

Dynamics of Japanese Transnational Community and Its Impacts on Local Development: A Case Study of Ethnic Communities in Mae Suai District, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand

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Abstract

This study aimed to 1) explore the dynamics of the Japanese transnational community under the Rungarun (dawn) Project in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, 2) analyze the international and global dimensions of cultural exchange that emerged from the project, and 3) examine the impacts of these dynamics on local development within ethnic communities in Mae Suai District, Chiang Rai Province. A qualitative research methodology was employed, comprising document analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. Data collection included in-depth interviews with 30 Japanese participants and 40 locals, participant and non-participant observations, and focus group discussions. The findings revealed that the Rungarun Project fostered a Japanese transnational community through shared values in education, sustainable agriculture, and the preservation of ethnic cultures. Japanese individuals from both Thailand and abroad participated through on-site involvement, financial support, and community-based activities, forming an expanding transnational network. This network positively impacted local development in ethnic communities. For example, at Ban Lo Jor, women practiced traditional weaving to increase income and preserve cultural heritage. At Ban Pa Kia, sustainable agricultural practices enhanced household income and promoted community cooperation.

The study suggested that the formation of modern transnational communities was no longer confined by geographical proximity, but it was shaped by shared values and interests. These communities developed through broad social networks that supported cultural exchange, knowledge sharing, and sustainable local development.

Keywords: Japanese transnational community, Community beyond place, Local development

Introduction

The movement of people across international borders for education, travel, employment, and marriage is a widespread global phenomenon. This movement significantly impacts demographic, social, cultural, economic, and political landscapes in both origin and destination countries. Consequently, such migration gives rise to transnational communities—communities that extend beyond geographical boundaries and are formed through shared interests, values, and identities rather than proximity alone. It also leads to transnational communities, which transcend geographical boundaries and create connections beyond specific locations.

Globally, transnational communities emerge as significant phenomena influencing demographic, social, cultural, economic, and political dynamics of origin and destination countries. A transnational community, or a community beyond place, differs from traditional communities as it is often formed based on shared interests, identities, or values rather than geographical proximity. Individuals can simultaneously

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belong to multiple communities that exist both online and offline (Delanty, 2008). This form of interaction aligns with the broader dimensions of global cultural flows. These flows occur through distinct scapes—ethnoscape, technoscape, financescape, mediascape, and ideoscape—which collectively describe how people, technologies, capital, media, and ideas circulate globally, reshaping societies and cultures (Appadurai, 1996). This interconnectedness fosters the exchange of ideas and cultures, leading to the emergence of dynamic, hybrid identities and a more globalized worldview. These transnational interactions not only redefine community boundaries but also highlight the transformative role of global flows in shaping modern societal structures.

In Thailand, various types of contemporary communities have emerged, including transnational communities such as exiles, legal and illegal migrants, students, and leisure tourists. Among these groups, the Japanese represent a significant presence, both as short-term visitors and long-term residents. In 2012, it was estimated that 51,767 Japanese were residing in Thailand (Japanese Embassy in Thailand, 2021). This number has continued to grow, driven by push factors from Japan and pull factors from Thailand, reflecting broader trends in transnational migration and settlement.

Chiang Rai, the northernmost major city in Thailand, has become a notable destination for Japanese residents. It has become a focal point for Japanese residents engaging in various transnational activities. According to the Japanese Consulate, approximately 300 Japanese individuals reside in Chiang Rai, though actual numbers may be 2–3 times higher (Japanese Association Chiang Rai, 2009). Japanese influences, such as restaurants and language schools, are visible throughout the city. Many Japanese relocate to Chiang Rai due to marriage, work, or short-term volunteer opportunities at local schools and foundations, while others visit annually for brief stays.

The Japanese transnational community in Chiang Rai is not merely a group of Japanese people residing abroad but a network that is continuously evolving and developing. One significant initiative is the Rungarun Project under the “Foundation for Education and Development for the Highlander,” established over 30 years ago with support from a Japanese entity. The project aims to assist highland communities, primarily ethnic minority groups facing socio-economic challenges. Its key objectives include providing educational support to children and youth, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, preserving traditional crafts such as weaving and embroidery, and fostering cultural exchange among ethnic groups, Thai citizens, and Japanese participants. Japanese residents from Chiang Mai and Bangkok, along with individuals from Japan, actively contribute to the foundation through teaching, donating, and volunteering efforts, highlighting the collaborative and transnational community of Japanese involvement in Chiang Rai’s development. As part of globalization, the Rungarun Project exemplifies how cultural exchange between Japan and Thailand extends beyond national borders, fostering extensive social and economic networks. Studying the dynamics of this network helps to understand its impact on the economic, social, and cultural development of local communities.

