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## Can Landscape Empower Rural “Minorities” Through Tourism? Eco-Ethnicity in the Highlands of India, Nepal, China, Laos and Vietnam

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CAN LANDSCAPE EMPOWER RURAL  
"MINORITIES" THROUGH TOURISM?  
ECO-ETHNICITY IN THE HIGHLANDS OF INDIA,  
NEPAL, CHINA, LAOS AND VIETNAM

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# Can Landscape Empower Rural “Minorities” Through Tourism?

Eco-Ethnicity in the Highlands of India, Nepal, China,  
Laos and Vietnam

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**Abstract**

*Why is rural tourism growing in some “marginal” Asian highlands but not in others? Why, in the regions with growing rural tourism, are “local people” impacted in different ways? Based on qualitative fieldwork research, this paper addresses these issues through a comparison of five highland case studies in India (Kumaon), Nepal (Annapurna), China (Guizhou), Vietnam (Lam Dong) and Laos (Luang Namtha). It tests the following hypothesis among others: What we call eco-ethnicity – the dual visibility of ethnic and environmental identity of a group – explains to a large extent the empowerment of local groups. Being endowed with a significant eco-ethnicity can provide substantial soft power to a group.*

**Keywords:** *rural tourism, mountains, Asia, eco-ethnicity, minorities*

To what extent can the growth of rural tourism across the world provide incomes to local populations or even lead to their empowerment? True, rural tourism can become detrimental to these populations if its control is in the hands of people coming from outside or if it is captured by a local elite. In the case of farmers, who still form a majority of the national populations in many Asian countries, it is also a matter of knowing to what

extent tourism can help generate not only direct incomes (homestay, guide services, direct farm sales, etc.) but also indirect ones, such as when agricultural workers help maintain an attractive landscape for tourists. In mountain regions, spectacular rice terraces, the protection against erosion and the maintenance of biodiversity are all elements that can make the rural landscape an engine of emancipation for rural populations through instruments such as payments for “ecosystem services” or any other kind of benefit derived from landscape maintenance<sup>1</sup> (Oakes, 1997; Michaud, 2006; Stock, 2003; Sacareau, 2006; Smadja ed., 2009; McElwee, 2016). In particular, landscape can become an important resource for the local population if it is associated with a local culture or ethnicity. If an “ethnic landscape” is valorized (for e.g. the UNESCO-recognised Ifugao rice fields in Philippines), the local ethnic group can benefit from some revenue and a sense of empowerment, since the prestige of the landscape is partly transferred to the culture that contributed to build it. For this group, empowerment can mean autonomy of management and decision, fuelled by economic revenue and supported by a new sense of pride: the recognition by outsiders of their culture and local knowledge. Yet, three conditions must be fulfilled: 1. There must be a strong association between the local culture and the local landscape; this association must be recognized and present in the *image* of the landscape and in the dominant narratives around it. If a landscape is not attributed to a local culture, that culture cannot boast of it or try to derive benefits from it<sup>2</sup>. 2. The landscape must be given a value, either by tourists, environmentalists or local identity movements, etc. If the landscape does not attract tourists, if it is not considered worthy of conservation, if it is not seen as a strong element of regional identity and heritage, then its builders cannot expect economic or political gains to accrue in their favor. 3. Even if these two conditions are fulfilled, the benefits must not be siphoned off by external actors or captured by local elites.

It is no surprise that in the mountains of Asia, regional differences, not to mention the diversity of altitudes and slopes, are too significant to provide an unequivocal answer to our original question. It suffices to compare the embryonic state of rural tourism in most of the Indian Himalayas (except the pilgrimage routes or the Ladakh-Zaskar trekking region) with the highly developed rural tourism networks that exist in parts of

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<sup>1</sup> Yet the “benefit” generated through PES is debated (Kosoy and Corbera, 2010) and largely dependent on each situation.

<sup>2</sup>“Landscape” here is understood both as a material production with visual elements and as a representation imagined by stakeholders through possibly differing lenses (Malpas, 2011; Wylie, 2007).

neighboring Nepal. Tourism policies are no doubt also responsible for this, as is the interplay of actors, practices and places involved in the initial introduction of tourism in these regions. We would however like to emphasize here the role of ethnic identities and their images – cultural as well as environmental – as perceived by political powers as well as economic actors and tourists, nationally as well as internationally. Can these identities, all of which are more or less constructed or reconstructed and remain flexible, explain even partially the fact that some groups are able to derive multiple benefits from tourism, while others are marginalized or even excluded? To what extent can their possible association with a specific landscape explain these benefits or this marginalization?

In the AQAPA project *Whose Landscapes in Asia?*<sup>3</sup>, five Asian case studies were compared in India (Kumaon), Nepal (Annapurna), China (Guizhou), Laos (Luang Namtha) and Vietnam (Lam Dong) (Figure 1). The following hypothesis was tested: Eco-ethnicity – the dual ethnic and environmental image of a group (defined in detail later) – can partly explain the degree of the group’s integration in the explosion of tourism activity and the possible empowerment which may accrue from it. If a group is endowed with a strong eco-ethnicity, its role in local rural tourism can become more important than that of groups with a less dynamic image. Yet, we can already divulge, without taking away much from this text, that this hypothesis will not be validated.

The first section of this paper lays out critically the notion of eco-ethnicity. The second section presents the five case studies. The third section shows how the presence of the five groups under study is visible in many varied ways in the process of “touristification” of the local landscapes. The fourth section argues that the environmental identity of a group may – or may not – be recognized by dominant actors such as governments at various administrative levels, or by private companies.

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3 Project funded by the French National Research Agency (2014-19) and led by Evelyne Gauché (University of Tours, UMR CITERES) (<https://aqapa.hypotheses.org>). Each of the five research sites were studied by students doing their master’s degree at AgroParisTech, Paris, for establishing an “agrarian diagnosis” (5 months of fieldwork). They were also visited by senior researchers for about 50 person-weeks on average. They conducted landscape analysis, qualitative and quantitative surveys of households and tourists, and organized workshops with decision makers and tourism operators. Two PhDs in geography on the Indian and Nepal cases have also contributed to this research. Interpreters were used most of the time, given the challenge of numerous local languages. While agrarian diagnoses and landscape analyses were conducted using the same methodologies in the five case studies, the questionnaires used for the other sets of research had only a few questions in common and the types of survey differed. Indeed, we did not try to establish a strict comparison between the five cases since we wanted to “stick” to their specificities in order to highlight them better. Hence, all the sites do not have the same information. This article aims to prove that this methodology does not preclude the establishment of bridges between the five cases when a common lens, *e.g.* the notion of eco-ethnicity, is used for interpreting the results.

