Acknowledgements

As with any long-term project, the completion of this dissertation could not have been done in isolation. There are so many people I would like to acknowledge and thank for supporting me on this very personal academic endeavor.

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Oscar Salemink and Prof. Pál Nyiri, my supervisors, for their continuous support of my Ph.D research, for their patience, motivations, enthusiasms, and immense knowledge and also for the great efforts they put into training me in the scientific field. I have been fortunate to have Dr. Marjo de Theije as my co-supervisor. I am very thankful for her inspiring guidance and incisive critique. The insightful knowledge and support from my supervisors and co-supervisor enabled me to refine the various drafts of this thesis as the work progressed. Without their kind and patient support, it would have been impossible for me to finish this thesis. To you I express my heartfelt gratitude.

This project would not have been possible without the trust and hospitality of my Hmong friends who opened their doors and shared their lives with me during my fieldwork. To protect the anonymity of the individuals involved, I cannot thank them by name. To them I dedicate this work.

I am grateful to the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, and the Center for Vietnamese Philosophy, Culture, and Society (Temple University) for providing me with the financial and institutional support which enabled me to conduct this research. My appreciation extends to the Institute of Human Studies for granting me study leave. I also appreciate the support of my colleagues at the Institute who took on extra work during my absence.

The completion of this project has been a long and tiring process. Fortunately I was lucky to meet wonderful and generous friends in Amsterdam who helped me and by doing so, made the five years of being a PhD student easier. During my stay in Amsterdam, I enjoyed the company of colleagues with whom I shared experiences and exchanged ideas on topics that concerned us all. For this my thanks go to Scott Dalby, Patcharin Lapanun, Tam Ngo, Priscilla Koh, Ton Salman, Freek Colombijn, Caronine Grillot and other colleagues at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. My special thanks and appreciation go to Maaike Matelski and Joan van Wijk for translating the
dissertation summary from English to Dutch and for being the paranymphs at my defense ceremony; I treasure their helpfulness and precious friendship. I am also appreciative of Annet Bakkers’s and Chris Kanhaisingh’s efficient assistance for all kinds of bureaucratic and accounting paperwork.

Besides a group of wonderful people at the VU, I also enjoyed the support and friendship of Vietnamese students in Amsterdam. My special thanks go to two Vietnamese couples Chu Manh Dung and Tran Thi Ngoc Tu, and Dang Minh Triet and Anh Nguyen, who always provided me with a room in their tiny home whenever I came to Amsterdam, and who gave me hearty support when I was depressed. Also, there were still other friends who encouraged and supported me during my days in Amsterdam. The simple phrase, “thank you”, cannot express how much their friendship means to me. Also, I gratefully acknowledge Mollie David and John Revington for their time and professional editing of my text, making it as readable as possible.

In Vietnam, I would like to thank Dr. Tran Huu Son, Director of the Lao Cai Bureau of Culture, Sports and Tourism and his staff for all their support and assistance during my field trip to Sa Pa. I am grateful for the assistance of Mr. Le Van Hao and Mr. Do Trong Nguyen of the Culture and Information Department of the Sa Pa People’s Committee for their help with access to various information sources which were important to this research. I owe special thanks to Nguyen Ngoc Thanh who helped me make necessary local connections during my fieldwork. My appreciation also goes to Le Thi Thu Ha and Vu Thi Thanh who encouraged and supported me through the ups and downs of carrying out this research and who always helped me in any way they could, especially in accessing documents and literature in Vietnam.

My academic journey would definitely not have been possible without the love, care, and support of a number of people who are dear to me. I would like to express deepest gratitude to my dear parents and family. My father, Le Ngoc The and my mother Cao Thi Sam have made immeasurable sacrifices to give me and my sisters access to education at all times. They endlessly comforted me with affection and concern. My sisters, Le Thi Huyen Tram and Le Nu Cam Le, gave their unfailing support and care and sustained my energy and commitment. My very special thanks go to my son, Le Khanh Hoang, for his understanding about his mother’s situation. I can never say enough how sorry I feel for having spent too much of my time away from home, letting him live without everyday care from his mother. And my greatest gratitude goes to Bui Tien Hanh to whom I owe more than I am aware of. I cannot imagine how I could have finished writing up this dissertation without his unfailing support and infinite love.
INTRODUCTION

During the tourist season, the town of Sa Pa in the mountains of northern Vietnam slowly comes to life at around 6:00 in the morning as buses full of tourists coming from Lao Cai crawl up the winding mountain roads to drop their passengers off at their hotels that dot the town and the surrounding villages. About an hour later, after the tourists have checked in and dropped their bags in their rooms, Sa Pa becomes busy as they start their day with breakfast in the restaurants and coffee bars along the main road. As they eat, they watch one of the tourist attractions they’ve come to Sa Pa to see – Hmong and Dao women, ranging in age from teenage girls to middle aged women, all wearing their traditional, colorful, ethnic attire, some with babies strapped on their backs, selling purses, scarves, pillow cases and other handicrafts that they have made themselves. One of the region’s main attractions for tourists is to experience the “traditional, ethnic” way of life by trekking through the terraced rice fields and spending time with the ethnic minorities and taking part in homestays. These Hmong and Dao women, knowing that their heritage is on display, make an effort to show the tourists hospitality by greeting them when they get off their buses, and making small talk with them as they walk through the streets.

On a typical day during the tourist season these ethnic minority women who work as handicraft vendors and tour guides generally have put in a full day’s work at home before coming to Sa Pa to greet the tourists. These women travel, usually by foot, from their villages around the region of Sa Pa. To get to the town of Sa Pa before the tourists, they leave home in the very early morning, but not before preparing breakfast for the whole family and feeding poultry and livestock. Their work in Sa Pa is to follow the tourists around, sell them handicrafts or give them tours. When there are a lot of tourists, the women are busy, but when business is slow, they sit in groups singing, embroidering and spinning hemp. At around 3:00 pm, they walk home to pick up their housework where they left off, by cleaning up, making dinner for their families, taking care of their children and tending to the livestock and gardens. This is their daily work routine, except during the harvest season from September to October when only a few ethnic minority women come to town, because during this time of the year, Hmong women stay at home to help with harvesting, and drying and storing rice.

With the development of tourism in Sa Pa, a town in the Lao Cai province in the
north-west of Vietnam, more and more Hmong women, who are traditionally farmers, have become involved in tourism-related activities to generate extra income for their households. These women are involved in three major types of work: (1) self-employed home-based work; (2) self-employed but working outside the home; and (3) employees working for someone else. As the scene above illustrates, their everyday lives are not wholly dominated by tourism. Other elements such as rice cultivation and raising livestock are still very important work duties for them. Hmong people continue prioritize agriculture as their main livelihood source; therefore, as the vignette above shows, during the more labor-intensive periods of crop cultivation, they put their energy into their fields, and choose not to work in tourism. The scene above also illustrates the instrumental role Hmong women play in their household work. Balancing their duties at home with their tourism work is a difficult task that they negotiate on a daily basis, and doing so is transforming the landscape of their family dynamics in profound ways.

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the Hmong women involved in tourism-related activities in Sa Pa. It describes and explains the multifaceted experiences of Hmong women in detail with the goal of exploring possible opportunities that are becoming open to the women, or their exploitation by other actors who influence their life and work, such as tourists, the state, and those who wish to uphold their traditional way of life. This study uses anthropological theory to analyze the research findings, while taking a critical and holistic approach to examining the experiences of Hmong women who participate in tourism-related activities to define the intersection of gender and ethnicity in the multi-ethnic highlands of Vietnam.

As a point of departure for my anthropological inquiry, I situate the study within three theoretical debates to which I wish to make my own contribution. Firstly, I situate my research in the framework of ethnicity, especially the relatively recent studies emphasizing the power-agency aspects of ethnicity. This perspective highlights how, for the most part, the state upland development interventions work to favor certain groups of locals over others, and how local people navigate through the stereotyping imposed by power hierarchies and exercise their agency to work towards achieving their own goals (Bonnin, 2011; Michaud, 2000; Michaud, 2008; Turner, 2007; Turner, 2011a; Turner, 2011b; Turner and Michaud, 2008; Turner and Michaud, 2009). My study acknowledges the important role of the state in constructing the identity of ethnic minorities and in organizing tourism within the country and I aim to explore the interactions between the state and Hmong people, and the consequences
of such interactive relationships on the work of Hmong women in Sa Pa.

The second debate addresses the relationships between gender and work. Recognizing that gender and ethnicity converge to impact the lives and activities of Hmong women, this study aims to explore the women’s choices and involvement in tourism-related activities in light of ethnicity and gender roles. This research is also situated in the context of the earlier scholarly works on gender studies, in Hmong society in particular (e.g. Duong Bich Hanh, 2006; Bonnin and Turner, 2013). This study has very similar research topics to those of Duong Bich Hanh, however it moves forward to focus on Hmong married women and explores how Hmong women negotiate and perform gender relations in the family which are topics not emphasized in earlier works.

Engaging in tourism-related activities means Hmong women move from their homes, which are spaces with limited social relations and interactions, to a wider, more public space that contains both risks and new experiences that can give Hmong women a sense of freedom and help them to shape new identities. These new identities, though, are still heavily influenced by the pressures placed on the women from multiple gender ideologies, including those imposed by: international ideals of “ethnic women,” ethnic Viet-Hmong\(^1\) patriarchal kinship, and Christianity. Each of these external forces defines gender roles and the identities of women and men in a slightly different way. Given the constraints of this reality, this research aims to explore how gender is defined and constructed or unconstructed, or as this phenomenon is referred to in gender literature, (un)done, when Hmong women engage in tourism-related activities. Taking the assumption that gender in Hmong society can be performed and (un)done in various situations, this study focuses on strategies used within cultural gender norms and morality as discourses of power. First, this research outlines how engaging in tourism-related work creates new, gendered tensions and conflicts for Hmong women. Second, it examines how Hmong women negotiate with other actors (husbands, fathers) to redefine, reconstruct or reconfirm gender within their families and communities.

In linking up these research findings with the large body of literature on gender and work, the third debate that my study focuses on is the aspect of agency. Following recent scholarly works addressing the agency of Hmong people in adapting and diversifying their livelihood and resisting ethnic discrimination and enjoying their lives (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006; Turner and Michaud, 2009; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, 2009; Ngo Thi Thanh Tam 2010; Michaud, 2011; Turner, 2012), this study seeks to identify the different types of agency

---

\(^1\) Hmong is one of ethnic group of Vietnam’s ethnic composition
of Hmong people in work and life. By concentrating on what motivates the Hmong women to enter the realm of tourism-related activities, this study positions Hmong women as strategic actors. It aims to explore how they make use of the opportunities they gain through working in tourism, and how they develop strategies to negotiate with their husbands, their traditions, and the state and other external agents to achieve their desired goals. The study shows that the agency of Hmong women can only be fully understood when viewed in relation to the “social locations” of Hmong women which are created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based influences and other socially stratifying factors (Mahler & Pessar, 2001). Three factors that determine their “social location” are: (1) their own personal circumstances, including their age, marital status, number of children, and the location of their house; (2) their gender expectations, or how other people, including their parents, husbands, in-laws, and traditional Hmong society view them as women, daughters, wives, and mothers; and (3) their position within the power hierarchies of their families and communities, and their ability to negotiate with those in power. The study also reveals the relationships between desire and agency. These relationships are complex. They create fear and involve constraints on Hmong women.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters.

Chapter 1 presents theoretical debates related to this research. It expands a conceptual framework that places tourism and work at the intersection of gender and ethnicity.

Chapter 2 focuses on the history of the Hmong in Sa Pa and their incorporation into the modern nation-state of Vietnam. It includes local histories of the Hmong and their contact with others since their settlement in Sa Pa town. The chapter demonstrates the complexities of the relationships between the Hmong and the state and between the Hmong and the Kinh people.

Chapter 3 introduces some background information about two geographic areas of the study, Sa Pa and Ta Phin. It then provides a description and analysis of my fieldwork experience that reflects how I negotiated and navigated through power relations to establish relationships with informants in Sa Pa. This chapter focuses on the various ways in which I was situated in relation to the Hmong people and also with local authorities in Sa Pa. My research experience reaffirmed the importance of acknowledging my position in relating to different people in the field, of practicing reflexivity throughout the research process, and on how to navigate through complex administrative structures and the strong state control over
the research process in Vietnam.

Chapter 4 examines the history of tourism in Vietnam with a focus on the uplands as the context of local policies regulating tourism in Sa Pa. This is followed by an examination of recent policies and strategies of tourism development in Sa Pa. The chapter shows how temporary and ad hoc actions and policies concerning tourism and ethnic groups are, and what consequences these policies have for the livelihood opportunities of Hmong people.

Chapter 5 presents the diverse, complex factors that influence Hmong women’s decisions to become involved in tourism-related activities. This chapter shows how the dynamics of gender and ethnicity frame the home and work lives of these Hmong women. The life stories and accounts of these women illustrate their agency as they elect to participate in the tourism-related activities. As they enter into their tourism-related activities, the women factor many variables into their decisions, including: their backgrounds, expectations, desires, and available opportunities, which are related to their position, or “social locations”.

Chapter 6 illustrates the various ways, tactics and practices Hmong women use to be successful in the tourism market. The focus is on how Hmong women have used their own resources to overcome their inferior position within local and global hierarchies dictated by gender, ethnicity and class. Women’s intentions and their strategies are oriented towards establishing a “local” network among Hmong people and an “international” network and long-term relationship with tourists rather than focusing exclusively on the selling-buying exchange. Based on my ethnographic exploration, I shall argue that Hmong women exercise a great deal of agency to achieve their desired goals.

Chapter 7 analyzes how working outside home has affected the Hmong women’s lives and discusses the extent to which their status has changed at home in the context of Hmong discourses on morality and traditions concerning gender and work. It examines strategies used by both Hmong men and Hmong women to negotiate power dynamics. The analysis demonstrates that Hmong women are successful in manipulating these discourses to gain power in their relationships and to overcome the socio-cultural, economic barriers to continuing their tourism-related activities that provide new opportunities and experiences for them. More importantly, Hmong women working in tourism have been able to enjoy their lives in ways they had never been able to experience before. Strategies and tactics that Hmong women have developed in order to be successful in the marketplace and to enjoy a better life illustrate the desires and aspirations of Hmong women for personal transformation.

The conclusion summarizes the substantive findings presented in the dissertation,
highlighting the agency of Hmong women. The Hmong women express two different types of agency: One is their agency in dealing with their unstable political and economic status as they attempt to benefit from tourism; the other is their agency of desire, which includes their desire to escape boredom, to pursue romantic relationships outside the home, and to continue their work despite the challenges they face. It shows the complexity of emotional needs which encompass both fear and desire, and it shows how Hmong women have ended up negotiating with each other and with other actors to achieve personal transformations. This final chapter draws some general conclusions about the theoretical themes raised throughout the study.
Chapter 1

Tourism and Work at the Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity

This chapter introduces the main bodies of literature used for this research, though where necessary and relevant, more substantive discussions of the literature are provided throughout the dissertation. Supporting this study is a conceptual framework that places tourism and work at the intersection of gender and ethnicity. In this research, I argue that ethnicity and gender come together and have an effect on Hmong women’s work and lives. To create this framework, this chapter aims to provide a clear understanding of the relevant terms and how they connect to, and transect, one another to illustrate that tourism in Vietnam is not an all-powerful force that impacts the local people in a unidirectional fashion, and that instead, the engagement of local people shapes tourism as much as tourism shapes the local context (Picard, 1993). This symbiosis is directly influenced by a multiplicity of factors, including: socioeconomic contexts, state and local governments, and the historical construction of gender and ethnicity. To contextualize this web of motivations, consequences and changes in the cultural and social lives of local Hmong people, specifically women, as they relate to tourism, requires a close examination of both the agency of local peoples and the political and economic characteristics of the region (Parpart et al., 2002).

Ethnicity, State and Tourism

Tourism provides both formal and informal jobs for Hmong people. However, the nature and division of men’s and women’s labor are shaped by many factors including the belonging of local people to a certain group and relations between this and other groups – that is, ethnicity. For this study, exploring the key analytical concept of ethnicity is essential for understanding why ethnicity is important in state-ethnic minority relations and economic strategies. It also helps us to understand and connect the structural contexts and agency in Hmong women’s tourism-related activities.

Implications of ethnicity

The concept of ethnicity has been widely taken on by social science scholars in the field of identity. In general, ethnicity does not only imply fixed forms of identity rooted in biology and location; rather, ethnicity is defined as a “social construction, mediated by a continuous process of negotiation of cultural difference between various social actors within
and outside of the ‘ethnic group’” (Salemink, 2003: 2). The social construction of ethnicity includes self-identification and identification by others as being different (Eriksen, 2002; Keyes, 2002). Defining and classifying groups and belonging is a joint effort in meaning making that happens at the popular level through negotiations within the group and between the group and their immediate neighbors, and at the state level through official policies and laws. In addition to providing this definition, the complexity inherent in the concept is spelled out.

Instrumentalists today argue that ethnicity is in fact an instrumental construction that is used by specific actors for particular purposes. Hall (2002) and Jenkins (2008) argue that ethnicity creates a collective interest which does not simply reflect the differences between groups but encourages actors to act as if they are related. Ethnicity in this sense implies the agency of a group of people to define themselves as they want and to act according to their collective interests. Eriksen (2005: 353) takes this further to recognize that ethnicity requires both symbolic meaning and instrumental utility which are defined respectively as desires and strategies. These factors work together to allow particular groups to develop a sense of agency, which allows them to deal with the constraints and opportunities placed upon them by outside actors (Michaud and Forsyth, 2011). Recently, a middle approach to ethnicity which encompasses both biological and political positions has emerged. For example, Michaud and Forsyth (2011: 11) see ethnicity as involving blood ties, cultural variety, local agency and the political agendas of people in dealing with constraints and opportunities.

Despite the inconclusiveness and ambiguity associated with the concept of ethnicity, it is a powerful tool for understanding human behavior in particular contexts, including, in relation to my research topic, how people in given locations negotiate their livelihood, works and lives. Recent studies exploring ethnicity and livelihood have been conducted in Vietnam and other countries in Southeast Asia (Bonnin, 2011; Michaud, 2000; Michaud, 2008; Turner, 2007; Turner, 2011a; Turner, 2011b; Turner and Michaud, 2008; Turner and Michaud, 2009). These studies highlight ethnicity as a key factor in the local interpretations and translations of global commands and engagements (Michaud and Forsyth, 2011: 219). The implication that comes from these studies is that livelihoods can only understood in relation to local identity and ethnicity.

My dissertation takes ethnicity seriously, and relates it to the shared cultural features, political agendas and agency of Hmong people in order to explore how it enables Hmong women to make choices regarding the opportunities afforded them and the constraints placed
upon them. Ethnicity helps people to produce and reproduce an identity they believe in and it helps people to pursue particular tourism-related activities as in my study here, while negotiating the constraints of a specific socio-cultural, political, economic and environmental context. To interpret how ethnicity influences the work and lives of Hmong women in Sa Pa, I focus on state–minority relations in order to explore how the state creates a hierarchy of dominance and thus constructs stereotypes and discrimination toward ethnic minorities. I emphasize the instrumental aspects of ethnicity which refer to power and agency, and I do not focus exclusively on the normative perspective which views stereotypes and discrimination as causal factors that make people do things. This allows me to gain a broader understanding of state–minority interactions and to explore how these interactions relate to processes of state control and the manipulation of tourism development in the uplands. In turn, the power and agency of local people, which are always influenced by identity and culture, define the ways in which they respond to the state’s control and interventions. This is the basis of the approach that I use in this research and I shall elaborate on it by discussing the theoretical debates surrounding it.

State and ethnic minorities: power-agency

State–minority relations can be seen firstly in the way ethnic minorities are defined and classified through official policies and laws. The state classifies and defines ethnic groups based on the discourses of dominant groups, and on its ideologies of nationalism, culture and civilization (Tapp, 2004). Ideological preferences for a homogenous, pluralistic or multicultural society will determine the relationships between the state and different ethnic groups. This relationship could result in either the state’s insistence on the assimilation of ethnic groups into the national culture, or the state accepting a multicultural (or pluralist) ideology, but ranking ethnic groups based on the national ideas of cultural superiority and inferiority (Eriksen, 2002). For example, Schein (2000) argues that the state, with its hegemony and discourse (power/knowledge), situates people into certain subject positions or coerces them into seeing themselves in particular ways. Schein analyzes the process in which the Miao in China, like other ethnic minorities, are framed and defined by Chinese classificatory theories and policy as the Other (Schein, 2000).

In Vietnam, ethnic minorities, including the Hmong, are identified as ethnic people

---

2 “Miao” is often used in China to refer to an officially recognized group, the Miao-zu, of which the Hmong is one subgroup. Hmong in the Indochinese Peninsula are descended from the Miao in China and belong to the same linguistic sub-family (Miao-Yao) (Culas and Michaud 2004). Recently, the term Hmong has largely replaced the term “Miao” (Tapp 2004).
(nguoi dan toc) through state discourses and classification techniques. Official ethnic classification was a lengthy and highly debated affair that began in the 1950s, with state ethnologists continuing to revise their classifications until they arrived at the final list of 54 ethnic groups in 1979 (Khong Dien, 2002; Salemink, 2003; McElwee, 2004). Minorities are classified according to their cultural, economic and social practices. Minorities who most resemble the Kinh – the majority ethnic group – in terms of culture and customs may be seen as “almost like Kinh”, and those who have different cultural practices such as shifting cultivation and matriarchal social organizations are viewed as less developed (World Bank, 2009). Minorities live mainly in rural, remote areas of the northern mountains and Central Highlands. This geographical location limits their mobility and access to markets and services. Although the status and rights of ethnic minorities are recognized as equal in Vietnamese law, and although the state prohibits all acts of discrimination and division, ethnic minorities are still seen as “backward” peoples in Vietnam.

Stereotypes were often seen as causal factors of discriminative policies and laws that the state has imposed on ethnic minorities. Before 1975, Hmong people were seen as superstitious savages and jungle rebels fighting against the Viet Minh (a national independence coalition formed during the time of French colonization). In order to integrate the Hmong into mainstream society and to gain their support for the revolution, the state enacted the cadre policy. Under this policy, Hmong people were assigned to administrative positions with the aim of mobilizing them. Another example of a state policies aimed at “helping” ethnic minorities were the sedentarization and resettlement policies, predicated on the view that traditional Hmong farming and cultivation techniques are the main causes of deforestation in the Vietnamese highlands. Everywhere they could, “states have obliged mobile, swidden cultivators to settle in permanent villages” (Scott, 2009: 5). A study by the World Bank (2009) on the topic of minority poverty in Vietnam highlights how the Kinh people, state officials and cadres, stereotype and hold misconceptions of “backwardness” and “underdevelopment” about ethnic minorities and the effects of this phenomenon. Taking an ethnocentric viewpoint, Kinh people see themselves (consciously or unconsciously) as more developed than ethnic minorities, and they believe that ethnic minorities have low intellectual levels, are lazy and dependent, do not know how to earn a living, and do not have the drive to succeed (World Bank, 2009; Pham Quynh Phuong et al., 2014). The state disseminates these stereotypes to mass audiences via popular media. Recent studies (Nguyen Van Chinh, 2009; ISEE, 2009) report a trend of the “dramatization” of the lives of ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities are portrayed in newspapers as naïve, credulous and easily exploited because they
support rebel forces. Development programs in fact continue to reinforce the racial and cultural hegemony of the Kinh majority and are designed to assimilate the ethnic minorities into Kinh culture.

Clearly, stereotypes exist, however they do not by themselves explain the whole thing. When analyzing the policies of sedentarization and resettlement in Vietnam, Salemink (2000, 2003) points out that these policies do not target deforestation, but instead aim to control ethnic minorities and their land. Sedentarization is “the precondition of Kinh migration to [the] uplands” and consequently leads to land scarcity and degradation (Salemink, 2003: 287). The recent policy of the government toward the conversion of Hmong to Christianity is indeed aiming at control and regulate the Hmong (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011). According to Salemink and Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, stereotypes are not “things” that make people take certain actions; rather, they allow people to pursue their projects at the expense of others. In other words, there are material and other interests at work that are connected with stereotypes. If stereotyping language and thinking can be seen as a discourse in the Foucaultian sense, then they do have a disciplining effect, but they are also linked to power (and hence to agency) (Salemink, 2003).

In this context of stereotyping, ethnic minorities develop their own agency to respond the state’s ethnically based policies in different ways. When scholars refer to the agency of highlanders in Southeast Asia, they limit the highlanders’ responses to one of two options. As historian Richard White (1991 cited in Tan and Walker 2008: 142) explains, most stories about the uplands generally fit the analogy of the sea battering a rock, where the sea represents the state (or the market) and the rock symbolizes the people or tradition. In this analogy, there can only be two consequences: erosion or resistance. This adversarial portrayal reduces complex social realities to overdrawn contrasts between hegemony and resistance (Ortner, 1995; Jonsson, 2004). It finds “agency among minorities only in acts that maintain their distinction from the mainstream, or their rejection of the system” (Taylor, 2008: 13).

In addition, High (2013: 12) argues that the domination–resistance model focuses on agency, but if this model “is taken to mean genuine agency is found only in resistance to state projects, then this model cannot account for the desire of local people”. In fact, the agency of ethnic minorities is also tempered by individual perceptions, aspirations and beliefs which are located in the realm of cultural values, practices, and human personality (Start and Johnson, 2004). Agency thus takes various forms: opposition or refusal (Pile and Keith, 1977), acceptance (Scott, 2000), rejection, self-defense (Turner and Michaud, 2008) and even
“experimental consensus” (High, 2008). Scott (1985) calls these responses “the weapons of the weak: everyday forms of resistance” which are never used to declare formal challenges, but act as local responses to power relations – a non-political form of resistance. For example, Schein (2000) takes a more nuanced approach to show how the Miao people in China are actively engaged in the processes that define them as exotic and as objects of tourist consumption gazes, particularly through cultural performance. For example, when being hired by Han photographers for photo shoots, some practice opposition by refusing to show up for the shoot, whereas others practice self-defense by imposing their own demands on the photographers and/or ask for remuneration. In another example young Miao women defied their elders’ scolding and sang privately for a Han photographer with whom they had a good friendship (2000: 211-213). Schein shows that Miao women are far from being objects of exploitation and often assert their subjectivities and use different strategies to attain their own goals (2000). Similarly, Oakes (1998) looks at how various ethnic minorities in Guizhou province in southern China engage with modernization processes and “reclaim the tourist landscape”. Studies in India and Peru also exemplify how indigenous women, when presented as female artisans as well as the cultural Other, successfully use this representation to earn a living and improve their lives (Babb, 2011; Henrici, 2002; Little, 2004; Stronza, 2008).