In Northern Thailand, this Rungarun Project represents a dynamic interaction between local ethnic communities and global influences. It serves as a platform that transcends national boundaries, facilitating cross-border exchanges and sustainable development in Mae Suai District, Chiang Rai Province. This study examines the evolving nature of this network, exploring how it facilitates cross-border exchanges and contributes to local development in Mae Suai District, Chiang Rai Province. By examining the contributions of Japanese participants in Chiang Rai and Japan, the research highlights the role of transnational networks in driving cross-cultural exchange and fostering community growth.

Purpose of study

1. To investigate the dynamics of the Japanese transnational community, or community beyond place, as manifested through the Rungarun Project.
2. To examine the growth and development of transnational connections within the Japanese community in order to gain insights into the global cultural dimensions of their engagement.
3. To analyze the impacts of the Japanese transnational community on the economic, social, and cultural development of ethnic communities in Mae Suai District, Chiang Rai Province.

Literature review

This research draws upon three foundational frameworks:

1. Community Studies and Community Beyond Place

Community studies in social sciences examine interactions at local, national, and global levels. Once defined by geographic proximity, communities now transcend physical boundaries, reflecting globalization's impact on social structures and networks. Barry Wellman and Milena Giulia argue that these communities are defined by meaningful interactions rather than geographic proximity, reflecting a shift toward interest-based or affinity communities (Wellman & Giulia, 1997). Etienne Wenger's concept of Communities of Practice further explores professional and shared-interest communities as platforms for collective learning and knowledge exchange (Wenger, 1998). Scholars like Gerard Delanty expand on this by critiquing geographically bound concepts of community, emphasizing the rise of diverse, fluid, and interest-driven communities enabled by globalization and technological advancements (Delanty, 2008). Individuals now simultaneously engage in multiple communities across online and offline spaces, fostering cultural exchange and social learning.

Scholars such as Yuji Baba extend this framework to analyze communities that transcend geographic boundaries. Baba's study on the Tai Lue community highlights the significance of shared traditions and mutual aid networks in sustaining communal sentiment despite spatial dispersion (Baba, 2014). The rise of globalization has further facilitated transnational communities, which are characterized by shared identities and affiliations that transcend national borders. Heike Dahles, in her study of the ethnic Chinese business community, underscores the adaptability of transnational communities, which rely on shared ethnicity and economic activities rather than spatial proximity to maintain cohesion (Dahles, 2010).

These studies underscore a paradigm shift from traditional, geographically bound definitions of community to the emergence of virtual, interest-driven, and transnational communities. This research focuses on examining the dynamics of the Japanese transnational community under the Rungarun Project, utilizing "Community Beyond Place" as a framework. This framework highlights that communities are no longer confined by physical boundaries but can emerge through social networks, shared interests, and common values. It is applied in this study to analyze how transnational communities are formed and sustained through networks, as well as the role of knowledge exchange in contributing to local community development.

2. The Concept of "Scapes"

Globalization, marked by interconnected economies, cultures, and societies, drives transformative global flows of people, technology, capital, media, and ideas. Arjun Appadurai's Modernity at Large (1996) conceptualizes these flows through five 'scapes':

Ethnoscape: The movement of people (migrants, refugees, diasporas) fosters cultural hybridization and identity transformations.

Technoscape: The global diffusion of technology accelerates connectivity and economic-cultural interactions.

Financescape: Cross-border capital flows reshape economies, driving both growth and vulnerabilities.

Mediascape: Media dissemination influences cultural values, enabling both homogenization and diversification.

Ideoscape: The global circulation of ideologies shapes political narratives and collective identities.

Appadurai (1996) emphasizes the dynamic interplay between global flows and local contexts, demonstrating that globalization is negotiated rather than unidirectional. This study applies Appadurai's framework to analyze Japanese transnational communities in Chiang Rai, Thailand, focusing on how global flows intersect with local cultural practices, economic activities, and identity formations. By examining these intersections, the research highlights globalization's role in reshaping local development and fostering transnational networks. This lens highlights the dynamic interplay between global and local contexts.