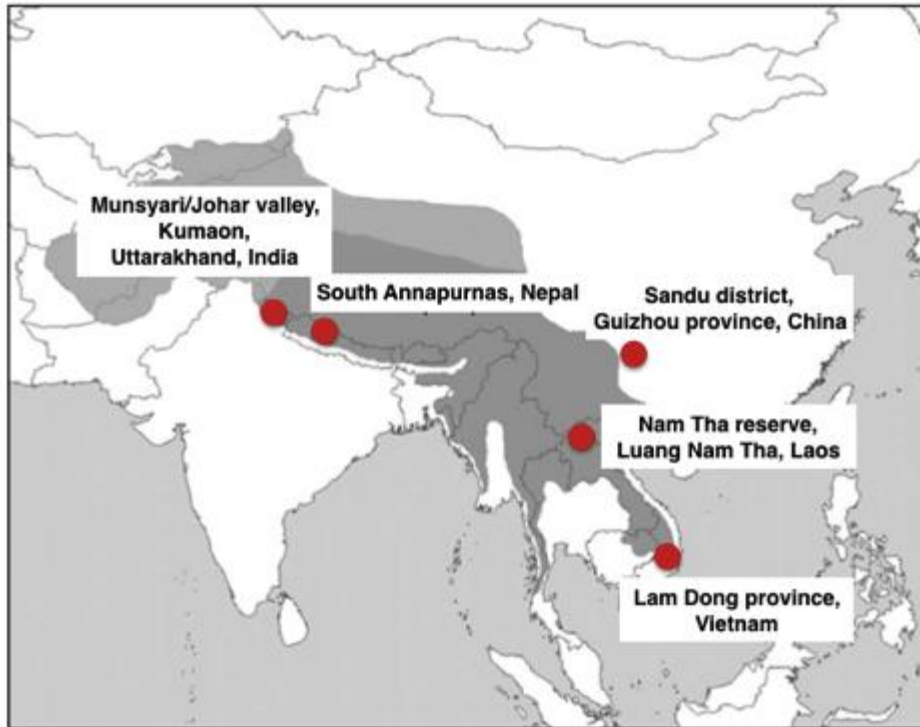


Figure 1. Zomia and the location of our five case studies in India, Nepal, China, Laos and Vietnam (based on Michaud, 2010).

NB. Zomia is the term coined by van Schendel (2002) (dark gray), and then adapted by Scott (2009) (light gray), to designate mountain areas populated by minorities that have historically been outside the control of Asian governments of the lowlands. AQAPA selected the research sites according to the following criteria: strong presence of ethnic minorities, high relative elevation, and growing rural tourism.

## 1. THE HYPOTHESIS OF ECO-ETHNICITY: ECOLOGICAL AND ETHNIC IMAGES AS SOFT POWER

### 1.1. Eco-ethnicity: a more or less environment-friendly image

Can groups endowed with an ecological image make use of it as soft power (Nye, 1990)? We created the notion of eco-ethnicity to be able to find an answer. By “eco-ethnicity” we mean an identity made up of the two following components.

1) The first component is that of *ecological identity*, i.e. the type of material and immaterial interrelationships that exist between a group and its environment. This “eco-component” can sometimes be measured quantitatively (how much biomass is collected each year in the village; how many species of plants does the local population know of). At any rate, it can be described precisely, as part of an anthropological approach that



often transcends the culture/nature dichotomy of Western societies (Descola, 2013). And yet, often reality matters less than the *image* of this identity, seen from outside the group concerned by the eco-component, an image which can be perceived as more or less “environmental” and thus more or less positive. The interrelationships between a group and its environment may be “sustainable” and “environmentally friendly” in actual terms but may not be recognized as such by other groups, within the country or abroad. Conversely, some communities may have a mythical image of “ecological wisdom” while their reality could be very different. Today most social scientists agree that the “ecologically noble savage” is a myth (Hames, 2007). The landscape in particular often proves to be a very unreliable indicator of interest in conservation: the landscape of shifting cultivation at the moment when the plot is burnt and then left fallow is often decried, but when rice covers the plot of vegetation and the previously charred appearance of the earth disappears, the perception by outsiders often changes. Hence this ecological identity is an image, as much as, and sometimes more than, the reality; an image that is produced by various actors including local ones, as we shall see, either unwillingly or when they want to bolster their image as a commercial asset. Here is a crucial issue at the core of the AQAPA project: landscape is far from being only a visual component, since it is constructed and imagined by different actors (Wylie, 2007; Gauché, 2015). Differing productions, visions and expectations of a landscape may result in dispossessing the local populations of their landscape to the benefit of outside actors, be they tourists, companies or state agencies (Gauché, 2017).

2) The same relativism applies to the second component of the eco-ethnic identity: the “ethnic” aspect, which may be more or less “visible” to the “other”. First, we must be careful not to essentialize the “ethnic groups,” both from an anthropological point of view (their reality is largely performative) as well as from a socio-economic one (the groups are characterized by multiple identities of class, gender, etc.). Second, “the other” helps define ethnicity by its perception (Barth, 1969). All foreign tourists arriving in South-West China know about the existence of “Tibetans”: their ethnicity has been popularized and folklorized abroad by their religion, the attire of their monks and so on, not to speak of the political issues they face. In the national park of Pudacuo (Yunnan) which has been opened to mass tourism, visitors are invited to admire the alleged harmony between Tibetans and their natural environment; the local population has understood that their own interest is to match this image (Vandenabeele, 2015). On the contrary, foreign tourists

who come to India are generally unaware of the existence of Adivasis<sup>4</sup>, even though they make up almost a quarter of all the indigenous people in the world (Landy, 2014). The Adivasis, often despised by “mainstream” Indians for their “primitive” minds and practices (shifting cultivation) which are allegedly anti-environmental, are endowed with a weak eco-ethnic image. In contrast, the Tibetans’ eco-ethnicity has become strong.

Admittedly we should not have an excessively instrumental view of eco-ethnicity. As a reviewer of this paper wrote, “ethnicity does have utilitarian aspects, but it is also contingent, emotive, symbolic, and not entirely the product of conscious thought. It is not an essentialist ‘given’, neither is it a purely instrumentalist ‘tool’”. Hence a group cannot “increase” or regulate its eco-ethnicity at its discretion. Yet, let’s emphasize that the group has often enough leeway to try to improve its image, whether successfully or not. Depending on the strength of its eco-ethnic image, a group is more or less adequately equipped to fight for more rights or privileges and to invest in activities such as ethnic tourism (Sacareau, 1997). A strong and positive environmental image can help in obtaining specific rights, financial aid from governments, private organizations and large international NGOs, and in attracting tourists. A strong eco-ethnicity can be a new kind of “weapon of the weak” (Scott, 1985), often a paradoxical way to take advantage of a socio-cultural or political marginalization.

However, let us mention right from this introductory part, several factors of complexity that prevent eco-ethnicity from always becoming an instrument of soft power. This image of identity is fragile in many ways, as our five case studies confirm.

