

The tourists started coming 20 years ago, when Pha Dua was still a market town for opium. Now the opium has long gone, but the tourists have multiplied. On a busy day, the village of 900 may receive 300 visitors.

Yao high priest Leh Tsan Kway welcomes the change. "Tourism has made life better," he says. "Before, we could only survive by planting crops. Now, we can also sell souvenirs to tourists. We are better off, and less dependent on agriculture."

Such views would please the Tourism Authority of Thailand. The Thai Government has encouraged hill farmers to adopt tourism as another way to replace the income once brought by opium. But unlike more obvious substitutes such as cabbages and strawberries, tourism provides income without agriculture. Traditional shifting cultivation has deforested much of upland northern Thailand, and many conservationists claim that new cash crops cause water pollution and soil erosion.

"Tourism dominates our daily routine," Leh Tsan Kway explains. "Every day we set up stalls to sell goods to tourists. The first coaches arrive before 9 a.m. Tourists spend 20 minutes taking photographs and then drive on to the next hill tribe. We are the most accessible Yao village in the area, and so get many coach trips."

Pha Dua has always benefited from its location. Yao tribespeople founded the village 45 years ago when they left northern Laos to avoid taxes from Pathet Lao forces. During the 1960s, Pha Dua supplied and traded opium under directions from the Chinese Kuomintang settlement 15 kilometres away at Doi Mae Salong. Today, the site near Mae Chan in Chiang Rai province is a popular staging post for tourist trips to more famous sites in the Golden Triangle such as Mae Sai and Chiang Saen.

"We enjoy waiting for tourists," says Jong Tave Siao. At 29, she depends on tourism to feed her two children and aged mother. "We buy wooden elephants, opium pipes and other trinkets at a market in Burma. We also embroider hats and clothes." Tourists are mostly middle-aged, on package tours from Europe or Japan. They bargain for goods and watch street scenes of women in traditional indigo gowns, and children in scarlet bobble hats. "I prefer French tourists to Japanese," Jong Tave Siao jokes. "They bargain less, and appreciate my needlework more."

Some people worry that tourism on this scale might damage the culture of the Yao. Hill tribes are the primary tourist attraction of northern Thailand, and anthropologists have questioned whether the poorly

developed groups may lose identity.

But Leh Tsan Kway is optimistic. "There is no problem," he says. "Most tourists stay on the main street next to the stalls. Sometimes important wedding festivals are held in houses nearby, but few tourists find out. In fact, we would prefer more interest in our culture. Besides, if I see villagers wearing modern clothes, I get angry and say they will stop the tourists coming. If anything, tourism enforces tradition."

However, tourism is still developing at Pha Dua, and some problems usually associated with cities are spreading to rural areas. "A man from India offered to pay Baht 15,000 (US\$570) for a young Yao wife," re-



Yao tribesman Leh and his wife May Sang.

ported one stallholder. "He spent an hour talking, but left empty-handed."

If tourism's cultural impact is weak so far, the financial benefit of stalls may seem positive. But stallholders away from Pha Dua's main gate may make two or three sales a day, and make just Baht 30 or 40.

"We get cash from tourism, but we couldn't survive on it alone," says Jow Kek Kway, a father of four. Villagers claim tourism provides on average just 25% of total household income. The rest comes from cash crops, and the value of non-cash crops. Money from tourism is often put back into agriculture.

"Stallholders hire labour to do agricultural work," explains Leh Tsan Kway. "The

richest buy pick-up trucks. But the honest villagers cannot afford to buy goods to sell. They have to work the soil very hard." Tourism, it seems, has not reduced agriculture.

Such low returns encourage villagers to try their own schemes. Silverware from Yao villages in Nan province is sold at Pha Dua. Villagers have also built a "Yao Museum" to display antiques.

But while there is enthusiasm, business acumen is questionable. "The Yao have built the museum 10 minutes from the gate where tourists arrive," complained one tourist guide. "Few tourists go near. Yao geomancy, the folklore guiding the location of buildings, prevented its location near the gate."

Another failure is the purchase of souvenirs bearing the name "Nepal" from the market in Burma. Tourists laugh at the mistake, but it suggests Yao culture is unready to manage tourism thoroughly.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Pha Dua disappoints many tourists. Advertising suggests hill tribes are remote and primitive. "We did not come here to buy wooden elephants," a French woman said. "Why are these people so commercialised?"

Pha Dua now faces the risk that tourism may change from coach trips to resort and hotel development. Neighbouring Akha villages have already sold land to a Bangkok developer, and in 1991 a Taiwanese group in league with local Chinese offered to buy woodland above Pha Dua. "We used to be controlled by the Chinese at Doi Mae Salong," says Lek Tsan Kway grimly. "It seems we will be in the future."

As a community still dependent on agriculture, Pha Dua must maintain control of its land in order to survive. Tourism has helped substitute opium, but it has not replaced agriculture. The greatest threat to Pha Dua is not tourism but land development. As the Thai Government chooses where to reforest, it must decide if Pha Dua's value as a tourist attraction exceeds its role in supposedly damaging agriculture.

"We do not want to sell land to developers," says Leh Tsan Kway. "But if our land is going to be reforested anyway, we may sell and leave. At present, I hope tourism may help us keep our tradition and land. But ultimately, I fear for them both." ■

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