

Research Article

Study on Cultural Identity and Tourism Transformation in Santichon Village

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Santichon Village, a Yunnanese Chinese community in northern Thailand, from a socio-cultural and economic perspective. Originally established by migrants fleeing political unrest in China via Myanmar or Laos, Santichon was historically marginalized due to its association with statelessness and illicit economies, particularly opium cultivation. In recent decades, however, the village has transitioned into a prominent ethnic tourism destination. Against the backdrop of regional development initiatives and shifting tourism policies in northern Thailand, this study investigates how tourism serves as both a catalyst for economic restructuring and a force of cultural change. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and theories from anthropology and cultural studies, the article analyzes how residents engage in strategic cultural reconstruction to attract tourists while simultaneously reasserting ethnic identity. The research highlights the multifaceted role of tourism in transforming livelihoods, reconfiguring built environments, and reshaping symbolic practices such as language, ritual, and heritage. Santichon's tourism model—developed through cooperation among state agencies, local leaders, and external funders—demonstrates how minority communities negotiate between cultural preservation and market adaptation. While tourism has brought increased visibility, income, and infrastructural improvements, it has also introduced challenges related to cultural commodification and identity performance. This case contributes to broader debates on tourism and cultural change in Southeast Asia by showing how marginalized communities can actively reposition themselves within national and global frameworks. Ultimately, Santichon illustrates the dynamic and contested processes through which cultural heritage is not only preserved but also remade under the pressures of globalization.

Keywords

Santichon Village, Yunnanese Chinese, Cultural Identity, Northern Thailand, Tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism is no longer merely an economic sector; it has become a powerful social and cultural force that redefines how communities represent themselves, negotiate development, and imagine their futures. Across Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, cultural and rural tourism have been strategically positioned within national development agendas

as tools to generate income, reduce rural poverty, and articulate state-sanctioned narratives of cultural diversity. However, such top-down frameworks often obscure the nuanced, dynamic ways local communities respond to and engage with tourism. Far from being passive recipients of development, these communities actively participate in remaking their cul-

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tural practices, reconfiguring their social worlds, and reconstructing their identities.

This study focuses on Santichon Village, a Yunnanese community in northern Thailand in Pai District, Mae Hong Son Province. Once established as a refugee settlement for displaced Chinese soldiers and their families, Santichon was long situated on the geographic and socio-political periphery—both marginalized by national narratives and entangled in the illicit economies of the borderlands. In recent decades, however, Santichon has undergone a significant transformation. It is now promoted as a cultural tourism site, offering curated experiences of Yunnanese Chinese heritage to domestic and international visitors alike. From serving as a survival enclave to becoming a heritage village, Santichon's evolution exemplifies how peripheral communities reposition themselves in cultural commodification and development circuits.

This article examines how the emergence of tourism in Santichon has catalyzed shifts in local livelihoods, spatial configurations, and identity formations. Through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and analysis of local discourse and policy frameworks, the study investigates how residents selectively revive, reinterpret, and sometimes reinvent elements of Yunnanese culture to engage with the expectations of visitors and the imperatives of market-oriented tourism. It asks: How does tourism affect everyday life, cultural expression, and social organization in Santichon? What does it mean for a historically marginalized village to rebrand itself as a cultural destination? Furthermore, how do villagers understand, contest, or embrace these transformations?

By foregrounding the agency of local actors, this study resists the narrative of tourism as an external imposition. Instead, it situates tourism as a field of negotiation—where heritage is performed, modernity is mediated, and identity is reaffirmed and reimagined. Drawing on anthropological theories of cultural change [8, 17] and the ethnographic tradition of studying lived experience [13], this paper argues that the transformation of Santichon is not merely a response to global tourism trends but also a strategic reconfiguration of place, meaning, and belonging by the villagers themselves.

Santichon's case offers broader insights into the dynamics of tourism-driven rural transformation in borderland regions. It reveals how local communities mobilize their histories, aesthetics, and narratives to participate in the broader visibility economy, often oscillating between cultural preservation and commercial adaptation. As Thailand continues to promote tourism as a key engine of development, the experience of Santichon raises important questions about the sustainability of cultural commodification, the politics of representation, and the shifting meanings of heritage in a globalized world.

2. Literature Reviews

Cultural change has become a significant focus within

cultural studies, particularly in the context of tourism development. The first Anthropology of Tourism Conference, held in Mexico in 1974, marked a milestone by discussing the impacts of tourism on cultural change, particularly with tourism destination development. Since then, scholars from anthropology and sociology have increasingly examined how tourism reshapes cultural practices and identities. Early anthropologists, motivated to protect indigenous cultures, often perceived tourism development as inherently detrimental to local cultures and held a predominantly critical stance toward tourism.

