

A COMMUNITY BRANDING DEVELOPMENT FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ECO-CULTURAL TOURISM IN NAKHON PHANOM PROVINCE, THAILAND

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ABSTRACT: *Nakhon Phanom Province has positioned themselves to be the heart of tourism in the Grater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). The concept of ethnic identity is useful for cultural heritage in Nakhon Phanom Province has become particularly involved with the specialists of cultural and sustainable tourism in the country. The question of ethnic identity in eco-cultural tourism practices becomes an important issue regarding what is locally perceived as authentic and what tourists and developers examine as a key travel experience. So, this study aims to record and review through semi-structured in-depth interviews about the opinions about ethnic identity of community and the opinions of policy makers and tourism developers of community eco-cultural tourism. In particular, the research emphasizes on how the concept of ethnic identity can enhance a position of Nakhon Phanom Province as a tourism destination and develop its brand equity on the national tourism market.*

Keywords: *Ethnic Identity, Eco-Cultural Tourism, Community Branding, Nakhon Phanom*

Introduction

The tourism development in the new era of global economy is one of the most important factors for national image. Therefore, the government closely monitors and manages how other countries perceive them as the tourism destination (Ringer, 2013). It has triggered scholars, academics, and politicians to engage in the field of community branding. In addition, it has initiated strategic marketing plans that help to figure out and change the global perception of a particular country. It is a new incidence that is different from the national image in a feeling that community

branding involves a practical approach to the shape, revision, and management of the country's image (Sharpley & Ussi, 2014, Tiberghien, 2019). Normally, the local image is strongly related to the country-of-origin effect.

Nakhon Phanom Province located in the northeast of Thailand, was a part of Lan Consequently. Most indigenous people in Nakhon Phanom Province contribute to the producing of products and services produced similar to the certain country in the eyes of an outsider consumer (Gardiner & Scott, 2014). Insofar, Nakhon Phanom Province is not known as tourism destination either globally or nationally. Although, the number of inbound tourists is quite small, the province puts great efforts to promote the province in eco-cultural tourism attractions with a variety of ethnic cultures and unique landscapes (Srito & Walsh, 2012). As the heritage is inherently a contested phenomenon (Waterton &

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Watson, 2010), especially when communities are consisted of diverse ethnic groups, belief systems, cultures and social norms. The concept of identity applied to the cultural heritage in Nakhon Phanom Province has become particularly relevant to the specialists of cultural and sustainable tourism in national level (Phumiworramunee et al., 2019). Particularly, the current cultural landscape of Nakhon Phanom has undergone a tremendous process of transformation from being shaped by previous indigenous people activities into agrarian (Chantamool et al., 2015). The daily life of ethnic people does not greatly change from the past and most indigenous people still preserve their way of life as usual. In other words, the indigenous people in Nakhon Phanom Province have semi-ethnic lifestyle which incorporated with many new commoditized cultural habits and changes in ethnic traditions. For example, in Piman village, it has been slowly changed from the ancient time since the ancestors had moved from Laos and established the village 230 years ago. The visitors can participate in the ethnic traditional wedding, practice doing bamboo handcraft and try ethnic food while staying in home-stay which is the identity culture of Piman community and a tourism resource to contribute to community branding.

However, the question for the Governor's office is how to practice authenticity of the ethnic group regarding eco-cultural tourism. Wallace, and Wallace and Russell (2004) recommended that it not only reflects the real livelihood of community in the present day, but also acts as a model for how cultural and eco-tourism could be engaged with the local people to build an empowered for sustainable development in the future. Typical

