The Discourse of Tourism Development in the Construction of a Bai Cultural and Historical City

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Dali Bai Autonomous prefecture is in the west of Yunnan, Dali is the capital city, about 450 km. away from the metropolitan centre - Kunming. As a strategic interchange, Dali is historically well-known, and was a centre of political power from the 8th century to the 13th century. The Bai people are the second largest ethnic group in Yunnan with a population of 1.34 million in 1995, 80% of whom live in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, making up 33% of the local population. The Bai speak a distinctive language, with no written form for it. Most of their historical records are recorded in Han Chinese characters which were synonyms for Bai terms. Historians and ethnologists have never agreed upon the origin of the Bai people or their culture. Scholars within China, like You Zhong and Lin Chaomin, state that the Bai originated from the ancient Diqiang indigenous tribes in southwest China, who had extensive contact with neighbouring ethnic groups, and that their “advanced” culture, by comparison with other indigenous groups in Yunnan, has been the result of extensive Han Chinese influence and successful acculturation. Scholars outside of China, like David Wu, have pointed out that the term ‘Bai’ is a recent classification defined under the national ethnic identification project of the 1950s, and applied to the people formerly known as Minjia, who were studied by C.P. Fitzgerald and C.P. Yang. Most research has been based on the assumption that the Bai people, and their culture, are historically indigenous to the region.

Before the tourism development discourse of the late 1990s had fully developed in Yunnan, tourism was closely related to socialist construction and modernization projects, and emphasised historical heritage.

In April 1996, for example, the China National Tourism Bureau organized a working meeting with representatives from several major cities, and General Director Mr. He Guangwei made the official discourse of ‘tourism development’ very clear in a speech entitled “Promoting Tourism, Promoting Urban Globalization and Modernization”. He argued that tourism should serve the cause of realizing the Four Modernizations (the modernization...
of industry, agriculture, technology and national defense), which had been a national ideological motivation since the 1980s when a market economy had been accepted as the only way to realize the Four Modernizations. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping had strongly advocated that tourism development should be tied in with the basic infrastructural conditions of urban areas, the ‘two serving one another’. Deng envisaged that the state should invest a little in the first few years, and that further investment would then derive from tourism. So the modernization of cities was put as the top priority of the development agenda and tourist-oriented cities became an ideal parameter to evaluate such development. In 1995, the China National Tourism Bureau started a national campaign to select the “China Top Tourist City” (sic); 54 cities won this title in December 1998 (Dali was one of the first), and 69 in 2000. In 2000, one-fifth of all the cities in China participated in this campaign. (He, Tourism in China, a Fifty-year Trajectory, 2000). The criteria for nomination have mostly included economic revenue, the percentage of tourism income in terms of GDP, local government involvement in tourism development planning, supportive policies and management, and the ideological construction of “spiritual civilization”, availability of neon lights in streets as signs/indicators of service and night-time entertainment, increased rates of tourists received and other facilities, such as public toilets. Furthermore, steps were taken to “standardize” the tourism industry in major tourist cities in 1999, checking on the quality of service and basic infrastructure.

It was quite reasonable for the Yunnan government to have originally chosen Dali to initiate its campaign for tourism development on the basis of its historical features, because Dali had long been an important historical place, well-known in the memories of Chinese through textbooks and media. In the first few years of tourism advocacy, historical sites in Dali were emphasized, and its history frequently invoked, as Dali had been the centre of the glorious Nanzhao Kingdom (738–902) and the powerful Dali Kingdom (937–1253). These sites included the southern gate of the Ancient Town (first built in 1382), the three Buddhist pagodas (built during the Dali Kingdom period, and where more than 680 archival remains were discovered in 1978 when a renovation was undertaken), Wuwei Temple (Buddhist), Guanying pond (a Buddhist nunnery built in the Ming Dynasty around 14th to 15th century), Nanzhao Dehua Stone Memorial (built in 766 to record the political and military affairs of the Nanzhao Kingdom), Du Wenxiu Tomb (built in 1917 by local people in honor of a Qing general who rebelled in 1872 but failed, and renovated in 1985), and some others. Another reason for choosing Dali was that it is an important interchange of the well-known Burma Road and the Yunnan–Tibetan road, linking the heart of Yunnan with its northwest and western borders; it serves as a strategic center for transportation and business.

