

THE PLACE IDENTITY AND THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF RURAL THAILAND: AN APPROACH FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF MAE KLANG LUANG IN NORTHERN THAILAND



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ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 3 July 2017

Revised: 2 August 2017

Accepted: 9 August 2017

Published: 15 August 2017

Keywords

Place identity

Attractiveness

Rural tourism

Sustainability

Mae Klang Luang.

This research is to propose the understanding of place identity and the awareness of the destination attractiveness as a way to continuous tourism system in rural Thailand. Particularly, the research focuses on understanding and describing a complex and dynamic issued in Mae Klang Luang attractiveness, a small village in Northern Thailand, for tourism activities from both sides of tourism system. For the local community to understand their tourism resources, images and the attractiveness is important to develop tourism industry. Moreover, the understanding of demand side perspective of attractiveness of these attributes helps the community to enhance their tourism industry in a more sustainability way. The attractiveness of a tourist destination encourages people to visit and spend time at the destination. Without the attractiveness, tourism does not exist at the first place. At the same time, without understanding of what tourist perceive as the attractiveness, tourism cannot be continuously developed. The importance of both sides' perceptions towards attractiveness helps rural tourism future development in more sustainable choices. It will help guiding the community to develop their tourism industry in the way continuing attracting people to the area at the same time not losing its own identity.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes in the existing literature of sustainable tourism development in rural Thailand, particularly in Mae Klang Luang Community. The study proposes the understanding of place identity and the awareness of the destination attractiveness as an alternative way to sustaining tourism system of the community.

1. INTRODUCTION: STUDY OBJECTIVE

Tourism in Thailand, as other places in developing countries, has long been evidenced of its significant growth since 1960s. This is because of the country's diversity of both existing tourism resources and potential assets for tourism development (Li and Zhang, 1997). Rural areas in particular have been developed and promoted for tourism activities. In this respect, tourism has been used for rural economic development, in forms of employment and income distribution. Rural tourism in Thailand has experienced a rapid boom of growing tourism industry.

However, as those tourist activities taking place within local communities it creates a direct impact both positive and negative on local people and their livelihood (Chatkaewnapanon, 2012).

Significant, negative impacts on local communities can lead to the country degradation of tourism development. With the pace of inappropriate tourism development can lead Thailand into unsustainable tourism development. With these awareness, however, many rural communities are not having been suggested on how to achieve sustainable community tourism development. Those communities are only having been promoted and examined for its tourism potential. Once rural tourism industry started, local communities are rarely properly suggested on how to continuance their tourism industry.

With this concern, this research paper aims to examine the foundation for a more extensive tourism development process in rural Thailand. Specifically, the research proposes a model for sustainable tourism development for Mae Kang Luang, a small village in the northern Thailand. To achieving the aim, this research adopts two concepts of place identity and attractiveness to provide a theoretical framework for developing the model of sustainable tourism in this village. Objectively, there are two folds that need to be addressed: one is to discuss the place identity as the tourism attractiveness from the demand side. The other one is to assess the same approach from the supply side. With the understanding of what both sides think about the place, it will help tourism to be developed in ways sustaining rural community and tourism industry.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK RELATED TO THIS STUDY

Tourism, theoretically, is perceived as either important for rural sustainability or major cause in host community impacts. Practically, tourism is also increasingly important as a cause for urbanization in many rural areas, particularly in developing countries. Therefore, there are highly dynamic and interactive studies on the interaction between tourism and destination development. There are studies on residents' perceptions towards tourism (Andereck and Vogt, 2000; Andriotis, 2004; Andereck *et al.*, 2005; Aref *et al.*, 2009; Amuquandoh, 2010). Tourism is not only to generate local economic, but also to change physical landscape of the area. Tourism is a factor of change, where has transformed an area into a tourist destination (Chatkaewnapanon, 2012; Hanpachern and Chatkaewnapanon, 2013).

