Race, Space and Inequality in an Internal Periphery: A historical perspective on a contemporary conjuncture in upland northern Thailand

Daniel B. Ahlquist
Duke University

Amanda L. Flaim
Duke University

For centuries, race and space have been inseparable in northern Thailand, where the rugged upland landscapes and the languages, cultures and land use practices of upland peoples have long frustrated lowland statecraft and marked them as the unruly and threatening Other in the lowland Thai imagination (Wolters, 1982; Winichakul, 1994, 2000; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995; Laungaramsri, 2001; Scott, 2009). Over the past half century, the Thai state has drawn upland spaces, peoples and resources into its administrative and economic purview through diverse and extremely ambitious development agendas, many of which have all but decimated upland economies. In this paper, we draw on extensive and unique mixed methods research in northern Thailand (2009-2011) to expose a present-day upland landscape characterized by complex and deeply racialized inequalities. We argue that the emergence and maintenance of Thailand’s racialized and unequal internal periphery cannot be understood apart from the European colonial encounter and the production of upland spaces and people as objects of development within the Western development and conservation paradigms over the course of the 20th century.