

# From State Multiculturalism to Multiculturalism from Below: A Case Study of the Chiang Rai Flower Festival and the Cultural Square<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Many Thai scholars claim that the idea of multiculturalism, a product of the West, has yet to arrive in Thai society. However, the present article challenges this notion and suggests that the Thais are using an alternative approach to understanding multicultural issues in Thai society. The study used ethnographic research to study the Cultural Square, a space where Chiang Rai's 17 ethnic groups have presented their identities at the Chiang Rai Flower Festival and applied the concept of multiculturalism from below. The research found that these displays of ethnic and cultural diversity do not necessarily express the idea of state multiculturalism, as the Thai state regards ethno-cultural diversity merely as colorful festivals, ethnic craft products, and rhetorical policies. Nonetheless, the presentations are concerned with the idea of celebrating differences: through the Cultural Square, the ethnic hosts expressed their identities and cultures beyond the image of ethnicity being as exotic as flowers, and engaged various concerns that are culturally and socio-politically related to their ethnic groups/communities.

**Keywords:** state multiculturalism, multiculturalism from below, multiculturalism in Thai society, the Cultural Square, Chiang Rai Flower Festival

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## Introduction

When the idea of multiculturalism, a product of the West, was introduced into Thai society in the 2000s, it was transformed into a local meaning. While the idea of multiculturalism in the West is defined as celebrating differences and group-differentiated rights (Kymlicka, 1995; Coates, 2008: 316-318; Song, 2020), in the Thai context, the state practices multiculturalism solely through colorful festivals, ethnic craft products, and rhetorical policies. This is an example of the depoliticizing of ethno-cultural diversity, as the Thai state has never recognized ethno-cultural diversity beyond state unity and nationalism. Hence, the status of multiculturalism in Thai society is, in fact, “state multiculturalism” (Gunew, 2001, Sunanta, 2013). However, socioeconomic changes in Thai society have affected rural and ethnic communities since the early 2000s. The focal point of multiculturalism has shifted to issues of livelihood relations, patterns of majority-minority relations, and tactics of resistance of the minority, as well as a grassroots movement supporting multicultural rights (Horstmann, 2013b; Leepreecha, 2013a, 2019). Consequently, the status of multiculturalism in Thai society needs to be thoroughly reviewed.

Before examining the state of multiculturalism in Thai society, it is necessary to present a general view of the concept, which was initiated amid the global displacement following the Second World War. The idea of multiculturalism also comprises a sense of political policy, and has led to various debates among multiculturalist scholars and politicians.

Academically, multiculturalism has been defined as the idea of celebrating differences and encouraging diversity and group-differentiated rights. In practical terms, it consists chiefly of managing ethno-cultural diversity, providing coexistence-based solutions to ethno-cultural differentiation, and highlighting anti-racism, victimization, and resistance (Glazer and Moynihan, 1964; Kymlicka, 1995; Coates, 2008: 316-318; Song, 2020). In actuality, however, there is a significant debate over whether the idea of multiculturalism succeeds or fails once it is practiced.

Pro-multiculturalism scholar Will Kymlicka argues that the dynamic of multiculturalism in democratic countries (in the West) has gradually progressed since the 1970s (Kymlicka, 2012, 2015). This progression is evident in cases in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Canada continues enacting multicultural policies, such as the Employment Equity Act of 1986, the Race Relations Foundation in 1996, its Action Plan Against Racism in 2005, and its Multiculturalism Program in 2010 (Wong and Guo, 2015: 4). Australia, similarly, initiated multiculturalism policies, such as the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia in 1989 and the New Agenda for Multicultural Australia in 1999 (Koleth, 2010); and New Zealand initiated a multiculturalism policy in 2013 that is based on the Treaty of *Waitangi* (indigenous rights) (Multicultural New Zealand, 2015).

However, some scholars and politicians have argued that in the twenty-first century, multiculturalism has failed. During the first decade, countries such as Canada and Australia viewed multiculturalism policies as a disruption of the socioeconomic integration of their immigrant people (see Nagra and Peng, 2013; Gozdecka et al., 2014; Joppke, 2014). At the same time, some European countries experienced tragic events resulting from ethno-religious conflicts,<sup>2</sup> and the idea of multiculturalism had difficulty in being accepted within such contexts. European leader David Cameron declared, “multiculturalism is dead,” while then-Chancellor Angela Merkel stated, “The multicultural approach as a policy has failed, and absolutely failed” (BBC News, 2010; BBC News, 2011). Some say that the idea of multiculturalism has become solely a feel-good celebration in the United Kingdom: the cultural diversity of South Asians is reduced to the “3S’s” – saris, samosas, and steel-drums (Brubaker, 2001; Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010). In Germany, the increasing numbers of Muslim immigrants have built strong Muslim communities rather than integrated with German society. A former senior official at Germany’s central bank stated that this

<sup>2</sup> Examples are the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the Madrid train bombings in 2004, the London bombings in 2005, the firebombing of the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris in 2012, and the Charlie Hebdo office shootings in 2015 (Colombo, 2014; Wong and Guo, 2015: 5).