Overdevelopment of tourism industry can be resulted in no longer attract people to come (Butler, 1980). Therefore, understanding what tourists perceive as tourism attractiveness of the destination is important for guiding appropriate development (Formica, 2000). Regardless of taking sustainable tourism development concept into rural tourism development consideration, ignoring to understand the negotiation of place identity concept between the destination and the potential tourists can lead to the process of the perceived impacts of tourism development on host communities (Formica, 2000). This section reviews the importance conceptions to support the aim of this research. It presents a conceptual framework attempting at developing a negotiation of place indemnity as a destination attractiveness. The research framework is conceptualized around the concept of place identity for sustainable tourism development is rural Thailand, Mae Klang Luang in particular.

2.1. Sustainability and Community-Based Tourism in Rural Area

In responding to negative impacts of tourism, the adoption of the principle of sustainability into tourism context has been widely practiced. It is the idea of engaging and creating a balance between tourism industry and the community where tourism taken place. The concept of sustainability has been focused into rural communities to minimizing negative impacts (Sharpley, 2009). In this essence, it aims to reconciling the rural livelihood and tourism development. To achieve the goal, tourism planners require the understanding of sustainability, the knowledge of tourism activities and the components of a location (Dredger and Jenkins, 2007; Hall, 2008).

To meet a point of sustainable tourism, economic growth is necessary in order to meet basic needs. The focus should be on the quality of economic growth rather than its quantity (Butler, 1993). Then to meet a point of

developing a sustainable tourism, economic growth is necessary to generating additional incomes and diversifying the local economy as long as it compatible with the environment (Tuffin, 2005; Bestard and Nadal, 2007). Therefore, it needs to keep tourism activities continuously in order to maintain local economy. However, the concept of sustainability is not only focusing on promoting economic development, but also conserving local natural and cultural resources in return (Hunter and Green, 1995). In this point, tourism should be developed in compatible to a community's livelihood and in attuning to tourists' perceptions of a destination (Awaritefe, 2005; Choi and Murray, 2010). This aspect will create positive tourism images of a destination, where in turn marketing the competitive advantage of the destination in the future (Buhalis, 2000).

As issues of community and sustainability increase, it reflects on the importance of community involvement in tourism development process, with the emphasizing on the quality of local participation (Garcia-Rosell and Makinen, 2013). It is the concept that allows local communities to take control over the management of their own tourism activities. The local knowledge on tourism industry is important for building and strengthening the successful sustainable tourism development in a local community. To maintain tourism industry in a community, the whole system – sustainable local livelihood and acceptable numbers of tourist, needs to be active. Therefore, to sustaining tourism development is to maintain and enhance the quality of local livelihood, and the quality of the tourist experience.

2.2. Place Identity and the Attractiveness

Place identity is consisted of both human beings and features of the physical environment, including the importance of place ambience and character (Seaman, 2011). Place identity is the concept of 'people-place relationship' (Seaman, 2011). Within this conception of the relationship, there are three aspects representing all elements that relates to the place, which are geographic ensemble, people-in-place, and genius loci.

In tourism context, place identity is seen as products for tourism consumption (Ekinici and Hosany, 2006). Specifically, geographic ensemble refers to the material and environmental qualities of the place. It is a form of outstanding and unique scenic natural and/or human-made resources, which becomes initially consideration for tourism development (Green, 2005; Specht, 2009). This aspect includes the form of heritage attractions (Ryan, 2005). Moreover, people-in-place indicates people living in the place. It is another factor for tourism development particularly in forms of cultural tourism or indigenous tourism (Cohen, 1996; Ryan, 2005).

