

Redefining “Otherness” from Northern Thailand

Introduction: Notes Towards Debating Multiculturalism in Thailand and Beyond

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Multiculturalism has not been on Thailand's official agenda. Thailand has been known as a homogeneous country, or rather, homogeneity had been incessantly stressed in official and other discourse while repressing differences, in the process of nation-building throughout the twentieth century. Those who do not fit into the narrowly defined “Thai-ness” have therefore been deemed “others” and outsiders, threats to the unity of the homogeneously conceived nation. For most of the twentieth century, approach to difference had been fundamentally assimilationist. As Renard points out in his paper in this issue, Thailand's stress on homogeneity or non-recognition of its own diversity stands out among countries in the region. The socialist regimes on Mainland Southeast Asia all officially recognize their diversity numerically. Vietnam counts 54, Myanmar 135, and Laos in between 47 to 236 [Vatthana 2005: 81] nationalities or ethnic groups. Thailand too has always been culturally and ethnically diverse. While diversity itself is unquestionable, the question is how the diversity and differences have been managed. In the recent relationship between the state and minorities in the North, we seem to find increasing recognition towards diversity. The evolving process over more than a century, the nature of the recent recognition of differences, and the varied responses from those “others” towards the process in “negotiating identities” is what we will address in this special issue.

This collection of papers is the outcome of a panel session at the 9th International Thai Studies Meeting held at Northern Illinois University in April 2005.¹⁾ The papers are by scholars who have conducted long-term fieldwork in Northern Thailand, one historian and four anthropologists. The paper by historian Renard looks at the definition of Thai and Thainess from the center from early twentieth century, seeking how Thailand launched into this homogeneous discourse. Looking at how the self becomes defined

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allows us to pursue how the “others” were defined. The paper by Kwanchewan discusses the Tribal Research Institute, the instrument of assimilationist policy towards the hill minorities. The remaining three papers deal with specific groups of “others” as defined by the hegemonic “self”: the elderly in Tai Lue society (Baba); the over-land Chinese *Chiin Haw* (Wang); and Karen (Hayami). All in one way or another deal with how “Others” versus Self have been defined and are now being re-defined in Thai society.

As an introduction to these papers, I will discuss the recent trends in Thailand from the point of view of the institutional changes, and try to lay out the present orientation towards difference and diversity in Northern Thailand. In doing so, I find it useful to take up “multiculturalism” as the key concept. It may seem contrived to talk about multiculturalism in a country where it has never been professed in official discourse, yet, much of what is happening in Thailand, especially the North seems to be most pertinent to the debates critiquing western liberal multiculturalism. These arguments might therefore give us some clues towards thinking about the issue in Thailand. The process taking place in Thailand is relevant in contexts in other parts of Southeast Asia. If there is increasing recognition of diversity and difference, in what contexts is that taking place? What does it mean for the “Others” to be thus “recognized”? And ultimately, how can we talk about multiculturalism in Thailand in a way satisfactory to all parties involved?

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The process of nation-building in Thailand has been one of delineating and defining Thainess versus Otherness both within and across its boundaries. “Others” here might include not only the more obvious national and ethnic others, but also those whose various loci of identity (religious, sexual, or occupational, etc.) are marginalized in the normative social order. Such delineation and redefinition have undergone changes at different points in the nation-building, especially in the past decade.

The original impetus for organizing the panel at the Thai Studies Meetings was the dissolution of the Tribal Research Institute in 2002. Established in 1962 as the Tribal Research Centre during the times of communist insurgency and opium production in the hills, TRI had been the center for implementing various development projects towards the “hill tribes” to deal with these problems. The hill tribes (*chaw khaw*) were problems to be dealt with and ultimately to be either assimilated or expelled outside the Thai territory. In the Administrative Reform Act of 2002, however, the Tribal Research Institute of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare was dissolved. The questions raised were: does TRI’s dissolution mean that the government no longer considered the “hill tribes” as problematic, and/or, did they evaluate their assimilationist policies as having been completed successfully? What is actually happening in the hills today seems to be, in some ways, contradictory. On the one hand the hill-dwellers have come to show far

more readiness to adopt state-initiated projects including agricultural innovations, education, health-related programs, etc. Yet in many cases they have been prompted by those very government agents to also maintain ethnic representations and displays. Even if it seems that they no longer pose serious threats and problems to the state, from their perspective, they have yet many problems they want the state to solve, such as citizenship and land rights, and they at times resort to conscious self-representation of difference as a strategic way to claim them. State magnanimity admitting their benign differences could simply be a way to appease them in the face of such problems.