3. Previous Studies on Japanese People in Thailand and Beyond

Research on Japanese migration often examines motivations, patterns, and impacts. Jun Nagatomo discusses Japanese lifestyle migrants in Australia, driven by leisure and cultural enrichment rather than economic need, highlighting middle-class transnational mobility (Nagatomo, 2014). Yuko Fujita explores Japanese youth migration to global cities such as New York and London, emphasizing identity formation influenced by transnational media and cultural participation (Fujita, 2009). Ayumi Takenaka highlights how Japanese-Peruvian migrants construct a distinct Nikkei identity through transnational networks, emphasizing the role of collective ties in shaping community boundaries (Takenaka, 1999).

In the context of Thailand, studies focus on retirees and professionals. Pansak Atornturasu et al. examine economic opportunities from elderly Japanese tourism in Chonburi and Rayong (Atornturasu et al., 2019), while Duanjai Lortaravanit and Pratuang Hongsaranakorn identify Thailand as a retirement destination during Japan's economic growth (Lortaravanit, 2004; Hongsaranakorn, 2004). Chiang Mai emerges as a preferred destination due to affordability and quality of life (Liaorungreung, 2010). Existing research predominantly emphasizes economic factors and individual motivations, neglecting socio-cultural dynamics and transnational networks. This study fills these gaps through an ethnographic analysis of Japanese communities in Chiang Rai, focusing on their networks, transnational ties, and interactions with local society.

Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research methodology with an ethnographic fieldwork approach to collect comprehensive data on the Japanese transnational community and its impact on local development through the Rungarun Project. The research fieldwork was conducted over a period of approximately 1.5 years, from May 2022 to September 2023. The research method is as follows:

1. Research Methodology

1.1 Participants

Participants included Japanese individuals participating in the project (residing in Thailand and Japan) and local residents in two ethnic villages, Lo Jor and Pla Kia, in Mae Suai District, Chiang Rai, Thailand. This research is qualitative and anthropological in nature, emphasizing depth and detail rather than a large number of participants. The units of analysis were determined based on the principle of data

saturation (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Hence, selecting 12 participants for each study is appropriate for the anthropological aim of obtaining in-depth understanding from a small group of informants who clearly reflect the research issues under investigation (Bernard, 2017).

1.2 Participant Selection

The research used purposive selection to ensure that participants were selected based on their relevance to the research question. Both male and female participants were selected to avoid gender bias. This approach ensured the inclusion of a diverse participant group, representing various demographics, experiences, and perspectives relevant to the research. The details are as follows:

1.2.1 Rungarun Project (Key Informants): A sample size of 5 participants, consisting of 2 Japanese and 3 Thai individuals. These participants were chosen due to their role in project implementation and their insights into its objectives and impacts.

1.2.2 Japanese Participants in Chiang Rai: A total of 15 Japanese individuals, including volunteers, interns, and project visitors, were interviewed in-depth to gather their experiences and contributions within the project framework.

1.2.3 Japanese Participants in Japan: Another sample of 15 individuals, comprising former or current contributors to the project, were engaged in in-depth interviews to explore their perspectives and involvement. Contact information for these participants was obtained through the Rungarun Project, and interviews were conducted during their participation in relevant activities.

1.2.4 Local Villagers in Lo Jor and Pla Kia: A combined sample of 40 participants (20 from each village) involved in project activities participated in focus group discussions to provide a community-based understanding of the project's outcomes.

2. Data Collection Techniques and Research Instruments

The data collection methods are categorized into two types: primary data and secondary data. The primary data were collected through ethnographic fieldwork using interviews, participant and non-participant observations, and focus group discussions. The research employed interview guidelines, participant observation, and focus group protocols. The researcher observed and participated in farming, handicrafts, cultural programs, lectures, and cultural exchange activities to gain insights into daily practices in villages and project facilities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants, including Japanese and Thai participants, as well as Japanese volunteers, interns, and contributors to the project. Focus group discussions were organized with local villagers from the two ethnic villages, Lo Jor and Pla Kia, to gather community-level insights. Participant and non-participant observations were conducted during various project activities such as sustainable agriculture, weaving, and cultural exchange events to capture practical engagement and social interaction. Translators were used for interviews where participants spoke Japanese, Akha, or Lahu languages. Data were recorded through detailed field notes, audio recordings, photographs, and videos.

