

Homestay Tourism and the Commercialization of the Rural Home in Thailand

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Despite its growing importance to the domestic tourism market in Thailand, and its pertinence to community-based forms of tourism generally, homestay tourism remains a neglected topic. The purpose of this paper is to explore the implications of successful participation in homestay tourism in Thailand. Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 residents of Mae Kampong, a well-known homestay village located in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai, this paper argues that success in the context of homestay tourism is a double-edged sword, because even when communities succeed in operating a homestay program, this success comes at the price of diminished authenticity, greater dependence on tourism, and enhanced social and economic inequalities. Notwithstanding such challenges, rural communities will continue to respond to tourist demand for novelty and authenticity by commercializing their homes and offering homestay experiences that deliver glimpses of rural life to curious guests.

Key words: commercial home, community-based tourism, homestay, success, Thailand

Introduction

In the past decade, the tourism industry in Thailand has demonstrated two seemingly contradictory trends. On the one hand, rising demand for conventional tourist services and experiences has led to an enormous increase in the number of international tourist arrivals,

from 9.5 million in 2000 to 22.4 million in 2012 (Tourism Authority of Thailand [TAT], 2013). On the other hand, since the early 2000s, demand has grown for alternative tourism experiences, including volunteer tourism (Mostafanezhad, 2013), wildlife tourism (Duffy, 2013), and ecotourism (Walter & Reimer, 2012). These two trends

may at first appear incongruous, but they are in fact related in that alternative tourism is a response, and proposed antidote, to the many harmful social and environmental costs associated with mass tourism in Thailand. Further, rather than existing entirely outside the realm of conventional tourism, companies in Thailand that offer novel, individualized, and small-scale experiences must often tap into mass tourism markets and marketing channels to succeed (Weaver, 2002).

For tourists visiting Thailand from “Western” countries, alternative forms of tourism are appealing not only because they offer novelty, but also because they help to alleviate the apprehension or guilt that some visitors feel when reflecting on or learning about the problems created by the influx of international tourists. However, the most important reason for the growing demand for experiences such as ecotourism and volunteer tourism is a desire among international visitors to interact with Thai people and Thai natural environments in more authentic ways. By providing tourists with a glimpse into facets of Thai life concealed from the majority of package tourists, alternative tourism experiences promise a certain level of authenticity. Since mass tourism is widely, albeit simplistically, perceived to destroy the cultural and natural authenticity of a destination, Westerners hoping for an authentic vacation in Thailand have therefore turned increasingly to the various alternatives made available in the past decade or so.

While there is little doubt that international tourism has made great contributions to the Thai economy, or that international tourists have brought about long-lasting changes to the lives of many Thais working directly in the tourism industry, it is important not to underestimate the significance of domestic tourism in Thailand,

which in scope, impact, size, and implications is more important than tourism related only to international visitors (Kaosa-Ard, Bezic, & White, 2001). With rising incomes, improved infrastructure, and greater exposure to tourism marketing, Thais now travel in much greater numbers and with greater frequency than in the past. Though international tourists are more concentrated and visible in certain well-known locations, Thais account for approximately 80% of all tourist trips in Thailand, as well as 45% of total tourism revenues (Suansri & Richards, 2013, p. 529).

Perhaps the most important example, or form, of alternative tourism in Thailand today, and the one most closely associated with the domestic tourism market, is community-based tourism (CBT), defined as tourism that takes environmental, social, and cultural sustainability into account, and that is “managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the purpose of enabling visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life” (Suansri, 2003, p. 14). Conventional mass tourist motivations and behavioral patterns continue to characterize many domestic travelers in Thailand, but Thais are increasingly participating in CBT for many of the same reasons motivating international tourists to engage in alternative tourism. In particular, growing material prosperity and rapid social change have created a burgeoning urban middle class in Thailand, and the rise to social, political, and economic prominence of this group – along with the continuing power of more traditional elites – has prompted a noticeable turn in Thai culture toward nostalgia for an idealized rural past that is perceived to be under threat from the forces of modernization and globalization (Peleggi, 2002).

A key feature of CBT in Thailand, and a manifestation of middle-class nostalgia, is the widespread availability of opportunities for visitors to stay overnight with a host family in a rural community. Rural homestays allow guests to catch a glimpse of the daily lives of village residents and therefore serve as a means of experiencing a local community in ways that differ from conventional tourism interactions and settings (Dolezal, 2011). As an alternative form of accommodation that features basic standards and takes place in small, and often remote, rural communities, homestays appeal to a very small and specific niche of tourists: in a 2011 survey of nearly 55,000 Thai domestic tourists, only 0.7% had stayed in an overnight homestay (TAT, 2012). Nevertheless, homestays are an important component of CBT in Thailand, and awareness of homestay programs continues to grow among Thai, and increasingly international, tourists.

Despite the importance of homestays to both the concept and practice of CBT in Thailand, very little has been written in English on homestay tourism in Thailand, aside from conference papers (Silparcha & Hannam, 2011), doctoral dissertations (Oranratmanee, 2009; Vajirakachorn, 2011), short research notes (Naipinit & Maneenetr, 2010; Thaochalee, Laoakkha, & Panthachai, 2011), and papers published in Thai university journals (Boonratana, 2010; Oranratmanee, 2011). The purpose of this paper is to address this gap in the literature by examining the evolution of homestay tourism in Thailand. By using the example of Mae Kampong – a renowned example of a homestay tourism village in northern Thailand – this paper argues that even when homestay tourism projects avoid the pitfalls that characterize some community-based development efforts in Thailand, there remain a number of dilemmas

and challenges. Moreover, evidence from the Mae Kampong case study illustrates that these dilemmas and challenges stem in many ways from the very factors that create successful homestay tourism in the first place.

