



# The community-based tourism system in a rice-growing village in Northeast Thailand

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**ABSTRACT:** The objective of this paper is to describe and analyze the structure and functioning of the community-based tourism system in Phu village, Pao sub-district, Nong Sung District, Mukdahan Province. This village is inhabited by members of the Phu Thai ethnic group. They have distinctive cultural traditions, including music, songs, and dances, unique rituals, and ethnic foods. Also, they whenever tourists visit the villagers dress in colorful costumes. Data were collected in semi-structured interviews with the community-based tourism group leaders and a sample of villagers who participated in tourism activities, and with participatory and non-participatory observations. The structure of CBT in Phu village is quite complex, with a CBT leader, coordinator, and seven functional groups: 1) service group, 2) food preparation group, 3) homestay group, 4) music group, 5) cultural show group 6) ritual group and 7) educational group (with includes the handicraft group). Phu Village offers tourists three packages, which include different activities: have lunch, have dinner, and stay the night in homestay houses. More than half of the households in the village are involved in CBT activities. Several factors contribute to this high participation rate: Most of the residents are elderly people who care for their grandchildren whose parents are working in other places. Their main economic activity is growing rain-fed rice, so they have free time for CBT activities except at planting and harvesting times. Also, growing rice generates low incomes, so the villagers need to earn extra cash by participating in tourism activities.

**Keywords:** community development; rural tourism; agricultural system; system analysis; Phu Thai culture

### Introduction

According to the government's plan for promoting tourism in 2019, which reflects the goals set out in the 2018 - 2037 National Strategy, Thailand will be made a global tourism destination or a global tourism magnet. One of the concepts for promoting tourism is Creative and Cultural Tourism. This involves promoting tourism by developing products and services based on indigenous knowledge, which in Thai is referred to as "local wisdom" (Supasorn, 2019). To achieve this objective, the local communities must be involved in developing and managing tourism. Community-based tourism (CBT) is a form of tourism which is aimed at developing people and communities to promote quality of life and the community economy (Suansri, 2013). It seeks to foster the participation of all people in the community and to create pride in their way of life. CBT in the Northeastern region of Thailand functions alongside existing agro-tourism and ecotourism projects. The region also has cultural tourism because the northeast has diverse ethnic groups. There are a variety of arts, cultural traits, and traditions that differ in each locality and

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Received: date; March 27, 2023 Accepted: date; April 27, 2023 Published: date; July 7, 2023

each province, so community-based tourism in Northeast Thailand uses its ethnic diversity to attract outsiders who want to learn about different lifestyles and traditional cultures.

Ban Phu Village, where the research reported in this paper was conducted, is one of the few successful examples of CBT in the Northeast. The understanding of the structure and functioning of the CBT system and its management in Ban Phu village generated by this research can be used to promote, develop, and improve sustainable CBT in other villages in Thailand.

## Methods

This research presents an ethnographic description of the structure and functioning of the CBT system in Phu village which is inhabited by members of the Phu Thai ethnic group. Phu village is located in Ban Pao sub-district, Nong Sung district, in Mukdahan province at [16°26'27"N 104°20'03"E]. Ban Phu village is located on a low hill and surrounded by mountains. The area between the village and the mountains is covered by rain-fed paddy fields. The majority of Ban Phu villagers are rice farmers who grow both glutinous and non-glutinous rice for consumption and sale. This analysis is based on qualitative data supplemented with some quantitative data. Data were collected using information from documents and interviews with 45 key informants, including village headman, leaders, and members who participated in CBT in Ban Phu village by using semi-structured interviews (SSI), participatory and non-participatory observation, village mapping, recorders, and taking notes. Sub-topics covered in these interviews included the history of CBT in the village, the structure of the CBT committee, the roles of different CBT leaders, the activities of different functional groups, and benefits that the villagers gain from CBT. Data collection was conducted in the village during several one-week visits to the village: July 2019, February 2020, July 2020, December 2021, and April 2022. The research was conducted over such an extended period because fieldwork was interrupted from mid-2020 until the end of 2021 by the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were analyzed by using content analysis.