The fact that the museum, now placed under the Tourist Authority is left as a legacy of the TRI seems to be quite telling of the kinds of difference the state is ready to promote. What used to be a small one-room display in the building of the TRI was moved in 1997 to occupy a four-story building beside a scenic lake on the outskirts of Chiang Mai. Jonsson analyses the narrative behind the layout. On the lowest floor is a display of the hill-tribe traditional material cultures, and the successful development efforts by the government, bringing “occupational, social, educational, and moral development” to the backwards and ecologically destructive peoples, commemorating Thai society’s commitment to progress. Then there is the second floor which introduces hill tribes and Buddhism, and the top floor, demonstrating the King’s benevolence and the hill people’s trust towards him [Jonsson 2005: 64–67]. The museum today also sponsors language and culture classes for the minorities to learn their own languages. Thus it is a juxtaposition of preservation of cultural difference (as demonstrated in the display of objects) on the one hand, and state’s self-congratulating itself on attaining development and modernization among them in the face of their backwardness. Here we find a similar process as those that have been discussed in other parts of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia. State promotion of local arts and performances, and misrecognition of “culture” have had the effect of reducing local culture into performance and display [Acciaioli 1985]. I come back to this below.

In place of the overall disinterest in the cultures of the others, and the eagerness to assimilate and incorporate them into the national developmental effort, now there is this attempt to define their culture as part of a benign recognition of difference. Meanwhile, up in the hills, former “tribal” villages are now putting up public displays of their own cultures in juxtaposition with displays of themselves as proper Thai citizens, such as in sports festivals [Jonsson 2005], rituals and performances (Baba this issue), or eco-tourism (Hayami this issue), by their own initiative or in response to administrative prompting.

The TRI dissolution was only a very small part of an overall administrative reshuffle in 2002 under Thaksin. Another small part was the founding of the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry’s foundation can be traced back more than half a century. The institutional basis for promoting Thai culture as the basis of a civilized nation against the threat of foreign powers had been founded earlier in the twentieth century, with emphasis on the three national pillars of nation, religion and monarchy. It was in 1942

under Phibun, that the National Culture Council was established under the Culture Act, to consolidate the policies that began with the various decrees (*rathaniyom*) since 1939, most of which had to do with civilizing the appearance of the Thai nation such as dress and manners of the people. Also under Phibun, the Ministry of Culture was founded in 1952, but together with the NCC, both were abolished when Sarit took over in 1958 [Connors 2005].²⁾ Subsequently under the threat of communist insurgency, Buddhism and the kingship was further stressed as the linchpin of Thai culture and citizenship. In 1979, the National Cultural Commission was founded in the Ministry of Education, to promote unity of Thai culture in this vein. With the end of cold war and struggle in Indochina, from the 1980s into the 1990s, power shifted from the military to business and politics. “Thainess” became open to contestation, and the various waves of recognizing Thainess in varied locations and stress on local cultures began. Culture seems to have been handed to the people and their localities.

The Ministry of Culture was founded in 2002 within the same Administrative Reform as that which brought the dissolution of TRI. Upon the foundation of the ministry, a seminar of administrators and academics was held titled “Vision of Thai Culture,” an official in charge of drawing up a master plan noted that “culture is plural in Thailand” [*ibid.*: 538]. The resulting plan of 2003 endorsed the politics of diversity, acknowledging more than 30 ethnic groups each one having its own characteristics and culture. With a change in the minister, after 2004 there was further emphasis on culture as “capital” for economic and social development, facilitating both the commercial uses of culture as well as regional and provincial demands for promoting local cultures. As Connors points out, since the 1980s, the issue of “Thai-ness” has changed its nature. “The question now is how culture and identity forms can be used to articulate local cultures, multiple ethnic identities and national identity into a Thai-ness for the global age” [*ibid.*: 544].