## **1.2. Eco-ethnicity and soft power: complex relationships**

First, eco-ethnicity is mainly a relative value and thus depends on the multilayered relationships with other groups and the general socio-political environment. It can be seen as an extension of the contemporary environmentalist concerns of Western societies, which accord to some indigenous societies harmonious forms of relationships with their environment on the basis of traditional knowledge (Pinton and Grenand, 2007). And yet, most of the time, this traditional knowledge which is very pragmatic, does not encompass environmental concerns as they are understood in “developed” societies (Bruun and

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<sup>4</sup> In this article, the term “Adivasi” is used broadly and encompasses all Indian “tribes,” including those in the country’s northeast. According to the Census of India, 2011, Scheduled Tribes account for 8.6% of the national population.

Kalland, 1995). Whatever the actual ecological relevance of “traditional” livelihood systems, this irenic vision corresponds largely to an image projected from the exterior on places and ethnic groups.

Second, the most downtrodden groups are unable to make use of their strong eco-ethnicity without the help of outside actors. For example, international NGOs have worked hard for the Sherpas of Nepal, and have participated in environmental struggles in Thailand (Hirsch and Warren, 1998). In more closed countries, such as China, Vietnam and India, these actors are less present and can leverage to a lesser degree the strong eco-ethnicity of some communities.

Third, the value of eco-ethnicity varies over time and space. The Sherpas have learnt how to use their “tradition,” in the form of forest management committees for example, in order to demonstrate their ancestral environmental awareness to decision makers (even though originally, the Sagarmatha National Park was created mainly because of the Sherpas’ poor environmental image, as they were perceived to be degrading the environment (Sacareau, 1997)). Mobilizing their heroic mountaineering reputation, and with the support of Sir Edmund Hillary, the Sherpas were able to obtain some relaxations from the park legislation, which other lesser-known groups in other parks, established at the same time in similarly conflicting conditions, could not (e.g. Chitwan, Rara). In China and Vietnam, it was primarily the Stalinist approach to the nation and ethnic minorities that prevailed (Rolland, 2017), long before they became assets for the country’s tourism development.

More generally, ethnicity is a historically contingent creation, quite adaptable to changing socioeconomic and political contexts (Leach, 1954; Hale, 2004; Ulloa 2010). Identities reshape themselves continuously due to local factors as well as external pressures. This is especially the case with the eco-component of eco-ethnicity. Indeed, it is only because today the “environmental paradigm” that emphasizes the urgent need for ecologically sustainable development, climate change mitigation, etc., is growing globally in the general opinion, although not yet in policies and practices, that eco-ethnicity has become a kind of soft power. Only under these conditions can the environmental values of the local populations be highlighted, in order to show to the authorities that they are good “environmental subjects,” within the framework of the form of government that Agrawal (2006) has called “environmentality.”

Yet, in times when modernity was privileged, just a few decades ago, living “close to nature” was disdained, as opposed to the transformation or removal of nature for the sake of intensive cultivation, industrialization or urbanization. At that time, eco-ethnicity could have, in fact, been *dis*-empowering. It is only when the increasing distance from nature started being criticized in the growing environmentalist narratives, that “primitivism”, as it was then called, or those who were deemed “savages”, became subjects of praise<sup>5</sup>. “The deployment of ecological nobility as a political tool by native peoples and conservation groups” (Hames, 2007, p.177) became fruitful. This for example is the case of the Nanda Devi reserve that neighbours our Indian study area, where the action of the local NGOs for “the more or less concerted production of a façade identity adapted to international institutions has proved to be a rewarding strategy.” (Benabou, 2007, p.116).

The issue is even more complex since in a given country, different cultures, ethnic groups, social classes, genders and generations coexist. This is why, in spite of a partial rehabilitation of the Adivasis in India, they continue to be dominated and their political situation remains fragile. Many Indians with an environmentalist bent criticize them for their allegedly harmful practices, while the Indians who have remained “modern”, because they (or their parents) recently left rural areas for a better life in the urban jungle of cities, still despise them as “backward” (Dejouhanet, 2017). In both cases, their eco-ethnic image often remains an object of contempt.

Fourth and last, eco-ethnicity is also a complex notion because it consists of two parts: the concerned group’s own image, which it is more or less aware of, and the representation of that group by the others (its image for aliens). Both have always been intimately linked. They cannot be analyzed separately because they interact permanently, not only because interrelationships shape identities, but also because the mobilization of eco-ethnicity by a group in the pursuit of political rights or economic benefits, is dependent on what *they* think of what the *others* think of *them*. In northern Thailand, some groups like the Karen have adopted “environmental” discourses to resolve socioeconomic problems (Hirsch and Warren, 1998), with the risk that their ethnic image becomes permanently linked to “primordial attributes” thus making any “dynamic

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<sup>5</sup> Even then, this was done selectively, since it is the dominant powers (plains, city, majority, etc.) that reserve the right to define what is good or not in the “savage” (Menziés, 2003).

adaptation” impossible (Walker, 2001, p. 162). Hence eco-ethnicity is undergoing a never-ending reconstruction and is not frozen in time.

## 2. “MINORITIES” IN THE “TOURISTIFICATION” OF THE LANDSCAPE

### 2.1. “Himalayan” versus “communist” ethnicities

Eco-ethnicity cannot be considered in isolation from the socio-political context that contributes to shape it. The current development of rural tourism among the studied groups must be informed by the political history of those regions. Our case studies are all located in geopolitical “margins” of the countries concerned – India, China, Vietnam and Laos (and, to a lesser extent, Nepal) –, all of them more or less within the “Zomia,” which, according to some researchers, encompasses spaces refractory to the idea of the nation-state (Michaud, 2010; Figure 1). These border regions are crucial areas for national governments who want better control over them, in a sometimes ancient process of “State making” (De Koninck, 1996, 2000; de Maaker *et al.*, 2016; Déry, 2000; Sofield, Li, 1998). Groups are targeted by programs launched by the government which fears their rebellion and wants to undertake “national integration,” as the official Indian motto says. In this context, eco-ethnicity can be a factor of demand and struggle as well as a factor of integration into the “mainstream,” irrespective of whether it is used to claim more rights or to develop ethnic-based tourism.

We can group our five case studies into two sets. The first, which we call “communist ethnicities” for the sake of convenience, includes:

- in China, west of the southern province of Guizhou, the three villages of Gulu, Zenlei and Shuige (about 800 m asl), populated primarily by the Shuis (Tai-Kadai linguistic branch);
- in northern Laos, the Nam Ha National Protected Area and its surroundings, near Luang Namtha, populated primarily by the Akkas (Tibeto-Burman), Lantens (Hmong-Mien) and Khmus (Austroasiatic), who live in villages between 300 and 1200 m asl;
- in central Vietnam (Lam Dong province), the surroundings of the Bidoup-Nui Ba National Park in the hinterland of Dalat, where the Koho, Lach and Cil (Austroasiatic), live around 1500 m asl.

