

The Village in Transition: Development and Cultural, Economic, and Social Changes in Mae Kampong Village, Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Abstract - Behind the scene of the national economic success of Thailand over the last several decades, rural villages were forced to face predicament because of the urban-centered industrial economy based on neo-liberal economic beliefs. It is often said that the national economic boom was coupled with the political views of disregarding the countryside as peripheral, stagnant, and threatened area, preferring investment into cities as the predominant driving force of the national economy. In light of the historical context of the relationship between Thai community and the high-powered state authority, examining one specific community which is struggling to find a way of development in the globalized world today will be of great help to understand the contemporary notion of rural development in Thailand. In this paper, research is focused on Mae Kampong village, which has been under great influence of the Government in terms of development and has been experiencing a number of, for better or worse, changes, in terms of Mae kampong has been traditionally recognized as a site for its cultivation of tea and production of a fermented tea product, called *Mieng*, however, it has been in a great transition of modes of economy, namely primary industry of *Mieng* production to service industry of eco-tourism as one of the most well-known tourist destinations in rural Northern Thailand, ever since it began to get involved in tourism industry in the late 1990s. This paper examines cultural, economic, and social changes that occurred in the village over the course of the contemporary development and ultimately the outlook of community self-sufficiency and self-reliance in Mae Kampong village.

Keywords: Social Development, Culture, Economic, and Social Change

I. INTRODUCTION

Starting from the 1950s, Thailand had experienced unprecedented economic boom in the nation's history until the 1980s. The average annual growth in the 1960s was 8%, 7% in the 1970s, and 4-6% in the beginning of the 1980s [1]. Thai people, especially those who are in the nation's capital, Bangkok, enjoyed the economic boom and started to have "modernized" lifestyle. However, behind the scene of

the national economic success, rural villages were forced to face predicament because of the urban-centered industrial economy based on neo-liberal economic beliefs.

In light of the historical context of the relationship between Thai community and the high-powered state authority, examining one specific community which is struggling to find a way of development in the globalized world today will be of great help to understand the contemporary notion of rural development in Thailand. In this paper, focus is centered on a village called *Mae Kampong*, which has been under great influence of the Royal project and the Government in terms of development, and yet has a great deal of potential for achieving a self-reliant way of community governance because of its traits as a traditional agrarian rural community. This paper aims to examine the socio-cultural changes that occurred in the village over the course of the contemporary development and ultimately the outlook of community self-sufficiency and self-reliance, deploying a realistic and empirical approach to look at the Thailand's contemporary phenomena happening in the rural communities.

Mae Kampong is the third village of seven villages in Huai Kaew sub-district, Mae On district, Chiang Mai province, Northern Thailand, known as a major producer of Northern Thai traditional tea product called *Mieng*. It is located east of Chiang Mai province, about 50 kilometers from the city, average 1,300 meters above the sea level. It has been about 100 years since the first generation of this village that had been searching for suitable places for tea cultivation came from nearby areas to settle in the location and started to form the community. Now, the village has 134 households and 374 people in total. The village consists of six clusters, Pang Nok, Pang Klang, Pang Khon, Pang Ton, Pan Nai No.1, and Pang Nai No.2.

Mae kampong has been well known for its making of the fermented tea product, called *Mieng*, in which

most villagers had been traditionally engaged as one of the major sources of income. In fact, about 97% of the villagers are engaged in Mieng production [3]. However, ever since the village started to get involved in tourism industry with its village home stay program in 2000, more and more villagers are shifting their focus on production of Mieng as a predominant economic activity to other forms of economic activities such as coffee production, home stay business, tea leaves pillow making as a souvenir product, and Thai massage service largely because of the declining demand of Mieng from lowland consumers. All in all, despite the fact that Mae Kampong has achieved a great deal of development, it has to be said that the development was chiefly brought by the government under the framework of rural development in Northern Thai context mentioned above, not by the villagers themselves.