In addition, genius loci mean a unique ambience, character and experience of the place (Relph, 2008; Seaman, 2011). In this aspect, there are two approach towards genius loci of the place; spirit of place and sense of place. Spirit of place is the image of the place which projected through invented or reemphasized by the destination (Govers *et al.*, 2007; Seaman, 2011). Sense of place, on the other hand, is the perceptions of tourists towards images of the destination (Specht, 2009; Seaman, 2011). In this respect, experiences of place identity, both spirit of place and sense of place, can be interpreted by both locals and tourists. Therefore, experiences of place identity through projected images and perceived images can be a major factor that effect profoundly on start-up and continuous of a tourist destination (Gu and Ryan, 2008).

The attractiveness approach is the search for a positive perception towards a destination. In tourism, it refers to the destination's perceived ability to continue tourism activities. To continuing tourism industry is to sustain local community and to maintain tourist activities in the community. Maintaining the community tourism development is the community able to conserve their attractiveness to the target group. Therefore, this study is based on the definition of what demand perceives about a destination as well as what supply understand about what to offer. In this respect, the mutual understanding of the destination attractiveness generates tourism development in a way determining fascination where continues future tourism activities. Attractiveness towards tourists is that 'the travel destination reflects the feeling, beliefs, and opinions that an individual has about a destination's perceived ability to provide satisfaction in relation to his or her special vacation needs' (Hu and Ritchie, 1993). Remaining its

attractiveness in the way to meet the tourists' satisfaction, it is perceived to be attractive and determine the community competition. Therefore, the attractiveness of a tourist destination aims to establish a satisfaction and sustainable tourism development in the way to govern numbers of visitation.

3. THE STUDY ARGUMENT

To start tourism activities, there is a guiding principle for tourism destination development. Regarding to this consideration, mostly researches have focused on the awareness of tourism to the quality of the community. As a result, there are widely practices on how to start tourism properly. The concepts of local involvement and a destination carrying capacity have been discussed. However, the essence of sustainable tourism development thinking should not be limited only on how to ensuring that the community does not begin its tourism beyond its means. To start tourism in a community requires a working process. The quality of the community in their attractions, infrastructure and facilities are necessary. Then tourism industry has a potential to be developed (Graci, 2008; Kresic and Prebezac, 2011). Once it developed, to keep the community tourism running and working attractively is more challenging. Within this concern, sustaining tourism development in a community is not only to just create tourism industry at the community, or to retain the quality of the destination, but all of these as well as to maintain the tourism system in the community for the future generations.

Tourism system is a means to generate awareness, understanding, and interest for the sustaining community tourism development. Within this research, the tourism system can be divided into two components, the destination and the tourists. Tourism is started off at any location with its potential tourism products and adequate infrastructure and facilities. Mae Klang Luang is about two hour-drive away from the city of Chiang Mai before reaching the top of Doi Inthanon, the Thailand's highest peak. The village is an agriculture-based community. Local products are mainly rice, grapefruits, and coffee. With a potential to be a tourist destination, tourism in the village was started as a stopover on the way to the highest peak of Thai tourists.

On the other hand, with all the village's characteristics of its location of not far from the city of Chiang Mai, the landscape of terraced paddy fields, the ideal of cool weather, numbers of natural trails into the forest, and being part of Royal Agricultural Farming Projects are able to attract the potential tourists. Moreover, the village has been promoted as a must stop before reaching the peak. Giving tourists awareness of 'the attractions power and uniqueness of a destination' (Formica, 2000) Mae Klang Luang attract tourists both domestic and international to come.

Therefore, the tourism system is the completed model of continuing a tourist destination (Formica, 2000). The attractiveness of the destination from the community perspective needs to be examined to give them an awareness of what their initial qualities to tourism development. At the same time, the attractiveness of the destination from the tourist side needs to be investigated to understand what have attracted them to come. To make tourism in the community sustainable is to plan tourism development by taking the perceptions of attractiveness of both sides into planning consideration. Specifically, the examination of this research emphasizes mutual understanding of negotiation within place identity, between 'spirit of place' and 'sense of place'. The two concepts within place identity are keys towards the diversity of attractiveness of Mae Klang Luang Community.