Commercialization of the Home

Homestays represent the process of commercializing one's home in order to utilize residential space for profitable purposes. As a form of accommodation, homestays occupy a middle ground between the intimate settings of a friend or family member's home and the purely commercial, informal environments found in hotels and other more conventional lodging facilities. By offering locally embedded and authentic alternatives to the universal and formulaic hospitality standards found in sites such as motels (Lynch, Di Domenico, & Sweeney, 2007), homestays appeal to travelers searching for novelty, personalized service, and genuine social interactions with hosts (Wang, 2007). Of course, entrepreneurial activity has long occurred in people's homes, but working from home is not quite the same as hosting strangers in one's home, because one involves engaging in commercial activities within the space of the home whereas the other transforms the very notion of "home" into a commercial space.

The multi-functionality of a homestay is reflected in the terms "home-based enterprise" (Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007, p. 321) and "commercial home enterprise" (CHE) (McIntosh, Lynch, & Sweeney, 2011, p. 511), the latter of which has become the most commonly accepted term in the literature for this form of accommodation. The intersection of competing purposes and the range of specific possibilities are captured in the following often-cited definition:

“Commercial home” refers to types of accommodation where visitors or guests pay to stay in private homes, where interaction takes place with a host and/or family usually living upon the premises and with whom public space is, to a degree, shared. “Commercial home” therefore embraces a range of accommodation types including some (small) hotels, bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), and host family accommodation, which simultaneously span private, commercial, and social settings. (Lynch, 2005, p. 534)

Lynch (2005, p. 549) goes on to delineate such “identifying characteristics” of CHEs as family involvement, local community benefits, guest engagement with the property, the sharing of space between guest and host, the participation of owner-managers in the shaping of the accommodation product, the involvement of “lifestyle entrepreneurs”, and lastly, the importance of gender, personal networks, social values, and family life cycle.

While, as mentioned earlier, the topic of homestays is generally neglected in the tourism literature, other kinds of CHEs have received attention from scholars attempting to assess the opportunities, challenges, and implications associated with the use of a private home for commercial purposes. For example, a number of studies examine various aspects of the bed and breakfast (B&B) sector, including the importance of websites, guidebooks, and word-of-mouth advertising to the success of B&Bs (Chen, Lin, & Kuo, 2013), the mental and physical costs of coping mechanisms employed to deal with the loss of privacy that comes with hosting guests in one’s home (Butler & Modaff, 2012), the gendered nature of the emotional labor required to operate a B&B (Harris, McIntosh, & Lewis, 2007), and the desire of B&B guests for security and a “sense of belonging” (Lin, Shiu, & Wu,

2012, p. 585). Similarly, several authors (Blekesaune, Brandth, & Haugen, 2010; Busby & Rendle, 2000; McGehee & Kim, 2004) discuss farmstay accommodations, which are an integral component of agritourism and feature opportunities for guests to stay and participate in the activities of a working farm.

It is tempting to think of rural homestays as simply one subset of B&B establishments, since both types of CHEs involve the mixing of private and commercial space, stem from a need for rural residents to earn supplemental income, and reflect in many cases tourist demand for authentic experiences. However, homestays differ from B&Bs and other CHEs because even though all such accommodations feature more personal and frequent interaction than is commonly found in conventional settings, homestay guests often participate in the daily activities of hosts, making homestay experiences even more interactive (and intrusive to hosts) than overnight stays in a B&B. The dearth of publications on rural homestay tourism is particularly unfortunate because homestays touch upon a wide range of interesting topics, including the role of homestays in community-based development (Kwaramba, Lovett, Louw, & Chipumuro, 2012), the commercialization of previously non-commodified spaces such as the home (Blunt & Varley, 2004; Hochschild, 2012), and the movement within tourism studies toward an “adaptancy platform”, a research orientation that favors “those forms of tourism which are responsive to the host communities and their socio-cultural, man-made, and natural environments, and at the same time provide tourists with new choices and rewarding experiences” (Jafari, 1990, p. 35).

Aside from neglecting rural homestays as a specific type of commercial home, the existing literature on CHEs also tends to focus on case

studies from wealthy countries such as Australia (Jennings & Stehlik, 2009; Lee-Ross, 2012; Moscardo, 2009), England (Lynch, 2005), Ireland (Mottiar & Laurincikova, 2009), New Zealand (Hall, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2011), and Scotland (Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007; Sweeney & Lynch 2007, 2009). There are, however, several studies that investigate, or at the very least touch upon, homestay tourism in low- or middle-income Asian countries, including China (Gu & Wong, 2006), India (Anand, Chandan, & Singh, 2012), Nepal (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013), and Vietnam (Nate-Chei, 2011).

Malaysia is another middle-income country that has received extensive attention in the homestay literature. Studies of homestay tourism in Malaysia address several themes relevant to the political, economic, and social context of homestay tourism in Thailand. First, Ibrahim and Razzaq (2010, p. 11) underscore the importance of the domestic market to homestay tourism in Malaysia, where three-quarters of all visitors to homestay villages are Malaysian citizens. Second, due to the ability of homestay tourism to create opportunities for women, youth, and the elderly, the government of Malaysia has since 2001 used homestay tourism as rural community development tool (Razzaq et al., 2011). Third, the success of homestays in Malaysia depends in large part on the competence of community leaders, the ability of communities to avoid dependency on external actors, the sufficient application of creativity and entrepreneurship skills, and effective marketing and networking efforts (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013). Fourth, the Malaysian government defines homestays as settings where “tourists stay with the host’s family and experience their way of life in a direct and indirect manner” (Kumar, Gill, & Kunasekaran, 2012, p. 22). This suggests that home-

stays in Malaysia, unlike B&Bs and other CHEs commonly found in wealthy destination countries, not only center on the active participation of guests in the daily lives of hosts, but also by implication lead to emotional, intimate, and authentic encounters with members of rural communities (Jamal, Othman, & Muhammad, 2011).

Homestay Tourism in Thailand

Like its Malaysian neighbor, Thailand has in the past 15 years witnessed the steady growth of CBT, an essential ingredient of which is the provision of homestay opportunities in rural communities. Prior to 2000, homestays were relatively uncommon in Thailand, and compared with the focus placed on maximizing mass tourism revenues and visitation, homestay tourism received scant attention from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). In the early days of CBT in Thailand, homestays suffered from numerous problems: inadequate marketing, unfair distribution of benefits among homestay operators, poor hospitality service standards, misunderstandings between guests and hosts of each other’s needs and motivations, insufficient facilities, and a lack of proper government regulation and planning (Wongtapim, 2003).

