

Adaptation of Indigenous Traditional Performance to a Tourism Entertainment: A Case Study of Hmong People in Ban Mae Sa Mai, Thailand

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Abstract

The Hmong are the second largest hilltribe group in Thailand. They migrated from China to the northern part of Thailand today during the nineteenth century. The Hmong have their own unique culture. Now they often use culture to promote tourism. Some of them live in Ban Mae Sa Mai, a Hmong community in Chiang Mai which is known for its traditional culture performance, handicrafts, and costumes. The Hmong in this community demonstrated traditional shows for visitors. The shows are only available with a request in advance. On this note, the purpose of this study is to explore the Hmong traditional culture shows for the tourists. Focusing on the adaptation process occurred between the original version of this traditional performance and the one presented to the tourists. The research objective that will be discussed is to identify and explore the adaptation process through selected elements in the Hmong shows presented to the tourists as a commercial art piece. It is qualitative research with an emphasis on observation, interview and video recording. This study uses Poetic Method by Aristotle as instruments to select elements in the shows for data analysis and uses Cohen's contrariety of ethnic tourism to explain the changes in the ethnic shows.

Keywords:

Indigenous traditional performance, tourism entertainment, Hmong Mae Sa Mai, indigenous culture, Aristotle's Poetics

1 INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that tourism is a true driving force of economic growth in Thailand. In 2019, before the wide spread of COVID-19, the receipt from the international tourists who came to Thailand was more than 51,000 million USD and even, during the COVID-19 crisis, the receipt in 2020 was over 8,900 million USD (National Statistical Office, 2021). It amounted to about 2 percent of Thailand's GDP in that year.

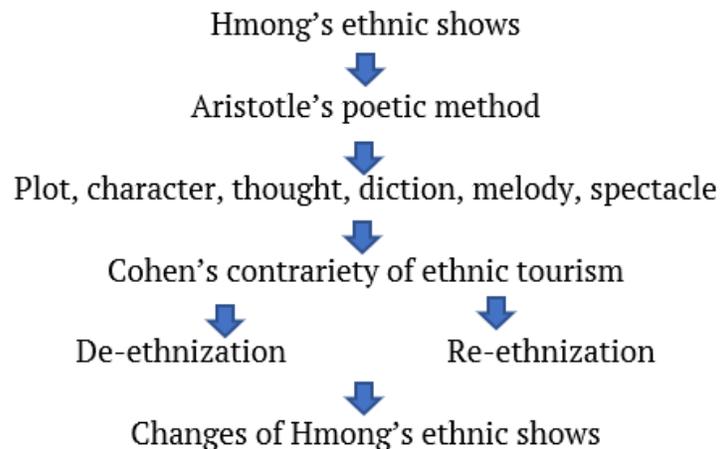
Chiang Mai, a province in the northern part of Thailand, is one of the most popular tourist destinations. In 2020, tourism amounted to about 8.8% of Chiang Mai's GPP (Maung Chiang Mai District Office, 2020). Its easy-going lifestyle and rich cultures attract people from around the world every year. In 2020, more than 2 million people came to visit Chiang Mai (Maung Chiang Mai District Office, 2020). There are many remarkable Lanna-style temples in the city center and, when going to rural areas, the tourists can visit communities of indigenous people. Each of them has their own unique culture. As such the indigenous people play an important role in promoting cultural tourism in Chiang Mai. Since the 1970s ethnic tourism in Thailand has become increasingly popular among foreign visitors which, in effect, made concerned parties, including the government and travel agencies, put more effort in promoting it (Cohen, 2012). Tourism, in some aspects, undoubtedly benefits ethnic communities. It generates incomes for the local people and encourages them to preserve their cultural identity. Nevertheless, tourism, at the same time, also brings changes to the communities. Some of them, such as, the deterioration of natural environments, crimes, and consumerism, are undesirable. In many cases, ethnic people commodify their culture for money to the point that that culture becomes devoid of any meanings. Moreover, some of the indigenous people decide to imitate the lifestyle of the visitors.

Hmong is one of the indigenous groups in Chiang Mai. They were originally in China and, due to political conflicts around 3,000 years ago, migrated to settle in mountainous areas in the northern part of Thailand today. Ban Mae Sa Mai is a Hmong community in Maerim, a district that is 30 kilometers away from the city center. They live in the Doi Suthep – Pui mountain. In 2016, there were 167 households in the area. The whole population was 1,131. 622 of them were males and 572 of them were females. 56% of them went to Thai schools and colleges. 64% of them earned their living through agriculture and jobs that were related to it (Kanjanatarakul & Kuson, 2018). Due to the cold weather in the mountain, they are a main producer of agricultural products including strawberries. Lately some of them started to run homestay business in the community (Jingjing & Onkam, 2021).