In these three officially communist countries, the ethnic issue is dealt with within the paradigm of a strong nation representing a united, multi-ethnic population. Thus, China is a “multinational state” made up of 56 “nationalities” (*minzu*), of which 55 are labeled as “minorities,” representing around 8% of the national population. They are mainly localized in the country’s border regions. The central government has adopted an ambiguous development policy for these marginal territories in order to integrate them with the rest of the nation, for example with preferential quotas in education. But this often results in a cultural, demographic and economic “Han-ization” of these regions, and in the reduction of local cultures to mere folklores that are very popular with Han tourists (Harrell, 2001).

In Vietnam, the majority Kinh ethnic group represents about the same percentage of the national population as the Han do in China, and the government recognizes another 53 ethnic groups. It does not however recognize any indigenous status, despite the promises made in the 1940s and 1950s of establishing autonomous territories.

While the Han or Kinh represent the vast majority of their respective national populations, in Laos, even after taking resort to semantic acrobatics, the Lao barely form half of the country’s population (Pholsena, 2011). The Laotian current constitution recognizes 49 ethnic groups (Schlemmer, 2015). But like in China and Vietnam, the only official line is that this ethnic mosaic will eventually blend to create Socialist Citizens, guided by the “elder brother”, respectively Han, Kinh and Lao.

The second set of case studies concerns two non-communist countries: India and Nepal. We call this second group “Himalayan” ethnicities because, unlike those in the first set, their regions are characterized by very high mountains. This has a direct impact on the place of the eco-ethnicities in the development of tourism around them, as we shall see later<sup>6</sup>.

Unlike the three countries mentioned above, India does not recognize “minorities” or “nationalities,” given the fact that the country’s entire population is divided into thousands of communities, castes, religions, etc. What is most similar to East Asian “nationalities” are the “tribals,” only partially synonymous with Adivasis (Guha, 2006). These ethnic groups come mainly under the head of the Scheduled Tribes, about 700 groups benefiting

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<sup>6</sup> This heuristic division between “communist” and “Himalayan” ethnicities does not correspond to a general typology valid for the entirety of the five countries. It remains specific to our local case studies.

from affirmative action (employment quotas, etc.), not so much for their indigenous character as for their poverty levels, in the same way as the former Untouchables (Dalits). This policy is actively pursued in the Indian Himalayas, given the importance of the Tibeto-Burmese population there, distinct from the majority Hindu, Hindi-speaking and dominant population of the Gangetic plains further south. This region, since the India-China war at least, is considered as geopolitically strategic and is partially under the control of the army.

Because of shared geography and history, Nepal has the same kind of ethnic distribution as Himalayan India. Populations of Tibetan and Bhotia origin dominate only in the north, in the sparsely populated high altitudes, with the Tibeto-Burmese occupying the middle mountains between 1500 and 3000 m. Officially, Nepal has 59 “indigenous populations” (*adibasi janajati*), accounting for a third of its total population (Hangen, 2007). But the young democracy has not implemented any affirmative action, since there is no real notion of “native” people given the large number of migrations: for example, the Gurungs, originally located in the center migrated towards the west and found their place between the Bhotia highlanders and the Hindu paddy-growing lowlanders. These Tibeto-Burman people, often with a Buddhist culture and a strong animist heritage (Smadja ed., 2009), sometimes differ strongly from their Hindu compatriots who dominate the country’s south. Yet they find a distinct place in the Nepalese caste system (officially abolished in 1964, but still *de facto* in force) (Kergoat, 2007).

As we can see, in these five countries, the approach to the issue of “indigenous peoples” cannot be the same as in America or Australia. Population movements have been very complex and continue to happen to the present day (e.g. forced displacements in Vietnam and Laos; Evrard and Goudineau, 2004), but without the “dominant” populations having their origins in another continent. Of our five countries, only the young Nepalese democracy has ratified the Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples adopted by the ILO in 1989. Ethnicities are recognized by the national governments, and ethnic populations enjoy a political status, which is sometimes specific. However this seldom serves to pull the ethnic groups out of their social marginality at a national scale.

Let us now examine the situation at the local scale of our five case studies.



1. *Dancing in front of partly “fake old” houses (Gulu village, Guizhou, China) (Photo: F. Landy, 2016)*



2. *Tourists preparing to visit the Langbian mountain (Lam Dong, Vietnam) (Photo S. Déry).*





3. *An Akka village circled by shifting cultivation (Luang Nam Tha, Laos) (Photo F. Landy, March 2017)*



4. *A Gurung homestay owner saying goodbye to tourists in Lwang, Machhapuchhre Model Trek (Photo F. Landy, April 2016).*

## 2.2. Nature tourism or culture tourism?

The situation of eco-ethnicities does not depend only on ethnic policies, but also on tourism policies. Here too, a wide diversity of situations can be found. India has had a tourism policy worthy of that name only since the 1990s, and even then, for long it focused on cities or places of Hindu pilgrimage, with tourists being mainly Indian.<sup>7</sup> Often, there is limited access to border regions. For example, the Johar valley bordering China, which we studied in Kumaon, was opened to foreigners only in 1993, and for a long time only partially, with the army even now inspecting the images and videos stored in tourists' cameras in the village of Milam, on the Tibetan border. Tourism is tolerated rather than encouraged (a special permit is needed). In the area concerned by our Indian case study, touristification is very limited. The trek from Munsyari to the Milam glacier or Nanda Devi attracts about 2000 tourists annually, mainly foreigners, whereas most of the 10-15,000 other visitors, mainly Indian, prefer to spend only a day or two in Munsyari to enjoy the views of the Panchachuli peaks and to relax in lodges and homestays in or around the small town.

In contrast, Nepal has been open to foreigners since 1951. Tourism in the country has been organized since the 1970s through the practice of trekking (Sacareau, 1997). In our region of study, tourism is largely framed by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project. While the majority of tourists on the trekking trails are foreigners, the Nepalese are recently beginning to evince interest, especially in the studied area of the Mardi Himal trek and the Macchapucchre Model Trek (a few hundred trekkers annually). In Laos too, the "treks" reign supreme in and around the protected area of Namtha, but they take place on very poorly maintained forest paths. These are short routes: most tourists choose a two-day trek that allows them to spend a night in a village (homestay or ecolodge) or experience the night in the "jungle." Tourists are almost exclusively Westerners. The number of trekkers in a year peaked at 8000 in 2012. This is the result of a relatively aggressive policy since 1999 not only to earn foreign exchange but also to bring "development" to these regions where the Burmese and Chinese borders meet.

