Hill Stations in Asia: A Discovery of Scenery and Environmental Change

Tsutomu INAGAKI

College of Tourism, Rikkyo University
1-2-26 Kitano, Nita, Saitama 352-8558, Japan
e-mail: inagaki@tr.rikkyo.ac.jp

Abstract

Hill stations are mountain resorts that were developed under colonial management by suzerain countries. Because of their historical background, hill stations are evidently products of colonialism. Hill stations tended to show a particular path of development from a few cottages, to military cantonments to popular summer resorts, or even “Summer Capitals.” The colonial history of these hill stations has come to an end. However, hill stations still survive as mountain summer resorts for domestic tourism of the new nation states. This article focuses on the formation process and social role of hill stations in relation to environmental change in particular. Then it discusses their transformation in the post-colonial era. For hill stations, a cool climate caused by high altitude was especially important. In coastal colonial cities, it was extremely difficult to maintain a Western lifestyle because of the hot, humid climate. The Western colonizers could maintain their own lifestyle only under the cool conditions at the hill stations. Hill stations were indispensable to the management of a colony as a device to maintain a Western lifestyle and also to uphold the colonizers’ identity as Westerners. It has been shown that the Western colonizers had marginal characteristics in terms of adaptation to tropical environments. Hill stations began with the “discovery of scenery,” like that the British found in the picturesque landscapes of lake districts in mountainous areas of colonies. The natural environment once discovered was altered into quasi-Western landscapes by afforestation and addition of some particular facilities. At present, this hybrid landscape is still reproduced by the formerly colonized people. Consequently hill stations have become exotic locales to everyone, both foreign and domestic, and attract tourists with their marginal characteristics and exoticism.

Key words: colonial space, hill stations, mountain resorts, quasi-Western landscape

1. Introduction

The subject of this article is hill stations in Asia and their relationship to the environment. Hill stations are summer resorts encountered widely in mountainous districts of former colonies from Southeast Asia to Africa. I will focus on South and Southeast Asia, and investigate the nature and environmental aspects of hill stations. From a historical viewpoint, hill stations are apparently products of colonialism. However even now many of them still survive and serve as a destination for domestic tourism. As a result, hill stations are not only a historical issue but a current issue for tourism studies.

Hill stations brought European landscapes into existence in the Third World. One aspect of their development was “a discovery of scenery” followed by reconstruction of the natural environment. Hill stations intentionally introduced imitation Western natural and social environments into Asian or African lands, which belonged to others who were completely different from the Western settlers. The history of academic studies in this area is comparatively new. At the same time, hill station studies have mainly been conducted by the suzerain (colonizing country) that previously owned the hill stations. From such a background, studies on hill stations have mainly focused on colonial history, and there are very few examples of post-colonial studies, even though hill stations as an object of research are extremely diversified. Especially from the viewpoint of leisure studies and tourism studies, this article will provide not only a general understanding of the relationship between hill stations and their environment but also of the process of adaptation of the quasi-Western environments by post World War II nations.

2. Climatic Importance of Hill Stations

Many articles on hill stations in Europe and America need not provide a definition (Spencer, 1948; Reed, 1976). This fact may reflect academic traditions in
Anglo-Saxon nations. Even now those countries remain in the mainstream of hill station studies. We, however, may consider why no definition is necessary for them. The word “hill station” evokes a concrete spatial image with emotional undertones in people of those countries. From the names of places such as Shimla (Simla), Darjeeling and Maymyo, people can imagine vividly not only the scenery of those places but also the more generalized landscape features peculiar to hill stations and the lifestyle there.

In spite of the scholastic view of hill stations in Anglo-Saxon nations, we have the necessity to tentatively define hill stations for further discussion. We may define hill stations as follows: urban spaces that suzerains constructed aiming at utilizing the climate conditions of a high altitude mountainous district in their colonies.

First, for this definition it should be noted that hill stations were an outcome of colonialism and its related immigration. Second, the cool climate conditions of hill stations located at altitudes of 1,200-2,000 m. possess great significance even though they are located in the tropics and subtropics. Finally, it is also important to point out that the hill stations were intended as urban spaces even though all hill stations started apparently from only one bungalow or cottage. Among the three points mentioned above, the climate of mountainous areas has special importance. Figure 1 is a comparison of temperature between Darjeeling and its mother city, Calcutta (Kolkata). Darjeeling is 7°C-10°C cooler than Calcutta year round. This temperature difference allowed settlers to maintain a temperate lifestyle. It would have been impossible for them to maintain such a lifestyle in the coastal colonial cities. In summary, hill stations are resorts that were formed on account of climatic conditions.