This was clearly an attempt to take part in Chiang Mai’s booming tourism, which was a fast-growing economic section. To entertain the tourists, Hmong people at the village offered them what this study calls “indigenous traditional performance” or “ethnic shows”. These were shows that imitated the Hmong lifestyle or practices in the past. The goal of the performance was to let the tourists experience “authentic” Hmong lifestyle. If the tourists wanted to see the shows, they needed to make a request in advance.

Nevertheless, as these shows were offered in a new context, changes and adaptations inevitably occurred. The objective of this study was to identify and explore the adaptation process through selected elements in the Hmong shows presented to the tourists as a commercial art piece. The area of study was the Hmong community in Ban Mae Sa Mai, Chiang Mai. The authors believed that this study would deepen the understanding of concerned parties outside the community of the effects of tourism on ethnic culture. At the same time, it would help people in the community to understand and find ways to deal with the effects of tourism.

The element of the ethnic shows to be selected for data analysis are based on the elements of performance proposed in Aristotle’s Poetics: plot, character, thought, diction, melody and spectacle, while the framework used in this paper to explain the changes of the ethnic shows as the result of tourism comes from Cohen’s contrariety of ethnic tourism (2012). The theoretical framework of the study can be illustrated as follows:



2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to scope the elements in the traditional performance which will be the subject of analysis, the authors use Aristotle’s Poetic Method as a framework. Wirunrak (2014) summarizes the elements of drama according to Aristotle’s Poetics as follows:

1. Plot: the arrangement of events in the story

2. Character: a figure in the story
3. Thought: the theme that the story tries to convey through dialogues and actions
4. Diction: word choice that the author uses to express feelings and thought
5. Song: music, singing and poetry reading
6. Spectacle: visual elements including the set, costumes, and props

Mahasarinan (2022) adapts the above framework and proposes the following elements as things to consider when making a criticism on performance: text, character, acting, stage direction, space, set, costume and lighting. Similarly, Saengdaeng (2018) proposes the following components as a focus for an analysis of dancing arts: designing of the show, casting, dancing style, sounds, display equipment, costume, the display area, and lighting. As these materials show, Aristotle's framework is influential and can be used as an approach to analyze various kinds of performance.

Another concept that is related to this study is "cultural tourism". It is a type of tourism activity that many academics give a definition. According to the National Culture Committee (2007), cultural tourism is a kind of tourism activity which focuses on man-made attractions. It aims both to entertain the tourists and make them understand cultures and societies that are different from theirs. This kind of tourism can help encourage the preservation of local cultures. In the same way, Krachangmek (2018) defines cultural tourism as a tourism activity that informs the tourists about the historical and cultural significance of a particular place and an object. It aims to increase the tourists' understanding of the process of social development and lifestyle of people in different periods. The two definitions above describe cultural tourism in a positive tone.

However, not all academics seem to agree. Mousavi et al. (2016, p. 74) argue that: Cultural tourism is not merely associated with visiting monuments and sites, which is the traditional view of cultural tourism, it also includes consuming the way of life in different destinations. In other words, cultural tourism is not just about consuming cultural products of the past; it also deals with contemporary way of life and culture of people. Accordingly, this view of cultural tourism, to some extent, moves in harmony with the current issue of globalization and the inevitable process of commodification associated with it. It is believed that cultural tourism or tourism in general, plays an important role in diminishing local identity of communities considering the very nature of tourism development dictates that commodities should be presented to tourists in exchange of economic benefits. Furthermore, considering the contemporary pattern of cultural consumption among cultural tourists explained before, this commodification process associated with tourism

development does not limit to physical products, but the elements of everyday life of locals as well.

From this perspective, cultural tourism can have a negative impact on local people. It encourages the process of commodification which can undermine the identity of local people. There are also many studies on the effects of cultural tourism on indigenous cultures. Cohen (2012) argues that cultural tourism always leads to two self-contradictory outcomes. Firstly, it initiates the process of de-ethnization which results in the severance of ethnic cultural attractions from the ordinary life. The attractions are adapted to serve a new purpose for a new audience in a new context outside the original ethnic group. Secondly, it encourages the process of re-ethnization which results in the revival of ethnic cultural attractions to create a sense of “authenticity”, which the tourists are looking for.