In this conscious construction of a historical Dali, natural scenic spots were connected with historical events/figures with reference to local legend and folklore. An example of this is the Mr. Cangshan area, where many Buddhist temples and pagodas can be found. A small stream in the mountains here is described by a tour guidebook as a place where a famous traveler of the Ming Dynasty, Xu Xiake, had been in 1636. Lines from his well-known travel notes are cited to describe this stream. Again, the “Horse Bathing Pond” is supposed to have derived its name from the time when Kublai Khan took his army there and gave his horse a bath in it, according to local folklore. Great efforts were made to locate historical figures who had visited Dali, like Marco Polo. If one put aside such stories, these places are really nothing more than they appear! Tourists may be partly aware of this, but nevertheless such interpretations and their attached historical meanings cater to the desires for an ‘educational’ visit.

To make the history and culture of the place even more explicit to the public, a modern replica of Nanzhao Cultural Centre (the nan zhaowen hua chen) was built in around 1997–1999, purporting to “represent the history, culture, important events and religious practices of ancient Nanzhao Kingdom”. Whatever the status of the “historical records and ethnographic data” which were used to support such development of tourism, this marked a new stage for Yunnan in the national trend for developing the economy, through “digging up and promoting national/ethnic history and culture” (similar artificial replicas had been built in Guangzhou in the late 1980s and in Beijing in the early 1990s). The main objective was, of course, to bring in cash income through admission and other services, so as to enable some big state-owned leisure parks to support themselves instead of remaining totally dependent on state funding. In this way, tourism has served as a vital means of economic development in the transition of the state from a planned economy to a market economy.

As a result of these developments, Dali received 426,880,000 tourists in 1998, which brought in 1.088 billion yuan. Tourism offered more than 130,000 employment opportunities (fieldwork data, 1999).

In the early initiatives of tourism development, the history of Dali was given full attention, while Bai culture occupied a secondary position. However, the subsequent rise in local people’s living standards (compared with ethnic communities without such access to tourist markets) and the visible benefits they obtained from the tourist market provided a strong basis for a quite new awareness of the importance of ethnic culture and a consequent shift of governmental focus, away from merely rehabilitating local history, towards what is known as “digging up and promoting ethnic cultures”. Political and economic factors have thus had a powerful impact on local ethnic identity through the formulation of development plans, new policies and the accessibility to state resources and the way all these are defined by different kinds of modernizing discourse.

However, tourism in its turn has shaped and changed the lives of local people in ways quite unforeseen by the state, and local people have responded to these developments in novel and creative ways. Dealing with tourists, local ethnic business people tend to identify themselves as either Bai, or originating in Tibet,
or simply claim that their commodity is of some particular ethnic origin, and regard this kind of strategy of ethnic identification as vital to their survival. In some cases, sticking to their own ethnic identities proves to be so beneficial that they actively exoticize themselves and try to alienate/differentiate themselves from the visiting tourists and even from their own countrymen, who may be in the process of rejecting their own cultural backgrounds, in the competition for more business opportunities. In other cases, rather than resisting the adoption of cultural traits from neighboring peoples like the Yi, Tibetan, or Miao, they actively adopt whatever may be most economically profitable. In this deal, local people are making a living out of what is perceived, for example, as Bai tradition, yet they are perhaps losing their own cultural integrity through competing with each other to sell “tourist products with cultural traits”.

The most popular items in the numerous local antique shops are Miao embroideries and silverware, although the Miao population in Dali is very small. I found that the meanings/stories attributed to these goods far outweighed the importance of their actual origins or qualities. Most of the goods in local antique shops in fact have a very broad range of ethnic origin, and are collected from remote areas where antiques are commonly regarded as worthless, useless, old stuff. Most shop owners began their businesses by going from village to village collecting their stock themselves. Now, however, they acquire most of their goods from rural middlemen who collect anything which looks old. When the latter take their collections to the urban entrepreneurs, the latter buy whatever they think may prove valuable, and pay little attention to its actual origin. Most of the Miao/Yi/Bai embroideries are cut off from their original clothing and attached to modern products like mobile phone cases, bags and fashion clothes.

The local businessmen’s original quest for “old” or “authentic” antiques was a direct response to the demands of tourist consumption. Business agencies (rural collectors, urban businessmen and international businessmen from France, the US, Thailand, Japan and Holland) as well as tourists, all come for what they see as “authentic” ethnic antiques. And now that they have run out of stock, people simply start to “make things look old”. Since most tourists (Chinese or foreign, even local sellers) cannot tell the differences between ethnic groups anyway, the fabrication of ethnic souvenir products has become so easy and so widespread that no specific ethnic origins are tracked anymore because they have simply become unimportant. The meaning/story that is subsequently attached to a given commodity therefore usually eclipses its ‘real’ origin. In daily transactions, sellers are ready to tell a particular story, and tourists are willing to believe it; the real origin or meaning of a good, however, is put to one side. With some people claiming a Bai identity for themselves or their goods, and others responding to market demands by taking up other ethnic cultural identities, an exclusive Bai identity or origin (if one ever existed), can hardly be found in Dali any more.

