

FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY AND GENDER ROLE TRANSFORMATIONS IN NORTHERN THAILAND HOMESTAY TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of gender roles of ethnic Lahu women who are participating in homestay tourism and community-based tourism development in northern Thailand. Since 2015, tourism has become a significant source of income for villagers. This comes from tourism activities such as the homestay experience, purchasing souvenirs, trekking tours, etc. Tourism development has also impacted communities' socio-fabric; this is both in nourishing and detrimental ways, not all of which are mentioned in this paper. Lahu women play an active role in both the domestic and public spheres. They are challenged by double burdens of farm production and reproduction work, as well as with and by community-driven activities related with homestay tourism development. These phenomena are shifting, even reconstructing, the functions and meanings of Lahu women's traditional gender roles. For example, with homestay tourism what has been historically considered non-value work (e.g., caretaking, cooking, cleaning, etc.), due to it not cultivating financial income, is evermore becoming value-work. Women's economic status is transforming, and so are traditional gender roles. This, at least in this village case study, is being exemplified by women's bolstered capacity for negotiating traditional gender roles, particularly during peak tourism season. Moreover, women are brokering their family related decision-making powers. An example is convincing the husband to support the purchasing of a vehicle, a washing machine; domestic work duties are also being rearranged. Still, women seemingly cannot secure full decision-making power because they still seek (or require) agreement with their husband. However, acquiring independent income does render significant impacts on these overall dynamics.

Keywords: homestay, feminist political economy, gender, Thailand community-based tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on gender and development in the context of CBT and homestay tourism in northern Thailand. I examine the transformation of gender roles among ethnic Lahu women in the domestic and public spheres. This includes economic related roles at the family and community levels, which have been reproduced and contested in homestay tourism. The case study involves a Lahu village named “Jabo,” comprised of a Lahu subgroup called, “Sheh leh.” This community is located in northern Thailand’s Pang Ma Pha district in Mae Hong Son province. Almost all villagers are kinship. Their ancestors came to this village area from the Tibetan plateau and through Myanmar’s borders. Villagers’ religion is animism, which is the belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe.

Community-based tourism (CBT) development can impact community societal dynamics. This is particularly true when considering income generated from CBT. With economic activity functioning as a primary motivator of social dynamics (and social change), men and women’s gender relations can become resultantly altered; this impacts the family, household, and community (Beneria et al. 2016; Werner et al., 2017). Moreover, while a default assessment may consider that CBT related financial income is beneficial for villagers, female participants of CBT “homestay” tourism can also become multi-burdened with farm production, reproductive, and community work.

This research project explores: how is CBT homestay tourism gendered and with what political-economic implications? How does CBT impact gender relations in terms of community gender roles? In-depth semi-structured interviews were used for interviewing about key focal points; this is for understanding Lahu women's roles while participating in homestay tourism. Moreover, participant observation was used for understanding gender roles in everyday life shared between Lahu men and women, particularly during this contemporary period. This research involves interviews with 14 Lahu women who currently operate homestay tourism businesses and are members of the village’s CBT group. I also interviewed six former homestay group members (both men and women) in order to learn their reasoning for ceasing their homestay tourism participation. Lahu men in the homestay households were interviewed in order to obtain deeper and richer information regarding gender relations. I interviewed 10 elderly and middle-aged Lahu

men and women who know the village's history and of the traditional gender roles. Data from field notes and interview transcripts was analyzed by using content analysis. This was in order to observe major themes that describe gender roles in the homestays, as well as the transformation of gender roles that reproduced and contested in homestay tourism.

2. FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY CONCEPT

Recent domestic economy studies concerning household activities, access to resources, and social status highlight the differences between males and females (Hastorf and D'Altroy, 2001). Gender underlines political relations and power allocations at the family, community, and society levels (Swain, 1995). Feminist political economy (FPE) argues that women are subject to being "sex-blind" in modes of production, and this leads to unpaid work. Feminist political economy demonstrates that gender is a social construction that is related to gender power relations among men and women. Gender inequalities based on socio-economic conditions include division of labor that sustains male power in the domestic and public spheres. Women's roles normally are constructed in the domestic sphere, particularly by and through the homecare work they perform.

