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## Tourism and "eco-ethnicity": the challenges of environmental soft power for minorities in highland Asia (China, Laos, Nepal)

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environnemental pour les minorités de l'Asie d'altitude (Chine, Laos, Népal)  
[fr]

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Turismo y "eco-ethnicidad": los retos de un *soft power* medioambiental para  
las minorías en las tierras altas de Asia (China, Laos, Nepal) [es]

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### Résumé

This article tests the following hypothesis: What we call "eco-ethnicity" – the dual images of ethnic and environmental identity of a group – can explain to a large extent the empowerment of local groups; being endowed with significant eco-ethnicity could thus provide substantial "soft power" to a group from tourism. The paper is based on qualitative fieldwork research comparing three highland case studies in Nepal (Annapurna), China (Guizhou) and Laos (Louang Namtha). There, local tourism highlights ethnicity and local environmental knowledge, although to very different extents. In conclusion, eco-ethnicity does not appear to be a decisive factor for economic empowerment.



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## ***Entrées d'index***

**Keywords** : rural tourism, highland Asia, eco-ethnicity, minorities, ethnicity, soft power

### **Notes de la rédaction**

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## ***Texte intégral***

# **Introduction**

1 The term “soft power” was coined by Nye in connection with the United States and its place in international relations. It therefore has a geopolitical meaning originally limited to relations between countries. It seems to us that the richness of the concept allows to apply it to other scales and to other fields, in its simplest definition: “*This soft power - getting others to want the outcomes that you want - co-opts people rather than coerces them*” (Nye, 2004, p. x). We can thus speak of the soft power of a firm like Apple (its “brand image”), or even that of fashion to disseminate new values (Bidault-Waddington, 2016). This article intends to use the term in connection with ethnic minorities. The Nepalese Sherpas have acquired such international fame that their ethnic name has become the common name of a profession: this positive visibility is likely a major reason why they were able to obtain rights of use and co-management of Sagarmatha National Park around Everest (Sacareau, 1997). It therefore seems that groups with a strong and positive environmental and ethnic image, which we will call “eco-ethnicity”, would enjoy certain soft power. This is an identity that has two parts.

2 1. *Ecological identity*. It corresponds to the material and ideal relations (Godelier, 1986) which associate a group and its environment. This “eco-component” can be quantitatively measured (how many plant species does the population know?) and be described precisely, within the framework of anthropology that breaks the culture/nature dichotomy of Western societies (Descola, 2013). For what concerns us here, however, materiality matters less than the *image* projected outside the group concerned: it can be judged more or less “environmental” and at the same time more or less positively assessed. Most researchers agree that the “ecologically noble savage” is a myth (Hames, 2007). Yet, many organizations, local or international, and the group in question itself, can peddle such images - which the Western tourist is fond of. Some communities may therefore have a reputation for “ecological wisdom” that may not correspond to reality. In contrast, groups practicing swidden agriculture convey a negative image that is often unjustified: many indigenous populations in Asia are accused of promoting erosion, flooding and even climate change through their agricultural systems, even though their practices are completely sustainable, at least in areas of low population density (Ducourtieux, 2009; Gauché *et al.*, 2019).

3 2. *Ethnic identity*. The same relativism must apply to this second component of eco-ethnicity. We must be careful not to essentialize “ethnic groups”, from both anthropological (their reality is largely performative) and socio-economic (the groups cross multiple identities of class, sex, etc.) points of view. Ethnicity is above all to be considered “as will and representation”, to use the Schopenhauerian title of an article by J-L. Amselle (1987). Ethnicity is “the awareness of belonging to a human group different from others and claiming it” (Otayek, 2001). However, this notion, born from the amalgamation of colonialism and the beginnings of anthropology in the 19th century, was reinvented and often frozen by modern Asian States in the second half of the 20th century (Pholsena, 2011 for Laos; Elliott, 2015 for China). From this



perspective, the use of the term “people” applied to a single group would be inappropriate: on the one hand, it is seen as a threat by certain countries (Vietnam, Laos, China, India, etc.) which refuse to use the term “indigenous peoples” because this could pave the way for certain international rights. On the other hand, the term “people” is used to describe the nation itself, while the different groups become merely *ethnic*, and for the most part, minorities. The multiple and flexible identities studied by Leach (1954) in Burma declined almost everywhere in southern Asia: this is one of the reasons why Scott did not dare to venture chronologically after WWII in his anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia (Scott, 2009).