It is worth noting that the relationship to the mother city was extremely important. Hill stations existed as “negatives” of colonial cities in combinations such as Delhi and Shimla, Calcutta and Darjeeling, and Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) and Dalat. Hill stations could not help taking on urban functions of the mother city from the necessity of supplementing those colonial cities.

In addition, certain Japanese summer resorts were founded by Westerners. Because of their cool climates, those places were chosen as potential resort areas. Some are therefore of the opinion that Karuizawa and Unzen should be considered hill stations (Spencer, 1948). However it is difficult to conclude that summer resorts in Japan should be considered hill stations, because Japan kept its independence. The characteristics of summer resorts in Japan may be left as a challenge for future study, for example, as a similar case to Lushan in quasi-colonized China.

3. Development Stages of Hill Stations

The origin of hill stations is deeply related to their military purpose and geopolitical importance at that time. The “discovery” of Shimla in 1819, known as an epoch-making event in the history of hill stations occurred in the course of the strategic route reconnaissance that connected India with Tibet and China (Knavar, 1984; 1999). Moreover, Darjeeling was discovered in quite a similar manner. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Dalai Lama XIII asked Britain for help in a conflict with the Qing Dynasty and opened temporary courts in Darjeeling and Kalimpong. After that he sought an opportunity to return to Lhasa (Aoki, 1920). More recently, the Dalai Lama XIV, who escaped from Tibet, established an exile government in Dharamsala (McLeod Ganji) in 1960. He escaped to Assam across the border, and then opened a temporary government in exile in Mussoorie. In the next year he moved to Dharamsala. Both Mussoorie and Dharamsala are known as hill stations. These facts tell us that the location of these hill stations has strategic importance because they face Tibet and other parts of China over the Himalayas (Kenndy, 1996).

The military role of hill stations is not only to secure strategic points and trade routes. It is said that the first British force lost over half of its men in a short time from sickness. Fighting in the heat was severely taxing for the suzerain and colonizers. The cool climate of the hill stations offered good conditions for stationing forces safely without any losses. In addition, this climate possesses great significance for recuperation. The hospital and sanatorium were indispensable elements of hill stations for treatment of diseases caused by heat stress. At the same time, colonizers who were looking for a cool climate built their own bungalows, and hill stations turned into health resorts and summer resorts. Visitors could escape temporarily from the intense heat and humidity of the coastal colonial cities.

Subsequently schools were established. The schools educated the colonizers’ children under the quasi-Western atmosphere at the hill stations. As a result, education became one of the traditions at hill stations that continues to the present time. On the other hand, the cool climate enabled temperate vegetables and floriculture.
ture to be cultivated, which would have been impossible otherwise in the tropics. Plantations (mostly tea) were introduced, and the peculiar landscape of hill stations was formed. Darjeeling, Nuwara Eliya (Sri Lanka), and Cameron Highland (Malaysia) (Boon & Khoo, 1980) are still known as production centers of tea (Fig. 2). In the scorching summer, the governmental administrative function was moved to the hill stations from the colonial cities, and they served as “Summer Capitals.” Shimla was a typical example (Kanwar, 1984). In summer, the Viceroy of India stayed there and the administrative functions of Delhi were moved there. Similarly, Dalat in Vietnam worked as the “Summer Capital” for a short period even though construction of a complete city was never accomplished (Wright, 1991; Reed, 1995).

Mitchell (1972) discussed the formation process of hill stations in developmental stages. She mentioned various functions which were adopted gradually, changing the character of the hill stations. The developmental stage of hill stations is often understood as the addition of functions. In general, at first, hill stations started with a military function and medical function, like recuperation, then a leisure function was added followed by an educational function. Finally an administrative function was added, and consequently the hill stations arrived at their final phase. Of course, the growth path wasn’t the same for all hill stations, and also not all hill stations developed into “Summer Capitals.” How each hill station shared those functions was determined by the relationship between the hill stations and their mother cities (Kennedy, 1995). The distance from the mother cities, the scale and natural features were especially important. Because of this complicated relationship, functions of hill stations were definitely diversified. Once “Discovery of Scenery” had happened, however, and development into hill stations had begun, we can see a constant law in a temporal context and the combination of the above functions to a certain extent.