Secondary data were used to complement the primary data, including documents and brochures published by the Rungarun Project and the Foundation for Education and Development for Highlanders. Additionally, online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and other visual media related to the project were analyzed to provide further insight and contextual understanding.

3. Research Ethics

Reliability was ensured through consistent data collection procedures, including standardized interview protocols and systematic documentation. The study adhered to ethical research guidelines by obtaining approval (Project Code: EC 23074-23) from the Mae Fah Luang Ethnic Committee on Human

Research. Participants provided informed consent, ensuring they understood the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation.

4. Data Verification

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, triangulation was employed by cross-verifying information obtained from multiple sources, including interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis.

5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic and content analysis to identify key themes such as education, cultural preservation, and sustainable agriculture. The study applied ethnographic analysis guided by the concept of community and the “scapes” theory from anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. Rather than solely categorizing thematic patterns, the research critically examined how Japanese transnational communities in Chiang Rai were shaped by socio-cultural dynamics, transnational networks, and globalization processes.

Results

The research findings are organized into three sections as follows:

1. The Rise of the Rungarun Project: Its History and Mission

The name “Rungarun,” meaning “dawn” in Thai, symbolizes hope and opportunity—a transition from darkness to light through education and development. The project aimed to empower local communities while fostering transnational relationships between Thailand and Japan. It was established in 1987 in Wiang Pa Pao District, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, by Ajarn Hozumi Nakano to address the educational needs of ethnic minority children—such as the Lisu, Akha, and Karen—who lacked access to education beyond Grade 6.

Early challenges, including limited resources and administrative constraints, led to collaboration with Mr. Takeo Toyota, one of the co-founders of the Foundation for Education and Development for Highlanders. The foundation was formally integrated into the project in 1993. In 2000, the Lisu student housing project concluded in alignment with the government’s free education policy. Since then, the project has evolved to focus on scholarships for underprivileged students, sustainable agriculture, and the preservation of ethnic handicrafts, continuing to empower local communities and promote cultural and economic development.

The Rungarun Project’s mission centers on three main activities: Educational support; Sustainable agriculture and environmental development; and Cultural preservation and promotion.

Education: Education remains a cornerstone of the Rungarun Project. Initially, the project addressed the lack of educational access in mountainous areas by providing scholarships to ethnic students, enabling children from disadvantaged families to pursue secondary and higher education.

The project also serves as a learning center for those interested in sustainable agriculture and ethnic cultural preservation. Visitors—including students and interns from universities in Thailand and Japan—can choose from three program options: half-day, full-day, or two-day visits. A half-day lecture costs 1,000 THB, with additional charges of 100–150 THB per person for meals and activities. Participants from both Thailand and Japan take part in these programs. During the visit, they learn about coffee production, sustainable farming practices, and ethnic textile preservation. The project supports ethnic women in enhancing traditional textiles for the Japanese market, and visitors are encouraged to purchase locally made products to support the initiative.

Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Development: The Rungarun Project promotes sustainable agriculture in Mae Suai District, with a focus on villages like Lo Jor and Pla Kia. It supports organic

farming practices, particularly the cultivation of crops such as coffee and red tea, while avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The project purchases agricultural products from participating communities and also manages its own 12-rai organic farm. Key products include coffee, red tea, herbal tea, roselle, pandanus, butterfly pea, dried plum, dried papaya, seasonal fruit jams, and honey. A significant portion of these products is exported to Japan, serving as the main revenue source for Ban Rungarun and sustaining the organization.



Figure 1 Key products from Rungarun Project

Noted. Jaruwan Hatapasu

Cultural Preservation and Promotion: Cultural preservation is a key pillar of the Rungarun Project. It engages ethnic Lahu women in traditional textile production. The initiative began when parents of scholarship recipients introduced Lahu textiles, initially selling bags to Japanese visitors. However, due to limited popularity of the bag designs, the project shifted its focus. Villagers were encouraged to weave textiles that could be transformed into more marketable items such as *obi* (traditional Japanese sashes), fabric furniture, table runners, and other household goods. Ajarn Hozumi supported the initiative by purchasing organic thread, distributing it to women who wove textiles at home, and compensating them for their labor while deducting material costs. The women retained creative freedom in choosing colors and patterns, allowing them to preserve their cultural practices while contributing economically without having to leave their villages.