- 4 Our hypothesis: depending on the strength of its eco-ethnic image, a group is more or less in an advantageous position to benefit from tourism development. Isn't soft power itself mainly about image? The first part of this text analyzes the concept of eco-ethnicity, and presents the AQAPA project which tested it in Asia. The three case studies are then described with regard to the environmental and ethnic dimensions of their tourism development, before the eco-ethnicities involved are analyzed. Finally, it will be noted that the hypothesis is hardly validated: the “eco-ethnicity” of these three groups, although sometimes highly valued or even exploited, cannot in themselves explain their political and economic position in each localized tourism system. In conclusion, the reasons that limit the scope of the use of eco-ethnicity as an effective tool of soft power will be identified.

## I. Eco-ethnicity and soft power

- 5 The scientific literature has already explored the manipulation of ethnicity for economic (Michaud, 2010; Picard, Wood ed., 1997; Swain, 2011) and (geo)political purposes (Chun, 2009); this article will not go into that. The approach in terms of self-exotism has analyzed the “ambiguous confrontation with the internalized Other” (Schon, 2003, p. 17), but it remains above all limited to the study of postcolonial literature. Research has sometimes brought to light the effects of a positive environmental image, in particular the mastery by local populations of an ecological discourse that may appeal to rulers and external actors (Hirsch, 1996; Forsyth, 2003; Li, 2001; Luangaramsri, 2001; Menzies, 2003; Walker, 2001), even though the knowledge of indigenous peoples does not, for the most part, integrate environmental concerns such as we understand them in Western societies (Bruun and Kalland , 1995; Pinton, Grenand, 2007). To our knowledge, however, the literature has never associated the two components, ethnic and environmental, even though it is their combination that proves to be strategic<sup>1</sup>. According to some (Fontaine, 2006), there may even be an incompatibility between ethnic identity and “environmentalist identity”, as shown by the tensions between Amazonian Indian movements and international or Western environmental organizations. This is certainly the case if one gives this “environmentalism” the purely Western perspective of nature conservation, which seldom exists among indigenous peoples, whose environmentalism is based on animism or totemism (Descola, 2013). It is much more questionable if we consider that eco-ethnicity is based on an “ontology”, a representation of the world which cannot separate the human from nature. In addition, this incompatibility between ethnic identity and environmental identity is inclined all the more to be reduced as, Fontaine himself shows very well, the Amazonian Indian movements learned a whole new vocabulary and norms in contact with the environmentalist movements of the countries of the North. They now know how to use these in national and international arenas to assert their rights - in particular their capacity to promote “sustainable development” and to manage protected areas. As Ulloa (2005, p. 4) writes, *“indigenous peoples' political actions and the emergence of 'ecological' identities coincide with an internationalization of*



*environmental law that has constructed indigenous peoples as subjects who can have full rights over their territories and resources in order to enter into the environmental market”.*

6 Eco-ethnicity would then help to explain the degree of integration of these ethnic groups in tourism development and the possible empowerment they can benefit from it. In the use of the term, we mean empowerment that involves critical awareness and endogenous development, in a process of transformation of power relations (Calvès, 2009). The hypothesis that there is a correlation between eco-ethnicity and positive benefits for the group from tourism in its heritage dimension has proved conclusive when comparing urban national parks (Landy *et al.*, 2017; Landy ed., 2018); we will now test it in three Asian regions characterized by altitude, increasing tourism, and the strong presence of “ethnic minorities” - in China, Laos and Nepal, three of the five countries studied by the project AQAPA *To whom do the landscapes in Asia belong?*

7 As part of this project funded by the French National Research Agency (2014-2019)<sup>2</sup>, each site was studied by master's students from AgroParisTech to establish an “agrarian diagnosis” (five months of fieldwork). They also received visits from more experienced researchers for an average of 50 person-weeks, for landscape analyses, qualitative and quantitative surveys of households and tourists, and to lead workshops with decision-makers and tourism operators<sup>3</sup>. Two doctorates in geography on India, Nepal and China also contributed to this research. Interpreters supplemented the team most of the time, given the challenge of the many local languages that are different from the national languages. While the methods of agrarian diagnosis and landscape analysis were similar for each site, the surveys for other parts of the research were specific: we did not seek to establish a strict comparison between the five sites, preferring to stick to their specificities in order to better understand and highlight them. This article shows, in our opinion, that the methodological differences do not prevent the establishment of bridges between fields due to a shared issue based on the notion of eco-ethnicity.