Such a differentiation is also found in our Vietnamese case study around Dalat, the country's garden city par excellence. It received 5.4 million visitors in 2016, 95% of

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<sup>7</sup> A cultural tourism based on "tribal" folklore, more or less imagined, is growing in India (Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, etc.), but it has been late and slow in taking off.

them Vietnamese, while the Bidoup-Nui Ba National Park, some 35 km away, received only about 30,000, more than half of them foreigners. Finally, of the 2000 to 3000 people who trek within the park's forest, more than 95% are foreigners. In contrast, in China, the three villages studied are visited exclusively by Chinese tourists (around 3000 per year in Shuige), who spend one to two hours to admire the architecture and to watch "traditional" cultural shows (songs and dances), sometimes while walking in the rural landscape along a predefined route of little length and difficulty.

What are the drivers of these tourism developments? Policies developed and implemented by the State play a key role in India and China, including at regional and local levels. Thus, in Guizhou province, to the northwest of the karst mountain chains of Li Bo and Guilin, the district of Sandu adopted an ambitious policy of economic development at the beginning of the 2000s, partially based on leisure activities and tourism. While in Laos and especially in Nepal, international institutions – ranging from UNESCO and IUCN to small and large NGOs – as well as interactions with foreign tourists have had and still play a crucial role in defining and even implementing tourism policies. The local ethnic groups are only one type of stakeholder among many others and are able to assert their interests more (Nepal, India) or less (China, Vietnam, Laos), depending on each particular case.

We should also emphasize the importance of the landscape factor. The media and tourists, especially Western, are much more likely to be aware of a summit like Annapurna (8091 m) in Nepal or even Panchachuli (6904 m) in India than the medium-height mountains, more hill-like, of our other study sites in China, Vietnam or Laos. We must therefore differentiate between two types of tourism. On the one hand nature tourism is essentially landscape-oriented, practiced by those attracted above all by the vision of the world's highest peaks, and which, for the most part, ignores the culture of local ethnicity (Indian case study). On the other hand cultural tourism is based on local folklore (Chinese case study)<sup>8</sup>. But between these two distinct types are three intermediate cases: Nepal is host to nature-oriented tourism, but the ethnic aspect does represent a certain interest for tourists, foreigners and Nepalese alike; the Laotian and Vietnamese cases combine both these aspects in different measures, more balanced in Laos, more

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that tourists come to Guizhou Province also because of the karst landscapes and not just for the ethnic minorities. It is only when we go down to the level of the villages selected by our study that the purpose of the trips becomes "cultural."

segmented in Vietnam. In Laos, tourists wanting to spend time in the “jungle” usually have to pass through “ethnic” villages, while in Vietnam, those climbing Mount Langbian are offered “ethnic add-ons” in the form of handicrafts for sale or gong shows.

In all five countries, policies regarding protected areas have had a strong impact on the livelihoods of local people. In Southeast Asia, where ethnic minorities had to often convert to a sedentary lifestyle, protected areas have been a part of national territorial strategies (Déry and Vanhooren, 2011), and even of a “neoliberal conservation governance” agenda (Dressler and Roth, 2011). In the end, the result has been a growth of tourism, used in Luang Namtha to reduce poverty (Harrison and Schipani, 2008), and in Lam Dong as a justification to transform local livelihoods from forest dependency to market integration (Ducourtieux *et al*, 2018; Nguyễn Duy Mậu, 2016). Around Nam Ha protected area, near Luang Namtha, impacts have varied in space and time, from villages untouched by tourism to others fully integrated in tourism circuits (Déry and Dubé, 2019). In none of the five studied sites has permanent human habitat been banned; in fact tourism attraction has necessitated the presence of lodges and hotels. Very often nature conservation has supported tourism growth instead of restraining it. Yet most of the new structures have a relatively low impact on the environment, when they are concentrated in the small towns where tourists are accommodated (Luang Namtha, Munsyari...).

The place of eco-ethnicity, whether in its “eco” component or its “ethnic” component, is *a fortiori* more important in Chinese culture tourism than in Indian nature tourism. In the latter case, the primary interest is not cultural, even though the visitor may have some knowledge of the inhabited and cultivated lower mountain altitudes. Even though tourism publicity material frequently emphasizes the richness of human contact with villagers and their “legendary hospitality,” the voices of local ethnic groups lack leverage given their relatively low importance in the motivation of the tourist.

### **3. ECO-ETHNICITIES AS PERCEIVED THROUGH TOURISM**

In this section, we analyze and describe in greater detail the eco-ethnicities present at our five locations. We examine their two components, the “ethnic” component (3.1) and the “environmental” component (3.2).

### 3.1. Cultural, political, touristic ethnicity

We analyze here the ethnic component of eco-ethnicity from three angles: cultural, political and touristic<sup>9</sup>.

In our case studies, the Bhotias in India are arguably the group with the strongest “ethnicity” from a political point of view, since they have managed to acquire Scheduled Tribe status despite a relatively favorable socio-economic situation. The Johar valley under study was originally inhabited primarily by a section of Bhotias called Johari Shaukas (for the sake of simplification, we will call them Bhotias in the rest of this article). They have lost their Tibeto-Burman language over the years and now use Kumaoni, and they have become Hindu over a long process of cultural change (Benz, 2014). They have nevertheless retained a strong identity: for centuries the Bhotias undertook trade with Tibet and the various Bhotia lineages had an upper summer village where they would use alpine meadows to graze their sheep and goats. They had their permanent settlement in a village near Munsyari, and owned some fields in a lower village, which were cultivated by sharecroppers, often Dalit (Hoon, 1996). Following the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959 and China’s war with India in 1962, the border was sealed, and trade stopped. (Even today the area is very sensitive; its military and strategic value prevents tourism from growing dramatically). Another blow for the Bhotias was the land reform which led to the loss of most of their fields in the lower villages. Fortunately for them, in 1967 they obtained Scheduled Tribes status: the Indian government’s affirmative action policy granted them quotas in government jobs and other advantages. Today, the summer villages are being partly revived, not so much by tourism but by army activity (a road is being built) and by the harvesting of *Cordyceps sinensis*, a rare mushroom that fetches a very high price in the Chinese market. Some lands are also cultivated for medicinal plants and herbs (and potatoes for feeding the Milam army post), sometimes by non-Bhotias (LeBihan, 2015). In the Johar valley the majority of the local population was Bhotia until the 1950s, but since then, their emigration combined with the immigration of other peoples attracted by economic growth have turned them into a minority. This minority, however, remains richer than the other groups – even though many Bhotias are poor. In

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<sup>9</sup> Let us insist here that we do not assign to “ethnicity” an essentialist and uniform character. Yet, on the field, ethnic groups do exist, whatever the performative reasons behind it. Hence we shall speak of “the” Bhotias, “the” Gurungs, etc., since ethnic boundaries, always moving, are the product of social interactions that self-identify in-group members and distinguish the groups for outsiders.

this respect, the Bhotias are an exception in our five case studies, since this “minority” is not socio-economically marginalised<sup>10</sup>.