In 2002, the newly created Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MOTS) assumed responsibility of tourism administration, regulation, and product development, leaving the TAT to handle tourism marketing and promotion. Three years later, in 2005, the Office of Tourism Development (OTD) within the MOTS developed its first set of homestay standards, which included 43 criteria that homestays had to meet in order to receive official government certification. In 2008, after feedback from tourism experts and participating

rural communities, the OTD streamlined the homestay standards and settled on 31 indicators spread across 10 major categories. The most recent homestay standards were announced by the MOTS (via the newly renamed Department of Tourism) in 2012 and retained the same categories and indicators as those established in 2008 (Table 1).

Besides needing to meet these 31 specific indicators, official certified homestay owners must also – according to the Department of Tourism’s definition of a homestay (Ministry of Tourism and Sport [MOTS], 2012, p. 59) – sleep under the same roof as guests, maintain a maximum capacity of 4 homestay rooms and 20 guests, register with the Department of Tourism, use the homestay as a supplemental (rather than primary) source of income, and receive remuneration from guests in exchange for services provided, in accordance with the Hotel Act of 2004. Certification is granted to communities (with a minimum of four participating homes) for a period of two years and is advertised through an official “Home Stay Standard Thailand” sign that communities must post in a location easily visible to visitors (Figure 1).

Of the approximately 400 communities throughout Thailand offering some form of homestay accommodation (Satarat, 2010, p. 17), 151 had received official MOTS homestay certification by 2011; these 151 certified communities earned an average of THB 85,432 (\$2916) per year from tourism activities (Suansri & Richards, 2013, p. 540). The large number of communities that offer what are labeled and marketed as homestays indicates one of the central limitations of the MOTS homestay standard certification system, namely that it is entirely legal for homeowners and communities to use the homestay label without securing the official certification that, in theory, indicates a

certain level of quality control. As a result, it is not unusual to find false advertising among CBT projects, including in many cases homestay programs (Boonratana, 2010). Regardless of such problems, Thailand now has among the most detailed homestay standards in the world, and compared with just a decade ago, the Thai government has dramatically improved its regulation, management, and promotion of homestay accommodations.

Methods and Case Study Context

One of the earliest and most successful examples of homestay tourism in Thailand is the village of Mae Kampong. Located in the province of Chiang Mai, Mae Kampong is one of eight *mu baan* (villages) in the Huai Kaew *tambon* (sub-district) of Mae On *ampoe* (district) (Figure 2).

Founded in 1914 by settlers from the neighboring district of Doi Saket, Mae Kampong is located approximately 50 kilometers north-east of the city of Chiang Mai and derives its name from a combination of the northern Thai word for river (*nam mae*) and the name of a flower (*dok kampong*) that grows abundantly in this region of northern Thailand (Satarat, 2010). According to the latest Thai government statistics (Rural Development Information Center [RDIC], 2013), Mae Kampong contains 312 people, living in 123 households. Geographically, Mae Kampong’s households are spread across six housing clusters, or hamlets – known in Thai as *pang* and in the northern Thai dialect as *bpok* – that lie both adjacent to the road that winds through the village, and near the stream that runs through the steep forested valley in which the village is situated. With a mountainous terrain and elevation of 1100 meters, Mae Kampong is ideally suited to grow tea, which

Table 1 Homestay Standards and Indicators in Thailand

Standard	Indicator
1. Accommodation	1.1 Well-proportioned housing 1.2 Clean and comfortable bedding 1.3 Clean bathroom and toilet 1.4 Space to relax in the home or in the community
2. Food	2.1 Adequate quantity and quality of dishes and cooking ingredients 2.2 Clean drinking water 2.3 Clean utensils and food containers 2.4 Hygienic kitchen and kitchen equipment
3. Safety	3.1 First aid preparation 3.2 Availability of on-duty security guards
4. Hospitality	4.1 Welcoming setting aimed at creating familiarity 4.2 Opportunities to exchange information about community life
5. Tour programs	5.1 Clear tour possibilities for tourists that are accepted by the community 5.2 Availability of information on tourism activities 5.3 Willingness of homestay host to provide or arrange local guide services
6. Natural resources and the environment	6.1 Variety of [natural] tourist attractions in, or near, the community 6.2 Proper upkeep of [natural] tourist attractions 6.3 Conservation plans or measures to reduce the impacts of tourism and global warming 6.4 Activities that reduce the impacts of tourism and global warming
7. Culture	7.1 Preservation of local cultural traditions 7.2 Maintenance of normal community routines
8. Creation of value for community products	8.1 Creation of community souvenir products to sell to tourists 8.2 Production of unique community products that create value
9. Homestay management	9.1 Cooperation among villagers 9.2 Formation of executive homestay committee 9.3 Establishment of working rules for executive committee 9.4 Fair distribution of benefits 9.5 System for advanced bookings and payments

(Continued)

Table 1 Continued

Standard	Indicator
	9.6 Clear, detailed, and up-to-date information on fees for various services
10. Public relations	10.1 Publication of printed materials about tourism in the community
	10.2 Formulation of marketing plan

Source: MOTs (2012, pp. 60–61). Translated by authors from original Thai version.



Figure 1 MOTs’s “Home Stay Standard Thailand” Certification Sign, Mae Kampong.

in this area is traditionally fermented into a mild stimulant, known locally as *miang*, and chewed as a snack and digestive aid. For most of its history, Mae Kampong relied on the cultivation of *miang* for the vast majority of its income and employment, and despite an ongoing and steady decline in the demand for *miang* among Thais, over 95% of Mae Kampong’s population continues to derive at least part of its income from the picking, processing, or packaging of *miang* (Laverack & Thangphet, 2007).