From another perspective, in studies about resettlement and irrigation in Laos, Holly High shows that local people develop “experimental consensus” with the state’s policies, by an initial agreement with the government policy (or other dominant transcript), but with a “try and see” approach. Even when the outcomes are negative, people are able to use the state’s own discourse as justification for an effective reversal of policy. According to High, “this process begins not with resistance, but with consensus. People do not lose their voice through this initial consensus. Instead, the very act of initial acquiescence gives them grounds for a voice, in the form of an on-going negotiation” (High 2013: 15; 2008). This approach involves looking at local responses to people’s desires within ethnic, cultural, social, economic and political structures.

In the context of Vietnam, Turner and Michaud (2008, 2009) show how Hmong in Lao Cai, Vietnam, adapt and negotiate their livelihoods based on their identities, traditions, and political and geographical situations. While trading opportunities in Lao Cai are predominantly in the hands of Kinh intermediaries and retailers, Hmong people “choose to play the cracks in the system rather than trying to dominate or conquer” (Turner and Michaud, 2008: 181). They decide not to become too committed to commercial activities as a refusal to
cooperate (Turner and Michaud, 2008) based on “the conditions and constraints under which they are generated” (Scott, 1985: 242). Hmong girls in Sa Pa also resist the gaze of Kinh people by maintaining a certain distance from Kinh people and find their own ways to challenge existing stereotypes of Hmong people as “backward” and “exotic” others (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006). The ability to speak a foreign language and to form friendships with foreign tourists has enabled them to acquire a new status in relation to Kinh people. For Hmong people in Lao Cai and for “Montagnards” in the Central Highlands, Christian conversion enhances literacy and self-esteem and provides minorities with transnational avenues to escape marginality (Salemink, 2003; Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011) and/or reclaim their agency and their identities (Salemink, 2003, Salemink, 2009). By converting to Christianity, ethnic minorities not only redraw their ethnic boundaries in the field of religion (Salemink, 2003) but also find their own ways to reach modernity (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011).

By accommodating the “power–agency” perspective within the ethnicity framework, this research avoids focusing solely on how ethnicity creates constraints and discrimination toward Hmong people; it also looks at how each actor in the power hierarchy negotiates and uses ethnicity to pursue their projects for their own benefit. I seek to enrich current perspectives regarding the practical strategies ethnic minorities employ to be successful in the marketplace by paying specific attention to accounts of the motivations, desires and choices of Hmong people.

State, minorities and tourism

In the context of tourism, state policies shape, sanction, objectify, define, marginalize and organize constituent ethnicities to promote tourism and ensure political stability (Hitchcock et al., 2009). To do so effectively, they must account for the historical power struggles and politically sensitive nature of ethnicities. Sanctions and development policies are carefully constructed to maintain the veil of control and order, and they avoid any manifestations of the agency that ethnic cultures use to claim their political, social or cultural independence (Wood, 1997). Van den Berghe and Keyes (1984), in their study of ethnicity and tourism, examine the relationship between tourists, tourees and middlemen to understand

---

3 Montagnards is a French word meaning mountain people. Michaud (2000: 74) explains that in early French literature on Indochina, as well as in a growing number of recent English language publications, the term is understood as encompassing the minority populations living in mountains in all of the Indochinese (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) mountainous areas. In Vietnam this generic French term has become an ethnonym which is much politicized as it is a colonial legacy. Because of this, so I do not use this term in my thesis, except in direct quotations from other authors.
the role of the state and other actors in ethnic tourism. The relationship between tourist and touree is defined as a spectator–actor relationship in which the tourist normally seeks for the exotic, and touree is the native serving the needs of tourists. The state and other agencies are middlemen or brokers in ethnic exoticism and seek to gain a profit from manipulating ethnicity. As Van den Berghe and Keyes point out, “The state often manipulates people and their cultural symbols with little regard for, or consultation with, the tourees, but which often unwittingly provides local groups with new ways of pressing claims against the state” (Van den Berghe and Keyes, 1984: 348).

In addition, the state–minority relationship reflects the powers and hierarchies that influence tourism development and economic activities through production and control of tourist spaces. Even in the case of ethnic tourism, the power and coherence of the state are apparent. Studies of ethnic tourism in Southeast Asia and China illustrate this point. Oakes (1998: 39) has proposed a “Southeast Asian model” of tourism development among the countries of ASEAN where centralized states are directly involved in all aspects of tourism promotion and development. In the context of ethnic development in Yunnan in China, Morais, Yarnal, Dong and Dowler (2005) link the state to their definition of ethnic tourism as follows:

Ethnic tourism differs from traditional forms of tourism because it is based on the conflict between the dominating government’s intent to control the unassimilated ethnic tribes and the tourists’ motivation to experience authentic and marginal ethnic cultures (2005: 165-166).

In a similar vein, Wood explains that the Chinese state designates tourist sites and decides which specific areas are open or closed to foreign tourism (Wood, 1997: 11). Nyiri (2006) shows how the Chinese state constructed “scenic spots” and defined how these tourist sites are consumed. In another case, the state regulations about tourist spaces and markets in Sanur, Bali contribute further to the marginalization of mobile women working as masseuses (Bras and Dahles, 1999). Additionally, as Ismail’s (2008: 4-5) ethnographic study of the Kayan in Thailand indicates, the government can also dictate living spaces for ethnic people. In this instance, the local government relocated people from three separate villages into one centralized settlement, the “Village for the Preservation of the Kayan Traditional Way of Life and Security of Mae Hong Son”. This prompted feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction, and disappointment, because as Ismail (2008: 33) illustrates, ethnic tourism is detrimental to the tourees when its financial benefits are not equitably shared between tourism promoters and
people in the destination communities, particularly when these communities are forced to change their ways of life and sell themselves as products for tourist consumption. Clearly, the governmental control of ethnic spaces limits and defines the available employment options for the people who live in them (Turner and Michaud, 2008).

Ethnicity can also lead to ethnic divisions of labor. Recent studies in Thailand, China and Vietnam explore this phenomenon. A study of Hmong in Thailand by Michaud (1997) indicates clearly how Hmong are exploited by dominant groups in Thailand. A similar situation is found in Toops’ (1992) analysis of the relationship between Han guides and minority peoples in Xinjiang, China and in Turner and Michaud’s (2009) study of Hmong in Vietnam. In both cases, the major economic benefits of tourism accrue to the dominant ethnic group.

In this study, I acknowledge the important role of the state in constructing the identity of ethnic minorities and in organizing tourism within the country. At the same time, it is crucial to pay attention to the influence of the market and other actors in all aspects of tourism. Cohen (2001: 29) argues that “the complex relationship between three sets of actors – the ethnic groups, the tourist establishments and their clients, and the state and its agencies are at the heart of the dynamics of ethnic tourism in all Southeast Asian countries” and that this complex relationship influences all aspects of ethnic tourism in the region, “including the politics of representation of the ethnic groups in touristic media, the dynamics of the encounter between tourists and ethnics, the emergence of an ethnic ‘touristic’ culture, and the transformation of ethnic identities in response to tourism” (Cohen, 2001: 29). Importantly, this research looks at how this relationship results in patterns which reflect how actors are able to access and participate in tourism-related activities. It also seeks to explore how each actor engages with opportunities and negotiates constraints in tourism-related activities in order to be successful. Focusing on the agency of Hmong women in the tourism process and in “turning back the gaze”, I will show that tourism is not always imposed on passive and powerless people (Stronza, 2001), but rather, it is an event whose construction relies on the perspectives and active participation of local people.

**Gender, Work and Tourism**

In order to better understand the experiences of Hmong women working in tourism, it is important to explore how gender operates within specific work and life contexts, and how each context affects Hmong women. Examining Hmong women’s choices relating to work, this study focuses both on the work opportunities available to Hmong women, and the agency
they assert within gendered environments. Gender, along with ideologies, discourses and norms, provides a repertoire of practices and influences the opportunities for work available to women. In addition, women make choices based on their agency which is shaped by the many factors in which gender is embedded. This study also explores how gender is performed, challenged, renegotiated and undone in the family. In what follows I shall elaborate on my approach to gender by discussing the debates surrounding it.

Opportunities for work and gender

Tourism provides both formal and informal jobs for local people; however, societally constructed, context-specific, gender-based norms structure how women and men participate in all economic activity inside and outside the home, including tourism. These norms are shaped by “a system of culturally constructed identities, expressed in ideologies of masculinity and femininity” (Swain, 1995: 28). Gender norms, and moral regulations, attitudes and practices, long codified through tradition if not law, are increasingly recognized as key to shaping people’s lives. As “shared expectations […] regarding how people should behave”, social norms mould not only our actions but also our attitudes and beliefs” (Heise, 2011: 3). Given this reality, in many cases women’s and men’s work opportunities are regulated through the constructions of gender visible in a repertoire of ideologies and institutional norms (Gibson, 2001: 29; Brandth and Haugen, 2010). This leads to employees being offered jobs and remuneration “in a range of occupations which are associated with gendered characteristics called women’s work and men’s work” (Sinclair, 1997: 7; Elma, 2007).

Women’s work is usually associated with gender-based ideologies about the role of woman as wife and mother. Studies on tourism and work in many countries indicate that women’s work in the tourism industry reflects norms regarding the gendered division of labor. They are relegated to jobs that fall under the ‘three Cs’: catering, cleaning, and caring (Polly, 2003: 233). For example, Balinese women work as vendors of clothing, food and other objects (Norris, 1994) or in hawker cooperatives selling massages and manicures (Cukier and Wall, 1993) or they work in the entertainment field, as menial service workers (Chant and McIlwaine, 1995). Additionally, their “feminine” positions are as chambermaids, cooks, servers and commercial sex workers (Apostolopoulos and Sonmez, 2001). Filby, (1992) in his study about personality in service work shows the power of gender ideologies by examining how employers in the leisure sector allocate jobs to women and men based on their ideas of choosing the right personality for the job. For example, women are considered appropriate for
waitresses and/or receptionists due to their sexual attractiveness. In a similar vein, Adkins (1995) found that all interactive service jobs such as receptionists are awarded to women. Other gender attributes such as physical weakness and lack of knowledge are said to prevent women’s access to certain kinds of jobs. Many separate empirical studies have explored the gendered belief that men have the characteristics necessary to be successful managers in the hospitality industry, while women do not (Hicks, 1990; Walsh and McKenna, 1991: 5; Brandth and Haugen, 2010). These beliefs and norms, derived from gender ideologies, inform and reinforce recruitment, limit women’s opportunities and often exclude them entirely (Purcell, 1997).

Women’s “choices” cannot be understood in isolation, but only through the power dynamics of roles in the family structure, and in the context of their relations to men. In many contexts, the proper place and role for a woman is in the home, attending to housework and the children, while a man’s place is in public, being the breadwinner for the family. These gendered functions implicitly emphasize the home-power base and uphold a tradition of women being excluded from participating in public life (Mary, 1991). Assigned to this role, mothers are forced into prioritizing their families over work outside the home. Therefore, they usually choose jobs that enable them to combine domestic work with earning incomes such as part-time or self-employed work (Stringer, 1991; Long and Kindon, 1997; Julie Scot, 1997; Cukier, 2002; Feng, 2013).

Women are required to act according to gender norms, not only to fulfill their roles but also to keep their reputations and honor, and to avoid shaming their husbands, their families and themselves. For example, in Gerome, Turkey, being outside of the home is seen as improper for women, and thus the involvement of Turkish women in tourism is limited (Tucker, 2003). Similarly, posing for a tourist’s camera is deemed inappropriate for indigenous women in Peru (Ypeij, 2012). In the case of Miao in rural Fenghuang, China, a man builds his reputation on his ability to earn money; therefore men’s employment needs take priority over women’s (Feng, 2013). Studies of the Hmong in Sa Pa (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006; Bonnin and Turner, 2013) also indicate this trend in which moving to work is seen as inappropriate for Hmong women and “a good wife should stays home” (Bonnin and Turner, 2013: 12). Therefore, Hmong women’s involvement in economic activities is restricted. In their examination of gender, however, Bonnin and Turner do not mention how Hmong women negotiate and perform gender relations in the family. Duong Bich Hanh (2006) deals with this issue, however the subject of her study is non-married Hmong girls, so their
situations and roles are different from those of their mothers.

To fill this gap and to take these accounts of gender into consideration, this research explores how the beliefs, gender norms and moral regulations that are derived from gender ideologies create conditions and/or constraints that inform the choices, decisions and participation of Hmong women in tourism-related work. It also looks at how Hmong women perform and negotiate gender relationships within their families and society with the aim of explaining how these women interpret, experience, challenge, and/or submit to ideological messages in society about appropriate gendered behavior (Henderson, 1994: 132).

Women’s agency

Despite of gender inequality of tourism work that limits women’s involvement in the field, studies in tourism reveal that women’s involvement in tourism work reflects their own choices and agency, and that they are able to judge the value of their work (Cone, 1995; Steel, 2008; Turner and Michaud, 2008). Therefore, to have a comprehensive view of women’s experiences in the tourism industry and of their ability to choose their jobs, and to obtain an understanding of how they conduct their lives, it is necessary to observe their agency as it plays out through their social positions and relationships with others.

Agency, according to Ortner (1996, 2006), has two fields of meaning, both of which are contingent upon social power and inequality. The first field is agency of projects. This field looks into an agent’s intentions, purposes and desires to pursue a project. The second field is agency of power, which is organized on a domination/resistance axis. People have both powers and projects of their own. Domination and resistance are in the service of the projects to pursue meaningful goals. Ortner also points out the influences of cultural meanings and structural arrangements on the dynamics of agency:

Studies of the ways in which people resist, negotiate, or appropriate some feature of their world are also inadequate and misleading without careful analysis of cultural meanings and structural arrangements that construct and constrain their agency, and that limit the transformative potential of all such internationalized activity (1996: 2).

Ortner’s perspective on agency suggests a focus on cultural and political contexts to comprehensively analyze women’s experiences in the tourism industry. “Cultural context” suggests the importance of understanding the diversity in women’s agency in term of choices, behaviors, relative powers and disadvantage (Henderson, 1994). Henderson also suggests that people’s choices and gender behavior are determined by the contexts and relationships in
which gender actors are defined. Circumstances and cultural contexts also influence how people interpret, experience, challenge and/or submit to ideological messages in society about appropriate behavior for women and men (Henderson, 1994: 132).

Dealing with aspects of power and agency, Mahler and Pessar (2001) use the concept of *gendered geographies of power* to investigate the agency of people in general and in the context of migration. This concept is also relevant for this research since Hmong women’s employment is mediated by multiple hierarchies of power operating within and across many terrains (the family, the community, and the state). The concept has three main elements. First, gender ideologies and relations “operate both within particular spatial and social scales (e.g. the body, the family, the state)” (Mahler and Pessar, 2001: 815). The second element is “social location”, which refers to a “person’s positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based and other socially stratifying factors” (2001: 816). In this sense, hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender influence the social location of individuals and groups. This notion of “social location” provides a conceptual tool to capture how agency relates to the various experiences of women in choosing their work in the tourism industry. The third element explores the types and degrees of agency people exert in their given social locations. People’s choices and actions are then determined by both their social location and their degree of agency, to the extent that they determine people’s ability to access resources, while their agency enables them to refine and transform these conditions to initiate changes. The degree of agency is determined not only by considerations above beyond personal factors, but also by individual characteristics such as initiative and imagination. Imagination here means people’s ability to predict what will happen to them, and their ability to think about how to deal with what will happen to them, before they make any choices or take any action. The more resourceful people are, the more influence they exert over their actions. Pessar and Mahler’s notion of gendered geographies of power indicates the value of looking at the dynamism and complexity of agency in multiple social contexts. These contexts include family, community and society at large, and in these contexts, agency can be examined in relation to the negotiations of various actors situated in the different “social locations” created by historical, economic, political, cultural and social stratifying factors. In addition, personal background, including life experience, age, race, and nationality also influence the ways in which agency is operated and negotiated.

Studying women’s agency, recent works have focused on explaining the motivations,
choices and experiences of women engaging in tourism-related employment. Steel (2008), for example, indicates that street vendors in Peru make the decision to enter into or to persist in street vending based on their desires and their evaluations of costs and benefits, rather than as a response to economic difficulties or a lack of other labor opportunities. Cone (1995) explains the dynamics of agency in making choices by showing how and why two women in a Mayan village make choices, negotiate and adapt to participating in tourism work. Two women in different circumstances (i.e. different places of origin, families, and economic situations) enact different degrees of agency to construct their lives and their identities and to transform power relationships in the tourism industry. A woman from a happy and secure family did not hesitate to take part in a big business with a foreigner for her own profit, while the other woman, from a poor family who regards herself as a servant, chose not to insert herself into the tourism industry (Cone, 1995).

In the academic literature, much is made of Hmong agency (see, e.g. Duong Bich Hanh, 2006; Turner and Michaud, 2009; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, 2009; Ngo Thi Thanh Tam 2010; Michaud, 2011; Turner, 2012). Likewise, Turner and Michaud (2009) explain how Hmong women use their agency to adapt and diversify their livelihoods based on their circumstances. Similarly, Hmong girls in Sa Pa are active agents in resisting ethnic discrimination and they resist measures which could prevent them from enjoying their lives (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006). The above studies successfully examine agency in social, cultural and political contexts. However, they focus mainly on the collective agency of Hmong in relation to their livelihoods, and on single Hmong girls in their work. They do not pay sufficient attention to individual factors.

Applying Ortner’s definition of agency as the intentionality, purpose and desire to pursue a project, this study seeks to understand the complexity and dynamics of the agency of Hmong women in relation to the factors proposed by Pessar and Mahler, and it seeks to understand how this dynamism influences women’s choices. Considering Ortner’s suggestion about the relationship between agency and power in gender analysis with a special focus on “social locations”, this research describes how women’s agency associated with power relations is determined by gender, ethnicity, age and social status. Due to gender ideologies, there are many constraints affecting Hmong women in choosing their work. These constraints include their status and position in society as women and as members of an ethnic minority. This study examines how, in such a situation, Hmong women exercise their agency to comply with those constraints, to negotiate with different actors in the family and society, and/or to
resist when making decisions about what kind of work they will do. This is the question that this study is seeking to answer.

(Un)doing gender: Negotiating gender for change

Many studies recognize that tourism developments can offer opportunities to challenge local communities to initiate changes and question existing gender constructions (Swain, 1989; 1993; Nash, 1993; Wilson, 2005; Little, 2004; Brandth and Haugen, 2010). To examine gender roles within communities, families and the employment context of tourism, scholarly works generally focus on the influence of economic and social power. A study in Annapurna, Nepal reveals that when women contribute to the family income through working in tourism, their value in the household increases, prompting male members of the household to assist with historically ‘female’ household work (Walker et al., 2001). In a similar study, Tucker (2003) finds that Peruvian women experience a sense of empowerment because their participation in tourism work gives them more freedom and financial independence.

Another factor that helps challenge local gender norms comes when local women interact with both national and international tourists. These interactions can lead to changes in terms of lifestyle and behaviours regarding consumption in addition to shifting gender perceptions. Through encounters with tourists, local women’s views are opened to a broader spectrum of gender roles and non-traditional worldviews. For instance, Chant (1997) suggests that women’s changing perceptions of themselves and their potential roles as individuals are affected by their interactions with female tourists who display characteristics of autonomy and self-reliance. In her study about gender and tourism in Mexico and the Philippines, Chant (1997) finds that “meeting with other women increases knowledge of gender roles and relations in other contexts and, combined with women’s access to work and income, arguably leads them to be more reflective about their own situations” (Chant, 1997: 162). Through exposure to North American tourists, Mexican women learn that women are able to control income and make major decisions. Filipino women in Cebu, through their contact with foreign males, formulate more rounded perceptions of men and think about patriarchal institutions and practices more generally (Chant, 1997: 162). Elma (2007) finds changes in Turkish women’s perceptions of self as a result of their involvement in tourism work.

Social and economic power, however, do not always create new roles and elevated status for women in the family. Despite obtaining economic autonomy, women’s roles and status remain unchanged in many societies. A number of studies in Greece address this issue and note that despite increased economic power, women are still “left aside” (Tsartas, 2003: 21...
118), and in fact jobs in tourism are often extensions of their domestic roles (Levy and Leach, 1991; Garcia-Ramon, Canoves and Valdovinos, 1995). In some cases, economic power proves to be a risk for women. Bringing in significant monetary contributions to a traditional household income may cause tensions, because in a man’s power is often derived through his capacity to provide financial support to the family, and thus any threat to this capacity delegitimizes his ability to make financial decisions and poses a challenge to his status (Rotthschild cited in Bui Phuong Dinh 2006; Scheyvens, 2002). Changing the power dynamics in such situations often results in strong opposition from the men who are being asked to give up power. In the face of this opposition, resistance on the part of women is rarely accepted because it is against the norm and brings dishonor to the family (Harrison, 1992; Timothy, 2001). While this male opposition is the norm, in some cases, husbands are able to recognize the contributions of their wives and respect them for it. This scenario is able to play out only if the wife’s heightened status does not threaten the husband’s role and power as head of the family (Rotthschild, cited in Bui Phuong Dinh 2006).

A secondary power struggle may occur as husbands and their working wives negotiate domestic tasks, which are often traditionally “women’s work.” Men’s participation in household chores and childcare is a “threatening prospect” as it is seen to diminish their power (Timothy, 2001: 244). Walsh (2001, 2005) shows how men in Loushui village in China justify their refusal to do household work on the basis that it breaks with traditional culture. Chant (1997) shows that although having an independent income can help Mexican women to have more egalitarian relationships with their spouses, not all Mexican men are pleased with their wives’ economic independence. These men “retali ate by either dropping out of work or scaling down their contributions to household income” or “use their wives’ earnings to play cards or to go out drinking with male friends” (1997: 142). In these instances, women suffer more from their economic autonomy than they benefit from it.

Clearly, if cultural struggles between men and women to renegotiate gender roles do not value the woman’s need for independence and the man’s need to maintain some vestiges of power, women’s work outside of the home is jeopardized. These struggles can be seen in the Vietnamese context. Hy V. Luong (1997) notes that Vietnamese women have a long history of making considerable contributions to their families’ incomes through trade and craft production. However, this economic role is not always indicative of an increased status for women. According to Luong, this model is quite typical in the Confucian, patriarchal society of the north of Vietnam. Even after the reunification of Vietnam, and especially after
the 1986 economic reforms, gender inequality, restrictive gender practices and domestic divisions of labor persist (Nguyen, 2001; Luong, 2003). Women’s significant roles in the Vietnamese economy have not led to the restructuring of gender relations to their advantage (Luong, 2003: 221).

The above discussion clearly shows that economic and social factors are not enough to explain the changed or unchanged nature of gender relations in communities and families. Cultural norms and traditions about gender influence the perceptions, roles and relations between women and men. Thus, power should be defined according to relationships, connections and the manner in which it manifests itself rather than according the attributes of the actors involved (Foucault, 1975: 31-32; Foucault, 1976: 112-113; Finas, 1977: 4-5). Power as a mode of action includes one’s use of economic, social, and cultural strategies to mobilize the available resources in society in order to gain an advantage over another. For example, Ilcan, in her study of the work and struggles of women in rural Turkey, argues that tradition and moral discourses are instruments and effects of power. She argues that moral judgments that “one ought to do this or that”, are beliefs interpreted as choice or duty, and direct the actions of people by restricting them to spheres of conformity and responsibility (Ilcan, 1996). Considering that moral discourses are not strictly rule-bound, Ilcan emphasizes that people can resist and adjust to them through the play of power relations. In the power game, individuals can be both “subject” and “agent” by determining which moral discourses can be enhanced or invented.

Reviewing these studies provides a conceptual tool for investigating changing gender roles in the context of tourism. Existing gender constructions may be either reconfirmed or challenged to initiate change. Changes (if they are possible) are influenced by economic, social and cultural factors, and if successful, change is a process of contestation and negotiation of power between individuals. One may “do gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) in ways that support or challenge existing norms and practices in a particular situation. In this sense, gender is can be performed, renegotiated and undone as the situation permits. In the case of Hmong women, Duong Bich Hanh’s notable study of Hmong girls in Sa Pa, Vietnam (2006) finds that gender roles and relations are changing in the Hmong community. Hmong girls can now choose, and are encouraged by their families, to go to town to engage in tourism-related activities. Gender patterns that traditionally existed in Hmong villages are changing, and men do household work while their wives work in town and bring money back for their families. However, the subjects of Duong Bich Hanh’s study are unmarried girls, so
their independence is more unfettered because they are not constrained by the responsibilities of being wives and mothers. In addition, this study does not mention changes in gender norms due to conversions to Christianity in the Hmong community. Ngo Thi Thanh Tam (2011) argues that Hmong girls now have to act within new constraints on desires and behaviors imposed by Christian gender and sexual norms. Therefore, the freedom and fun of Hmong girls in Duong Bich Hanh’s study in fact is “a kind of asceticism that young Hmong people are imposing on themselves” (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011: 318).

Clearly, while engaging with tourism activities can give Hmong some degree of freedom and new social identities, they are still living under the constraints of different gender ideologies – including international, Vietnamese state, ethnic Viet, Hmong patriarchal kinship and Christian ideologies – each of which adds a layer of expectations regarding gender roles and identities on women and men. Given these realities, this research explores how gender is (un)done when Hmong women engage in tourism-related activities. Taking assumptions that gender in Hmong society can be performed and undone in various cases, and focusing on cultural strategies with cultural gender norms and morality as discourses of power, I will firstly show how engaging in tourism-related activities creates new gendered tensions and conflicts for Hmong women. Secondly, I will look at how Hmong women negotiate with other actors (husbands, fathers) who hold different ideologies to redefine, reconstruct or reconfirm gender within the family.