The Bhotias’ strong ethnicity, both cultural and political, contrasts with their low visibility in the development of tourism in the Munsyari valley. Travel agencies are unaware of their culture. Out of 15 tourists or groups of tourists, foreign and Indian, that were interviewed, 13 did not know who the Shaukas were, and 6 had no knowledge at all of the Bhotias. A tourist from the western Indian city of Pune even asserted “You will not find Bhotias here”!

The Shuis of China are in the opposite situation. Their ethnicity is politically less recognized (no affirmative action, although new buildings under construction are earmarked for them in the nearby town of Sandu), but they are at the forefront of tourism development. Minority villages inserted into tourism itineraries by the government become official sites of Chinese tourism. Han visitors come for Shui culture, songs, dances, language, houses, festivals, all more or less reshaped to meet tourist expectations, as part of a “heritageization” process in which authenticity – whatever this word may mean in tourism studies (Bruner, 2005; Xie, 2010) – is not an issue at all (Taunay, 2011). It is above all the landscape of the settlement that counts, with its houses that are made of old wood (in Zenlei), new wood (Gulu), or imitation wood (Gulu, Shuige). The surrounding agrarian landscape is only a backdrop for highlighting the village, the *jingdian* (official objects of tourist interest) and the folk performances. Indeed, we are witnessing a form of “internal orientalism” (Schein, 1997; Gladney, 2014), in which the Han come to be amazed by the “exotic” rural environment of these non-plains areas which they perceive as closer to “nature,” very different from their “civilized” spaces (David, 2010)<sup>11</sup>. Following Chinese Communist Party thinking, this folklorization is used to construct the Han modernity (Oakes, 1997; Schein, 1997).

In Laos, in addition to the “jungle” promoted by tour operators, the cultural component of tourism is important as visitors can sleep in the Akha, Lanten or Khmu villages and share their food. Tourists often come away impressed by the wealth of knowledge the local people have about forest resources, which tourist guides highlight all along the routes (food, medicinal plants, building materials, etc.). Despite some changes

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<sup>10</sup> The Gurungs in the Annapurnas also appear to be in a position of relative strength at the local level, but to a lesser extent than the Bhotias.

<sup>11</sup> Internal orientalism exists in all the countries studied, but its importance is specific to China because of the high proportion of domestic tourists and the extent of “ethnic tourism”.

(fibrocement roofs; gradual disappearance of traditional clothing, even for women), ethnicity remains an integral part of the tourism product: “Live the Akka adventure,” proclaim agencies that offer “ethnic paths”. We found that among ten groups of tourists, a majority (seven) knew the name of the ethnic group in the village they were visiting.

From this point of view, the Nepalese case closely resembles that of Laos. No doubt, the landscape – Himalayan high peaks dominating mountain pastures and forests – remains the fundamental attraction, but the discovery of local ethnic groups, especially of the Gurungs, is a significant element of tourism in the Annapurna region, even if they do not enjoy the same fame as the Sherpas. In our study area, more than 20 ethnic groups and castes coexist, of which one-third are ethnic Tibeto-Burman. The Gurung and Tamang hamlets rarely overlap with the Brahmin or Dalit settlements (Létang *et al.*, 2017). The Gurungs maintain a vibrant and specific culture. While it is true that their ethnicity is being reshaped by dominant acculturation processes coming from the south, from Nepali culture and Western countries, even young Gurungs can speak their ethnic language, and inter-community marriages are not very common. Their religion remains based in Hinduism as well as Buddhism and animism. Several villages, including Gandhruk, have small museums with traditional objects; service providers are often Gurung; and in areas where community-based forms of tourism with homestays have been developed (Upadhayaya, 2013), ethnicity becomes more explicit, often with small shows aimed at tourists.

As for the Koho, Lach or Cil in Vietnam, their ethnic identity has been rebuilt through several land upheavals during the last 50 to 60 years. Displaced during the second Indochina war, they were allowed to go back to their original land only partially (Mounayar, 2015; Roy-Petit, 2018). They were forced to grow coffee since the 1990s. And yet, the Lach and Cil languages are still alive; since the mid-2000s, Kinh civil servants have to learn the local languages when they get a job in an ethnic minority area. With the re-development of tourism around Dalat in the 1990s, a “product” has been developed around the Langbian mountain to which gong shows performed by the Lach have been added. The owner of the first company to promote this product credits, of all people, a Vietnamese from Ho Chi Minh City for the idea. What is clear is that this cultural component of tourism would have been insufficient on its own to attract tourists in the way it is doing now. As for the Cil, who live further from the Langbian Mountain, projects were launched by the Japanese agency JICA at the turn of the 2010s to develop the same

kind of cultural “products” to be added to the ecotourism component of Bidoup-Nui Ba national park. In the same way, some areas near Dalat, parts of which are tourist resorts (the fake village of Cu Lan for example), have been entirely created by tourism companies.

### **3.2. The environmental image of eco-ethnicity and its place in tourism**

In general, all these populations still suffer from a negative environmental image given their agricultural practices such as shifting cultivation, wrongly blamed for accelerating erosion and deforestation when practiced according to the rules of art (Ducourtieux, 2015).

The only exception are the Bhotias, who were never farmers traditionally. Their ecological identity as goatherders and traders, their symbiotic relationship with the high mountain in general and pastures in particular, could not have been attained without an excellent knowledge of the geographical elements around them. Despite all this, their environmental image in the eyes of the general public is almost non-existent: they are known to be traders more than herders, and few stakeholders, including the Bhotias themselves, highlight their talent for adaptation to natural hardships. Even the people of the alpine Milam village, when asked what they would advise the tourists to see, name the snowy peaks or the Milam glacier; they never mention the man-made landscapes attached to their identity. Indeed, the only tourism that for long was encouraged by the Indian government (and in some aspects linked to the concern of securing the border with China) was mountaineering expeditions in the Nanda Devi basin.

But it is better not to have an environmental image than have a bad one. The worst image is perhaps that of the Laotian minority ethnic groups. Foreign tourists expect to discover the “jungle,” but what they encounter instead are smallholder or capitalist rubber plantations or, worse, burned fields of shifting cultivation. Only the rice fields at the bottom of the valley find favor in their eyes. For the rest, the myth of the hunter-gatherer that they had more or less in mind crumbles in the face of reality, even though tourists discover that the villagers are very familiar with the wild species of the forest and admire them for it.

The other cases are less contrasting than these two Indian and Laotian extremes. In Vietnam, the Lach, and even more the Cil, also traditionally practiced slash-and-burn.



The former learned about wetland rice cultivation long before colonization, but this did not change the perception that the other groups, including the Kinh, had of them. No narrative exists claiming that the Lach or Cil live close to nature, as is the case with other groups in Southeast Asia. But ever since the Bidoup-Nui Ba national park area was classified by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve in 2015, local guides have started being trained to showcase their culture to tourists. The Lach have already started propounding the government's environmentalist discourse. The State is also hiring them to protect the forest, and to patrol the park in teams, a practice called "forest allocation" (Sikor, Tan, 2007).