Declining demand for *miang* has been offset by agricultural diversification, tourism, and the generation of community revenues

through the production of micro-hydropower. For the past 30 years, Mae Kampong has utilized its geographical conditions, specifically steep drops in elevation and a well-forested watershed, to produce its own electricity through three micro-hydroelectricity generators. In 1986, three years after the construction of the village’s first 20 kilowatt micro-hydroelectricity generator, Mae Kampong established an electricity cooperative, to which every resident of the village belongs. Since becoming connected to the national electrical grid by the Provincial Electricity Authority in 2000, residents of Mae Kampong have continued to use both the centralized electrical grid and its own micro-hydropower, though the community revenues linked to the sale of hydropower to the national grid has slowly declined in the past decade. Nevertheless, as Smits (2011) points out, Mae Kampong is among the last remaining, and arguably the most successful, examples of rural micro-hydropower in Thailand; as a result of its successful use of micro-hydropower generators, Mae Kampong has largely managed to escape the poverty afflicting some other rural and, until recent decades, remote rural communities in northern Thailand.

The use of micro-hydropower to counter, at a community level, declining incomes from

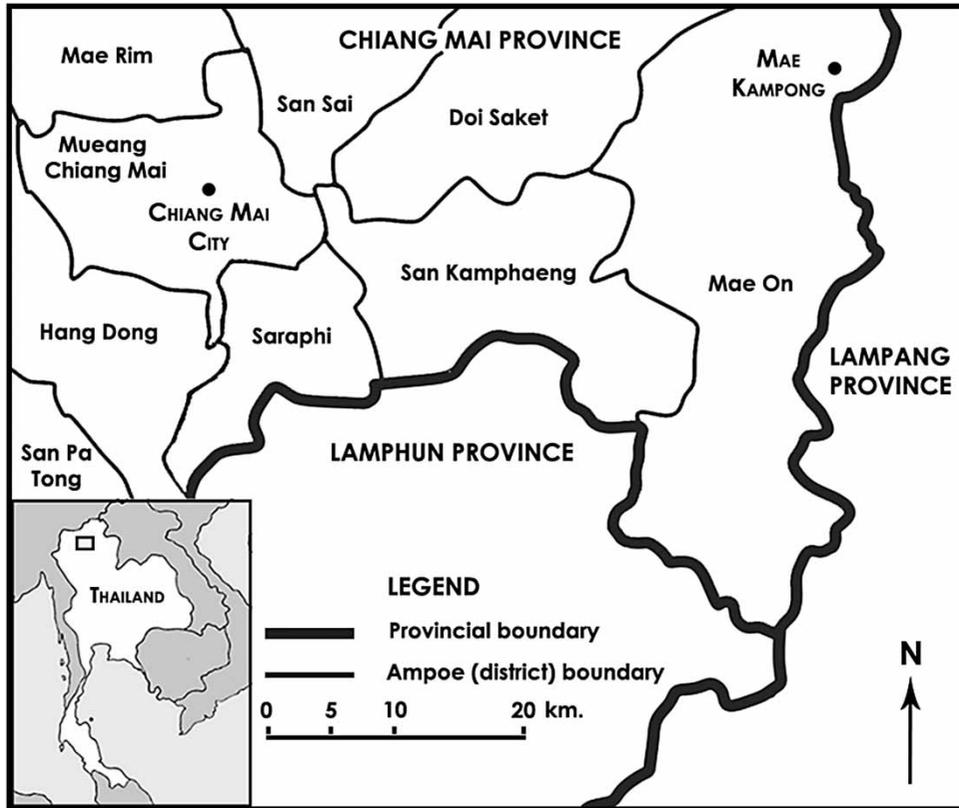


Figure 2 Mae Kampong and Southern Chiang Mai Province, Thailand.

miang cultivation has been coupled in Mae Kampong with a shift toward alternative economic activities that all, in one way or another, benefit from the topographical and climatic circumstances of the village's location. For example, many villagers now supplement their incomes by growing Arabica coffee, which grows well in the high tropical elevation of Mae Kampong. The village's setting and proximity to natural attractions also contribute greatly to attracting tourists. Prior to 2000, the road leading to Mae Kampong was unpaved, which made it uncomfortable and time-consuming to visit the village from anywhere other than neighboring communities. After the road was upgraded, however, the

number of tourists began to increase, mostly because of a desire to escape the heat, smog, and crowded conditions found in Chiang Mai and other urban areas throughout Thailand. The cool climate is an obvious draw for visitors to Mae Kampong, as is the quality of the air and water. Further, the tranquil setting of Mae Kampong, which features traditionally built teak houses amidst forests, as well as the constant sound of flowing water from the stream that traverses the village, appeals to visitors hoping for an escape into what is perceived to be a pristine natural environment. The village itself is also within a few kilometers of other natural attractions, including the seven-tiered Mae Kampong

Waterfall, Mae Takhrui National Park, and several limestone peaks popular with rock climbers.

As part of several ongoing research projects on various dimensions of CBT, the authors, independently or as a group, made approximately 30 visits to Mae Kampong over a span of three years as trip leaders, participants, or researchers. The objectives of this specific study are to examine the evolution of homestay tourism in Thailand, to explore the implications of successful participation in homestay tourism, and to document the dilemmas and challenges created by Mae Kampong's participation in homestay tourism. In order to examine the reasons for Mae Kampong's success in promoting homestay tourism, as well as the unanticipated dilemmas associated with this success, the authors employed a qualitative case study research methodology. According to Stake (1995, p. xi), a case study is the "study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances". Despite not offering the same level of generalizability as some other research methods, case study research nevertheless represents an effective means of generating rich and detailed context-specific knowledge. As one of the best examples of successful homestay tourism in Thailand, the village of Mae Kampong itself is an example of an "exemplary case", which is a case that comes closest to fitting the profile of an ideal type in its category (Kuiken, 2010).