Women usually are economically dependent on men. The division of the domestic and public sphere is related to the unpaid work of women that culturally controls women in terms of their reproductive work and claim to unvalued work which does not generate financial income. Political economy looks at domestic household work as a non-market activity. Unpaid work involving taking care of people within the household and community is invisible to economic analysis. FPE argues that housework domestic work is economic work based on the argument of its societal value. Women work in subsistence production activities such as food cultivation, caring for animals, and community members. Unpaid labor is performed by women in the family farm or via enterprises, including assisting their husband and father. Reproductive work is also a form of unpaid work for reproducing the present and future workforce. (Wollstonecraft, 1792; Mill, 1870; Gilman, 1989; Chafetz, 1991; Svetamra et al., 2013; Beneria et.al., 2016). Nevertheless, housework is becoming an economic activity, and the inclusion of women's voices is needed (Beneria et.al., 2016). Thus, a homestay service in the form of domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of guests, washing bed sheets, preparing the bedroom etc.

are shifting to the market sphere and generating economic value by and for women.

3. A FOCAL POINT TO ARTICULATE COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE VILLAGE

Thai State rural development policies, comprised largely of market-driven forces at both international and national levels, impacts Lahu villagers in-terms of transformations of their traditional gender relations, natural resources use, as well as their livelihoods. Tourism market development has involved establishing tourism-place-villages that are nested amid a competitive market for consumer capitalism (local) niche markets. Ethnic tourism has been created as a means for attracting tourists to CBT, homestays, etc. (Baker, 2012). During 1998-1999, the central Thai government started promoting Thailand as an attractive tourism destination under the “Amazing Thailand” campaign. The government eventually acknowledged and directed the promoting of cultural conservation, community development, gender empowerment, and poverty reduction throughout CBT development initiatives (Sarobol, 2002; UNWTO and UN Women, 2011; Ateljevic, 2008). The village community informing this research article began articulating CBT in 2001. This was supported primarily by NGOs for creating a better understanding by lowland “Thai” people about the Lahu (and indigenous “hilltribe”) people’s livelihoods, traditions, and overall culture. CBT development, at least explicitly, for villagers has been aimed toward illustrating to the greater public that Lahu people do live harmoniously with their forest environment.

CBT, therefore, is a soft power policy tool for managing natural resources and local culture, community empowerment, and economic influences. This rural development initiative is also in order to persuade ethnic people to live harmoniously with the forestry area, while supporting national security and the national economy. In the past, highland villagers were looked down upon by greater Thai society. They were negatively labeled as opium producers and shift cultivators who as “destroyers of the forest” (Luangaramsri, 1998) cut down trees and polluted the air while burning upland rice fields; they were essentially viewed as uncivilized ‘untamed savages.’ These sentiments were even part of the mainstream Thai public education curriculum. Villagers were also accused by some institutions claiming that villagers’ pig manure polluted the watershed.

These conditions were the turning point for the Lahu people comprising the village informing this study to adopt the community-based tourism project later on. During the first period between the early 2000s and 2014, after the village articulated the CBT and ran a homestay in the village, tourism income was supplemental in a family. But after the 2014, tourism income dramatically changed; this has impacted gender roles and women's economic status, while constructing a new meaning of homestay related value-work.

4. THE TRANSFORMATION OF GENDER ROLES DURING THE INITIAL STAGE OF THE COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT PERIOD (2001-2004)

In this period, and before, agricultural comprised villagers' primary income; miniscule amounts of income came from tourism. A household that traded agricultural products generated more income than from agricultural and tourism. Daily life for both men and women has traditionally involved doing farm work together. Lahu women play important roles in both the domestic and public spheres. Women as caretakers play primary roles in domestic work. The homestay place is of the public sphere. Considering family, the husband and wife must allow guests to stay in their houses and provide for good hospitality. During this period, an average of 200 tourists per year visited the case study area; 80% were foreign tourists coming with a tour guide company. A homestay welcomed guests only 2 or 3 times per year. At the first stage of CBT development, all 60 households in the village comprised the CBT member group. However, 60% of them quit being homestay members because they didn't have time; they were doing other businesses such as trading and growing cash crops. A Lahu man and woman who used to be members of the CBT group said, "The CBT group developed a new tourist attraction that involved constructing steep ladders leading to a historical cave. We worried that if tourists died, we would have to take responsibility and pay for this."