Cohen’s explanation is in line with many indigenous studies around the world. Thuy & Santasombat (2013) witnessed the process of de-ethnization that occurred in the Yao community in Vietnam. They maintained that local people commodified their cultural identities to attract the tourists. They performed rituals out of the usual seasons. Dances that were naturally performed in the past were put on the stage. In effect, these practices lost their original values. The Yao people, nevertheless, also re-ethnized their cultures by starting to wear traditional costumes again in order to showcase their identity. Tamakloe (2011) conducted research on the effects of tourism on indigenous people in Boabeg-Fiema, Ghana. He found that tourism made teenagers in the communities imitate western fashion and the ways to season local dishes were changed to suit the taste of the tourists. At the same time, people in the communities knew that they needed to preserve their cultural identities to attract visitors. Xuan & Ngan (2020) studied the impacts of tourism on indigenous people in the southern part of Vietnam. They found that cultural tourism motivated local people to preserve their identities but there were also teenagers who imitated the lifestyle of people from the outside.

Song & Yuan (2019) did a study on the effects of tourism on traditional music of Song people. They maintained that Song people translated some of their songs to Mandarin, but tourism also made more people want to study Song music. Similarly, a study on Mah Meri people in Malaysia showed that although the indigenous people maintained that their wedding was still conducted in an authentic, traditional way, there were several notable changes that both the researchers and some local people confirmed. The travel agents added some activities in the ceremony to make it more dramatic and boat-like wooden crafts were used as a decoration though they were originally used in a healing ceremony (Chan, 2018).

The results of studies in Thailand were rather similar. Punwun (2020) maintained that cultural tourism in the Lahu community in Chiang Mai caused the revival of Lahu music, but it was also played alongside several Lanna musical instruments which people from the other areas were more familiar with. These results were in line with documentary research done by Assawarangseekul (2022). This study showed that cultural tourism made indigenous people feel proud of themselves and value their identity. In many cases, it encouraged people to preserve some of their cultural practices. Nevertheless, tourism also made local people more closely contact with the outsiders. The interactions between them often led to imitation and commodification in which the local people performed a cultural show outside its original context and as such the show looked “authentic” only on the surface value.

All these studies proved that Cohen’s proposal was sound. In the case of Hmong in Ban Mae Sa Mai, there was development research by Lilapattana et al. (2011) on how to develop a homestay business in the community. However, there seemed to be no studies on the effects of cultural tourism on the community and there were definitely no studies on the adaptation of ethnic shows for cultural tourism. It is the gap that this study tries to address.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

This study was qualitative research. The authors purposely selected concerned parties who took part in arranging Hmong ethnic shows as the participants. There were two key informants. One of them was the head of the community and the other was the director of the Hmong Local Wisdom Learning Center (this center is open to the public). There were six causal informants. They were musicians and players who performed indigenous traditional performance for tourists. The shows recorded by the authors were performed by these participants.

3.2 Research Procedure

The following is the procedure of the study which took approximately 2 years:

3.2.1 Preparation and documentary research (2 months)

- The authors consulted related documents and studies on indigenous tradition and tourism with an emphasis on the impact of cultural tourism on indigenous culture.

- The authors consulted materials concerning the background of Hmong, Ban Mae Sa Mai. This was also aimed to find gaps in previous studies.

- The authors identified the research objective. From the documentary research, the authors saw that there were no studies on the impact of tourism on Hmong people in Ban Mae Sa Mai. There were also no studies on traditional performance of Hmong in this community. Hence, the authors decided to set the impact of cultural tourism on Hmong traditional performance as the objective of the study.

3.2.2 Data collection (1 year)

- Observation
- Interview with the participants
- Recording of the Hmong traditional shows

3.2.3 Data analysis (6 months)

- Analyzing the data according to the research's framework

3.2.4 Writing the report (4 months)

3.3 Research Instruments

3.3.1 Non-participant observation

The authors went to the study area to observe its social contexts and daily lifestyle of people in the community. During the first fieldtrip, the authors made a contact with the head of the community to ask him for a permission to do this study.

