

# Impacts of Social Change on Domesticated Elephants in Thailand

## —A Case Study in the Provinces of Lampang and Surin —

Entry in Heisei 15

Destination country : Thailand

Dispatch organization : National Institute of Elephant Research and Health Service  
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### Summary of dispatch organization

National Institute of Elephant Research and Health Service (NIERHS) is a state organization that is nationally responsible for the conservation of Thai elephants. Located at the thirteenth kilometer on Surin-Prasat Road, Muang District of Surin Province, NIERHS was established in 1999, and has ever since functioned under the aegis of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. Its main objective is to conserve Thai elephants, at least by impeding the decline in number of elephants through various programs including health care services and academic research (see Fig.1).

In practice, NIERHS acts as a locus of an elephant-caring unit, or so-called “elephant hospital”, of which the crucial mission incorporates the elephant mobile clinic to provide a series of medical check-up and care for elephants in numerous sites, in coordination with the league of elephant-concerning groups from other regions in Thailand. To gain the authority of its operation at the national level, NIERHS has gradually developed a useful, comprehensive and automatically updated data base of (domesticated) elephants and their medical profiles through the elephant mobile clinic program. Thanks to its location in Surin Province, where the population of elephants appears to be the most abundant, this elephant hospital is structured with the most advanced and well-supplied appliances in the permanent clinic, and is renowned by roaming elephant keepers in the country (see Fig.2).



Fig.1 The entrance of NIERHS



Fig.2 An ailing circus elephant from Chaiyaphum awaits diagnosis at NIERHS

## **Aspiration/motive of dispatch and objectives before being dispatched**

At the beginning, my research sites mainly included a Kui village, in Surin Province, in northeastern Thailand, the National Elephant Institute (NEI), in Lampang Province, and the Elephant Nature Park (ENP) in Chiang Mai Province, in the northern part of the country. Having previously visited those areas where elephant communities exist, however, I realized that there would also be other places which could possibly impart upon me more profound understanding of elephantine circumstances in Thailand. With this initial motive, I then planned to set out my journey with the elephant mobile clinic of the National Institute of Elephant Research and Health Service, setting out from Surin Province in July and August, 2007.

Unfortunately, owing to time and budget limits of NIERHS, the veterinarians to whom I had already contacted before I left for Surin Province told me that the operation of the elephant mobile clinic had finished. The budget in this fiscal year had to be hastily expedited to cover some demoted, yet enchanting, parts of northern region, therefore limited funding precluded traveling to my previously selected site.

## **Activities during dispatch**

To deal with this predicament, I utilized NIERHS, the famed, for two purposes. Firstly, I sought the updated data, surprisingly automatically generated by a systematic program to acquire a range of necessary statistics, together with some relevant information. To be specific, I could gain, for instance, the elephant owner's names and their proper numbers of possession, as well as information related to the change of elephant owners in a couple of recent years. This data shall undoubtedly be a crucial part of understanding the past and present dynamics of elephant location, at least in the literal terms, along with the authoritative accounts on the ratio of possession, e.g., those held by the state, group of influential individuals, and local persons. In addition, the indeterminacy of the elephant population in Thailand, whether now really precarious and in decline or conversely on the rise, might be portended with a clarification.

Secondly, I did some interviews with the director and a senior veterinarian of NIERHS, and could eventually visit two important elephant camps in Chiang Mai Province with their help. Throughout the conversations, we exchanged ideas and insights, and progressively made several fruitful arguments. At the same time, the connection that I have created with the veterinarians could readily introduce me to the Elephant Training Center Chiang Dao (see Fig.3), the first elephant private camps in Thailand, and the Maesa Elephant Camp (see Fig.4), the seemingly most popular elephant camp in Chiang Mai Province.



Fig.3 The Elephant Training Center Chiang Dao.



Fig.4 Paintings by elephants in The Maesa Elephant Camp.

## Experiences and impressions of the dispatch destination

I have learned that there is not always just a sole solution for a problem. Traditionally, elephants in Thailand have long been through domestication processes in which the captured or new born elephants (at the age of 3 or 4) must be separated from their mothers before being trained to be docile for working. During the training process, or even after, a set of ankus and chains is still deemed culturally and practically necessary for each mahout to control the pachyderms. Nevertheless, in recent years, various groups of animal conservationist or welfare supporters have strongly repudiated this traditional practice, or demanded it be completely purged.

After having opportunities to interview and observe at numerous elephant-rearing communities, I noticed that there exists an evidence/a sign of change in elephant management that aptly became compatible with the westernized mindset (like that in the Elephant Nature Park). However, what is more important is that other elephant-relevant communities, for instance, the Elephant Training Center Chiang Dao and The Maesa Elephant Camp, also proved to have unfailingly treated their elephants in an humane sense while still utilizing ankus and chains. Moreover, the owners of those two elephant camps have successfully managed to create a suitable and environmentally friendly landscape to facilitate natural breeding, and keep their elephant camps and surroundings hygienic (see Fig. 5). To this point, the contestation over the innate diversity of ideas and practices, molded between tradition and modernization, among elephant-raising groups in Thailand is markedly tangible.

Fig.5 Elephant taking a shower composed of Effective Microorganisms (EM), to prevent water pollution, before entering into the river in the Maesa Elephant Camp.



## Attainability of objectives and reflections

Visiting the National Institute of Elephant Research and Health Service in Surin Province, and two elephant camps, in Chiang Mai Province did help significantly shape my thoughts and comprehension towards the intricate interrelations among elephant-raising groups in Thailand. Often, I get used to having a stereotype of gazing social phenomena in a binary aspect without adequate scrutiny. After roaming place to place however, it came to my understanding that the ideology and practices of elephant “conservation” for each relevant groups did not simply originate in parallel from the beginning. Also, the rhetorical discourses-along with the pragmatic managements of domesticated elephants in the country- from groups of elephant keepers, have actively and at times passively interacted with social changes, predominantly propelled by modernization.

In brief, local mahouts as well as those in private elephant camps who had never been aware that elephants had to be “preserved” before the 1980s have endeavored to substantiate their tradition, including taking elephants on tour, by struggling to create a modernized stance that corresponds to the externally imposed ideas of elephant conservation. It is the intermingled network of state agencies and non-governmental organizations/international organizations that have actively played their domineering roles in searching for the way in which elephants should be conserved. Even so, a congruence of ideologies and practices has yet to be reached.

