

Community - Based Tourism's Image Positioning and Strategic Management in Thailand and Lao PDR for Achieving ASEAN Community

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The Asian Conference on Asian Studies 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This research paper is a synthesis of knowledge gathering from related researches in the realm of image, management, participation in tourism activities, strategic issues and competency development of community-based tourism in Thailand and Lao PDR for supporting ASEAN tourism expansion in 2015. The researchers have conducted a community survey in some villages where carried on community-based tourism in 4 provinces of Thailand which are Chiang Rai, Phayao, Nan and Uttaradit and 4 provinces of Lao PDR which are Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha and Bokeo. This research has collected data from field research, an in-depth interview, a focus group, and questionnaires. Samplings are Thai/Lao stakeholders in community-based tourism. The findings are as follows; Lao PDR community-based tourism management and potential has had high criterion when compared with Thailand. Lao PDR community-based tourism's image is clearer than Thailand. The positioning of community-based tourism strategies and competency development can divide into 2 parts. Firstly, offensive strategies are (1) to build up a Thai/Lao community-based tourism network for developing cooperative tourism not competitive one (2) to mutually administrate and manage borderlands under collaboration of both local governments (3) to specify explicit image and positioning of community-based tourism and (4) to create new community-based tourism image and activities which link community tourist spots in Thai/Lao borderlands area. Meanwhile, defensive strategies are (1) to mutually develop community-based tourism skilled-human resources between Thailand and Lao PDR and (2) to support the possibility of food production for visitors in both countries.

Keywords: community-based tourism, Thailand, Lao PDR

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Introduction

Tourism is a substantial industry and it has generated significant incomes for many countries since the end of Second World War. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has mentioned that there were worldwide tourists around 668 millions in 2000 and hit 1,000 million tourists in 2010. In addition, it has expected that in 2020, there will be more than 1,500 million tourists around the world (Sinth, 2002). The tourism growth rate is continuously increasing in spite of the uncertainties of international terrorism, natural disaster, epidemics, high-priced fuel, political-economic crises.(MOTS Thailand: 2012) In this regard, Tourism is an important mechanism for driving economy, nationally and internationally.

Achieving the ASEAN Community in the end of 2015, tourism is one of the key factors to support mutual cooperation among nation members. During the 15th ASEAN Summit in 2009 in Cha-am Hua Hin, Thailand, the idea of “ASEAN Connectivity” has addressed and become a master plan to solidify ASEAN’s nation members and to integrate ASEAN Community. Under the Hanoi Declaration on the adoption of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (2010), the key elements of ASEAN Connectivity to support and facilitate the economic, political-security and socio-cultural pillars include (ASEAN Secretariat, 2011); Physical Connectivity: Transport, Information and Communications Technology, Energy; Institutional Connectivity: Trade Liberalisation and Facilitation; Investment and Services Liberalization and Facilitation, Mutual Recognition agreements/arrangements, Regional Transportation Agreements, Cross-Border Procedures, Capacity Building Programmes; and People-to-People Connectivity: Education and Culture, Tourism. In addition, ASEAN members have already had an agreement relevant to free flow of skilled labour called “ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement”. With this mechanism, tourism professionals is one of the eight career sectors (aside from tourism professionals they are architectural services, surveying, medical practitioners, dental practitioners, engineer services, nursing, and accounting services) which after the integration of ASEAN Community, it will facilitate the mobility of tourism skilled labours within ASEAN based on competence-based tourism qualifications. Also, it will strengthen mutual tourism professionals’ cooperations among ASEAN member countries.

Besides, the enhanced economic cooperation among six countries of GMS (Greater Mekong Sub-Region) which combines with China specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam under ADB (Asian Development Bank) assistances has widely supported ASEAN integration. The GMS has nine branches of collaboration which are Transportation, Telecommunication, Energy, Trade, Agricultural Investment, Environment, Human Resources Development and Tourism. Within tourism agenda, it has a marketing plan named “Six Countries One Destination” to support mutual tourism sites development and to make a linkage among GMS members. Therefore, tourism has played an important role to create a mutual cooperation and brought win-win benefits among ASEAN countries.