4. THE STUDY APPROACH AND METHODS

This research is qualitative approach with phenomenological methodology. With this respect, the study is the structures of experience and consciousness of the research participants. It is based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity with the inclusive of self and personal narrative (Goodson and Phillimore, 2004). It is the approach that emphasize on the importance of individual perspective and interpretation. Particularly, it aims to describe the situation rather than explain. Therefore, it is an approach for understanding the issues of subjective experience, and comprehending people's motivations and actions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). It focuses on

understanding research findings rather than making a strong prediction of the future out of the findings (Decrop, 2006).

From these assumptions of phenomenological theoretical approach, the research is allowed to be solely qualitative research without having quantitative approach as a mixed methodology. This is due to this research focusing on the understanding of the phenomenon in which qualitative approach will allow the findings to explain what some people think and do, rather than how many people think and do on specific things. In this research, the qualitative will be used to focus on understanding and describing a complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional process of tourism in Mae Klang Luang. The adopted methods in this research are to examine the identity of the place, and its attractiveness for sustainable tourism development.

5. THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Building up the research instrument is based on a definition of attractiveness that both side of the tourism system, demand and supply, need to be included in the research analysis. To following Formica (2000: 47) summarized various literature on destination attractiveness, the formulation and implementation of destination attractiveness, however in accordance to this research, concern over 5 related issues: 1) define the region under investigation, 2) measure the unit area, 3) inventory the resources of the region, 4) group the resources into attraction factors or categories, 5) evaluate the attractions.

First, define the region under investigation is the process of identifying the area of study. This research is a specifically carried on at a single site of Mae Klang Luang, a small community in the north of Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. Second, measure the unit area refers to the discussion on the boundary of the research location. In this research, Mae Klang Luang is part of the National Park boundary, which hosts the highest peak in Thailand. It is located in Chiang Mai administrative and within reasonable drive from the city, about two hours. The patterns of spatial distribution of the village is with ability of attractiveness scales and indicators to incorporate attributes to tourist. Third, it is the stage of inventory the resources. At this stage is fundamental to this research. Discussing with tourism experts from academia, attractions in the village can be group into tourism products and tourism supports. Tourism products in Mae Klang Luang are consisted of cultural factors and natural factors. On the other hands, tourism supports in the village are consisted of infrastructure and facilities.

Forth, it is the process of grouping those resources into attraction categories; cultural and natural factors, and infrastructure and facilities. The research used the nominal group technique (NGT) with a group of tourism scholars in order to create a research categories and criteria to evaluate the attractiveness of the place identity of Mae Klang Luang. The group of tourism experts from universities were chosen to represent the principles analysis based on teaching perspectives. The characteristics of inventory are in the association with the power of course syllabus in Tourism Studies at Undergraduate Level. The research used various core subjects touch for a degree in tourism studies to frame the procedures. The results of the attractiveness of place identity of Mae Klang Luang under the criteria of cultural and natural factors, and infrastructure and facilities are presented. Cultural and natural products are discussed within three aspects of authenticity, people-place, and uniqueness. Authenticity refers to the originality of the attributes. In this respect, it means those products are still giving traditional meaning of the place's cultural commodities and quality of its nature products. People-place refers to the exclusive relationship that represent the place. It refers to the space that signify the local livelihood. Uniqueness refers to both tradition and modern assets that establishing a profitable and sustaining competitive advantage of the place. Infrastructure and facilities are discussed within three aspects of tangible, intangible, and uniqueness. Tangible refers to the product design of landscape and architecture that tourists can experience the manifestation of the local environment. Intangible refers to service of people in place that giving the satisfaction to tourists. Uniqueness is a both experience and satisfaction of tourists that cannot obtain from somewhere else.