In Nepal, in spite of the remnants of animism, the Gurungs and the other Tibeto-Burman groups have almost no environmentalist image. In the prevalent theory of environmental degradation in the Himalayas, they have been accused, as have other farmers, of expanding their terraces at the expense of the forest and degrading it by taking their herds into it, thus increasing erosion (Smadja ed., 2009). Nevertheless, tourists appreciate these Gurung villages, clinging to spectacular slopes carved into terraces with flights of stone steps running up and down. The increasing number of tourists staying in homestays seems to have gradually convinced some peasant women of the importance of the "natural organic food" they produce and prepare (Dérnoz *et al.*, 2016).

The landscape therefore allows the Gurungs to increase their eco-ethnicity. For the Guizhou Shuis, it is the opposite: their ethnic visibility tends to impart a tourism interest to the landscape. The eco-component of Shui eco-ethnicity is weak – but tourists do not come for that anyway. The landscape of forested hills above paddy fields and villages with wooden stilt houses provide the exotic and reified scenery for the expected show of commodified ethnicity (Xie, 2010). But it is the State that has encouraged the afforestation of the slopes, especially on the "showcase" slopes visible from the main mountain viewing points. No doubt, in China, minorities are often photographed in "traditional" dress in front of "natural" and rural landscapes. And the Shuis are sometimes perceived by tourists as being "closer to nature than we are" (interview in Zenlei, 2014). But their respect for nature is not underlined by marketization, with the exception of their animist beliefs that they still keep alive, dedicated to trees and rocks, sources and votive caves.

#### 4. ECO-ETHNIC LANDSCAPES: RARE TOOLS OF SOFT POWER AND RECOGNITION

Among the five cases, the most “touristically visible” group, the Shui, is probably the one that benefits the least from tourism, while the Bhotias, the least visible, enjoy substantial benefits. Hence, contrary to our initial hypothesis, our case studies show no direct correspondence between eco-ethnicity and economic empowerment.

##### 4.1. The staging of a Shui landscape... at their expense?

No doubt, the Shui ethnicity is clearly recognized by the government and the tour operators. Minorities are part of the Great China, to be used in the service of the central government: the growth of ethnic tourism reinforces the control of the Party-State (Oakes, 1998; Nyiri, 2006) and accelerates the integration of the Shui space into the national territory. This is one of the reasons why the Chinese State is producing, through a standardized planning model, a partly eco-ethnicized landscape designed for tourist consumption. This requires the minorities’ tourist sites to meet the Han’s expectations of the ideal Chinese landscape, that of *shanshui* (literally “mountains and waters”), exploitable and staged. This is reflected in the mobilization of aquatic elements (waterfalls) and mountain views (kiosks for contemplation), and a picturesque architectural style reminiscent of *shanshui* painting, in which the wooden constructions are harmoniously integrated in a landscape of mountains and water. The villages, on the other hand, are transformed by an emphasis on their ethnic character, through the addition of different decorative elements (such as paintings, inscriptions in shui language, construction of fake facades of old houses), the highlighting of local cultural specificities (statues of Shui spirits, eco-museums...), etc. Thus the landscape is artificialized and “eco-ethnicized”, to better valorize the greatness of Chinese culture (through the *shanshui*) and the richness of the Chinese nation endowed with such diverse ethnic minorities. This contributes to the glorification of State power, while constituting an image that the tourists will remember. In other words, landscape and ethnicity are used for political ends (Gauché, 2017).

How do the Shui themselves benefit? Their “ethnic culture” seems to benefit from the recent “heritageization” of several elements such as ritual writing, embroidery, and festivals. For the rest, they are not particularly involved in any specific aspects of tourism – except for a woman in Sandu with political connections who built a museum of Shui culture in the neighboring city – nor do they manage any tour operator company. The

only meager direct financial income they derive are from bus parking rights, the food consumed locally by the tourists, and performances held by some dancers –who, incidentally, are sometimes not even Shui. However, far from resenting the marketization of their ethnicity by the government, the Shui wish to increase it, but obviously to their benefit. What they want more than the recognition of their identity is economic development which could limit emigration of the youth. But they realize that they would have to leverage this identity in order to try to promote the development of ethnic tourism.

#### 4.2. Empowered Bhotias, even without an eco-ethnic landscape

The contrast is clear with the least touristically visible ethnicity of our five cases, the Bhotias of India. In 2013, in the Munsyari administrative block, 16 out of 27 hotels and 16 out of 24 homestays were owned by Bhotias. They are dominant because the lower castes are too poor to invest, while many Brahmins, given their status, are reluctant to accommodate outsiders at home or to invest in the tourism business. However, the situation is gradually changing. In 2016, out of the 4 tourism agencies in Munsyari, 3 were owned by non-Bhotias. The well-off Bhotia prefer to invest in the plains (as far off as Delhi and even beyond). A good number of Bhotias are in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), an elite civil service. Why should they invest in eco-ethnicity if they have other easier sources of income and power? The Bhotias are so confident of their identity that they do not need to marketize it.<sup>12</sup> It is also worth noting that many regional actors are not happy with the development of tourism. The Bhotias who harvest the *Cordyceps* mushroom fear that some harvesters might come disguised as tourists, even though theoretically, the mushroom harvest is reserved for the rights holders in the Van Panchayats, that is, the village common forests. The army is another major local actor and it also fears the influx of a large number of tourists.

As has been observed in the case of the Shui, tourism is often analyzed in the Zomia region as a means for the central power to exercise control over geographical and ethnic margins. In contrast, in the Munsyari case study, tourism is less of a geopolitical tool than an economic activity which is just about tolerated. Foreigners' passports are retained by the army during their stay in Milam. Unlike the Shui, the Bhotia's eco-ethnicity is not instrumentalized by the government. Tourism is growing *in spite* of geopolitics.

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12 V. Hoon, discussion at the AQAPA workshop, IIC, New Delhi, May 4, 2016.

### **4.3. The fruitful Gurung combination of landscape and ethnicity**

Out of the five case studies, the Nepalese case is the one where the local minority derives the most substantial income from tourism. In our Annapurna case study, most homestays are owned by Gurungs. They sell vegetables to hotels, offer themselves as porters, etc. The Gurung culture is well presented in cultural programs that are held in the villages. Family and ethnic networks play their full role, as many of the trekking agencies in Pokhara are run by Gurungs. Like the Bhotias, the Gurungs have a history of migration (members of both ethnic groups have served in the British army) which makes it easy for them to interact with outsiders.

