Border Tourism in Southeast Asia: Thailand-Myanmar and Singapore-Malaysia Borders

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1. Closed National Borders in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is composed of eleven countries: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand which belong to the continent of Southeast Asia while Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines and Timor Leste (former East Timor) belong to the island chain of Southeast Asia (refer to Map 1). Ten countries out of these eleven won independence after World War II. Only Thailand managed to maintain her independence after the arrival of European colonial powers.
Soon after the end of World War II, Southeast Asian countries fell into wars for independence, civil wars and regional conflicts. For example, Vietnam declared war against her colonial master France who came back to the Indochina region in 1946. America interfered with its war with France and fought against Vietnam (North Vietnam) from 1954 to 1975. In 1978 the newly independent Vietnam invaded her neighboring country Cambodia. On the other hand, Indonesia declared a "Confrontation Policy" against the newly created Malaysia and sent airborne troops to Malaysia from 1963 to 1965. The Philippines claimed Sabah (Borneo's north eastern part of Malaysia's territory) as its own in 1967 and broke off diplomatic relations with Malaysia. Singapore was suddenly separated from Malaysia becoming an independent republic in 1965 with both countries having sensitive and unstable relations
for a long time (see Chapter 3 for further details). Malaysia declared a state of emergency in order to crush leftist and communist rebels in the nation. Burma (Myanmar) closed her doors to foreign countries to concentrate on internal politics and subjugate all the minority groups who wanted autonomy. Laos and Cambodia stayed neutral to keep a safe distance from regional conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus, these Southeast Asian countries have pushed forward with constructing their own nation-state and promoting economic development while keeping their national borders closed for long periods. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) formed in 1967 as a regional organization, now composed of ten countries in Southeast Asia, was useless in solving regional conflicts during this period. ASEAN member countries have been competing with each other to invite foreign investments to their own territory, setting aside economic cooperation. Chapter 2, a case study about border tourism on the Thailand-Myanmar border focuses on national borders that were almost closed and border tourism opened only for tourists from Western countries.

After the 2000s, international factors contributed to improving the situation as firstly, the Cold War in Asia has come to an end in the late 1990s, and secondly, economic globalization and the rise of China and India as well as the slowdown in the flow of foreign investment into Southeast Asian countries encouraged the creation of the ASEAN economic community. Chapter 3, a case study about the Singapore-Malaysia border focuses on national borders being opened for local people and allowing them to cross the border officially.
2. Hill Tribes on Thailand-Myanmar Border

(1) Baan Tong Luang

Eco-Agricultural Hill Tribes Village, Baan Tong Luang is located in the northern suburbs of Chiang Mai, the second largest city in Thailand, near the Thai-Myanmarese border. It is located approximately one hour from the Chang Mai city center by car.

Hill tribes such as Kayan (Karen Longneck), Palong, Pakayor and Lahu Shibalah, who fled from oppression by the military regime in Myanmar reside here. Young officers took power by a coup in 1962 and their military regime remained in control despite the holding of the first multi-party general election in 1990. The military regime tried to crush almost of all the minority groups in the name of border safety. The hill tribes on the border area who wanted autonomy from the late 1970s to 1980s were especially targeted.

The hill tribes who run into northern Thailand were accommodated in refugee camps. The Thai government however asked some hill tribes to come and reside for the purpose of "tourist attractions" in Hill Tribes Villages such as Baan Tong Luang. For Example, the Palong costume designs show a clear uniqueness; the female costume is made of a long piece of cloth and the most distinguished look is the wearing of the carved or lacquered rattan loops, smaller dyed rattan loops and a couple of engraved silver-like metal loops on their hips (Photo 1). Lahu Shibalah's dressing is a black suit laced with colorful patterns and small bells. The ears of their women are pierced and inserted with big metal earring (Photo 2).
The entrance fee for one visitor in Baan Tong Luang is 500 baht (Thai currency) which is approximately equivalent to US$15, but if you consider living expenses in Thailand, 500 bath is equivalent to US$50. Visitors are allowed to walk around, look into their houses and take photos freely from 9am to 5pm. The entrance fee is used for maintaining the Village and also distributed to each hill tribe household. The authority provides houses, daily necessities and fields to plow (Photo 3), as the official leaflet mentions "in order to preserve the wonderful life style which is not easy to see in the present day." Children are permitted to go out of their Village freely for education and daily work permits are given to men if they work outside the Village. All the hill tribes sell their own folk handcrafts in front of their houses and they keep the proceeds as their own income.
(2) **Human Zoo?**