As part of study tours involving university students, the authors made several visits to Mae Kampong in the past three years as trip leaders, staying with homestay families and recording field notes based on direct observations and informal conversations with homestay owners and other key community stakeholders. During these trips, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with a

total of 30 residents of Mae Kampong, roughly split between those who participate in Mae Kampong's homestay program and those who do not. Key tourism leaders in Mae Kampong were also interviewed: this includes half a dozen interviews with the former village headman (*poo yai baan*) and current chairman of the village's tourism committee. Interviews covered several topics, including reasons for participating (or not participating) in the homestay program, benefits and challenges associated with hosting visitors in one's home, contributions of homestays and other tourism activities to household incomes, and perceptions of the social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism in the community. Supplemental information was also gathered through both interviews with researchers from organizations such as the Thailand Community Based Tourism Institute (CBTI), and online resources that provide marketing information for Mae Kampong's homestay program. Not only did this supplemental data facilitate data triangulation, but it also allowed the authors to gauge the ways in which Mae Kampong depicted itself to those outside the community.

Successful Community-Based Homestay Tourism in Mae Kampong

In response to concerns about their lack of control over the ecological, social, and cultural impacts of burgeoning tourist visitation to their community, the residents of Mae Kampong formally launched a CBT program in December 2000. For at least one year prior to the initiation of CBT, the village headman and other local leaders convened several community meetings and workshops in order to gauge interest in CBT, to introduce the CBT concept to members of the community, and

to gather information about what skills, resources, and attractions would be most appropriate to any potential tourism program in the village. From the very beginning, the homestay program was the focal point and distinguishing feature of Mae Kampong's tourism efforts. Initially, only five families operated homestays in 2000, but the number of homestay operators grew steadily each year, eventually reaching 24 where it stands today.

At first, Mae Kampong received only a few hundred visitors per year, but since around 2006, the number of annual visitors has generally remained somewhere between 3000 and 4000. Village records show that in 2012, this number of visitors shot up to 4657, but it is not yet certain whether this was the harbinger of a new, elevated trend or merely an anomalous year. Approximately 80% of all visitors to Mae Kampong stay overnight with a homestay host, while the remaining 20% visit the community on either a one-day package tour, or as part of a specially designed one-day study tour. Roughly half of all visitors to Mae Kampong are international tourists, though they tend to be concentrated in the one-day tour segment of the market compared with Thai visitors who account for a majority (60% and 80%, respectively) of participants in overnight stays and study trips. The intimate interaction that sets homestays apart from conventional accommodation establishments, and even some other types of commercial homes, is delivered in Mae Kampong through shared host-guest participation in daily activities such as cooking and sharing meals, offering alms to monks in the early morning, and visiting sites where local economic products such as coffee, tea, *miang*, rattan handicrafts, or aromatic pillows (stuffed with dried tea leaves) are cultivated or manufactured.

Judged against virtually any measure – from financial solvency, to environmental conservation, to active and widespread community participation – homestay tourism in Mae Kampong, and the CBT framework within which it operates, is highly successful and serves as models for other communities hoping to control the planning, management, and direction of tourism at a local level. In terms of income alone, the initiation and development of tourism have helped to diversify Mae Kampong's economy at a time when demand for its principal agricultural commodity, *miang*, has experienced a steady decline. In its first full year of operation, Mae Kampong's CBT program earned a total of just THB 80,000 (\$2,730) in revenues, but by 2012, this had expanded by more than 30 times to just over 2.6 million baht (\$88,737) (Figure 3).

Individual, household, and community incomes over this period also grew considerably: between 2003 and 2006, total village income related to tourism grew each year by an average of 85% (Suriya, 2010, p. 10). Meanwhile, average household incomes in Mae Kampong went from THB 49,000 (\$1,672) in 2003 (Untong, Phuangsaijai, Taweelertkunthon, & Tejawaree, 2006, p. 72) to THB 154,550 (\$5,275) in 2012 (RDIC, 2013). Homestay tourism is not the sole reason for this rapid improvement in the financial well-being of Mae Kampong, but it has certainly played a role in expanding the livelihood choices available to community members. The story of Mae Kampong's success has reached far beyond the village, leading to frequent recognition, including a Thailand Tourism Award for CBT in 2007 (given by the TAT) and a Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Gold Award for cultural tourism in 2010.

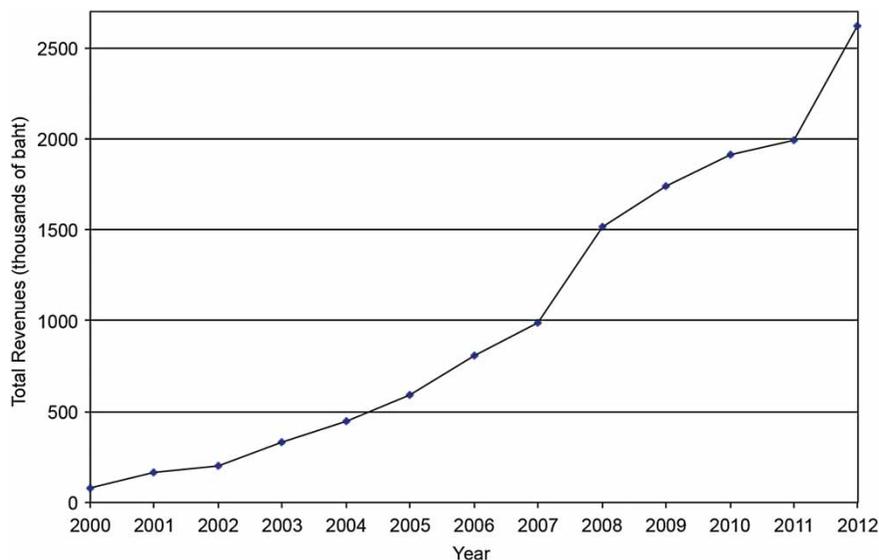


Figure 3 Annual Revenues from Homestay Tourism in Mae Kampong, 2000–2012.