The early evolutionary school proposed that human culture evolves universally from lower to higher forms, progressing from simplicity to complexity in a linear fashion. As leading figures in classical evolutionism, Tylor [26] and Morgan [15] laid the groundwork for early anthropological theory. Their focus on rituals, religion, material culture, and kinship systems reflected an interest in fundamental human relationships. Morgan [15], in particular, suggested that societies progress through universal stages—from savagery to barbarism to civilization—following a linear path. He also observed that indirect cultural contact often led to borrowing cultural traits, which he viewed as a manifestation of cultural decline or the fading of civilization [15]. His contribution to anthropology also included advocating for the “materialist method” in analyzing social and evolutionary processes. Boas [2] argued that culture should be examined as a dynamic interplay between internal social development and external influences, including environmental factors. This perspective marked a departure from the deterministic views of earlier evolutionists, recognizing the role of cultural areas as geographically distinct regions where specific cultural patterns are distributed. Unlike biological evolution, which involves differentiation, cultural evolution is shaped by diversity and adaptation. White [28] proposed that culture comprises technological, social, and ideological subsystems. He viewed technology as the primary driving force behind cultural evolution, with social systems and philosophical ideas functioning as extensions of technological progress. In contrast, Steward's theory of multilinear evolution sought to identify general cultural rules that transcend specific contexts [22]. Steward posited that while cultural contexts vary across time and space, similar causes tend to produce similar results [22].

Kroeber [9] offered a different perspective, suggesting that biological evolution is characterized by replacement, whereas cultural evolution is accumulative, adding layers of complexity rather than replacing existing ones. Consequently, cultural evolution can be understood as pursuing principles governing cultural transformation. This approach aligns with later empirical studies, such as those by Cohen [4] and Boissevain [3], who demonstrated that tourism could actively shape social and cultural dynamics. Cohen's research on Thailand and Boissevain's study of Malta revealed that tourism transforms local economies and reconfigures cultural identities. MacCannell's “staged authenticity” theory further

developed the discourse on tourism and cultural change [11]. He argued that tourism destinations often perform an ethnic culture to meet tourists' expectations, creating a "pseudo-culture." This performative dimension underscores how tourism can transform cultural expressions into curated spectacles, often detaching cultural practices from their original social contexts.

Chinese scholars have also made significant contributions to the study of cultural change. Rong [16] suggested that cultural change generally arises from internal cultural development or intercultural contact, resulting in cultural content or structure transformations. Shi [18] elaborated on this by noting that cultural change encompasses both material and non-material dimensions, including structural shifts and changes in cultural traits. He argued that cultural change occurs when environmental shifts prompt social members to respond innovatively, creating new cultural characteristics that gain collective recognition. Notably, cultural borrowing is often selective, as local communities do not adopt all external influences indiscriminately. Only innovations perceived as meaningful, adaptive, and practical are integrated, while those deemed irrelevant are resisted. The feasibility and predictability of cultural adaptation increase the likelihood of acceptance. Tang [25] emphasized that cultural change can be observed in shifts in livelihood patterns, dress, language, architecture, marriage practices, values, ideologies, national spirit, religious beliefs, and aesthetic orientations. Wu [29] argued that cultural change exhibits regional, ethnic, and diverse characteristics, encompassing material, ecological, spiritual, and institutional cultural dimensions.

Tourism-induced cultural change is not uniformly negative or positive but reflects a complex negotiation between preservation and adaptation. Sun [23] advocated for community involvement in tourism to preserve ethnic traditional culture. By actively participating in tourism development, communities can retain cultural continuity, highlight ethnic identity, and foster cultural preservation awareness. Similarly, Gao [7] identified ethnic cultural eco-tourism as a balanced approach that mitigates the adverse effects of commercialization while promoting cultural heritage protection. In the context of village tourism, Mao [14] analyzed the social and cultural transformations in Longsheng Ping'an Zhuang Village after tourism development. He observed that changing value orientations reshaped local identities, often reconfiguring traditional cultural practices. Likewise, Li [10] emphasized the importance of sustainable cultural tourism in ethnic communities, advocating for principles of cultural construction, community participation, and ethical engagement.

The complexity of tourism-related cultural change requires a multi-dimensional analytical framework that integrates theoretical and practical perspectives. While tourism can foster cultural resilience, it risks cultural commodification and loss of authenticity. To comprehensively understand the impacts of tourism on cultural change, it is crucial to examine the interplay between economic incentives, cultural preservation,

and local agency. In Santichon Village, for example, tourism has served as a driver of cultural revival and a force of commodification. The village's experience underscores the importance of understanding cultural change as a dynamic and context-specific process shaped by the intersection of local traditions, state policies, and global tourism trends. By synthesizing theoretical insights and empirical findings, this literature review demonstrates that tourism-driven cultural change is a multifaceted phenomenon. It highlights the importance of community agency in navigating the challenges and opportunities of tourism, offering critical perspectives on how ethnic communities like Santichon negotiate identity and cultural preservation in a rapidly globalizing world.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This research is situated within the interdisciplinary frameworks of anthropology and cultural studies, integrating ethnographic fieldwork with critical theories of identity, cultural transformation, and tourism. It investigates how cultural meanings are actively reconstituted and how local livelihoods are reorganized in Santichon Village—a Yunnanese Chinese settlement in northern Thailand that has experienced profound changes through tourism development. Rather than viewing culture as a static or homogeneous entity, this study conceptualizes it as a dynamic and contested process, continually negotiated, performed, and redefined in response to evolving structural forces and symbolic contexts.

3.1. Theoretical Perspectives

This study is grounded in the interdisciplinary traditions of anthropology and cultural studies, combining ethnographic fieldwork with critical theories of identity, cultural transformation, and tourism. It investigates how cultural meanings are reconstituted and livelihoods reorganized in Santichon Village, a Yunnanese Chinese settlement in northern Thailand that has undergone substantial transformation through tourism. In this research, culture is not treated as a fixed or static construct but rather as a dynamic process—continually negotiated, performed, and redefined in response to shifting structural and symbolic conditions.