Section 30 of the 1997 Constitution³⁾ states that “all persons are equal before the law and shall enjoy equal protection under the law. . . . Men and women shall enjoy equal rights. . . . Unjust discrimination against a person on the grounds of the difference in origin, race, language, sex, age, physical or health condition, personal status, economic or social standing, religious belief, education or constitutionally political view, shall not be permitted.” Under this Constitution, it would seem possible that Thailand might declare itself a multicultural society, by guaranteeing that its people will not face discrimination based on such differences as noted.

The King’s first royal address to the newly inaugurated Prime Minister Thaksin’s

2) Much of the information on the Ministry of Culture in this and the next paragraph were drawn from Connors [2005].

3) Just as I am writing this introduction, on the night of September 19th 2006, a Coup d’Etat by military personnel has overthrown the Thaksin government. The 1997 Constitution has been abrogated. In this early stage, it is impossible to know what will come in its place.

cabinet on Feb. 21, 2001 stated that the Thai nation “comprises people from various parts of the country. They differ in thoughts and ways of life. Their home topographies are different. So are their standings. . . . One of the problems that the government will face concerns the people who have long been living in our country but are not yet considered Thai. . . . They were born in Thailand. They have been living in Thailand. But they haven’t received the benefits of being Thai citizens. This matter must be handled without discrimination.”⁴⁾ All of this suggests that Thailand has become more accepting of cultural differences. Is it the maturity of the nation state that now Thailand’s constitution could admit its internal differences, or is it a change in the nature of the difference thus acknowledged? As according to Appadurai, “the mobilization of markers of group difference may itself be part of a contestation of values about difference” [Appadurai 1996: 14]. Difference has itself come to mean something else.

Indeed, there has been significant interest in cultural diversity on multiple levels in the past two decades. The interest in regional cultures such as in Isaan or Lanna cultures can be seen, for example, in recent cultural revival of the North since the celebration of the 700th Lanna year. There is much interest in these regions also in pop cultures including food and music [Jory 2000]. Chinese cultural elements have also appeared in the media, especially TV dramas. Another wave was the interest in local cultures of rural communities. Since the 1980s, and the community culture movement, the true Thai tradition and wisdom were to be located in the local communities. There was also expansion of interest into areas adjacent to the Thai national borders as those hitherto inaccessible regions in Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar and Southern China were opened up to visitors since the latter 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. In these regions many Tai-speaking peoples resided, and interest in Thainess/Tainess spurred explorations into these areas from Thailand, commercial, academic, tourist etc. Finally, with the expansion of the domestic tourist market, state interest in tourism has expanded not only to the regional and provincial cultures, but also to the hills and other minorities. The diversity of cultures has become a cultural resource, yet, the difference as presented as cultural resource is often a standardized and homogenized version acceptable to the state. Thai Culture and History as viewed from the center have been reviewed and interest in local histories and cultures was advocated. With the alleviated pressure on security especially in the border areas, there has been more space for the display of differences. Administrative decentralization also opened paths for local initiatives. Plus, against the background of economic development, difference has become an economic resource and the move has been towards commercialization. Is the Thai state then ready to recognize diversity within?

4) Cited in Norman Vasu [2005].

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Multiculturalism has claimed the plurality of cultures as a way to counter the assimilationist tendencies of majority society and culture, but at the same time most often its effectiveness has been recognized and encouraged in terms of managerial policy or administrative norm. By multiculturalism we generally refer to the attitude of welcoming diversification of culture and society positively, and arguments pertaining to multiculturalism emerge as a discourse concerning the state and the formal aspects of state and society. It has also come to represent the magnanimous attitude towards minorities by those majority civilians whose own authenticity is unquestionable. From the point of view of the status quo, multiculturalism replaces the counter-narratives of oppositional politics deemed destructive to its maintenance. By calling all kinds of cultural strategy etc. “multiculturalism,” or by recognizing differences on display, it could tame and domesticate the critical sharpness of certain counter-narratives of identity politics, glossing over outcries from minorities demanding their rights as citizens. We need, then, to question the nature of the difference claimed in the diversity allowed to coexist in the claim.