phenomenon indicates issues of claiming a welfare state and committing crimes rather than the state of living happily side by side (BBC News, 2010). Steven Vertovec used the term, “multiculturalism backlash,” to refer to multiculturalism being rejected and seen as a source of social separation and disruption (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010). Ted Cantle likewise asserts that multiculturalism has failed to deal with differences between minorities and the majority in the context of super diversity, and that the differences are complex (Antonsich, 2015). Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Spivak caution that the idea of multiculturalism may merely indicate another form of state assimilation and integration (Gunew, 2001, 2004). Thus, the idea of post-multiculturalism has emerged in Western countries in response to the crisis of multiculturalism: the rise of anti-immigration political movements, stricter rules of immigration and citizenship, and an overemphasis on gendered inequality in culturally diverse societies (Gozdecka et al., 2014). Post-multiculturalism became a widespread concept in Europe to move beyond multiculturalism by combining cultural diversity with social cohesion and state security (Gozdecka et al., 2014; Wong and Guo, 2015: 5).

While the debate on multiculturalism concerns whether this idea succeeds or fails, the idea of “everyday multiculturalism” has emerged and has opened an alternative arena for understanding multiculturalism. The significant spirit of everyday multiculturalism is the grassroots reality which implies a sense of everyday life: a realm where social reality is grounded rather than debated in terms of political structures and policies. Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham remark that multiculturalism has often been studied as top-down governmental strategies (policies), which failed when it was not possible to maintain cultural differences or resolve socially-segregated problems (Wise and Velayutham, 2009). Top-down multiculturalism always views “differences” as unalterable ideas that come into conflict. However, “differences,” grounded in concrete and everyday interactions, can be seen as situated products of power relations among people who produce, reproduce, transform, and challenge cultural differences, the result of

encounters characterized by unequal distribution of resources and power, or the operation of social reality (Semi et al., 2009).

Thus, everyday multiculturalism raises central studies from everyday life; the main research field is, rather than policy making at the state level, social relationships in everyday life among different people amid cultural diversity. At the methodological level, Wise proposes an ethnographically-oriented approach (i.e. ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, and focus groups) to explore how cultural diversity is experienced and negotiated on the ground in everyday spaces such as markets, neighborhoods, schools, centers, gyms, and any micro-public spaces where cultural diversity and differences are perceived, conceived, constructed, experienced, and enacted (Wise and Velayutham, 2009: 1-13; Colombo, 2014). These spaces become the micro-politics of everyday life that show how the state ought to practice multiculturalism (as policy) in specific contexts; everyday multiculturalism thus bridges the everyday life level to the macro political level (Wise and Velayutham, 2009). That is to say, the ethnographically-oriented approach can fill the gap left by top-down multiculturalism, which merely highlights the policy of managing differences, yet repeatedly reduces cultural diversity. Viewed in this way, multicultural festivals can be conceived as micro-political spaces as well, despite not being everyday spaces, but representing social life spaces. According to the subfield of cities and cultural diversity, multicultural festivals are somewhat separated, interrelated, or assimilated with multiculturalism – the so-called “multiple multiculturalisms” (Penrose, 2013), which provide opportunities for ethnic/minority people to negotiate/contest for a social space among the majority (Duffy, 2005; Veronis, 2006; Taucar, 2016). In other words, multicultural festivals provide the relevant actors with a micro-political space in which to contest the dominated image, redefine their identity, challenge hegemonic power, and regenerate social life (Veronis, 2006; Penrose, 2013; Taucar, 2016; Waitt, 2008).

In the context of Thailand, the latest constitution (2560 BE/2017 CE) mentions “multicultural issues” in Section 30: the state *should*

provide all ethnic groups the right to peacefully live with their own traditions and cultures by self-determination without conflicting with common morality and national security. This will of multiculturalism might demonstrate the development of building multiculturalism in Thai society. However, although the multiculturalism content of Section 30 is sustained from the preceding two constitutions, there are some differences between the previous text and the latest one. The same section in the 2550 (2007) Constitution states “the state *must*,” not “the state *should*,” as the 2560 (2017) Constitution does. This leads to the question: to what degree is the Thai state concerned with multiculturalism on a practical level? (Vajirakachorn, 2018: 69-94).

As was mentioned above, the concept of multiculturalism, a product of the West, was introduced into Thai society in the 2000s. It can be understood following the explanation of Baogang He (2005): Asian countries use the idea of multiculturalism on different levels depending on local and global contexts, such as historical context, political system, state security, economic contribution, and socio-cultural value. Hence, the idea of multiculturalism has been transformed into a localized practice (Sunanta, 2013). The state can never regard the idea of multiculturalism as being above the ideology of national assimilation and integration. The right to differences can be solely the rhetoric or discourse of so-called “state multiculturalism” (Gunew, 2001; Sunanta, 2013). Similarly, the Thai state practices multiculturalism in terms of ethnic and cultural festivals, ethnic craft products, and rhetorical policies (Sunanta, 2013). The state has never regarded ethno-cultural diversity in terms of access to resources. This approach is what Nidhi Eoseewong termed the depoliticizing of ethno-cultural diversity (Eoseewong, 2012). Some Thai scholars argue that the Thai state has never recognized the idea of multiculturalism beyond state unity and Thai nationalism (Santasombat, 2008; Thangsifar, 2009; Wongyannawa, 2008; Ganjanapan, 2012). This leads to the crucial question of whether multiculturalism has yet arrived in Thai society (Horstmann, 2013a). Similarly, Yoko Hiyami asks how the idea of multiculturalism (as a global trend) can develop in the Thai nation-state, whose core process of nation-state

building has been to generate “Others” in order to construct “Thainess” (Hiyami, 2006).