Following Geertz's [8] interpretive approach, culture is conceptualized as a system of symbols through which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their understanding of life. This foundational perspective informs the ethnographic lens applied here, emphasizing how individuals act, interpret their actions, and construct meaning within everyday contexts. In analyzing cultural change, the study also draws on Steward's [22] theory of cultural ecology, which conceptualizes culture as an adaptive system responsive to environmental and economic transformations. Steward's focus on core institutions—technology, economy, and social organization—offers a robust framework for analyzing tourism as a structural force

that reshapes everyday life and cultural practices.

In addition, this research engages with Rosaldo's [17] critique of the detached observer model in anthropology. Rosaldo argues for acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity and the emotional, historical, and identity-based lenses they bring into the field. Accordingly, this study embraces a reflexive stance, recognizing the co-construction of ethnographic meaning between the researcher and participants. In tourism, the work is informed by Urry's [27] concept of the "tourist gaze," which emphasizes the role of visual expectation and cultural representation in shaping destinations. It also draws on MacCannell's [12] theory of "staged authenticity" to understand how cultural elements are curated and selectively performed for touristic consumption, often resulting in their commodification.

The research further builds on the ethnographic legacy of Malinowski [13], particularly his commitment to long-term, immersive fieldwork. While aware of the historical limitations of early colonial anthropology, this study retains Malinowski's methodological emphasis on sustained presence, deep engagement, and holistic understanding of social life—principles that remain vital in contemporary ethnographic research.

3.2. Methodological Approach

This research adopts a qualitative ethnographic methodology rooted in anthropological traditions that privilege depth, context, and interpretive richness over generalizability. Fieldwork was conducted in Santichon Village over six months, involving multiple visits, extended stays, and sustained immersion in everyday village life. A triangulated research design was employed, encompassing participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and visual-textual analysis, to explore the multi-layered dynamics of cultural identity, socio-economic transformation, and tourism development.

Participant observation, a cornerstone of anthropological research since Malinowski [13], was a primary method. The researcher participated in local festivals, cultural performances, and village meetings; frequented teahouses, markets, and religious sites; and observed daily interactions between residents and tourists. These observations allowed for documenting observable behaviors and nuanced shifts in space, values, and social relations. Daily field notes combined descriptive accounts with reflexive commentary, aligning with Rosaldo's [17] call for ethnographic self-awareness.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse villagers—elders, entrepreneurs, youth, and local officials—capturing intergenerational and occupational perspectives on identity, livelihood, and tourism. Interviews focused on lived experiences of cultural change, personal and collective narratives, aspirations, and concerns about the future. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded using qualitative data analysis software in Thai, Mandarin,

and local dialects. The dialogical nature of these interviews reflects Geertz's [8] notion of culture as an ongoing conversation among multiple voices.

By integrating interpretive theory with ethnographic practice, this study offers a comprehensive examination of how Santichon Village has emerged as a site of cultural continuity and transformation under the pressures and possibilities of tourism. It highlights the agency of local actors in negotiating identity, adapting to economic restructuring, and reimagining their place within Thailand's increasingly commodified and interconnected tourism landscape. It contributes to broader academic discussions on heritage, authenticity, and the cultural politics of development in contemporary Southeast Asia.

4. Main Findings

4.1. The Formation and Cultural Background of Santichon Village

Skinner [20] contends that the Chinese diaspora has played a pivotal role in Southeast Asia's economic and social development long before the emergence of modern nation-state agendas. Their influence on regional economic structures was so substantial that any analysis of Thailand's modern history would be incomplete without accounting for the position and transformation of its Chinese population. Incorporating Chinese communities into Thailand's modernization processes—mainly since the mid-twentieth century—offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics of identity formation and state-society relations. Significantly, Chinese populations residing near political and economic centers tended to assimilate more quickly. At the same time, those in rural or borderland regions, whose interactions with Thai society were primarily commercial, retained a distinct Chinese identity well into the modern era.

4.1.1. The Formation and Cultural Background of Santichon Village

The origins of Santichon Village date back to the mid-twentieth century, when it was initially established as Nanhujie Village in the Wiang Tai subdistrict of Pai District, Mae Hong Son Province. In 1950, a significant influx of Yunnanese migrants—primarily Hui Muslims—arrived in northern Thailand, seeking refuge from the upheavals of civil war in China. The formal re-establishment of the village occurred in 1992 under the leadership of Colonel Panya Thepwan, then commander of the 5th Infantry Battalion of the 7th Infantry Regiment. With the collaborative efforts of stationed soldiers and residents, the area was developed and renamed "Santichon," meaning "peaceful river." Today, Santichon comprises approximately 1,500 residents representing diverse ethnic groups, including Yunnanese, Tai Yai (Shan), Khon Muang (Lanna), and Lisu. Although Santichon and the adjacent Lisu village fall under the same administrative cluster

(Village Cluster 5), they maintain distinct local governance systems, reflecting the region's long-standing history of ethnic pluralism and layered cultural complexity.