Cross-Cultural Exchange: Japanese participants in the project—including volunteers, students, and cultural tourists—gained firsthand experience of ethnic culture in Mae Suai. The project facilitated rich cultural exchange between Japan and Thailand, deepening cross-cultural understanding. Japanese participants engaged in immersive learning experiences such as traditional Lahu weaving, sustainable farming, and local culinary practices.

Conversely, Thai ethnic villagers adopted Japanese concepts of product design, resulting in a fusion of traditional and modern practices. Moreover, the project's transnational network enabled the global

dissemination of local culture, with handmade products such as organic coffee, handwoven textiles, and ethnic handicrafts being sold in Japan. This mutual exchange of knowledge, skills, and traditions exemplifies the Rungarun Project's role in facilitating international cultural exchange and global-local partnerships, ultimately contributing to community empowerment and the sustainability of transnational networks.

2. The Project's Revenue Generation and Support Network from Japanese

The project's revenue primarily came from financial contributions made by Japanese individuals and organizations, as well as the sale of handcrafted textiles and organic agricultural products such as coffee in both local and international markets. Japanese volunteers and interns also contributed to the project by providing educational, technical, and financial support. Former volunteers and project supporters in Japan actively organized events such as fair-trade pop-up stores, educational workshops, and intercultural dialogue sessions to promote awareness of Northern Thailand's ethnic heritage.



Figure 2 Ajarn Nozumi showcasing products from the Rungarun Project at a fair-trade pop-up store in Japan

Noted. Ajarn Nakano Hozumi

The support network for the Rungarun Project consisted of dedicated Japanese individuals who significantly contributed to its mission through their time, expertise, and financial assistance. For example, Mr. Hideyuki, a member of the Friendship Asia network, visited Rungarun annually since the 2010s. He actively participated in community activities, such as visiting nursery schools and coffee fields, while promoting Rungarun products like coffee in Japan through his personal network.

Meanwhile, Ms. Akane, who interned in 2018, focused on translating materials from Japanese to English to support the project's visibility. Motivated by her interest in child welfare, she also joined in rice cultivation and continued her support through an annual membership fee.

Mrs. Hiroko first visited Rungarun in 1999 and built strong connections with the students. Over the years, she supported the project through donations and product purchases, while also building a network of like-minded supporters in Japan.

Similarly, Mrs. Eriko, a university professor, organized study tours for her students over the past 15 years. These tours offered hands-on experiences such as homestays, coffee farming, and cultural exchanges. She also promoted the project through Thai-themed cafés at university festivals and awareness seminars, raising funds and encouraging cross-cultural learning.

The support network reflected a multi-layered, mutually beneficial relationship in which Japanese supporters assisted the Rungarun Project through funding, promotion, and direct engagement, while also gaining knowledge and cultural experiences. Their collaborative efforts—ranging from educational tours to product sales—demonstrated the importance of sustained international networks in advancing grassroots initiatives and fostering global solidarity.

Online and Offline Support Platforms: Online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and dedicated websites played a crucial role in helping the Rungarun Project transcend geographic boundaries and connect with a diverse supporter base. These platforms facilitated the sharing of updates, the promotion of events, and the raising of public awareness about the project's initiatives.

Key contributors significantly enhanced the project's operations and outreach. For instance, Ajarn Hozumi Nakano managed and promoted project activities, while Friendship Asia, an NGO, supported the project by importing and selling its products in Japan. Facebook groups such as "Rungarun Coffee Supporter" and organizations like Thai-Ishikawa Japan played an important role in event coordination and publicity.

Offline platforms, such as in-person meetings and community events, were equally vital for building personal relationships and expanding support networks. These interactions created shared experiences that strengthened engagement. In Japan, local events supported by newspapers and posters further fostered connections among supporters, helping raise funds and awareness.

3. Local Village Development through the Rungarun Project

The Rungarun Project focused on ethnic textile preservation, sustainable agriculture, and education to support Lo Jor and Pla Kia villages in Mae Suai District, Chiang Rai. Situated at 1,500 meters above sea level in a mountainous area, these villages faced challenges such as poverty, transportation difficulties, and the drug trade due to their remote location near the Burmese border.