In this regard, Alexander Horstmann (2013b) proposes an alternative approach to studying multiculturalism in Thai society, which is focusing on everyday life dimensions (seen from below or grassroots levels). Because of the realities of urbanization and rural society having changed rapidly since the beginning of the 2000s, causing diverse ethnic peoples to relocate to urban areas and become involved with labor and consumer markets, the focus of multicultural issues has shifted to livelihood relations, patterns of majority-minority relations, and tactics of resistance of the minority (Horstmann, 2013a). Especially since that period, according to Erik Cohen, after the Thaksin government encouraged “quality tourists,” Thailand’s tourism industry has grown hastily and towards ethnic communities (e.g. the expanding of national infrastructure into ethnic communities). The economic policies have caused rapid social change, particularly the destruction of traditional livelihoods, such as swidden agriculture. In the context of ethnic tourism, ethnic communities have gradually separated their daily lives from the natural environment and transformed themselves into part of the “tourist sphere,” which is subsidized by the state and external entrepreneurs. Subsequently, the tourist sphere has transformed ethnic communities into authentic tourist sites, cultural villages, ethnic theme parks, and ethnic museums (Cohen, 2008). Furthermore, regarding the resistant tactics of ethnic peoples responding to the negative effects of such socioeconomic changes, the idea of multiculturalism from below has emerged. It is evidenced in the works of Prasit Leepreecha (2013a, 2019), which demonstrate how the international discourse of indigenous peoples is practiced in Thai society as a grassroots multicultural movement in the form of the Network and the Council of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand (NIPT and CIPT). Looking from the grassroots angle, Leepreecha argues that the “Others”—who were previously referred to as “tribal peoples” and ethnic minorities who threatened national security, as defined by the state—are now becoming indigenous peoples (Leepreecha, 2013a, 2019). In other words, the becoming of

indigenous peoples can be considered as the becoming of multiculturalism in Thai society that responds to the challenging questions posed by Horstmann and Hiyami.

Despite the fact that Western-based multiculturalism as state policy does not yet exist in Thai society, multiculturalism from below has already emerged. Arguably, to study multiculturalism in Thai society, one needs to initially consider all multicultural issues from lower levels, such as the space of encounters in everyday life, livelihood relations in urban areas, and grassroots movements. Some outcomes of state multiculturalism, such as ethnic craft products and ethno-cultural festivals that may be regarded as the depoliticizing of ethno-cultural diversity (Eosewong, 2012), need to be reevaluated from the perspective of multiculturalism from below. This article reevaluates the multicultural event known as the Cultural Square in responding to the challenges of the state of multiculturalism in Thai society.

### Research Methods

This study used the qualitative research method to gather data and information from key informants (the relevant actors), historical/academic archives, and online sources. In collecting the data and information, the study used the “ethnographically oriented approach,” utilizing ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews as tools to explore how cultural diversity was experienced and negotiated on the ground in “encounter spaces” (Wise and Velayutham, 2009). In the present study, the encounter space is the Cultural Square, a space where 17 ethnic groups of Chiang Rai–Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, Akha, Khmu, Lahu, Lisu, Mien, Hmong, Lwa, Keren, Bisu, Dara-ang, Tai Khun, Tai Ya, Tai Yai, Tai Yong, and Isan–present their cultures and identities through the stage and the ethnic theme villages.

Rather than positioning the Cultural Square as a physical research site, the study regards this square as a “strategic circumstantial research site,” where the relevant actors (i.e. the local government, ethnic representatives, and tourists) are in power relationships with one another (Lee, 2015: 78) for the sake of their concerns/interests. Thus,

this strategic research site can be investigated according to three spatial dimensions. The first dimension is a physical space for the performance of multi-ethnic cultures. The second is the space of ethno-cultural diversity, the crucial component of the Cultural Square which represents Chiang Rai’s ethnic diversity, and is commoditized as touristic commodities, such as traditional ethnic houses, ethnic livelihoods, equipment, products, and performances. And the last dimension is the space of power relations among the relevant actors, the ethnic hosts, and officials of the local government (Chiang Rai Provincial Administrative Organization—the PAO) who interact with one another in the Cultural Square.

The data and information originate from the Cultural Square event, which the author researched during the first week of the three-week Chiang Rai Flower Festivals of 2019 and 2020. The research methods were mainly the following: observing the event in general, observing the opening ceremonies and stage performances, participating in some ethnic activities in the ethnic villages, interviewing tourists, and in-depth interviewing of the main actors (i.e. local government officials and ethnic hosts).