Given the limited availability of arable lowland, most villagers engage in hillside tea cultivation, supplemented by livestock rearing—including pigs, chickens, and horses. Tea farming remains an essential livelihood and a culturally symbolic practice, representing the trans-local continuation of Yunnanese agricultural traditions. The Thai government implemented assimilation policies from the 1950s through the late 1980s to integrate Yunnanese migrants into mainstream society. These initiatives included facilitating access to Thai citizenship and encouraging enrollment in state education systems. While these measures reduced migrants' aspirations to return to China, they simultaneously allowed for legal residence and economic participation in Thailand while preserving select elements of their cultural identity.

The architectural layout of traditional Yunnanese homes in Santichon reflects a distinct spatial organization rooted in customary values. Residences are typically divided into three sections: two symmetrical bedrooms on either side and a central hall serving as a communal space for family gatherings and guest reception. At the heart of the home, ancestral tablets and ritual offerings are prominently displayed, emphasizing the community's strong adherence to ancestor worship and familial continuity. The architectural style practically adapts to the mountainous terrain while preserving traditional aesthetics. Most structures are built using earthen walls reinforced with straw and are roofed with thatch or corrugated metal—materials suited to the regional climate. Wide eaves extend outward, providing shaded outdoor areas for drying crops such as corn and cabbage, resting, and conducting informal social activities. Courtyards, typically situated on a lower elevation adjacent to the house, function as vegetable gardens and gathering spaces. Kitchens are often constructed as freestanding units connected by covered walkways but remain structurally independent from the main house. Additional auxiliary structures—such as storage barns, stables, pigsties, and chicken coops—form a comprehensive domestic compound. One villager, Artikan, reflected on the changing economic practices within the community: “The house you are staying in once had a pigsty situated right next to it. In the past, we raised pigs to meet our family's needs and generate additional income through sales. However, as I now work at a restaurant daily and my children attend school, no one can care for the pigs at home. Consequently, we ceased pig farming” [19].

This configuration of domestic space not only continues Yunnanese architectural and cultural traditions but also illustrates a creative adaptation to the environmental conditions of northern Thailand. Through these built forms, Yunnanese migrants have actively synthesized ancestral knowledge with local materials and topographies—preserving cultural identity while adjusting to new geographies and livelihoods. As such, the residential structures in Santichon offer a valuable ethno-

graphic lens into the socio-spatial organization, cultural symbolism, and everyday practices of a diasporic community navigating transnational migration and local integration.

4.1.2. Cultural Adaptation and Identity Reconstruction

Although the Thai state did not enforce an aggressive policy of assimilation, it pursued integrative strategies that encouraged the incorporation of Yunnanese Chinese communities into the national mainstream. In response, Yunnanese migrants in Santichon adopted a dual approach: strategically adapting to their new sociopolitical surroundings while actively preserving and rearticulating their cultural identity.

At the community level, efforts to sustain Yunnanese heritage were manifested in forming cultural associations, organizing tourism-oriented village festivals, and preserving symbolic cultural elements within the built environment. Traditional Chinese-style architecture, hillside tea plantations, and the retention of culinary and domestic customs collectively reinforced a sense of ethnic distinctiveness and pride. This process of cultural revival—driven by both nostalgia and pragmatic adaptation—enabled residents to collectively represent themselves within the national context, asserting their identity on their terms. Santichon thus provides a compelling case study of how diasporic communities negotiate the tension between cultural continuity and sociopolitical integration. Situated at the intersection of globalization, national policy, and local initiative, the community's approach to cultural preservation illustrates a dynamic model of identity reconstruction. Although several decades have passed since their initial migration, villagers continue to demonstrate a deep attachment to Yunnanese values and symbolic systems. While geographically distinct from Yunnan, the village's natural environment bears ecological similarities that have facilitated continuity in agricultural practices, architectural forms, and ritual observances.

Everyday aesthetics serve as powerful vehicles of identity transmission. Chinese couplets inscribed on wooden doorframes, red lanterns hanging outside teahouses, and architectural motifs inspired by vernacular northern Chinese design articulate cultural belonging in visible and effective ways. These elements are not static relics of the past but are actively maintained and subtly modified in response to Thai cultural norms and the demands of the tourism economy. Festivals such as the Lunar New Year, Qingming Festival, and Ghost Festival play a central role in affirming family values, ancestral veneration, and ethnic cohesion. These occasions are internal mechanisms for transmitting cultural memory and curated performances for external audiences. As such, they operate simultaneously as acts of remembrance and tools for generating cultural capital. Through these festivals, foundational values such as filial piety, communal solidarity, and reverence for tradition are transmitted to younger generations while attracting tourists and contributing to the village's economic sustainability. One elder reflected that these tradi-

tions are not merely remnants of the past but serve as essential reminders of cultural identity for younger generations. The elder noted that the presence of tourists, who come to experience the village's distinct cultural practices, also contributes positively to the community by reinforcing a sense of identity and pride [1].

The fusion of heritage and tourism in Santichon reflects a form of cultural resilience—the capacity of communities to adapt to change while preserving core aspects of identity. From being passive recipients of external forces, Santichon's residents have actively engaged in cultural innovation and selective preservation. In doing so, they have transformed their village into a site of cultural survival and creative production within a transnational landscape. This underscores the potential for tourism to serve as an economic driver and enable new forms of identity work, cultural continuity, and community empowerment.