There are several reasons for the success of Mae Kampong’s community-based homestay program. First, and most importantly, Mae Kampong has benefited from responsible, competent, and proactive leadership. In particular, the previous *poo yai baan* (village headman) of Mae Kampong, who served as headman for 12 years between 1996 and 2013 and continues to serve as chairman of the tourism committee, designed the homestay program to maximize the fair distribution of benefits to the community. He did this by diverting 30% of all tourism profits to the pre-existing electricity cooperative, which pays an annual dividend from its funds to every single member of the community. Second, a long process of consultation and deliberation has ensured that members of the community feel vested in the homestay program. Third, without external assistance and support from government bodies such as the TAT, the MOTS, and the Thailand Research Fund, not to mention from non-gov-

ernmental organizations such as the Thailand CBTI, Mae Kampong would have likely found it difficult to initiate the homestay program and would have also suffered from some of the same marketing challenges that plague many other rural homestay programs in Thailand (Leksakundilok & Hirsch, 2008). Finally, one should not discount the importance of sheer luck to Mae Kampong’s success: with ideal natural surroundings and a driving distance of less than one hour from the tourist hub of Chiang Mai, Mae Kampong has made the most of its fortunate geographical circumstances.

The Dilemmas of Success

Thus far, this paper has discussed the evolution of homestay standards in Thailand and the ways in which Mae Kampong’s successful community-based homestay program has improved people’s quality of life and

facilitated the active participation of the entire community. Every resident interviewed for this research expressed gratitude for the opportunities created by tourism, and it is clear that there exists a tremendous deal of respect and appreciation for the former village headman who spearheaded efforts to implement the community's successful homestay program. While nobody can deny that this success is admirable or that Mae Kampong should serve as an inspiration to other communities engaged in homestay tourism, it is nevertheless true that Mae Kampong's success has created unforeseen dilemmas related to three of the most significant components of successful homestay tourism: rural authenticity, economic diversification, and community cohesion.

Threats to Rural Authenticity

A major reason for the success of Mae Kampong is growing social demand for experiences that symbolize a nostalgic vision of an idyllic rural past. For "Western" tourists, this demand stems from the perceived difficulty of finding authentic rural communities that remain "primitive and remote" (Cohen, 1989, p. 30) or "untouched by civilization" (Novelli & Tisch-Rottensteiner, 2012, p. 63). Hence, the "salvage paradigm" (Clifford, 1989), which views modernity as a constant threat to indigenous cultures, leads certain international tourists on a quest to discover traditional rural ways of life before they disappear forever. This search for the cultural and historical "Other" may also be relevant for some domestic visitors as well, but unlike international guests, urban middle-class Thais are also inspired to participate in rural homestay tourism by the *saytagit paw piang* ("Sufficiency Economy") and *wathanatham*

chumchon ("Community Culture") movements in Thai society.

According to Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Board (2007, pp. 7–8), the Sufficiency Economy "stresses the middle path as an overriding principle for appropriate conduct by Thai people" and believes that "a way of life based on patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom and prudence is indispensable to create balance and be able to cope appropriately with critical challenges, arising from extensive and rapid socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural changes in the world". Similarly, the Community Culture social movement emphasizes the harmony and independence of traditional rural societies and looks to the rural past for solutions to today's problems (Evrard & Leepreecha, 2009). The influence of both movements is clearly evident in the marketing of homestay tourism in Mae Kampong; the term sufficiency (*paw piang*) is found in many Thai media stories about the village, and the former headman who continues to administer the homestay program is a strong proponent of the Sufficiency Economy philosophy. Although some authors (Dayley, 2011; Rigg & Ritchie, 2002) criticize Thailand's recent turn toward a Sufficiency Economy because it constructs an imagined agrarian past and promotes static notions of pure and noble rural societies that ultimately limit the economic and social options available to farmers, it is clear that sufficiency plays a large role in the successful development of homestay tourism in Mae Kampong.

However, the narrow framework for rural change established by the sufficiency ethic lies at the heart of a dilemma facing successful homestay communities: the financial success created in large part by the effective promotion of an idyllic rural authenticity leads to changes that ultimately threaten to

undermine that very authenticity. In Mae Kampong, success has increased the number of outsiders present in the village on any given day, but this poses a potential problem in that tourists, especially “Western” ones, locate authenticity in spaces not inhabited by (other) tourists. Thus, while homestay owners interviewed for this study expressed a strong desire to host more often than the handful of days per month that is currently the norm, deliberately boosting demand among tourists for overnight stays would lead to larger and more visible groups of tourists traipsing through the small space of the village. Any increase in the number of visitors would therefore erode the perceived authenticity of the village itself, thereby making it less attractive to visitors. Community leaders, and several residents, acknowledged this dilemma in interviews and conversations, stating that this is one of the reasons that the number of homestays has, for the moment, been capped at 24, despite the desire among some residents to increase capacity beyond its current level.

As is the case everywhere in Thailand, the dramatic improvements in household incomes in Mae Kampong over the past decade have aroused material aspirations, or more accurately have allowed residents to satisfy consumer desires that were latent but went unmet in the past. However, the success that has enhanced some residents’ ability to purchase modern conveniences such as appliances, flat-screen televisions, and smart phones has made it even more difficult for homestay owners to meet the basic requirements for safety and convenience required for certification while at the same time maintaining (and performing) a simple lifestyle perceived by visitors to be authentically emblematic of self-sufficient, traditional rural societies. Villagers may privately reject the false dichotomy between tradition and moder-

nity, and may come to one day resent the pressure placed on them by tourists and urban elites to stay “primitive and poor”, yet homestay communities like Mae Kampong that depend on the careful cultivation of a rustic image have little choice but to curb material desires, the fulfillment of which is made possible by success itself. It is also interesting to note that increased visitation connotes success in the minds of many individual homestay owners, but increasingly frequent contact with guests not only encourages hosts to make tourist-friendly modifications that erode the authenticity of the experience (e.g. replacing northern Thai dishes with more popular and familiar central Thai dishes), but also naturally leads to familiarity and standardization, both of which foster interactions that are less spontaneous, more staged, and therefore less authentic (Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007).

Threats to Economic Diversification

When Mae Kampong launched its community-based homestay program, the idea was to use tourism merely as a way of supplementing household incomes and coping with declining revenues from both *miang*, the village’s dominant agricultural commodity, and the sale of local hydroelectric power, which since 2000 has been increasingly replaced by much cheaper electricity available from the provincial grid. This approach to tourism – meant to prevent overreliance, vulnerability, and perhaps even too strong a move away from the sufficiency ethic promulgated by policy-makers – is also reflected in the Thai government’s homestay certification standards and guidelines, which state explicitly that homestays should play only a supplemental role in local economies.