Conclusion

Research on ethnicity and gender has revealed the complexity and dynamics of these two phenomena as they play out in tourism employment (Cone 1995). The experiences of Hmong women cannot be fully understood in isolation, but must be placed in the context of Hmong gender traditions and norms, and the Hmong identity as an ethnic minority within Vietnam. Focusing on the “experience” of Hmong women in work, rather than on the nature of their work in tourism, I analyze the women’s experiences. I aim to explore how the interplay between gender and ethnicity shapes Hmong women’s tourism-related activities, and how gender is being performed, renegotiated, challenged and/or undone through the involvement of Hmong women in tourism-related activities.
Chapter 2
The Hmong in Vietnam

Demography and Geography

The history of the Hmong people dates back 4,600 years and began in Central China (Ya Po Cha, 2010). The relationship between the Hmong and the Chinese was a violent one. Throughout thousands of years of Chinese oppression, the Hmong mounted many rebellions, but because the Chinese consistently outnumbered the Hmong and possessed better weapons, none of the Hmongs’ rebellions were successful. In order to seek “a better life,” the Hmong emigrated from China to the neighboring southern countries of Lao, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma (Lee Lo, 2007, Ya Po Cha, 2010). Although no exact records exist of the Hmong arrival in Vietnam, it is believed they settled in Vietnam nearly 300 years ago. Researchers suggest that the Hmong likely arrived in waves, settling in Lao Cai and neighbouring provinces starting around the mid-1800s (Culas and Michaud, 2004; Culas, 2010). Supporting this hypothesis, Vietnamese scholars state that the Hmong came to Vietnam in different periods with the largest influx in the late 19th century (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2000). The first Hmong peoples migrated to Vietnam and settled in Meo Vac and Dong Van, in Ha Giang province. The second wave of Hmong migration came to Dong Van, Si Ma Cai (the present Lao Cai province) and into areas of present-day Son La and Lai Chau. The third and largest wave brought Hmong to Ha Giang, Lao Cai and the north-western province of Lai Chau and Son La (Cu Hoa Van and Hoang Nam, 1994).

Prior to the official classification of Vietnam’s ethnic composition, the Vietnamese Hmong were called “Meo”, to reflect their relation to the “Miao”, an ethnic group in China. They were officially recognized as Hmong in 1979 after the lengthy and highly debated process of identifying and classifying “ethnic minorities” (Kampe 1997; Khong Dien 2002; Michaud 2006). The term “Meo” still exists in Vietnamese, but with negative feline connotations which reflect disrespect for the Hmong.

By 2009, the national population census revealed a total of 1,068,169 Hmong in Vietnam dispersed in the following provinces: Ha Giang (231,464), Son La (157,253), Lao Cai (146,147), Lai Chau (83,324), Yen Bai (81,921), Cao Bang (51,373), Tuyen Quang (16,974) (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2010). A small Hmong population also resides in the northwest-central border areas of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An. Since 1975, some Hmong have
migrated to Tay Nguyen (in the Central Highlands), through both spontaneous movement and the state-controlled colonization of these highlands. Lam Dong and Dac Lac are the two provinces with the largest number of Hmong. Up to 2004, an estimated 20,000 Hmong people immigrated spontaneously to Tay Nguyen (Nguyen Thanh Xuan, 2004).

The Hmong are classified into six sub-cultural divisions: Hmong Trang (White Hmong), Hmong Hoa (Flowery Hmong), Hmong Den (Black Hmong), Hmong Xanh (Green Hmong), and Hmong Na Mieu (Decision No 121-TCTK/PPCD dated 2-3-1979, Vietnam General Statistics). However, there is actually no consensus among researchers on this classification. Some researchers believe that there are five Hmong sub-groups in Vietnam, since the Na Mieu are fact Hmu or Mu people – not a subset of the Hmong (Nguyen Van Thang, 2001; Tapp, 2005). Others think that the Hmong have only four groups: White Hmong, Flowery Hmong, Green Hmong and Black Hmong (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2000; Vuong Duy Quang, 2005). In fact, the Vietnamese ethnic classification, which is styled on the Chinese model, is criticized as problematic because it obscures the self-identification of ethnic groups (Nguyen Van Thang, 2001). If the classification respected ethnic self-definitions, there would actually be more than ten Hmong sub-groups (Vuong Duy Quang, 2005).

In Sa Pa, the Hmong number about 27,322, comprising 51.65% of the total population of Sa Pa district. They live in communities with other minority groups such as the Dao and Tay. They are officially labelled as Black Hmong because they wear black clothing but in fact the majority consider themselves Mong Hoa (Flowery Hmong).

**Political Economy and Culture of Hmong in Sa Pa**

**Livelihoods**

Despite the fact that the Hmong are referred to as ‘semi-nomadic’ by state authorities (Culas and Michaud, 2004) they actually have a long tradition of sedentary agriculture dating back to their migration from Yunnan. Wherever natural conditions have allowed them to do so, the Hmong have generally favored rice paddies over swidden cultivation (Donovan et al., 1997; Corlin, 2004). In the areas of Sa Pa district where this research is centered, the majority of Hmong household economies are based upon semi-subsistence livelihoods oriented mainly

---


5 Swidden cultivation (often pejoratively referred to as ‘slash and burn’ cultivation)
around rice and maize cultivation. The Hmong harvest one rice crop and one maize crop annually in Sa Pa. Rice is planted in terraced fields by April, and harvested between September and October. Maize is usually grown in February on the mountainsides and in gardens near homes. It is used mainly as fodder. The annual general agricultural schedule of Hmong is illustrated in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>New Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>Post-New Year rest period. Prepare fields for corn planting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Prepare corn fields. Plant corn at month’s end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>Prepare rice fields. Rice transplanting. Indigo and hemp plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Transplanting rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>Finish rice transplanting. No agricultural activities in the fields, except some households start cardamom harvesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul</td>
<td>Cardamom harvesting. Harvest hemp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug</td>
<td>Cardamom, corn and indigo harvesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept</td>
<td>Harvesting and drying cardamom. Beginning to harvest rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct</td>
<td>Rice harvesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>Rice harvesting finishes. Making clothes for New Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>Making clothes for New Year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure1**: Annual general agricultural schedule of Hmong
Additionally, the Hmong in Sa Pa grow food crops such as beans, cucumbers and fruit trees, and collect wood, fodder, herbal medicines and honey from the nearby forest (Corlin, 2004). Livestock, generally consisting of buffaloes, chickens, pigs and goats are another important part of the Hmong livelihood. Buffalo are extremely important to Hmong since they are the primary workforce in households and are a symbol of wealth. While they are raised for plowing fields, buffalo may also be sacrificed during special rituals, and in extreme financial emergencies they are traded.

It is important to mention that trading has been a secondary income source for the Hmong in Sa Pa for a long time. From the 1980s onwards, opium trading was a profitable business for the Hmong in Sa Pa. They grew opium to sell to the British at first, and then the Chinese, French and Americans during colonial periods although this trade was not practiced by all Hmong in Sa Pa. For example, the Hmong in Lao Chai did not make a fortune from opium production (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006). This production was banned by the state in the early 1990s.

New commercial opportunities opened to Hmong people in 1992 when the government announced a policy of buying wood for export. The interest of Vietnamese in forest timbers is high. This applies particularly to *per mu*, a sought-after, rot-resistant wood which has been used in China and Vietnam for centuries (Turner, 2011: 6). The Hmong people entered the forest and cut down pine and *per mu* trees to sell. However, this activity lasted only for three years, with a new state regulation banning logging in 1995. In 1999 trade opportunities opened for non-timber forest products, such as cardamom when the local Vietnam-China border was reopened. It is reported that each household in Sa Pa produces between 60 and 100kg of cardamom on average each year. Despite price fluctuations, this has proven a profitable product for the Hmong.

Recently, the booming tourist industry in Sa Pa has provided employment opportunities for many ethnic minorities, particularly ethnic women. They work as trekking guides, handicraft sellers and retailers. But what exactly are the opportunities for the Hmong, and how do Hmong women engage with these sources of income? These issues will be discussed thoroughly following chapters.

*Gender in Hmong society*

Khu, an 80-year-old Hmong woman with a haunting voice reminiscing on her experiences growing up:
I was the second child in a family of six. I had two brothers and three sisters. I was the oldest daughter in my family. My sisters and I started working at age six. We started with cooking; the older sisters looked after the smaller ones. We also collected rice during harvest. We learned to embroider and make clothes. I did not go to school and had to work all day while my two brothers played. My mother always told me that as a girl I had to know how to do everything and had to help my parents. Because my parents anticipated that my brothers would take care of them when they got old, they did not ask them to help out as children. When I was 12 years old, I remember my parents telling me that within a week’s time, I would get married. It was neither a “marriage by courting” nor “marriage by capture”. I did not even know anything about my future husband. Reportedly, he was the son of my parents’ friend in Ban Ho village, about 20 kilometers away. It was my parents’ affair and it was in my interests not to oppose them. My married life was incessant work from early morning to midnight. My children were born one after another – every year and a half. I kept having children until there was a son. In total, eight children were born. At the beginning of my married life, my husband did not help with anything. He was only a teenage boy and just played. After the fifth child was born, he occasionally helped me when it suited him; otherwise he went out with friends.

Khu’s daughter-in-law sitting next to us added, “My life is the same, not much different. As daughter-in-law, I work all day without help from my husband. Nobody in the family understands this situation”. It seems that Khu takes her daughter-in-law’s complaints as a personal criticism, as though her daughter is criticizing her for not asking her son to help his wife. Khu said in a low voice “What can we do now? Just ask men”. Two women then keep silent without another word.

Khu’s story and her daughter-in-law’s reactions show that the life of Hmong women is full of never-ending work and hardship that passes from generation to generation. Indeed, their lives are never easy. It is rare to see a Hmong woman at rest. Hmong girls learn household work and embroidery at an early age, while boys are free to play. In a study about the Hmong in Thailand, Symonds (2004: 10) writes “women subscribe to the systems of asymmetrical power by aligning themselves with the patrilineal, patrilocal, extended family in

---

6 There are three kinds of marriage in Hmong society. One is called marriage by courting, in which a young man and woman love each other and agree to live in the same house through the bond of marriage. Another is arranged marriage where parents of very young children agree to betroth them to be married when they grow up. The last one is marriage by capture – a girl is forced into marrying the man who has captured her (also see Ngo Thi Thanh Tam 2011).
which they live”. The situation for Sa Pa women is similar to that of the Thai Hmong.

Before doing this research about the Hmong, my understanding about Hmong women’s lives was based on Vietnamese movies and literature, notably the short story “Vo chong A Phu” (The A Phus of To Hoai) (see Duong Bich Hanh, 2006) and the movie Chuyen cua Pao (Pao’s Story) which shows how hard Hmong women’s lives are. I was very impressed by Pao’s Story. It is a story about three Hmong women in a family in which Kia, the adoptive mother of Pao, could not have children. She suffered the cold rejection of her husband and accepted the presence of another woman in the house. This woman was Sim, the second wife of Kia’s husband and the mother of Pao. Sim gave birth to two children (Pao and her little brother), but she did not receive any love or support from her husband. He was always drunk and blamed the women in the family for the family’s poverty. On a windy and rainy night, she fled the house and left her two small children to her husband and Kia. Kia was reluctant to take care of Pao and her little brother who were not her children, and a husband who never cared about her. Her sufferings overwhelmed her life. The film ends with an image of Pao as a teenage girl. Witnessing the hard lives of two women that she called mother, Pao understood well that if she did not want to live a life like the lives of her mothers, she had to decide who she wanted to marry. The movie was adapted from the novel Tieng dan moi sau bo rao da which is based on a real story. The movie mirrors the real lives of Hmong women in earlier generations who were constrained by gender norms and customs. It also reveals changes in the desires and hopes of younger generations today in Sa Pa. The life of Hmong women in Sa Pa today is still difficult, and it is full of hard work and responsibilities, however young girls are now enjoying more freedom in terms of work and love (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006).

Khu’s real-life story and the movie Pao’s Story also reveal the male dominance over women, as even a mother keeps silent about the poor behavior of her son. The ideology of male supremacy in Hmong society, as some researchers have shown, gives men certain forms of control over women and women assume a subordinate position and have to display respectful behavior toward men according to the culture’s norms (Donnelly, 1994; Tomforde, 2006). In this regard, Khu’s story is typical. In fact, Hmong families in Sa Pa remain patriarchal. Men are the leaders and decision-makers in families. As I will show in the following chapters, Hmong men play an important role in influencing women’s decisions to work, and in some cases they control what Hmong women do. In addition, Hmong men have the right to do what they like and to refuse to do what they do not like. As a result, many
Hmong girls and women complain about how hard their lives are and criticize “the irrational privileges”, “the legitimate laziness” of Hmong men (see Chapter 7).

**Political, social and cultural relations between the Kinh and Hmong in Vietnam**

*Pre-colonial and colonial times*

From their first settlement in Sa Pa (Lao Cai), the Hmong in Vietnam have been considered as “primitives in the mountains” and have earned very little respect. However, during pre-colonial and colonial times, minorities in upper northern Vietnam, including the Hmong in Sa Pa, were left alone without much interference from lowland powers (Michaud and Turner, 2000: 88; Salemink, 1995). Before the French colonial rule (1802–1882), the northern Vietnam uplands were under the direct administration of the Vietnamese Ministry of the Armies (Binh Bo). Under the Emperor Gia Long’s administration (1802–1841), the northern region was divided into *chau* and *huyen*. *Chau* were the peripheral and mountainous districts inhabited by ethnic groups, while *huyen* were occupied mostly by Kinh. Classified as remote, *chau* districts were not under direct Vietnamese administrative control. Among minorities in the northern parts of the Red River Delta, only the Tai (The White and Black Tai) were closely connected to the Hue administration while other minorities such as the Tho⁷, the Nung and the Hmong “all lived under their own local chiefs” (Woodside, 1971: 244) and hence minorities had no political representation and were generally left alone. Leaders of these minority groups would occasionally pay tribute to Hue (Dang Phuong Nghi, 1969; Michaud, 2000, 2004; Turner, 2010).

The political organization of the Hmong was based on kinship and to a lesser extent, neighborhood. The most numerous and powerful direct neighbors of the Hmong and Dao in the northern region were Tai peasants living in the upper Red River Delta valley.⁸ The Tai, who had been present in the region since the late thirteenth century, organized themselves into a political unit called *Sip Song Chau Tai*, meaning the federation of twelve Tai states. The Hmong people were involved in commercial trading with the Tai and other traders on the China–Vietnam border (Corlin, 2004; Turner and Michaud, 2008). The Hmong and Dao provided Tai merchants with forest products and domestic animals such as pigs and chickens.

---

⁷ This group was officially recognized with the name Tay in 1978
⁸ In the first half of the 1800s, northern Vietnam was schematically divided into three zones: the highest levels on the mountain peaks above 1,000 metres, inhabited by Hmong and Yao. The second zone included foothills and high river valleys – an intermediate zone inhabited by groups from the Tai linguistic family, linked together in a weakly centralized feudal system. The third zone, below 500 metres was the Red River delta inhabited by the Kinh who defined and formed the imperial nation (Michaud 2000).
and the latter brought salt and matches to sell to villagers. The Hmong in northern Vietnam also traded with Cantonese and Yunnanese merchants, though this local trade was still of minor importance compared with the long haul trade in merchandise between Yunnan and the Red River Delta. For centuries, the Red River and other rivers in Massif, like the Black and Clear Rivers, have been used as commercial and military routes between Yunnan, Guangzi and the Red River Delta. In the 19th century, Cantonese and Yunnanese traders occupied the location of today’s city of Lao Cai and they bartered with Sa Pa inhabitants for various forest and animal products. The most sought-after goods included *per mu* wood, and *sa moc* (a tropical conifer used for medicinal and religious purposes) (Michaud and Turner, 2000). The traders also entered Sa Pa through the mountains, carefully avoiding Lao Cai and therefore, taxation (Michaud and Turner, 2000). The commercial exchanges between the Hmong and Chinese traders were also based on raw opium, and the opium trade became a major economic activity in the region during the French colonial period.

*French colonialism*

The Hmong, along with other ethnic groups in the northern highlands, came under French colonial rule in 1883. During the French occupation, Vietnam was divided into three territories: Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. The Hue treaty signed between the Hue Government and the French agreed that Tonkin and Annam were to be French protectorates. At the end of the 19th century, the French established a dichotomy to separate the highlands and lowlands, and to limit contact between people whose degrees of “civilization” (a term subsequently replaced by “development” and “modernization”) differed so markedly. The aim was to administer the “less civilized” groups and to prevent any contact between them and the anti-French Kinh bandits. A subsequent aim was to facilitate and maintain the lucrative opium trade (Michaud 2000). Opium helped the Hmong connect to various groups and secure their position in the economic, political and cultural web in the region. Between 1898 and 1992, the opium industry’s contribution to the total gross income of French Indochina fluctuated between 25 percent and 42 percent (Michaud, 2000: 345). Because of its high value, raw opium became the biggest source of income for the Hmong. However, it is important to mention that the Hmong did not abandon their traditional economic activities, such as rice planting. They only worked on opium as a secondary source of income after attending to their traditional agricultural activities (Michaud and Turner, 2000).

The French policy for the mountainous regions of French Indochina was guided by ad hoc considerations (Salemink, 1995: 262) and aimed at maintaining metropolitan economic
interests and keeping the ethnic minorities under loose but steady control. As Christie (1996: 90) describes:

France’s policy towards the Montagnards depended on their policy towards Vietnam. If France decided to negotiate with the forces of Vietnamese nationalism, then its special relationship with the Montagnards would necessarily be sacrificed. If, on the other hand, the French strategy was based on a denial of Vietnamese national unity and an attempt to encourage the political fragmentation of Vietnam, then the special relationship with the Montagnards would become a key part of that strategy.

According to Michaud (2000), the French at this time did not have any definite policy regarding the “Montagnards” of Tonkin in particular, apart from perhaps creating favorable conditions for growing poppies and the opium trade (Michaud, 2000: 346). The French proclaimed the independence of the Hmong from the neighboring Chinese and Tai and appointed local leaders from the Hmong community (Michaud 2004). During this time, when any conflicts or disputes arose between highlanders and lowlanders, the French would act as judges. However, in disputes between highlanders, the French left judgment to local officers, leaders or elders (Michaud 2004).

The Indochina War

The French colonial period in Sa Pa was terminated altogether when the war with the Viet Minh\(^9\) broke out in 1946. This First Indochina War brought many changes for the ethnic minority populations in Sa Pa. When the war began, both the Viet Minh and the French sought the support of ethnic groups, with the Viet Minh developing a “coherent effort to appease ethnic minorities for their support” (Salemink, 1995: 261). Minority representatives were integrated in order to build up anti-colonial resistance and communist party structures (Friederichsen, 2012). However, the support of ethnic minorities for the Viet Minh was varied. The French succeeded in allying with White Tai, and to some extent the Black Tai in the Sip Song Chau Tai by promulgating an accord to create an independent Tai Federation within the French Union – a federation grouping the provinces of Lai Chau, Phong Tho and Son La under the presidency of the Tai leader Deo Van Long. The Viet Minh, on the other hand, had the unlimited support of the Tho.

Some of the Hmong opted to join the Viet Minh, while others tended to side with the French. The Hmong on the east side of the Red River fought tenaciously against the Viet

\(^9\) In English: League for the Independence of Vietnam. It was a national independence coalition formed in 1941 to seek independence for Vietnam from the French.
Minh because of their traditional antagonism toward the Tho (McAlister, 1967: 819). Numerous Hmong in Ha Giang and Pa Kha (today called Bac Ha), with the help of Hmong in Than Uyen, opposed the Viet Minh and supported the French in guerilla operations against Viet Minh bases in the upper Tonkin (Friederichsen, 2012). Between December 1952 and July 1954, twenty-five such military operations against the Viet Minh were conducted, “most involving montagnards guerillas, including many Hmong” (Michaud, 2000: 351). In contrast, the Hmong on the west side of the Red River turned to the Viet Minh for support because of their animosity toward the Tai, who had been taking advantage of the French support to exploit and oppress the Hmong, especially in opium trading. The success of the Viet Minh in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 would not have been possible without the contribution of the minorities, including the Hmong. However, their important contribution is not acknowledged in official Vietnamese historiography (Michaud, 2000).

Those Hmong who sided with the French against the Viet Minh are called Phi or Tho Phi. Historically, Phi were active in the north-west of Vietnam before 1945, however during that time they were seen as bandits rather than as political rivals to the state (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011). When the Viet Minh were founded in 1941, the term Phi or Tho phi was used by Viet Minh during this period to refer to the counter-revolutionary movement (see Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011). In another words, it was a movement against the Viet Minh. The French invested heavily in the Hmong, giving them salt, weapons and silver. “Hmong-ness” was encouraged and differences between Hmong and Vietnamese interests were emphasized in slogans like “Against the dominance of the communist Viet Minh and of the Vietnamese”, “Autonomy for minority groups” and “Hmong country for Hmong leaders” (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006: 79). Due to a vast number of Hmong taking part in the Phi movement against the Viet Minh, the Hmong more than other groups, are seen even up to the present to be connected the Phi phenomenon, while in fact,

many Hmong who fought against the Communists did not do so not for ideological reasons but because the Communists had attempted to restrict their autonomy and deprive them of the benefits of opium growing. Due to local animosities, many Hmong people in Vietnam allied themselves with the warring parties on non-ideological grounds (McAlister, 1967: 863).

The labelling by the Viet Minh of the Hmong as Phi, together with the reluctance to acknowledge the contribution of the Hmong in the Dien Bien Phu victory, have shaped the (mis)understanding and images that the Hmong and the Vietnamese government have of each
The North Vietnamese socialism and reunification 1956–1986

Once the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) was fully established in 1954 after the Geneva Conference, it was necessary to restore, if only temporarily, relations with minority groups in the north. In the Viet Minh’s celebrations of their return to Hanoi in January 1955, Ho Chi Minh announced the decision to grant autonomy to the north-western zone and possibly to other areas. Two autonomous zones were declared in the north to honour the promises of the communist party to minorities who had joined the fight against the French. The Thai-Meo (later called Tay-Bac) Autonomous Zone was founded on the first anniversary of the Dien Bien Phu battle and included 190,000 Thai and 60,000 Hmong. The Viet-Bac Autonomous Zone, organized in 1956, was home to 800,000 people of different ethnic groups, mostly Tay and Nung (McElwee, 2004).

Although they were defined as “autonomous zones” the areas in question remained controlled and managed by the government until the order to revoke autonomy in 1981 under economic pretexts (McElwee, 2004: 192-195). The zones were described as “an echelon of local administration placed under the direct control of the central government” (Eastern World, 1955). As Pelly (1998) observes, “the real meaning of autonomy was considerably less than suggested: what it meant in practice, in fact, was that territories of the Thai and other groups could be more completely absorbed into a national framework dominated by Hanoi”. In reality, this policy was no different to the “divide and rule” policy of the colonial times (Salemink, 2003).

The concepts of “socialist thinking” and the “new socialist man” were promoted by the socialist state and were used to incorporate ethnic minorities into socialism. At the same time, the state promoted the elimination of harmful “pre-capitalist” and “feudal” thoughts among minorities. New economic and political measures were enforced to help “uncivilized” highlanders reach the superior levels of lowland civilization as quickly as possible. Ideologically, this was thought of as

helping the uplands catch up with the lowlands, the border regions with the central regions, the minority peoples with the Kinh (majority) people, and urging all the nationalities to further develop their revolutionary spirit and great capacities and to unite closely so as to do advance towards socialism (Viet Chung, 1968: 18).

Socialist political aspirations worked toward an egalitarian society that respected
cultural minorities. Inspired by the words of Lenin, Ho Chi Minh associated evolutionary logic with equality. He said that the minorities were “little brothers” in a large Vietnamese family, and that the role of the “big brother” Kinh (Viet) was simultaneously to observe and assist the development of the minorities (Salemink, 2000: 130; Salemink, 2008; see also Koh, 2004). Inspired by Ho Chi Minh, Nong Quoc Chan created the aesthetic metaphor of the flower garden in 1977. In this metaphor, each minority represents a particular color and fragrance that is essential to the overall diversity for a whole nation. This metaphor, however, implies that the Vietnamese Communist Party and the state have authority over minorities, and Salemink (2003: 276) points out that:

Mr. Chan might not have realized to what ends his metaphor might be used. For, though beautiful flowers are a gift of nature, beautiful gardens seldom grow by themselves. In gardens, flowers are sown or planted, cultivated, weeded, tended, arranged and presented in a careful manner; some people – among them many British, Japanese and Vietnamese – would even say that gardening is not a skill, but an art. Thus, the idea of Vietnamese culture as a garden of flowers presupposes a subject cultivating, arranging and presenting the flowers in the desired fashion. And this is exactly what happens in Vietnam, where the Party and State assume the authority to decide which aspects of minority cultures are valuable enough to retain, which aspects should disappear, and which aspects should be transformed.

However, this image of the flower garden was still used by Vietnamese anthropologists (like the Chinese ethnologists, themselves under the influence of the Soviet tradition, see especially on this topic: Evans, 2005; Mueggler, 2001 and Tapp 2001) to describe the differences between groups, and subsequently classify them according to their degrees of development and proximity to the Kinh. As a result, the first exhaustive list of minorities in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) was proposed in 1959 with 64 ethnic groups. A second one followed in 1973 with 59 and in 1979 the official list of 54 ethnic groups was finally established. This classification thus conflates the cultures of groups into two categories, the majority and the minority. As Salemink points out: “[T]he notion of ethnic minorities as ‘contemporary predecessors’ doubling as ‘contemporary ancestors’ plays an increasingly important role in the way that the nation is imagined, and hence in the way that minorities are imagined” (2008: 275).

At the time of reunification, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam placed a priority on fostering the nation. To this end, they promoted a strategy to integrate minorities. According
to this policy, in order to make the progressive leap into socialism, the “backward” minorities needed to make dramatic changes, such as abolishing their primitive traditional customs. The strategy came to be called “selective cultural preservation”. As result, folklore, dances, music, handicrafts were renovated for presentation to the masses. On the other hand, “primitive”, “counter-productive” and “superstitious” practices such as funeral rites, animal sacrifices, and shamanism were slated for eradication. Under this strategy, Directive 214 of the Communist Party Central Committee Secretariat requires most ethnic groups to get permission to perform any large harvest or funeral rites. This policy was to ensure that “backward” practices were regulated. The traditional political system, based on kinship, traditional village headmen (gia lang) was also replaced by the party political system due to security concerns (McElwee, 2004). This policy of “selective preservation” is criticized as a state-imposed reification of the minorities, and because it decontextualizes culture (Salemink, 2003).

For the minorities, the most dramatic policies in the post-unification period were Fixed Cultivation and Settlement (Dinh Canh Dinh Cu) and Collectivization of Land. The Fixed Cultivation and Settlement program was promulgated in 1968 for nomadic people. Nomadic people who practiced swidden agriculture were seen as backward and primitive (lac hau) people who usually led “an uneducated, poor, and miserable life” (Cu Hoa Van, 1992: 2). Therefore, the sedentarization was needed to make nomadic highland dwellers stable and productive. However, the objective of this program, as argued by Scott, was

less to make [highland dwellers] productive than to ensure that their economic activity was legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable, or failing that, to replace it with forms of production that were. Everywhere they could, states have obliged mobile, swidden cultivators to settle in permanent villages (Scott, 2009: 5).