4.1.3. Language, Belief, and the Symbolic Anchoring of Identity

For the Yunnanese community of Santichon Village, language is a communication tool and a crucial medium for expressing ethnic identity and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. Despite the increasing linguistic dominance of Thai in public institutions and education, Yunnanese dialects remain widely spoken within households and in community interactions. This multilingual environment—comprising Yunnanese dialects, Mandarin Chinese, and Thai—illustrates a layered linguistic strategy that simultaneously anchors cultural memory and facilitates socio-economic integration. The continued use of Yunnanese dialects reflects a deep-rooted sense of cultural continuity. At the same time, the growing prominence of Mandarin, particularly among younger generations attending local Chinese-language schools, signals an orientation toward national and transnational futures. Thai, learned primarily through formal education and state interactions, enables residents to navigate broader institutional and civic landscapes. Together, these languages form a repertoire of linguistic capital that is both effectively and practically valuable.

In Santichon, fluency in Mandarin facilitates economic mobility and cross-border commerce, particularly in the tourism and trade sectors that increasingly connect the village to China. Meanwhile, Yunnanese continues to function as the language of emotional intimacy and cultural transmission within families, reinforcing intergenerational bonds and sustaining a shared cultural worldview. In many interethnic households, it remains the first language spoken to children, even as Thai dominates the schooling system. Religious and spiritual practices further consolidate cultural identity within the village. Santichon exhibits a pluralistic and syncretic religious landscape, where Mahayana Buddhist traditions coexist with Christian influences and ancestral folk beliefs. Many households maintain domestic altars for ancestor worship, while public spaces are punctuated with shrines and

Chinese-style temples that serve as focal points for communal rituals. These practices reflect enduring cultural values such as filial piety, spiritual reciprocity, and moral continuity. Ritual offerings to kitchen gods, earth deities, and family ancestors are performed throughout the year, especially during major festivals such as the Lunar New Year and Qingming. These ceremonies not only affirm cosmological beliefs rooted in Chinese heritage but also serve to bind the community together through shared ritual cycles.

Cultural practices also link spiritual belief with ecological consciousness and livelihood rhythms. Seasonal ceremonies—such as offerings to the Earth God during planting and harvest—maintain a symbolic relationship between agricultural labor and spiritual protection. Traditional practices like chicken bone divination, used to determine auspicious timings for weddings, house construction, or travel, exemplify embodied systems of knowledge that mediate uncertainty and sustain cultural coherence. During an interview, one elder remarked that despite being far from their homeland, the community strongly believes that their ancestors and spirits continue to watch over them. The elder explained that every New Year, they offer incense and food as a form of reverence, which brings peace to their hearts and fosters harmony within their homes [21].

The case of Santichon exemplifies what Rosaldo [17] described as cultural citizenship—the right to maintain cultural differences while fully participating in the public and political life of the nation. Through language, ritual, and spatial design, the Yunnanese Chinese have transformed Santichon into more than a place of settlement. It has become a “different village,” embodying heritage, resilience, and cultural agency in the face of social change and state formation.

4.2. From Margins to Recognition

Northern Thailand's highlands are defined by rugged topography and dense forests, forming the headwaters of rivers that nourish the central plains. Covering approximately 170,000 square kilometers, the region is home to a mosaic of highland communities from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Historically, the inaccessibility of these mountainous areas hindered effective state governance, creating conditions in which opium cultivation emerged as a central livelihood. According to surveys conducted by Thailand's Narcotics Control Board in the mid-1960s, highland groups cultivated poppies across nearly 112,000 rai (approximately 179 square kilometers), producing an estimated 145,000 kilograms annually. Before the 1960s, the Thai state paid limited attention to highland agricultural practices' environmental and social implications. As forest clearing and swidden cultivation intensified, the absence of regulatory oversight or reforestation initiatives exacerbated environmental degradation. Although the cultivation and sale of opium were officially banned in 1959, enforcement proved challenging. Heroin production soon filled the void, escalating both public health concerns

and national security threats.

A significant turning point emerged through the intervention of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who shifted the state's approach from punitive suppression to developmental inclusion. Acknowledging the chronic poverty and marginalization of hill tribe communities, the King initiated agricultural replacement schemes that offered new crops, technical support, and guaranteed market access [24]. These efforts were institutionalized through highland development projects led by Prince Bhisadej Rajani in partnership with agricultural experts from Thailand and Taiwan. The projects aimed not only to eliminate opium cultivation but also to restore forest ecosystems and introduce sustainable livelihood options such as fruit and vegetable farming. Among the groups affected by these transitions were Yunnan Chinese migrants—many of whom entered Thailand via Myanmar as refugees, displaced soldiers, or transnational traders. Concentrated in remote areas like the Pai District in Mae Hong Son Province, Thai society often viewed these communities as stateless, undereducated, and entangled in illicit economies. Some Hui Chinese referred to locally as “Ho people,” played prominent roles in the regional opium economy, functioning as growers, transporters, and brokers. Their integration into highland trade networks, combined with access to armed protection—particularly before their disarmament in 1970—positioned them as key actors in transnational trafficking routes.

By the late 1970s, state-led development and narcotics suppression campaigns began to reshape the northern economy. Establishing the Central Narcotics Suppression Committee in 1976 and its subsequent coordination of law enforcement, livelihood development, and international cooperation marked a significant intensification of anti-drug efforts. Surveys conducted in 1979–1980 confirmed the continued prevalence of poppy cultivation in provinces such as Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, and Phayao, prompting more aggressive and coordinated responses. A significant milestone came with institutionalizing the Northern Highland Agricultural Development Project, which systematically promoted crop substitution and forest regeneration. These efforts were further reinforced in 2009 by the “Five Protective Walls” strategy, a multi-sectoral framework designed to prevent drug addiction through targeted interventions in schools, families, communities, border zones, and the broader society.