8 The ethnic minorities present in the three regions studied in China, Laos and Nepal participate very unequally in the various forms of tourism. It is therefore a question here less of considering the manipulation of tourism by the States to ensure soft power, than of questioning the soft power of minorities whose ethnicity can play an important role in the shaping of the landscape or the cultural attraction of tourist destinations, which themselves may be the object of visits within the framework of what is called “ethnic tourism” (Lekane Tsogbou, Schmitz, 2012).

9 Eco-ethnicity can be part of the construction of a contemporary tourist imagination, expression of a sensitivity to the environment and of representations built by a system of tourism or political actors, who put it forward to integrate, develop, or even control a space populated by minorities. In return, this eco-ethnicity can provide these minorities with a useful lever to negotiate rights with local authorities or seek support from global environmentalist organizations. A strong and positive image in environmental matters can generate the granting of specific rights, the arrival of financial aid from government, private, or large international NGOs, strengthen the attractiveness of tourism, twist the arms of governments in negotiations over land for conservation (Bellier ed., 2015; Hirsch, 1996). A strong eco-ethnicity could then turn out to be a “weapon of the weak” (Scott, 1985) of a new kind, which would make it possible to reverse a process of socio-cultural or political marginalization (Déry *et al.*, 2012). A weak eco-ethnicity, on the contrary, would hardly allow this soft power to develop (Landy *et al.*, 2020), leaving these groups at the mercy of the “environmental rule”, as in Vietnam (McElwee, 2016). We start from a less politically radical approach than that of Scott (2009) who takes up the underlying anarchism of Clastres (1974) about minorities turned “against the State”. In our view, these “weapons of the weak” are used less to oppose the State, or even to circumvent it, than to try to make use of it. The objective is to fit into power relations (power of the State at its different scales, but also the powers of private actors in the



tourism economy) in order to try to extract a few crumbs, or more if possible. Most often, it is certainly less a question of "strategies" than of "tactics", of "tricks" - to use the terminology of de Certeau (1990) - but this risky bet can prove to be a winner, at least for some components of the ethnic group taking advantage of their positive image.

## II. The place of "minorities" in tourism development

### A. From Zomia to integration? Diversity of ethnic situations in Nepal, China and Laos

10 Our three sites are located in Zomia, the mountainous Asian region populated by minorities who have long tried to evade the control of centralized power in the plains (van Schendel, 2002; Scott, 2009; Michaud, 2010). These national fringes are strategic for governments, in a context of sometimes long-standing strengthening of the State or more recently of transnational agricultural, energy or industrial investments (De Koninck, 1996). In this regard, eco-ethnicity can be a tool for local populations to claim more visibility and rights *from the State*, but it can also be manipulated *by the State*, in particular through a policy to implement tourism, in order to integrate the region to the country.

11 The three fields of the AQAPA project studied here<sup>4</sup> are:

12 - in China, to the south of the southern province of Guizhou, the villages of Gulu, Zenlei and Shuige (800-1000 m altitude), populated above all by the Shui people (Tai-Kadai linguistic branch);

13 - in northern Laos, Nam Ha National Protected Area and its surroundings, near Luang Nam Tha, a region populated above all by the Lanten (Hmong-Mien), the Akka (Tibetan-Burmese) and the Khmu (Austro-Asiatic) peoples, in villages located between 300 and 1200 m;

14 - in Nepal, on the southern slope of the Annapurnas, the area of the recently opened Mardi Himal and Macchapucchre Model Trek treks (villages at 1500-2000 m), where the Tibetan-Burmese Gurung, Magar and Tamang ethnic groups represent about a third of the population.

15 In the first two countries, which are officially communist, the ethnic question is treated according to the principle of a strong nation representing a united multiethnic people. China is a State that officially counts 56 "nationalities" (*minzu*), 55 being "minorities" who represent 8% of the population (against 92% Han). The central power carries out a development policy in these peripheral territories in order to integrate them into the whole nation, which translates into a cultural, demographic and economic "Han-isation", and by the reduction of local cultures to popular folklore among Han tourists (Harrell, 2001; Oakes, 1998; Nyiri, 2006; Schein, 1997). In Laos, the Constitution similarly recognizes 49 ethnic groups (Schlemmer, 2015) - that of the Lao forming just half of the country's population (Pholsena, 2011). But as in China, the official line is that this ethnic mosaic eventually crystallizes to form Socialist Citizens, guided by a "elder brother" group, in this case the Lao.