The program has been criticized as a way of state intervention and control of ethnic minorities that is consequently harmful. Sedentarization is “the precondition of Kinh migration” and consequently leads to land scarcity and degradation (Salemink, 2003: 287). In addition, the government’s encouragement of migration has had a number of unanticipated consequences. Conflicts between incoming lowland Vietnamese and highland minorities have flared in many areas. The land taken by new Kinh settlers has caused great bitterness among many minorities and land scarcity has caused great hardship for minorities (McElwee, 2004). This also happened in Sa Pa in the early 1960s when Vietnamese settlers arrived and exploited land for subsistence (Michaud and Turner, 2000).

Between 1960 and the early 1990s, the economies of the minorities were tentatively
reorganized under the national agricultural collectivization scheme with the introduction of the cooperative system. Under this policy, all land was placed in state ownership and management and only a small residential land plot and family garden could be privately operated. Following collectivization of land in the province of Lao Cai, cooperatives were widely supported by the movement of Kinh from the South Red River lowlands to the north. The minorities found themselves selling their labor to the newly arrived Kinh (Michaud, 2008).

Agents of the Vietnamese state have blamed the failure of the state development programs and policies on the recalcitrance of the ethnic minorities, who continue to practise their “backward” and “ignorant” ways in adherence to “outmoded” traditions. For example, Vietnamese scholars argue that Hmong culture is to be blamed for the limited achievements of the Dinh Canh Dinh Cu program (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2000; Dang Nghiem Van, 1998; Tran Huu Son, 1996). These scholars claim that Hmong stubbornness and their traditional culture prevent them from reaping the benefits of development projects, on which the government has spent a huge amounts of national resources. Historically, and even in the present, minorities in general and the Hmong in particular have been blamed for their poverty, and for the failure of state development programs (see Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011). These biased perceptions, together with socioeconomic policies which do not pay enough attention to the needs and conditions of ethnic minorities (Le Trong Cuc and Rambo, 2001), have caused conflict between minorities and the state and they have intensified the strained relationships between the Viet and minorities, including the Hmong. Blaming the Hmong culture for the failure of state development policies and programs is not rational. Hmong people in Thailand have succeeded in charting their own livelihoods in the absence of excessive state interference and government control, which resulted in material improvements and cultural autonomy (Tapp, 2001). In another case, Tapp and Lee (2004) find that most Hmong families living in Australia are now “comfortably off materially”, and socially integrated in Australia society (Tapp and Lee, 2004: 23). Another study finds that Hmong in French Guiana have happy lives in what they call their new paradise (Pal Ujvarosi, 2012).

Clearly, the Vietnamese policies and programs toward minorities in the postcolonial period are a product of socioeconomic tensions and political power struggles, as Scott noted regarding the wider Southeast Asian Massif:

The postcolonial lowland states have sought fully to exercise authority in the hills: by military occupation, by campaigns against shifting cultivation, by forced settlements,
by promoting the migration of lowlanders to the hills, by efforts at religious conversion, by space-conquering roads, bridges, and telephone lines, and by development schemes that project government administration and lowland styles into the hills (Scott, 2009:20).

The Doi moi from 1986 to the present

_Doi moi_, the economic reforms decreed in 1986, ended 30 years of collectivization in the north of the country. _Doi moi_, according Salemink (2007) was a painful but necessary recipe for Vietnam to survive and grow economically. Despite critics of the state policies toward minorities and the appeal for more sensitive minority policies, most development programs during this period were formulated by the centralized national state, and called for “industrialization” and “modernization” of all economic sectors. The transformation to _Doi moi_ was accompanied by two other important economic changes that directly impacted the highlanders, including the Hmong in Sa Pa. Firstly, the state introduced a ban on logging for commercial and agricultural purposes and on growing poppies and using opium. As explained earlier, opium was a major source of income for Hmong people. After the banning, various agricultural products such as maize, jam, taros, fruits and herbal medicine were substituted as economic alternatives to opium production. However, very few Hmong in Sa Pa benefited from such programs. Instead, the Hmong and the Dao in Sa Pa started to grow cardamom for trading. While not promoted by the government, cardamom has been a popular and lucrative substitute crop. Cardamon cultivation has helped highlanders in Sa Pa, especially those with limited land, or with fields located in areas with less productive microclimatic conditions, to cover seasonal food deficits. However, since 2002 the new regulations make cardamom livelihood choices even more complicated for cultivators living in Sa Pa district because about three-quarters of the district is located within the protected forest of Hoang Lien National Park (Le Van Lanh, 2004). The Hmong are being seen as the main cause of deforestation in Hoang Lien Son due to their cardamom planting.  

The second transformation which impacted the highlanders in Sa Pa was the 1993 Land Law. Under this law, agricultural and forest land is allocated to households and individuals for management and use. The allocation of land to households has been carried out on the basis of land quotas and the status quo; that is, each household in the northern

---

10 Recently, many articles have been written about the deforestation caused by cardamom planting
mountainous areas was allotted not more than three hectares of agricultural land and 30 hectares of forest. Due to population pressure and a lack of land in the northern mountainous areas, very few households were allotted that amount. In addition, the privatization and commoditization that came as a result of the Land Law has meant that land prices are prone to market forces and this has placed the Hmong and many other minorities at a disadvantage.

The legal acquisition of land is generally controlled by the Kinh who have access to the information necessary to assess the market value of land; consequently the Kinh often buy land and resell it at such high prices that the Hmong cannot afford to purchase it (McElwee, 2004, De Koninck, 1997). In a series of papers on the effects of land allocation in Vietnam, Corlin shows that the recent allocation of agricultural and forest land has proven problematic for the Hmong. It has led to conflict over land and poor Hmong households have not received their share because local institutional arrangements are not taken into account (Corlin 1998, 1999). Mellac suggests in this regard that:

Nowadays, the state is more likely to impose a liberal and market-oriented standardization, which, following the capitalist model, uses a geometrical perception of the land, and which sees individual tenure of land have fragmented the only feasible means clustering and category of managing and sharing resources (Mellac, 2010: 55).

Other development policies such as hunger eradication and poverty reduction programs have recently been implemented to help “develop” ethnic minorities. These programs are nationally targeted; however some of their components are designed particularly for ethnic minorities. These components include education polices (boarding schools, scholarship for ethnic minorities), support for extremely difficult ethnic minority household situations, resettlement to new economic zones, and preferential, low interest credits. Other programs and policies are designed to target a wide range of socio-economic issues related to ethnic minority development, including: the Program for the Socio-Economic Development of Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic, Mountainous, Boundary and Remote Areas (called Program 135), the forest land allocation and reforestation program, education policies, health policies, price and transportation subsidies, and communication and information policies. By 1998 the Vietnam Government had 21 different national policies and projects focused on socio-economic development and poverty reduction in ethnic minority and upland areas (Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong and Baulch, 2007: 1).

11 The criteria to define an extremely poor ethnic minority households within this Program are: i) Living in the mountainous, remote and isolated areas; ii) The average of per capita income is under VND 80,000 per month; iii) Living largely depends on gathering, horticulture and they lack land for production; iv) Total asset value per capita is less than VND 1 million (excluding the value of land).
However, these policies and programs have been evaluated as inappropriate because they fail to pay attention to cultural and social factors (Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong and Baulch, 2007). Therefore, these policies and programs provide little assistance to ethnic minorities. As Jorgensen, in his study of poverty reduction in the Hmong community in Ha Giang found, recent development policies and programs related to roads, markets and land allocation create better economic opportunities only for better-off households. For households that are already poor and vulnerable, the situation becomes worse. Poverty is deepening and has become individualized because these policies and programs erase social arrangements traditionally designed to provide social security (Jorgensen, 1999). Others criticize these policies and programs because, in fact, they are aimed to further the Vietnamese state’s security objectives in mountainous and border areas (Phan Si Man, 2005), rather than help ethnic minorities.

A recent problem for ethnic minorities, especially for Hmong, has been the problem of religion. Many minorities have converted to Christianity, a religion the state views as a “foreign influence” and a threat to security (Human Rights Watch, 2002; McElwee, 2004; Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011). Viewing conversion as a troublesome phenomenon, the government has designed and implemented numerous education and political propaganda policies in communities where conversion occurs. Yet, these policies do not pay enough attention to the religious practices of the Hmong (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2006). In addition, government policies aiming to control and regulate the Hmong in relation to conversion have limited their access to economic opportunities, like the tourism policy that I analyze in Chapter 4.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provides a historical overview of relative positions and relationships between the Vietnamese state and its ethnic minorities in general and the Hmong in particular. Not only are minorities in Vietnam classified as “backward” and “undeveloped,” they have to cope with economic and political structures imposed by force by the Vietnamese state. Many policies and programs have been introduced to help them integrate and participate in the “civilized” nation-state. However, these policies and programs have failed because they seldom mesh with the needs of ethnic minorities. For example there is a need for the appropriate design of villages and houses suited to the ways of life of the ethnic minorities in the new resettlement villages, and the behavior of minorities is not taken into account in health care programs. State intervention aims to control ethnic minorities. This relationship between the state and ethnic minorities is further reflected in the tourism development policies at different levels that I will explore in Chapter 4.
Chapter 3
Entering the field

Early one cool September morning, my train jostled to a stop and I was awoken by the shouted invitations of bus drivers as they came carriage by carriage to find passengers to take on the next legs of their journeys. As this was my first field visit to Lao Cai, I needed to stay there for a day to meet with the Director of the Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism to get permission for my research before going to Sa Pa. I bypassed the rush for buses to wait for my friend Thanh, who worked for the Lao Cai Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism, to pick me up. The next day, with permission in hand, I took an early morning bus from Lao Cai to Sa Pa. It was only a twelve-seat minibus, and the driver added small plastic chairs to accommodate the sixteen of us making the journey.

Autumn is not a good time for domestic tourism in Sa Pa. Because the weather is quite cool all over the country, people do not need to go to Sa Pa to escape the heat; in fact, with the fog, autumn in the mountains is quite cold. Also, families are not able to travel then because their children are in school. September till May is international tourism season in Sa Pa. The driver and I were the only Vietnamese people on my bus – the rest were foreigners. During the 40 kilometer journey from Lao Cai to Sa Pa, I watched the landscape and weather change. By the time we got to Bridge 32, the fog was so dense it was impossible to see more than 10 meters in front of us. An hour after we left Lao Cai, the bus got us safely to Sa Pa.

This chapter introduces background information on the two areas in which this study is situated: Sa Pa and Ta Phin. It then provides a description and analysis of my fieldwork experience that describes how I negotiated power relations to establish relationships with my informants, and the various ways in which I was situated in relation to the Hmong people and the local authorities. The challenges I faced, and the successes I achieved through the research process, will be examined in the last section of this chapter.

Fieldwork location

This study was conducted in the town of Sa Pa and Ta Phin commune. The town of Sa Pa is the center of Sa Pa district where mass tourism is quite developed. Ta Phin is a
community-based tourism commune. These two sites were selected as the study areas with the purpose of identifying if there were any differences between them in terms of job opportunities for Hmong women.

*Sa Pa*

The town of Sa Pa, (spelled Chapa by the French) is located about 40 kilometers from Lao Cai province. Sa Pa district consists of Sa Pa town and 17 communes: Hau Thao, Ban Phung, Ta Phin, Nam Sai, Thanh Phu, Sa Pa, Lao Chai, Trung Chai, San Sa Ho, Thanh Kim, Ban Ho, Su Pan, Suoi Thau, Ta Van, Ban Khoang, Ta Giang Phinh and Nam Cang. According to the 2009 census, the population of Sa Pa is 52,899 and comprises nine ethnic groups: the Hmong 51.65%, the Dao 23.04%, the Kinh 17.91%, the Tay 4.74%, the Day 1.36%, the Xa Pho 1.06%, and other groups are in very small numbers and account for only 1.2%.\(^{12}\)

Before the arrival of the French, Sa Pa was a small isolated village populated by the Dao and Hmong. From 1909 to the early 1940s, the French transformed Sa Pa into a famous resort by building small hotels and establishing a tourist bureau. The night train from Hanoi operated frequently in 1923. Tourism to Sa Pa started to pick up and by 1927, Sa Pa welcomed approximately 800 Europeans each summer. The number of tourists to Sa Pa increased annually until the Second World War, and then the Indochina war and the disorder in South China, caused tourism in Sa Pa to come to a standstill (Michaud & Turner 2006: 789). In the summer of 1940, the civil war in China brought a wave of Chinese immigrants from South China to Lao Cai and Sa Pa, which resulted in increased economic and social unrest in the border areas. These Chinese migrants exploited and devastated the local people and environment of Sa Pa. They harassed the local population, looting the area and trafficking women (Nguyen The Anh, 1993). Houses, restaurants and hotels were devastated by Chinese rebels of the Black Flags movement and their rivals, the Yellow Flags.\(^{13}\) These bands arrived from Yunnan or Guangxi in the aftermath of the Taiping rebellion to evade capture, and comprised a diverse assortment of runaway rebels of various allegiances, outlaws, and freebooters (Laffey, 1975; Michaud, 2000) who took control of trading routes throughout the Massif to levy taxes. As a result of their actions, the price of daily necessities increased dramatically (Michaud, 2000; Aline, 2005). The August Revolution, which broke out in 1945,  


---
further devastated Sa Pa. At the beginning of 1949, the Viet Minh took control over Sa Pa and after that there was no tourism for many decades. The Viet Minh’s policies during this period were mainly to seek political support for the Indochina War from ethnic minorities and they had no interest in tourism development in these minority areas (Salemink, 1995; McAlister, 1967) (see Chapter 2 for more on the Viet Minh’s policies toward ethnic minorities).

Tourism returned to Sa Pa after the introduction of the integration policies and the _Doi moi_ in 1986. The state’s decision to open the door to international tourism in 1992 reinstated the glory days of Sa Pa’s tourism trade of the mid-1900s by ushering in a full rebirth of domestic and international tourism. This allowed Sa Pa to become a “contact zone” in Pratt’s phrase (1992: 4) where “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other”, where “peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” (Pratt, 1992: 6).

To meet the increased demands of tourists (see Figure 2), the quality of night trains from Hanoi to Lao Cai has improved in recent years.

![Figure 2: Tourists in Sa Pa, 2006-2011](image)

*Source: Sa Pa Department of Culture and Information*

The tourist trains, which are rented out to tourist companies, are more comfortable
than “normal,” local trains. Every carriage in the tourist trains is divided into spacious, wood embellished, four-bunk compartments, while local trains pack six-bunks into compartments of the same size. Tourist trains stop at fewer stations on the way, they are more secure, and their bathrooms are modern.

As I described in the opening vignette, tourists go directly from the night train to buses to make the 40 kilometer trek to Sa Pa. These buses, that cost VND 50,000 (US $2.50\textsuperscript{14}), drop the tourists off at their hotels. Upon arrival, the tourists have their breakfast at the hotel or in restaurants and coffee shops on the street. This is when the workday begins for Hmong and Dao girls. Loaded down with handicrafts, they wait for the tourists outside the busy restaurants and hotels. The girls approach the tourists with English greetings of “Hello! How are you? Where are you from?” Their whole day consists of talking with a steady stream of tourists, hoping to sell the items they carry with them.

\textbf{Figure 3: Sa Pa viewed from Ham Rong mountain}

\textsuperscript{14} Exchange rate in 2012
At the center of the town of Sa Pa is the stadium, or field, as the locals call it, with a huge star in the middle. From 2002 to 2008, the stadium was used as the handicraft market for ethnic minorities to sell their home-made products, mostly to tourists, but now it is a place where local people play football, enjoy musical performances every Saturday night and celebrate cultural activities on special occasions. On one side of the stadium is a run-down Catholic church built by the French in the 1920s and restored in 1995. Sunday mass provides a “meeting point” for Catholic Hmong. The church is the only remaining colonial building in the town and is an attractive place to take photos. My friends who have travelled to Sa Pa all show me their obligatory pictures taken in front of the church as a memento of Sa Pa.

Sa Pa’s main street has many privately owned and newly renovated modern businesses catering to tourists. Shops sell many kinds of souvenirs such as small bags and T-shirts decorated with images of Sa Pa, like the church, or simply the word Sa Pa embroidered or printed on them. The shops, restaurants and hotels along this main street are stylish, three- or four-story narrow buildings. In the evening, the street becomes alive with color light from hotels, shops and restaurants, and because the distinctive ethnic minorities leave town in the early evening, at night the street looks like a street in any modern, western city. Tourist activities buzz until midnight, and all of this makes it difficult to believe that just a short way downhill, on the very same street, are traditional villages populated by the Hmong, Tay, and Giay.

In addition to new roads, private hotels and restaurants, the tourism industry has brought with it new recreation projects. A large man-made rose garden on the way up to Ham Rong stone forest was built in the late 1990s to attract Kinh tourists. This is the place to see organized “traditional minority” dance shows. In 2002, an artificial lake was created on the outskirts of the town with willow trees around it. Locals describe this as a romantic spot that gives a town a harmonious and charming beauty.

Sa Pa tourist areas are now divided into two zones: one zone is inner Sa Pa town with its hotels, restaurants and some natural and man-made landscapes of great attraction to Kinh tourists, and the other zone is composed of community-based tourism destinations with trekking routes. In 2012, there were five community-based tourism routes:

- Sa Pa - Cat Cat - Sin Chai - Sa Pa
- Sa Pa - Cat Cat - Y Linh Ho - Lao Chai Ta Van - Sa Pa
- Sa Pa - Lao Chai - Ta Van - Ban Ho - Thanh Phu - Nam Sai - Sa Pa
- Sa Pa - Lao Chai- Ta Van - Su Pan - Thanh Kim - Sa Pa

- Sa Pa - Ta Phin - Mong Sen - Tacko – Sa Pa.

Map 1: Sa Pa trekking trails

Source: SNV (Netherlands Development Organization), 2010

This community-based tourism, which is controlled by the state (see Chapter 4), provides tourists with experiences of living with local villagers in homestays. In homestays, tourists eat local foods and enjoy “traditional ethnic” shows of songs and dances. However, the Hmong are not permitted to provide homestays because their conversion to Christianity causes political insecurity among local authorities (see Chapter 4 which includes a detailed discussion of state intervention and involvement in Sa Pa tourism development, including community-based tourism). While tourism in inner Sa Pa is in the hands of the elite Kinh people (Michaud and Turner, 2006; see Chapters 5 and 7), community-based tourism is supposed to bring employment and economic opportunities for the local community. I chose Ta Phin, a community-based tourist site, in which to situate this study, because this enabled me to examine the differences between it and Sa Pa in terms of job opportunities for Hmong women.
Ta Phin

Ta Phin is a mountainous commune in the Sa Pa district of the province of Lao Cai on the Chinese border. The center of the commune is located in a valley that can be accessed by car or on foot from Sa Pa town. From Sa Pa, tourists take a road back to Lao Cai and then turn left after eight kilometers and go for another four kilometers to reach Ta Phin. Many tourists, especially foreigners, like trekking to Ta Phin on back roads through small Dao and Hmong villages. They enjoy the landscape along the roads with its traditional houses and magnificent terraced rice fields. They also have brief encounters with villagers, sometimes just saying “Hi” or “Hello”.

Ta Phin spreads over six hamlets including Xa Xeng, Can Ngai, Suoi Thau, Ta Chai, Lu Khau and Giang Cha and is a commune of Red Dao, Hmong, Kinh and Giay people. The center of the Ta Phin commune is Xa Xeng which is inhabited mainly by Red Dao people. Along two sides of the main roads are houses of Kinh people, with small shops in front selling handicrafts for tourists, or shops where local people can find everything they need for daily life.

Kinh people started to settle in Xa Xeng in 1995. They migrated from different provinces of Vietnam, bought land in the center of the commune and opened shops. The
houses and shops that line the main roads function as a barrier separating this commune tourist center from the Ta Phin People’s Committee’s\textsuperscript{15} building, terraced fields and Hmong and Dao hamlets. Dao and Hmong women usually sit in front of shops embroidering while waiting for tourists. During the winter, a fire is lit to dispel the terrible cold. Each woman wears a rattan basket on her shoulders with many kinds of handicrafts such as wallets, bags, and handicraft bracelets, ready to get up and rush to buses of tourists whenever they arrive. When these buses slow down and enter into the little bus station, each woman looks through the windows of the bus, tries to choose a traveler, and follows him or her during their whole trip in Ta Phin.

Planned as a community tourism destination for the district of Sa Pa, Ta Phin attracts a large number of tourists. According to the statistics of the District Department of Commerce and Tourism in Sa Pa, Ta Phin received 2,792 visitors in 2005. By 2006, the number of tourists to Ta Phin increased to 13,000 people because of the newly launched Dao herb bath service. However, unlike other community tourism destinations such as Lao Chai, Ta Van and Ban Ho, which are usually crowded with many overnight tourists, Ta Phin is only active during the day. There are some homestays in the village but the number of tourists staying there is quite modest. Travel agencies do not arrange for overnight stays in Ta Phin, and independent, backpacking tourists find it difficult to stay there overnight because as foreigners they have to get permission, and if they do not go on tours for which this permission is arranged by tour agencies, it is not easy for them to get it (see Chapter 4).

In Ta Phin center, tourists can visit the Hmong and Dao handicraft clubs that were opened by Craft Link. The clubs help Hmong and Dao women promote their handicrafts. The clubs are in a specially built house on the main road where their club meetings are held (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of Craft Link and handicraft clubs). If tourists come on club meeting days, or when women come to receive and return orders, they can see many Hmong and Dao women sitting in front of the club doing embroidery and chatting. Tourists can talk with them and see how they work.

Walking one kilometer away from Ta Phin center, passing through terraced fields and Dao and Hmong hamlets, tourists can visit Ta Phin cave. This was explored by the Sa Pa district as a potential tourist attraction in 2005. From Ta Phin cave, tourists can visit Dao and Hmong houses located at the base of the mountain. The Dao herb bath, owned and operated

\textsuperscript{15} The People’s Committee is an executive body of the Vietnamese administration system at all local levels: provincial, district and commune or municipality.
by Dao people, is a favorite service for both domestic and international tourists.

Tour groups often have limited encounters with local people. They mainly interact with women street vendors when they buy their goods. Because tours are designed for only half a day, tourists have no time to explore hamlets and meet with local people.

**Positioning Myself in the Field**

*Situating the self: multiple positionalities*

The first time I discussed my research with the director of my research institute, where I have worked for many years, he gave me an official state document indicating three sensitive issues around which researchers should exercise caution: human rights, ethnicity and religion. He expressed interest in my research, but cautioned that issues surrounding Hmong ethnicity are complicated. Conducting a literature review of other ethnographic works also produced a sense of anxiety within me on how to successfully conduct fieldwork about an ethnic group about whom I had a limited understanding.

My curiosity about this topic was piqued by my own experience as a tourist in Sa Pa in 2001. I visited there with a group of 24 colleagues. I had my first encounter with Hmong villagers on a rainy day in front of the church. There I met a Hmong woman who had just stopped there for a while after following an Australian couple to Cat Cat village.

“It has been raining hard today,” I said, to start our conservation.

“Yes, it has”, she said, “If you stay in Sa Pa for a week you will see that six out of seven days are rainy”.

Our conversation centered on her life and work as a street vendor. However, she just gave short answers to my questions and repeated “it is very hard” (*kho lam*) several times during our conversation. A foreign tourist stepped into the church and she approached him quickly, said hello and started talking in her very good English. Her ability to speak English fluently, her confidence and selling skills surprised me, and I was unable to stop thinking about her. Prior to meeting her, my understanding of Hmong women was that they were innocent and traditional and were heavily involved in their housework. After our conversation, I found myself wondering about her and what made her life and work so hard.

As with other researchers studying in the Vietnamese context, both Vietnamese and foreign, I had to follow a set of regulations that reflect the state’s control and surveillance over the research process. Firstly, the researcher has to find a host institution to sponsor
his/her research who will write a recommendation letter indicating who the researcher is, what his/her study is about, when she (he) will be doing fieldwork and for how long. The researcher then brings this letter to the People’s Committees at provincial, district and community levels – three layers of bureaucracy. She/he can begin her/his fieldwork only when these authorities have granted their permission. For foreign researchers, the process is much more complex, as apart from the above procedures, they have to apply for permission from the Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Public Security (see Salemink, 2013). It may take days or months for the researcher to get permission, depending on the relationship between the researcher and relevant authorities. The relationship can be a personal one (i.e. the researcher may know the local authorities in advance), a business relationship, or a relationship developed through contacts. The researcher can easily get approval from local authorities if she (he) creates a good impression with local authorities by coming at the right time when local authorities are happy and/or not too busy with their work. A small gift would be an advantage, and so would asking for a favor rather than making a request. And as shown below, a female researcher can get sympathy from officials.

Given these circumstances and learning from the experiences of my friends and colleagues who had previously done research in Vietnam, I knew it would have been extremely difficult for me to get permission if I had presented myself as a student from a foreign university; therefore, I decided to use my personal contacts. Before going to Sa Pa, I emailed Mr. Tran Huu Son – a person with whom I had worked for many years. He is an anthropologist and now the director of Lao Cai Provincial Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism. Mr. Son in this case was seen as the local authority and his power and influence would be helpful. In the email, I told him briefly about my research and asked for his help. I also did not forget to mention that my supervisor was Professor Oscar Salemink because I knew Mr. Son had worked with, and had good contact with, Professor Salemink. I hoped that this would be an advantage for me. He replied to my email promptly and agreed to help as much as possible. I went to Lao Cai a day later, and in contrast to what I had imagined, the process of getting permission was easy and quick. It took me only one day to fulfill all the necessary conditions to do the fieldwork. There were three principal reasons for this. One was that my research topic was not too sensitive: although it was related to ethnicity it was related more to economic issues than to politics or religion. The second reason was that I am

16 As I mentioned earlier, research about ethnicity is a sensitive topic in Vietnam. Research issues relating to Hmong people such as religion and politics receive the close attention of the state due to the history of
Vietnamese with quite a long history of working for a state organization (the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences). Being a researcher in a governmental institution means that I was well aware of, and had to conform to, the law, so there was a lower risk that I may cause problems during my field trips. The third one was that I am female. Most authorities I contacted expressed their sympathy toward me, an urban woman, who was going to live in a mountainous town alone, and believed that such a female researcher would not do “wrong” things.