## Results and discussion

### 1. The History of CBT in Ban Phu village

In the past, before Ban Phu village established CBT, the villagers used to welcome visitors who came to the village from other places to take part in merit-making ceremonies (*Tam boon; Kathin, Phapa*) in the village. Some visitors attending these merit-making ceremonies stayed in the villagers' houses without charge. As a result of this experience, the Ban Phu villagers gained the ability to welcome visitors. The village has a unique culture (ethnic dress, food, music, and lifestyle) that is attractive to outside visitors. Still, it was only after the Community Development department and other agencies provided training about managing tourism that the village began establishing homestay facilities.

In 2004 – 2005 CE, Ban Phu village was a pilot village for a research project intended to empower community members to explore the history of local culture. This was a project of the Office of the National Culture Commission. Outside researchers and students worked with villagers in this project to collect data on Ban Phu village's local history and culture (Piromvong, 2009).

In 2006, Ban Phu Village received an award as a Volunteer Village that had been developed according to the philosophy of the sufficiency economy in the Northeast. The village also received numerous other awards and was featured in a film for the popular TV program *Tung Saeng Tawan*. As a result of this attention, Ban Phu Village

became even more well-known, which helped to attract more visitors. In 2006, the homestay project was started (Somnuek, 2012), and by 2007, 30 homes had passed the Thai homestay standard assessment to accommodate tourists.

In 2016, Ban Phu Village was designated as a "Tourist Community" by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. In 2018, the government supported the "*Navat Withi*" project, which financially supported visits to Ban Phu village by many people from various villages in other parts of the Northeast. Until the Covid-19 pandemic caused a shutdown of tourism, most tourists visiting Ban Phu Village came under government sponsorship.

## 2. Structure and functioning of the CBT system in Phu Village

This discussion is divided into two parts: The first part describes the structure of the community-based tourism system. In the second part, the functioning of the community-based tourism system in Phu village is described.

### 2.1 Structure of the CBT system in Phu Village

Tourists, the management committee and its subordinate functional groups, and participating villagers are the main components of the structure of the CBT system in Ban Phu Village. Villagers who participate in tourism are divided into three types: those who participate as members of the functional groups, those who join in activities only occasionally, and those who belong to handicraft groups. Tourist visits to Ban Phu village are managed by a complex structure (Figure 1).

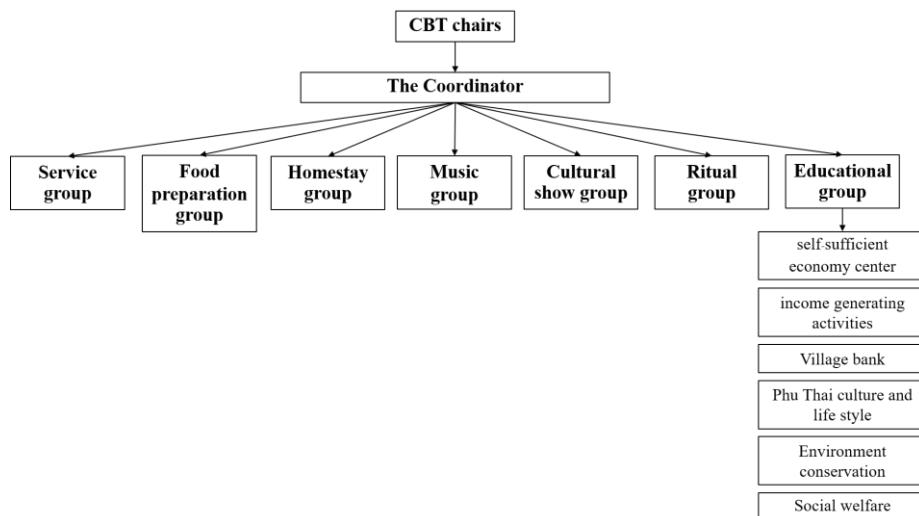


Figure 1 CBT management structure in Ban Phu Village

1) **Tourists** are divided into three types: (1) Government-funded tourists, which can include groups of people from other villages, students, and members and staff of organizations or government agencies. (2) Private tourists who arrange and fund their own visits, and (3) Researchers and students who conduct studies here. The number of tourists who visited Ban Phu village was 5,826 in 2020 and 1,110 in 2021 (Source: The coordinator of CBT in Phu village). The number of tourists in these years was greatly depressed compared to previous years because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the Covid-19 situation, the Phu villagers preferred to have tourists who only came for lunch rather than those who wanted to stay overnight in homestays. For example, in 2011-2015, there were 25,214

tourists who came on government-funded study tours, and 6,564 private tourists (Khiaomaneerat, 2017). Thus, the great majority of tourists who visited Phu village came on such government-funded study tours. The main purpose is for them to learn about tourism management in Phu village in order to develop and improve their own villages tourism development projects.