16 The young Nepalese democracy does not adhere to this model: it is the only one of the three States to have ratified the ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989). Officially, Nepal has 59 "indigenous peoples" (*adibasi janajati*), about a third of its population (Hangen, 2007), but it ignores the notion of "aboriginal" (*lit.* "here from the beginning"), in particular because of the great





migratory movements within the country. The Tibetan populations or the Bhotia dominate in the north, in the sparsely populated high altitudes, the Tibetan-Burmese such as the Gurung occupy the lower mountains approximately between 1500 and 3000 m. Most often of Buddhist culture with a strong animist heritage (Smadja ed., 2009), these groups differ from the populations in the south, who are mostly Hindu (Kergoat, 2007).

## B. Cultural ethnicity, political ethnicity, tourist ethnicity

17 Let us place the eco-ethnicities of our three cases within the determining framework of tourism and environmental policies.

18 Nepal opened up to international tourism when Laos was in the midst of war and China was still more or less closed to visitors from capitalist countries. Nepalese tourism has been organized around trekking since the 1970s (Sacareau, 1997): in our region, it is supervised by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, in a relatively open field of actors. While international tourists remain the majority on high altitude trails, domestic tourists have also recently taken an interest in them (Dérioz *et al.*, 2016). In Laos, on the other hand, tourism has only developed since 1999, and with much lower numbers of tourists (primarily Westerners). Trekking is dominant in and around the protected area of Nam Tha, for a clientele that is almost exclusively European, North American or Australian. This is part of a policy to bring in foreign currency, but also to develop these regions which lie at the crossroads of the Burmese and Chinese borders (Déry, Dubé, 2019). The treks pass through the forest on small paths. These are short routes, allowing tourists to spend a night in a village or in the *jungle*<sup>5</sup>. Finally, in China, the three villages studied are visited by almost exclusively Chinese (Han) tourists, who venture little beyond the inhabited space: they devote one to two hours to admire the architecture and "traditional" cultural shows (songs and dances), and walk only along a predefined and limited circuit in the rural landscape.

19 All this testifies to distinct tourism settings. What are the drivers? State policies play a critical role in China, including those at the provincial and district levels. In addition to its role in economic development, domestic tourism aims to build a feeling of national identity (Taunay, 2011), which paradoxically involves giving value to local ethnic particularities: these, frozen in essentialism by Chinese ethnologists, are seen as the nation's wealth through tourism development of their diversity (Oakes, 1998). In Laos, the place of ethnicity in the promotion of Luang Nam Tha's ecotourism is also assumed by the State. Though the groups are subject to a right of inventory by the Party between "good" cultural practices (folklore) and practices considered "backward" (slash and burn, hunting, opium, shamanism, etc.), theoretically they play an equal part in building the socialist revolution together (Évrard and Goudineau, 2004). In Nepal, on the other hand, if the State encouraged tourism, it was first of all the interactions between foreign climbers and local society that were the origins of tourism of Annapurna (Sacareau, 1997). In this country as in Laos, international institutions, from UNESCO or the IUCN, national donors such as the USAID, to small and large NGOs, have also played, and still play, a crucial role in defining or even implementing the tourism policies, even if it means presenting neocolonial forms. In all cases, the local ethnic groups did not initiate the process and are only one actor among many.

20 The attraction of the landscape is another driving force of tourism. The media and tourist publicity, at least in the West, of a summit like Annapurna (8,091 m) is far greater than that of the mid-mountains of Chinese and Laotian study areas. For all that, do we have a clear opposition between nature tourism and cultural tourism? Not



at all. Tourism in our Chinese case is undoubtedly cultural, based on the local folklore of the Shui ethnic group. But Nepal, while it welcomes much more nature-oriented tourism, does not negate the ethnic facts which are of some interest to foreign or domestic tourists. The Laotian case is the most balanced: visitors to the jungle generally go through “ethnic villages”, constructed as such by advertising.