Thus, one has to accept that the development of Mae Kampong is a result of the Government-led rural development schemes and the initiation by the villagers has not played a major role in the village's contemporary development. Finally, "change" is the word that most clearly illustrates what has been happening over the last few decades in Mae Kampong. Change in the mode of the village's economy, namely from Mieng production to community-based tourism, brought wealth and the material abundance to the villagers. However, the development, as is the case anywhere in the world, has two sides of which negative one can possibly lead to the destruction of essential elements for the community cohesion. Therefore, in this paper, emphasis will be made on the examination of the recent change of the village's economy in terms of cultural, social, political, and economic perspectives.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. What are the socio-economic and cultural changes through the course of development in Mae Kampong, and how have villagers perceived these changes?
2. In what way have these changes affected on social relations among villagers, and how they adapt based on existing physical, social, and cultural capitals?
3. How have villagers participated in and negotiated with development process and activities which brought changes into the community?

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

A. Symbolic meaning of Mieng for Mae Kampong

The community symbol of Mae Kampong is Mieng. When some survey questions were asked like what

the symbol of Mae Kampong is, almost all the villagers answered: it is Mieng. Therefore, one of the most valuable findings through the field research was that Mieng was something far more than a mere cash crop and it is unconceivable for the villagers to abandon the production of Mieng just because of the current declining consumption. In fact, a home stay house owner, in the life history interview, said that "My grandfather migrated to this village in order to cultivate Mieng. And my parents also grew Mien. That is why Mien is important for me [7]." And also, another interviewee said "We cannot cultivate rice because of the high altitude here, and we had traditionally bartered Mien with rice. So, Mien is the source of life for us just like rice is for the lowlanders. That is why Mien has been the most important for us, and it is true even after we started tourism [7]." For this, it can be said that Mieng is essential for the villagers' sense of identity and bears a great deal of memories and experience as a Mae Kampong's village member.

For the people in Mae Kampong, Mieng production, in which almost all the villagers have been engaged as a special meaning in terms of both economic and cultural perspectives. Since approximately 100 years ago, when the ancestors of the current generation came to settle in a place where it is called Mae Kampong today, almost all the villagers across the generations have been participating in Mieng cultivation and processing of it. Thus, it is natural to think that Mieng was ingrained in the villagers' cultural identity and came to bear an important symbolic meaning for them.

B. Mieng as Social Capital

Except it is located in a high land, which makes it difficult for the villagers to grow rice, Mae Kampong is not different from ordinary Thai communities in that they believe Buddhism and worship the king and the royal family. In Mae Kampong, the people's cooperative attitude and bond came not only from the fact that they are geographically bound but also from the labor intensive characteristic of Mieng. Although one's farm land and tea trees are clearly demarcated from that of others based on the individual ownership of lands and trees, in the past when the level of Mieng production was much higher than now, they used to work together with other villagers as well as waged laborer from the nearby villages since it was too hard for one household to cover all of their Mieng fields. In addition, after the tea leaves are picked, they need to collectively process the tea leaves in groups. This work often involved cross-household work in the village, and it was a common form of Mieng production in the past (but nowadays it can be

rarely seen because of the declining level of Mieng production). Importantly, the groups were not formally formed, but people often informally gathered and initiated the processing of tea leaves. This is the traditional way of Mieng processing in Mae Kampong, and it fostered the sense of cooperation in economic activities and psychological closeness among the villagers. Thus, it can be said that for the villagers of Mae Kampong, Mieng is not only economic capital but also, importantly, an agent to foster social capital for the people.

C. Community-based tourism (CBT) in Mae Kampong

Mae Kampong's community-based tourism (CBT) was initiated, with help from external agents such as the government and NGOs for planning and consultation, mainly by the former village headman. In 2000, that persuaded three households to open their houses for homestay, and now there are 27 home stay-serving households in the entire village, most of which are concentrated in Pang Nai No.1 and pang Nai No.2. Home stay-serving households get 520 Baht per one visitor for a one night accommodation and two meals a day services. 350 Baht out of 520 Baht goes directly into the household's revenue and the rest 170 Baht goes to the village cooperative.