Yunnan Chinese communities, including the residents of Santichon, were among the beneficiaries of these structural transformations. Through participation in crop substitution programs, many households transitioned from dependence on opium to cultivating fruit orchards and engaging in tourism-related entrepreneurship. While economic diversification yielded tangible benefits, disparities persisted—particularly among refugee households relying on seasonal or migrant labor for subsistence. The shift from marginalization to recognition was not merely economic but symbolic. In earlier decades, Yunnanese migrants existed on the peripheries of the

Thai state—geographically remote, legally unrecognized, and socially stigmatized. However, their increasing participation in development programs and access to citizenship began to reverse this invisibility. More importantly, their cultural presence has gained visibility through local education, tourism, and religious expression initiatives. This emergence into the public sphere reflects an ongoing cultural reclamation and negotiation process.

The case of Santichon thus illustrates that cultural identity is not passively shaped by external forces but actively reconstructed in response to changing political, economic, and social conditions. From formerly stateless agriculturalists to recognized contributors within Thailand's pluralistic society, Santichon's transformation highlights the agency of ethnic communities in reconfiguring their place in national narratives. In this context, cultural recognition is a product of state policy and the outcome of strategic local efforts to assert visibility, legitimacy, and belonging.

4.3. From Isolation to Engagement: The Turn to Tourism in Santichon Village

The emergence of tourism in Santichon Village exemplifies the intersecting dynamics of cultural negotiation, economic restructuring, and spatial reconfiguration that have redefined many highland communities in northern Thailand over the past several decades. Once geographically remote and socially marginalized, Santichon—an ethnically Yunnanese Chinese settlement—has undergone a notable transformation from an isolated agrarian enclave into a recognized site of ethnic tourism. This shift must be situated within the broader context of regional inequality, post-1997 financial crisis development policies, and evolving imaginaries of place within a globalizing tourism economy.

As state-driven development strategies converged with market liberalization and local entrepreneurship, Santichon began repositioning itself from a periphery to a cultural and economic exchange node. Tourism has not only introduced alternative sources of livelihood for villagers but has also acted as a catalyst for reimagining cultural identity, reshaping community dynamics, and reconfiguring everyday practices. Thus, the village's transformation reflects more than a change in economic activity; it marks a broader reorientation from social seclusion to active participation in regional and global representation, mobility, and development circuits.

4.3.1. The Emergence of Tourism in Northern Thailand

In the two decades following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Mae Hong Son Province experienced a significant shift in its economic composition. Between 1997 and 2017, its Gross Provincial Product (GPP) grew from 4.398 billion to 13 billion baht—an increase of nearly threefold. Agricultural sectors—including hunting, forestry, fisheries, and mining—saw a fourfold increase in output, while non-agricultural sectors such

as industry, construction, trade, hospitality, education, and healthcare also expanded. Despite the province's predominantly rural character—with over 90% of the population residing outside municipal zones and more than 60% still engaged in agriculture—the growing significance of tourism-related service sectors signaled an emergent economic reorientation. Although Mae Hong Son accounted for just 4.2% of northern Thailand's total tourist arrivals in 2018, the province's ecological landscapes and multiethnic cultural tapestry positioned it as a latent high-value destination. Among its districts, Pai stands out as a paradigmatic case of tourism-led transformation. Historically a quiet town populated predominantly by Shan (Tai Yai) communities with cultural affinities to Myanmar, Pai's tourism development unfolded across three key phases [5, 6].

The first phase, beginning in the 1980s, was characterized by the arrival of international backpackers. These travelers, drawn by Pai's serenity, affordability, and unspoiled natural environment, contributed to an informal, low-impact form of tourism that aligned with countercultural and "authenticity-seeking" ideals. During this period, the town remained outside mainstream tourist circuits, sustained by word-of-mouth recommendations and alternative guidebooks.

The second phase (1987–2004) saw a marked increase in domestic Thai tourism. Infrastructure and road access improvements made Pai more reachable, leading to the growth of small guesthouses, cafés, and artisanal shops. The town's image shifted from a hidden enclave to a niche retreat for urban Thai tourists searching for a pastoral escape.

The third phase (2005–2009) witnessed rapid commercialization, catalyzed by popular Thai films, media coverage, and social media exposure. Pai was increasingly reimagined as a romantic, bohemian landscape—an idealized rural idyll that catered to middle-class aesthetics and leisure practices. This shift expanded the tourist demographic and repositioned the town as a cultural commodity. By this point, tourism had become more than a sector of economic activity; it was a powerful cultural force, reshaping spatial imaginaries, everyday practices, and local identities.

4.3.2. Santichon and the Village Tourism Model

Santichon Village exemplifies a state-supported model of village tourism in northern Thailand, where ethnic heritage is strategically mobilized as both an economic resource and a symbolic capital. Located near Pai in Mae Hong Son Province, the village was founded initially by Yunnanese Chinese migrants fleeing political upheaval in China and Myanmar during the mid-20th century. For decades, Santichon remained marginalized—politically excluded, economically underdeveloped, and socially stigmatized—due in part to its association with statelessness and historical involvement in the regional opium trade.

