategy is based on community resources, needs and decisions. It aims to support livelihood, maintain biodiversity, stimulate SMEs, and reduces poverty (Okazaki, 2008; Simpson, 2008; Tosun, 2000; UNWTO, 2008). A community participating actively in their tourism development is a central focus to the CBT concept. It encourages the community to take control and management of their industry for greater success of achieving sustainability (Choi and Sirakaya, 2006; Simpson, 2008; Mitchell and Reid, 2001). Therefore, CBT has introduced as a promising alternative to conventional approaches to tourism development. A participatory, holistic and inclusive process can lead to positive and permanent changes in host communities.

In many instances, CBT has been identified as either a main or a substantial source to address sustainability of a community. However, to start a CBT in any community is not an easy task. There are two major keys aspects for CBT to develop in each community – adequate tourism attractions and adequate tourism infrastructure and facilities. First, CBT development starts with assessing potential tourism products within a community (Cooper, 2004). Potential tourism products or 'community-based tourism assets' (Mountain Institute, 2000) are necessary as a key instrument to bring in tourists to the community (Mitchell and Reid, 2001). CBT assets cover wide range of products including nature-based resources and activities; cultural resources and events; and local handicrafts and goods in the community (Cooper, 2004). However, those adequate tourism resources ideally should be unique and offer distinctive experiential (McKercher and Ho, 2006). The second aspect is that communities must possess adequate tourism infrastructure and facilities (Graci, 2008). Tourism infrastructure and facilities refer to the physical features of a community ranging from accommodation, road, transportation, tourist information, to hospitality and garbage collection for example. These qualities help the community to function its tourism properly. As adequate infrastructure creates the safety and good experiences for the tourists in the community, it then addresses tourists' satisfaction of the location.

Once CBT is developed and started, one of the challenges is to keep the project running and sustained. The first major challenge identified to CBT progression is to have adequate supported resources. This issue is associated with capital and opportunity. Communities need to be able to have access to financial funding and tourism training (Craci 2008). Sufficient funding is necessary as to improve tourism facilities. However, opportunities to develop tourism related skills and knowledge, most importantly, would broaden the success of CBT (Choi and Sirakaya, 2006; Cooper, 2004).

Marketing strategies is another issue to establish a promising CBT growth in communities. The CBT stakeholders will benefit from the adoption of suitable marketing theories and models. There is little effort made to incorporate the development of CBT marketing strategies with the creation of place branding. Place branding is the process of applying branding principles to a geographical location for a target market (Morgan *et al.* 2004). Hall (2008) states that place branding occurs at different geographical scales in the manifestation of

particular economic, political, and socio-cultural processes as well as various institutional agents. Place branding and marketing strategies in the context of tourism is generally conceptualized as the inter-connectedness of the projected brand identity and perceived brand image of tourists (Cai, 2002; Morgan *et al.* 2004). Incorporate the development of CBT marketing strategies with the creation of place branding then the projected identity of the place is created by the CBT stakeholders including the tourists themselves (Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2003; Clarke, 2000). A proper of marketing capacity and adequate of knowledge on the marketing structure operation will contribution to the success of CBT projects.

Community participation is seen as the most important catalyst need for the success of CBT. It is not a CBT project if a community lacks the desire to participate, control, manage and make decisions over their tourism industry (Tosun, 2000). The community needs to be included from the outset of its development. More importantly, strong community support and participation is needed in the development process to ensure long-term success as a tourist destination (Tosun, 2000). Moreover, the issue of transparency needs to be taken into account. A transparent community participatory process will support the resolution any conflicts that may occur (Cooper, 2004).

In addition, a strong non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involvement will aid a community in building the community capacity for the tourism industry (Simpson, 2008). The role of NGOs as closer and understanding agents of development for the locals is clearly recognized (Tosun, 2000). Thus, NGOs are one of the important players to assist the locals in their needs such as knowledge, skills, and capital. They assist the community to move forwards to a more participatory tourism development approach (Tosun, 2000). Once CBT can develop, then the next significant process is for creative tourism development to balance the costs and benefits for the community economically, socially and environmentally.

