



## Gendered practices in urban ethnic tourism in Thailand



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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate the gendered economy of ethnic minority souvenir vending in Thailand's urban and coastal tourist areas. Increasing numbers of the Akha minority group have migrated towards tourist hotspots to engage in urban souvenir vending. Ethnographic research shows that according to the Akha gender division of labour, souvenir production and distribution are considered women's work. Peddling on foot, female Akha souvenir vendors are at the bottom of the informal tourism economy. It is shown that urban ethnic tourism primarily reproduces gender asymmetry in the division of work and that contestations of gender roles prove to be difficult. Mobile street vending enables ethnic minority women to become breadwinners of households but simultaneously reinforces gender inequality.

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### Introduction

This paper examines the development of urban ethnic tourism in Thailand by analysing gendered socioeconomic practices of predominantly female Akha souvenir vendors. Over the last decades, increasing numbers of Akha highland ethnic minority people have moved to Bangkok and other urban tourist destinations to work as souvenir street vendors (Trupp, 2014). Street vendors are an integral part of almost every city in Asia (Bhowmik, 2005; Kusakabe, 2006; Walsh & Maneepong, 2012) but have often been neglected as a working group in tourism scholarship (Steel, 2012). Ethnic minorities as tourist service providers or as attractions have mainly been examined in village contexts and only rarely investigated in urban areas (Cohen, 1989, 2001; Diekmann & Smith, 2015; Dolezal, 2015; Ishii, 2012; Michaud, 1997; Wood, 1984; Yang, 2011). The case of Akha souvenir sellers represents a highly feminized migration and work pattern in the context of tourism, ethnicity, and the informal economy.

Ethnic tourism often takes place in or near the home villages of ethnic groups and existing studies have demonstrated that female members of the groups play an important role in economic activities including the production and distribution of handicrafts or souvenirs (Cone, 1995; Ishii, 2012; Little, 2008; Swain, 1993). Gender has received increasing attention in tourism studies (Figueroa-Domecq, Pritchard, Segovia-Pérez, Morgan, & Villacé-Molinero, 2015; Hall, Swain, & Kinnaird, 2003; Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Pritchard, Morgan, Ateljevic, & Harris, 2007; Sinclair 1997; Swain, 1995; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012), but “less has been said about women as producers of handicrafts and souvenirs” (Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, & Timothy, 2001; Swanson & Timothy, 2012).

Our observations as well as other studies about the Akha in tourism contexts in mainland Southeast Asia (Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007; Ishii, 2012; Trupp, 2017) noted that the ethnic minority souvenir business is almost entirely conducted

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by females. More than 90 percent of souvenir sellers and producers are women. The strong presence of ethnic minority women in urban Southeast Asian tourism has also been noticed in Northern Vietnam (Hanh, 2008; Truong & Hall, 2015) and Northern Laos (Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007). However, these studies do not include a gender analysis of urban ethnic tourism. These observations lead to the following unanswered questions: Why is the percentage of Akha women in urban ethnic tourism particularly high? What are the underlying processes of gendered migrations and practices in the urban souvenir business? And how has migration into urban ethnic tourism been influencing and influenced by Akha gender roles and relations?

In this paper, we focus on female Akha micro ethnic entrepreneurs who work as mobile souvenir vendors in Thailand's urban tourist areas. Urban mobile souvenir vending requires hard physical labour as vendors walk long distances carrying heavy baskets of souvenirs. Akha women, more than their male counterparts, are willing to embrace the work and employ their feminine and ethnicized traits to sell. This study sheds new light on gendered practices of minority street vendors in urban ethnic tourism contexts.

This research is based on ten months of field research in different urban and coastal tourist areas in Thailand (Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Koh Samui, Phuket, Pattaya, Hua Hin) between August 2008 and December 2014. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 27 female and 6 male Akha vendors as well as forms of observation in Akha urban homes, two of their home villages, and at popular sale locations were the methods used to obtain data. With the support of a Thai research assistant one of the authors approached urban Akha communities and established rapport with informants over years of contact. Interviews were mainly conducted in Central or Northern Thai, the second language for most Akha vendors. With some of the souvenir vendors who have acquired fair English-language skills, informal conversations were conducted in a mix of Thai and English. The ages of souvenir sellers the first author of this paper talked to ranged from 20 to 61 years, though children of school age and even infants were sometimes brought along during the sales activities. The participants were of various marital statuses: single, (re)married (both migrated as couple or migrated alone), and divorced. Most Akha sellers were converted Christians or had been born into Christian families, and a few were Buddhists. However, syncretic forms of belief systems exist. All the interviewed souvenir vendors had migrated from either Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai provinces in Northern Thailand but not all of them had Thai citizenship. The vast majority of Akha vendors belong to the Akha *Uqlor* subgroup which is the largest subgroup in Thailand.

In order to understand female and male practices in urban ethnic minority tourism it is necessary to analyse social and cultural structures as well as leisure and tourism through gender lenses (Aitchison, 2005; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). In this article, we argue that the Akha gender division of labour based on the received notion of appropriate practices for women and men has led to the feminization of urban ethnic tourism. By the term 'feminization of urban ethnic tourism' we refer to disproportionately high numbers of women in Akha urban souvenir selling as well as to the gendered understanding of the 'nature' of the work. We highlight the socio-cultural processes in which practices in ethnic tourism are constructed as feminine and therefore draw women into this informal economic activity. Akha men, on the other hand, are often reluctant to participate in urban souvenir production and sales. As tourism income has become more important for Akha households, Akha men have started to work in the souvenir business but our ethnographic data demonstrate that certain aspects of traditional gender roles and hierarchy persist.

The following section will review debates on gender and tourism and highlight our contribution to the marginalized but growing academic field of gender and tourism research.

## Gender and tourism

This study is informed by the debates on gender and tourism, particularly the relationships between ethnic minority women and the tourism economy. The domination of women in tourism employment can be explained by the gender division of labour – the notion that social constructions of distinctive male and female qualities designate what women and men's work should be inside the household and in the workforce (Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Sinclair, 1997; Tucker, 2007). Differentiated and unequal social values attached to women's and men's work create a hierarchy in which women's work is regarded lowly and paid less in the job market. This results in women's employment in low-wage jobs, more unpaid work within the household, and continuing dependence upon their husbands (Pritchard et al., 2007; Tucker, 2007; UNWTO, 2011; Walby, 1997). The occupational gendered hierarchy is a product of patriarchal capitalism that marginalizes women when they join men in the labour force (Adkins, 2004; Gu, 2012).

Women's jobs in tourism mirror the traditional role of women in the household (Bauer & McKercher, 2003; Cabezas, 2009; Timothy, 2001). Most studies on tourism and women's employment pay attention to the way in which various jobs in the tourism business, e.g. in the airline business, the food and restaurant industry, or destination promotion in general (Momsen, 2010; Sinclair, 1997; Van Esterik, 2000; Veijola & Valtonen, 2007) require feminine traits and skills and demand employees to embody such characteristics.

Gender differences, the gender division of labour, and its underlying inequalities are 'naturalized' and taken for granted through everyday bodily practices that have been repeated over time. According to Judith Butler (2011, p. 191), (heteronormative) gender identities are not natural but constituted in time through a 'stylized repetition of acts'. She posits that we perform ourselves into male and female beings in accordance with existing social scripts. In a similar vein, Bourdieu (2001, p. 30) explains male/female opposition as "two different classes of habitus" which we inhabit according to our embodied dis-

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