Even though the eco-component of Gurung ethnicity is quite low, the Gurungs often claim that they follow environmentally “good practices” in order to obtain grants and benefits (plants, seeds) from the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). ACAP and other agencies, on their part, are training and educating the Gurungs and other communities in better environmental management. In a country such as Nepal where the environment is a crucial element for the rural populations as well as an important source of national and international funding, it is not surprising that the environmental card is often played by all kinds of stakeholders, including the Gurungs. Furthermore, the environmental image of the Gurungs has improved thanks to international labor emigration (Aubriot and Bruslé, 2012; Dérioz *et al.*, 2016), which led to abandonment of cultivation and shrub recovery (Khanal and Watanabe, 2006). Instead of being threatened, the forest appears to be winning.

### **4.4. Showcased ethnicity but weak environmental image of the non-Lao groups**

The ethnic Laotian communities find it obviously more difficult to play this environmental card. The responsibility of using ethnicity to promote eco-tourism in Luang Namtha is claimed and taken on by the State, probably because of the historical role played by minorities in the country’s north which provided the bulk of the communist military effort during the civil war (Evans, 2002). Subject to the decision by the Party of what the “good” cultural practices (folklore) and “backward” practices (slash-and-burn agriculture, hunting, opium, shamanism) are, the groups are theoretically equal in the country’s ethnic mosaic and together build the socialist revolution (Evrard and Goudineau, 2005). The low eco-ethnicity of Luang Namtha’s ethnic groups prevents them

from exercising any political influence in this matter. It is unthinkable for them to expect payment for their current farming systems as ecosystem services – except for the rice fields (a new crop that is not accessible to all) and possibly their gathering practices. Fortunately, the regional officials we met are increasingly aware that a good policy is not one that bans shifting agriculture but one that proposes alternative options. International donors, NGOs and the State could target their aid to local ethnic groups so that the latter can produce a landscape more in line with tourist expectations. Some individuals have already been able to take advantage of the tourist windfall – very likely a legacy of the benefits obtained by the victors of the civil war: about three-fourths of the tourist agencies in Luang Namtha belong to the non-Lao, mostly the Khmus.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4.5. For the Lachs, some benefits from marketization**

In Vietnam's Lam Dong province, socio-economic transformations have been triggered from outside, either directly by the national government (new economic zones, protected areas) (Déry, 2004; Déry and Tremblay, 2009), or indirectly through spontaneous migrations, or by more recent payment schemes for ecosystem services related to hydropower (McElwee, 2016). The Lachs of the small town of Lac Duong have embraced the tourism dynamic to some extent. In the high tourism season, a dozen shows are offered at the same time. The Lachs are both actors and beneficiaries. Yet those who have had to embark on riskier farming ventures, such as the cultivation of vegetables or strawberries, find that their household economics remain shaky due to debt (Ducourtieux *et al.*, 2018). The current situation bestows some economic power on the Lach because of the monetary income. This also allows them to modernize their shows: some happily combine traditional music and dance with modern instruments and sounds (rock), as they are broadly open to the influence of Vietnamese popular music. But their situation does not necessarily result in more political power. As for the Cil, they paradoxically benefit from greater poverty, which pushes the authorities to intervene with various socio-economic initiatives.

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<sup>13</sup> In the study area, tourism revenues are predominantly cornered by the owners of urban accommodation and trekking agencies (which may often be one and the same) with villagers only getting a marginal amount.

## Conclusion:

Our hypothesis was as follows: what we call eco-ethnicity explains to a large extent the various levels of involvement of a group in tourism growth and the resulting empowerment of that group. This hypothesis has not been validated. While it is clear from our case studies that a showcased ethnicity may provide some benefits to the group, the “eco-”, environmental component of eco-ethnicity does not play so much of a role.

Recall that we have identified three types of tourism: a nature-oriented tourism in Kumaon (India), a culture-oriented tourism in Guizhou (China), and intermediate cases, from the “natural” Annapurna (Nepal) to the “cultural” Laos, with Vietnam in between. It may seem obvious that the more tourism is “nature”-oriented, the less eco-ethnicity can help ethnic groups in acquiring soft power. After all, the tourists are not there to “see” people. It may also seem evident that there is enormous potential for acquiring soft power in regions where cultural tourism reigns. However, this has not been proved. In the Everest region, tourism primarily “for nature” has not stopped the Sherpas from using their eco-ethnicity and strengthening it, with the Gurungs seemingly following the same path in the Annapurnas. Conversely, cultural tourism in our Chinese case shows such a strong exogenous planning (by the State) of the eco-ethnicity of the Shui, that they derive hardly any benefit from it, least of all political. For the most part, their visitors are very “modern” in their thinking, believing in “development,” and do not perceive as positive what others might regard as environmental values. Thus, wooden houses are seen less as clever adaptations to the environment and more as indicators of “backwardness” that evince the tourists’ curiosity. In any case, in tourism projects such as those depicted in Figure 2, it matters little whether the ethnic group in question has a strong environmental image or not: it is swept away by processes that far exceed it!



*Fig.2. Tourism development plan for Gulu village: of what use is a strong eco-ethnicity?*

Another factor of complexity, inviting a nuanced reading, is that enjoying a high eco-ethnicity is probably an advantage only if a group wants to progress economically and/or become collectively empowered. It is not useful if individuals succeed in promoting themselves, through tourism or other activities, without “playing the collective card”. We have been able to highlight this aspect in the case of some Gurung women who were able to find new income streams or even new ways of emancipation in a situation of male emigration and increasing tourism (Derioz *et al.*, 2016). As a result, on the basis of the cases studied, we have to conclude that eco-ethnicity – whose dual attributes may seem to constitute, *a priori*, potential assets for the minority populations as regards tourism – does not appear to be a tool that can be systematically mobilized to lift these populations and their territories out of poverty. This does not prevent the State or other stakeholders from “eco-ethnicizing” landscapes in order to attract tourists, but it does not always work to the advantage of the poorest.

Our research zone is located in the so-called Zomia region: tourism clearly acts like a tool to integrate four out of five studied areas in the national development process and the general control of populations. An exception is the Indian case where tourism is considered by the Indian government as a possible hindrance to the army’s action and control over the Munsyari region. There are two reasons why the Bhotias did not develop a very high eco-ethnicity: it was not encouraged by the authorities since rural tourism is not a priority in that border area, and there was little attempt by the Bhotias themselves to seize the tourism opportunity. Just compare this with the neighbouring Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve. In that protected area, considering the strict government policy of conservation, the NGO “Nanda Devi Campaign” helped provide rights to the Bhotias by “enabling them to insert themselves in the dominant environmental paradigm” (Benabou, 2007, p.114) and retain the possibility of benefiting from the local natural resources and ecotourism by showcasing their alleged “environmental wisdom”. The Munsyari area is not a protected area and the environmental regulations are less strict. Hence the Bhotias are less inclined to invest in rural tourism and prove their eco-ethnicity. This is further proof that eco-ethnicity is a relative concept, very much dependent on the context in which the group finds itself; it cannot be reified by attaching it to a non-situated identity.

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