Fifth, it is the final stage of evaluating the attractions. As mentioned earlier that this research is qualitative approach, the research is not willing to measure the attractiveness of the location for the destination competitive advantage. In fact, the research aims to find out what some people think as the attractiveness of the location in order to planning any future development accordingly. Therefore, the process of evaluating the attraction started with identifying the present state of tourism in Mae Klang Luang, using the secondary data from various literature and internet web search, coupled with site survey. Then the research is based on direct observation, participation observation, and semi-constructed conversation. Direct observation helps the researcher to understand how they behave in situations of interests towards the tourism attractions. Moreover, participation observation gives the researcher to recognize the perspectives of the participants' experiencing to tourism assets. Furthermore, semi-constructed conversation is used to getting people in the site both locals and tourists to talk about their opinions, feelings, and beliefs of attractiveness of those resources.

6. THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

With the above discussed research process, the research findings are;

6.1. From Supply Side

1. Tourism products

As discussed above, there are two aspects of tourism products that Mae Klang Luang need to be focused; cultural and natural factors. Within cultural aspect, locals perceived that their village having a strong attractiveness through their being a Karen village. Locals placed their perceptions on place identity as Mae Klang Luang Karen Village. Then the attractiveness of the village was in accordance to their cultural products and livelihood. The attractiveness, therefore, was the ability of the village to offers abundant cultural resources. Moreover, being a single ethnic group results in a well preserved of their traditional Karen culture. The village offers a direct experience of Karen livelihood and cultural practice to tourists.

For natural factors, on the other hand, locals perceived their products as being an ecotourism village. Within this aspect, locals divided their place identity into their initial resources and quality of management those resources. The place identity through their natural resources was being Mae Klang Luang Ecotourism Village. Then the attractiveness of being the ecotourism village was offering the originality of an agriculture-based community. As part of Royal Agricultural Farming Projects, the village was in guarantee of the qualities of their products. Moreover, with the location in national park, the ecotourism village referred to abundant natural resources informs of natural forest and ideal climate. Furthermore, the quality of ecotourism management was perceived as the attractiveness of their place identity as the ecotourism village. The quality of ecotourism management could be observed through the creation of a landscape of terraced paddy fields and numbers of natural trails into the forest. These natural attractions have been promoted to in several ways. In return, it has attracted a number of visitors to Mae Klang Luang.

2. Tourism supports

Infrastructure and facilities are two focused aspects in this research. Locals perceived that their infrastructure offered the attractiveness to tourists in many ways. The village is situated on the major road on the way to the highest peak of the country. The village is then well developed for its road, electricity, and water supply. In terms of facilities, the village provided tourists with what they had utilized within the village. Although the village had developed tourism industry, they still offered food, drink, and

accommodation in relation to their identity. Therefore, the local community perceived the attractiveness of their infrastructure and facilities as its convenience, comfortable, and creativity to tourists.

6.2. From Demand Side

1. Tourism products: natural and cultural assets

Tourism products in the demand side were examined within its natural and cultural assets, where focuses were on authenticity, people and place, and uniqueness. In terms of authenticity, tourists perceived Mae Klang Luang was agriculture-based community regardless of having gone through much of tourism development. Their agricultural products were still authentic to their living as being agrarian and being part of Royal projects. Their cultivation to harvesting and processing was still part of their local wisdom of the Karen community. Their tourism activities were association with their everyday living such as making their own grown coffee in a traditional way, gazing at their traditional landscape of terraced paddy fields, and genuine natural trails to the forest. In this respect, the attractiveness of those products were the traditional meaning and originality of the place's cultural commodities and quality of its nature products

Moreover, tourists' perceptions observed the attractiveness of Mae Klang Luang through the relations between people and place. The attractiveness was the initiative of locals' living their life in an agricultural society. Although it had shown the sign of business-oriented in the village, their livelihood was still showing the significant local wisdom of the community that had been accumulated and passed on down generations. Being a Karen community, there were common scenes to witness people in their traditional costumes and customs in everyday life. Local people inherited from their ancestors their weaving skills in making traditional cloths. Therefore, Mae Klang Luang was still a place where the exclusive relationship that representing the place was still exist. The attractiveness was the space that signify the local livelihood.