Although I was welcomed as a researcher in the community and got permission easily, I was forbidden from participating in any religious activities and from asking the Hmong people sensitive questions relating to the state, religion and ethnicity. I was warned not stay in Hmong houses since it was believed to be unsafe to do so; for example, I was told I could be kidnapped and killed. Local authorities also appointed a contact person who “helped” me during my fieldwork. This person sometimes came to meet me and asked me about my work; sometimes he went to the villages with me and attended some interviews. This surveillance, together with official concerns over my contact with the Hmong and my research topic, placed tremendous pressure on me as I became overly conscious of every glance. This surveillance also influenced how I wrote up my dissertation. Salemink (2013), in his article about the ethical principles of anthropology, indicates that the field is more than just a location where researchers collect empirical data; it involves power relations among professionals, and it involves institutional and discursive contexts which the researcher is part and parcel of (Salemink, 2013). Giving examples from his own experiences when doing field research in the Central Highlands in Vietnam, Salemink argues that in situations involving power relations, adhering to ethical principles was necessary because research for ethnographic texts should not involve unacceptable risks for informants. He chose to write up his ethnography in a deliberately bland manner (compensating for this with a detailed historiography), while engaging in public debates which may go beyond the “no harm” principle by striving for positive outcomes. This is a possibility “as long as the researcher realizes that both publication and public engagement are risky ventures that require a careful reading of the wider field” (Salemink, 2013: 255). Although, as I explained above, my research about Hmong women in Sa Pa was not politically sensitive, my position as a researcher from a governmental organization reminded me of the necessity of being careful
when writing up my research paper, especially when I was warned about this by my director. How I dealt with this problem will be further discussed in the following sections, but before that it is important to describe how I was able to contact my informants and build long-term relationships with them.

Collecting data is a process of “knowledge production” which is socially constructed, situated and value-laden (Haraway, 1991). It is shaped by power relations imbued in the research process, which often awards more power to the researcher than to the informants. The interactions between local officials, my participants, and myself were mediated by my position as an individual with all the desirable social markers. For local officials, I was a PhD student who was seeking help from them and who depended on them, and therefore I had to follow all the rules and requirements that they tried to impose on me. For example, at the district level I was always warned about the complexities of Hmong groups and the need for sensitivity when talking about state–minority relations. In the eyes of Hmong residents, I was primarily characterized as a Kinh, and I was viewed with suspicion due to the historically unfriendly relations between the Kinh and the Hmong, which are still present today.

During my fieldwork in Sa Pa, I developed relationships with a lot of Hmong women and girls who worked in Sa Pa, as well as Hmong women and girls from different villages surrounding Sa Pa. Through them, I also had contact with Hmong men who also played an important part in my research. A large number of the Hmong women and girls I met and made friends with provided interesting information relating to their work and lives directly and/or indirectly. However, the life stories and narratives introduced in this thesis came from my in-depth interviews with fourteen Hmong women involved in tourism-related activities and six Hmong men who were husbands, partners and friends of the women. Village leaders and residents, local government staff and tourist company directors were also involved in my research. It is important to mention that my relationships with Hmong people did not always go as smoothly as I expected.

To meet my research goals, I had to contact local Kinh and Hmong authorities. When Hmong women saw me leaving the People’s Committee building or the Department of Culture and Tourism or talking with Kinh people, they accused me of working for the Kinh. For them, if you work for Kinh people you do not work for the benefit of the Hmong. In the days after they saw me doing these things, they turned away from me and stopped talking to me. In their eyes, I was a liar and a traitor. It took me almost a month to make them understand my position and my relationship with local authorities, and the misunderstanding
was erased gradually, allowing for closer relationships between me and Hmong women and girls. Recognizing the existence of asymmetrical power relations, I tried to forge reciprocal relationships with the study participants by telling them that I was there to learn from them and convinced them to realize how much they could teach me. I acknowledged the position of “researcher-as-supplicant” (England, 1994: 82) and acknowledged that local people possessed greater knowledge than I did about the specific issues I was researching, and that they were doing me a favor by sharing knowledge with me. In so doing, I dismantled some of the barriers that arose when contacting the women, especially with bureaucratic local authorities who had the power to decide whether my presence in Sa Pa and my fieldwork could continue.

In addition, gender differences had different impacts in different locations. My gender played an important role in the conduct of my fieldwork. As mentioned above, it helped me obtain the trust and sympathy of local authorities, and thanks to this I had a good start. At the village level, my gender played a major role in terms of getting information. I was able to develop closer relations with the women in Sa Pa and other women, for example mothers-in-law and daughters would talk to me about “women’s” issues such as kitchen work. My gender intersected with age as well as my marital status when I was often “taken under people’s wings’ and called _em_, which has the dual meanings of the sister or wife/lover. Women expressed sympathy toward my marital status as a fairly young divorced woman because they believed it was an unfortunate thing for woman. Since the Hmong had close community relations, most Hmong street-vendors in Sa Pa knew me and although some did not have close contact with me, they all knew about my situation. It was clear that my personal situation was a topic of conversation in any discussions I had with them, and it made me seem more approachable. I believed that my personal status made me seem “vulnerable” in their eyes, and encouraged them to share their experiences in their marriages and to confide in me.

On the other hand, I found it relatively difficult to create rapport with the Hmong men. This was because I could not speak Hmong fluently, which will be discussed in detail in the next section, but more importantly because of “social skills”. I was usually invited to partake in men’s drinking as a guest, and since I did not drink I tried to avoid it. This generated dissatisfaction among Hmong men and influenced my relations with them. To make up for my shortcomings, every time I went to the village I bought some food and tried to be busy with food processing instead of sitting at the men’s table, and I engaged in men’s loud discussions from a distance. These relations with women and men were important in developing trust and ultimately in influencing the villagers’ decisions to participate in the
research. They also revealed how gendered practices intersected with my needs and research goals. They also showed how my status as a female “outsider” allowed me to circulate in both gendered domains.

Building relationships and getting information

My main stints of fieldwork in Sa Pa and Ta Phin were eight months from September 2012 to April 2013, and three months from August to October 2013. By being in the field sites both in the peak tourist season and the off-season, I was able to get a sense of the changes and continuities occurring over that time and I witnessed some significant social and political events. I spent the first six months of field research in Sa Pa town with frequent visits to Hmong families in surrounding villages. I had initially planned to stay in Hmong houses in order to “live with and live like those who are studied for a lengthy period of time” (Van Maanen, 1995: 4-5). However, I changed my mind after a short stay with a Hmong girl’s family. It was a very cold, foggy day in September when I followed Mrs. Lan, the Chairman of the District Women’s Union, to Lao Chai commune, about 12 kilometers from Sa Pa. On that day, a women’s meeting was held in the village as part of the campaign against domestic violence. After the meeting, I was invited for lunch with a Hmong woman’s family. Her name was So and she was working for the Commune Women’s Union. Entering into the house, I immediately realized how different I was from the others, specifically from the Hmong children in this house. Because of the severe cold, I had equipped myself with a thick coat, a woolen cap, gloves and leather boots up to knees, while children only wore thin clothes. I felt so embarrassed and thought the difference between local people and me would be noticed and become an obstacle for me if I stayed in the villages during my field research.

In addition to this difference, I also had to be aware of the rift that my choice of living quarters could create among my informants. After lunch, I was accompanied by So’s daughter to walk around the village. We met some Hmong women sitting in front of their houses embroidering and we stopped to have a short talk with them. Telling them I was doing a study about Hmong women and tourism and that I would be coming to this village frequently, I was asked whether I would stay in So’s house. Some locals also added that it would be good if I stayed at her house since she was wealthier than them and her house was also bigger and cleaner. When we came back, So’s daughter told me that they were jealous because I was going to stay in her house and bring candies for her and her sisters. Again, this helped me to realize how my staying in the village had both negative and positive impacts on the attitudes of villagers toward me and my research. In the end, I decided to stay in Sa Pa and paid
frequent visits to Hmong households. This decision confirmed my “neutral” position and helped me to build good relationships with the Hmong women.

During my time in Sa Pa, I rented a room on a monthly basis in a poorly patronized hotel on the edge of the town. The hotel owner was a retired man who had worked in the army. He stayed there with his wife and two children, a twelve-year-old daughter and five-year-old son. As a long-term guest of the hotel, I became like a member of the family, shared meals with them, played with the children and sometimes helped them with their studies. Although it was a hotel with not many tourists, it was a meeting point for many local authorities. Local authorities and even local people who worked in governmental organizations in the town came to eat, drink, and catch up with one another. This situation proved a favorable one for me, as it allowed me an opportunity to talk with people who would otherwise have remained at a bureaucratic distance. Staying in a reasonably priced hotel with hot water, quilted blankets and hot meals helped me to be able to confront the cold and wet winter of Sa Pa. From my home base hotel, I was able to take daily trips to Ta Phin and organize some overnight stays in different Hmong houses rather than stay permanently there.

For the most part, my fieldwork involved a combination of participant observation and interviews, both planned and contingent, based on various relationships that I developed with different people in Sa Pa and around the village. Though I had already developed relationships with several Hmong people and also with local authorities at both the provincial and local levels, my first contact with Shu Tan had an important effect on my life and research in Sa Pa and in the village. Shu Tan was a twenty-three-year-old Hmong woman from Lao Chai commune. Born in a poor family and like many other children in Sa Pa, she stopped going to school after completing only two years of schooling. She was one of the first girls who participated in street vendor groups in Sa Pa. Gradually, with her experience and relationships with foreigners, she opened a learning center called Sa Pa O’Chau and provided free informal education for many Hmong and Dao children from poor families. This venture was funded by foreign individuals and organizations. Her connections with Hmong people, especially those doing tourism-related activities, as well as with tourist agencies, helped me not only to approach and form close relationships with Hmong women, but also to have a unique perspective about the plight of these women because so many of them came to her for help and advice.

My days in the field often started at around 7:30 am. I sometimes had breakfast at the hotel or at small inns in Sa Pa market. During my first two months, I spent most of my time
every day walking up and down the main street chatting with the Hmong women there. The data I gathered during my field study came from these conversations rather than from formal interviews. I often had lunch with them in the shade of a tree in the park near the church. During their short break times like these, I asked the women whether, in addition to chatting and talking to each other, they would teach me the Hmong language and they asked me to teach them English. As a result of these activities, more and more Hmong women came to join us and the group became bigger, allowing me to gradually meet and get closer to many women. In the fourth month of my field trip in Sa Pa, when I had established close relations with many Hmong women as well as a number of Hmong men, I participated in their work activities, mostly by going on the tours they led. Following Hmong women when they worked as street vendors, and going on tours with them, helped me observe their behaviors and conversations as they interacted with tourists and also their reactions to different types of tourists.

Figure 5: A Hmong village in Ta Phin

My contact and rapport with Hmong women in Ta Phin, who mainly worked in
handicraft clubs, were quite formal. In December 2012, during my first visit to Ta Phin village I was informed by the chairwoman of the Ta Phin of Women’s Union about a workshop on gender equality and I came to join it. The workshop was one of several activities within the project “Enhancing cultural continuance, economic prosperity and political participation of the indigenous people in the Lao Cai Province through the involvement of surrounding communities, local authorities and international actors” by Oxfam Italia, an Italian non-governmental organization. The project worked closely with both Dao and Hmong women in Ta Phin and focused on promoting economic growth through sustainable activities. These activities helped to revive and enlarge ethnic minority handicraft production for fair trade, thereby helping the people to better integrate in their communities, achieve better cooperation with local authorities, and empower women. This empowerment was not only intended in economic terms, but implied a “personal change in consciousness involving a movement towards control, self-confidence and the right to make decisions and determine choice” (Oxfam Italia, 2010).

At the workshop, I had conversations with the project manager who told me the program had considerable difficulty working with ethnic minorities and local authorities because many conflicts occurred. Since there were neither local staff in Sa Pa nor “anthropologists” who could help them get a better understanding of local people and local culture, the director asked me to help them. I knew that working with Oxfam Italia might not be beneficial for me or my own research goals, as the local people might react negatively toward my involvement. They might have come to think that I was doing something good for the project at their expense. However, after examining carefully the objectives, the activities and the degree of my participation and interaction with local people when doing the tasks, I decided to work as a volunteer for Oxfam Italia. I was responsible for conducting interviews with local people and participated in project activities to guide (if possible) local people to do some specific work. Based on this work, I was to provide recommendations for project improvement based on the practical data I gathered from my observations and my own professional experience. As a volunteer who worked for the Oxfam project without any remuneration, I was quite free in deciding what my work would be, and the degree of my involvement in the project. My aim was to help the project without affecting negatively my relations with local people.

My involvement in the Oxfam Italia project did indeed help me a lot with data collection. I had more opportunities to work and talk with local people, not only with the
Hmong but also with Dao people. Through this contact, I explored and understood conflicts between Hmong and Dao people relating to tourism business in the community site of Ta Phin. As discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, Dao women in Ta Phin do not welcome Hmong women to work as street vendors in the center of Ta Phin commune. In addition, I gained a lot of valuable knowledge of specific project activities that I would not have had access to without my Oxfam connection. For example, by the end of the project, Oxfam Italia wanted to introduce an activity to promote Hmong and Dao handicrafts. I proposed a Photovoice project instead, since I believed it would the best if local people themselves presented their own works and culture.

Duong Bich Hanh explains that “Photovoice is a method which combines photography with grassroots social action in which local people are trained to take pictures about specific topics and then talk about these pictures” (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006). Hanh had already done a successful Photovoice project in the early 2000s with Hmong girls who had left their villages for Sa Pa to engage in tourist activities. Photos taken by Hmong girls during this Photovoice project were exhibited in a room in the Sa Pa Tourist Center and in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. In the Oxfam Italia Photovoice project, participants were asked to make presentations about their communities or points of view by taking photographs, discussing them together, developing narratives to go with their photos, and conducting outreach or other actions. Hmong people (both men and women) were trained in using cameras to take photographs of the handicrafts of their community, what they were proud of and what they would like to share with the public. After almost three months, residents had taken more than 1000 photos, and 150 of them were chosen for exhibitions in Hanoi and Sa Pa. By being intimately involved in this activity, I learned in depth about the gendered division of labor and gender relations from narratives and the frequency of certain types of images. In fact, Photovoice was an interesting and helpful complement to the other methods used in my ethnographic research, as with the pictures people felt comfortable talking about and describing things related to what was in the picture, and this also made it easier for me to ask questions relating to what informants had said and what actually was in the pictures and/or what was not.

Language issues

It was lucky for me that most Hmong women doing tourism-related activities knew English or Vietnamese or both. However, because some could speak the languages fluently, while others could use only few words, I had some difficulties in communication with them.
Being aware of the importance of language in the research process, I tried to learn the Hmong language as much as possible and as quickly as possible. However, it took a lot of time to learn a new language which was totally different from my mother tongue, so I chose to work with interpreters. The selection of a competent, appropriate and reflexive interpreter was of the utmost importance. Lloyd et al. (2004) argue that “the appropriateness of an interpreter is thus determined not only by their language and communication skills but also the degree to which they can engage with people and groups of different status, and be conscious of their own positionality”. In addition, working in a Vietnamese context, Scott et al. (2006: 36-37) emphasize the importance of interpreters or field assistants, since factors such as age, gender, regional and class background and prejudices such as attitudes towards women or ethnic minorities can play a major part in shaping interactions between the researcher, interpreter and research subjects, and in shaping the nature of the data obtained. Another problem with interpreters is the interpretation of concepts from one language into another, since languages, words and expressions are constructed differently and have different meanings and cultural connotations. Frenk (1995: 138) argues that “every utterance in our interviews becomes ‘untranslatable’ since it is shaped, framed, configured by and for both its immediate, contingent contexts and its cultural contact for which there is no equivalent in another language”.

Recognizing the contextual nature of translation, the power and postionality of interpreters as well as of all those involved in the research process (Twyman et al., 1999), I decided to work with informal native Hmong interpreters who spoke Hmong, English and also Vietnamese. “Informal interpreters” refers to those who are neither formally trained, nor act as professional interpreters. In practice, my interactions with Hmong people were undertaken in the form of conversational chats, rather than formal interviews. I usually had conversations with a group of women and/or men and asked those in the group who spoke good English or Vietnamese to translate for me. In fact, since no one person was able to know all the relevant words and expressions in English and/or Vietnamese, more than one person was involved in translation for me and they supported each other in translating. By doing things this way, the interactions between me as researcher, the interpreters and the participants, and between interpreters and participants, were quite natural, allowing participants to feel at ease. There was no clear distinction between interpreters and participants, and in fact interpreters acted as informants at the same time. This was also done to allow me to look over my notes to check if I had understood things correctly and to cross-check to ensure they interpreted correctly.
While the interactions with Hmong people in the “tourism sphere” were quite easy with the help of many informal interpreters, I encountered a great number of difficulties in trying to understand and catch ideas when talking with Hmong people in their families. Trying to make myself understood in a language in which I was not fluent (Hmong) and trying to understand Hmong people in a language they were not fluent (English and/or Vietnamese) was frustrating for both me and my hosts, but these exchanges also involved a lot of fun. In many cases, we acted as deaf and dumb people, communicating through gestures and hand signals. This often ended in laughter. It cannot be denied that this helped us to become closer to each other. Because of language barriers, conversations between me and Hmong people, including both men and women, relating to complex issues requiring clear explanations, usually took place at their work places where I could ask for translation help from others. Despite many language challenges, amiable, kind, open-minded and friendly informal interpreters contributed significantly to the success of my research activities in each community.

**Research challenges and success**

Apart from the aforementioned language challenges, I faced other difficulties in the field. In Sa Pa, criticisms were commonly expressed about each other by the Kinh, local authorities and ethnic minorities. The criticisms were sometimes discriminatory on the part of the Kinh, who labelled Hmong people as “backward” and “underdeveloped”. Hmong people criticized local authorities who “suppressed” ethnic minorities (see Chapters 1 and 3). In addition, the politics of tourism and village life which excluded Hmong women from tourism development in Sa Pa, created numerous difficulties and dilemmas concerning both my fieldwork experiences and the writing up of my research. It was not surprising that many people I tried to interview were hesitant to give their views and experiences, especially about issues relating to the state and state policies. Gossip and criticism were rife in Sa Pa, and participating in it could lead to serious consequences.

Related to this was the politics of writing up the thesis. Jordan (1991) emphasizes the concern of the “new cultural anthropology” for “representing others”. Jordan argues that anthropologists should not claim sole authorship or authority over the information produced, and that “it is important or useful to focus on the way in which the text is constituted in and constitutive of larger relations of power” (1991: 57). In my thesis, the voices of participants and knowledge produced are bound up within the field of power relations between the state, myself and villager informants. Participants’ voices are inevitably subject to interpretive bias.
with regards to selection, translation of quotes and other meaningful data. In addition, constraints imposed by the Vietnamese state on my research topic and on myself as a Vietnamese researcher working in a governmental institution are limitations of my thesis. However, I have tried to incorporate both the voices of the villagers and their impressions through interpretation of the data and through narration in the voice of the villagers as much as possible. To the best of my ability, I have tried to present a fair account of tourism in Sa Pa, the experiences of Hmong women, and relations between the state and ethnic minorities in a specific tourism context, based not only on my own understandings, but also on the understandings of the many people I had contact with during my fieldwork.

I faced an additional challenge when talking with women about issues relating to their family life. For them, family life is something belonging to the private realm that is not easily shared with outsiders. To build up a trustful and friendly relationship between the women and myself, I always shared my life stories with them and let them ask any questions they wanted. They sometimes found their images in my stories and also shared their stories with me in sympathy. As time passed, our relationships were more intimate and my conversations with them became increasingly rich. One challenge I faced related to a difficulty in finding suitable observation posts. As my research focused on the changing gender relations in Hmong families, it was important to get information about the relations between husband and wife in work, life and childcare. However, since this was a “private realm”, I could not be present in every activity of the family, and even if I could have done that, people would have tried to act nicely toward each other as they did not want outsiders to know the real situations in their families. Sometimes I therefore had to observe discreetly, for example by playing with children but giving an eye to their parents who were talking and discussing something. This method was very effective, since I could see the real interactions without interfering with or disturbing them.

Despites the challenges and difficulties I experienced during my fieldwork, on the whole I believe that my data collection activities were successful. Participants appeared to welcome and appreciate my research. As Pratt and Loizos (1992) state, the research encounter can indeed enable people who do not generally have the chance, to reflect on and voice their needs and concerns. Participants felt honored to have their personal experience and knowledge acknowledged and valued through my research. They were also surprised but glad that I had travelled so far to come and learn from them and live with them, and that such a “city” woman could do some physical agricultural work. Some participants felt that the
interviews validated their knowledge, and both women and men gained an awareness of their expertise through the process. For instance, when I participated in the Photovoice activity mentioned above, people were asked about the meaning of patterns in their traditional clothes and many people replied that they did not know. One Hmong woman from Ta Phin reflected, “Through this activity, I have started to come to ask the old people about handicrafts and learn about the meaning of several patterns and know that patterns in Hmong clothes link closely to our ethnic group’s traditional culture.” Many male participants also explained that they were glad to be consulted about handicraft production, which was the domain of women but which also affected their lives. Finally, many Hmong women noted that the research encounter provided them with rare and welcome friendship and even “sisterhood” with a Kinh woman, an experience that they had not had before.17

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed overview of my research methodology including my rationale for the selection of field sites, and of my data gathering and sampling methods. I also discussed the experiences and problems I faced while doing fieldwork in the ethnic minority villages of Ta Phin and other communes around Sa Pa, and the process of negotiating with local authorities as well as Hmong women and men for data collection during the fieldwork. The research experience reaffirmed the importance of acknowledging my position and that of my interpreters, of practicing reflexivity throughout the research process, and of navigating carefully through complex administrative structures. It also revealed the strong state control over the research process in Vietnam. As a female Kinh researcher, I faced being stereotyped by Hmong women in a way that made it difficult to get into closer contact with them. At the same time, the surveillance of local authorities was something that I could not ignore if I was to avoid being kicked off the field. Clearly, my Kinh heritage had both positive and negative impacts on my ethnographic research. It helped me a lot in exploring the discrimination and stereotyping from both sides, as the two sides (Kinh and Hmong) were usually critical of each other. On the other hand, my Kinh heritage meant that it was not easy to check the information I was given. Under these circumstances, I tried to get closer to Hmong women without surveillance by local authorities by playing different roles, for example as a volunteer for Oxfam Italia, and by taking part in different formal and informal activities. By playing different roles, I succeeded in getting the necessary information for my thesis.

17 As indicated in Duong Bich Hanh’s research (2006) and further discussed in my thesis, Hmong people often do not want to have friendships and long-term relationships with Kinh people.
Chapter 4

Tourism Development and the Hmong in Sa Pa

One evening during dinner at my hotel in Sa Pa, I was joined by some local district authorities. Over dinner, our conversation turned to an upcoming district meeting on new tourism policies. District authorities, representatives of mass organizations such as the Youth Union and the Women’s Union, and representatives of departments of the Sa Pa People’s Committee were scheduled to attend this meeting to discuss the logistics of implementing a policy for removing vendors from the streets. This event took place three months after my first field trip in Sa Pa and after I had established a rapport with my informants. As I was already familiar with local authorities in Sa Pa, I asked one of the officials of the Department of Culture and Information for permission to attend this meeting, but because this was a formal meeting among local authorities, I was denied access. However, he promised to invite me to a commune meeting where the same content would be discussed with the public.

As promised, in late December 2012, I accompanied him to a meeting at the Lao Chai Commune People’s Committee office. Also in attendance were two officials from District Department of Culture and Information, the Chairman of the Lao Chai People’s Committee, the chairwoman of the Lao Chai Women’s Union, the Chairman of the Youth Union, the commune party committee secretary and some local street vendors. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the District People’s Committee decision regarding street vendors. It was the committee’s position that street vendors were a nuisance to tourists, and that their persistence in ‘pestering’ tourists to sell their wares was detrimental to the tourism industry. The committee’s decision was to place a ban on street vendors in Sa Pa and in community-based tourism villages. An official from the District Department of Culture stressed that Hmong women from Lao Chai comprised a large proportion of street vendors in Sa Pa and it was the responsibility of

---

18 The People’s Committee is an administrative body of Vietnamese state administration system. It is responsible for executing state laws and policies at all local levels: provincial, district and commune. Departments under the People’s Committee include: the People’s Committee office, the Department of Finance and Planning, the Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, the Department of Industry and Trade, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of Justice, the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Health, the Department of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs, the Department of Inspection, and the Department of Culture and Information.
local commune authorities to “educate” them not go selling in Sa Pa anymore. Small handicraft markets for ethnic minorities would be built in Sa Pa and in community-based villages. Local commune authorities were responsible for ensuring that all vendors were removed from the streets, and the edict stated, “related organizations and individuals are requested to strictly implement this decision”. One after the other, the chairman of Lao Chai People’s Committee, the chairwoman of Women’s Union, and the chairman of the Youth Union responded that they would try to implement the assigned task. No street vendors in the meeting were asked whether they agreed with the decision or not, and the meeting ended.

The decision mentioned above is one of many tourism policies and strategies that the district government has initiated in order to promote tourism development. However, as we can see this decision was made in a typically top-down manner. As I will show in this chapter, local people, especially ethnic minorities, are excluded from policy-making processes. After the meeting in Ta Phin that I describe above, I had a brief talk with some street vendors and asked them what they thought about this policy. Some told me that local authorities did not ask them before deciding and that local authorities were robbing the Hmong of their ability to earn their daily bread. In reality, this policy proved unsuccessful, as street vendors continue to work in Sa Pa. The new markets in Sa Pa and in community-based villages were abandoned because they were very far from the village center and nobody passes by them. As I will show in the next section of this chapter, the local authorities’ policies and strategies about tourism development in Sa Pa are ethnically based and treat different local ethnic groups differently. In this situation, the main question of concern is how these policies and initiatives create inequitable structures of inclusion and exclusion, and how the Hmong people are left out of the policy-making process, which results in their frustration and lack of cooperation. In an attempt to illustrate the complexity of the political situation, this chapter begins by examining the history of tourism in Vietnam with a focus on the uplands as the context of local policies on tourism in Sa Pa. This is followed by an examination of recent policies on tourism development in Sa Pa to show how ethnically biased actions and policies concerning tourism affect the livelihood opportunities of Hmong people in terms of exclusion and inclusion.