The village's transformation into a tourist destination began in the early 2000s, catalyzed by the convergence of state-led rural development initiatives and community-led strategies

for economic diversification. Tourism in Santichon was envisioned as an income-generating activity and a vehicle for cultural revival and social legitimacy. Central to this transformation was the selective performance of Yunnanese identity: traditional architecture, culinary practices, ethnic costumes, linguistic heritage, and ritual observances were reconfigured as consumable experiences for visiting tourists.

The initial phase of tourism development was modest. In 2004, a small thatched structure was constructed as a cultural exhibit. Over time, with support from district authorities and funding bodies such as the Thailand Research Fund, this modest initiative evolved into a fully developed cultural center—symbolizing both institutional recognition and a shift in the village's identity from a marginal borderland to a recognized cultural site.

Santichon's tourism model is notable for its collaborative architecture, integrating village leadership, subdistrict administrative organizations, military personnel, and civil society actors. For example, Colonel Piyawut Losuya of the 173rd Infantry Regiment worked closely with cultural project coordinator Chatuporn Wisitchotiankun to institutionalize tourism efforts. Their shared aim was to enhance local livelihoods, create employment opportunities, and reposition Santichon's historical narrative—shifting it from displacement and socio-economic exclusion to a story of heritage, resilience, and cultural value within the provincial tourism economy.

While drawing inspiration from more established Yunnanese enclaves such as Mae Salong in Chiang Rai—known for its association with Chinese nationalist history and tea production—Santichon has developed a more accessible and flexible tourism model. Unlike Mae Salong, which attracts long-stay tourists and diaspora returnees, Santichon targets short-stay domestic and regional tourists from Pai and northern Thailand. Its tourism model, therefore, reflects a hybridized approach that balances state-directed heritage construction with grassroots participation and market responsiveness.

Ultimately, Santichon's evolution into a tourism village underscores how heritage can be curated, commodified, and instrumentalized within rural development agendas. By framing the village as a "living heritage site," residents and officials have turned cultural identity into an economic asset—recasting historical marginality as a basis for inclusion in Thailand's broader development and tourism narratives.

4.3.3. The Impacts of Tourism Transformation

Incorporating Santichon Village into the regional tourism economy has precipitated a multi-dimensional transformation, fundamentally altering local livelihoods, social structures, cultural practices, and spatial configurations. While tourism has undeniably provided economic opportunities and increased the village's visibility within national and international circuits, it has also introduced tensions and ambivalences that complicate narratives of progress and empowerment.

Economically, tourism has diversified income sources be-

yond subsistence agriculture. Many residents have transitioned from farming and wage labor to operating souvenir shops, teahouses, guest accommodations, and cultural performance venues. This shift has increased household income and reduced reliance on precarious agricultural cycles. For younger generations in particular, tourism offers aspirational pathways—enabling them to engage in entrepreneurial activities, acquire language skills, and participate in service-oriented professions. However, this economic shift is uneven: not all households benefit equally, and disparities have emerged between those directly involved in tourism and those excluded from its benefits due to limited capital, language barriers, or lack of social connections.

Culturally, tourism has become a medium through which heritage is preserved and reinterpreted. Local traditions—such as tea cultivation, Chinese-style festivals, and culinary practices—are selectively revitalized and packaged for visitor consumption. While this process enables cultural expression and intergenerational transmission, it also risks essentializing complex identities into simplified narratives tailored to tourist expectations. Practices once embedded in intimate social and religious contexts are increasingly staged, raising questions about authenticity, ownership, and cultural fatigue.

Socially, tourism has reconfigured community relations and collective life. The rise of tourism-related enterprises has fostered new forms of cooperation, particularly among youth and local entrepreneurs, but it has also introduced competition, generational tension, and shifting gender roles. Older villagers sometimes express ambivalence toward the rapid commercialization of sacred or familial spaces, while younger residents often embrace tourism as a source of pride and modernity. These dynamics reveal a community negotiating between continuity and change, tradition and innovation.

Spatially, the village has undergone visible reorganization. Traditional Yunnanese courtyard homes are increasingly renovated or repurposed into restaurants, lodges, and retail outlets. Roads have been widened, signage erected, and public infrastructure upgraded to accommodate growing visitor numbers. While these changes enhance accessibility and comfort, they also erode spatial intimacy and environmental degradation. The transformation of everyday spaces into performative zones for tourism has altered the village's rhythms and aesthetics, creating a new landscape of cultural display.

Crucially, tourism has also affected how residents imagine themselves and their place in the nation. Participation in tourism production allows villagers to narrate their histories, project cultural pride, and assert belonging in a society that once marginalized them. Nevertheless, this visibility comes with constraints: representations must be curated, performances must be repeated, and authenticity must be sustained under market logic. As a result, villagers are not only producers of culture but also its managers and negotiators—constantly adjusting to evolving demands from the

tourism industry and government agencies.

In sum, the transformation of Santichon through tourism is neither wholly empowering nor wholly exploitative. Instead, it reflects a dynamic interplay between economic opportunity, cultural negotiation, and structural constraint. Tourism has enabled new forms of agency and self-representation, but it has also introduced pressures that reshape local life in profound and sometimes contradictory ways. The Santichon case underscores the need to critically assess how heritage-based development unfolds in practice and how communities navigate the promises and pitfalls of cultural commodification in a globalizing world.