Thailand is one of the world’s top tourist destinations. In 2014, there were international tourists visiting Thailand around 24.7 millions (Department of Tourism, 2015: Online). The main international tourist came from China, Malaysia, Russia,

Japan, South Korea, India, Laos, United Kingdom, Singapore and Australia. In the eyes of tourists, Thailand's tourism images are renowned on nightlife, food, beaches and shopping paradises. (DASTA: 2014) Since 2012, tourism has been set as a national agenda and strategy under the 11th national economics and social development plan (2012-2016). For reaching the ultimate goal of Thailand tourism strategy, Ministry of Tourism and Sports has set the vision which is "Thailand is a prime tourism spot among world class tourism competency that generates and distributes incomes, justly, equally and permanently." The Thai government also supports entrepreneurs to create alternative tourism innovation and identity by concerning the local wisdom and sustainability such as health tourism, adventure tourism, spiritual tourism, MICE, sport tourism. However, the situation of tourism in Thailand recently has encountered the flux of tourists which directly affects on the deterioration of natural tourism sites.

Lao PDR is now one of the countries which have high potentials in tourism because it has plentifully and variously natural, historical and cultural tourism sites. Also, it has political stability and cordial people. In 2013, it was named the world's best tourist destination by the European Council on Tourism and Trade (ECTT). (Bangkok Post, 2013: Online) Lao PDR government has strongly supported tourism industry as a key factor for national incomes and development. The number of international tourists visiting Laos has gradually increased from 670,000 in 2000 to more than one million for the first time in 2005 and hit 2.5 millions in 2010. Expectantly, there will be 4.3 millions within 2020. The majority groups of international tourists are from Thailand, Vietnam, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, France, United Kingdom, Germany and the United States. Tourism sector has been the second largest national revenues placing behind mine industry. Lao government has launched the national tourism strategy (2012-2020) for supporting and developing tourism spots and products. It has also invested in public infrastructures such as nationwide connected highways for facilitating tourists and attracting foreign investment from outsiders especially accommodations, entertainment venues, casinos and golf clubs. Lao PDR looks at itself as "a land linked country" which not only intimately connects other ASEAN mainland members but also non-ASEAN member like China. (Department of Tourism Marketing, Laos: 2011) Albeit, Laos has completeness of tourism resources, it still has an inefficient management and lack of professional tourism staffs both public and private sectors.

What is Community - Based Tourism?

The concept of community-based tourism (hereinafter referred to as "CBT") is one of the alternative tourism which supports community to participate in tourism development process. (Hatton: 1999) The CBT is a tourism which concerns about social and environmental sustainability which is guided by community, managed by community, and owned by community. Therefore, community needs to make people feel proud and cherish on their identity. The CBT is a part of community development by supporting community participation to develop tourism activities based on local wisdom and environmental conservation. The examples of pattern of CBT are ecological tourism, cultural tourism, agricultural tourism, health tourism and so on. No matter what type of CBT, the purpose aims at develop and strengthen community by people in community. (Yot: 2001)

The principles of community-based tourism (Thailand Community-based Tourism Institute, 2013: Online) are (1) the ownership of community (2) participating of community in the right of decision (3) promoting community pride (4) enhancing quality of life (5) environmental sustainability (6) sustaining local culture and identity (7) knowledge engagement between different communities (8) valuing different culture and human prestige (9) fair yielding for locals in community and (10) income distributing for community's public benefits. When community is prompt for CBT site, it should have four matters to concern which are tourism activities, tourism services, tourism facilities, and managing mechanism. (Thailand Research Fund: 2004)