21 As we can see, the importance of ethnic tourism varies between the three regions. In the Chinese case, the Shui ethnicity is at the forefront in the tourism development of the Sandu district. The minority tourism villages developed by the State become official sites of domestic tourism, which amounts to an official recognition of their ethnicity without conferring any rights on them. Han visitors to the three villages come for the Shui culture, for the Shui dances, the Shui houses, the Shui festivals - all more or less reconstructed to meet the expectations of tourists, as part of a heritage development process where “authenticity” does not really matter whatever the word may mean in tourism (Bruner, 2005; Taunay, 2011; Xie, 2010)<sup>6</sup>. We are in fact witnessing a form of “internal orientalism” (Schein, 1997; Gladney, 2014), where Han city dwellers come to be surprised at the “exotic” rural environment, which is closer to nature than that of “civilized” spaces in the plains (David, 2010).

22 In Laos, in addition to the jungle promoted by tour operators, there is an important cultural component: visitors can sleep in Akka, Lanten or Khmu villages, share their food and visit their schools. Western tourists often remark on the wealth of their knowledge of the resources offered by the forest, which guides highlight along the routes (food, medicinal plants, etc.). Despite certain technical developments (fiber cement roofs, decline in traditional clothing), ethnicity is an integral part of the tourist product: “Live the Akka adventure!” proclaim the agencies that offer “ethnic paths” or Hmong homestays.

23 The Nepalese case is quite similar to that of Laos, even if the landscape attraction of the high Himalayan peaks represents the primary tourist motivation there (Dérioz *et al.*, 2016). The discovery of local ethnicities is indeed an element of tourism in Annapurna. In our study area (Létang *et al.*, 2017), the Gurung maintain a vibrant and original culture. Of course, their ethnicity is modified by processes of acculturation coming from the rest of Nepal, Western countries and migration abroad. Yet even young Gurung can speak their own language, and interethnic marriages are not very common. This cultural dimension can be read in the landscape through a particular architecture; several villages, in particular Gandhruk, have small museums presenting traditional objects; in sectors where forms of community tourism with homestays have been developed (Upadhayaya, 2013), ethnicity becomes more explicit, with shows intended for fewer and more informed tourists - notably Nepalese customers – than those who only take the major routes.

### **III. Eco-ethnicities are variable and are not determining factors**

#### **A. The relative weakness of many eco-ethnicities**

24 In our sample, the Laotian ethnic groups have the worst environmental image. Tourists, all Westerners, expect to discover the advertised “jungle”; in reality they also come across small-scale or industrial rubber plantations, and, worse still in their eyes, forest plots burnt for swidden agriculture<sup>7</sup>. Only the rice fields at the bottom of valleys find favor with the landscape expectations of Western tourists. For the rest, the myth of the hunter-gatherer that they more or less had in mind collapses in the face of the reality of an agriculture in full reorganization. Clearing is not harmful to the environment if it is practiced correctly (Ducourtieux, 2015), but the remarks of





tourists in this case resemble those of the “theory of Himalayan environmental degradation” (Ives, Messerli, 1989) who accuse these peasant practices of accelerating erosion and deforestation. However, we must qualify this: tourists discover and admire the fact that the villagers know the wild species of the forest so well. They can also eat them: this knowledge of the forest then gives a more positive image of the ethnic groups. Yet, the number of “trekkers” has tended to stagnate in Luang Nam Tha since 2006, the main reason being the discrepancy between what is “sold” by tourism operators and the reality of the treks.

25 In Nepal, the Gurung and other Tibetan-Burmese groups have a low environmental image despite their animism. Their ethnicity is very visible in the landscapes featured in tourism products, but it includes few ecological components, at least those that are attractive to Western tourists, and they have been accused of extending their terraces at the expense of the forest and degrading the latter by passing their herds through it, thus increasing erosion (Smadja ed., 2009). Most passing tourists are ignorant of the debates about deforestation in Nepal, but they are increasingly imbued with a common confounding of the issue of climate change and threats to biodiversity. The fact remains that if the environmental practices and knowledge of the Gurung are often neglected, tourists are sensitive to their villages clinging to spectacular slopes sculpted into terraces. It is therefore the landscape itself that allows the Gurung to increase their eco-ethnicity<sup>8</sup>.

26 Among the Shui of Guizhou, we have the opposite situation: it is their visible ethnicity that gives touristic interest to a landscape that would otherwise hardly have any. Certainly, in China, minorities are often photographed in “traditional” dress in front of rural landscapes, improperly qualified as “natural” by tourism stakeholders. The Shui are sometimes seen by Han tourists as being “closer to nature than we are” (interview in Zenlei, 2014). But their possible environmentalist practices are in no way emphasized in the promotion of tourism, with the exception of their animist beliefs which are still alive, dedicated to trees, rocks, or votive sources. Moreover, their urban visitors steeped in belief in “development” severely judge what others might consider environmentalist values: thus, wooden houses are seen less as a skillful adaptation to the environment than as a backward trait and historical curiosity. A Chinese (English-speaking graduate) even told us: “The Shui villages are the first stage of human beings”. Such social evolutionism prohibits eco-ethnicity from being valued. In tourism projects such as those shown in Figure 1, it does not matter whether the ethnic group in question has a strong environmental image or not: it is swept away by processes that go far beyond it.

