

Identity Expression and Negotiation Across Generations of Mon People in Ban Wangka, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand

Kaung Khant

Abstract

This study examines the ethnic identity negotiation of the Mon diaspora in Ban Wangka, Sangkhlaburi, Kanchanaburi, Thailand, utilizing a comparative framework across three prominent generations: first-generation elders, Thailand-born youth, and recent arrivals. Established in the late 1950s by displaced Mon refugees fleeing civil war in Myanmar under the spiritual guidance of the revered monk Sayadaw Luang Phor Uttama, Ban Wangka has evolved from a safe refuge into a transnational social space and a highly successful, state-promoted 'cultural village.' The research investigates how these distinct groups navigate their ethnic identity amidst interactions with dominant Thai culture, tourists, and nearby ethnic groups. Through an ethnographic qualitative design, including participant observations during the Songkran and Visakha Bucha festivals and twenty-two semi-structured interviews, this study explores the 'encounter'—the specific situations where ethnic identity is performed, contested, or adapted. The findings reveal a strategic 'Double Win' system: the Thai government utilizes the village as a cultural product to boost national tourism, while the Mon diaspora leverages this state-sponsored platform as a shield to protect their language, preserve their Theravada Buddhist practices, and secure their socio-economic survival. The study analyzes three critical layers of this negotiation: (1) a political-historical layer of royal recognition and soft diplomacy, (2) an economic-spatial layer showing a clear dichotomy between the commercial 'front stage' of the Mon Bridge and the authentic, localized 'backstage' of the morning market, and (3) an intergenerational layer where youth adopt linguistic Thai-ization while maintaining visual and ritual Mon-ness. This research contributes new conceptual insights into the fluid, relational, and situational nature of identity negotiation in borderland zones.