In their discussion of multiculturalism in Asia, Baogang He and Will Kymlicka point out that Asian countries are now in intense search of new alternative ways of conceptualizing state-minority relations. These draw upon a variety of traditions such as pre-colonial centre-periphery relations, European colonial practices of legal pluralism and indirect rule, and socialist theories of national liberation and self-determination, etc. On top of these today what many countries have come to draw upon as model for the democratic negotiation of diversity is the emerging models of multicultural citizenship, and human and minority rights in the international discourse: a way to manage ethnic diversity within the bounds of peaceful and democratic politics without jeopardizing the basic security and prosperities of the society [He and Kymlicka 2005: 5-6].

In Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar, ethnic/national differences are abundantly used in the state propaganda. The diversity is portrayed in posters, billboards, various media, postage stamps, and currencies. As Jonsson and Taylor point out for Vietnam, “particular ways of imagining and experiencing diversity” are thus sanctioned [2002: 176]. Signifiers of local identity is appropriated by the nation state for its hegemonic process of modernity and progress [*ibid.*: 180]. In these settings it is not so much that cultural diversity is accommodated, but rather, the state’s project of national integration is celebrated and propagandized by demonstrating the diversity. Vatthana, arguing for Laos where difference is equally emphasized in propaganda, denies the possibility of liberal multiculturalism in Laos, and at the same time cogently critiques this brand of multiculturalism [2005].

More widely, the western brand of liberal multiculturalism has been critiqued over the years for its own contradictions. The contradiction is that encouraging multiculturalism enhances the generality and normativeness of the common culture. State recognition of ethnic groups is itself a form of state control of its marginal peoples, and furthermore, culture becomes an economic resource such as in the tourist industry. Thus, multiculturalism is not only management by state and administration, but also by business and the market. When marginalized minority culture becomes visible in dominant society, it does not merely mean that the cultural minorities have gained increased opportunity for self-representation. It also meets the demands of the market, as their culture becomes a resource. The marginalized might gain audience only by capitalizing on and commercializing one's own difference strategically.

Multiculturalism of this brand is management of diversity where difference is domesticated and enclosed. However, to simply give up on multiculturalism for such contradictions, would mean also throwing away its strategic effectiveness. Such things as cultural strategy of social minorities called identity politics, also is founded on liberal multiculturalist stance to difference. "Identity politics" is taken up by those who are excluded from institutional processes and historical representations so far, who are marginalized and who align themselves under the banner of diverse cultural, social and historical differences. By giving themselves a name, or by taking up a name given to them, they are constructing their selves not as mere objects of others' representation and narrative.

This may be true of the "indigenous peoples" discourse, and the identity politics used in debating land rights among some of the hill-dwellers in Thailand. Karen for example, have labeled themselves indigenous people who have long lived sustainably in the forests. The labeling of some uplanders by the lowland powers as "forest people" is now taken up by the uplanders themselves in claiming their rights. By taking up the standardization of culture that is imposed on them, they are able to create some space to negotiate their rights [Yos 2004]. Kymlicka points out that among the varied forms of multiculturalism, the "indigenous peoples" were the more successful in such debates. For those who can take up this label without controversy, it does become a locus for claiming rights to land and resource. However, this has been a problematic term to use in Thailand, since as Toyota points out, some (such as the Karen) might more easily take on the label than others (such as the Hmong). The more serious question as Toyota points out, however, lies in the way a cultural community might become institutionalized [2005: 133]. Acciaoli analyses how the Indonesian state's sanctioning of local cultures has brought the aestheticization of daily cultural practices through the hands of the state which prescribes and domesticates diversity [1985: 153]. Local culture can thus be standardized and appropriated through emphasis on performance and display, a misrecognition of culture as an object, which will allow the institutionalization of cultures.

In addition to culture being institutionalized, difference is de-politicized. Diversity as

recognized in Thailand today is one that standardizes and homogenizes each “culture” as an entity. State recognition of diversity could be just as much a way to impose a discourse of de-politicized difference. It might even be said that the way diverse cultures are recognized in the North today in some ways resembles how Thainess and Thai culture was institutionalized towards national integration in the early twentieth century. Just as the process of defining “Thainess” in the nineteenth century was concerned with civilizing the appearance of the state and its populations, emphasizing public displays such as dress, comportment and manners, as exemplified in the *ratthaniyom* (1938–44) and the subsequent culture policy [Connors 2005] so in the multiculturalist age of the twenty-first century, standardization of various cultures can be found in recognizing certain benign aspects of each “Culture” as representation or display, including costumes, certain ritual practices which do not contradict Buddhism, indigenous knowledge, etc. However, by taking up some of the elements of de-politicized “culture,” “others” can also re-adopt their culture as defined by those in power, towards strategic identity negotiation [Adams 1998]. De-politicization of differences may have allowed “others” to take them up for identity negotiation.