Lo Jor comprised 184 households with 560 residents, while Pla Kia had 220 households and 655 residents. Villagers primarily relied on farming, small-scale vending, and service work in nearby cities such as Chiang Rai or Bangkok. Prior to the project's intervention, the region struggled with agricultural poverty and drug-related issues. Youth, lacking educational opportunities, were vulnerable to addiction and involvement in the drug trade. Farmers faced limited market access, debt from high-interest loans, and crop failures caused by climate change. Inadequate infrastructure and a lack of modern agricultural training further limited productivity.

Economic Development and Women's Empowerment in Lo Jor: The Rungarun Project contributed to the development of Lo Jor and Pla Kia by enhancing their economic, social, and cultural conditions. In Lo Jor, women were empowered through traditional weaving, earning between 300 and 800 baht per cloth and producing approximately five to six pieces per month. This income helped reduce financial stress in their families.

Women appreciated the flexibility of the work. One participant expressed,

“No pressure. I can do it in my free time, and the style depends on me—on my ability.”

This illustrates how the project allowed women to integrate their craft into their daily lives without interfering with other responsibilities. Unlike many income-generating activities that require upfront investment, this initiative reduced barriers to participation. Ajarn Hozumi provided organic thread and materials, while women contributed their time and skills.

As one weaver explained:

“I don’t need to spend any money to start. I just use my time and my skills. This makes it easy for me to participate without worrying about debt or investment.”

This model supported women’s financial autonomy and allowed them to remain at home to care for their families. The preservation and innovation of traditional weaving techniques also helped sustain the village’s cultural heritage.

Sustainable Agriculture and Youth Opportunities in Pla Kia: In Pla Kia, sustainable agriculture became the foundation for economic development. Previously, villagers faced financial hardship due to low corn prices and the high costs of fertilizers and chemicals, often requiring loans from institutions and private lenders. Around five to six years ago, maize was their main crop. In the past three years, however, the project promoted biodiversity and sustainable farming, transforming local practices. Farmers began cultivating a variety of crops, including coffee, cherries, corn, and avocados—with coffee being the top-selling product.

The project also supported villagers’ participation in training and workshops beyond the village, broadening their perspectives. One participant shared her aspiration:

“I want to travel and open my eyes.”

For individuals who had spent most of their lives in mountainous, remote areas, the project offered rare opportunities for exposure to new environments, people, and ideas. Another participant said:

“...Got to go out and go out because I didn’t have the opportunity. I only stay on the mountain.”

Infrastructure and Collective Savings: With the project’s support, villagers expanded their income sources by selling coffee beans and tree leaves at fair prices. A major barrier in the past was access to a coffee huller machine, which was located in a distant village. In 2018, the project provided the community with its own huller machine, greatly improving convenience. A small usage fee was collected from villagers and contributed to a collective savings account. By the end of 2022, the community had saved enough to purchase a second machine. With two hullers available, the village improved productivity and reinforced its commitment to sustainable agriculture.

Social and Cultural Impact: The project improved the quality of life in both villages through workshops that increased knowledge and fostered pride among residents. Participants from Pla Kia reported that the project made their daily lives more convenient and expanded their access to resources and economic opportunities.

In addition to learning practical skills in farming, textile production, and cultural exchange, participants expressed a growing sense of pride and self-worth. They gained recognition for their traditional knowledge and contributions to a transnational network—particularly through connections with Japan.

In Lo Jor, weaving was not only a source of income but also a means of cultural preservation. The project supported the marketing of traditional textiles to Japanese consumers, enhancing both the economic value and the cultural pride of the women involved. This dual impact—economic and cultural—strengthened the community’s identity while also encouraging broader participation in development efforts.

Conclusions

The Rungarun Project exemplified how Japanese transnational communities transcended geographical boundaries to promote sustainable economic, social, and cultural development in local villages. By integrating global cultural flows and shared ideologies, the project fostered inclusive growth that benefited both Japanese stakeholders and local ethnic groups. This study highlighted the transformative role of transnational networks in advancing global-local partnerships for sustainable development. The research findings can be summarized according to the study's objectives as follows:

1. The Formation of a Japanese Transnational Community

The Rungarun Project, initiated by Ajarn Hozumi Nakano, illustrated the formation of a Japanese transnational community that extended beyond geographical borders. The project thrived through on-site contributions—including volunteering, workshop facilitation, and knowledge transfer in sustainable agriculture and cultural preservation—as well as remote support such as financial donations, internship coordination, and product promotion in Japan. These interconnected efforts ensured the project's financial sustainability, fostered collaboration, and facilitated cultural exchange between Japanese residents in Thailand and supporters in Japan.