Figure 1. **The new tourism development project for the ethnic village of Gulu (China): what can eco-ethnicity serve here?**





Planning document consulted at the CEO (of the Shui ethnic group) of the *Guizhou Legend of Shui Country Culture Tourism Development Ltd.* Photo F. Landy, 12.8.2017)

## B. Beneficiaries or left behind?

27 According to our initial hypothesis, that a community enjoys a strong eco-ethnicity would *a priori* appear to be an advantage in Chinese cultural tourism, based on visiting villages populated by ethnic minorities; much less in Nepalese tourism which is more focused on nature. If Han tourists come "for the Shui", doesn't this minority have leverage in return? On the contrary, the tourists of Annapurna do not come "for the Gurung" but first for the high mountains: it could therefore be more difficult for this local ethnic group to be heard given its lesser importance in the motivation of the tourists. What is the reality revealed by our field research?

28 It is clearly quite different. Our surveys do not indicate a direct link between eco-ethnicity and empowerment, in any dimension of the term: neither in the dimension of awareness-raising, nor in those of economic empowerment and political transformation.

29 Among the three cases, while the Shui are the most "visible" from the touristic point of view, it is also the group that benefits the least. The development of tourism in their villages involves bringing the sites into conformity with the ideal Han Chinese landscape, that of *shanshui* - literally "the mountains and the waters" - (Escande, 2005), enhanced and staged. This is reflected in the development that values rivers and waterfalls, mountain views, as well as by the addition of architectural decoration and the highlighting of cultural specifics such as dances and writing (Gauché, 2017). The local population told us they appreciate these landscape transformations - as far as we can measure the sincerity of the narratives noted in our interviews, given the lack of freedom of speech<sup>9</sup>: the *shanshui*-type vision of the landscape has been reappropriated by contemporary Shui culture, and in return this Shui culture benefits from the heritage valuation of some of its elements (writing, embroidery, myths, etc.). For the rest, the Shui do not control any aspect of tourism, and do not manage any tour operation. The only meager direct financial profits are those left by parking fees for buses, meals eaten on site by tourists, or performances by dancers who are sometimes not even Shui. (The peasant association of the village of Shuige only redistributes 40-100 yuan/person/year - see Gauché *et al.*,



forthcoming). The population does not revolt against the commodification of their ethnicity by the public authorities (Xie, 2010); they would even like to increase it, but that it be more to their benefit. Relying on the valuation of this identity to try to promote the development of ethnic tourism, they want economic development in order to limit emigration, more than the recognition of the Shui identity<sup>10</sup>.

30 The Nepalese case is the only one of the three where the local population, its Gurung component in this case, controls a share of tourism and derives substantial income from it. But its relatively low eco-ethnicity explains less than the fact that the region's wealthiest families historically are Gurung. The capture and accumulation of the wealth created over the long term (land rent, contracts with former herdsmen, etc.) have been used for tourism activities, which require substantial investments. Moreover, their migratory history (in the colonial army and now to the Gulf countries) accustomed the Gurung to interact with foreigners, and has provided some savings reinvested in tourism (Sacareau, 1997). The interaction between the Gurung and the first tourists was then played out, as well as the effect of family and ethnic networks: many of the trekking agencies in Pokhara are run by Gurung, who maintain ties in the high valleys. In the study region, most guest houses are run by Gurung. They sell vegetables to restaurants, or can hire themselves as guides or porters (Dérioz *et al.*, 2016). In addition, the Gurung culture is present in the village shows offered to tourists. Although the eco-component of their ethnicity is quite weak, some Gurung display “good practices” in order to obtain subsidies and support of all kinds (plants, seeds, etc.) from the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). Conversely, ACAP and other agencies train Gurung and other communities in “environmental management”. In a country like Nepal where the environment is so crucial for rural people and constitutes an important source of national and international funding, it is not surprising that the “green” card is being used by all kinds of actors, including the Gurung.

