

Can a transborder ethnic identity emerge within minorities in the Great Mekong Sub-region?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will address the issue of ethnicity amongst so called « hilltribes » or ethnic minorities from Thailand, Laos and Vietnam in the light of the transborder phenomena in the Mekong Sub-region. These three countries together with Yunan province of China and Myanmar are home to an extensive range of ethnically diverse groups, inhabiting both lowlands and highlands. These populations were sometimes established, in what it is known today as Thailand, Laos Vietnam or China, long before today as larger or dominant ethnic groups. They gradually became ethnic minorities as the result of 1) contact with European, 2) colonisation, 3) formation of modern states, 4) development policies, which contributed to their social and economic marginalisation and induced many changes in their living conditions.

In contemporary South East Asia artificial ethnic classifications, such as *Chao Khao* in Thailand or *Lao Theung* in Laos, are still used to refer to people who belong to these “minorities”. Geographical features such as the Mekong, the Anamite Chain or the highest mountains between Laos, Burma, Thailand and China, have contributed throughout history to fragment large ethnic units into smaller groups which settled in different countries. These geographical and historical elements together with recent states policies towards minorities, although different from one country to another, have created more confusion in contemporary ethnic labels particularly when used by outsiders. Some minorities identified themselves according to government classification (Laos), other became more or less taïcised to the extend that individuals may be ashamed of their own ethnic affiliation and claim another one, especially when it bears a poor image in the country (Thailand). In contrast, some ethnic groups have gained a “good name” in the light of their reasonable and long term uses of natural resources (Karen) or seemed to claim a new image through an ethnic revival (Khmu in Laos).

Overall, it can be said that belonging to an ethnic minority in the GMS is not an advantage, but the emergence of NGOs within minorities, the access to higher education, a renewed interest amongst scientists and policy makers for environmental indigenous knowledge, and the opening up of countries have created new avenues through which ethnically marginalised people may find ways to make their voices be heard. The fact, for example, that the Mekong River is now a unifying element at the regional level can contribute to overcome differences within and amongst ethnic minorities which share similar experiences in neighbouring countries without knowing it. It is still too early to assume that a pan hill-tribes ethnic identity will emerge in the near future but some encouraging elements can be noted and may contribute to restore self esteem that is still largely lacking, especially amongst the

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poorest and most marginalised groups. Drawing on case studies I collected in Thailand and Laos, and using examples from the literature for Vietnam and China, I will explore what may bring a better representation and recognition of minorities rights in the future on the basis of their common experiences in various countries from the GMS.