**Vietnam’s uplands and tourism**

The history of Vietnam’s upland tourism can be divided into three periods: the colonial era, the socialist era and the current era, which is post-*Doi moi*. During the colonial
era, the French developed tourism in hill stations in Da Lat in central Vietnam and Sa Pa in the north. After this, Ba Na, a small mountainous area in Da Nang, was discovered by the French and developed as a tourist destination. However, compared to Da Lat, this hill station was less developed due to difficult transportation, and tourism in Ba Na lagged until 1937 when the road to the mountain peak was constructed. After the revolution succeeded in August 1945, marking the end of the French colonial regime in the whole territory of Vietnam, French citizens also left the Ba Na Hills Resort. To prevent future French tourists from using the Bà Nà Hills to their advantage, the local people in the areas of Hoa Vang, Dai Loc, Dien Ban destroyed the whole Ba Na Hills Resort in less than a month. As the nation struggled against the French and American invaders, the Bà Nà Hills Resort, now in ruins, was reclaimed by the tropical forest of the giant Truong Son mountain range until 1997. Now though, tourism in this area has been revived, and tourists from Ho Chi Minh City come to stay in hotels at Da Lat hill station (Jennings, 2003). From Hue, they can go to hotels at Ba Na hill station, and from Hanoi, to Sa Pa hill station (Reed, 1995: 46).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, during the colonial period, Sa Pa housed sanatoriums, barracks and official villas for the upper ranks of the military and the colonial administration. This infrastructure led to the establishment of a tourist bureau, the Syndicat d’Initiative de Chapa in 1917 that promoted tourism to Sa Pa and trekking to ethnic minority villages. This attractive tourist destination became widely known, not only within Indochina, but also throughout Europe. In 1924, a Sa Pa tourist booklet titled Livret-Guide de la Station d’Altitude de Chapa was published and it was reprinted over the years. Elements of this guide are still evident in the tour companies’ marketing and advertising in Sa Pa today, such as opportunities to walk to different minority villages to experience village life and buy indigenous handicrafts (Michaud, 1997). Da Lat, on the other hand, was developed as an urban center and designed as a European health and recreation resort catering to adventure tourism and hunting activities (Reed 1995; Jennings 2003). Tours to ethnic minority villages of the Lat and Koho were also offered (Jennings, 2003); however, ethnic minority people in Da Lat were subtly portrayed as “noble savages” (Jennings, 2003)

After the French retreat, Vietnam entered the socialist era, and tourism became “socialist tourism” (Hall, 2001: 95), characterized by state control and restrictions imposed on international tourists. During this time, traveling outside Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam’s two entry points, was difficult for tourists, because they had to obtain police permission to do so (Taylor and Johnson, 2002: 246). Foreigners were viewed with suspicion;
therefore, international tourism was severely constrained, with the exception of governmental officials from COMECON (CEMA)\(^1\) countries (Hobson et al, 1994; Cooper, 2000) who moved more freely because of the growth of economic aid and cooperation with the Soviet bloc. Tourists from the Soviet bloc, as Hall explains, came to Vietnam during this period mainly under the auspices of “friendship groups” formed between the countries (Hall, 2001: 94). Vietnam delegations went to COMECON countries to study and work while official delegations from these countries visited Vietnam to exchange ideas and maintain relations.

Tourism in the upland areas was not developed during this time. The only visitors were Vietnamese government officials and scholars traveling there for work, not recreation. During this time, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam began to build a socialist oriented, modern nation-state, which included projects to incorporate ethnic minorities into the Vietnamese nation (see Chapter 2). As a result, Vietnamese government officials and scholars, influenced by the work of Marx, Morgan and Engels, traveled to the uplands of central and northern Vietnam to inspect the development of their “younger brothers,” and to conduct fieldwork involving counting, labeling, evaluating and tutoring them (Pelley, 1998:382). Culture and heritage was promoted through cultural performances in order to “endorse a sense of (implicitly national) identity and solidarity” (Salemink, 1997: 517-518).

*Doi moi* was officially endorsed by the Vietnamese Government in 1986. It is characterized by a transition from the command economy model toward a market economy with a socialist orientation. This economic shift happened in southern Vietnam long before 1986, but the *Doi moi* officially expanded the market economy to the north (Hy V. Luong, 2003: 13). Tourism in this new economic context is characterized by a blend of socialist and capitalist ideals (Lloyd, 2003). Business entities are no longer solely owned and run by the government, and private companies and foreign tourist agencies are now able to enter the market. The state still asserts its power over the tourism industry by issuing policies and regulations on the development of tourism and the transportation and infrastructure that support it.

The state established a tourism management organization in 1992, known as the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT), and charged it with implementing the government’s tourism policies at all levels (Cooper, 2000: 175). A special unit of VNAT, Vietnam Tourism, is responsible for offering tours to promote foreign travel to the country.

---

\(^1\) COMECON (CEMA): Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, existing from 1949 to 1991, was an economic organization whose members were countries of the Eastern Bloc and a number of other socialist states. Vietnam became a member of COMECON in 1978.
Other aspects of tourism are controlled and monitored by the VNAT subcommittees: the Travel Department, the Hotel Department, and the Tourism Marketing Department. Local travel offices associated with the government implement VNAT’s policies and plans.

The current global shift away from mass tourism toward local, niche tourism (Hall, 1991: 100), combined with the need to present a national ‘Vietnamese’ identity, has led the state to promote heritage tourism by offering tours to UNESCO World Heritage sites such as Ha Long Bay (since 1994), Hue Imperial City (since 1993), Hoi An Ancient Town (since 1999), and My Son Cham Towers (since 1999). In addition, ethnic tourism in the uplands of Vietnam is also promoted as a new form of tourism for a number of reasons. First, the uplands are becoming more accessible due to the expansion of the road and transportation system. Now, tourists can travel to ethnic minority villages more easily. The second reason is that the state’s notion of ethnic minorities as “backward” and “remote” communities creates an exotic and attractive image to tourists. In tourism guidebooks, tourists are encouraged to “enjoy sights and sounds of vibrant Montagnard markets in Sa Pa and in other parts of north-western uplands” (Florence and Jealous, 2003: 243). I will further illustrate how ethnic minorities in Sa Pa are represented in promotional tourist materials in the next section.

The rapid tourism development in Vietnam in the late 1990s raised socio-economic, cultural and environmental issues for local people, especially ethnic minority communities. To address these concerns, the government ratified the Revised Master Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development in Vietnam (2001–2010) in 2001 with a focus on the development of eco-tourism and village tourism in “remoter” areas (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2001: 19). To address the growth–sustainability dilemma, the government has been working at the community development and policy-making level on a number of initiatives by international non-government organizations to promote eco-tourism, cultural tourism and community-based tourism (Allan, 2011). The goal is to use tourism development as a strategy for “poverty reduction and livelihood enhancement for poor ethnic minorities, including those in relatively remote locations” (Hainsworth, 1999: 247). An example of this strategy is the emergence of community-based tourism and sustainable pro-poor tourism in Sa Pa. I will describe these in the next section.

Tourism in the uplands today still includes mountain tourism, particularly in Da Lat and Sa Pa. Da Lat today is a popular destination for domestic tourists. Alneng (2002) explains the attraction of Da Lat to tourists. For Vietnamese from the lowlands, Da Lat has a “highly
seductive elsewhereness”; it is a cold and exotic place with “rolling pine tree clad hills”, a romantic ambience and “exceptionally beautiful girls with pale complexions” as a result of the highland climate (Alneng, 2002: 131). Sa Pa has been transformed from a “dusty provincial Vietnamese hamlet” into an urbanized modern town, a change largely directed by district and provincial authorities who want the hill station to be seen as another Da Lat (Michaud and Turner, 2006: 790-792) to attract more domestic tourists who account for two-thirds of tourists coming to Sa Pa (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>259.079</td>
<td>305.907</td>
<td>282.716</td>
<td>405.000</td>
<td>450.268</td>
<td>520.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>193.724</td>
<td>206.868</td>
<td>182.000</td>
<td>295.000</td>
<td>319.665</td>
<td>370.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>65.355</td>
<td>99.039</td>
<td>100.716</td>
<td>110.000</td>
<td>130.603</td>
<td>150.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Domestic and international tourists in Sa Pa during 2006-2011**

*Source: Sa Pa Department of Culture and Information*

Both Vietnamese and foreign tourists alike visit Sa Pa today. According to a market survey of the Center of Culture, Information, Sport and Tourism of Sa Pa District (CCIST), visitors from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh account for 47% of domestic tourists in Sa Pa (Center of Culture, Information, Sport and Tourism of Sa Pa, 2001). Vietnamese tourists usually travel with friends and relatives in groups of four people on average. In addition to small-group domestic tourism, it is common for employers to organize and pay for getaways to the countryside for their employees. These groups comprise, on average, about 20 people and are most commonly state workers at various government levels and branches working for the socialist *bien che* system and therefore in permanent employment (Phuong An Nguyen, 2002; Michaud and Turner, 2006: 794). Private and jointly owned companies also provide these opportunities for their employees. According to statistics from SNV, in 2005, European visitors represented the highest proportion of foreign tourists to Sa Pa (58%) followed by Americans (16%), Australians (13%) and Canadians (6%). Chinese made up only 4% of foreign tourists in Sa Pa. They usually travel in smaller groups than Vietnamese tourists.
The groups of tourists who come to Sa Pa can be broken into three categories, each with their own expectations and assumptions: Vietnamese tourists, western tourists, and Chinese tourists. Vietnamese tourists are interested in seeing the local landscape and have relatively little interest in the local minority people (Howard, 2013). They prefer picturesque photo opportunities such as the man-made rose garden at Ham Rong and the Thac Bac waterfall. While they tend only to visit the villages closest to Sa Pa, namely Cat Cat and Ta Van, domestic tourists will often travel 20 kilometers by motorbike to visit Ta Phin. They generally do not travel further to see the villages of Ban Ho, Lao Chai or Thanh Phu. They usually spend a few hours in the villages and then return to Sa Pa. Homestay tourism is not a domestic tourist preference. They explore minority villages to see the landscape rather than to experience ethnic minorities’ lives and cultures, as Michaud and Turner (2006) note:

Kinh tourists also tend to approach the local minorities in a very set way through cultural performances prepared for touristic consumption in locations and at times fitting the tourist agenda. Very rarely will national tourists to Sa Pa take the trouble to visit a minority village and see for themselves the reality of highland life, as this would be perceived as totally unnecessary (2006: 796).

For Europeans and other westerners, visiting minority villages is the main motivation to come to Sa Pa (CCIST). To do so, they can organize trips to Sa Pa on their own, or they can book tour packages in their home country or in Hanoi. Foreigners prefer trekking to villages that are easy to reach and are conveniently accessible by road; however, some intrepid foreign tourists prefer difficult treks to remote villages. Regardless of whether the village is remote or easy to access, foreigners appreciate the homestay option. A tourist from Germany told me “homestay is an authentic experience in Sa Pa.” I did some quick interviews with tourists about their motivations for coming to Sa Pa, and it is interesting that the reasons given by foreigners were fairly similar. They wished to see and experience the countryside and lifestyles of “ethnic minority villages” and the “Hmong and Dao culture.” They were also interested in seeing how Hmong and Dao women make their handicrafts.

Differing from both domestic and western tourists, Chinese tourists are not interested in ethnic minorities or landscapes, because these features are readily available in their own country (Chan, 2008). Chinese tourists usually go to Lao Cai first through land border crossings for shopping; they are interested mostly in entertainment activities including massage and sex services (prostitution) (Grillot, 2013); they spend an afternoon in Sa Pa and then go back to China, usually before the border gate is closed at 5 pm. They seldom spend
the night in Sa Pa. My observations in Sa Pa show that Chinese tourists do not go to villages; they just walk around the town of Sa Pa, go to the market and buy some handicrafts as souvenirs. They usually come to Sa Pa on tours run by a Kinh tour guide who accompanies them from Lao Cai.

Some tour guides told me that contingents of male Chinese tourists go to Sa Pa for sex. This statement is supported by Chan’s (2008, 2009) research into the motivations of Chinese tourists in Lao Cai. These tourists usually ask their tour guide to find gai (female sex workers) for them. During my time in Sa Pa, I heard rumors about ethnic minority girls working as prostitutes; however, I could not find any evidence to support these rumors. In discussions with Kinh tour guides, I tried to find out about this practice, but these guides would not divulge any specific details about it. So for me, the question of whether girls from ethnic minorities are involved in prostitution is unanswered. In contrast, the involvement of Kinh girls in prostitution along the Chinese border is well documented (Grillot, 2013; Chan, 2005)

**Tourism policies and strategies in Sa Pa**

Lao Cai province has developed a number of local policies and strategies aiming to promote tourism in Sa Pa. The province has done so based on expressed tourist needs and in accordance with the tourism development policies, plans and strategies as defined by the Revised Master Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development in Vietnam (2001–2010). The government expects “tourism to develop swiftly in the next decade, becoming a ‘spearhead’ economic sector of the national economy, while playing an important long term role in the sustainability of the country’s culture, economy, environment and state security” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2001: 12). Policies and strategies in Sa Pa’s tourism development emphasize promoting and representing ethnic cultures and local people to tourists, developing and preserving culture for tourism, and promoting street vendors and “civilized lifestyle” policies in tourism.

*Promoting and representing ethnic cultures and local people*

The predominant perspectives of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam have been the state-imposed views that they are “backward”, “ignorant” and “remote” (World Bank, 2009). However, since Vietnam is on the way to becoming the next “Asian tiger”, the state does not wish to show this image to the outside world. Instead, ethnic minorities are selectively included in images of a “multi-ethnic” nation whereby the nation is reminded of how far they
have come (Taylor and Jonson, 2002). Aiming to highlight this shift in rhetoric, promotional tourist materials regulated by the state present ethnic minorities in Sa Pa, specifically the Hmong people, as having their own “primitive” cultures, while at the same time becoming more developed, as in these two advertisements published on the website of the Sa Pa Tourist Information Center.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Through small H'mong villages to Ta Phin – 1 day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Itinerary:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The walk commence(s) from Sa Pa on a trail running through the beautiful gardens and lush pine forests. You will then pass through the Black H'mong ethnic minority village of Ma Tra, a very small village hiding away from civilization. The walk continues through rice paddy fields and spectacular scenery. During the day you will also be able to visit a local school. You will enjoy your lunch before arriving at the Ta Phin commune. Here you can hear about the unmixed cultural life of Black H'mong and red Dao minorities, two largest ethnic groups in the area. You can recognize them by dressing while they are both very famous of handicraft. You will enjoy walking among local people. The trip also offers you the opportunity to visit the local houses as well as visit the local caves.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sa Pa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sa Pa would be of considerably less interest without the Hmong and Dao people, the largest ethnic groups in the region. The billowing red headdresses of the Red Dao are visible all over town, a surreal sight amid the accelerating development. The Hmong are more numerous. Their villages may look medieval but most have a mobile phone and an email address to stay in touch. Traditionally, they were the poorest of the poor, but have rapidly learnt the spirit of free enterprise. Most of the ethnic minorities have had little formal education and are illiterate, yet all the youngsters have a good command of English, French and a handful of other languages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If possible, try to visit during the week, when Sa Pa is less crowded and more intimate. Crowds flock to Sa Pa for the Saturday market, but a smaller market is held everyday. There is plenty to see on weekdays, and there are lots of interesting villages within walking distance of the center.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 Downloaded from http://Sa Pa-tourism.com/en,4,23,through-small-hmong-communes-to-ta-phìn-1-day accessed 18/03/2013

21 Downloaded from http://Sa Pa-tourism.com/en_home_tic_419_introducing-Sa Pa accessed 18/03/2013
From these two advertisements, we can see that the images of the Hmong are embedded in “medieval society” with communities living in small villages “hiding away from civilization”. This state-sanctioned information refers to modern and commercial aspects of ethnic villages and people at the same time. These representations serve dual purposes. First, they provide a particular image to attract tourists, because one of the tourists’ interests is discovering exotic images and cultures. Therefore, tourism should serve to reinforce “shared understanding of cultural difference” (Lutz and Collins, 1993: 2). The Hmong people are portrayed as an ethnic minority for tourist consumption. Second, these representations also reflect the “success” of state policies related to ethnic minorities. A section about cultivation and husbandry in the Sa Pa Tourism Travel Handbook highlights that “at present, nomadic cultivation practiced by the Hmong and Dao is completely abandoned” (Pham Hoang Hai, 2004). It is well known that such agricultural practices are discouraged by the state (Rambo and Jamieson, 2003). And as illustrated in the advertisements above, the Hmong now are catching up with development; for example, they own phones and access modern technology (email). This message highlights the merits and effectiveness of the state development policies and promotes the process of selective cultural preservation, which aims at erasing supposedly “backward” practices (like swidden agriculture). Representing the Hmong people in such way has created barriers between developed and undeveloped people and between majority and minority groups (Messier, 2010) and therefore it gives the minorities lower status than the Kinh.

Tourist companies in Sa Pa try to maintain this imagined developed/undeveloped dichotomy set up by the state in their promotion of tours to ethnic minority villages. It is worth mentioning that Vietnamese media are under strict censorship. In particular, the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Information and the Ministry of Information and Communications are required to censor promotional content before they are published and disseminated. In addition, the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism under the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism is responsible for implementing the government’s tourism policies at all levels – including tourism promotion. Under this regime, tourist companies must comply with regulations on tourism promotion, including how they are required to represent images of the local people to the outside world. Tourism companies must maintain precise representations of minority groups in the region to ensure the profitability of their operations. Brochures and posters about trekking reinforce the interest of travel agents.
in minority groups. Tours proposed by travel agents must be in line with the regulations of the Vietnamese state. As such, trekking to ethnic villages is now advertised in the tourism promotional material because it provides an opportunity for the state to showcase its ethnic development plans, while also providing opportunities for ethnic minorities to participate in tourism-related work. The extent of their participation in tourism is still an issue of contention, which I will further discuss in the next section.

Tourist marketing materials on Sa Pa mainly feature females wearing their so-called ethnic or traditional dress. The typical Hmong representation is of a young woman wearing a traditional colorful dress while she weaves dances or sells handicrafts in the market. These advertisements have imposed a clear, gendered identity on Hmong people that focuses on Hmong women rather than Hmong men. In promotional tourist materials, ethnic women in general, and Hmong women in particular, are marketed as images to promote their culture and encourage tourists to visit Sa Pa. A similar use of images of Hmong women for tourism can be found in China where Miao women (the Hmong are called Miao in China, see Chapter 2) are represented in a way that makes them exotic and erotic to Han and foreign tourists (Schein, 2000). This feminized image has led to “women being represented as exoticized commodities which are there to be experienced” (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000: 891). Overall, there is an overrepresentation of women in tourism advertisements – not just Hmong women. (see Pritchard & Morgan 2000 for more examples). A comprehensive analysis of advertising imagery confirms “the range of images used to present women has been and continues to be very narrow” (Enloe, 1989).

These representations clearly imply both exclusion and inclusion of Hmong people based on the state’s interests. Stereotyped images of Hmong people are strategically used by the state and tour companies for tourism promotion in Sa Pa, thus they are included in certain activities that fascinate and attract tourists’ curiosity. At the same time these images, both intentionally and unintentionally, exclude Hmong women from certain tourism activities by imposing stereotyped gender roles on them, and this happens because of Kinh tourist practices. Tourism promotion materials play a vital role in creating and maintaining everyday perceptions of accepted roles for women and men; women are restricted to certain forms of employment that are supposed to be suitable for them and for the tourists to observe. Pritchard (2001), in his research about tourism and representation in Great Britain, argues that female images in tourism promotional materials
serve not only to distort reality, but also, by maintaining sexist stereotypes, to constrain female identities. Such images play a vital role in creating and maintaining everyday perceptions of accepted roles for women and men— and if the majority of images are limiting or even degrading they significantly contribute towards legitimizing such images (Pritchard, 2001: 91).

For local people, these representations provide a space to engage with the state. The tourists’ fascination with certain activities and work based on the state’s representations provide the employment options available to them. They know how to provide the activities the tourists are looking for. For example, in examining tourism promotional materials and work opportunities in Hoa Binh, Allan (2011) indicates that after repeatedly seeing tourists’ fascination with stilt houses and Thai clothing and weaving, villagers gradually came to appreciate the value of these types of houses and clothing. Therefore, they promote services to offer tourists opportunities “to stay in a stilt house” to experience “authentic” and “traditional music and dance” and to buy “[Thai] silk clothing and weaving” (Allan, 2011: 115). In China, Miao performers portray the image of the Miao that is presented in promotional materials, including acting out their alleged backwardness if tourists like it (Schein, 2000). This behavior is due neither to coercion by the state nor unqualified consensus with the state, but rather the consensus brought about by the need to act in their own interests.

Tourists who visit Sa Pa seek the ethnic ideal presented in tourism promotional materials, in particular, the “ethnic minority villages” and their Hmong and Dao inhabitants and “culture.” This reinforces the notion that Hmong women are “traditional”, “noble” and “savage,” and it makes their handicrafts, like weaving, a focal point. Therefore, Hmong women engage with the policies and regulations emanating from the district by choosing to work as handicraft vendors and tour guides. I will return to this issue in Chapters 4 and 5 to explore how Hmong women develop their choices and practical strategies to engage with the state to ensure their success in the market place in Sa Pa, but before I do so, let us consider other policies and strategies of tourism development in Sa Pa.

Developing and preserving culture for tourism

In 2002, the Lao Cai People’s Committee approved a project entitled, “Preserving, developing and promoting cultural aspects of ethnic minorities in Lao Cai in the period 2001–2005 and to 2010” in accordance with the state’s policies on promoting heritage for tourism. From 2001 to 2005 the tourism promotion involved district officials compiling an inventory of tangible and intangible heritage markers of six ethnic groups living in its territory. The aim
was to identify one historical-cultural site to be promoted as a tourist destination for each ethnic group: Hmong, Dao, Giay, Tay and Nung. Simultaneously, specific cultural features (e.g. handicrafts, cuisine, jewelry, knitting, and herbal medicine) from each ethnic group and locality were identified as promotional features. In addition, cultural performances of ethnic groups in Sa Pa such as Giay, Hmong, Red Dao were planned to be promoted with the aim of bringing economic benefits to the local people through cultural performances associated with the revival of festivals and ceremonies. In 2002, within framework of a project “Revival and promotion of traditional festivals and ceremonies among the minority peoples of Ta Van commune, Sa Pa” implemented by the Vietnamese Ethnic Minorities Arts and Literature Association with the sponsor of Ford Foundation and the cooperation of the Sa Pa People’s Committee, a Ta Van commune cultural group was established to provide cultural performances to tourists. However, little success was recognized because of lack of support from local authorities, as Howard indicates “…while government officials, as was expected, were positive about promoting Ta Van’s performances, support for the idea remained lukewarm” (Howard, 2013:14). Recently, the Sa Pa Cultural Center, a local government organization, organizes cultural shows every day for tourists. However, as I argue in the next chapter, the participation of ethnic minorities was limited due to biased attitudes of Kinh organizers.

The second phase of this project focused on erasing the “backward” and “primitive” cultural practices and customs of ethnic groups in Sa Pa. Practices and customs defined as backward and primitive were underage marriage, Hmong funeral ceremonies, the free ranging cattle of Hmong people, and healing rituals. The reason for abolishing these practices, according to an official from the Department of Culture and Information, was that they inhibit the development of society in general and tourism development in particular. For instance, practices such as Hmong funeral ceremonies, in which the body of the deceased is kept in the home from five to seven days, may cause health problems. In addition, the long days of ritual are costly and wasteful. Only when these practices and customs are dropped, the official said, will poverty be reduced and ethnic groups have a better life. This selective cultural preservation policy reflects the message of the state with the predominant view of ethnic minorities today as developmentally disadvantaged and among the nation’s poor and hungry. According to this view, the lowland Viet are the center, the cultural standard and model of development for all ethnic groups (Taylor 2004, 2007, 2008). In addition, the Kinh see themselves as charged with the duty of helping the minorities to “catch up” to the dominant culture, because they hold the view that the “cultural level” and educational levels of
minorities are lower than their own (Salemink, 1997, 2000, 2003). Therefore, projects of
selective preservation are implemented by Kinh party cadres, local authorities and state
officials who claim to know exactly what should be preserved and what should be done away
with (Salemink, 1997)

In the case of selective preservation project in Sa Pa, as seen in the project final report,
this project is typically top-down and is an example of the “selective preservation” approach to
local people. State officials and local authorities convened no meetings with local people, made
no consultations with local heritage carriers, and held no discussions on what should be
preserved and what should be promoted. Nor did they explore the potential benefits of including
local communities in the production of authentic products for tourism. Local voices and
agencies relating to the commodification of local culture were virtually absent in official
documents and discourse. The way of implementation was to educate local people about what
they should do and compelling them to follow what had been decided.

Once the state officials defined what features were to be preserved, the cultural
practices, rituals and festivals and local historical and cultural monuments were validated
through formal investigation and recognition by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism,
and deemed “national cultural heritage.” Upon recognition as “national cultural heritage,”
these features become the cultural property of the state. Cultural practices are then reified and
separated from the everyday lives of the “cultural carriers” who embody that heritage
(Salemink, 2013).

In addition to defining what cultural practices should be kept or erased, the state also
depicts what “the nice culture and the good behavior” should look like by defining what
cultural features should be preserved and displayed for tourism. Selected minority traditions
such as Dao traditional marriages and Hmong handicrafts are defined with the help of
“outside experts” and some have been filmed to broadcast on national television channels
such as VTV522 (Messier and Michaud 2012). The purpose of film broadcasts, according to
Salemink (2003) is to:

seek … to improve cultural standards at community level throughout the country by
means of activities in the fields of mass culture, propaganda and advertising, … It
provides guidance to and oversees the activities of provincial and municipal cultural

---

22 VTV5 is one of the official national VTV network. The broadcasts of VTV5 are screened in 13 different
ethnic minority languages. Broadcasts include short documentaries and national and local news coverage. The
best programmes of VTV5 production are rebroadcast as weekly ethnic minority shows on VTV1 (national news
and politics) (Messier and Michaud 2012: 3)
centres throughout the country and co-ordinates the design and nationwide distribution of government propaganda posters (Salemink, 2003: 284-285)

However, it is important to mention that cultural practices are modified for the purposes of media presentations and representations. For example, Messier and Michaud analyze the filming of a Hmong blacksmith in Sa Pa who produces utilitarian tools such as knives and hoes for Hmong villages. They find that the timing of practices is carefully reorganized according to the requirements of the film director and cameraman. Certain cultural and economic practices are limited, adjusted or simply eradicated (Messier and Michaud, 2012:12).