3. Chiang Khan: The Shaping of a Tourism Development

Use of the CBT concept in the analysis of tourism development in Chiang Khan aims to examine aspects of tourism development in the sustainability effects. A focus on fieldwork effects provides a clearer understanding on tourism impacts both positively and negatively on the local population. However, the use of these fieldwork data is intended as an analytical tool with which to begin to uncover some of the complex sets of sustainability aspects towards tourism.

3.1. Adequate Tourism Attractions

Numerous tourism attractions were documented through participant observation in Chiang Khan and surrounding area and focus group with local community. The community-based tourism assets in Chiang Khan can be grouped into four categories: 1) Cultural sites; 2) Natural features; 3) Activities; 4) Aesthetics

Cultural sites: The Chiang Khan itself is a main historical cultural site. It is an outstanding architecture. Owing to its unique character flavor, Chiang Khan has been the site of several Thai movies and TV programs. The Thai Dam community is another cultural site in the surrounding area. It is a village of a Thai ethnic group that is located about 10 km from Chiang Khan. It has a Thai Dam cultural center for tourists to visit. Besides several local Buddhist temples, Chiang Khan has two major significant Buddha Images. First, Phra Yai Buddha image is located on a hill facing Mekong River. The image is 19 meters tall, and the base is 7.2 meters wide. It was built by the Thai Army in honor of the King and the Queen of Thailand. Second, Phra Phutta Bat Phu Kwai Kgen Buddha image is about 6 km away from the main touristic area. It is highly venerated by the local population. Every year there is a ceremony held here on the full moon day of the third or fourth month.

Natural features: Chiang Khan is one of many places in Thailand that has abundant natural resources. It has four National Protected Forest Areas. However, the main feature as a tourist attraction is Mekong River. Chiang Khan is located where the Mekong River reconnects with Thailand to form the border with Laos. Therefore, the river itself provides a stunning view

with the backdrop of mountain ranges in Laos on the opposite side of the river. Moreover, the river at this point has rapids. These rapids, comprising of large boulders in the middle of the Mekong River spread across almost its entire width. The best time to view the rapids is between February and May.

Activities: Many heritage buildings in the area have been adapted to retailing, accommodation, restaurants while retaining their original looks. Shopping in a wooden houses-oriented main street is a key activity feature in Chiang Khan. One other element of the village's attractive activities is that of riding a bicycle. The village has been presented intensely in various medias as a place you can ride a bicycle.

Aesthetics: Chiang Khan gives the atmosphere of historical connections with the world heritage site of Luang Prabang in Laos through the local tradition and lifestyle. Arms food to monks in the morning with sticky rice is one of the unique characters of the village. It is not only a main activity for a reason of staying overnight in Chiang Khan, but also adds a beautiful and romantic picturesque event for tourists' to experience. Moreover, Chiang Khan has been presented as a place where traditional life is alive giving a sense of place as a historic flavor and charming ambience.

3.2. Adequate Tourism Infrastructure and Facilities

Chiang Khan is approximately a 30-minute drive from Loei Province as well as from several other tourist towns along Mekong River. It is well connected to the highway from Bangkok. Chiang Khan has a direct bus service from Bangkok and other major cities. The upper road area is a typical, resident-oriented main street with adequate physical infrastructure for residential needs. Beside those basic infrastructures, Chiang Khan also offers the unique feature of tourist facilities. The touristic area has been converted into a large souvenir shopping, dining, and accommodation community. It is because the wooden-houses heritage has been so well preserved in Chiang Khan. Many restoration projects not only offer the unique tourism facilities but also add value on grounds of authenticity and design compatibility.