### Findings

The findings classify the space of the Cultural Square into three dimensions: the context of the Cultural Square, the Cultural Square as state multiculturalism, and the Cultural Square as a space of various different interests/opportunities that ethnic hosts can gain.

### The Research Site Contexts

Within the context of tourism’s flourishing, generated from regional economic development since the late 1990s (Kaosa-ad, 2005; Cohen, 2008), ethnic and cultural diversity has been used as a core mechanism to drive Chiang Rai’s tourism industry since the early 2000s. The touristic slogan, “*City of art and diversity*”—introduced by the local government and civil society movements<sup>3</sup>—conforms to the vital touristic

<sup>3</sup> The local governments are the Provincial Administrative Organization and the Municipality of Chiang Rai city, as well as the civil society movements, for instance, the Art Bridge Association.



city of Chiang Rai, which presents a variety of attractions, including unique temples, ethno-cultural performances, and natural settings. A major tourist event is the Chiang Rai Flower Festival, exemplifying the type of cultural event which features ethnic and cultural diversity and, which, crucially, contributes to Chiang Rai's tourism industry. Although the event's name, the Chiang Rai Flower Festival, does not mention ethnic or cultural diversity, the background, theme, and displays of the festival are connected to ethnic activities. Initially, the festival's background began in Pu Chi Fah, a highland area of Chiang Rai where ethnic communities reside.

In 2004, Rattana Chongsuttanamanee, chief executive of the Provincial Administrative Organization at that time, was in search of a tourism policy. On a visit to Pu Chi Fah, she observed the remarkable potential of this area: stunning scenery, a suitable site for growing temperate flowers (e.g. tulips and lilies), and local people who create distinctive ethnic handicrafts that would be marketable. This plan, it seemed, could subsidize ethnic communities as a livelihood opportunity. Subsequently, Rattana initiated the first Chiang Rai Flower Festival near Chiang Rai's downtown, from December to January, 2005 (Chiang Rai Municipality, 2018). The festival gradually grew in both scale and number of visitors. The planting scape became larger every year, and the exhibited plants came to include not only various kinds of temperate flowers, but also vascular plants, such as ferns brought from Mae Sai District. After the sixth festival, the site was relocated to the Mae Kok riverside in the eastern part of downtown.

Aside from temperate flowers and local products from other provinces (i.e. products from the OTOP program), the ethnic activities have been the festival's highlight. These activities are held in an area called the "Cultural Square," a space where Chiang Rai's ethnic groups present their cultures and identities via the stage and the ethnic theme villages. Within the Cultural Square, tourists can experience and enjoy aspects of ethnically diverse ways of life, such as traditional houses, clothing, foods, craftwork products, livelihood displays, and performances. This cultural space is organized alongside exquisite flower displays,

and together they attract over a thousand visitors per day for a month. Generally, for Chiang Rai people, this is the most notable cultural event as it consists of vibrant cultural diversity as well as a vast assortment of vivid foliage.

The 17 ethnic groups in the Cultural Square can be divided into three categories according to connections in their histories, cultural traits, and dwelling areas. The first category consists of the Tai-speaking groups, who comprise the majority of Chiang Rai people: Tai Yuan and Tai Lue who have inhabited Chiang Rai since the Lanna era in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Tai Khuen and Tai Yai (and some Tai Lue) who relocated to Chiang Rai from the Lanna period to the Cold War period (the 1960s–1970s), and Isan people who settled in Chiang Rai in the late 1960s (Srisawat, 1950; Kinawong, 2012; Nasomsong, 2012). The second category consists of the highland ethnic groups—i.e. Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Mien, and Hmong—who are recognized publicly in a variety of colorful images of Chiang Rai (especially in the tourism industry). The highland ethnic groups were mostly displaced from neighboring countries (Myanmar, Laos, and China) to Chiang Rai during the Second World War and the Cold War. However, some highland ethnic communities were already living in northern Thailand before the emergence of the Thai nation state (Walker, 2010; Leepreecha, 2013b). The last category consists of the indigenous groups<sup>4</sup>—Karen, Lwa, and Khmu, who are the original people of the Mekong subregion. While the Lwa, the Karen, and the Dara-ang generally reside on the western side of northern Thailand (i.e. Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai, and Chiang Rai), Khmu communities primarily relocated from Laos to Chiang Rai during the Second World War and the Cold War (Evrard, 2011). The 17 ethnic groups to a certain extent represent Chiang Rai's ethnic diversity. Although there are more than 30 ethnic groups in Chiang Rai, according to Boonchouy Srisawat's famous book, *30 Nations in Chiang Rai*, most

<sup>4</sup> In general, regarding the classification of ethnic groups by the Ministry of Interior, Karen and Dara-ang peoples are the highlanders. However, this study categorizes the Karen and the Dara-ang as indigenous groups: the Karen, Lwa and Khmu were the native people in this region before the creation of the modern nation-states, as well as the Dara-ang, who belong to the indigenous Mon-Khmer linguistic group.

are subgroups of the 17 groups. For instance, the Lue Chiang Rung, Lue Nam Ou, and Lue Jang are subgroups of the Tai Lue; the White Hmong and Black Hmong are subgroups of the Hmong; and the Yang Kaler is a subgroup of the Karen (Srisawat, 1950).