These developmental stages of hill stations can be confirmed in the example of Darjeeling, West Bengal, India. Darjeeling was discovered as a potential location for a sanatorium during mountain reconnaissance by British forces in 1829. This investigation was stimulated by the success of hill stations in the West Himalayas that preceded those in the East Himalayan Range. At that time, the area including Darjeeling belonged to the Raj of Sikkim. After negotiation with the Raj of Sikkim, the land was acquired by the British in 1835. In 1835, when Darjeeling was acquired, its population was only 100. In 1838, the first cantonment was established followed by the first hotel in 1839. The first school was established in 1846 by missionaries who utilized the cool climate of the hill stations. The first governmental school was introduced subsequently in 1860. This educational institution accepted Indian pupils. Also the first Indian boarding school was opened in 1874 and these two institutions merged into a high school in 1891. In the mean time, the transport network had been improving gradually. In 1861 the Cart Road opened traffic between Siliguri and Darjeeling. Also the extra narrow gauge Darjeeling Himalayan Railways opened in 1881. Prior to that, Calcutta and Siliguri were connected by railways in 1878. The opening of the mountain railways meant Calcutta and Darjeeling were connected directly by trains. It is interesting to note that recreational facilities were also established, including a gymkhana club in 1909 and golf links in 1905 (Dozey, 1922). By the end of the 19th century, Darjeeling was known as a summer retreat in Bengal and the population reached 17,000 at the beginning of the 20th century.

4. Spatial Configuration of Hill Stations

Usually hill stations originated from reports by reconnaissance troops. The reconnaissance troops were sent to mountainous areas to find strategic routes or potential locations for cantonments or sanatoriums, or to conduct geographical surveys. In accordance with the reports of their investigations, development of outposts began. Additionally, young officers and civil servants who joined the reconnaissance troops often built their bungalows or cottages there (King, 1974). The history of Shimla as a hill station started thusly in 1819 and Mussoorie, in 1825. In areas other than India, the situation was quite the same. The Cameron Highland in Malaysia was founded in 1885 and Maymyo (Pyin Oo Lwin) in Myanmar was founded in 1896 in a similar process.

On the other hand, the reconnaissance activities mentioned above constituted “discovery of scenery.” The people who participated in reconnaissance activities found the proper locations for hospitals or sanatoriums and discovered the scenery of the native land. They showed a particular tendency to discover picturesque scenery (Lowenthal & Prince, 1965) reminiscent of the Lake District in England (Aiken, 1994). Once development as hill stations started, various elements were brought into the hill stations, and the “discovered scenery” was transformed into more a Western-like one. Consequently, we may consider the development of hill stations to be intentional modification of the environ-

![Fig. 2 Tea plantation. Munnar, Kerala, India.](image-url)
Of course both the elements and facilities introduced to hill stations were limited by geographical conditions. Hill stations in the Himalayas were often developed along ridge lines like Shimla (Kanwar, 1999). For this reason, usually these hill stations did not have a man-made lake in the vicinity. However, many hill stations are characterized by common components, and have particular spatial configurations.

In many cases, hill stations comprised a peculiar environment clearly distinguished from other places. This means that hill stations were not merely urban spaces in mountainous areas. Hill stations combined peculiar elements and facilities, unlike those of other mountain cities. For example, manmade lakes, botanical gardens, racetracks, polo grounds and churches were included among the elements and facilities that composed the notable landscape of hill stations. Also the designs and representations of facilities like brick buildings or stonework contributed to the unique landscape of the hill stations. (Figs. 4 and 5)

According to their role, elements and facilities, hill stations can be divided into two categories. The first is those maintaining the hill station as an urban space, and the second is those modifying the environment of the hill station into a Western landscape. Tribal markets in which mountain minorities gathered were indispensable. As a place for the supply of commodities, they supported the life of the residents. On the other hand, botanical gardens filled with temperate-zone plants were a device for modifying hill stations into a Western landscape. Of course, some of elements and facilities had two roles. The vegetation of hill stations differed from that of the plains because of the altitude. In addition, pines and cedars were planted for afforestation. Even now these trees are considered symbolic of hill stations. Thus, various means were utilized, and the landscapes of the hill stations were re-created.