In addition, uniqueness was also perceived by tourists as the attractiveness of Mae Klang Luang. Mae Klang Luang was inhabited by a group of Karen. Tourists perceived that the village offered abundant cultural resources. Being a single ethnic group resulted in a well preserved of their traditional Karen culture. This resulted in offering an authentic livelihood of Karen culture and uniqueness experience to Karen cultural practice. Although there was an aspect of foreign cultures, Mae Klang Luang accommodated both tradition and modern assets in a more proper way to protect its uniqueness of its own traditional culture.

2. Tourism supports: Infrastructure and facility

Tourists discussed these issues under three aspects of tangible, intangible and uniqueness. In terms of tangible, tourists perceived the attractiveness of the village through its landscape and architecture. In other words, tourists perceived that Mae Klang Luang offered the product design of landscape and architecture that tourists could experience the manifestation of the local environment. Although they offered accommodation in different styles, their housing and living area was still representing their traditional design and cultural purposes. Interestingly, most tourists felt that their currently bungalow style was more attractiveness than a homestay style in somewhere else.

For the aspect of intangible, tourists referred it to the encounter between them as the locals through service quality. They regarded on this issue towards experiencing of the nature of natural resources and cultural aspects. Specifically, services of people in place gave them the satisfaction. Tourists felt freedom to cruise around the village and relaxing within the village atmosphere. Tourists perceived that the attractiveness of the village was the substantial tourism supports, services, and space between them and the locals.

In addition, the uniqueness of the village's infrastructure and facilities was the attractiveness of Mae Klang Luang. They pointed out that both experience and satisfaction was unique here. Being to its hilly geography, Mae Klang Luang offered panorama view of evergreen forest and terraced rice paddy field within convenience distance from the city. Mae Klang Luang offered the country-style accommodation with beautiful scenery and interesting local ways of life. Moreover, tourists could experience local festivals, local ways of life, taste local foods, and explore natural attractions a in extensive services but privacy in a way. This was the attractiveness of its unique geographical uniqueness.

7. CONCLUSION

The research brings the discussion on rural tourism sustainability back to the situation with which it began: the limitation of the interpretation. The implementations and focuses of STD arise in conditions of negative impacts of tourist destinations. The research is not questioning the desirable objective of STD. In fact, the concept of STD should not be directed into only the supply segment of tourism system. Along with the ensuring that a community should not live beyond its means, it is important to achieve, and to maintain an acceptable numbers of tourists. Therefore, the research is to propose the understanding of place identity and the awareness of the destination attractiveness as a way to continuous tourism system in Mae Klang Luang. The research focuses on understanding and describing a complex and dynamic issues in the community attractiveness for tourism activities from both sides of tourism system.

For the local community to understand their tourism resources, images and the attractiveness is important to develop tourism industry. The result shows that locals perceive their tourism resources positively, particularly on the tangible products. This reflects on their positive direct experience with tourism. Moreover, the understanding of demand side perspective of attractiveness of these attributes helps the community to enhance their tourism industry in a more sustainability way. Tourists' perceptions towards the attractiveness of the village are very much on their experience occurred during their encounter with the locals.

The attractiveness of a tourist destination encourages people to visit and spend time at the destination. The major value of destination attractiveness is the pulling effect it has on tourists. Without the attractiveness, tourism does not exist at the first place. Moreover, without understanding of what tourist perceive as the attractiveness, tourism cannot be continuously developed. Furthermore, the importance of both sides' perceptions towards attractiveness help rural tourism future development in more sustainable choices. It will help guiding the community to develop their tourism industry in the way continuing attracting people to the area at the same time not losing its own identity.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Contributors/Acknowledgement: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

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