Few families in Mae Kampong have entirely abandoned agriculture, and residents of Mae Kampong still view tourism as a supplemental source of income. For example, by earning 380 baht for each guest, and hosting around 13 guests per month in 2012 (mostly in groups of two), homestay owners on average earned approximately THB 58,900 (\$2,010) last year from homestay guests; these earnings are certainly higher than in the early years of the homestay program, but nonetheless still account for only one-third of the average household income for Mae Kampong in 2012. However, as the community continues to succeed in expanding the number of visitors and the number of households participating in tourism, there will be added pressure in the future to rely more heavily on tourism, thereby undermining the original idea of using tourism not as a primary income-generating activity, but rather as a tool for economic diversification. Agriculture is still the dominant source of income and employment for residents of Mae Kampong, but the share of household income derived from tourism activities has grown in less than a decade from 4% in 2003 (Untong et al., 2006, p. 73) to 14% in 2012 (RDIC, 2013). At the community level, tourism activities now produce 55% of the total capital available in the village cooperative account. If this trend continues, Mae Kampong will eventually come to depend on tourism to a much greater degree than was originally intended. Thus, it is perhaps ironic that the agrarian sufficiency ethic, which underpins the image of the community packaged and sold to visitors, has contributed to financial success, and with it, a slow but steady move away from arduous agricultural work and toward the attractive employment opportunities afforded by tourism.

One of the main reasons that tourism accounts for only 14% of household income but 55% of the cooperative fund is the contribution made toward the latter by *Flight of the Gibbon*, an outdoor adventure company that since 2008 has operated “canopy tours”, also known as zip-lining, in a forested area of Mae Kampong. In exchange for the right to use Mae Kampong’s forests for its 33 platforms and 18 zip-lines, Flight of the Gibbon agreed to pay several hundreds of thousands of baht into the cooperative fund, spread out over the 15-year period of its lease. The arrival of Flight of the Gibbon is significant because it enhances communal funds, and therefore signals success, but its presence in the village also threatens long-term community acceptance of tourism because, as residents living near the Flight of the Gibbon site indicated in interviews, the company employs mostly outside workers and insufficiently addresses the noise, garbage, and traffic that have accompanied an increase in the number of people visiting the village. Additionally, the kind of tourism promoted by Flight of the Gibbon, while small scale and ecological in many ways, does not precisely correspond to the cultural and social tenor of Mae Kampong’s homestay program. Indeed, it may prove difficult for potential visitors to Mae Kampong to picture the village as a bucolic and authentic rural oasis when they are constantly exposed in Chiang Mai to ubiquitous Flight of the Gibbon advertisements.

Threats to Social Harmony

Hoping to avoid the mistakes made by other communities in Thailand, the leaders of Mae Kampong designed and implemented their

homestay program with fairness, equity, and social harmony in mind. These objectives were achieved by widespread community involvement in the planning of tourism, as well as by specific measures such as requiring homestays to take turns in hosting guests. In the initial years of operation, social harmony was easily accomplished because the benefits were clear and the stakes were low due to the small number of visitors and the insignificant revenues produced by those visitors. Over time though, the mounting importance of tourism has exposed inequalities between groups and individuals and, as a result, may undermine the cohesion and unity that have made homestay tourism in Mae Kampong successful. It would be naïve and inaccurate to claim that conflict and inequality did not precede tourism's arrival, but it is obvious from speaking to village residents that tourism has highlighted existing inequalities, and will continue to do so if tourism keeps growing. A dilemma therefore arises whereby successful homestay tourism exposes and exacerbates certain social divisions, even as it fosters cooperation and communal pride.

Individual perceptions of the homestay program are generally positive among all residents of Mae Kampong, but there are definitely noticeable differences in the level of enthusiasm based on where in the village one resides. The reason for this is the heavy geographical concentration of homestays. Of the six hamlets (*pang*) that make up Mae Kampong, the two closest to the village temple and nearby natural attractions account for 18 of the 24 homestays. Thus, despite containing only about 10% of the Mae Kampong's households, these two *pang* (one of which is the former headman's base) account for three-quarters of the village's homestays.

Attitudes toward tourism also differ between those who work directly with tourists and those who do not. The primary beneficiaries of homestay tourism include participating homeowners, local tour guides, dancers, musicians, members of the tourism committee (who collectively receive 10% of tourism profits), and producers of items sold to tourists such as rattan furniture, herbal tea pillows, coffee, and wild orchids. The individuals who receive the greatest benefits from tourism are the chairman of the tourism committee (who receives 25% of profits), and the handful of landowners whose land is rented by Flight of the Gibbon. Overall, one-third of all households in Mae Kampong now work directly with tourists. For the remaining households, tourism is also viewed favorably, but to a lesser extent. Despite efforts by community leaders to communicate the role played by tourism in generating revenues for the cooperative fund, not to mention the "community development" and "social welfare" funds that provide services for the entire community, residents who do not work directly with homestay tourists or one-day excursionists tend to downplay the importance of homestays while also complaining about insufficient access to the direct benefits of tourism. On a related note, a small number of residents living in the *pang* nearest to the Flight of the Gibbon location implied that despite having to deal disproportionately with costs such as worsening crowds, noise, and waste, they enjoy poorer access, in practice, to community funds than residents of other *pang* who host homestay guests or work with tourists in other capacities.