4.4. Rethinking Cultural Change Through Tourism in Santichon

The case of Santichon Village provides fertile ground to revisit classical and contemporary theories of cultural change, particularly within the context of tourism development. Drawing from Julian Steward's theory of cultural ecology and the broader lineage of evolutionist thought, cultural transformation in Santichon is not a linear progression but a context-dependent adaptation to structural shifts—ranging from state policy to global tourism markets. The village's shift from marginality to visibility, from subsistence agriculture to service-based tourism, exemplifies Steward's assertion that cultural systems adapt to their ecological and socio-economic environments in varied, multilinear ways. At the same time, the findings reflect what Leslie White termed the technologic driver of culture. In Santichon, technological inputs—such as transportation infrastructure, media representations, and digital tourism platforms—have accelerated the commodification of local heritage. This convergence of technological and cultural systems suggests that identity reconstruction is not merely symbolic but also materially grounded. The spatial reorganization of the village, the redesign of traditional homes, and the staged performances of cultural festivals all signal a shift in the functionality of tradition—from lived practice to curated display.

However, theories of cultural adaptation alone are insufficient to explain the layered ambivalence expressed by residents. As MacCannell [11] theorized in his notion of “staged authenticity,” tourism often leads to the selective presentation of culture, producing experiences that meet external expectations while veiling deeper complexities. Santichon's transformation supports this theory, as villagers simultaneously perform and negotiate their Yunnanese identity in ways that blur the lines between authenticity and market responsiveness. The architectural and ritual elements retained in the village are not frozen relics but dynamic constructs tailored to dual audiences: insiders who seek cultural continuity, and outsiders who consume ethnicity as spectacle. Furthermore, Rosaldo's [17] critique of the detached observer prompts a more reflexive engagement with how power, representation, and positionality shape both research and village life. The appar-

ent “success” of Santichon’s transformation—measured by economic uplift and increased visibility—must be weighed against the costs of homogenization, the loss of cultural depth, and the emotional labor demanded of communities performing their identities for others. Informants voiced concerns that while tourism provides income, it also redefines tradition in marketable terms, displacing practices that do not fit tourist imaginaries.

Critically, the case challenges romanticized narratives of cultural resilience by revealing the pressures villagers face to continuously innovate within limits set by tourism demands. Cultural heritage becomes a flexible resource, but also a burden, as communities must balance authenticity with appeal, and preservation with profitability. While tourism has enabled Santichon to re-enter the national narrative and move beyond its stigmatized past, it has also introduced new hierarchies—between those who adapt quickly and profit, and those left behind in the shifting economy. In this light, Santichon should not only be seen as a “model” for ethnic tourism development, but also as a site of negotiation, compromise, and uneven transformation. The interplay between theory and findings underscores the need to see tourism not merely as development, but as a field of power where identity, memory, and livelihood are continually contested.

5. Conclusion

As a vital component of the modern service economy, tourism has increasingly emerged as a driver of national development. Its growth relies on the dual foundations of natural landscapes and cultural heritage, offering employment opportunities while catalyzing structural economic transformation. Tourism has been progressively integrated into Thailand’s national economic and social development strategies, facilitating a shift from agrarian livelihoods toward service-oriented models. This reorientation has profound implications for cultural continuity and change, particularly in marginalized regions.

The transformation of Santichon Village—from a remote border settlement historically associated with statelessness, narcotics, and displacement into a vibrant ethnic tourism destination—reveals the complex intersections of cultural construction, economic imperatives, and state intervention. Initially inhabited by Yunnanese migrants and ethnic minorities, Santichon was shaped by geopolitical marginality and informal economies. However, sustained engagement by state institutions and international actors enabled the village to transition toward alternative development pathways, with tourism emerging as a pivotal strategy. Through the selective revival, reinterpretation, and commodification of Yunnanese cultural practices—ranging from architecture and cuisine to rituals and artisanal crafts—Santichon has repositioned itself within Thailand’s tourism economy. This process generated new livelihood opportunities and reconstituted local cultural identity, making heritage both a resource and a performance.

Nevertheless, this transformation is not without contradictions. While tourism has revitalized cultural expression and increased economic inclusion, it has also introduced authenticity, cultural commodification, and uneven benefit distribution challenges. Traditions once embedded in intimate social and spiritual contexts are increasingly staged for external audiences, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of cultural heritage in market-driven environments. Santichon’s case illustrates the multifaceted role of tourism in shaping community development. Enhanced income, improved infrastructure, and greater integration into national and regional networks have contributed to its social and economic advancement. Tourism has also fostered new forms of intercultural engagement, allowing the community to reimagine its identity within local and global frameworks. Significantly, this transformation has been driven not only by top-down policies but also by the agency of local actors who actively curate and negotiate their cultural narratives.

Santichon demonstrates that tourism is more than an economic engine—it is a powerful cultural production and spatial reconfiguration force. It operates at the intersection of tradition and modernity, enabling heritage to be both preserved and reimagined. The village’s trajectory from a peripheral agrarian settlement to a recognized tourism destination reflects broader patterns of social change in upland Southeast Asia. Through its hybrid cultural practices, multiethnic integration, and adaptive strategies, Santichon offers a compelling case of how marginalized communities can navigate—and reshape—the forces of globalization to construct new futures.

Abbreviations

GPP Gross Provincial Product

Author Contributions

Dueanphen Ariyasapwatthana is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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