perception of tourists is the traditional aspect of local cultures presented to visitors and while this 'performed authentic ethnic identity' is created, staged and provided for external consumption (Ringer, 2013). It is important to position tourism in the perspective of how and why the tourism industry defines and presents its version of the local identity in both ecological and cultural aspects of tourism experience (Jamal et al., 2002). The empirical analysis will meet an overview of the various meanings of ethnic identity, policy makers and tourism developers in term of eco-cultural tourism in local community area (Neupane & Shim, 2019). The term of ethnic identity has been given to Piman village's landscapes and cultural artifacts such as craft-making, architecture, rituals and traditions. Then, it is examined how these different perceptions of ethnic identity can be used to position Nakhon Phanom Province as a tourism destination and develop its brand equity in the national tourism market. A review of these perceptions of ethnic identity associated with how the concept of ethnic identity can influence some of the impacts related to the tourism development. Finally, the degree to which local community tourism stakeholders in Nakhon Phanom Province can shape the creations of eco-cultural landscapes that adhere to the realities of local community cultural heritage; moreover, these creations relate to the notion of ethnic identity in the developing tourism of Nakhon Phanom Province is discussed.

Literature Review

Ethnic identity as the product of culture

Despite the fact that the issue of ethnic identity is the meaning about heritage, cultural and nature tourism. They

are complicated to define what is authentic, traditional or natural. Therefore, the identity in terms of the current forms of life, or of the fact of being, then the very existence of the tourist makes such experiences challenging are explained and defined (Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017). Importantly, the development of indicators to define ethnic identity used in tourism should take into account in the politic of representation in authenticity, particularly in the cultural and heritage sites and attractions (Jamal et al., 2004). The integrating ethnicity and identity issue should be controlled over the product and marketing involving the material and symbolic of culture as well (Lanfant, 1995). The dynamic composition nature of heritage is an important consideration for national and public spaces by developing economies, cultures and populations. The characteristic of “ethnic identity” is usually given to something relevant to the tradition or culture (Smith & Duffy, 2003, Svensson et al., 2018). While the tourism industry has a tendency to provide its own definitions of the traditional or cultural identity, the question of the real identity in eco-cultural tourism practices come up with essential as it seems to be negotiated through what is locally perceived as authentic and what tourists and tourism developers view as the important for travel experiences (Smith & Duffy, 2003). Thus, it is needed to consider the role of the private and public sectors in the product and marketing of tourism attractions and destinations, particularly in community branding identity (Hanna et al., 2018).

Sense of place and community identity branding

The community identity brand has combined various elements including its

culture, history, people, government, and business which make up the unique image of the local area as a whole (Ruzzier et al., 2013). In other words, the community identity branding is the formation of building an outstanding of a particular area and its own people in the community. Unlike commercial brands, community brands are unique and cannot be duplicated or cloned. Moreover, they need to be realistic and be independent from misinterpretations or confusing messages because failures failing to understand cultural and traditional might result in serious reputation damage (Saunders, 2008). Schroeder (2015) has defined “cultural branding” is the blend of cultural and social aspects of the community for the creation of a brand image that the most effective approach for building a community identity brand. Another argument from Sun and Tieslau (2016) is that building of a community’s brand should be done through the development of various sectors in addition to the tourism. In addition, a significant attention of the community identity branding should be paid to the natural resources and landscapes. Identity can contribute importantly to the creation and sustenance of a distinctive competitive edge. Raising awareness and take into account to the local historical is the concept of culture in relation to the ‘extraordinary’ (Smith, 2014) that tourists are in search for. It is relevant in the process of identity formation at local level to promote to the global level (Konecnik & Go, 2008). The building of community identity branding should not only be motivated by the political side but should also satisfy a broad range of stakeholders in the eco-cultural tourism development in local community. Supports from governmental and managerial

perspective for the community branding are necessary for this study as the concept of ethnic identity applied to the Nakhon Phanom's local community branding strategy, involving community members and local insights. Nowadays, modern tourists want to experience 'a sense of place' at the destination site, therefore experiential and symbolic benefits play as functional benefit in a destination brand's identity and make them attractive for tourists. Kapferer (1998) highlights that the building of the identity branding is the 'before knowing how we are perceived, we must know who we are.' Community brand identity can also be unique identity which conceptualized by its vision and culture in turn to drive its preferred positioning, personality and subsequent relationships. As the image formation goes well beyond the tourist-perceived approach to encompass the destination image, as projected by the destination management organization (Chahal & Devi, 2015). The present study aims at surveying various community tourism stakeholders involved in the development of eco-cultural tourism in Nakhon Phanom Province. Particularly, a theoretical framework is applied to examine the concept of ethnic identity and to respond to the issue on how Nakhon Phanom Province can incorporate the perception to develop its tourism destination in community brand identity. Suggestively, the survey of the supply side regarding the community branding concept is particularly important for Nakhon Phanom, as a province still does not have a clear community brand image so far (Prommahaa, 2015)