During that initial time of tourism development, villagers raised menial income from tourism. This was not motivating them to continue doing homestay tourism. However, some households continued doing the CBT because they think that it can generate supplemental income. Thirty-four households of the CBT group members continued doing community-based tourism. Fourteen of these thirty-four households run the

homestay service because their houses qualify for the homestay standard. Members who could not provide a homestay service generated income from group cooking and trekking excursions. The village in 2007 qualified for the Thai homestay standard, which is issued by the Department of Tourism. A woman who runs a homestay said, “I think in a long term, I want to help the community. CBT helps to develop the community, for example, by keeping the community clean, preserving the culture, and outsiders can understand the Lahu ways of life. We clean up the rubbish every month and we wear more traditional dresses when tourists come.”

At the initial stage of CBT development in this village, men had higher participation in CBT management than did women. As for gender roles in the homestay, men were the primary ones welcoming guests. They also managed the CBT group, such as with financial management, contacting outsiders, and attending tourism trainings held outside of the village. In homestay tourism, women normally cooked and prepared other accommodations; they had few interactions with guests. Lahu women were shy to talk with outsiders. During that time, Lahu women said they, “did not yet have the confidence to speak Thai.”

5. THE BLOOMING OF TOURISM PERIOD (2015-PRESENT): A TURNING POINT OF WOMEN’S ECONOMIC STATUS, AND TRANSFORMATION OF GENDER ROLES

Since 2015, tourism in this village has bloomed. CBT has become an important element of this villagers’ socio-economic (and socio-political) fabric. Tourists normally visit the homestay during the winter season between November to January. Women also sell souvenirs and create Lahu handicrafts for selling to tourists, which can generate good income. Again, homestay tourism in the past generated less income than agricultural income. Currently, tourism generates income higher than agriculture.

Since 2015, the number of tourists visiting this village has increased by about ten times. This is largely because of social media marketing; bloggers and a famous singer visited the village and posted on a famous Thai webpage. Since 2015, there has been an average of 2,000 tourists visiting the CBT homestays per year; 80% are Thai and 20% are from other countries. Nowadays, the number of homestays in the village CBT group increases

from 14 households to 24 households. Financial income is a key motivator for Lahu women to contest their roles in the homestay space. This has motivated women to participate in the homestay service and contest men's space. In a homestay, Lahu women interact with guests and perform “hospitality service;” this is their gender role. Nowadays, women are welcoming guests, while also cooking, preparing accommodation, cleaning the house, facilitating and interacting with guests, washing bed blankets, and so on. Women have also become leaders in performing cultural tour activities such as teaching tourists how to make Lahu handicrafts. Men simultaneously show about weaving bamboo and about traditional music. Women are tour guides, participate in tourism committees, and are serving as environmental protectors. Men help women with collecting water and wood while guests are there; they are also tour guides for hiking and trekking. As for community tourism development activities involving laborious hard work (e.g., constructing ladders leading to the caves) men play the primary role. Sometimes when there is a large group of tourists, Lahu women who are members of the CBT group gather and do the cooking; they share the tourism income. When guests are staying in the homestay, men normally visit neighbors and come back at night; they have few interactions with guests. Women say men are shy to talk with guests. The women joke about this. Some Lahu men, after coming back from the farm, also help the women with taking care of small children. Women said, “Normally men take a rest after doing farm work, but now they have to help us to take care of a baby or small kid when there are guests at our home.” Sometimes, a husband helps his wife with cooking, if a woman is sick or there are many tourists that day. Nowadays, Lahu women usually stay at home if guests stay overnight at the homestay in order to prepare things for welcoming guests. Thus, men now take the primary roles in the farms during when tourism guests are present. Women now play an important role in CBT group finances. They manage queues for homestays as well as contact tour companies and organizations. A woman leader who is a committee member of the village CBT group does account. She also records tourism data for the CBT group; this includes documenting the number of tourists, about many tourists the related income, as well as managing and recording the tourism fund. Currently, Lahu women have more confidence in interacting with tourists. They also practice speaking Thai with them. Lahu women said, “I cannot talk with foreign language, but I sometimes