5. Cryopreserved Resort Space

Although hill stations existed continuously between the colonial era and the post World War II era, there were substantial gaps in several aspects. This is one of the most important things to consider with regard to hill station studies based on social sciences. The “hill station as a phenomenon” consisted of a spatial configuration, the residents’ lifestyle and the image shared by the people. At the same time, the “hill station as a phenomenon” was produced as a result of correlation among the natural environment, colonizers and colonized people. At the end of the colonial period, the relationship between the colonizers and colonized people changed drastically. This change was the cause of a gap. In addition, another important point of hill station studies is that hill stations were a leisure space reproducing a European lifestyle and culture as a kind of city for consumers. Therefore, this aspect cannot be disregarded in leisure and tourism studies.

I can summarize the importance of hill station studies in the following three points based on leisure and tourism studies. The first is to highlight research into the original form of resort spaces. The second is to illuminate new aspects of the formation process of places for cultural reproduction, such as leisure spaces under colonialism. The third is, in addition, to present post-colonial aspects on how people of a new nation state that was once colonized remember the colony through the frame of leisure and tourism.

First I will examine the first point. The history of hill
stations spans only 200 years. If we say the development of hill stations by the suzerain ended after World War II, we may consider the history to be less than 150 years. Furthermore, not all hill stations share the same history. In particular, some hill stations in Southeast Asia entered a period of confusion in World War II just after their development had begun, and finally faced termination. Sapa in Northern Vietnam near the Chinese border is one such example. These days, Sapa is famous for its ethnic tourism, especially to see mountain minorities such as the Hmong and Dao. The history from the “discovery” to the abandonment of Sapa spanned less than ten years (Michaud, 2001).

Many hill stations followed a certain growth path even if it cannot be considered strict developmental stages. When they were abandoned in World War II, the spatial structure of each hill station could be considered a kind of “cryopreservation” representative of its own developmental stage. There are not many places where the original form of such resorts can be observed at present by scholars who engage in leisure and tourism studies. From this viewpoint, hill stations offer information extremely valuable to research on the spatial structure of resorts.

6. Revision of Colonialism

We proceed to the second viewpoint. The relationship between the colonizers and colonized people was obviously hegemonic. The deprivation of the latter by the former was an undoubted fact. The colonizers, however, could not maintain their hegemonic status. The colonizers could not move their base from the coastal colonial cities because these cities were key to their colonial management. Actually the coastal colonial cities were the distribution centres for goods and windows open to their native countries. These cities, however, were located at the mouths of rivers, and they were hot and humid especially in summer time. It was extremely difficult to maintain a Western lifestyle in coastal colonial cities. Severe natural conditions such as extremely uncomfortable climates sometimes threatened the identity of colonizers as Westerners.

For the colonizers, the hill stations meant access to their home country’s scenery within the colony. Therefore they made it look like Europe (Grove, 1993). The British discovered their picturesque Lake District in India, the Shan Plateau in Burma, and the Malay Peninsula (Aiken, 1987, 1994). After that they transformed these into urban spaces of the mountainous areas.

The colonizers could enjoy producing and eating the same fruits and vegetables as in their own country, such as apples and strawberries by utilizing the cool climate of the hill station. Also, they could enjoy life filled with familiar flowers like roses. Similarly, the cool climate of the hill station enabled them to build houses similar to those of their own country and wear similar clothes. The colonizers reproduced the lifestyle of their own country and developed a social life around that (Morris, 1972; Hocking, 1987). The hill station is considered an almost completely import-dependent city, excluding some self-sufficient agricultural production. The hill station was indispensable to the management of the colony as a safety device. It maintained the colonizer’s identity through a cultural reproduction of the original European lifestyle, especially leisure life. This is why hill stations are considered “negatives” of coastal colonial cities (Reed, 1972).

7. Hill Stations in the Postcolonial Era

The third point is a situation that has continued up to the present time after World War II. The hill station is an unmistakable relic of colonialism. After World War II, the former colonies declared their independence, and became new nation states. For these countries, it was better that the hill stations be abandoned and forgotten. However, the hill station is still talked about as a special place with a European air in many former colonies. (Fig. 6) Dalat of Vietnam is a “Mecca” for domestic honeymooners, and hill stations in India such as Shimla and Ootacamund are filled with new middle class Indians (Inagaki, 2002) (Fig. 7). The residents of Mandalay (Myanmar) seek coolness and enjoy day...
excursions to Maymyo by chartered bus on hot summer days. In addition, besides the emergence of a new middle class in developing countries, global warming may be one reason for the increasing demand for cool mountain resorts in those countries.