Methodology

Data Collection

The data were collected from 45 key preformats using random sampling considering characteristics of ethnic people, such as age, education features, occupation, length of living in the village, and the use of wetland resources for subsistence purposes. The sample represented the community's history, traditional identity, sense of place, and community identity branding.

In-Depth Interviews

The fieldwork has taken place in Piman Village, Nakhon Phanom Province where it has a strong community identity effort to provide to be a tourism destination. The research method for the study is explorative and interpretive Piman community identity. A qualitative methodology approach such as in-depth interview was conducted. The participants involved in the qualitative sampling included senior men and women, while younger men and women were selected as representatives of the communities to a study sites. Piman Village provided context to develop the research design, and helped identifying the most suitable participants joining in the research. In addition, documentation and secondary data including travel brochures were used. A series of recorded interviews with the chosen participants was held in the community visit. A semi-structured interview format was used as a tool to capture the thoughts of the participants in their own domain, which allowed us to further investigate how the people's world views influenced their relationship with natural resources. An interview script was also used with the following sets of questions: (1) oral history, (2) religion beliefs, (3) traditional culture and the community, and (4) general issues.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

The focus group discussions (FGDs) provided a platform for validating or testing some of the theories. The semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions which the duration of the interviews was approximately one to two hours. The interviews were used with various stakeholders who were directly and indirectly involved in the development of eco-cultural tourism and Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in Nakhon Phanom Province. The interviews and subsequent analysis of the interviews was employed to identify themes of interest including identifying village history, cultural and ecological aspects of the Piman Village. Especially, the cultural aspect can be incorporated into an authentic eco-cultural tourism experience for local and international tourists. The interviewees were dealt with additional questions such as what a cultural identity is and how it could be incorporated into the community branding of the eco-cultural tourism development. As a unique culture is produced by individual community, especially small-scale artisans and artists who sell their hand-crafts to tourists (Horng et al., 2016). The researchers decided to interview in detail with the producers who jointly represent the destination culture as distinct from the tourists. In order to examine a phenomenon within Piman village real-life context (Richards, 2014) and provide valuable understandings of people, events experiences, and organizations in their social and historical context (Perera, 2015), the researchers participated in one of the eco-cultural tours. It was organized and managed by the local community to get in touch with the local community as well as experience some of

the CBT activities prepared for prospective tourists.

This method was chosen to select unique cases, especially information about the development of eco-cultural tourism projects in Nakhon Phanom Province. Multiple stakeholders selected considering the expertise in ethnic culture, tourism agents and local community has allowed the researchers to

to interview all the different groups of population involved in the development of the Nakhon Phanom Province eco-cultural tourism. In particular, one significant question for researchers was asked to the different stakeholders. The question is what kind of involvement locals had in the establishment of the tourism experience that is being offered and how the point of view of the ethnic identity could be used in the community branding strategy. So, the case studies of the research can provide valuable understandings of people, events experiences and organizations in their social and historical context (Veal, 2006), which necessary for the research project. Moreover, information and qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews and narratives recorded from 5 identified relevant individuals. Moreover, there are 5 key informants including the village's leader, the village's shaman, and three elders. Participant monitoring was used to observe and record information focusing on their physical and cultural characteristics and language used during the interviews.

Data Analysis

Data management and analysis were conducted in three steps:

Step 1: Data were coded from in-depth interviews and FGDs in the form of narratives or free flowing texts to outline

the perspectives of the people. The context and the word use were considered important for exploring the ethnic traditional spaces and identified ethnic identity for community branding strategy. Therefore, text was not fragmented as is the case for word count. Word count analysis was not considered either in the context in which the words occurred, nor whether the words were used negatively or positively (Johnstone, 2017).