3.3.2 Unstructured interview

The authors did an unstructured interview with the participants to gain information about the background of the community, their lifestyle and their traditional performance. As some of the participants did not frequently make a contact with people from other areas, the unstructured interview helped put them at ease and it was flexible so the interview could cover a wide range of topics.

3.3.3 Video recording

The authors recorded the Hmong traditional performance for data analysis. All of the shows were recorded in the same day.

3.4 Data Collection

The authors did a documentary research concerning the background of this study, and went to the study area to do a survey and inform the head of the community about this study in 2020. The interview and the recording took place between 2021 and 2022.

4 Results and Discussion

The study found that the Hmong traditional performance was divided into 7 shows. The first show was Qeej. It was a kind of reed pipe. It consists of a wooden wind chest, with a long horizontal tapering neck ending in a mouth hole. The instrument was often used to showcase Hmong culture as it was showed in the Highland People Discovery Musuem in the city center of Chiang Mai. Hmong people usually played this instrument as a way to greet visitors. If the visitors could play Qeej, both parties would play together. This activity was meant to build their relationship. Hmong people also used Qeej during the funeral. It was believed that the sound of qeej would carry the spirit of the dead to heaven. Thus, the qeej player would be at the funeral from the first day to the last day. Qeej is different from other kinds of reed pipe or Kaen as it has no notes. The player must remember them by himself.

The player who performed for the authors learned how to play Qeej from his grandfather and his father. Now he was the only one in the community who played Qeej. In terms of thought, the show lost some of its original function. Although it could still be considered a greeting, it no longer performed its original social functions. There was no attempt to build a relationship through the show. The player did not ask the audience whether they could play Qeej. The show also did not do a spiritual service as when it was played in the funeral. There were no notable changes in terms of music though as the show ended in less than 3 minutes, one suspected that this was a shorter version of the original practice. In terms of spectacles, the player dressed in the Hmong traditional costume but with western-style shoes. One remarkable change was in the materials used to create this Qeej. The instrument was normally made of bamboo but the one that the participant used in the performance that the authors witnessed was made of metal and PVC. The player took a bow at the end of the show.



Figure 1: Qeej Show

Source: The authors

The second show was Hmong singing. The singer started the show by making a Thai greeting (wai) and then introduced himself in Hmong language. He was 81 years old. He began singing Hmong songs when he was 10 years of age. The theme of the recorded song was about the unrealistic expectation of some outsiders towards the Hmong community. Some of them hoped to find clean air and beautiful nature in the village. Nevertheless, when they were there, they would find that life in this village was rather mundane. They did farming which produced similar products like many other villages did. There were less and less agricultural areas and only old people were left in the village as attractive, healthy young people went to find jobs in the city center. Therefore, some visitors were bound to feel disappointed. The song and the word choice in the lyrics clearly addressed the outsiders. As in the first show, the spectacle of the show was the traditional costume that the singer put on top of a western-style shirt. It was notable that the singer seemed to be more relaxed while talking to another Hmong than while singing. The song duration was 3 minutes.



Figure 2: Singing of a Hmong Song

Source: The authors

The third show was nae show. Nae was a type of flute. The player was 72 years old. He started playing it when he was young. At first, he played nae to flirt with the ladies. In the past, Hmong people often played nae when they were broken-hearted. There was a custom 50 years ago that when a man was disappointed in love, he would come out of his house and play nae at midnight. After hearing nae, in the morning, the elders would visit that young man to cheer him up and tell him to move on.

Although the music in the recorded show was traditional, the player did not look relaxed. The show was very short. It ended in 1 minute. Like the other shows, the player dressed in the Hmong costume.



Figure 3: Nae Show

Source: The authors

The fourth show was brass wedge show. The musician whistled at and scratched the wedge to create musical sound. The musician in this case was a 71-year-old woman. She started playing brass wedge when she was 15. She started playing it to express her grief over the loss of her mother. It was her way to wordlessly open her heart to the nature. When she was a teenager, she also played the brass wedge to communicate with men who came to flirt with her.

In the past, Hmong people played brass wedge to get the attention of the opposite sex. The young man would come to the young woman's house and stay at the side of the house that the young woman was. Then the man would play the wedge so the woman would know that he was here. The man always made sure that the sound of the wedge was almost imperceptible so the parents of the woman would not know that he came to flirt with their daughter. Sometimes if the woman was interested in the man, she would whistle at the wedge as well to communicate with him. They did this because, in the past, according to Hmong culture, men were not allowed to touch women who were not their family members. Except during the Hmong's new year festival, young men were also not allowed to talk with young women. If they broke these rules, the parents of the women could ask them to pay compensation. As such the brass wedge played an important role in helping

young people to find life partners. Nonetheless, today there were only senior people who knew how to play it.