Figure 1 The Cultural Square (left) and the Chiang Rai Flower Festival (right)

### The Cultural Square as State Multiculturalism

The author observed in 2019 and 2020 that the Cultural Square communicated the idea of state multiculturalism. Within the Cultural Square, there are 17 ethnic theme villages. The houses, according to their house patterns, can be categorized into three groups: 1) the highland ethnic groups in which the house is abutted on the ground, and the main structures are made of bamboo; 2) the Tai-speaking groups, whose dwellings are high stilt houses made of wood; and 3) the indigenous groups who live in half-stilt houses made of bamboo. These traditional ethnic houses are located around the center area, which consists of the performing stage, the space for audiences, and the local cuisine zone.

On each night of the event about a thousand people visited the Flower Festival, and half went to see the Cultural Square. They spent time looking at the ethnic houses and buying ethnic products and foods. Afterwards, the visitors attended ethnic performances on the center stage presented by hosts who also provided ethnic products and interacted by presenting some information, such as histories of the ethnic group's relocation, livelihood activities, and community backgrounds. However, most of the visitors enjoyed buying ethnic foods and watching ethnic performances more than learning about the groups themselves.

The author observed that the Cultural Square presents Chiang Rai's ethnic diversity mainly as what might be called "colorfulness under Thainess." That is to say, in the opening ceremony, the guest of honor of the Flower Festival since 2012 has been Princess Ubonrat, who is a vital symbol of Thainess. Moreover, another special guest is the governor of Chiang Rai province, which is part of the state authority. The performances demonstrated that Chiang Rai's ethnic groups had been among the core components of the Lanna kingdom, but had become a part of the Thai state, as seen in the narrative of the performance: "various ethnic peoples peacefully living under the kingdom and the Thai state." The guest of honor of the Cultural Square also repeated that this event reintroduced Boonchouy Srisawat<sup>5</sup> and his book, *30 Nations in Chiang Rai* (Srisawat, 1950), one of the earliest and most famous works on ethnic groups of Chiang Rai (and of Thailand). Furthermore, within the ethnic theme villages, the hosts exhibited their traditional cultural traits, such as livelihood equipment and traditional clothing. Some of the displays showed the influence of the Thai Royal Family. For instance, the Lisu theme village presented Lisu traditional knowledge of herbs and cuisine related to the Sufficiency Economy of King Rama IX; the Isan theme village displayed the items used in a well-being ceremony (*su khwan*) (บายศรีสู่ขวัญ) which was placed under the image of King Rama IX; and the Yong theme village demonstrated the success of community development under the livelihood development project of Princess Sirindhorn. The significance of the opening ceremony and the ethnic presentations is that now, unlike in the past, the ethnic groups have an opportunity to express their cultures and identities. However, the presentations demonstrated merely a variety of minority cultures which are under the domination of mainstream culture—Thainess. Thus, the event was not an expression of the rights to differences, but solely the rhetoric or discourse of so-called "state multiculturalism" (Gunew, 2001; Sunanta, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Boonchouy Srisawat was a Chiang Rai Member of Parliament under the government of Phibun Songkhram (1948-1957). He is academically known as a pioneer of Thai anthropology because of his ethnographies, especially the work, *30 Nations in Chiang Rai*.

Viewed in this way, the Cultural Square presented ethnic identities and cultures in their essential forms, which are isolated and fixed. This is the influence of Boonchouy Srisawat's work, which states that among the 30 ethnic groups in Chiang Rai, there are Tai-speaking groups (e.g. Tai Yuan, Tai Lue and Tai Yai) and highlanders (e.g. Hmong, Mian, Akha, Lisu, and Khmu). The first groups had been coming to Thailand for centuries, long before it was a nation, while the other groups have been displaced recently from neighboring countries (Myanmar, Laos, and China),<sup>6</sup> hence they lacked Thainess. His work provides primary information about languages, clothing, livelihoods, rituals, and traditions that those ethnic groups have constantly preserved (Srisawat, 1950). However, it views ethnic cultures as the preliminary stage of Thai culture and somewhat prejudicially presents those ethnic groups as exotic and uncivilized. For a half century, Boonchouy's romanticized image of ethnic diversity has not only represented Chiang Rai's diversity, but also has been accepted by the majority of Thais, especially by the government.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the romanticized images, the opening ceremony, the ethnic performances, and the displays in ethnic theme villages are national beautifications of Thainess. This implies what Nidhi Eoseewong (2012) called the depoliticizing of ethno-cultural diversity: ethnic and cultural diversity devalued into mere ethnic products, cultural materials, and colorful cultural events, while the rights to resources and citizenship are ignored. Thus, the multicultural phenomenon in the Cultural Square can solely manifest itself as the marginality of Thainess, which is different from celebrating differences or rights to differences, the core ideas of multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995; Coates, 2008: 316-318; Song, 2020). Those multi-ethnic groups can be regarded as a part of Thai society; however, they are accepted solely in terms of touristic authenticity, while being ignored in sociopolitical aspects, i.e. some ethnic groups still lack citizenship rights. Thus, whether the Cultural Square signifies symbolizes the idea of state multiculturalism is debatable (Sunanta, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> However, Walker (2010) and Leepreecha (2013b) state that some highland ethnic groups had settled in northern Thailand before the emergence of the Thai nation state in the 1890s.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, in 1997, the *30 Nations in Chiang Rai* was selected by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF), as one of a hundred recommended books for Thai people.