Step 2: The terms and phrases in Step 1 were grouped into categories and labels assigned for easy retrieval. The triangulation technique used to facilitate data validation. This step highlighted the community brand identity and the rebranding of Nakhon Phanom tourism image.

Step 3: Recurrent phrases were noted to identify general patterns and to compare texts by using content analysis due to quantifying patterns in communication, in a replicable and systematic manner (Skalski et al., 2017).

Study Area

Around 17th century, the ancestors of Piman community migrated from Mahaxi city to Piman Village (Figure 1). Since the escape from Chinese minority war, they have preserved their traditional culture and heritage until now. One of the examples to demonstrate the evidence is establishing themselves to be an eco-cultural community tourism. This campaign has been supported by the Local Administrative Office (LAO). LAO has been looking into the development of Community-Based eco-tourism which promoted by PTT Group. The project started in year 2013. During the project running they performed 28 eco-culture activities with an establishment of home-

stays and souvenir productions of ethnic traditional handicraft wares made in Nakhon Phanom Province. The indigenous people have managed to preserve skills of producing articles from their felling and numerous unique textiles, bamboo craft and local food products that made available to the visitors. According to the livelihood of ethnic people in Piman Village involved in unspoiled nature, ancient historical and well-preserved way of life of the local people makes the “Piman Village” to be an eco-cultural community tourism. It showcases the way of fabulous place to visit for visitors who like to travel and explore new and interesting things by themselves.



Figure 1: Piman eco-cultural community tourism

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2018

Results and Discussion

According to the interview of main stakeholders, the opinion of ethnic identity is deeply related to the eco-cultural tourism practices and tourism that manage by the community. As the former indigenous people lived in harmony with the nature in a sustainable way. Their lifestyles deeply have a relationship with their landscapes.

This combination creates a unique tourism experience for tourists who often had no previous knowledge about the traditional ethnic culture before arriving in the visit site. In particular, the “Piman village” tourism management matches the definition of eco-cultural community tourism (eco-cultural community tourism can be obtainable as a concept that ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape are combined to create as a site for tourists’ destination (Wallace & Russel, 2004). Mixing ecological and cultural aspects of Nakhon Phanom Province’s landscapes is the outstanding strength of a variety of cultures, traditions, the local identity tribes, and remarkable scenery have effectively influenced regarding to sustainable tourism development in the area of Nakhon Phanom (Thipsingh, 2015).

Themes identified ethnic identity for community branding strategy

From the finding of research, three following themes have been identified by the respondents to ethnic identity regarding to eco-cultural tourism experience for inbound and outbound visitors, and can be used as well in community branding strategy.

1. The “cultural landscape imagination”

Ethnic cultural landscapes: There is no doubt about ethnic culture and traditional practice which shaped from physical impact such as landscape. Culture and scenery are integrated inextricably in expectations and perceptions of indigenous people and tourists. (Tiberghien *et al.*, 2014). From a physical landscape perspective, it is useful for tourism management in term of attention site to the situated place and space in which the object is provided the real experience. In this

research, all stakeholders have been interviewed regarding their perception of the sense of landscape and the environment which they have experienced during the eco-tour of “Piman Village” in Nakhon Phanom Province.

According to this research, the performance of the community in tourism management and objective ethnic identity can be found in the cultural landscapes reflected by the tourists. In the case of Piman Village, the scenery is shared by indigenous home-stay which provides their way of life based on landscapes and environment to tourists. This activity is recognised to be one of the most authentic themes for tourists to feel that they are a part of the particular place. The archeological site of “Srichomchuen Temple”, from the establishment of the village around 230 years ago offers a unique opportunity for visitors to appreciate ancient authentic historical site as local people mentioned in in-depth interview,

‘Historical site is presented the beginning of the village when it was established in a unique and interesting way. Vast low relief and traditional painting about the life of the Buddha of Piman Village is such an amazing combination of culture (belief and faith), ancient historical monuments, and rather well-preserved way of life of the indigenous people. This makes Piman Village eco-site a great place to visit for those who like to explore something in a unique and interesting for themselves’