(Publisher is currently a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, ANU; fieldwork was conducted with Dr. Steven Doore and Irene Atejevik from the University of Wellington in June 2000 and March 2001. The article is extracted from a paper recently given at the 6th Women in Asia Conference, ANU, 23–26 September 2001.)

PUBLICATIONS

Khon Muang, by Thanes Jararimmuang, Chiang Mai: Local Government Studies Project, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University and Chiang Mai Urban Studies 2001. [In Thai] Reflections on his identity by “the Khon Muang” himself. This book is the proceedings work from a special seminar on “The Khon Muang Identity” at Chiang Mai University, August 2000.

Vitheekid Chaungaon Nai Karn Vijai Chumchon and Mish Chumchon: Vitheekid Thongthin Wadawy Sithi Annath Lae Karmjadkarn Sapayakorn by Anan Ganjanapan, Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund [TRF], 2001. [In Thai] Collected works on community and resource management, in two volumes, by a Thai scholar who has conducted his research on Thai rural villages for more than two decades. Interesting and significant for those who begin to study and/or understand the dynamics of Thai rural villages in changing worlds.

Local Control of Land and Forest: Cultural Dimensions of Resource Management in Northern Thailand, by Anan Ganjanapan, Chiang Mai: Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development [RCSD], Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 2001. First monograph from RCSD; a book which reflects Anan’s distinctive approach to community and resource management in Northern Thai rural areas, based on his empirical works over two decades.

Prawatisath Sipongpanna [Xishuangbanna], by Yanyong Jiranakorn and Rattanaporn Sethkul, Bangkok: Vithithad Institute, 2001. Mostly based on myths, folklore, oral history and other historical documents, particularly from Chinese, the authors plot a history of Tai Lue through their myths and folklore, political system and its changing periods of relationships with Chinese, Burmese and “other” Tai states, describing rice culture and social organisation and Tai Lue ways of life. The book ends with contemporary changes under Chinese government policy in the 1950s.

Edward Charles (Ted) Chapman

The sudden death of E.C. (Ted) Chapman deprived Australia of one of the country’s best known and experienced experts on Thailand, the Mekong region and mainland Southeast Asia. He was an early director of the National Thai Studies Centre. Most recently he had directed the International Mekong Research Network and its Australian precursor, linking and informing over five hundred to several hundred academic and government experts working in the field. There were few names on the circulation list not known personally to Ted and tributes have flowed in from far afield since his death on 31 July.

Ted Chapman was educated at the University of Sydney as a geographer and was well grounded in both the human and physical aspects of the field. He graduated in 1955 with an MA Honours and picked up an education diploma along the way. His first research topic was into development in Australia’s Northern Territory, still a frontier environment then and the source of some of his best dinnertime stories. Between 1954 and 1969 he taught at the University of New England, Armidale with two terms on a visiting appointment at Ohio State University in Columbus. He joined the Geography Department at The Australian National University in 1970, retiring as Reader in 1994. A dedicated teacher whose schedule included frequent fieldwork with his students, he still managed to amass a list of committee memberships and administrative appointments that daunted his fellows. He became head of his department, Deputy Dean and Acting Dean, and represented the ANU on numerous academic bodies and committees advising government. It was as an adviser and researcher on Thai land development that he began his long involvement with the Southeast Asian region in the mid-1960s. His interests in northern Thailand he shared with a research anthropologist, the late Dr Gehan Wijeyewardene of ANU, and the Thai Yunnan Project Newsletter and several International Thai Studies Conferences came out of the joint interests of a handful of ANU scholars and their contacts in the region and overseas.

Thus, both the newsletter, the network and the partial overlaps with the National Thai Studies Centre should be seen as important events in the better understanding of Thailand and the Mekong Subregion when some other aspects of Australia’s involvement were, on occasion, less peaceful.

Ted Chapman’s involvement certainly did not slacken after retiring from his teaching post. He became an inveterate traveller and enhanced his knowledge of the people and conditions in Thailand and the neighbourhood. He held several research grants into aspects of development and cooperation among the riparian states of the Mekong. He also took on a range of consultancies to organise regional conferences, chair the proceedings and then see the papers through to publication. This was no easy task since many arrived in poor shape and should have been listed as “by … as told to Ted Chapman”.