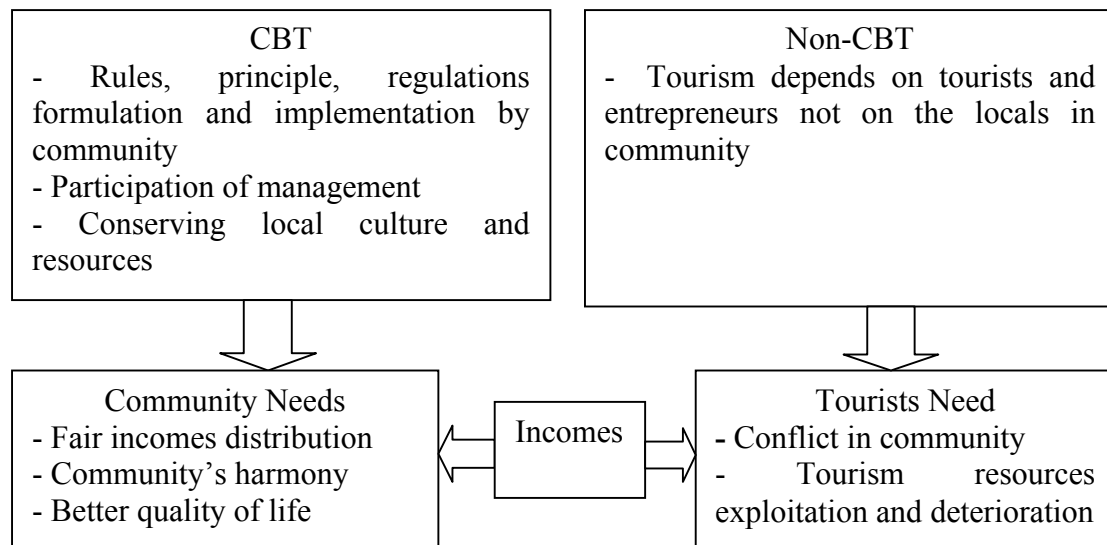


Figure 1: The comparison of Community Roles in Tourism Management

Regarding to Community-based tourism effectiveness evaluation, there are six indicators assessed by CBT scholars assessment and suggestion. (Pimrawee: 2010) First of all, the successful CBT derives from genuine participation of community. The community willingly aggregates for obvious tourism management. Secondly, the interests from CBT must be fairly distributed to community. Major interests are in socio-economic dimension such as revenues, enhancing living standard, poverty reduction, and increasing local employment. Thirdly, CBT management system must be carried out with good governance. Tourism management should gradually and cautiously develop for community adaptation. Fourthly, there should be collaboration from stakeholders both in and out community. Community can get assistance and support from business sectors, political and economic institutions. Fifthly, Community must have its own distinctive point of tourism resources for sustainable tourism development. For example; culture and traditions, man-made tourism site, historical tourism site etc. Lastly, CBT must be concerned about environment as well. Some communities may support natural tourism sites as a knowledge center for environmental conservation learning.

Therefore, nowadays the community-based tourism is an alternative choice of tourism. It creates the understanding of people in community by promoting tourism management participation. Locals will not only directly earn interests from CBT but

also take into consideration about the effect of tourism for utmost sustainability of CBT resources.

The Objectives

- 1) To analyse CBT image positioning and competency of Thailand and Lao PDR for achieving ASEAN Community.
- 2) To propose CBT strategic management of Thailand and Lao PDR for achieving ASEAN Community.

Framework and Methodology

This research paper is a synthesis of knowledge gathering from related researches in the realm of image, management, participation in community-based tourism activities, strategic issues and competency development of CBT in Thailand and Lao PDR for supporting ASEAN tourism expansion in 2015. It has been conducted a community survey in some villages where carried on CBT in four provinces of northern Thailand which are Chiang Rai, Phayao, Nan and Uttaradit and four provinces of Lao PDR which are Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha and Bokeo. This research paper has collected data from field research, an in-depth interview, a focus group, and questionnaires. Samplings are Thai/Lao stakeholders in community-based tourism.