### **The Cultural Square as Space of Various Concerns**

However, it is inaccurate to refer to the Cultural Square as a space of state multiculturalism. While all of the ethnic theme villages presented their identities and cultures in response to cultural preservation and restoration, viewed from the hosts' perspective, through an ethnographically-oriented approach, they have not demonstrated multi-ethnic cultures as part of the national beauty of Thainess. But the ethnic hosts presented their cultures in various concerns/interests. The Cultural Square in some ways can be viewed as an ethnic theme park: the relevant actors displayed and negotiated ethnic authenticity relating to economic, social, and political concerns (Cohen, 1988; Yang, 2007; Yang, 2011; Trupp, 2011). Here, this article endeavors to highlight the ethnic hosts' concerns/interests according to the three categories of ethnic theme villages – the indigenous groups, the highland ethnic groups, and the Tai-speaking groups. These three categories are defined not only by their shared cultural traits and dwelling areas, but also by their shared backgrounds. The indigenous groups are Chiang Rai's somewhat marginalized groups; the highland groups' leaders have experience in non-government organizations (NGOs); and the Tai-speaking groups comprise the majority of Chiang Rai, with strong ongoing relationships with the other groups.

#### **1. The indigenous groups: Restoring cultures and identities**

Chiang Rai's indigenous groups are the Bisu, Lwa, Khmu, Karen, and Dara-ang, who settled in the Mekong sub-region before the arrival of Tai-speaking groups (e.g. Tai Yuan and Tai Lue). However, after the Thai nation-state was established, those indigenous groups have been ignored. Although they have been associated with national ethnic networks, such as the Network and the Council of Indigenous People in Thailand (the NIPT and CIPT), because of the rise of civil society in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Leepreecha, 2019), they were still disregarded by the public because of their small numbers. Only in 2005 when the Cultural Square was organized, did the indigenous groups have an opportunity to introduce their identities and cultures.



The Bisu are found only in Thailand and only in Chiang Rai. The leader of Bisu communities, one of the ethnic hosts in the Cultural Square, said that there are only three Bisu communities, consisting of a total of 500 people, in Chiang Rai. When the Bisu language was studied two decades ago at Mahidol University, it was found that it is distinct from the other ethnic languages, but had not been widely recognized. However, their participation in the Cultural Square provided an opportunity to introduce Bisu identity to the public. The event offered a revival space for their identity, which has nearly vanished due to assimilation by majority (Tai Yuan and Thai) cultures. Although Bisu culture is mixed with these other cultures, the Bisu language, according to one leader, is “a unique one that can be clearly identified,” while another stated, “Only in Chiang Rai, can you meet Bisu” (Ounreun [Pseudonym], 2019). Likewise, the Khmu, the Lwa, and the Karen used the ethnic theme villages to introduce their traditions and identities, such as livelihood equipment and forest products, which are related to the sustainability of the ecosystem. In addition, the Khmu host mentioned another concern beyond the Cultural Square: that is, a study center for Khmu culture and identity in their communities, for which the PAO provides financial and management support (Dee [Pseudonym], 2019).

## 2. Highland ethnic groups: Connecting global trends

The highland ethnic groups are the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, and Mien. The Lisu presentations in the Cultural Square were an explicit example of the concerns of the highland ethnic groups. Besides displaying traditional cultures as an aspect of ethnic authenticity, the highland ethnic theme villages also addressed different interests at different times. The representative of the Lisu theme village provided information about how the highland ethnic groups engaged the Cultural Square. There were three phases, as follows: the first was to introduce the diverse ethnic cultures to the public; the second was to display ethnic colorfulness and commodities; and the third was to connect the localities of ethnic cultures to global trends. For example, in the latest phase, the “You and Me Garden” was a backyard garden displayed in the Lisu theme village. There were Lisu vegetables and herbs, the main

ingredients of Lisu traditional foods and medicines. This garden was used as a bridge between Lisu traditional materials and the global trend of food security (Supot [Pseudonym], 2019).

It can be concluded, as the Lisu host said, that the Cultural Square provided both cultural and social spaces where the highland ethnic people could be proud of their own identities and cultures, as well as examine their ethnic potentiality to public and international perceptions. They did so by using the NGO networks that they have been involved with since the rise of the civil society movement in Thailand in the 1990s (Leepreecha, 2019). In addition, the Cultural Square showed that the highland ethnic peoples can adapt their livelihoods to socio-economic changes. For instance, the Akha communities, whose land is suitable for planting coffee, have played an important role in the coffee industry through the support of academic and business institutions. Likewise, the Hmong, who have had trade experience for centuries, can connect to transnational trade through their international kinship networks (Supot [Pseudonym], 2019). Thus, for the concerns of the highland ethnic groups within the Cultural Square, their ethnic presentations do not solely involve Thainess, but also connections between their cultures and livelihoods with global trends and the national economy.