Travel was rough and food sometimes indifferent but he survived on a safe but standard diet of chicken and rice. Only on his final journey did he show signs of wear and his colleagues realised early this year that he may have to curtail his travels. Ted was a very pleasant and informative companion on these trips, always quick with the revealing anecdote or story. He showed an amazing passion for minute details of livestock movements, forage practices and changes in upland cultivation that left others gasping.

Yet he had a wry wit and sense of the ironic which no doubt carried him through his many hours of committee work and sitting at a remote road junction counting cattle or pigs or even chickens.

Once or twice his good humour deserted him, as when a young delta Vietnamese boatswoman, in Viet Cong pyjamas, failed to make adjustments for his size and weight, depositing him in a thankfully shallow stretch of the river that had been so much the core of his academic studies. Ted Chapman’s work will continue to inform later generations of students and scholars and his devotion to solid field research should inspire them.

His many friends and colleagues will miss him deeply but none more than his family and that of Dongmei Yang. His mark on Thai and Mekong studies will be a fitting memorial.

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Development and the Dong

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Dong people refer to themselves to Kam, which means “people”. The Dong are an ethnic minority of China located in SW China. At present, their population is nearly 2.5 million. Most of them live in SE Guizhou province and some in the border of Guangxi and Hunan province. The Dong, originating from the Baiyue people, first appeared in China during the Sung dynasty (AD 960–1279), named Geling. Han people also called them Dong-jia or Dong-miao in classic literature. Since 1949, they have been called Dong nationally formally.

According to their old songs, “Where the ancestors of the Dong came from” and “Walking along the roads ancestors have passed”, ancestors of the villagers came from the Five Ridges and traveled along Duliu River in the late Tang because of overpopulation.

They speak the Dong language which belongs to the Kam-Sui language family and is related to Tai. They did not have writing. Some literature on rituals and theaters was documented in Chinese. However, the Dong are known as “a sea of poems and songs”. Female and male age groups exchange their feelings through singing love songs. People often get together during the New Year to perform “large songs”. In winter, old people tell stories around the fireside in the Drum Tower, the public meeting site. They handed down their histories and survival lessons by means of narrative poems and historical songs. Young men and girls also enact Dong drama in their village or other villages during the major festivals.

The villages of the Dong are situated in valleys and near brooks. Sometimes your vision is obstructed by mountains. But if you go upstream a little further, you will find that a Dong village appears before you. They build their villages on the hillsides and farm irrigated rice fields in the plains. Behind their village, there are fir or tea plantations on the mountain slopes. Dong people are engaged in agriculture and also manage small plantations. Their staple food is glutinous rice. They are also good at raising fish in the irrigated rice fields. Women plant cotton and indigo. They weave, dye and make cloth by themselves. Traditionally, a form of political organization based on alliances between small mountain valley communities was known as the ‘dong’ (cave) system.

A Civilized Village — Lashui in Congjing County, Guizhou Province

With the penetration of the Communist Party into minority areas, local leaders have been changed. Older leaders still have an influence on traditional affairs, such as building the Drum Tower, setting local regulations and arranging traditional theaters. However, political affairs are under the control of new village cadres, including the village, the Communist Party vice-secretary, clerk and accountant. They carry out government policies and have introduced politics into a quiet village.

Most Dong farmers work in the fields and hills all the year. They arrange their work according to the cycle of the four seasons. What they can exchange in the local market is the surplus of production. It takes a great deal of time for them to support their families and make clothes and food. They seldom have savings to spend in the market. However, they know how to bring up their descendants and how to plant the crops generation after generation.

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NEWS/CONFERENCES

Two conferences of regional interest recently took place at the ANU. One, the Sixth Women in Asia Conference (23–26 September), convened by Kathy Robinson with Tsari Andersson and Catriona Heath, included two panels on Burma organised by Khin Mar Mar Kyi from the Faculty of Asian Studies, ANU. They were provocatively titled 'Resilience and resistance: nationalist missions, silent emergencies and ethnic insurgencies in Burma' and 'Rescuing Burmese women from nationalist history and colonial stories'. Papers were presented by Emily Rudland on Burmese women in health and education, Diana Carroll on the philanthropist Daw Tee Tee Luce, Aye Aye Kyaw on Karen women in insurgent areas and refugee camps, and Khin Mar Mar Kyi on the myth and reality of Burmese women in their society. On the first day, Saowapha Viravong, the daughter of Lao writer and intellectual Maha Sila Viravong, presented a working version of her film on the life of her mother. The film provides a moving account of the intersection between historical events and personal biography in Laos.