2. Transnational Networks and Global Cultural Flows

The Rungarun Project demonstrated how modern communities leveraged global cultural flows—such as ethnoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—to establish meaningful connections beyond physical proximity. These flows enabled Japanese participants to engage with local ethnic communities in Chiang Rai through various channels, including sustainable agriculture initiatives, educational support, and collaborative cultural preservation.

The project's use of digital technologies and social media facilitated continuous communication between participants in Japan and Thailand. Financial contributions from individuals and organizations supported the project's operations, while the promotion of organic agricultural products and ethnic textiles in both local and international markets enhanced its sustainability.

Cultural exchanges—such as weaving activities and agricultural collaborations—reflected shared ideologies and mutual learning, helping build a resilient transnational network. These global-local partnerships illustrated how transnational communities contributed not only to sustainable development but also to deepened cultural understanding. The expansion of these connections within the Japanese community under the Rungarun Project reflected the transformative power of globalization. This community operated as a fluid, diverse network, defined not by geography but by shared interests and values. It served as a model for how such networks could redefine traditional community structures and catalyze sustainable development through cooperation and cultural exchange.

In conclusion, the growth of the Japanese transnational community, as observed in this study, offered insights into the dynamics of global cultural flows and emphasized the importance of shared goals and ideologies in fostering inclusive and sustainable development. The Rungarun Project served as an example of how transnational networks could bridge cultural and geographic divides, creating long-lasting impacts on both local and global scales.

3. Local Impacts: Economic, Social, and Cultural Dimensions

Economic Impact

The Rungarun Project significantly improved the economic conditions of local communities through the promotion of sustainable agriculture and traditional crafts. These practices reduced reliance on harmful chemicals and improved the quality and marketability of agricultural products, helping farmers

secure fair prices and stabilize their income. This increased their bargaining power with middlemen and allowed families to manage finances more effectively, reducing their dependency on high-interest loans. Some households still required financial assistance, but the amount they needed to borrow decreased significantly.

The project also provided income-generating opportunities through the sale of ethnic handicrafts in both local and international markets. For example, women in Lo Jor village earned supplementary income from weaving, which alleviated household financial burdens and promoted economic independence. When women contributed to family income, household financial stability improved, and women gained a greater sense of pride and confidence. This enhanced their status within the family and encouraged a more inclusive and participatory household dynamic.

Social Impact

Financial stability also contributed to stronger social cohesion in the villages. The project fostered inclusion, autonomy, and collective participation among local residents. In Lo Jor, women balanced caregiving duties with home-based weaving, reducing dependency on single-income households and easing household tensions. The project also cultivated a culture of sharing and mutual support, as villagers exchanged skills and resources through workshops and training sessions. This promoted trust, cooperation, and a sense of dignity, inspiring greater community engagement.

Cultural Impact

The project's emphasis on cultural preservation had a profound effect on ethnic identity and heritage. Initiatives such as traditional textile production helped sustain and revitalize weaving practices while also meeting market demands. Middle-aged women led these activities, although there remained a challenge in passing knowledge to younger generations. Without active youth engagement, the risk of cultural erosion persisted.

The promotion of sustainable agriculture and environmental stewardship further supported the preservation of cultural landscapes and natural resources. These efforts reinforced ethnic identity and positioned cultural heritage as a key strategy in community development.

Rungarun Project's activities have brought tangible benefits to the local ethnic communities in economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

Transnational Collaboration and Global Cultural Dynamics

The Japanese transnational community's impact extended beyond the local level, fostering global cultural exchange that benefited both supporters and villagers. The Rungarun Project created opportunities for Japanese participants to engage in cross-cultural learning through volunteering, product promotion, and collaborative activities. This mutual interaction promoted understanding, appreciation, and respect between cultures.

The project exemplified a "glocalized" dynamic—where global ideas such as sustainability and inclusivity were adapted to local contexts. This fusion of perspectives stimulated innovation and ensured that development initiatives aligned with cultural values and community needs.

In conclusion, the Rungarun Project demonstrated the transformative power of transnational collaboration. By drawing on shared values and sustained engagement, the Japanese transnational community created tangible economic opportunities, strengthened social inclusion, and preserved cultural heritage in participating villages. These contributions highlighted the potential of transnational networks to overcome geographic boundaries and drive holistic, community-based development.