For the recorded show, as in the past, the brass wedge's music was very soft. In terms of spectacle, the female musician dressed in the Hmong costume. Like the other performers, she did not seem to be relaxed while playing.



Figure 4: Brass Wedge Show

Source: The authors

The fifth show was sword dancing. The dancer was 45 years old. He said that he learned how to use the sword not to fight with anyone but to protect his family and his fields from robbers. Sword trainers would decide to train or not to train someone based on their personality. They looked for someone who was calm and peace-loving since they did not want people to use their arts to hurt anyone. Now sword dancing is not practiced in order to fight anyone, but it is considered an exercise. The dancer in the picture was the only one in the community who knew how to do sword dancing because modern technology offered people a lot of other options to protect themselves.

The dancer did the sword dancing in the Hmong costume and western-style shoes. The sound of the sword went through the air and the dancer's movements created a spectacle that was very powerful. The dance took about 30 seconds.



Figure 5: Sword Dancing

Source: The authors

The sixth show was top spinning. It was and still is a recreational activity that is popular among Hmong people. The top was made of wood. Normally, while playing, each player will try to make their top spin as fast and if possible. Sometimes, when there are two players. They would spin their tops at the same time and make them clash. When the top of one player tips the top of the other player over, that player is the winner.



Figure 6: Top Spining

Source: The authors

The seventh show was leaf whistling. In the past, the senior members of the community would teach the younger generation how to do leaf whistling

as the practice had many practical functions. Since young men were not allowed to talk with young women who were not their family members, the young people could communicate through leaf whistling. Hmong people also used leaf whistling for hunting. They whistled at the leaf to send a signal to their hunting companions and let them know their positions. Sometimes they imitated natural sounds through leaf whistling to make wild animals come out from their hiding places. The Hmong also did leaf whistling to express their feelings. This practice let them show the nature how they were feeling.

As the wedge show, the sound volume of leaf whistling was rather soft. There were no special spectacles except the Hmong costume that the musician wore. The show was very short. It took less than 30 seconds.



Figure 7: Leaf Whistling

Source: The authors

All of the performers insisted that their shows were authentic, and the shows truly reflected the traditional practices of the Hmong people. Nevertheless, the authors noticed several significant changes and adaptations. This does not mean that the shows were “fake” or there were deceptions involved. In fact, changes and adaptations were inevitable, wittingly, or not. As Worthen (1997, p. 9) points out, “the work is always absent”, meaning due to its ephemeral nature, any original shows materialize at that moment and then disappear forever. Even if there are recordings of the original shows, there are several elements that are irrecoverable, including the reactions of the audience which can have a great impact on the dynamics of the performance. In the case of Hmong traditional performance, things are more complicated. As there are no recordings or even pictures of the original practices. All that we have are some fragmented narratives from people who

witnessed these practices. It also seems reasonable to assume that even in the past there were various ways to perform each show.

When any cultural shows are offered to the tourists, they are materialized in a new context and there are always elements that need to be reinvented. Furthermore, the new context undoubtedly has an impact on the shows. In the case of Hmong traditional performance, many practices, such as leaf whistling and nae playing, were no longer done in people's daily life. Like people in other areas, Hmong people today communicated through mobile phones and social media. Unlike in the past when people played nae to satisfy their inner feelings and things happened naturally, now all the shows were staged. A noticeable effect of this was that the performers looked self-conscious and even nervous. It might be due to the lack of practice as the COVID-19 crisis had prevented the tourists from visiting the village for a long period of time. Under the gaze of the authors, the performers might feel like characters on the stage and as such they seemed to experience stage anxiety. It might explain why some of the shows were very short. The presence of the tourists also had an impact on the thought in the Hmong song. The song in the recording clearly aimed to communicate with the outsiders. In other words, the thought and diction of the Hmong song was adapted to a theme that the visitors could feel related. For the spectacle elements, the most noticeable adaptation happened in the terms of costume. All the performers dressed in the Hmong costume, but the authors observed that actually people in the village no longer wore this kind of costume in daily life. They instead dressed in western-style clothes rather like those of people in the city center. Some of the performers wore western-style shoes and shirts underneath the traditional one. Some props were made of metal and PVC rather than bamboo.