At the conference on ‘Migrating identities and ethnic minorities in Chinese diaspora’, organised by Penny Edwards and Shen Yuanfeng for the Centre for the Study of the South China Diaspora (26–28 September), with the assistance of a grant from the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, summaries were presented of a talk by Bertil Lintner on the Golden Triangle and by Leo Alting von Gesau on Hani-Akha identity; Nick Tapp gave a paper on the Hmong diaspora, and Gary Lee introduced Pea Holmqvist’s new film, From Opium to Chrusanthemums. Joy Bai (Yunnan University) spoke on the impact of tourism on the Bai people of Dali, and Hsieh Shih-Chung gave a fascinating paper on the Dai from Sipsong Panna who had joined the Kuomintang and now live in Taiwan and have recently adopted the Yi torch festival as a means of attracting tourists. Disappointingly, though, the majority of papers concerned Chinese identity overseas.
In order to increase production, the local government chose Lashui as an experimental site for planting the new rice and a cash crop — oranges — in the early and late 1980s respectively. Farmers could apply for loans from the Fruit and Vegetable Development Company. However, the Company owns the right to select big oranges at low prices. Previously, only the Company could sell the crops, not the farmers themselves. But trading channels have been opened recently, so now businessmen from large cities come here to purchase oranges. In the end, farmers who provide a cheap labour force do not receive much profit. These two years, the government has also organized a Festival of Oranges to appeal to outside visitors.

In 1999, Lashui was nominated as a ‘civilized village’, with responsibility for the prevention and extinction of fire. Those officials ignored the fact that the Dong had a tradition of building pools in front of their houses. These pools served the purpose of fire-prevention, and moreover could be used for breeding fish. However, the cadres asked people to build “cement” pools to preserve water. To clear a fire-break, buildings in the way were dismantled. Cowhouses and pigsties had always had wooden fences around them. The local cadres ordered them to demolish all these fences and to build brick walls instead. The farmers complained a lot, for they had to pay the money themselves to build those modernized walls. To honour leaders, the local cadres mobilized villagers to embroider insoles and present coloured eggs. They even forbade the villagers to stockpile their firewood and straw in the village. Whenever farmers needed to cook, they had to fetch firewood from outside the village. It caused them great inconvenience.

Old farmers squatted far away from the theater stage where the cadres announced these orders. One said, everyone would enjoy living in a clean and beautiful city, but we are the Dong who live in the mountainous areas where our livelihood depends on ourselves. We need to work and raise livestock. The cadres have imposed civilized notions which were far from prevention of fire. It is too much for us.

Indigenous knowledge and their traditional modes of livelihood are hidden in a corner like those cowhouses nowadays. Even the fences have to be clothed in what is seen as ‘civilization’, and dressed up like a modern village. And people are giving up the lessons of their ancestors - how to make use of nature and allow it to renew itself. They are forced to pay everything for the sake of ‘civilization’ in the course of modernization.

(Aura Yen, from Taiwan, is undertaking her doctoral research at Griffith University. She has spent several years living in a Dong village).
Lak Chang: A reconstruction of Tai identity in Daikong

written by Yos Santasombat

The Thai–Yunnan Project is proud to present this English-language version of Professor Yos Santasombat’s fascinating ethnography of the Tai in Daikong, southwestern China. It represents a significant contribution to the ethnographic record of the Tai peoples.

The village of Lak Chang is located close to the edge of the Tai world and is increasingly embraced by Chinese influence. Professor Yos skilfully weaves ethnographic and historical writing to chart the course of Lak Chang’s incorporation into the modern Chinese state. This has been a painful history but what emerges in this account is a sense of Tai cultural identity that is vigorous and adaptive.

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The Tai World: A Digest of Articles from the Thai–Yunnan Project Newsletter

edited by Nicholas Tapp and Andrew Walker

This collection of articles and translations from the old Thai–Yunnan Project Newsletter has been prepared in the belief that back issues of the Newsletter contained so many priceless gems of Thai and Tai folklore and history, culture and ritual, that a well chosen selection of them collected together would form a valuable book which a wide range of readers would enjoy and appreciate. The Digest has been prepared by members of the Department of Anthropology, in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University, where the late Gehan Wijeyewardene, the founder and maintainer of the Thai–Yunnan Project Newsletter, worked for so many years. This collection forms one tribute to the memory of this remarkable man and his endeavours and achievements in the field of Thai/Tai Studies.

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