As background to this situation, it is possible to point out that hill stations were established in marginal lands and originally belonged to the mountain-dwelling minorities (Fig. 8). The ethnic groups taking the lead in the new nation states did not originally possess the land of the hill stations. Besides, there was an influx of various people from places throughout the colonized countries during their formation process, and a complicated ethnic structure emerged. One must not disregard the influences of this at many hill stations. The hill station still maintains its exotic and marginal character for everyone and this attracts people.

The formerly colonized people have tried cleverly to employ two contrary discourses. One is to oppose colonialism and another is to protect the hill stations that were an actual product of colonialism. As a matter of fact, they are trying to rehabilitate the hill stations to their own tastes. The education that started at the hill station eventually accepted local children, and then people who received an education at that school took an important role in the independence process. This fact in particular highlights both facets of the hill station and the use of double-sided discourses has been accelerated.

In the context of leisure, the hill station forms a typical place where a complex postcolonial system emerges. Simultaneously the hill station produces various hybrids on the basis of complex changes in the social structure at the hill stations and the former colony’s own society itself. This social change is also deeply related to the time axis of the shift from colonialism to postcolonialism and the temporary inflow of immigrants or tourists according to each occasion in the historical stages. The hill station offers an attractive theme for research not only in leisure and tourism studies but also in general social science as a world in epitome.

Fig. 8 Hmong girls and tourists, Sapa, Vietnam. Hmong girls persuade Western tourists to buy their ethnic crafts.

8. Conclusion

Hill stations constituted “a discovery of scenery” by the West, and were part of a process that turned the environment into a westernized one, utilizing various methods and substitutes. It can be said that hill stations represented a movement to establish the Occident in the Orient. It appears to have been a hegemonic relationship through the modification of the environment. However, the hegemonic position of the colonizers had a limit. The natural environment of the tropics had a definite influence on the social life of the colonizers. It was difficult to maintain a Western temperate-zone lifestyle in tropical colonies. Consequently the colonizers needed the hill stations to maintain their society, lifestyle and even their identity as Westerners. The colonizers’ marginal nature can be observed in the above case.

Also, the changed environment of the hill stations was marginal. Hill stations were neither the Orient, nor the West. As the West in the Orient, they formed a peculiar hybrid environment. Because of this, hill stations are still exotic for both the former colonizers and the people once colonized. People of the new nation states are trying to reclaim hill stations to their tastes, even though the marginality or hybridity of hill stations attracts the former colonized people. They tend to call the hill stations “Special Places” and visit them as tourists. Tourists visiting hill stations may be divided into two fundamental categories, domestic tourists and foreign tourists. In former days, domestic tourists tended to visit hill stations for special occasions like honeymoons. However at present, domestic tourism become more generalized. By contrast, foreign tourists are diverse, ranging from nostalgic tourists to ecotourists and ethnic tourists because of the hill stations’ multi-dimensional characters. Hill stations sometimes offer good trekking routes because of the high altitude and their location in mountainous areas. Also, hill stations have a complicated ethnic structure because of their history.

It seems hill stations are entering a new stage under globalization. In the post-World War II era, the nationalization of the colonial spaces was in opposition to the reproduction of quasi-Western landscapes by the former colonized people themselves at many hill stations. This tendency is still observed. However, a new trend has developed. A French hotel company has refurbished abandoned colonial buildings to open a villa style resort for the up-scale market in Dalat. On the other hand the Cameron Highland in Malaysia attracts retired Japanese who wish to settle there. Those may be typical examples of the result of globalization. The dichotomy of “colonizing” and “being colonized” has been changed by emergence of new stakeholders from the outside world.
Acknowledgement

This research was partly supported by the Ministry of Education and Sciences, Shiritsudaigaku Keijouhikojojink – Chiiki Kyodo Kenkyu.

References


Tsutomu INAGAKI

Tsutomu INAGAKI is a Professor of Cultural Studies at Rikkyo University, College of Tourism. After graduating from the Graduate School of Social Relations (Sociology) at Rikkyo University, he has engaged in tourism studies based on sociology, with a particular focus on tourists’ consumption and commoditization of the local culture and livelihoods of local people, including mountain minorities in Southeast and South Asia. He has published many books, including Kanko Sangyo no Chishiki (Fundamentals in Tourism, in Japanese), and edited others, such as Japanese Tourist. He was also a former leader of the Centre for Human Migration and Acculturation, which was supported by the Ministry of Education and Sciences.

(Received 30 October 2008, Accepted 20 November 2008)