Both from the point of view of those managing the diversity, as well as by those who strategically take it up for identity negotiation, difference is stabilized by defining the boundaries and institutionalizing and standardizing its contents. It may operate towards de-historicizing or de-contextualizing culture in order to offer standardization as the instrument for organizing differences. Multiculturalism is therefore highly contradictory [Gordon and Newfield 1996: 6–7]. At the same time the recognition of difference can be the marking of hierarchies of value and power [Adams 1998: 328]. While emphasis on sameness can exclude “others” who are different, emphasis on difference can be merely confirmation of difference between those in power and those without, center and periphery, or those of more or less value. At least, however, emphasis on difference made possible varied forms of identity negotiation by those “others.” The intolerance in the South does not refute but highlights the nature of the de-politicized recognition of diversity in the North. In the South, culture has not been separated from politics, and therefore difference remains un-tolerated.

A critical brand of multiculturalism, on the other hand, would be grounded in grassroots alliance rather than diversity management, away from assimilation or exclusion towards recognizing and accommodating diversity. Rather than standardizing of cultures in order to accommodate them to the majority culture, which would, in effect, be another path to assimilation, there might be multiculturalism which not only aligns the various recognized groups, but also recognizes how intermixed and unbounded each group is. In talking about multiculturalism in arts, education and politics, Trinh Minh-Ha notes, “multiculturalism does not lead us very far if it remains a question of difference only between one culture and another. Differences should also be understood within the same culture, just as multiculturalism as an explicit condition of our times exists within

every self. Intercultural, intersubjective, interdisciplinary... To cut across boundaries and borderlines is to live aloud the malaise of categories and labels; it is to resist simplistic attempts at classifying, to resist the comfort of belonging to a classification, and of producing classifiable works" [1991: 107–108].

The experience in Thailand is that at the same time that participation in international discourse has brought a liberal democratic mode of multiculturalist approach to the minorities, the attitude remains at the same time as one of "civilizing the margins." One half of the purpose of this special issue is to point out this process. Thus state power attempts to make use of the cultures of the marginalized by standardizing them, de-politicizing them and dressing them up, and making a display of them just as had been done to the Thai self earlier in the twentieth century. Recognition of such diversity has not necessarily led to recognition of the rights of the people of diverse culture, but rather to gloss over the issue. The other half of our purpose is to follow the response of the "other." Not only in the sense of how they are negatively affected, but also in the positive and creative practices by which such "standardization of diversity" by the authorities could open up paths for "others" to claim their own differences and negotiate. Because those in power have de-politicized difference, difference can be taken up without threatening the status quo. How are the "others" playing, improvising and re-defining themselves on the stage and script that are now open for them.

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Renard's paper gives us a good start. In order to create its "self," it was necessary for the Thai nation-state to define its "others" and vice versa, and therefore the two were mutually constructed one against the other. As Thongchai points out, Thai-ness is "a claim to legitimacy of more often than not, the official or hegemonic discourse operating in its own particular cosmos over the subordinated or marginalized ones [1994: 9]." Renard begins by mentioning pre-modern times of diversity, perhaps akin to what Hinton (cited in Hayami's paper) refers to as the times of "tacit understanding" from the culturally diverse Ayutthaya. Subsequently in the late Rattanakosin period, especially under the 6th reign, such understanding was taken over by a regime of "Thainess." Drawing upon policies especially on language and education, and making comparisons with European nationalism and the influence of the parallel notions of "sameness" in the administration of the period, Renard in effect argues how difference, and others, were constituted concomitant to these policies.