31 The Laotian farmers obviously find it more difficult to play this card. The low eco-ethnicity of the ethnic groups in Luang Nam Tha prevents them from having any power in this area. If tourists associate their slash-and-burn landscapes with desolation, they cannot expect to receive payment for environmental services from their forestry practices - except for the rice fields, popular with tourists but more recent and few in number. Gathering is another positively rated activity - but hunting is not. If three-quarters of Luang Nam Tha's agencies belong to non-Lao people (often Khmu), the common Khmu villagers, as even more marginal groups (Akka, Lanten), remain excluded from the meager redistribution of income from a few overnight stays or from meals paid for by tourists to agencies. There is, however, hope: the provincial officials we met recognize that the slash-and-burn ban will only be effective after viable alternative options are widely implemented. This local administration has only a few Lao people and is composed mostly of Khmu or Lu, whose ancestors were with the Communist Party early on during the Civil War (1950s-1975, cf. Evans, 2002).

## C. Eco-ethnic image fragile in many ways

32 These results show the fragility of the eco-ethnic image and its power. A strong eco-ethnicity can help to obtain soft power, but it does not guarantee it. However, our hypothesis is not invalidated when taken in the negative: in Laos, the low eco-ethnicity of the ethnic minorities studied is certainly a factor that reduces their ability to obtain more recognition and rights. But generally speaking, eco-ethnicity does not appear as a tool to be systematically mobilized by populations to lift them out of poverty. In other words: eco-ethnicity often works, but it all depends on who implements it. Other factors intervene and in the first place, the State, which with other actors is often the first to “eco-ethnicize” landscapes to attract tourists - as we



saw in China - but this is not always for the benefit of the most disadvantaged. If the role of the State is rather weak in Nepal, where a lot of room is left to international NGOs which benefit the Gurung, it is very strong in China where the concern of redistribution of benefits for the Shui is not the primary concern. Another factor, indirectly linked to the previous one, is the economic context, which allows the Gurung to repatriate on the spot the capital and knowledge that they were able to acquire in emigration, according to family rather than community strategies (Dérioz *et al.*, 2016). Finally, a third factor is at play: the essential role of *psyches* and dominant representations, whether at the national level (the Han view marginalizing "nationalities") or at the global level (negative views of swidden agriculture). Knowing by whom they are shaped, in the name of which ideologies and values, and for which interests, is beyond the scope of this article, however.

## Conclusion

33 Many factors combining historical and territorial contingencies are taken into account to explain the place held by mountain minorities in the tourism system. This means that eco-ethnicity, an everchanging identity image, cannot always prove to be an effective lever for at least four reasons.

34 First of all, it is doubtful that even a very strong eco-ethnicity will succeed in providing particularly marginalized groups with a soft power that can counterbalance much more effective hard powers. They often need the help of external actors: international NGOs have worked a lot in favor of the Sherpas of Nepal, or to participate in environmental struggles in Thailand, from which the Karens have benefited (Hirsch, 1996). In more closed countries, such as China or Laos, these actors are less present, or less powerful, and cannot highlight the eco-ethnicity of certain communities. In these two countries, the ethnicity of minorities is strongly emphasized by the State itself to strengthen their power to attract tourists, but, as we have seen in this study, without necessarily emphasizing the environmental component.

35 On the other hand, the value of eco-ethnicity changes over time as well as over space. In China and Vietnam, it was first the Stalinist approach to the "nation" and ethnic minorities that prevailed, before they became assets for the country's tourism development. In Nepal, the Sagarmatha National Park was created largely because of the negative environmental image of the Sherpas, accused of degrading the forest, before they managed to put forward their traditional modes of management, to demonstrate to decision-makers the importance of their environmental knowledge and of being involved in the Park (Adams, 1998; Sacareau, 2009). In addition, by mobilizing their image as heroic mountaineers, they obtained flexibility in the legislation that did not benefit lesser-known groups in other parks of the country which were established in a more conflicting manner (Chitwan, Rara, etc).