The tribe the visitors particularly want to see is Kayan (Karen Longneck or Giraffe) ladies (Photo 4 and Photo 5). The brass rings around their necks is said to "symbolize Kayan female beauty." However those Kayan ladies remaining in Myanmar seldom wear brass while the ladies here wear them as the Thai authority pays them for attracting visitors.
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Photo 6: A Kayan house

It may be true that the hill tribes here are living a comfortable life when compared with other tribes who stay at refugee camps. However they are not entitled to receive financial support from international organizations nor permitted to leave Thailand for another country as they are not considered to be refugees.

Some human rights groups in Thailand and European countries criticize Baan Tong Luang as a "human zoo," since the hill tribes are always exposed to visitors and their children sometimes beg for money. However the Thai authority refutes that hill tribes lack enough money to live comfortably and they have the freedom to go back to Myanmar anytime.

Thailand is making good use of various kinds of tourist attractions such as temples, historical ruins, food and even people to become one of the most famous tourist attracting nations in the world. Hill Tribes Villages are but one of the means to attract tourists and its policy looks successful so far.
3. Border Crossing Singaporeans: Iskandar Development Region Project

(1) Singapore-Malaysia Relations

Singapore and Malaysia have the most intimate propinquity in geography, history, socio-culture and economy. As for geography, history and socio-culture, the current Johor, the southernmost state of peninsular Malaysia and the most immediate neighbor to Singapore (Map 2), and Singapore were part of a same Malay Kingdom prior to the arrival of European colonial powers in Southeast Asia. Singapore had developed as a regional trading post in Southeast Asian trade network as well as a trading settlement connected to China, South India and the Middle-Eastern Muslim world. After the nineteenth century, Singapore became the thriving center of administration, politics and economy in British Malaya.
Singapore and Malaysia are now different independent countries but the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore remained strong. Many Malaysians, especially Johoreans and Singaporeans, have close relatives and friends across the causeway. Both countries have been economically dependent on each other with Singapore being the largest trading partner of Malaysia and vice versa. Malaysia is very important to Singapore as she imports almost all the daily necessities including food and water. Everyday nearly 30,000-60,000 Johoreans commute to Singapore to work. These people have been the major source of workers for Singapore's rapid industrialization for decades.

Generally these historical, traditional and economic links are the basis of trust and credibility in foreign relations, but Singapore-Malaysia relations have proved to be the exception. They are considered to be one of the most sensitive and unstable relationships between any pair of ASEAN members.

(2) "Cold Relationship" and Social Distance

Singapore gained independence from Britain through merger with already independent Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia. After only two years, however, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia and became an independent republic in 1965. At issue were personal ambitions, economic questions, communalism, political ideology and the question of federal power and state autonomy. Current sensitive and unstable relations between Singapore and Malaysia are significantly shaped by the legacy of this merger and separation.

The animosity leading to separation had created such a deep well of mistrust and resentment that frictions arose almost immediately. Malaysia became Singapore's "Potential Enemy No.1" with Singapore strongly developing her national identity based on animosity towards
Malaysia. Singapore's Malay past has become almost invisible, swept aside in the official school textbooks. Singapore's history generally begins with the arrival of the British colonial master and narrates the contributions of British imperialism and modern law, English language and hard-working immigrants especially Chinese immigrants to Singapore's economic success. However, many foreign scholars agree that highly developed regional trade since pre-colonial times was the primary factors facilitating its rapid growth in the nineteenth century.

Singapore's rapid economic development after the late 1960s gave confidence to her national identity. Singapore's per capita income was twice Malaysia's when it became independent in 1965 but is by now some 6 times greater. Similarly, the city-state has been commonly projected by Malaysian politicians as arrogant, opportunistic and insensitive to her neighbor despite the reliance on them for labor, water, food and other basic necessities, though Singapore's rapid economic development stimulated economic development of Johor. After years of this counter criticism, it is hardly surprising that there exists a growing social distance between the Singaporean and Malaysian public, with each viewing the other through the prism of state constructed discourses and stereotypes.

