

# VU Research Portal

## Experiences of Hmong Women Engaging in Tourism-related Activities in Sa Pa, Northwestern Vietnam

Lê, T.D.D.

2015

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Lê, T. D. D. (2015). *Experiences of Hmong Women Engaging in Tourism-related Activities in Sa Pa, Northwestern Vietnam*.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

This thesis explores how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shapes the working lives and home lives of Hmong women engaging in tourism-related activities in the town of Sa Pa in north-western Vietnam. Conceptually the research is based on theories of gender and ethnicity, and contemporary debates on agency. As the focus of this study is the lived experiences of Hmong women and the strategies they use to negotiate their own roles and power within the confines of a traditional system, rather than the nature of their work they are doing, a qualitative approach and a context analysis have been used. Data were collected through an ethnographic approach using in-depth interviews, life histories, observation and participation.

Hmong women's choices about whether to work in tourism are framed by the dynamics of gender and ethnicity. Their experiences reveal that they are continuously balancing their economic opportunities, gender constraints, local constraints and individual desires. These factors mingle to shape the women's decisions regarding their employment in tourism. My findings emphasize the concept of social location, which entails looking at the position of women within a patriarchal community, and specifically the position of Hmong women as an ethnic minority within a marketplace dominated by an ethnic Kinh majority. This concept is a useful tool for capturing the experiences of women's work and lives, and for understanding how they make sense of their situations on their own terms.

In exploring how ethnicity influences Hmong women's work, this research demonstrates both exclusion and inclusion due to ethnicity. Tourism development in Sa Pa is market-driven and state-mediated, and the state tourism development interventions, for the most part, work to favor certain groups of locals over others. The state's policies and strategies are based on negative stereotypes and misconceptions about the Hmong. They introduce opportunities for other groups (mostly Kinh) to control and monopolize tourism by excluding Hmong in general. Dao women also try to exclude Hmong women from certain tourism benefits. On the other hand, the policy of marketing stereotypical ethnic minority images provides Hmong women with unique economic opportunities to capitalize on their ethnicity.

The experiences of Hmong women who engage in tourism-related activities reveal that Hmong gender norms regarding women's duties and responsibilities are highly influential factors in Hmong women's decisions about whether to work. In joining these research findings with the larger body of literature on gender and work, my emphasis has been on agency. The experiences of Hmong women engaging in tourism-related activities show that in making their decisions about work, Hmong women weigh a range of factors including: economic opportunities, local constraints, women's expectations of and desires for the benefits work will provide them with, and their "social locations." The decisions Hmong women must make regarding work are: choosing work relevant to their interests and situations, deciding how best to utilize their talents, sustaining their distinct cultural practices and traditions, and diversifying their livelihood while resisting economic opportunities that run counter to their values.

Similarly, the 'negotiation processes' that women involved in tourism-related activities must engage in to operate successfully in the marketplace require diverse strategies and tactics. Effectively employing these strategies that do not come naturally to the women reflects a high degree of agency and "intentionality" channeled toward achieving their goals. These negotiation strategies include: creating their own economic spaces, converting their cultural capital into economic capital, choosing their trading partners, and resisting the commodification of their identity by the state and the dominant Kinh majority. These strategies reflect the Hmong women's "everyday politics" and desire to overcome their inferior position within local hierarchies dictated by gender, ethnicity and class. The findings also reaffirm previous analysis that Hmong adopt roles as protagonists by participating actively in their socio-economic development, while proactively protecting their ways of life.

Through exploring the experiences of Hmong women involved in tourism-related activities, my focus centers on how working outside the home has affected their lives and their perceptions of themselves. In this respect, my findings show that Hmong women seem to be living in two different worlds at once, and this result in lives which are full of contradictions and tension. The "Kinh and international outside" world offers enjoyment, satisfaction and freedom from patriarchal constraints. In particular, the Hmong women's romantic relationships with their boyfriends in the marketplace were significant for them. Hmong women gain emotional satisfaction from these

relationships and they see them as a form of therapy which helps them to cope with the hardships they endure in their marriages, including the difficulties they have in getting married, their hard work in the rice fields, their housework, and the stress of dealing with their husbands' extramarital relationships. However, the "inside" world of the home requires a submission to gendered discourses about what women should do and how they should behave in order to be "good Hmong women." Cultural norms of masculinity and femininity inform their perceptions of work and their roles within the family. Hmong women's perceptions of themselves are shaped by stories and gossip about the characteristics of both proper and improper Hmong women, along with perceptions about marriage and inheritance which are structured by Hmong culture. To cope with this dichotomy, Hmong women have developed strategies to achieve their desire to both to work and to enjoy a better life without reversing gender relations in the family. These strategies involve manipulating the gendered power relations which govern the division of labor and men's authority in the family. Hmong women choose to play a subordinate role to their husbands. But Hmong women are successful in mobilizing the skills they have learned through their work in tourism in order to manipulate and regulate their husbands' resistance to changes in the gender-based division of labor within the home, the wife's employment outside the house, and the husband's continued economic support for the family. The women's main method for maintaining this balance of power is to ensure that their husbands maintain a dominant role in the family and feel respected as the primary breadwinners.

Based on the findings of my research, I highlight the importance of exploring women's agency in order to fully understand their lives. Experiences of Hmong women in different tourism-related activities are complex and are dependent on both their "social locations" and their personal agency. The Hmong women in this study expressed two different types of agency: One was their agency in dealing with their unstable political and economic status as they attempted to benefit from tourism; and the other was their agency of desire, which included their desire to escape boredom, to pursue romantic relationships outside the home, and to continue their work despite the challenges they faced.