The village has a system of village cooperative, and the major financial source to the cooperative now comes from remittance by each home stay owner. The cooperative redistributes wealth made by the home stay service to all the village members, securing them to have benefits such as financial support for young people's education (e.g., grant of 1,000 baht, 2,000 baht, and 3,000 baht for young people who go on to high schools, BA, and MA respectively.) and medical care financial support (e.g., 150 baht per night for those who stay and get treatment in hospitals, 1,000 baht for a newborn baby, and 2,000 baht for households of which family members pass away).

Individual perception of the village tourism varies from person to person. Generally, it looks that young people in the village welcome tourism and are keen to engage in tourism activities. Among the middle-aged and elderly people, there seems to be consensus that they have the sufficient level of tourist visitation and if they have more, it will bring the village a more chaotic situation. Thus now, people think that they have a good balance between their traditional way of life and tourism, and more development in tourism is not needed.

D. Cultural Change: Fusion of Mieng and Tourism

Handler and Linnekin (1984) [8] states that tradition is a product of symbolic construction that occurs in the present, not something handed down from the past; there is no fixed tradition, but it is always in the process of on-going reconstruction [4]. Therefore, traditional local identity or community symbol is always renewed, remade, and modified in each generation. In other words, there is no fixed and objective thing that one can say identify as traditional culture; and what is defined as traditional culture is constantly being reformulated both in the past and the present. Perhaps, if the consumption of Mieng is significantly decreasing and the habit of Mieng savoring is to disappear, there might be a need of integrating Mieng more into the tourism activities so that Mieng can keep its presence even after Mae Kampong turns (if it really happens) completely into a tourism community in future. In other words, the villagers of Mae Kampong have to reconstruct a new community symbol and the community boundary, synthesizing Mieng and CBT through invention of new Mieng-related products (such as, for example, Mieng flavored chewing gum and Mieng herbal products) that can sell to the tourist who visit Mae Kampong.

E. Division of Labor and Social Change

While tourism brings economic benefit to host communities, in that it creates new employment opportunities and brings about income generation, it is necessarily coupled with division of labor. Division of labor is a crucial element for economic growth because it enhances effectiveness of production and in the economics perspectives; it has been hailed as a key factor of the contemporary economic development in the post-industrialized world. However, in the sociological perspective, it brought some negative effects on local communities. Especially, in tourism destination communities, many of which used to be traditional agrarian communities, the tendency is more obvious. In fact, one of the liveliest discussions about negative impacts of tourism is its introduction of division of labor to the communities.

In fact, one of survey respondents said that "Since the beginning of the tourism project, human relationship in this village seems to have changed. In the past, we helped each other without any return, like rendering other villagers Mieng processing tools for free, but now we have to pay to borrow them" [7]. Similarly, another interviewee said: It is nice to have a lot of tourists because they certainly bring money to the village. But, nowadays, people living in the tourist area seem to care only about their businesses [7].

Since it has been only about 15 years since Mae Kampong started to get involved in tourism, the long-term impact of tourism made on the village is open to question. In order to fully examine qualitative aspects of tourism consequences such as changing human relations among the villagers, a further research in the longer period must be required. Nevertheless, even now, there are some testimonies from the villagers that the village is changing in a negative way. Therefore, it must be concluded that the village needs more tourism development because of the current situation of the declining demand of Mieng, but the tourism development has to be under the village's control so that it does not ruin the traditional way of the villagers' life.

F. Problems of Mae Kampong's Administrative Management

The modern development was first brought to Mae Kampong in 1970s by the state-led rural development schemes. The construction of the paved road was initiated by the US-aligned government's political intention to expel the communism activists who were thought to be hiding in mountains near Mae Kampong; and although it is the villagers (especially the former village headman) who decided to get themselves involved in tourism in 2000, later on, the eco-tourism became a part of the government-led OTOP (One Tambon One Product) program. Thus, it can be said that the development programs in Mae Kampong were always initiated by or taken into a part of the government-led development programs. Thus, it is highly dubious if the true voice of the village members were reflected in the village's development trajectory.