2. Ethnic traditional spaces and the politics of cultural sites

“According to the community tourism in Piman village, “Ethnic home-stays” with guests (indigenous home-stays) managed by local people. The view of eco-cultural tourism and ethnic identity have a

real meaning together as most villages in Nakhon Phanom Province still look the same as their primitive subsistence's'. The villages that are part of the tours are points where visitors can stay. There are no 'staged' parts from the home-stay group, as well as not any significant signs aiming to emulating a "typical" Piman Village. Furthermore, the indigenous people have managed to preserve skills of producing articles out of their feelings, numerous unique textiles, bamboo craft, and local food products. By staying in the indigenous home-stay sharing an "Ethnic traditional life-style" and interacting with the native people, the visitors can participate in an authentic tourism experience.

"Traditional ethnic food" is a part of promotional community tourism in which authenticity is experienced regarding traditional ethnic food of Piman Village made available to the tourists during the eco-tour. It can provide visitors to experientially participate and share the life of indigenous people. The traditional ethnic food of Piman village attracts visitors to practice and discover the traditional way of cooking in the village. Moreover, the tourists can appreciate a good experience with local meal with the host as they engage in tourism activity rather than observation. The tourists most likely to experience a sense of existential authenticity and more chance to allow tourists to feel that they are a part of the local community and experiencing culture bodily (Boniface, 2013). For example, when the tourists received not 'staged' experiences from the indigenous people while staying in home-stay, they are served the meals according to the traditions of the ancestors and there is a meaning behind each of the cooking and eating experience, as a quote from one of the members of the home-stay group.

'Putai ethnic traditional food is the best expression of our culture. The traditional meals that we prepare for visitors are prepared in the same way from generation to generation'.

3. Hand-made crafts produced by ethnic community

Hand-made crafts in the forms of 'lamps' made of bamboo materials are produced in the village of Piman for tourists on demand. The souvenir articles are individually owned by ethnic people. The villagers and members in the village sell a wide range of hand-made craft souvenirs including hand-made lamps, laundry boxes and mobile phones cases. Some of these crafts might be seen as delight delightful from some ancient traditional crafts. Some shops also sell hand-made ethnic textiles with unique pattern of Putai's Piman village. Putai is the name of ethnic group dominant in the Piman village that who can participate in experiential authentic tourism experiences when they are worn by the visitors' outside of the village or back home.

Determining community brand identity

The research has examined how tourism management in Piman Village can be constructed by community members, policy makers, and tourism developers. The findings showed that ethnic identity and eco-cultural tours in Nakhon Phanom Province could be relevant for this study. Furthermore, tourism stakeholders should not deform the authenticity of ethnic way of life. However, they should provide an interpretation of the true social and economic situation in the destination site that redefines the social meanings of the particular area, thus creating an image of the ethnic community that would be shown to the national level. As Silva and Sinha

(2016) illustrated, 'cultural landscapes' are viewed and shaped by geophysical aspect, which can be devoted by potentially impressionable tourists. The construction of the landscape in the peripheral regions and areas with indigenous residents is sensitive to the fact that this is a process that involves the creation of a "fantasy", (Lemelin et al., 2015).

After the end of the Indochina war, some of ethnic groups in Nakhon Province have faced a need to identify themselves in the eyes of the world (Saunders, 2008). Salakhum (2015) stated that Nakhon Phanom governor's office has put great effort into creating a '...unique, recognisable, and credible ethnic community brand' and the provincial office has indeed approached the process of forming an ethnic community brand strategically based on the 8 ethnic groups (such as Putai, Tai Nyow, Tai Poun, Tai So, Tai Seng, Tai Kaleung, Tai Kha, and Tai-Lao). According to Fung (2016), the province's governor office has so far monopolised the process by limiting the people who involve in the domestic audiences and developing of its community brand image. The provincial office chose to locate the community as a practical, stable and diver-ethnic group situated in a fairly unstable area of the province. This also serves as a crossroad between Thailand and Laos PDR, combining the similar cultures and beliefs in two countries (Saunders, 2008). Furthermore, Nakhon Phanom Province has a unique role of acting as a bridge between Laos and Thailand and it can be perceived as a typical the Greater Mekhong Sub-region (GMS) country. In order to promote this image, Nakhon Phanom governor's office has adopted the message "Nakhon Phanom – the Heart of GMS" that highlights the province's

