

## **Day 5: Simao to Xi Shuang Ban Na**

### **Revising First Impressions Based on Stage Front**

The drive from Si Mao to Xi Shuang Ban Na was quite scenic. Under bright blue skies we passed through valleys overhanging with lush forest greenery, intertwined with hillside plantations. Halfway through the journey more and more of the forest greenery started to give way to rubber plantations. It wasn't long before we arrived at Xi Shuang Ban Na.

It's all too easy to judge things by appearances, we all fall into that trap from time to time. The Dai Minority Park in Xi Shuang Ban Na is a case in point. We'd already been told that Xi Shuang Ban Na as a tourist destination was highly staged and commercialised. Much of the tourist industry at the park is, indeed, highly staged including the water sprinkling festival and, especially the stage show in the theatre. The show features choreographed demonstration of Dai artefacts such as fishing nets and hair washing basins. The artificiality of these staged pieces is obvious, but what is less obvious is the comparison with alternative modes of display. Is a performance of hair washing using a traditional basin any worse than putting the piece in a museum with a placard? The stage show tourists can see how the artefacts are actually used, albeit in a mimed set piece. The show is also a source of employment for the Dai people with performers all being Dai minority people.

On the way to the stage where the water sprinkling festival takes place we saw some old ladies weaving on looms and spinning yarn. When one of our tour group members asked them if they lived there the old lady replied, "One for one kuai", seemingly in despondent

resignation to becoming a commodity for visiting tourists. However, later as we walked through the residential areas in the park on the way to another tourist attraction, the White Tower, we saw the local Dai people building houses in the traditional Dai style out of wood. We saw free ranged chickens running along the streets and one member of our tour group could smell the scent of hogs. Contrary to initial presumptions of alienation, the Dai in the village are able to modernise at a pace with which they are comfortable without having to completely change the way they live. The moral – one should not jump to conclusions based on first impressions.