2) **The CBT management committee** is responsible for organizing and directing activities related to tourism in the village. The committee is comprised of the leader, the coordinator, and the heads of the seven functional groups. These include the service group, food group, music group, cultural show group, homestay group, educational group, and ritual group. The committee represents the formal structure for managing CBT in the village. However, it only occasionally meets, and day-to-day tourism activities are organized by the coordinator, who individually contacts the leaders of the functional groups whenever a visit by tourists is expected. These group leaders, in turn, contact the individual members of their groups responsible for carrying out various activities and providing different services to the tourists. The role of the leader of the CBT committee is to serve as the chair of formal meetings of the committee. In addition, he welcomes arriving groups of tourists when they first come to the village. He gives a talk about CBT activities and sings songs about the history of Phu village. The Committee Chair also plays a role in the *Bai Sri* ritual when this ceremony is performed for tourists. He is the master of ceremonies who invites the tourists to sit in a circle around the *Bai Sri* centerpiece. Brahmin Sutras are recited. The coordinator (who is also the wife of the committee chair) is responsible for overseeing all activities related to tourist visits and is also responsible for managing money received from the tourists and distributing shares of this income to the functional groups. The tourism center is located on the grounds of the *Sri Nantharam* Temple (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 2** Lan-Wattanatum or the cultural courtyard and Meeting room in the cultural learning center (Photo by an author)

### 3) Participating villagers

#### 3.1) Functional groups

(1) **Service Group:** This group has a leader and nine other members. When groups of tourists visit, some members are responsible for setting tables and arranging chairs at the learning center and luncheon venue. Members who provide these services on any given day are reimbursed at fixed rates: 200 baht for toilet cleaning,

100 baht for cleaning the learning center and five baht for washing each tablecloth. If there is more work than can be done by the regular members of the service group, the leader can ask other villagers for help. These temporary helpers are later reimbursed according to the tasks they perform.

**(2) Food preparation group:** This group is responsible for procuring and cooking food for tourists at lunch and dinner. This group has a leader and four members, all women. This group receives 18 baht per tourist, divided equally among group members. When tourists spend the whole day in the village, they are provided with drinks prepared by the food service group in midafternoon. The members who wash the glasses receive one baht per tourist. In addition to the six regular members of the food preparation group, other villagers are recruited to carry the food from the kitchen to the tables of the tourists. The food servers receive task credits.

**(3) Homestay group:** When a group of tourists wants to stay the night in the village, they are assigned to houses belonging to members of the homestay group. There are 30 houses, each of which can accommodate four tourists. The houses take turns receiving tourists. The house owners are responsible for preparing the rooms for the tourists, keeping the house clean, procuring the ingredients, and cooking breakfast. They also interact informally with the tourists and answer their questions about Phu Thai culture. The house owners receive 170 baht per tourist from the coordinator. If the tourists want to use the air conditioner, there is an extra charge of 100 baht for the whole house. This fee is paid directly to the homeowner by the tourists. Villagers who want to join the group must be trained and have their houses inspected by the Department of Tourism. In 2003, the Department of Tourism of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports discussed establishing a Thai Homestay Standard initiative to support rural communities in setting up homestay accommodations to allow tourists to experience the rural culture.

**(4) Music group:** The music group performs traditional music when the tourists have lunch or dinner. It also participates in the drum parade, where villagers dance through the village to entertain homestay visitors. The group has about 20 members, some living in neighboring villages. They play different traditional instruments or sing traditional songs. Ten members participate in each performance. If only a few tourists visit, tape-recorded music is played. The leader of the music group receives 400 baht, and members receive 100 baht each per live performance.