This practice is similar to that in Guizhou, China. Oakes (1998) describes how authorities in a small ethnic village in Guizhou “sought to fossilize certain aspects of minzu (ethnic) cultural tradition, drawing distinct boundaries around local customs, fixing them in time and space and ensuring that they remain encased as exhibits” (Oakes, 1998: 179). The “selective preservation” policy, as Salemink (2003, 2013) argues, is as “folklorization” that decontextualizes cultural practices from their cultural settings and re-contextualizes them for a different public for whom esthetic meanings are paramount.

It is not clear how effective this policy is; however, it is obvious that facing these tough challenges within the framework of state power, local people still retain agency over their cultural representation on a local level and they react to this in different ways that are manifested in their involvement in representing their culture to the outsider. I will discuss this in more detail in later chapters. In addition, local authorities are still complaining that “backward” and “primitive” practices have not been eradicated yet. During my time of working as a volunteer for Oxfam Italia (OI)²³ in 2012, OI implemented of their own volition a two-day workshop on cultural diversity in order to: (1) share basic concepts of diversity and cultural diversity and what it means to respect diversity and cultural diversity; (2) discuss indications of poor cultural respect, its causes and consequences; (3) develop recommendations and action plans to eliminate misunderstandings and prejudice against cultural differences at the individual, organizational and community levels (and possibly develop a code of conduct – according to Decree 05/CP on ethnic minorities); and (4) create a mini-forum within the workshop for different stakeholders to voice their views issues and discuss solutions. However, after many discussions with the Department of Culture, Sport and

²³ For Oxfam Italia, see more in Chapters 3, 5 and 7
Tourism of Lao Cai province (DCST), the workshop became a “place” where “outside experts”, district and local authorities educated ethnic minorities about “bad” and “good” cultural practices, and local people today still express disagreement (though their voices are limited) with the ideas about eradicating their “backward” cultural practices. I will not discuss here the interaction between the OI and DCST as it is not the aim of this study, but the above workshop reveals how much the state wants to control cultural resources and impose its ideas of modernity on local cultural owners.

Ethnic people in general and the Hmong people in particular have testified to the way the government looks down on them and they have recognized the importance of culture in their lives. Ga, a Hmong man, argues that every ethnic group has their own “logic” for why they keep their traditional customs. In their view, some customs might have faded away for various reasons but some must continue. He says that:

We are often criticized as trying to keep backward customs because they take time, waste money, and may cause hygienic problems to the community. Some poor households even fall into debts after their parents’ funeral ceremony. But why can’t we drop it? The answer is simple: Because we need to show our deep filial duty to parents. If we don’t follow the customs, we will be denounced by the community as “ungrateful wretches” to our late parents.

Criticizing the state’s authoritarian intervention into local culture, Lu, a Hmong man from Cat Cat village, explained to me that that it is hard to quit the customs that have originated through the long history of ethnic groups, but such customs could be adapted to new environments and social conditions. He argues that in reality, the Hmong funeral ceremony has been simplified over the last few decades. The Hmong funeral ceremony today has been shortened to one or two days instead of five to seven days as it was before. The most important consideration, in his view, is that the local community makes such changes voluntarily rather than have them imposed from the top down by an external force. What he worries about is that the labels imposed on ethnic minorities through totalitarian interference from local authorities and outsiders will never yield positive results.

The state policy tends to homogenize ethnic cultural diversity rather than respect differences. The Hmong, for instance, need their shaman (thay cung) for their whole life cycle. Shamanism, in the eyes state policy makers, is some kind of bad evil and superstitious activities but we, the Hmong, look at shamans as community intellectuals whose knowledge
and roles are fully admired.\(^{24}\)

Lu feels that viewing ethnic customs and practices as backward and primitive is unacceptable. Not all ethnic customs and practices are static and conservative. In fact, some practices have been changed by the community.

*Ethnic tourism and community-based tourism*

In 2001, the government began focusing on sustainable tourism development, such as community-based tourism and responsible tourism. Sustainable tourism is designed to “spearhead” a burgeoning sector of the national economy, while simultaneously “playing an important long term role in the sustainability of the country’s culture, economy, environment and state security” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2001: 12). In line with this official state vision, the province of Lao Cai created a sustainable tourism department with the support of SNV (a Netherlands quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization or quango in the field of sustainable development) and the IUCN (World Conservation Union) in 2001. Out of this partnership came the “Support for Sustainable Tourism Development in Sa Pa district” project, which was implemented in collaboration with Sa Pa District People’s Committee (Sa Pa DPC) and other key stakeholder groups in the region. The four main project components were: (1) a tourist fee system; (2) responsible trekking activities; (3) a tourism information and service centre; and (4) capacity building for various stakeholders (Sa Pa DPC, IUCN and SNV 2001). To implement the project, a new tourism organization, the Center of Culture, Information, Sport and Tourism of Sa Pa (CCIST) was set up (This center has been renamed the Center of Culture, Information and Tourism and is still in operation). The Tourism Information and Promotion Center was established in 2003 with the purpose of providing tourist information, promoting Sa Pa as a tourist destination, coordinating training for local organizations and businesses, and supporting the development and implementation of tourism practices in an effort to alleviate poverty.

Ban Ho commune was the first pilot community-based tourism site developed by the Support for Sustainable Tourism Development in Sa Pa District. A community-based tourism management board was established in 2004 to plan, operate and monitor tourism activities in the village. This board, along with the Sa Pa District, constructed new trekking trails and

\(^{24}\) Shamans are crucial to Hmong culture. Hmong shamanism is, strictly speaking, not a religious domain but rather a form of healing. Shamans act as helpers to restore the patient’s body image by calling upon the spiritual sphere through trance practice. One kind of shamanism requires the shaman to enter a trance, and the other kind does not require trances. The first kind of shamanism cannot be learned but is imposed on the shaman by supernatural beings. And shaman spirits are usually passed on from one generation to the next (Tomforde 2006).
initiated community-based homestay services at Tay villages. The project was reported to be successful in an evaluation published by SNV as it achieved its goals. However, the reality is not always positive because minority groups are often marginalized when larger issues are discussed. They are asked to participate in meetings, workshops, and training courses after all decisions have been made. In addition, their representation in the formal bodies of the project such as the Tourism Support Board and the Project Coordination Committee is low or even non-existent (Thernstrom, 2002). Su, a Ban Ho man in his fifties, said to me “they [foreigners and district local authorities] came and asked us to do different things without having consulted us”. In fact, only a few households with powerful financial resources are involved in providing tourist services such as homestays in Ban Ho, and Ban Ho villagers do their tourist business in their own way, with no management board. The fee system for tourists now belongs to the CCIST without any involvement of local people.

After implementing the Ban Ho project, the Sa Pa District Committee, under the guidelines and guidance of the Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism of Lao Cai Province, continues to implement community-based tourism in other villages. So far, twelve villages have been promoted as destinations for ethnic, community-based tourism according to criteria for so-called “cultural villages.” Four of these are the Hmong communes of San Sa Ho, Ta Van, Lao Chai and Sin Chai. Ta Phin, another of the “community-based site” has both Hmong and Dao inhabitants. As in Ban Ho, the community does not manage the “community-based tourism.” These “community-based tourism” activities are managed and exploited by the Sa Pa Department Culture and Information and/or private companies.

There is a fee system in place at the entrance of each community-based tourism site. According to an official from the Department of Revenue, tourist fees are invested in tourism development, particularly in ethnic villages. However, nobody knows exactly where this money goes. The roads from Sa Pa to community-based tourism sites such as San Sa Ho and Ta Phin have deteriorated severely in recent years, but no restoration plan has been made. Plastic bags, bottles and trash litter the roads because there are no garbage bins at tourism sites. When tourists enter these sites, they are provided with limited information and services. Generally, the only information they get are signs warning them to not give cash to the minorities. This clearly creates negative images of the minorities in tourists’ eyes. At each ticket window, as many as five or six employees are responsible for selling and checking

25 According to the report, the project has reached its goals of: 1) introducing a tourism fee for visitors 2) increasing incomes by providing tourist products and services (trekking activities and homestays), and 3) improving the capacity for sustainable tourism development.
tickets. All of these employees are Kinh people, and as the local people point out “they are descendants of local authorities” (*con ong chau cha*). They receive a decent monthly salary of VND4-5 million (US$250).

The Tourist Information Center was set up to act as an intermediary between tourists and local service suppliers in rural villages surrounding Sa Pa. It has supported local villagers in developing, marketing and selling community-based tourist products. In reality though, as a tourist’s note in the guest book at the center states, the Center is now “where tours are sold”. In fact, many of the officials working in this center own their own hotels and provide tour services. One officer told me “all tourists looking for hotels and/or tours are introduced to these hotels.” Hotel and tour agency owners who want a share of this market have to pay a commission for each business introduced by the Center. The Center works, therefore for “the pockets of local officials and other Kinh people in Sa Pa,” as a Tay homestay owner in Ta Van said.

![Figure 6: Entrance to Cat Cat tourism-based village](image)

The Hmong village of Cat Cat in San Sa Ho, a community-based tourism village
famous for its traditional handicrafts, is now operated by the Cat Cat Tourism Company – a private company owned by Kinh people. The entrance to this village is blocked by a checkpoint and tourists have to buy tickets (VND 30,000, about US$ 1.50 for Vietnamese people and VND 40,000, about US$ 2.00 for foreigners) if they want to enter the village. If people who are not local villagers, but are also not tourists, for example anyone coming to the village on business, want to enter without paying, they need to have a letter of introduction from authorities stating their purpose for entering the village. The revenue goes to the company and the local villagers receive nothing from it. Only some households in the village are chosen by the company for tourist visits, and only one to two women are chosen to give weaving demonstrations. After passing through the checkpoint and buying tickets, visitors pass by handicraft shops, restaurants and mini-theatres that host ethnic singing and dancing performances. The tourism company controls the income from all of these ethnic attractions, and the participation of local villagers is limited. Only a few households, located on the main road, can sell their own handicrafts.

When I asked a district official about the decision to allow private companies to manage ethnic tourist sites as opposed to giving control to the local people, he explained that because ethnic people, especially the Hmong, have very little formal education, and no knowledge of management, they are not able to organize the affairs of their own village. He said that a company with better-educated staff will maximize resource use, providing more benefits for both the company and local residents. This official believes that the life of the people in Cat Cat village has improved significantly in recent years thanks to the tourist company. His reason for believing this is that household income in this village has doubled since their economy has switched from agriculture to tourism. In fact, though, this is not the case. The Cat Cat company’s total ticket sales revenue in 2010 was more than VND 8 billion (US$ 400,000). Depending on actual work performed, the average monthly salary for villagers who participate in ethnic tourism, such as weavers, was VND 300,000 to 1,000,000 (US$15 to $50). Mrs. Tung, a sixty-seven-year-old Hmong woman, who has been working for Cat Cat Tourism Company since 2011 complained:

I am asked to work for the company as a weaving demonstrator because I know Hmong handicraft and textile very well. My house is chosen as a visiting house because it is an authentic, traditional Hmong house. Then two neighbor women come to my house every day for work. Whenever tourists come, we show them how to make hemp, how to do embroidery and how to make Hmong traditional clothes. The work is
not very hard, because it is daily work that Hmong women usually do. However, it takes us a lot of time. During peak tourism season, from April until September, we have to work from early morning till late afternoon and also on weekends. We even have no time for lunch. The payment we receive from the company is VND 1,000,000 (US$ 50) per month. If we don’t work for one day, VND 40,000 (US$ 2) will be deducted from our monthly salary. We don’t know how much the company gets per month, but from the large number of tourists coming to the village every day I think the revenue is a lot. And only one entrance ticket is enough to pay my salary for a day.

It clear that community-based tourism in Sa Pa is using local resources for the benefit of the state and the private sector rather than for the benefit of the local people, as Michaud (1997) indicates:

The peoples’ committee’s vision of tourism development focuses on leisure and recreation for the wealthy nationals and its activities are based in town, comfortable state owned hotels, sport facilities, and foreign investment like the Victoria hotel…and they show no visible intention of genuinely involving the minorities in any other ways than as occasional providers for basic amenities and services like any other inhabitant of the rural area of the province (Michaud 1997: 2).

It is not only the private companies, but also the local government policies and regulations, that create barriers which prevent ethnic groups, in particular the Hmong, from accessing these opportunities. These barriers increase the inequality between the Hmong and other groups. Homestay is one income source for ethnic residents but it is difficult to estimate the fluctuating monthly income this provides as it depends on the volume of tourists. Homestays are permitted in the two villages of Ta Van and Ta Phin, where Hmong people live. However, only the Giay in Ta Van and the Dao in Ta Phin are allowed to offer homestay services, while the Hmong are locked out of this business. This is not because of any official policies in Sa Pa nor any other official policies in Vietnam against the Hmong, since there are no official documents mentioning it; however, in the case of Sa Pa there is an implicit agreement that tour companies do not bring tourists to stay in Hmong houses based on the claim that they are poor, unclean and have bad hygiene. However, there are no concrete criteria for homestays and from my observations, conditions in homestays in Ta Van and Ban Ho are of a similar standard to conditions in Hmong houses. In reality, the underlying reason for this discrimination is related to religion-based discriminatory policies, masked by a stated concern for the security of foreign tourists. Recently, the conversion of Hmong people to
Protestantism has put them in a vulnerable position. Despite the fact that the Protestantism has been officially recognized nationwide since 2005, local government discourse on Protestant conversion and evangelical activities is rather negative. These discourses associate Protestantism with foreign and transnational forces that question or endanger national sovereignty and the regime (see Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011). The ethnic minorities are now viewed with more suspicion by the state, since there were uprisings against the socialist state in 2001 and 2004 when the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands demonstrated against their dispossession and cultural disenfranchisement (McElwee, 2004; Taylor, 2004, 2007; UNHCR, 2002).

The government is also worried about missionaries posing as tourists, and contact with these missionary-tourists would imply potential political problems for local authorities. Foreign tourists are therefore not allowed to stay overnight in Hmong villages, even though these villages are located in the commune where homestays are booming. Hmong villages are sometimes even blocked from contact with outsiders during the peak tourist season, the “sensitive time” when there are many festivals. For example, when I visited Sa Pa during the traditional Tet and Hmong festivals in 2012, I had to pass through a checkpoint 10 kilometers from Sa Pa. Everybody on the road, both Vietnamese and foreigners, was asked to show their ID card and/or passport. Every car going to Sa Pa center was checked carefully. Beyond that checkpoint, there was further screening, and some Hmong villages were barred to foreigners and only Vietnamese with ID cards could enter them. The police and army were everywhere. “We could not enjoy our festivals joyfully. They [Kinh people] even oversee our festivals”, one Hmong man from Lao Chai said.

While many tourists come to Hmong villages for their distinctive cultural attractions, Hmong people cannot get economic benefits from tourism services, while others do. This marginalization is apparently a direct outcome of local government policy. The Hmong’s exposure to global connections through tourism and religion places them at the top of the list of groups that the local government views as suspicious.

Street vendors and “civilized lifestyle” policies

As illustrated in the opening vignette of this chapter, the local government in Sa Pa is attempting to introduce legislation to standardize street vending practices in the villages. The local government considers this practice harmful for tourism development because it breaks the rules of civilized etiquette and is counter to the local and national identity which the state wishes to see portrayed. Therefore, a number of measures to stop this activity were applied
during the period 2006–2011. In 2005, a project called “Consolidating state governance in order to solve the situation selling and pestering that bothers tourists and affects order and urban civilization” was implemented. Project measures included establishing new textile cooperatives, constructing retail areas, and making the second floor of the two-story Sa Pa market available to ethnic retailers. Currently, Kinh traders occupy the most accessible areas on the first floor of this market, while, according to official documents, the second floor is for ethnic minority traders. However, according to Hmong and Dao women, tourists rarely come to the second floor because it is very small and there are too many shops and kiosks downstairs and on the street. In addition, as Michaud and Turner (2002) indicate, while the market activities concentrate on industrialized consumer goods, “montagnards” cannot fit into this system and will not be ever able to compete successfully with Kinh traders who are now firmly entrenched in Sa Pa. Although ethnic minorities attract the tourists to Sa Pa, they receive almost nothing from it, as Michaud and Turner point out:

It is definitely the latter [montagnards] who bring international tourist fame to Sa Pa, while it is the former [Kinh people] who capitalize on the momentum local trade has gained from this economic bonanza. Economic and social relationships between the two set of actors remain rather limited, with the most of the economic benefits being channeled in one directions (Michaud and Turner 2002: 98).

Under this policy of “urban civilized style”\(^\text{26}\), vendors who follow, pull and nag tourists are to be detained and their merchandise confiscated. After the initial week, the Hmong and Dao women were all selling their merchandise in the newly constructed retail area in Sa Pa town. However, a few weeks later, they came back to the streets because, as one Hmong woman from Ta Van said,

“We failed to sell anything. How can we sell something to the tourists since the retail areas are very far from commune center? Nobody passes by. Sitting for the whole day without any penny is wasting time, isn’t it?” So I asked her about selling her products on the second floor of the town market. She replied, “Oh, do you think it is easy to have to sit there? The second floor is enough for 15 to 20 people, but we as Hmong and Dao we are thousand, thousand people. Only women who have connections with local authorities can have a place in the town market. In addition, how can I manage to

\(^{26}\) “Civilized style” is a policy introduced by the Vietnamese State and Party after the *Doi moi* of Vietnam. Under this policy, a set of “civilized styles” were identified according to specific contexts, for example civilized style in public places, civilized style in marriage, civilized style at work, etc. The main point in the policy of urban civilized style as manifested in Sa Pa project is “no street vendors in the streets”.

86
run a stand in the market? With no money, I cannot buy a table to display my merchandise and invest money for more products.”

This short conversation illuminates the disadvantages and ultimate failure of the retail campaign.

When the local government realized that they would not be able to remove Hmong and Dao women from streets, their softer and more tolerant policy was to allow them to sell their merchandise in the busy the main square. From 2006 until 2010, the main square became a “new market” for Hmong and Dao people, and their work seemed stable. They went to the main square every day and displayed their merchandise on pieces of cloth or nylon on the ground. They did not have to follow tourists, since a lot of tourists visited and bought their handicrafts, earrings and necklaces.

This situation changed in 2011 when the local government once again considered street vending as a major issue on the political agenda. Street vending was regarded as a social problem that needed to be eradicated. A new project, but with the same objective and content, was launched. Similar measures and actions were taken, but they were stricter this time. A car with a megaphone went around Sa Pa town saying how harmful street vending was. The police patrolled every street of Sa Pa to chase away street vendors. Hmong and Dao people were not even allowed to sell their products in the main square. “The main square”, an official from Tourism Information Center stated, “used to be the place for cultural activities. It is the face of Sa Pa, and therefore it cannot be a market”.

The policy of suppressing street vending can be seen also on the streets of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, where it is not an ethnic issue. Hanoi is becoming so “civilized” that all wet markets are banned, and people are forced to visit supermarkets. However, it is noteworthy that many other kinds of mobile vending on the street of Sa Pa operated by Kinh people, such as selling fruit and other foods, are not strictly forbidden. Because of this ethnic favoritism, the Hmong and Dao spoke out about how this local government “abuse” and “repression” has made their lives even more difficult. They complained to me that the local government did not offer appropriate solutions to their situation, because the new markets were located on the periphery, outside the tourist center, and therefore generated no business for them. Ultimately, they felt that the local government was not trying to help them but had increasingly marginalized them and even criminalized their livelihood activities.

Many vendors have testified to being mentally and physically exhausted because they have to hear unpleasant or even rude words and run from local agents who are constantly
hunting them down to chase them away. Vendors point out the local authorities who used to let them sell in the main square are now aggressively and brutally trying to remove them. That is why Hmong and Dao women have considered this local policy as “an abuse”. The local government does not want to understand them but to chase them away from Sa Pa.

When I came back to Sa Pa in 2013 on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Sa Pa tourism, the main square in Sa Pa was coated with cement with a big stage in the middle. The main square has become a place for district festival activities. In addition, new handicraft markets had been constructed in some communes such as Ta Van and Ta Phin; however, they were all abandoned. The market in Ta Phin occupies a small space with small stalls close together, while the market in Ta Van is in fact a shop with a thatched roof. According to local people, no traders are seen in the market even when they are encouraged by local authorities. Sa, my close friend in Ta Phin said that:

It is a small market and only for handicraft. We, as Hmong people, like to go to the market where we can buy many things for our household, where we can meet each other, and where we can sit together for chatting. We go to market not only for buying and selling, but also for playing.

From Sa’s story, it is clear that local authorities do not understand or acknowledge that for ethnic minorities, going to the market is not simply for buying and selling; it is a hobby and a cultural activity. Traditionally, market gatherings were a key way to meet and court future marriage partners. Moreover, these arenas of social interaction were important for building, strengthening and renewing social networks, as well as for exchanging information, such as about agricultural practices, political matters, or simply gossip (Michaud 2006). These significant marketplace functions beyond their clear economic purpose have been maintained up to the present. As I will show in the following chapters, for Hmong women going to the market and being involved in tourism-related activities is not just a matter of achieving economic goals; it satisfies personal desires and needs (see Chapters 6 and 7). In addition, ethnic minorities only take up marketplace opportunities in flexible arrangements while giving priority to their agricultural activities, and a market with no social exchanges is not their choice (Bonnin and Turner, 2014). By ignoring the cultural dimensions of the market and failing to recognise the need for flexibility in the work activities of ethnic minorities, local officials prevent ethnic minorities from engaging in economic activities.

The case of street vending is different from the case of ethnic minority representation in one key respect: the coercion. The actions used to remove ethnic minorities from the
streets, including their relocation to new constructed retail areas, and the use of detentions and confiscations, appear to be coercive. Street vendors whom I spoke with emphasized that they were not opposed to the state’s original policy, but the problem was their exclusion from the beneficial aspects of the markets. They were being disadvantaged in the locations they were provided due their lack of access to tourists. The vendors also objected to the state’s enforcement measures, including detainment and confiscation. Because they want to continue their work, street vendors resist the state’s policy.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown that various state policies have reflected the unequal power structure dominated by the major population of Kinh people and those with political connections. I have shown that this imbalance is having adverse impacts on the Hmong. These policies have created a set of exclusions against Hmong women. The advertisements which focus on representing ethnic minorities as “backward”, “primitive” and “traditional” have imposed stereotyped images on ethnic minorities in general and on Hmong people in particular. At the same time, the overrepresentation of women in tourism marketing materials has maintained and reinforced prescribed gender roles. These representations thus work to limit the employment options available to Hmong women, and exclude them from certain other activities at the same time.

Various tourism and modernization policies have further marginalized the Hmong. These policies have proven inappropriate, ineffective, and counter-productive because they are based upon the ethnocentric perspectives of policy-makers and practitioners at all levels. These policies clearly illustrate both ethnic and gender discrimination toward Hmong women. The ethnic and gender favoritism at work here clearly allow dominant groups to benefit from the efforts of minorities. Stereotypes of Hmong people which frame them as lacking the skills needed to make sound business and management decisions have been used to enable private interests to control community-based tourism in Sa Pa. A policy of religion-based discrimination, masquerading as a concern for the welfare of foreign tourists, and the “civilized lifestyle” policy are being used to exclude the Hmong from aspects of the tourism industry. Not only have these policies failed to empower the Hmong, they have also allowed a dominant group to pursue their projects at the expense of Hmong people. In the next chapter, I explore how the Hmong make their decisions about how to wage the political, social, and economic battles they find themselves in, and how they respond to the limited opportunities they have for earning their livelihoods.
Chapter 5

Hmong Women in Tourism

Despite all of the state and private restrictions and regulations on the tourism industry in northern Vietnam, the Hmong women who participate in tourism-related activities are still able to make some employment-related decisions to accommodate their personal situations and affinities. Three women in particular, Song, Sung, and Chan typify three common, but very different, narratives of how Hmong women enter into and express their autonomy in this narrowly defined field.

Song

I have chosen this job because my husband works at the same company, so he can help me. My main duty is selling tours, and I normally work during office hours; however, sometimes the director requires that I also work as a tour guide. When he does, I ask my husband to work for me so that I have time to take care of our little daughter.

– Song, a twenty-three-year-old mother of a three-year-old girl working as a tour saleswoman and tour guide

Song, a pretty girl with long hair and fair complexion, is from Ta Van. Like many other Hmong girls in her village, she received a marriage proposal at the age of thirteen. She did not like her potential husband and did not want to become a wife and mother that early. To avoid this fate, she decided to go to Sa Pa with some older girls to sell handicrafts, but this meant facing pressure and accusations from her parents. She started her career selling small bags with her cousin who was also a street vendor in Sa Pa. Because Song’s cousin was already established in the business, she would buy the bags for Song to sell. At the end of each day, Song would pay her cousin back, with interest. As Song made money, she was able to buy products to re-sell on her own, and gain financial independence from her cousin.

Selling in the street meant that Song had to follow tourists around. Sometimes, she was asked to act as a guide, showing tourists the way from Sa Pa to her village. Because of these experiences trekking with tourists, Song learned English and was recruited to work for a travel agency in Sa Pa. Her work at that time was to assist tour guides on trekking trips by carrying food and supplies. Sometimes, at the request of the tour agency’s director, she acted
as an informal tour guide for tourists wishing to have a local guide. Song feels she learned a lot from this work. It taught her the essential skills of being a good guide, such as improving her English and learning how to make tourists happy. After three years working for this company, one of her Kinh colleagues opened his own tour agency and invited her to work for him. In this new position, Song took advantage of her good looks, strong command of English and communication skills, and her trekking experience. She was assigned to be a tour saleswoman, a job that Song describes as being quite light, but requiring her to occasionally act as a tour guide. Here, she met a male tour guide who later became her husband. Working in the same company, Song and her husband help and support one another. With her husband’s support, she was able to continue working even after having a baby. She has worked for this company for four years, and has no desire to change jobs. Song exemplifies the experiences of a young dynamic generation of Hmong women who are resisting early marriage by trying their utmost to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to work successfully in the labor market.

*Sung*

The Handicraft Club was established by Craft Link. Many women in my village have joined this club, and so have I. This work does not require me to go out and work all day. I have four children. I have to take care of them and do many other household chores, so I can only work one to two hours in the afternoon. Whenever I am free, I accept many orders. If I am busy with my children and housework, I don’t accept any.

– Sung, a twenty-eight-year-old Hmong woman in Ta Phin, who works for the Handicraft Club

In contrast, to Song, Sung exemplifies the middle generation of Hmong women working in tourism. Women like Sung have no experience working in tourism and are busy with family life. Generally these women receive very little help from their husbands, but are trying to earn extra income for their families by participating in handicraft clubs.