Research Findings

The CBT Image Positioning and Competency of Thailand and Lao PDR

Analysing the CBT image positioning and competency of four provinces of northern Thailand; Chiang Rai, Phayao, Nan and Uttaradit, are as follow. Firstly, Thakhunthong village, Chiang Saen district of Chiang Rai, is the best practice for CBT site's success. In 2013, it received Thailand Tourism Award for the Sufficiency Economy Village. The strong point of the community is the variety of tourism activities which based on the locals' pace of life such as cotton weaving lady's group, cricket farming, and tea plant. Specially, it has a historical guide tour for natural and historical sightseeing run by the locals for traveling alongside of Mekong River between Thai-Lao borderlines. It also has standard homestay accommodations. The participation of villagers for CBT management is somewhat active; this can be assumed from the role of local administration officers who play a substantial support the community development through CBT. Secondly, Ban Huak Checkpoint, Phu Sang district of Phayao, is named "the Valley of Two Lands One Heart" because of the border connection with Xayaboury province of Lao PDR. It is the strategic point of Phayao and Xayaboury for economic exchange and tourism. Besides, Ban Huak Checkpoint is a part of GMS strategic cooperation which links Northern Vietnam to Mawlamyine and Dawei of Myanmar. (Kannika and Adisorn: 2013) Thirdly, Huay Kon, Chalerm Prakit of Nan, is the international point of entry between Thailand and Laos. Mainly, tourists use this border immigration for visiting Luang Prabang. For the tourism sites, it has Thai-Lao border market, waterfalls, and communist base camp historical site. However, after surveying the research site, even though the number of tourists is increasing, it found that Huay Kon community has not yet established CBT because of more than 90 percents of the village are national conservative sites. In addition, the route from Nan city to Huay Kon village is somewhat inconvenient

because of topography. Lastly, Phu Doo village, Ban Khok district of Uttaradit, is also the permanent international point of entry between Thailand and Lao PDR. It has Thai-Lao border market but main products are household stuffs and made in Thailand. In addition, Lao products are wild products which do not meet the demand of tourists. After the field research, it is recently found that major agricultural areas both in Thailand and Laos are corn fields. This situation letting people in the village have operated homestay for buyers. Regarding to CBT, same as Huay Kon village, it has not yet concretely been CBT because of main area are conservative sites. However, local administration office is interested in CBT and need support from experts and also its locals. Recently, Uttaradit province has set a strategy for Phu Doo village by trying to carry out the public bus from Bangkok to Phu Doo which will increase the number of tourists.

Analysing the CBT image positioning and competency of four provinces of Lao PDR; Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha and Bokeo, are as follow. Firstly, Luang Prabang is well-known as the UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995. It is the second place for highest number of international visitors coming after the capital city of Vientiane. It is the main destination and a city where links to other provinces in northern region. Ban Phanom village, one of Luang Prabang city, is set as a cultural village by its province because of the famous cotton and silk weaving and easily access from international airport and bus terminal. In addition, Ban Pakham where is named a tourism center of Luang Prabang province because it is loaded with attractive tourism sites such as the Royal Palace which is now a national museum, a remarkable of Wat Xieng Thong temple, colonial styled architecture buildings and night market. Besides, there are various kinds of accommodation, cafés, restaurants which can respond for tourist needs. Secondly, Oudomxay is defined as “the Heart of Northern Laos” because of its location which connects to Southern China, Northern Vietnam and Northern Thailand. The provincial tourism office has supported CBT in some communities of Oudomxay. Pak Beng is a stopover village on the bank of Kong River where tourists need to stay a night before reaching Luang Prabang. It has standard accommodations, restaurants and other facilities which run by the locals.

There is also a homestay indigenous community that attracts visitors with authentic identity culture of Dai Lue in Bar Yor village. The interesting remark from field research is an active role from relevant government offices especially Oudomxay tourism agency. However, CBT sites lack of tourism management and language skills to communicate with international visitors. Thirdly, Luang Namtha has notable CBT image positioning as “Eco-Trekking Destination” especially in Ban Nam Aeng village where situated in mountainous area of the Nam Ha National Park. In the community, there are homestay accommodation and trekking tour guides by locals. Luang Namtha has borderline with China by Boten International Custom Checkpoint and R3A Road which can connect all six GMS member countries. It makes Luang Namtha a crossroad and stopover for Chinese visitors to travel along Laos and Vietnam conversely international tourists comfortably visit China. Lastly, Bokeo province is distinguished in both natural and cultural tourism resources. It is adjacent to Chiang Rai province of Thailand. In December 2013, the 4th Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (Chiang Khong-Huay Xai) has been officially opened and strengthened relationship of both countries also linked the transportation throughout the region. Bokeo is now attractive for international investors especially from China and South Korea as they request for concession from Lao government for making investment in trades,

logistics, and tourism sectors. Ban Panna of Bokeo has continuously welcomed Chinese tourists who are brought into the village by King Roman Casino, one of the Chinese investments in Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone of Lao PDR. In the village, it is supported by local government to develop waterfall and forestry area for becoming village tourism spot. In addition, Ban Nam Chang where is close to the city but it still preserves unique culture and tradition of Luntan minority group which also attracted by the visitors. Regarding to field research, it seems that Bokeo province has been vigorously supported by government for CBT sites such as information center, handicraft distribution center, and standard homestay accommodations.