**(5) Cultural show group:** This group performs Phu Thai dances for tourists during lunch or dinner. The membership of this group is unstable, fluctuating between 30 and 60 people because most of those who participate in the cultural show only show up occasionally. Members include both men and women and young and old villagers. The coordinator records the number of times each member participates in cultural shows during any given period. They receive payment based on the number of shows they participated in during that period.

**(6) Ritual group:** The ritual group prepares the ceremonial objects used in the *Bai Sri* ritual before dinner for tourists participating in homestays. Tourist groups only visiting the village for one day can pay an extra 600 baht per group to have a *Bai Sri* ritual performed before they have lunch. The group has five members, all of whom are women. The day before, the tourists will visit group members to obtain the materials they use to make the centerpiece used in the ceremony.

The *Bai Sri* ritual is a traditional practice that is believed to ensure good luck to participating people. At the end of the *Bai Sri* ceremony, which is led by the chair of the community-based tourism committee, some villagers tie cotton strings around the wrists of the tourists to ensure them a safe trip back to their homes. Villagers who take part each receive a task credit recorded by the coordinator.

**(7) Educational group:** Six villagers present short lectures on various topics relating to Phu Thai culture and village life. These lectures include Self-sufficient economy, Income generating activities, Village bank, Phu Thai culture and lifestyle, Environmental conservation, and social welfare. Each lecture lasts for 10-20 minutes. Following the lecture on income-generating activities, the tourists observe villagers producing handicrafts at four centers: Silk weaving, cotton weaving, soap making, and broom making. Tourist groups can choose to have all six lectures or only select the ones they find interesting. Lecturers receive 50 baht for each presentation, and villagers who work in the handicraft centers each receives one task credit.

### 3.2) Villagers who participate only from time to time

Some Phu villagers are not members of the functional groups whose members participate in tourism activities every time tourists visit. Instead, they participate irregularly when they have time off from their jobs. Approximately 230 villagers, including children, middle-aged, and elderly people of both genders, participated in tourism activities on an irregular basis. The children are usually the children or grandchildren of people who have already participated in community-based tourism activities. Still, other children join in because they want to do it with their peers. Adults often participate when they have free time from their other income-earning activities. In the case of men, they can participate when they are not engaged in cultivating crops and caring for livestock. At the same time, women can take time away from their housekeeping activities to welcome and send off tourists and participate in cultural performances. Villagers who participate only occasionally will be remunerated with task credits.

### 3.3) Handicraft groups

In Ban Phu village several groups are producing different handicrafts. Tourists who listen to lectures from the educational group can also visit the venues where various handicraft groups, such as soap-making, cotton weaving, and silk weaving, are at work. Each group has a shed where members demonstrate their skills and sell products to tourists. Sometimes, if tourists have enough time, they can try their hands at making various products. The members of the handicraft groups receive income from the sale of their goods to tourists and get task credits.

## 2.2 Functioning of the CBT system in Ban Phu Village

This section will describe how the community-based tourism system's structure works.

### 1) CBT activities in Phu Village

The tourist groups interested in visiting Phu Village first contact the village coordinator to book the visit date and select the type of package tour they want. Three packages that include different types of activities are offered. Table 1 details the packages, showing that each package includes various activities. The lunch package, for example, does not include the drum parade, educational lectures, visits to handicraft centers, *Bai Sri* Ritual, and cultural shows. However, some of these activities can be added for an extra fee. The dinner package includes more activities than the lunch package for no extra fee, while some activities can be added for an extra fee. The coordinator provides information about each package when she is contacted by tourists arranging to visit the village.

### 2) Sequence of steps in a visit by a tourist group

There is a regular sequence of six steps in visits by tourist groups:

(1) **Tourists contact the coordinator to arrange a visit** A group of tourists has contact with the coordinator by contacted via phone or social media.

(2) **Villagers prepare for the tourists to visit:** The coordinator will inform the leaders of the functional groups, who will mobilize the members of their groups to prepare for receiving the tourists. For example, the homestay owners prepare breakfast ingredients and clean their houses, toilets, bedding, and pillows. The food group procures and prepares enough ingredients to cook for the expected number of tourists. In the morning or afternoon of the day the tourists come, they will prepare food in the kitchen in the temple area, which is the area for community-based tourism activities.