36 More generally, eco-ethnicity has a value that is all the more changeable as it contains two components, ethnic and ecological. We know at least since Leach (1954) how ethnicity is a historically contingent creation, sensitive to the political and socio-economic context (Hale, 2004; Ulloa, 2005). But this is also the case for the ecological component of eco-ethnicity: it was not until the environmental paradigm calling for sustainable development and the fight against climate change became dominant in the general discourse, if not in the reality of policies and practices, that eco-ethnicity appears as a source of soft power. Only then could the environmentalist values of the local populations be brought to the fore, to show the outside powers that they were good "environmental subjects", within the framework of this form of government that Agrawal (2006) called "environmentality". On the other hand, at the time when Modernity reigned by consensus, a few decades ago, transforming and





artificializing nature was much more valued: having a strong eco-ethnicity was therefore rather a drawback, attached to an image of underdevelopment or ignorance. Our Chinese case thus attests, through the condescension of Han tourists towards ethnic minorities, that Han Chinese visitors do not have the same environmental values as most Western tourists. The case is all the more complex as in the same country, different cultures can coexist depending on social class, education, age, etc.

37 Finally, eco-ethnicity is a difficult notion to use because it corresponds to an image with two sides: that of which the group concerned is aware (its own image), and the representations of the group in others. They cannot be analyzed separately, not only because identity is shaped by relationships with others (Barth, 1969), but also because a group's mobilization of its eco-ethnicity depends on what *it* believes *others* believe *it* believes. Thus, the Karen people of Thailand have adopted an environmentalist discourse that allowed them to have socioeconomic benefits (Hirsch, 1996), with the risk that their ethnic image becomes frozen in essentialism of which they would eventually become prisoners (Walker, 2001), fossilized in what Elison (2010) calls in India “*bona fide tribals*”. The path to eco-ethnicity is decidedly very narrow.

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## Notes

1 "The social practice of nature is articulated at the same time on the ideas that a society has about itself, on the ideas it has about its environment and the idea that it is made about its intervention on this environment" (Descola, 2014, p. 81).

2 Project coordinated by Evelyne Gauché (University of Tours, UMR CNRS 7324 CITERES) (<https://aqapa.hypotheses.org>).

3 Landscape questionnaires, with photos for comment, were distributed to residents and tourists. Qualitative interviews were carried out on the fly, without seeking the representativeness of the sample. Little grey literature was used for the three fields, either because there was little access (China) or because we relied on first-hand data (agrarian diagnostics).

4 These three regions are characterized by altitude, growing tourism, and the strong presence of "ethnic minorities" in Zomia. They were selected by AQAPA because some of its members had already done research there (Nepal, Laos), or because existing contacts facilitated the process of obtaining authorizations (China, Laos).

5 This term of Sanskrit origin is used in English by Laotian travel agencies as a synonym for dense forest. Its use corresponds well to "the Western representation of a landscape from Elsewhere or more broadly a wild and naturalized anti-world" (Vieillard-Baron, 2011).

6 On the different conceptions of authenticity for local populations, anthropologists and tourists, see Cravatte, 2009.

7 "At first I was a little shocked" (French waitress, about 25 years old), "From my bike, I saw fields burning 5 km away. Fed up with this smoke! So I turned around" (Austrian engineer, 58).

8 "In the past, people here did not know the word paryatak (tourist), they would stutter when they wanted to pronounce it. Now the whole world knows the village of Lwang and the Machhapuchhre Model Trek! », says the Gurung chairman of the Machhapuchhre Tourism Development Committee.

9 We worked with interpreters, and without written permission from the authorities. Some peasant narratives are transcribed in Gauché *et al.* (forthcoming). A 52-year-old farmer, having fed tourists for a while at his home in Zenlei, is satisfied: "People are happy. Because the State has helped them build the road, and develop agriculture to feed livestock. The State helped them borrow. If the State did not help the peasants, there would be fewer tourists. Because the peasants would not have enough money to welcome the tourists." The inhabitants of Gulu approve of the tourist development and the development model, but not its practical modalities: "Tourism, the development of "stone eggs", it is good, but the problem is that we no longer have rice to eat", said another 49-year-old villager.

10 It is possible that in the future the Shui will become more aware of the potential soft power of their eco-ethnicity, as did the Tibetans in the neighboring province of Yunnan (Vandenabeele, 2015). There, in the Pudacuo National Park open to mass tourism, the visitors (Han Chinese above all there too) are invited to observe the supposed harmony between the Tibetans and their natural environment, and the local population have understood their interest in subscribing to this image.

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## Table des illustrations



**Titre**

**Figure 1.** The new tourism development project for the ethnic village of Gulu (China): what can eco-ethnicity serve here?

**Crédits**

Planning document consulted at the CEO (of the Shui ethnic group) of the *Guizhou Legend of Shui Country Culture Tourism Development Ltd.* Photo F. Landy, 12.8.2017)



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