## 3. Tai-speaking groups: Building social networks

The Tai-speaking groups who joined the Cultural Square were representatives of the Tai Lue, Tai Yuan, Tai Yai, Tai Kheun, Tai Yong, and Isan. The author found that the Isan and the Tai Lue used the Cultural Square as a space for building social networks more than did the others. That is because the Tai Yuan, who comprise the majority of the Chiang Rai population, prefer to see the Cultural Square as a space for cultural presentations. The Tai Yong are a restored group after having been a part of the Tai Yuan or Tai Lue;<sup>8</sup> and the Tai Yai and Tai Kheun have strong networks with the people of the Shan State in Myanmar. Hence,

<sup>8</sup> Linguistically, the Tai Yong are part of the Tai Lue ethnic group. In northern Thailand, the Tai Yong somehow integrated with Tai Yuan, the majority. However, since the localism movement has emerged in Thailand in the 1990s, many Tai Yong communities restore their identities differently from Tai Lue and Tai Yuan.

the Tai Lue and Isan groups are significant ethnographic cases in the present study.

The Isan people in Chiang Rai became an ethnic group of Chiang Rai relatively recently. Because of a drought in the northeast in the late 1950s, many Isan people relocated to certain areas in Chiang Rai. After a decade of encountering cultural differentiation with the Tai Yuan, Isan people then adapted to the local culture, often by marriage. Hence, the young generations of Isan people in Chiang Rai identify as both Isan and Tai Yuan. In this respect, the Cultural Square was a social space where Isan people could introduce their hybrid identity, as the “*Isan Lanna*,” to the public. Within the Cultural Square there was a display of essential Isan culture which highlighted equipment of livelihood, home-grown vegetables, traditional textiles, and the *ponglang* or traditional xylophone (Sribungorn [Pseudonym], 2019). In particular, from the well-being ceremony (บายศรีสู่ขวัญ), which was performed beneath the image of King Rama IX, it could be seen that the livelihood of Isan people in Chiang Rai is integrated into the majority Tai Yuan and Thainess.

In addition to the presentations of traditional Isan culture, the identity of Isan Lanna, and the monarchic royalty, the Cultural Square also provided a social networking space for Isan people in Chiang Rai. The representative of the Isan theme village stated that the contribution from the Cultural Square is Isan networking. Although Isan people in Chiang Rai have participated in the Isan network for thirty years, the Cultural Square made the network more secure. Once a year the Isan network would gather within the Cultural Square, and exchange a variety of information – from daily life stories, to economic topics, and to political issues – that they could share and use to support one another. Moreover, the Cultural Square as a social networking space, provided an opportunity to build other ethnic networks. For instance, the Association of Culture and Ethnic Tourism of Chiang Rai (the ACEC), which was formed in the latest Flower Festival (in 2020), was initiated from networking among 17 ethnic hosts, of whom the founders are the representatives of Tai-speaking groups.

In addition, the Tai Lue theme village is another explicit case representing the concerns of Tai-speaking groups. The ethnic displays in the Tai Lue theme village generally correlated to the model of the Isan theme village: traditional exhibitions and social networking. Furthermore, through the Cultural Square as a social space, some members of Tai Lue networks in both Chiang Rai and Phayao utilized the Cultural Square as a space to advocate for the stateless Tai Lue in the Chiang Kham<sup>9</sup> area. In addition, the networking among ethnic groups in the Cultural Square was beneficial for other cultural events, such as “the Ten Ethnic Groups of Mae Sai,” in which the Tai Lue of Mae Sai district were the main organizers (Nhansom [Pseudonym], 2019).

### Conclusion and Discussion

Generally speaking, the events within the Cultural Square can be seen as a matter of state multiculturalism. For example, the opening ceremony and the ethnic theme villages demonstrated that Chiang Rai’s ethnic and cultural diversity is depoliticized into colorful cultures under the mainstream culture of Thainess. Nonetheless, in researching the Cultural Square in 2019 and 2020, the author did not perceive the Cultural Square as a space solely representing the idea of state multiculturalism. Instead, it can be viewed as an ethnic theme park where the relevant actors displayed and negotiated their ethnic authenticity relating to economic, social, and political concerns (Cohen, 1988; Yang, 2007; Yang, 2011; Trupp, 2011). Regarding the various concerns of the three groups demonstrated above, they involve introducing the ethnic identity of the indigenous groups, connecting global trends of the highland ethnic groups, and social networking of the Tai-speaking groups. It can be said that the concerns of ethnic hosts originated from their own desires beyond Boonchouy’s romanticized image of the colorful diversity of Chiang Rai. Consequently, seeing from the lens of ethnic theme parks, which provided opportunities to some of Chiang Rai’s ethnic groups, the Cultural Square can be considered an example of everyday

<sup>9</sup> Chiang Kham is a district of Phayao province, and is a city of the largest number of Tai Lue in Thailand.

multiculturalism and a micro-political space where cultural diversity is perceived, conceived, constructed, experienced, and enacted (Wise and Velayutham, 2009: 1-13; Colombo, 2014), particularly by the ethnic hosts who practice their cultural diversity regarding their various concerns. Hence, such tactical practices of the ethnic hosts can be reconsidered as multicultural issues from below (Horstmann, 2013b; Leepreecha, 2013a, 2019).