**Table 1** Schedule of activities of different packages

Activities	Packages		
	Lunch 120 baht/person	Dinner 350 baht/person	Homestay 600 baht/person
Welcoming ceremony	✓	✓	✓
Drum parade	-	✓	✓
Educational lecture and visit handicraft centers. (Optional for an extra fee) +500 baht per lecture Or +2000 baht for six lectures	✗	✗	✗
<i>Bai Sri</i> ritual (Optional for an extra fee) +600 baht	✗	✓	✓
Lunch	✓	-	-
Dinner	-	✓	✓
Cultural show (Optional for an extra fee) +500 baht	✗	✓	✓
Homestay	-	-	✓
Give alms to monks (Optional for an extra fee)	-	-	✗
Breakfast at homestay	-	-	✓
Sendoff	✓	✓	✓

**(3) Welcoming ceremony:** Tourists who choose the lunch package usually arrive at the village around 10 AM. The tourists who come for dinner and stay at homestays will arrive at the village around 3 PM. When the vehicle bringing the tourists arrives at the village, it will park at the entrance of the *Sri Nantharam* temple. The villagers wearing traditional Phu Thai dress line up in front of the cultural learning center to greet the tourists when they arrive. The chair of the CBT committee and some villagers welcome the tourists in the learning center and talk about the history of Phu village history of community-based tourism of Phu village and sing songs to entertain the tourists. For the tourists who come on the dinner and homestay packages, the villagers also perform a drum parade as part of the welcoming ceremony. After the CBT committee chair finishes his welcoming talk to the tourists, he will invite them to join the drum parade. The parading villagers will lead the tourists to the cultural courtyard before the cultural performance hall, where they will listen to educational lectures.

**(4) Educational lectures:** If the tourists want to learn about the lifestyle of Phu village, they can choose one or more optional lectures for an extra fee.

**(5) Cultural show, dinner, and *Bai Sri Su Kwan* ceremony:** The villagers led the drum parade and tourists to the cultural courtyard set up as a performance location. After finishing the drum parade, tourists can watch a performance by the villagers of a dance called *Fon Lan* in the cultural courtyard area and listen to another welcoming speech. The *Bai Sri Su Kwan* ceremony is held there. It starts when six villagers bring a *Bai Sri* ritual centerpiece to the center of the cultural courtyard and then do a *Ram Chern Kwan* dance performance to bring the *Bai Sri* Centerpiece out to tourists. The Phu Thai people's *Bai Sri Su Kwan* ritual is a ceremony that they believe increases morale and blesses individuals with happiness and longevity.

**(6) Homestay:** Each house accommodates four tourists. Homestays are regulated by rules that tourists must follow. These are: do not drink alcohol, do not gamble, and do not make noise that disturbs others (10 PM – 5 AM), and help maintain cleanliness and the environment of the village. In the morning, most of the villagers give alms to the monks. If tourists staying in the homestay houses want to join, they can inform the homestay owners, who will prepare sticky rice, and tourists can buy snacks or other things to give as alms to the monks. The tourists will have breakfast at the homestay houses before they gather at the learning center to depart from the village. The villagers line up to send off the tourists.

### 3. Benefits from CBT to the community

Villagers receive benefits from CBT in the form of direct income in cash and task credits, indirect income, enjoyment, and social interaction.

#### 3.1 Direct income

The villagers who are members of functional groups receive income from each visit by groups of tourists.

1) Food group: This group receives 18 baht per tourist, divided equally among group members.

2) Ritual group: The coordinator gives the leader of this group 600 baht for this group to perform the *Bai Sri* ceremony. Some of these funds are used to purchase the materials needed to make the centerpiece, with any remainder distributed equally among the group members.

3) Music group: The group leader will receive 400 baht, out of which he must pay transportation costs for members who must travel from other villages and keep any remainder for himself. Other members will receive 100 baht per performance.

4) Homestay group: Homestay owners receive 170 baht per tourist with one house accommodating four tourists. The owner uses some of this money to purchase food for the tourists' breakfasts and keeps the remainder.

5) Service group: Members who clean toilets receive 200 baht, those who clean the cultural learning center receive 100 baht, and those who wash tablecloths are paid five baht per tablecloth.