use body language to communicate with them. If they ask me to drink with them, I also join that too (laughing).” A Lahu woman said, “I feel bored that I cannot speak Thai. I think that Thai tourists also cannot speak Lahu language, but they try to speak it, at least learn how to say hi (“Abudaya”) in the Lahu language. It inspires me to speak Thai with them and not fear to speak Thai correctly; just speak. Now, in a training or meeting, I am not fear to speak through the microphone to introduce myself in Thai. In the past, when I attended a training, I normally avoided that. When they asked participants to introduce themselves, I hid in the toilet during the introduction session. Now, I do not fear like in the past (laughing).”

Lahu women still play an important role in domestic work when there are no guests. They do tasks such as cooking, taking care of children, and so on. It has been discovered that gender is fluid; it depends on time and space in a homestay place. However, particularly during the high tourism season, Lahu women experience multi-burdens doing domestic, public, and community work. A woman said, “This year, I don’t have time to feed the pigs, no time to sew new clothing for a New Year, and no time to pound the rice cake for a new year. I ask my son for doing that. Today I am tired. I don’t have time to take a rest or even brush my teeth. Sometimes I brush my teeth nearly noon. I have breakfast at almost noon, have dinner at 9 pm. I have to check the tourists contact, and tomorrow I have to wake up early morning to cook for my little son before he goes to school. However, it is good if there are many tourists, I can generate much income to support my family”. Men said, “It is okay to work on a farm alone, but it is good if my wife helps me too. During harvesting rice season in winter, my relatives and neighbours help me for harvesting rice as exchange labour, if my wife has guests at the homestay and cannot work on the farm. Anyway, homestay tourism can make a good income for the family.” However, women said, “If there are no guests, I also work on a farm to help my husband. Sometimes, my husband also complains if he often works alone in the farm. After tourist’s check-out, I will go to the farm and grow some vegetable; otherwise, he will complain that I don’t do anything.”

Even though women can negotiate gender roles that shift during high tourism season, they still work traditional roles during the low tourism season when there are no guests. Nevertheless, it was found that women’s bolstered economic status has the power to

capacitate negotiating their family's decision making. Tourism income can change a family's economic status as well as women's economic status. A Lahu woman said, "Nowadays, families who run the homestay business are getting rich. Some can buy a new car. I want to do a homestay too, but I have to ask my husband. I don't even have enough money now to build a new toilet (a requirement for a homestay)." A family who runs the homestay can save money and invest in agriculture, as well as purchase assets such as a car, a washing machine, television, etc. However, income that women earn through their homestay work does not necessarily become their own and of which they can do as they please. When a woman wants to buy things other than food, she generally must secure agreement from her husband. For example, a Lahu woman said, "One day, I talked with my husband about buying a car for our son. My son runs a coffee shop and often borrows a car from his friends to buy and carry stuff for his shop. My husband fears to have debt, but he agrees with me. I didn't borrow money; I use our saving money from homestay income to pay for the down payment for him."