In discussing Thai rural community administration, it is essential to touch upon the government's regional administrative system. For Thailand's regional administration, village (*muban*) and subdistricts (*Tambon*) play a significant role. In each village, village headman (*phuyai ban*) is elected by the villagers while sub-district chiefs (*kamnan*) are appointed by the government. At the tambon and village levels, tambon councils and village development committees are now integrated into the rural development framework and play a part in administration of rural development programs; and these bodies are dominated by the sub-district chiefs and village heads as agents of the state [2].

The concept of participatory development has been internationally hailed as a possible counter movement to the paternal and top-down development discourse, however, Thailand's situation with regard to participation in administration of rural development

programs is far from achieving community participation. In Thailand's case, the decentralized system of tambon administration is nothing more than a top-down program by the government within each bound of sub-district and village. Since all the village heads (*phuyai ban*) are summoned by the government for attending tambon meeting that aim to disseminate the government policies throughout the villagers via the village heads. After the tambon meeting, the village heads set up village meetings (usually compulsory) in their own villages to tell the same story talked by the sub-district chiefs in the previous meeting to the common villagers, and in the village meetings, the opportunity for the villagers to express their opinions and to give feedback about the government projects to the village heads is often limited. Importantly, this is also the case in Mae Kampong.

Therefore, although Mae Kampong is known as a very successful case of a CBT [5] village where the decision-making is based on community participation and the wealth made from the village tourism is redistributed to all the villagers through the village cooperative system, whether one can say that Mae Kampong has a democratic administrative structure is open to question, considering the fact that the common villagers attitude towards participation in the village's development planning and decision-making is quite passive, there are obviously problems in terms of the village's administrative management.

G. Mieng as Cultural Capital

It is not reckless to think that Mieng has an aspect of cultural capital, which has an important negotiation power in the community development discourse, as Bourdieu describes in his work. Although the high-powered government programs and strong leadership in the village structure have a significant role in the development trajectory, bottom-up from ordinary village members can be possible by the tradition of Mieng production. In fact, Bourdieu maintains that in modern societies, the confrontation between the distribution of economic capital (wealth, income, and property), which is so called the dominant form of hierarchy, and the distribution of cultural capital (knowledge, culture, and educational credentials), second principle of hierarchy, delineates the field of power [6]. Thus, cultural capital, which is the most significantly embodied by the tradition of mutual cooperation among the villagers fostered by Mieng production, can be a significant factor as the bargaining power for the ordinary villagers to negotiate with the development discourse.

IV. CONCLUSION

Mae Kampong has been through its development trajectory over the last several decades. The traditional agrarian community, which has put its predominant emphasis on production of Mieng, a traditional fermented tea product in Northern Thailand, is now in transition to turning into a tourism site for both Thai domestic and international tourists. Community-based tourism (CBT), without doubt, brought a great deal of economic benefit to the village, creating various income resources for the villagers and generating employment opportunities for them. Nevertheless, the transition of the village's mode of economy brought various negative impacts on the village such as a declining presence of Mieng, which has been bonding the villagers together, and changing human relations among the villagers. For these negative impacts brought by the introduction of the village tourism, enhancing the villager's awareness of cultural and social significance of traditional Mieng production would be essential. Therefore, there is a need for Mieng, in the villagers' heads, to be reconsidered and redefined so that it can keep its traditional value within the community even in the current time of the village tourism.

In addition, Mieng has a potential in enhancing the villagers' sense of participation in the village's decision-making and tourism planning and ultimately bargaining power to negotiate with higher authority that often pushes down their development ideology to local communities because it is what they are proud of as a villager of Mae Kampong, who should be capable of creating their own future. This can be made possible by integrating Mieng into the current CBT programs by inventing Mieng-related products that can be sold as a part of the village tourism or by actively showing the tradition of Mieng production to their visitors.

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