Although participation in the homestay program is theoretically open to anyone in the village, the ability of families to operate a homestay depends on socio-economic position. The implementation of uniform

certification criteria throughout Thailand was a necessary step in ensuring predictable levels of convenience and hygiene for homestay visitors. The tradeoff, however, is that poor villagers generally do not possess what is considered by government-appointed homestay assessors as “well-proportioned housing” (item 1.1 of the MOTS certification standards). As multiple authors have suggested (Leksakundilok & Hirsch, 2008; Smits, 2011), operating a certified homestay in Thailand requires hosts to purchase appropriate bedding and kitchenware, renovate homes to ensure that guests have their own private space for sleeping, install Western toilets and hot water tanks, and incur higher gas and electricity costs. Obviously, these costs discourage the participation of poor families. When asked why they do not participate in the homestay program, several informants confirmed that they lacked the financial resources to make the modifications to their homes necessary for official homestay certification. In any case, now that the number of homestays in Mae Kampong has been capped at 24, even those with the means to start and run a homestay will find themselves temporarily unable to participate. The end result of all these discrepancies in capabilities, resources, and access to benefits is that the successful expansion of homestay tourism – while generally applauded within the community and legitimately held up as a showcase for fairness vis-à-vis other rural tourism destinations – has also widened social divisions, thereby undermining the community cohesion so crucial for CBT.

Conclusion

In response to greater demands for alternative forms of tourism among international tourists and an emerging domestic middle class, many

rural communities in Thailand have initiated CBT projects aimed at minimizing the problems associated with conventional tourism. A central element of CBT in Thailand, as with some other middle-income Asian countries like China, Malaysia, and Vietnam, is the availability of homestays. Homestays allow rural societies with limited economic options to utilize their homes and the rural settings in which they reside to earn income. At a more theoretical level, homestays in Thailand, like other commercial homes, call into question prevailing binary distinctions between “the public hotel and the private home, home and away, commercial and non-commercial, commodification and authenticity, work and home” (Lynch, McIntosh, & Tucker, 2009, p. 14). Thus, despite being neglected in the tourism literature, homestay tourism in middle- and low-income countries such as Thailand merits greater attention.

This paper highlights the importance of homestay tourism to the overall CBT landscape in Thailand and argues that while success is indeed possible for rural communities, the achievement of this success is not only rare and fraught with multiple challenges, but is also restricted by forces and changes unleashed by that very success. Mae Kampong is an excellent case study on successful homestay tourism, and the dilemmas that success begets, because it demonstrates that success is possible with the right combination of leadership, external support, community participation, and the fair (if not entirely equal) distribution of benefits. Mae Kampong also, however, illustrates that the successful growth of homestay tourism, while appreciated by members of the community for its creation of net benefits, comes at the price of diminished material authenticity (in the minds of tourists, at least), greater reliance on tourism, and reduced social cohesion and equity.

This paper confirms the findings of quantitative surveys conducted previously on homestay tourism in Thailand. For example, in their survey of income distribution in Mae Kampong and two other CBT villages, Untong et al. (2006, p. 72) found that the “the income gap between rich and poor has widened since tourism was introduced in the village”, mostly because the wealthiest villagers are “more experienced in running businesses and have more capital to invest in souvenirs, accommodation, food, and transport services than do other villagers”. In another study on the effects of price increases on income generation and distribution in Mae Kampong, Suriya (2010) discovered that the income gains from tourism were highest among the top quintile but negligible for the bottom 40% of village residents. While the qualitative data on which the current paper is based revealed an overall positive opinion toward homestay tourism among all groups in Mae Kampong, it also uncovered slightly different levels of support and enthusiasm based on perceptions of unequal access to direct benefits. In terms of the erosion of authenticity that comes with success, Cole (2008) argues that cultural tourist destinations in Thailand that modernize risk losing their “primitive” appeal, while Rigg and Ritchie (2002) point out that, in the context of indigenous minority communities, the tourism industry values tradition but ironically generates the funds that enable people to embrace modernity.

Aside from the dilemmas discussed throughout the paper, there are additional challenges and tradeoffs that Mae Kampong and other homestay communities must navigate in order to continue succeeding in the future. One challenge is the entry of outside businesses such as Flight of the Gibbon and private accommodation lodges in or near the

village. Not only do such private businesses contradict the communal and cooperative nature of the current homestay tourism model, but they also threaten to divert workers away from the village’s homestay program: for instance, 4 out the 14 or so local guides who worked with homestay visitors as recently as 2009 now work for Flight of the Gibbon. The marketing efforts of private businesses in the area will also reduce the community’s ability to project a cohesive image in tourist advertisements. Another challenge is the uncertainty over whether there will be enough interest among future generations to continue offering a form of tourism that, by definition and scope, promises modest returns and incremental growth. As the material aspirations of Thais grows with each generation, it is unclear whether homestay tourism will receive the same level of support and investment of time as it did during the past decade. Migration to urban areas and the rapid decline of fertility rates throughout Thailand have also led to the aging of Mae Kampong’s population: since 2007, the percentage of village residents aged between 20 and 49 has fallen from 50% to 36% (Pupphavesa, Panpiemras, & Anushitworawong, 2007, p. 145; RDIC, 2013). Community leaders expressed concern about these issues, and admitted that it may prove difficult to convince young village residents to “stay on the farm”, so to speak.

Stepping back from the specific case of Mae Kampong, it is also worth asking whether homestays are worth the risks or even necessary for communities to pursue CBT. Several critics believe the answer to these question is no, claiming that forcing hosts and guests to live together creates spatial, social, and psychological impacts such as “crowdedness, confusion, anxiety, ambiguity, privacy loss and degradation of quality of family life” (Oranratmanee,

2011, p. 46). Others argue that homestays offer international visitors only a false sense of authenticity because the inability of guests and hosts to speak a common language makes interactions fleeting and superficial (Dolezal, 2011; Leksakundilok & Hirsch, 2008). Notwithstanding these concerns, homestay hosts in Mae Kampong stated in interviews that interactions with both international and Thai guests are enjoyable and provide memorable moments. The language barrier was indeed mentioned often, but it was not enough of a problem to diminish the value of participating in the homestay program. More importantly, homestays are what distinguish villages like Mae Kampong from the many other rural communities visited briefly by tourists for photo or shopping opportunities. In other words, staying overnight in a rural community that still functions as a living, functioning village independent of tourism is a fundamentally different experience than dropping in for part of the day. For these reasons, Mae Kampong will likely continue to promote its homestay program despite ongoing challenges and the dilemmas created by its success.

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