Another case sample: A Lahu man said, "I wanted to buy a second-hand car for trading agricultural products because I don't want to borrow money. But my wife convinced me to buy a new car; she said it is a high cost to fix the second-hand car, then we can use our savings from homestay for living and borrow some money from the bank to buy a new car." Considering economic status, Lahu women who run homestay tourism can negotiate power regarding domestic work. Many Lahu women in this village recently purchased a washing machine. Whereas, Lahu women used to wash the family's clothes and tourism service stuff (e.g., blankets, bedsheets, etc.) with their hands. Women said "It is a lot of work to wash blankets. A washing machine has helped me a lot. I can do other work at the same time while I am watching clothes." A woman said, "I initiated the idea for buying a washing machine. I asked my husband about buying this. However, if he didn't agree, I wouldn't buy it because I don't want to argue with him. But he agreed about this purchase because he sees how it is hard work to wash clothes by hand." A woman who runs a homestay also sells souvenirs for tourists said, "I bought a television by myself. The old one that we have is used by my son and husband. They usually watch Thai boxing and sports TV programs, but I want to watch the soap opera TV channel. I didn't ask my husband about buying the new television. I collected my savings money from selling

souvenirs. I also plan to buy a mobile phone. I don't have it yet, but my husband and my son have that. This winter season if I can save money from selling souvenirs, I will buy it."

6. CONCLUSION

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) maintains that tourism as a market-driven initiative has the potential for contributing to enhanced gender equality and the empowerment of women; this inline with the Third Millennium Development Goal. Tourism could assist women to increase their social power. In terms of gender power relations, mirroring the sentiments of liberal feminists, this can also empower women by increasing gender equality (Ateljevic, 2008). On the other hand, Marxist feminists argue that while capitalism bolsters opportunities for women to increase their economic status, hence potentially cultivating more life options, capitalism or public work also can create a subsequent "triple burden" for women (Beneria et.al., 2016). Thus, 'tourism development' resulting from State policies and capitalism's cash economy influenced from globalization results in transformation of gender relations; this is in terms of gender roles, household decision making, and social status. This also includes Lahu women's compiled burdens of caring for both domestic and public work, including tourism, farming, and community service. Likewise, there are power relations related with economics that impact gender relations among men and women.

Feminist political economy theory demonstrates that gender is a social construction that is yoked with power relations between men and women. The household is the site of gender inequalities in workload, resource allocation, and power relations. These inequalities include domestic and public spheres that are predominantly related with what is considered paid and unpaid work (Beneria et.al., 2016). For men, the division of labor has typically rendered them in public spaces and doing paid (value) work. Women, however, have been resigned to (and controlled by) domestic duties that have been determined as having no value, because these tasks generally do not generate income (Beneria et.al., 2016). In rural agrarian societies, such as the community informing this study, Lahu women have traditionally played (non-value) roles in domestic work, farm production, and reproduction activities such as food cultivation, caring for children, housekeeping, caring for animals, etc. With homestay tourism, driven by capitalism, Lahu women now

experience more space in the public sphere. They are serving important homestay tourism roles such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of guests, washing bed sheets, preparing bedrooms, etc. These traditional gender roles have therefore shifted to the public market sphere; women are also generating economic income. This has hence shifted women's domestic activities from being of non-value to value work. This phenomenon has become more accepted by the Lahu men because the homestay generates income used for supporting the family. Therefore, homestay tourism, in this case study, has constructed new meanings of women's traditional domestic roles, for both men and women. Moreover, women are using their bolstered personal economic conditions for negotiating gender power relations in their family or community. Therefore, this value work is cultivating empowerment in terms of women's economic status and capacity for negotiating gender roles.

Moreover, Morais et.al. (2005) investigated two ethnic communities in tourism development of Yunnan province, Musuo and Bai. They state that it cannot be generalized that tourism income generates gender equality; it rather looks beyond economic issues. This study contributes to debates about how CBT initiatives are gendered. This is particularly relevant when considering the historical, socio-economic, and cultural factors that are impacting local gender relations in response to tourism development and social change. From my study, even though Lahu women can negotiate temporal gender role shifting during high tourism season, they still work traditional roles during the low tourism season when there are no guests. Nevertheless, it was found that women's bolstered economic status has the power to capacitate negotiating their family's decision making. For instance, a Lahu women may negotiate with her husband when buying a washing machine in order to negotiate power regarding domestic work. However, homestay income is family income. When Lahu women want to buy things other than food, they generally must secure agreement from her husband. On the other hand, Lahu women who independently generate income from selling souvenirs have fully decision-making power to buy their own stuff.

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