3.3 Supported Resources

At the very first, tourism in Chiang Khan started with the arrival of tourism-related business people from Pai, another famous Thai tourist destination in the North Thailand. They clearly saw the potential to turn the historical wooden-structure village into a new tourist destination. The immigrant investors fronted the tourism development in Chiang Khan. It promotes higher utilizing of the abandon livelihood heritage than ever before. They transform the village's landscape into adaptive economical activities. Because of the indirect motivation of this group, locals have followed this lead. They, particularly elderly people, developed their own guesthouses, and multiple shops in several restored or redesigned buildings. A strong historic souvenir shopping area attracts nearby visitors for weekends and long distant tourists during its cool season. Although the locals were naïve to tourism-encounters, they soon realized the blooming of business opportunities. The return of the younger generation to Chiang Khan affects the face of tourism development. They are back home with urban development attitudes. They have a significant influence on the recent renewal of Chiang Khan touristic development. Their familiarity with the urbanity, education and capitalism has directly supported Chiang Khan's tourism resources in various capacities. They can get additional investment capital resulting in more tourism activities occurring. As this group has a varied background, they influence a diversity of tourism resources in the community.

3.4. Marketing Strategies and Place Branding

The District Municipality of Chiang Khan manages the marketing for the area. The town has been projected as 'Rich in Culture' and 'Fostering Arts and Crafts'. Other characteristics associated with natural and cultural environment have also been promoted. However, the image of the wooden house as old Thai traditional lifestyle has been the most important factor in the

re-invention of Chiang Khan as a tourist attraction. The local government has involved in number of local projects that represent new and changing attitudes towards previously under-utilized aspects of place identities. The biggest of those projects was the celebration of 100-years anniversaries being the official district of Loei in 2011. With the support of Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), the project was to market the environment, the memory and the livelihood of Sub-Mekong Region. Destination-wide marketing strategies use historic way of life as an easygoing lifestyle in the logo, theme, and images. Then local entrepreneurs reemphasize them through their reformation of the place identity into their products. Locals created value added to the overall marketability of Chiang Khan. Interestingly, a dominant government agent produces the images for marketing to meet the community's need.

3.5. Local Participation

Locals might lack the skills of planning for tourism marketing. However, as the boom of tourism in Chiang Khan continues, local people have noticed that increasing numbers of tourists visiting the town each year. Due to this large influx of tourists, local people realize the need to preserve their culture. They have set up a group called 'Thai Chiang Khan Love Chiang Khan'. The group was set up to respond to the concerns about the future problems related to cleanliness, security, and insufficient accommodation, high prices of food, degraded tourist attractions and service problems. They are actively participating in developing Chiang Khan sustainably. The locals want to protect the cultural heritage of their community without compromising with the increasing economic benefits of the tourism industry. They want to keep Chiang Khan the same as in its projected images. The management structure for the public sector includes the advisory board and the people's council. Their responsibilities would be compatible with the authority of the government. The Chiang Khan people's council must be approved by the district chief or provincial government. This group was set up to support genuine sustainable development in Chiang Khan.

3.6. NGOs/ University Involvement

With the awareness of tourism impacts on Chiang Khan, much research from different universities in Thailand has been conducted. These include research into social, cultural, environmental, economic transformations and the implications of tourism development. The worries of the locals on tourism impacts have made the people actively join with university research teams. The Research and Development Institute from Khon Kaen University in particular has worked with the community to set up the 'Thai Chiang Khan Love Chiang Khan' group. It is the result of a long co-conducted a research between the university and the community. Working in conjunction with the local government, the Chiang Khan's people council aims to develop sustainable practices for the community. Although their practices are not yet clearly established, their performance is developing with the university support. At the latest workshop of the university research team and the community on 24 August 2013, one of the main recommendations was to search Chiang Khan historical roots. Knowing their own values, norms and truly identities, the community will have a clear picture of who they are and what they want to preserve. This understanding will stimulate local people to work together to conserve and strengthen the uniqueness of their own community.

4. Tourism Development in Chiang Khan: Continuity or Disturbance?

From the CBT literature and the Chiang Khan's features discussed above, a number of specific issues become evident regarding the further creating sustainable tourism development in the village. Chiang Khan is full of cultural and natural attractions. Particularly, the cultural and heritage assets are unique for leisure purposes. The main tourism activities are in forms of shopping, cycling and sightseeing of the cultural and natural heritages, which are seen as strong fundamentals to attract tourists. As all these qualities have been publicized in most Thai

TV programs, leisure and ambience has become the main products to market and promote to tourists.