(3) Iskandar Development Region (IDR) Project and Border - crossing Singaporeans

The deadlock came to an end after the 2000s. As already mentioned, international factors contributed to improve relations. Globalization and the rise of China and India as well as the slowdown in the flows of foreign investment to Southeast member countries encouraged the creation of an integrated ASEAN community. Common cross-border problems including the rise of religious extremism, the spread of
international terrorism and the threat of epidemics such as Severe Acute Syndrome (SARS) and the avian influenza brought home to the leadership of both countries the necessity and wisdom of maintaining good relations. As a result, the national boundary of the two countries has been "lowered."

The most significant indication of the good bilateral relations is the Iskandar Development Region (IDR) project, which is scheduled to be completed in 2025 and by then the population in the state of Johor is estimated to increase from the present 1.4 million to 3 million. The project, three times as big as Singapore in size, is to include 5 districts: A zone will be a new administrative center for Johor, B zone will be a luxury residential area, with C zone as water development and sightseeing area, and D as a new industrial zone. Johor is set to become the hub of industries such as IT, education, medicine, marine technology, shopping, tourism and other services (Photo 7). A project thus this scale is the first experiment and experience of its kind in Southeast Asia.
Rising labor and land costs in Singapore could scare investment away. Singapore authorities are hoping that relatively cheaper conditions across the causeway will encourage local as well as international companies to locate low-value production facilities in IDR's industrial zone, while keeping their high-value research and management functions in the city-state. The Singapore government also hopes that 10% of its population will live at B zone, the luxury residential area. According to a Singaporean agent, many Singaporeans have already bought luxurious condos and houses there (Photo 8, more than half of "Sold Out" areas are bought by Singaporeans). An international primary school for Singaporean as well as foreign children is ready to open and Lego Land, a huge amusement park opened in March this year.
This IDR project will definitely make Johor an official hinterland and leisure area of Singapore. It will bring more economic depth and diversity as it encourages investment by foreign and Singaporean companies in low-cost production facilities in its industrial zone, while maintaining high-level research and management functions in Singapore exactly as the Singapore government hopes. And Singaporeans who can afford to buy houses and condos in IDR's residential area are willing to do so. In a small, land-scarce city-state, having one's own house is the dream of almost all the Singaporeans. For them, Johor is the place where their dreams can become a reality.

On the other hand, ordinary Johoreans can work at IDR as workers but cannot afford to buy homes there. Many Johoreans feel uneasy or are unhappy not just with the anticipated strong Singaporean participation in the IDR project, but also proposed liberalization of rules governing foreign investment in Johor, seeing the latter as Singapore's border expansion into Johor. The former Prime Minister who had opposed Singapore's investment in Malaysia, warned that if the community in Johor was not vigilant, Johoreans would be sidelined by the IDR: "If we give more land to Singapore, one day we would
lose south Johor just like we lost Singapore in 1965," he said.

Some Johoreans also fear of mass influx of Singaporeans and Singapore’s investment in Johor. Many Singaporeans have started buying property not only in IDR's residential areas but also in other parts of Johor where prices are lower. However Singaporean owners of these houses come only during weekends or holidays and they seldom join local festivals and religious events. Local people especially Muslim people complain that Karaoke houses and illegal houses of prostitution built for Singaporeans are noisy during weekends and fear the disintegration of their traditional community life.

In order to make the IDR project successful, the two governments are expected to close the economic and social gaps between their peoples. It is especially a challenge for Singapore, richer than Malaysia and making more profit on the IDR project, to stop looking down on Malaysians and constructing its national identity in critical opposition to Malaysia. Improvement of these relations will be a key in making this project fruitful and successful in stabilizing the Singapore-Malaysia border.

Conclusion

When national borders were virtually closed in Southeast Asia, border tourism was mainly limited to foreign visitors as the case study on Baan Tong Luang shows. But Hill Tribes Villages like Baan Tong Luang will be closed in a few years as the democratization process has already started in Myanmar and hill tribes there may go back to their home villages. This type of border tourism will disappear soon.

Singaporeans were used to going to Johor for shopping and the IDR project has accelerated this movement. Now, many Singaporeans and numerous goods are crossing over the Singapore-Malaysia border
soon after the start of the IDR Project. Johor is now set to become a hinterland, leisure and sightseeing place for Singaporeans. But the animosity created after separation has not yet dissolved. Without creating cordial relations among these two peoples, border tourism for local residents may not be fruitful.

Notes

(1) The author visited this Village in November, 2009.
(2) From an explanation written on the board at the entrance of the Village.
Supplementary Note

Baan Tong Luang was recently closed as almost all the hill tribes went back to look for job in Myanmar where foreign investment has dramatically increased with the democratization process advanced.