Discussion

The results are discussed as follows:

1. Japanese Transnational Community as a “Community Beyond Place”

The Japanese transnational community within the Rungarun Project aligned with Gerard Delanty's (2008) concept of modern communities as fluid, diverse, and interconnected—formed around shared identities, values, and collaborative activities rather than physical location. Japanese residents in Thailand collaborated with supporters in Japan through donations, internships, and cultural exchange, forming a “community beyond place” sustained by both online and offline social ties.

This dynamic also resonated with Etienne Wenger's (1999) concept of communities of practice, which emphasizes shared learning and collective goals. The Rungarun network leveraged digital technologies, such as the internet and social media (technoscapes), to unite individuals in Japan and Thailand who shared interests in education, sustainability, and cultural preservation, fostering a cohesive and dynamic transnational network.

The project also promoted cultural knowledge—such as sustainable agriculture and ethnic textiles—while fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among its members. It reflected the growing phenomenon of transnational communities, as discussed by Heike Dahles (2010) and Ayumi Takenaka (1999), who highlighted how such communities rely on shared ethnicity, culture, or interests, rather than spatial proximity, to maintain cohesion.

2. Global Cultural Flows and the Rungarun Project

The growth of the Japanese transnational community under the Rungarun Project reflected the global cultural flows described by Arjun Appadurai's (1996) concept of “scapes”:

Ethnoscape: The movement of Japanese individuals between Thailand and Japan facilitated cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and the development of a supportive network.

Technoscape: Technologies such as smartphones, social media platforms, and the internet enabled and enhanced communication, coordination, and collaboration between Japanese supporters and local villagers.

Mediascape: Media platforms promoted the project globally, raising awareness about sustainable agriculture and ethnic textile preservation.

Financescape: Financial contributions, including donations and product purchases, supported the economic stability of local communities.

Ideoscape: A shared ideology of sustainability and inclusive development connected Japanese supporters and local participants, fostering mutual learning and cultural appreciation.

These interactions created a glocalized dynamic—blending global ideas with local practices—that strengthened the Japanese transnational community while also enhancing the cultural and economic development of the local villages.

3. A Model of Transnational Collaboration

As a model of transnational collaboration, the Rungarun Project exemplified how Japanese communities beyond national borders could contribute meaningfully to local development. Reflecting the theoretical insights of Delanty (2008) and Appadurai (1996), the project demonstrated that modern communities are networked, value-driven, and shaped by transnational interactions rather than geographic proximity.

By empowering residents, addressing economic challenges, and preserving cultural heritage, the Rungarun Project illustrated the transformative potential of global-local interactions. These interactions

fostered sustainable development and a shared sense of belonging that transcended national and spatial boundaries.

This research contributed to our understanding of how transnational networks can drive sustainable local development and facilitate cross-cultural exchange in a globalized world. The new knowledge gained includes:

The formation of transnational communities based on shared values in education, sustainable agriculture, and cultural preservation, rather than geographic proximity.

A successful model of cross-border collaboration, where Japanese volunteers, donors, and organizations supported local development through financial, technical, and cultural contributions.

The localization of global sustainability principles through community engagement, resulting in a dynamic blend of global and local practices.

In summary, the Rungarun Project served as a compelling example of cross-cultural collaboration and the tangible power of transnational networks. By connecting local communities with international supporters through the exchange of knowledge, resources, and values, it contributed to sustainable development and cultural continuity in Northern Thailand.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for Practical Application

1.1 The findings of this research can serve as valuable resources for policymakers, NGOs, and NPOs in both Thailand and Japan. They may use these insights to design and implement effective community development strategies that integrate transnational collaboration, cultural exchange, and grassroots empowerment.

1.2 The study provides guidelines for enhancing cross-cultural collaboration and strengthening transnational networks. These guidelines can be applied to future development projects aiming to bridge international partnerships with local communities through sustainable practices and shared values.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

2.1 Future research should focus on examining the impact of the Rungarun Project on both participating and non-participating local residents. This comparative approach would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the project's overall contribution to community development.

2.2 Comparative studies should be conducted between the Rungarun Project and other transnational, community-driven initiatives within Thailand or internationally. Such research would provide deeper insight into the diverse approaches, successes, and challenges of similar efforts, and allow for the development of best practices in the field of transnational community development.

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