With the return of an entrepreneurial-oriented young generation, it is having the effect of stimulating spin-off for more tourist-oriented businesses. More shops increase the vibrant of the local economic community. At the same time, those new shops contribute to the place's pleasant ambience. As Chiang Khan has expanded the range of shopping, especially souvenirs that represented Chiang Khan, they are strengthening their existing tourism products. Through positive image building and going back to live the heritage lifestyle, Chiang Khan's tourism branding is defined. As to Selby (2010), Chiang Khan is creating the production of symbol-laden heritage landscapes for the cultural heritage consumers. Having its own character branding for a Chiang Khan is not only a big step closer to success for tourism marketing (Cooper, 2004) but also a way forward to the community sustainable tourism (Woodland and Acott, 2007).

In addition, adaptive reuse to tourism functions has preserved historic buildings and landscape in Chiang Khan. Although there is continuing replacement of old buildings with inappropriate new designs, there is not a total loss for the community. With the recognition of the importance of historic look for the village to continue as a tourist destination, the people council of Chiang Khan has encouraged the use of tourism and the heritage. Distinctiveness of the place is encouraged through the community's broad, with tourism facilities fitting into the community's character, rather than changing it. Therefore, economic purpose and architectural preservation has reinforced the community tourism theme and branding. Using marketing strategies that promote the character of the village and supporting businesses makes Chiang Khan a marketable location. The historic entrepreneurial character becomes tourist attractiveness, with both the community and tourist as beneficiary.

The main contributions to the successful sustainable tourism development also include a good leadership, participation and motivation of the local community (Mitchell and Reid, 2001). Moreover, ongoing support of consultation and commitment from the university can lead to the successful in CBT (Tosun, 2000). With the assistance of the university, the community has taken advantage of these opportunities to develop further their own community. In particular, they have utilized the various business models and understood the advantages and disadvantages of tourism development. Therefore, this continuing supports from the university in the beginning stage help to ensure that tourism in Chiang Khan sustains itself. Importantly, it is to ensure the continuing to successful.

Clear objectives and goals in improving tourism activities in Chiang Khan help them obtain capital to support local investments. Accessible to finance is important for locals who want to develop a business or provide simple infrastructure for tourism in a successful ongoing tourism development (Cooper, 2004). Therefore, being able to maintaining tourism investment, coupled with new generation entrepreneurial skills, and local control will enhance local economic growth. At the same time, it promises the long-term community support for tourism development. However, while people in Chiang Khan are welcoming, and actively participating in tourism, they lack knowledge of the tourism industry. Although they are hospitable and friendly, they need to be provided the proper training in tourism and hospitality. Suitable and appropriate training will help the community sustain their community-based tourism development.

5. Conclusion

There is great potential for creating sustainable tourism development in Chiang Khan. As was discovered through participant observation, the community contains many unique tourism assets that continuing to improve. Moreover, the situation in Chiang Khan can be broadly summarized as the growth of an effective space that is reflected control and integration of the heritage preservation and tourism development. Tourism influenced the transformation of the abandoned old settlement area into the tourism-related business landscape. A group of small tourism businesses utilizing the heritage buildings represented the ultimate means of organizing once a useless geographic area into a social, political and economic space that reinforces the process of a tourist destination development.

In addition, in the face of the massive tourism-growth-driven development and the attraction of the economic benefits, people in Chiang Khan are aware of the impacts both positive and negative of the tourism industry. This occurs between place and activities, people and culture, as well as between their traditional and modern components. The challenges facing Chiang Khan will most probably grow with more development and further tourism growth.

Fortunately, Chiang Khan is handling its fundamental change on the community level. The community is strong on the issue of local participation. Currently, there is a local people council group working closely with the university, which is re-creating a local history narrative. The local history is seen as a way to link the community cultural and historical legacies more deeply to the tourism experience. Indeed, Chiang Khan has the potential for sustaining tourism development. Their assets represent unique opportunities for tourism products and a competitive advantage in the tourism market. So far, tourism is benefiting the village significantly. Therefore, if the community can overcome any limitation in their community-based tourism development, it will guarantee the greater success of tourism development in Chiang Khan.

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