After showing distinctive points of each CBT research site of Thailand and Lao PDR, the researchers have made an evaluation for CBT image positioning by considering the tourism composition index which are Attraction, Accessibility, Accommodation, Amenity, and Activity. It has found that Lao PDR has better image positioning than Thailand in every index. Besides, the evaluation for CBT competency by using the index of a Diversity of CBT Tourism Resources, CBT Infrastructure, Marketing, Motivation for CBT Development, and Poverty Reduction. It has found that Laos is more competent than Thailand in CBT competency in every index. Furthermore, Chiang Rai province of Thailand and Luang Prabang province of Lao PDR are the best image positioning and the most competent in Community-based Tourism among the research sites.

The CBT strategic management of Thailand and Lao PDR

It is clear that tourism is substantial for Thailand and Lao PDR economic development. It generates revenues which make Thai and Lao government expect that tourism will be a crucial tool for poverty reduction, distribution mechanism, and growing community economy. Thailand and Lao PDR have set Community-based Tourism as a strategy for national tourism development. Regarding to CBT strategic management, there are two categories of strategy proposal which are offensive and defensive strategies.

For the CBT offensive strategies, there are four keystones. First of all, Thailand and Laos need to build up the network for developing a cooperative tourism not a competitive one. Also, both governments should support mutual linkage tourist destinations. For example; Chiang Rai – Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge – Bokeo – Luang Namtha – Luang Prabang. Secondly, they should closely have Thai-Lao borderlines management especially the role of local administration offices. Thirdly, they should specify explicit image and positioning of community-based tourism in both countries. Finally, they should create alternative tourism images and activities along the Thai-Lao borderland areas. For the CBT defensive strategies, there are two issues to concern about. Firstly, it should have the skilled-human resources development of Thai-Lao tourism staffs and stakeholders. Another one is the development of food production and distribution for tourists.

Conclusion

Thailand and Lao PDR have similar vision of tourism as a tool for poverty reduction and economic development. They have anticipated that their countries are the destination for tourism in global stage, For Thailand, it has already become in that

position but for Laos, it is worth to keep the eyes on. An interesting thing is the CBT competency index of Lao PDR is higher than Thailand. This is because of the comparison between borderline CBT sites of those two countries which Thai CBT areas are not well-developed and cooperative from their locals, also the lack of support by governmental sectors. While Lao CBT sites have mostly been received assistances and funds from their government and the outsiders such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID). However, this can be a two-edged sword for Lao CBT because either strategies or approaches are set by those organizations. This situation is challenging for people in Lao CBT sites whether they are able to manage their own communities. As the fact that CBT is linked to tourism system which tourism activities occurred by locals, controlled and managed by locals, those activities expressed the community culture and identity which are the core for attracting visitors. (Hinch and Butler: 1996)

Another challenge is the competency of community for sustainable tourism resources management. Sinth (2013) has reviewed CBT knowledge and raised the question that “Who does control CBT?” and “How the interests from CBT can fairly distribute to everyone in community?”. In fact, the CBT has been controlled by outsiders like interest groups, political groups, and entrepreneurs; that’s why CBT is not everyone in community needs. Therefore, if CBT will be a mechanism for sustainable community development, it should be concerned about (1) self-sufficiency of community (2) participation process in decision making (3) managing and bargaining power (4) role setting in mainstream tourism (5) sustainability of community ecology (6) community capacity for management (7) interests and individual response (8) strength of community culture and (9) CBT destination.

For achieving ASEAN Community, mutual CBT management along Thai-Lao borderlines can be a part to fulfill collaboration of ASEAN. The mobilization of tourists, local people, and cross-border economic activities will create opportunities for CBT sites to develop and make a growth for their societies. Also, the communities need to get ready for sustaining local value and wisdom in the midst of change in the near future.

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