6) Educational group: Lecturers are paid 50 baht per a lecturer.

Members of other groups, such as the cultural show group and villagers who only participate in tourist activities, occasionally receive task credits. The coordinator will record the name of the villagers who participated in each activity. The villagers will not be paid immediately after each visit but only after five or six groups of tourists have visited. The minimum income from task credits is about 100 baht, and the maximum income is about 700 baht per five to six groups of tourists, representing between 20 and 140 baht per group of tourists. Members of handicraft groups who demonstrate their skills to tourists receive task credits, and they may also earn income from selling their products to tourists. Other villagers can also bring their own products to sell to tourists.

### 3.2 Task credits

Villagers who participate in tourism activities earn "task credits," which the villagers call "*Reang*," which means the ability or strength of the villagers who do the work. Most villagers have their own identification numbers, which are used by the coordinator after a group of tourists visits to record the number of task credits earned by each individual. Those who do not have a number can join by name.

Villagers can earn task credits by participating in the following activities:

- 1) Prepare a location (e.g., arrange mats or chairs, set the table): one task credit.
- 2) Join the line to greet arriving tourists and participate in learning center activities: one task credit.
- 3) Take part in educational activities: one task credit.
- 4) Serving food: two to four task credits (depending on the number of tourists.)
- 5) Participate in a cultural show (Phu Thai dance and *Bai Sri Su Kwan*): two to four task credits.
- 6) Join in the drum parade: two task credits.
- 7) Join the line to send off tourists when they leave the village: one task credit.

After the departure of each group of tourists, the coordinator records the number of task credits earned by each villager. After the visits of several groups of tourists, the coordinator pays each villager according to the total number of task credits accrued. The amount paid per task credit is not fixed but varies according to the amount remaining after all other expenses have been paid.

### 3.3 Indirect income

Any villagers who want to do so can bring their own agricultural products, such as local vegetables, longan, and tamarind, to sell to tourists. Table 2 shows the gross income received from CBT each month in 2020.

The income in 2020 was much lower than in previous years because of the COVID-19 pandemic situation. There were several months when no tourists were allowed to visit the village.

**Table 2** Gross income from community-based tourism in Phu village in 2020

Month	2020 (Baht)			Totals(Baht)
	Lunch	Dinner	Homestay	
January	59,760	0	14,400	74,160
February	104,400	0	0	104,400
March	34,440	0	0	34,440
April	-	-	-	-
May	-	-	-	-
June	-	-	-	-
July	-	-	-	-
August	121,080	0	78,000	199,080
September	81,720	24,000	15,000	120,720
October	74,760	0	0	74,760
November	83,400	9,000	0	92,400
December	80,288	60,000	0	140,288
Totals	639,848	93,000	107,400	840,248

### 3.4 Enjoyment

Most villagers said their participation in tourism activities made them happy. They said they have fun when they join in community-based tourism activities such as performing in cultural shows.

### 3.5 Social interaction

Participating in tourism activities allows villagers to meet, converse, and interact with each other. Elderly villagers said they felt happiness at meeting other villagers and tourists. They say it is better than staying at home alone.

## Conclusion

The structure of CBT in Phu village is quite complex, with a CBT leader, coordinator, and seven functional groups divided by function, 1) service group, 2) food preparation group, 3) homestay group, 4) music group, 5) cultural show group 6) ritual group and 7) educational group (with includes the handicraft group). Phu village offers tourists three packages, which include different activities: have lunch, have dinner, and stay the night in homestay

houses. CBT is tourism that is managed by the community itself. CBT is a way to generate new sources of income for villagers. More than half of the households in the village are involved in CBT activities. Several factors contribute to this high participation rate: Most of the residents are elderly people who care for their grandchildren whose parents are working in other places. Their main economic activity is growing rain-fed rice, so they have free time for CBT activities except at planting and harvesting times. Also, growing rice generates low incomes so the villagers need to earn extra cash by participation in tourism activities. This study has documented that Phu village has a successful model of community-based tourism activities. The extent to which this model can be replicated in other rice growing villages in the Northeast region is an unanswered question. The answer will depend on whether they have their own unique characteristics that can provide the basis for development of their own types of CBT. However, additional studies of other villages are needed to answer this question.

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