favourable geo-cultural location and the efforts of the provincial government office to be recognised for its diver-culture and rich in natural resources (Lertcharnrit, 2014). Nowadays, most people are talking about sustainability of cultural tourism, eco-tourism or rural tourism. To achieve this sustainability and benefit permanently, there are some facts that have to be taken into account. Community brand identity is among them. In marketing literature, there are many different definitions for local branding. For example, the explanation of place branding is the practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing techniques and disciplines to the economic, social, political and cultural development of cities, regions and countries. Another definition of local branding may refer to a city, town, country or a tourist destination and to their competition and struggle for tourists, visitors, investors, residents and other resources. Branding is based on a vital approach to public relations, expressing that an altar of picture is an ongoing, all encompassing, intuitively and wide-scale process, requiring much more than a quick change of symbol or motto which a vital importance for cultural marketing efforts (Sun et al., 2016)

The rebranding Nakhon Phanom tourism image

According to the plan of Nakhon Phanom governor's office, in order to expand the target group of tourist and develop the advertising campaign, and tries to attract the elders and long-stay visitors by focusing more on cultural and tourism aspects. Two examples are the promotion of eight ethnic groups in the province and the 7 temples' route for 7 birthdays (Thipsingh, 2015). The reason for applying this campaign is to prove that Nakhon Phanom

has managed to be the home for diverse cultures and ethnicities. Furthermore, Nakhon Phanom Province has also positioned to be a hub of MICE city (*Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions*). This activity being actively involved in hosting of national and international events which have helped the province process the establishment of the community's brand in Nakhon Phanom Province.

The re-branding is not an easy process achieved by introducing new advertising campaigns or printing new brochures. But it is a complicated process that needs to be backed up by changing the provincial governor's strategy, reforming legislation, and improving infrastructure. The combination of these procedures not only produces real results but also benefits domestically and globally. Traditional cultural and heritage places and landscapes, like time, are always 'in the making' through important meaning, constructing and participatory activities within, generating a variety of personal, heritage and identity relationships including a sense of ownership or emotional attachment, empowerment, value, and feeling. These aspects of ethnic identity will be important for the community in Nakhon Phanom Province as the province keeps the dynamic nature of its tradition, culture, and heritage and the potential for its eco-cultural tourism practices.

To have a good brand name and position of the destination and its ethnic tourism products, focusing on features which are distinctive and superior to its rivals is necessary. There are efforts to design the mix of marketing and promotional tools and techniques to achieve a good place to rebranding and the greatest level of conversion of the market

potential. In this village, there is the realisation of the importance of ethnic branding and rebranding. Therefore, they have been started to be promoted as a tourism destination by their councils, emphasizing on ethnic and eco-culture tourism. Also, they have been supported by the government. Their promoting programmes in tourism marketing aim at boosting their villages' social and economic development through their rich cultures and heritages with the help of an effective place rebranding. They also make market research to validate the efforts for rebranding for eco-cultural tourism since they believe that their village should have an established brand and presence on the potential target markets and efforts should be done on the brand positioning as cultural tourism destination on markets (Boniface, 2013).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Piman District, Nakhon Phanom Province has over 230 years of history. The community image of Nakhon Phanom has been a subject of concern for numerous of resources. The effort has been put into developing a strong province image. However, the community brand is still in its initial stage. Therefore, every influential event needs to be closely managed and monitored because Nakhon Phanom Province is still required further development into a truly effective and recognizable national brand. The current research incorporates with the concept of ethnic identity into community branding strategy and the development of its brand equity as a unique tourism destination on the national and international market. This approach applied to organize eco-cultural tourism practices. It could shape the community brand identity and position of the country as a destination for tourism

experiences based on crafted tours which emphasizing on authentic community cultural heritage.

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