Baba's paper deals with a cross-section of local cultural revival and a formation of a standardized culture of the "elderly" (defined by this officially designated term *pua suung ayu*) through efforts of the National Culture Council and the Public Welfare Department. The paper is also a precious piece that examines ethnographically what aging is bringing

to local Thai society. The Tai Lue in Nan Province perform rituals for the memory of their ancestral land across the border in China. Within the trend of local cultural revivals mentioned above, the Tai Lue communities in Nan have modified and elaborated their ritual, as documented in Baba's previous works. However, now with changing role of the elderly and state's recognition of the problems of aging, added to this is what might be called "the culture of the elderly" which is in many ways imposed and standardized. There is some space, however, for cross-overs between the Tai-Lue self-representation and this standardized culture of the elderly. Formation of the "culture of the elderly" is at once a standardized representation of a state-formed category, and yet, in the context of local community and ritual, it provides an arena for performing as Tai-Lue. On the one hand there is standardization of "Thai" cultures in the North in general, and a formation of a homogenized "elderly culture," yet, specific Tai-Lue performances over-write these.

Wang's paper addresses a trans-national community of the Yunnanese Chinese known in Thailand as *chiin haw*. The term actually covers both the Han Chinese who are associated with the Kuomintang army, most of whom migrated after the 1950s, as well as the Muslim Yunnanese who have been known locally as caravan traders and who had formed some settlements on Thai territory by the end of the nineteenth century. In the context of the Communist threat in the hills in the 1950s, and the Thai government's special treatment of the Kuomintang Han Yunnanese, the Muslims were almost rendered invisible, even as they had increased in numbers as transborder refugees, settled and made living on Thai terrain. In this context, the Muslim Yunnanese have gradually found new ways of re-defining themselves as Thailand's more visible "other" by building mosques and religious networks to form Muslim communities that extend over the border. Based on recent extensive fieldwork across the border, Wang discusses the migratory processes of the Muslim Yunnanese, and their changing relationships towards the KMT and the Thai government. Their self/other definitions have evolved through changing political and social contexts on Thai territory.

The Tribal Research Center (later Institute) was instituted by the state in response to the same socio-political conditions as that which were behind the special treatment of the KMT Yunnanese in the same hill areas as inhabited by the "hill tribes." Kwanchewan follows the fate of the TRC, inaugurated with fanfare in 1965, and closed inconspicuously in 2002, and looks at its role in the research and policy formation towards the hill tribes during those years. While there were many contradictory aspects within the TRC/TRI which initially had its role in research defined by an academic with interest in applied work (i. e. Geddes), and yet was under the government agency (Ministry of Interior in the beginning). Throughout this process, the TRI's activities have been primarily defined by the relationship between the state, foreign funding agencies, and foreign advisors. This tripartite relationship was effective from TRI's foundation and the designation of "hill tribes" and the "hill tribe problems." Amid increasing interest in the hills as reflected in academic interests and NGO activities, the TRI was quietly closed. In the state perspec-

tive, the “hill tribe problems” as they had defined, have successfully been solved, and therefore the TRI had lost its *raison d’être*. Yet, Kwanchewan points out, this does not mean there are no longer problems for those who had been designated as “hill tribes” by the state.

The Karen were also counted among the hill tribes and were the targets of the policies initiated at the same time as the founding of the TRC/TRI. Hayami takes up the evolving discourse regarding the Karen over a century, since the earlier recognition as forest peoples (*chaw paa*), to being included among the trouble-making hill tribes (*chaw khaw*), then towards making their own claim as Karen (*pga k’nyau*). Rather than being an exercise in discourse analysis, the purpose of this first half of the paper is to see how elements of those very discourse that was constructed among administrators, academics, NGOs, etc. have then been taken up by the Karen themselves in claiming their rights, which is demonstrated in the case of an eco-tourism venture in the latter half of the paper. In the past two decades, Karen have found ways to voice their own demands, by strategically drawing upon existing discourse on themselves. Through analysis of a particular case of an eco-tourism endeavor, Hayami demonstrates that it is not merely Karen taking up elements of a standardized culture and thereby seeking voice within the hegemonic discourse upon themselves. Rather Karen in diverse positions and locations are drawing upon multiple levels of “self/other” definitions to seek legitimate position in the politically ridden landscape in Northern Thailand in which they are marginalized as the benevolent forest-dweller.

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