Unlike conventional multiculturalism, the everyday multiculturalism manifested in the Cultural Square cannot provide group-differentiated rights and liberal multiculturalism as state policies (Kymlicka, 1995; Song, 2020) for ethnic people in the entire society. However, it at least brings up the significance of celebrating cultural differences, which are presented as the various identities that compose a pluralistic society (Coates, 2008: 316-318). Hence, the Cultural Square somehow manifests in the light of multiculturalism, especially in the micro-political space of the idea of everyday multiculturalism, where cultural diversity and differences are perceived, conceived, constructed, experienced, and enacted (Wise and Velayutham, 2009; Colombo, 2014). Despite not being an everyday space but representing a space of social life (i.e. livelihood, community issues, and social relations), the Cultural Square as a multicultural festival provides the relevant actors (ethnic hosts) with a micro-political space to contest the dominated image, redefine their identity, challenge hegemonic power, and regenerate social life (Veronis, 2006; Penrose, 2013; Taucar, 2016; Waitt, 2008). Examples of the latter are the cultural restoration of indigenous groups, the engaging global trends of the highland ethnic groups, and the social networking of Tai-speaking groups.

Nevertheless, how can the significance of multiculturalism of the Cultural Square be an ideal type for understanding multiculturalism in Thai society? With respect to Horstmann's statement, because of the rapid changes in society in the 2000s, the focal point of multicultural issues has shifted from state policies to power relations between the majority (the state) and minority (ethnic people) (Horstmann, 2013b; Leepreecha, 2013a, 2019). As mentioned above, the ethnic hosts did

not solely present their cultures according to the local and provincial governments' prospect of integrating ethnic culture into Thainess. But the multi-ethnic presentations within the Cultural Square did relate to a variety of ethnic peoples' concerns which are indeed shaped by socioeconomic changes that have approached ethnic communities in the last three decades, especially the influence of the tourism industry (Kaosa-ad, 2005; Cohen, 2008). The concerns of the ethnic hosts—such as the cultural restoration of the Bisu, the citizenship issue of the Tai Lue, the engaging global trends of the Lisu, and social networking among Isan people in Chiang Rai—examine how the ethnic groups of Chiang Rai are negotiating with the majority to overcome images of themselves as “uncivilized hill tribes.” They do so showing their potentiality to public and international perceptions, as well as to create spaces for social networking (of the Isan) and political advocating (of the stateless Tai Lue). Viewed this way, the ethnic hosts are in some way expressing group-differentiated rights for ethnic people, whose concerns are related, not only to Chiang Rai, but to Thai society as a whole.

Moreover, the status of multiculturalism in Thai society, despite being mentioned in the latest Thai constitution, is narrow in terms of the state's legal and policy practices. As regards the significance of the Cultural Square, the multicultural phenomena in Thai society can be solely witnessed in the space of the tourism industry. This responds to the argument of Chayan Vaddhanaphuti (2005) on ethnicity and the Thai state. Politically, the Thai state has never included the ethnic people in the same way as the Thai majority (i.e. full rights of access to resources). On the contrary, economically, it is the forces of globalization, the state's development policies and grassroots movements since the 1980s that have opened more space for the ethnic people, particularly in the tourism industry (Vaddhanaphuti, 2005). Nonetheless, one might see the practice of multiculturalism from below in Thai society through the grassroots movement of the Network and the Council of Indigenous People in Thailand (the NIPT and CIPT). Perceiving the dynamics of the NIPT and CIPT since the 1990s, through the global indigenous movements, ethnic people in Thai society have had an active

role in leading the movement beyond the state or external organizations. An especially significant movement was the submission of the draft of the proposed act to the National Legislative Assembly in 2015. The draft demonstrates how ethnic people practice self-identifying as “indigenous peoples” to negotiate with the state for citizenship rights (Leepreecha, 2019). Viewed in this way, for the Cultural Square, most ethnic representatives are members of the NIPT and CIPT. The cultural presentations conducted by ethnic representatives to some degree imply political movements at the national level, such as deconstructing the image of indigenous and highland ethnic groups as uncivilized and resolving the stateless issue of the Tai Lue.

The status of multiculturalism in Thai society needs to be revised. This article argues that multiculturalism in Thai society cannot be perceived solely as state multiculturalism, but multiculturalism from below. Boonchouy’s romanticized image of ethnic diversity in Chiang Rai (and in Thai society) can no longer be considered definitive. An alternative approach to understand multiculturalism in Thai society is to conceive ethnic and cultural diversity from below, from grassroots perspectives, or from everyday viewpoints. Thus, one can see the Cultural Square in its entirety as an elaborate floral and cultural exhibit, an ethnic theme park, a micro-public space, and a space of multiculturalism from below.

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