In a larger picture, like many previous studies, this study again maintained that ethnic tourism clearly had a great impact on indigenous culture and identity. The adaptations and changes in Hmong performance were in line with the argument of Cohen concerning the contrariety of ethnic tourism (2012). According to Cohen, ethnic tourism usually leads to two contradictory processes, namely, the process of re-ethnization and the process of de-ethnization. The process of re-ethnization happens when indigenous people realize that their unique culture has market value, and many tourists want to experience "authentic" indigenous culture. As a result, indigenous people revive some customs and practices that have been neglected for a long time. They feel proud of their culture and look for ways to preserve and promote it. On the other hand, ethnic tourism also encourages the process of de-ethnization. To promote tourism, the indigenous people start to change, adapt or even reinvent their culture. They might perform a ritual out of season or perform an activity which used to have a social function, such as healing or worshiping, only to entertain the tourists.

In effect, these rituals and practices lose their original meaning. In many cases, people in the community, especially adolescents, see the cultures of the outsiders as superior and start to imitate them to the point that they ignore their own way of life. There are also cases in which indigenous people perform or dress as people from other indigenous groups do. In this case, preserving one's identity is beside the point. The priority here is to make the tourists feel as if they are experiencing something "authentic".

Cohen's argument can also be used to explain the adaptation process of the Hmong shows. It was clear that the process of re-ethnization took place with the Hmong shows that the authors recorded. Most of the shows, perhaps except the top spinning, were practices that Hmong people no longer practiced in their daily life. They neither flirted through traditional instruments nor used it in hunting. In effect, only a handful of people could do traditional performance. Most of them were in a retired age. Only the top pleyer was a teenager. However, due to cultural tourism, these traditional shows became attractive once more. The performers certainly felt proud when they maintained that they were the only ones who knew how to do traditional shows as they now knew these skills could be very valuable assets. This was a reason all of the performers dressed in the Hmong costume and insisted that what they were performing was "authentic". If cultural tourism continued to be an important source of incomes for the villagers, it is likely that more people would start learning to do the traditional shows.

On the other hand, the process of de-ethnization also occurred with the Hmong shows. All the shows were exclusively for tourism business. Their main function was to make money by offering the tourists a piece of their "authentic" tradition. The shows no longer served the community or created a sense of oneness as in the past when the senior members would come together to cheer up young musicians who were broken-hearted. Some performers wore both traditional and western-style costumes. Their song was written for the outsiders. They did the Thai greeting (wai) and took a bow to thank the audience. In other words, to make the tourists feel related or for the sake of convenience, Hmong people assimilated some practices from other cultures into their traditional performance. The practicality, convenience and business-like nature of the shows also contributed to fact that the shows' time durations were very short.

5 Conclusions

This study was qualitative research. The data were collected through a documentary research, observation, interview, and video recording. The subject of analysis was the traditional performance that Hmong people in Ban Mae Sa Mai, Chiang Mai, Thailand, used to promote tourism in their community. The authors used Aristotle's Poetic Method as a framework to

select elements in the indigenous shows for analysis. There were 7 kinds of performance in this study: the Qeej show, Hmong singing, nae show, brass wedge show, top spinning, and leaf music. Although the performers insisted that the shows were “authentic” and traditional, the authors noted several changes and adaptations in the shows. Tourism was clearly a reason of these changes and adaptations. In the past, these activities were the ones that people practiced in their daily life because of their practical functions, such as finding a life partner or hunting, but now they were performed before the audience from other areas as an entertainment. The presence of the outsiders made the performers nervous, and the shows were rather short. They did the Thai greeting and took a bow to thank the audience. The thought and diction in the Hmong song was written to communicate with the tourists. The music and song were performed in Hmong language with traditional instruments to create a sense of “authenticity”. The main spectacle of the shows was the traditional costume, which Hmong people no longer wore in their daily life. The costume was meant to make the shows “authentic”. These changes and adaptations were a result of what Cohen calls the process of re-ethnization and the process of de-ethnization. Hmong people revived their traditional practices to promote cultural tourism. They were selling their “authentic” culture but at the same time they borrowed things from the cultures of the tourists to make it easier for them to feel related to the shows. These traditional shows were there exclusively for the enjoyment of the outsiders. Here the severance of ethnic cultural attractions from the ordinary life of the Hmong seemed to happen.

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