*Chan*

I have been chosen to do weaving demonstrations for tourists because my house is located on one of the Cat Cat company’s tourist routes. I am old, 80 years old, and this is a light piece of work. I can do it at my house.

– Chan, an eighty-year-old Hmong woman in Cat Cat, who works for Cat Cat Tourist Company as a weaving demonstrator.
Chan’s story echoes another common narrative of Hmong women working in tourism. Chan, and women like her are considered lucky, because they receive employment based on the simple fact that their houses are located within the boundaries of ethnic tourism sites. Companies like the Cat Cat Company that manage these ethnic tourism sites employ the women who live in these houses, excel in their handicraft skills, and also have flexible schedules. Chan, and women like her, enhance the ‘authenticity’ of the sites through their embodiment of the ethnic ideal, and therefore attract more tourists.

Hmong women like Song, Sung, and Chan choose to participate in tourism-related activities in different ways due to the opportunities available to them. These opportunities are influenced by their age, social position and socio-economic status. The women, as well as the members of their communities, view their work through gendered ideologies that influence their beliefs, norms and moral values (see Chapter 1).

This chapter will investigate how individuals choose their tourism-related activities by recounting the life histories of some Hmong women working in tourism. The aim of telling these stories is to illustrate the women’s agency in their decision-making, and to explain how they navigate their social locations that have been created by historical, economic, political, cultural and social factors.

As I explained in Chapter 1, agency, as analyzed in this research, includes both the agency of projects, which relates to intentions, purposes and desires to pursue a project, and agency of power on a domination/resistance continuum (Ortner, 2006). People have both powers and projects of their own. Domination and resistance are in the service of the projects they engage in to pursue meaningful goals. Ortner (2006) points out the influences of cultural meanings and structural arrangements on the dynamics of agency. In this chapter, I will show that Hmong women not only exercise their agency to take advantage of the opportunities provided by tourism in order to choose appropriate and relevant work, but also to work in their own way to minimize financial risks by disengaging themselves from the market economy which runs counter to their culture. The agency of Hmong women in choosing the jobs they do will be examined in relation to their personal backgrounds including life experiences, age and multiple social contexts embracing family, community and society at large in relation to negotiating with various actors including husbands and children (Mahler and Pessar, 2001).

**Sa Pa and Opportunities for work**

Since 1999, Sa Pa’s tourism boom has attracted many ethnic minorities looking for
employment. Ethnic women in Sa Pa engage in a variety of tourism-related activities to get income for their households. Their tourism-related activities can be divided into three main groups: (1) self-employed home-based work, (2) self-employed but working outside of the home and (3) employees working for someone else.

The majority of Hmong women are self-employed. Almost all self-employed women of both types work to create handicrafts – some as tailors in handicraft clubs, some as street vendors and some, whose houses are luckily located in “ethnic tourism” zones, can sell their handicraft at home. Recently, a small number Hmong women who were experienced street vendors with good language skills started to act as free tour guides and/or free tour guide cum street vendors (see the next sections).

In her research into highlanders working in the textile industry in Northern Vietnam, Turner (2007) identifies three textile commodity chains. The first is the local wholesaler-based trade in which Hmong women sell their second hand textiles and embroidery to Vietnamese wholesale. The second chain is cross-border trade. Vietnamese and Hmong women living near the Chinese border, mainly women from Muong Khuong and Si Ma Cai, cross into China to purchase industrially made textiles and sell their goods to other traders in Vietnamese highland markets such as Sa Pa, Pha Long and Muong Khuong, and to other Hmong women who purchase these goods to incorporate them into their textile designs. The last chain is one which is being increasingly globalized. Hmong women are asked to embroider small patches for Vietnamese and Tay shopkeepers in Sa Pa. These patches are then sewed by Vietnamese women onto larger pieces of fabric to create wall hangings or cushions.

Hmong women in Sa Pa, unlike Hmong women in other districts of Lao Cai, are not involved in the transnational handicraft trade with the Chinese. This is because Sa Pa does not have a national border gate like Muong Khuong, or auxiliary border gates like those at Pha Long and Si Ma Cai. I found that Hmong women in Sa Pa are involved in three major kinds of handicraft markets which are slightly different from those of other Hmong women in other districts of Lao Cai. Firstly, they are involved in handicraft clubs organized by Craft Link, a Vietnamese not-for-profit organization. In the 1990s, Craft Link initiated handicraft projects by setting up handicraft clubs, first in Y Linh Ho, a village of San Sa Ho commune, and then in Ta Phin. The purpose of these projects was to support targeted groups of artisans in Vietnam to help them increase the production of their traditional handicrafts, and introduce new products to customers through trade fairs, handicraft bazaars and small exhibitions. A
group of Hmong women learned to make high-quality products using their own traditional techniques with designs based on their own traditional items of clothing. They took the patterns used in the sleeves and collars of their own clothes, and the rows of fine hand stitching which border the hems of their clothes, and used them in new products such as cushions, pillows, handbags, hair bands and blankets to be sold nationally and internationally. It is notable that although Craft Link promoted handicraft production in Sa Pa, the final products made by local people for Craft Link are not distributed in local markets. Rather, they are marketed and sold mainly in Hanoi and Europe. Craft Link’s rationale for this is to target customers who have not had the opportunity to travel to Sa Pa.

The second handicraft market is for street vending. The handicrafts sold by street vendors in Sa Pa are generally made by the women who sell them. Their products are various and include almost all types of handicrafts presented in the local market. Street vendors also buy Chinese products from wholesalers from Bac Ha to meet the demands of the tourists. However, they only show these products when tourists want to see a variety of products. Explaining why they don’t show Chinese products at the beginning, Song, the woman that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, said that: “we [Hmong] want to keep our identity in the marketplace and want tourists know about our traditional handicrafts”. Through more observations and interviews, I realized that this is one of strategies that Hmong women use in order to be successful in the marketplace. I shall come back to this point in Chapter 6.

The third market is for local shops in Sa Pa and for wholesalers. The external demand for handicraft products resulted in Kinh and Tay27 people joining the handicraft business. In 1997, some Kinh people opened shops in Sa Pa (Turner, 2011). Today there are over ten shops that trade minority handicrafts on a large scale. They work in retail outlets in Sa Pa, and have a handicraft wholesale business that sells hand-made objects around the country. This venture began with Hmong women selling secondhand clothes to these Kinh and Tay shop owners. Then other Kinh and Tay shopkeepers started to design new hangings, bags and cushion covers decorated with Hmong patterns. They asked Hmong women to embroider small patterns to attach to these products and even asked them to make complete products. However, not many Hmong women are involved in this venture because the Kinh traders treat them unfairly. Research has found instances of Kinh business owners taking advantage of ethnic minorities by locking them out of higher value-added segments of trade networks.

27 Tay is an ethnic minority group in Sa Pa. The Tay have been numerous and powerful direct neighbors of the Hmong (see more in Chapter 2)
tying them into credit relationships, or paying them unfair prices for products they sell in the market (Sowerwine, 2004; Turner, 2007; McElwee, 2008; Tugualt-Lafleur and Turner, 2009; World Bank, 2009). As I will show in the Chapter 6, due to these experiences Hmong women have gradually refused to take part in this handicraft business. Those who work for others as employees are mainly tour guides and performers. They are paid on a monthly basis or on a tour-by-tour basis. Because western tourists want ethnic minority tour guides, more and more tourist companies and hotels hire Hmong and Dao, however not many Hmong women participate in this activity due to personal reasons and discrimination from employers, as I will explain in the following sections of this chapter. There only 10 or 15 Hmong who are employed by companies as tour guides according to my calculations. There are other limited opportunities for Hmong women to work as weaving demonstrators if their houses are in “community-based sites” and if they are qualified handicraft makers. Single girls and men can work as singers and/or dancers in the cultural arts presentations organized for tourists in Sa Pa, however as I will show later in this chapter, those working in these presentations have faced cultural discrimination and they now refuse to participate.

The development of tourism and the handicraft market creates enormous opportunities for Hmong women to be involved in tourism jobs. Whether they are self-employed or work as employees depends on the choices they make based on personal and societal factors and their own agency. These factors will be discussed in depth in the remaining sections of this chapter.

**Gendered work, child bearing and household chores**

Sung, the twenty-eight-year-old woman who chooses to work for the Ta Phin handicraft club when she has time away from her household chores, has been working for almost 13 years. Her thirty-year-old husband farms rice, cardamom, and orchids. The orchids generate a significant income for his family, and his earnings from cardamom and orchids have enabled them to build a big house, buy motorbikes and a TV, and support the education of their four children.

In the morning, Sung gets up at 5 am to prepare breakfast for her family. When her children go to school, she feeds the pigs and chicken, goes to market to buy food and tends the vegetable garden. Her children return from school to eat a lunch that she has prepared, and then leave again to finish the school day. Outside of harvest time when she has to work in the rice fields all day, Sung’s afternoons are generally not as busy as the mornings. It is during the afternoon that she has time to work on embroidering, feeding the chickens and preparing dinner for her family. Her children are old enough
now to play together unsupervised in the courtyard, which frees up an hour or two of her day. “I was thinking about doing something in my free time, but I could not leave my children alone at home. I had to keep an eye on my children, especially my youngest daughter”, Sung said. In 2001, a handicraft club opened with the sponsorship and technical support of Craft Link and Sung decided to join this club. At this point, Sung said ‘I decided to take orders from the Handicraft Club to do at home. This work does not affect my time for family, because I only do it when I have finished all of my household chores. In addition, I can work at home while looking after my children. Therefore, my husband has agreed to let me do it.”

Every two weeks, she goes to the club to take orders and return the finished products. The number of orders she receives and takes up depends on her free time and her ability to finish on time.

This account illustrates Sung’s concerns regarding tourism-related activity. Sung’s main priority is her household work, and does not do outside work if it impacts her main work for the family. Her ability to participate in the handicraft club is contingent on her household schedule. Sung’s priorities and employment decisions draw on a long-rooted set of rules in Hmong customs and traditions, as shown in Chapter 2, in which women are bound to reproduction and private spheres and are expected to fulfil the roles of mother and wife. Following this cultural script, working full-time outside the home is difficult for married women like Sung. Therefore, self-employed work such as handicraft tailoring, home-based demonstrations and street vending, which do not require Hmong women to work specific hours or to be supervised, are much more suitable. This description of the work conforms to my observation that women working as street vendors account for the highest percentage of Hmong women who work in the tourism industry and are self-employed.

Many Hmong women I talked to emphasized the importance of freedom. They require activities that allow them time to do housework and to rest. In making their decision about work they factor in questions of how look after their children and perform other tasks associated with their households. As self-employed workers, they can manage their own time and work when they are able. If their husband does not want them to work they can stay at home, and if they need to rest they do not wind up hurting anyone else. Sao (aged 23), who sells handicrafts at home, said: “The work is in my hands. If I want to do it and if I feel happy, I will do it. Otherwise, I can do other work instead. Also if I feel tired, I can have a rest. If I can I sell many products then I close the store early”. For those who have to travel to Sa Pa,
the issue of how to take care of children is their deepest concern, and flexibility in work hours and type of work are of the utmost importance. Khui (aged 25) has been selling handicrafts in Sa Pa for nearly two years, and said:

I have four children. I started working as a street vendor when my first daughter was eight and my youngest son was one. At that time, I asked my parents to help me out with taking care of my three children, while I carried the youngest son with me to Sa Pa. But now my parents are too weak to help me, so I cannot count on them anymore. My husband’s parents have both passed away, and I have to arrange this work by myself. I stopped doing selling for a year because I could not count on help from anybody and my husband does not want to provide care to the children. I restarted working three months ago. Now my oldest girl is ten years old; after school she can help me with cooking and playing with her siblings and they are left to take care of themselves while I go to Sa Pa for selling. However, sometimes when one of my children is sick and/or when my first child has to go to school all day, I have to stay at home to care for my children.

Khui’s story shows she lives her life within the confines of childbearing, childcare, and housework. She can work outside the home only when these chores are finished. Clearly, while tasks associated with the household like feeding poultry are easy to deal with as this can be done in the morning or after work and/or with the help from others, child bearing is a main concern that Hmong women take into account when deciding how to work.

The advantage of freedom in time management is also an important consideration for other women working in the informal sector in Vietnam and in many other countries. For example, self-employed migrant women in the Red River Delta are able to stay at home or return during periods of farm work, during festivals and in response to emergencies (like illnesses of children) (Resurreccion and Ha Thi Van Khanh, 2007). Women, therefore, can balance their work and family commitments (Palnivel and Sinthuja, 2012).

Another factor affecting the choices of Hmong women in work is the compatibility of the work with their gender roles. Weaving demonstrators and selling handicrafts are considered by both Hmong men and women to be gendered activities that are compatible with traditional female gender roles. Nearly all Hmong young girls learn to spin hemp when they are six or seven years old. Some train themselves, but most are taught by their grandmothers, mothers and sisters. In the Hmong tradition, it is commonly believed that husbands are responsible for keeping the houses beautiful and in good condition, while wives ensure that
the family wears beautiful clothes and their children are taken care of. As a result, every woman shows her skill and ability to work hard through her embroidery. “A beautiful woman is still ugly if she does not wear a beautiful costume” is a common saying of the Hmong people. Therefore, today Hmong women weave and make clothes for themselves and for other family members. Making handicrafts is the work of Hmong women, and therefore “selling handicrafts is more suitable for women than men”, Khui’s husband said. This can be an answer to the question of why only Hmong women and not Hmong men sell handicrafts in the street. This pattern is present in Hmong societies throughout Southeast Asia and China where the production of textiles, embroideries and clothing is undertaken almost solely by women and these activities remain important to Hmong women throughout their lives (Schneider, 1987; Van Esterik and Milgram, 1994; Maxwell, 2003).

However, this does not mean Hmong men are never involved in trading and marketing. They are engaged in the cardamom trade, and they make and sell rattan baskets to sell at Sa Pa market. There are gendered divisions in trading work. A similar situation can be seen in Laos where Hmong men are very active in rubber trading (Lindeborg, 2012). Cardamom and rubber trades are male spheres because of the active role of Hmong men in agriculture. This hard, labor-intensive work requires endurance and strength. In addition, to transport large, heavy loads like cardamom and rubber (Lindeborg, 2012) requires the use of a motorbike and not many Hmong women are able to ride a motorbike. This separation and gendering of work is directly related to the Hmong views of what men and women should and can do. Making and selling handicrafts at home is more compatible with domestic responsibilities, and is therefore a more socially and culturally acceptable way for Hmong women to earn their livelihoods. Although their societal gender roles and the flexible nature of the work are important in Hmong women’s decisions to join the workforce, they also have to take into consideration layers of their personal circumstances and social conditions, which will be further elaborated below.

**Competition and language ability**

Xa Xeng, the commune center of Ta Phin, 7 am: Groups of five to seven Red Dao women sit together in front of souvenir shops embroidering and chatting. They wear baskets on their backs that contain handicrafts such as wallets, handbags and cushions. They sit talking to each other, but keep their eyes focused on the only main road, the road that brings the tourist buses to their commune.

8:00 am: The first bus with tourists slowly goes to the commune center. Red Dao
women run after the bus and through the windows, they scout out their potential customers. They yell at each other, “the man in red T-shirt is mine,” “the young girl with long hair and blue pull-over is mine”. When the tourists get off the bus, the Red Dao street vendors follow the tourist they’ve chosen until they make a sale.

Ta Phin is a commune of Red Dao and Hmong. In 2003, Ta Phin was designated as a community-based tourism destination. Every day ten to fifteen buses bring about two hundred tourists to Ta Phin, and Ta Phin is a good place for handicraft sellers. However, as we can see from the scene above, only Red Dao women form street vendor groups in Ta Phin. Hmong women cannot participate in tourism-related activities here. This is due to a combination of factors.

Firstly, it is because of the governmental system of separating the ethnic minorities. Historically, the Vietnamese state classified minorities according to their cultural, economic and social practices and some ethnic groups have been given higher status than others, and this has contributed to the differentiation between ethnic minority groups. Common misconceptions and stereotypes are rooted in the linear evolutionary thinking of the modern Vietnamese state. Nowadays, this thinking, and the associated perceptions about the differences between ethnic groups, permeates local officials’ attitudes about their own cultures and about other cultures. During my time in Ta Phin, I found many examples of this ethnocentric perspective in conversations with local officials and also with local people. In many of our conversations, a good number of Red Dao informants stated that they were more intelligent than their Hmong counterparts. The proof, in their eyes, was that they could do business better than Hmong. Shops in the commune center are run by Red Dao, as are herbal bath services. In addition, the Red Dao believe they treat their daughters better than the Hmong by keeping them in school longer. While on the surface these claims seem to be true, the underlying reasons for this, as I will show below, stem from the government intervention in tourism development in Ta Phin rather than from any differences in intelligence.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, local government offices in Sa Pa identify which villages are to be promoted as destinations for ethnic tourism. Within the Ta Phin commune is Xa Xeng, the home of Red Dao, which was selected as a site for preserving the social landscape, and some of its houses, and for reproducing handicrafts categorized as ‘ancient’ and ‘authentic.’ Dao paper making, paper carving, and textile weaving in Ta Phin were also identified for preservation. Within this commune, therefore, residents of villages other than Xa Xeng, which is also the commune’s center, have less access to income generating
The tours that bring tourists to Ta Phin are designed according to the state tourism policies which promote ethnic tourism. The tours are half-day tours only. Tourists are bused to Xa Xeng, the commune center, and guided around state-defined destinations such as Ta Phin cave, traditional Red Dao herbal baths, and the rice fields that surround the commune center. Village treks are limited on this short tour, and lunch is not provided. Therefore, contact between tourists with local people is limited to tourists interacting with street vendors in the commune centers.

Government intervention in tourism development, together with misconceptions about the Hmong and discrimination against them, negatively affect Hmong women’s work opportunities. Red Dao women have taken advantage of this situation and have further excluded Hmong women from participating in tourism-related activities in Ta Phin. The presence of a very strong Dao community in the tourist center has dominated all tourism services, and the Hmong people coming from remote villages have little to no opportunity to participate in this community-based tourism. May, an eighteen-year-old woman from Can Ngai village said, “I really want to sell my handicrafts in the village streets, but every time I go to the village center, the Dao people chase me away. They say this place is for Dao, not for Hmong.”

The commune center of Ta Phin is very small. There are a few souvenir shops for tourists and a few small grocery stores for local villagers. The Hmong people usually go to the village center every morning to buy food and catch up on town news. There is limited contact between Red Dao and Hmong people in this public center, mainly because they do not speak the same language. According to May, a fifteen-year-old Hmong, the divisions run deeper than that. She says the main reason is that “Red Dao women do not want to talk to us as they are afraid that we will take their business.” The contact between the two groups only happens outside the “tourist spaces” where Red Dao women believe there is no risk to their business from Hmong people.

May and other Hmong single girls like her who try to sell handicrafts in the street are chased away from the tourists. “Red Dao women are crowded around the tourists talking to them ... I can only approach the tourists after the Red Dao women go away, either because they have already sold something, or because they are tired of following them. If I can approach tourists, I just say ‘Hello’, ‘Hi’, ‘Buy from me.’ I do not know much English and Vietnamese, so selling is difficult”. This situation is also reflected in many other Hmong
women’s stories about the difficulties of being street vendors in their communes. I would argue that exclusion occurs because the structure of the tourist trade is defined by the state.

Going to Sa Pa town is also not a good choice for Hmong women in Ta Phin, because the Hmong women there from Lao Chai and Hau Thao have a long history of selling in Sa Pa, are skilful at selling and can speak English and Vietnamese fluently. In addition, the local authorities recently banned street vendors. This means selling in this way become difficult. It is very clear that the intervention of local authorities, together with ethnic boundaries, exclude Hmong women from involvement in tourism-related activities.

Figure 7: Red Dao women street vendors following tourists

The Hmong women of Ta Phin find themselves faced with limited employment opportunities due to the nature and structure of the tourist trade, their physical location, and their low language proficiency in Vietnamese and English. Their only remaining job prospects are working for the Craft Link handicraft clubs in Ta Phin. Initially, Craft Link worked with the Women’s Union of Ta Phin to establish a temporary board of management.
The management organized meetings with women in different hamlets to introduce the project and look for participants. Three months after their initial opening, the management organized another meeting to elect three women to the new management board. The process for joining the Craft Link club is informal: women approach the board, and their names are put on the list. Women in clubs are asked to embroider patterns designed by Craft Link and receive a payment based on their output. Club members range from 18 to over 60 years old. Almost all Craft Link club members find themselves in this line of work because of their poor Vietnamese language skills and inability to speak English. If I want to talk with the Hmong women of these clubs, I have to ask for help from an interpreter. Although tourism in San Sa Ho and Ta Phin is quite developed, with many tourists visiting the communes every day, Hmong people are excluded from this tourism development. Hmong women can benefit from street vending, but they face more difficulties when taking this opportunity, including fierce competition, discrimination and languages barriers as analyzed above.

![Figure 8: Receiving payment at the Ta Phin handicraft club](image)

The Craft Link club in San Sa Ho is for the Hmong only, while the club in Ta Phin has
both a Hmong group and a Dao group. There are about 150 Hmong women in the two handicraft clubs – 70 in San Sa Ho and about 80 in Ta Phin. The number of Red Dao women stands at only about 20 due to the fact that many Red Dao women have other opportunities to work as street vendors. Each group appoints its own leader who is responsible for receiving orders from Craft Link, distributing them to club members, collecting finished products from club members, paying them, and then delivering products to Craft Link. The participants receive all of the threads, patterns and materials necessary to complete the orders. Patterns are usually traditional Hmong and Dao motifs, with some modifications. Working in the same club but in different groups and making different products eliminates any conflict and competition between Hmong and Dao people.

Participants receive a modest payment for each embroidered product 10,000 VND (less than US$ 0.50) for simple and small patterns and 15,000 (less than US$ 0.75) for larger patterns. This amount of money is small and “is not appropriate to our time and effort since it takes half a day to embroider a small pattern”, according to Di, a seventeen-year-old Hmong girl working in the Ta Phin handicraft club. However, many Hmong women still choose to do this work, because it fits into their daily routines, and they do not need to invest any extra money into doing it. The work is also less demanding than selling in the streets and they do not have to deal with competition. As Sung explained:

I like this work even if I only earn a little bit of money. I do not have to invest in this work like I would with street vending, which is risky. A few years ago, some women made handicrafts for some Kinh people in Sa Pa; they had to spend their own money to buy materials and make the products. Later the Kinh people refused to buy their products at a fair price, so they lost a lot of money. In addition, since it is possible for me to work at home, I can take care of my family and children and do other housework at the same time.

Safer work with less competition, no risks, no invested money and free time to take care of their families is appreciated by Hmong women whose language ability is limited and who have no experience in dealing with competition and the market.

Working from home

Chan is an 80-year-old woman in Cat Cat. Her house is located in the community-based tourist site belonging to the Cat Cat Company. At her age, she stays at home taking care of her grandchildren and doing light housework like cooking and feeding
the pigs and chickens. Eleven family members who span three generations live in the same house. With the exception of the small children, all of her family are farmers. Chan is a skilled embroiderer. She is also a skilled wax woman\(^{28}\), which is an extremely difficult skill to master. When Cat Cat Company opened an ethnic tourism site in her village, her house was luckily at the heart of the site. The company asked her to do a weaving demonstration at her house, and pays her a monthly allowance. She was already busy from morning until sunset, but as she works at home, she only has to perform when tourist are around, and is free to do other work the rest of the time.

Chan told me that she was invited to work for the tourist company as a weaving demonstrator to tourists. Chan’s village is made up of about 80 households, mostly located along the only path in the village, with some houses scattered on the mountainside. Since the village became a community-based tourist destination, the path was concreted and the tourist company opened a handicrafts shop for the tourists. Some houses along the path are open for tourists to visit. The owners of the houses like Chan and Tung, as mentioned in the previous chapter, are asked to do weaving demonstrations and performances. “The job is not difficult and does not require much physical strength. Although I have to be available whenever tourists come, I am not busy all the time and more importantly I can work at my own house”, Tung said. The main factor that led to these women working as weaving demonstrators is their availability to perform whenever tourists come. Because these retired women no longer farm or travel far from home, they can easily meet these requirements.

Their performances usually take place in the front courtyard, where they have instruments, such as indigo buckets, a loom, a table with a bowl of wax and paintbrushes. When tourists arrive, Chan, stops doing other work and shows the tourist how handicrafts are made. Tourists watch her demonstrations of weaving textiles, dyeing, embroidering and drawing patterns with wax. There is almost no verbal interaction between Chan and the tourists, especially with foreigners because she cannot speak English. She just demonstrates in silence without explaining her techniques. Tourists wander around her house, watch while she is working and take pictures. They are then invited to purchase traditional handicrafts including scarves and handbags made by Chan.

Chan’s performance takes about five minutes. What she shows the tourists is part of

\(^{28}\) Apart from embroidering, Hmong people also use wax drawings to decorate their clothes. In order to be applied onto the cloth, wax first needs to be melted and then a paint brush is soaked in the melted wax to draw with. Wax drawing is extremely difficult and artistic, so not everyone can do it.
her everyday work. When I asked her about her work, she said “when I make clothes for my own family, I do the same thing … [however, because] I only give brief demonstrations for tourists, the performance is over-simplified and our culture is not fully represented. The tourists cannot fully understand our culture and tradition from this demonstration.” She shows me a medium-sized bag with two large Hmong traditional patterns and describes the process of making it:

Figure 9: Waxing performance

Making a bag like this takes time and effort. I have to grow hemp. Hemp only grows in March (Lunar Calendar) and is harvested after two months. It is then air-dried and peeled into threads. These threads are then put into a mortar and ground. After that, the threads are hung on beams and flattened. Two or three days later, they are rolled into big rolls and kept, to be gradually spun. Hemp threads are then joined and spun into rolls of threads (li sau). After being spun, hemp threads are boiled and spun into rolls of thread with a reel (chua mang). It takes Hmong women two or three days to produce one kilogram of hemp threads. After yarn is spun into rolls using the chua
mang tool, they are boiled, together with wax many times. They are then removed from the liquid, flattened by a stone or a piece of wood, and air-dried until the yarn is shiny and smooth. Then the yarn is spun on a big reel called khau li to make longer thread to be stretched on the loom. This practice can only be done on sunny days to prevent yarns from getting tangled. Only then can we do the weaving. After the cloth is woven, it is dyed with indigo. Indigo is planted in April and May (Lunar Calendar) and harvested in June. After being cut, indigo is soaked in a bucket of water for two to three days until the water turns black; then a little dissolved powdered lime will be mixed and stirred in for about 30 minutes to change the water into a shiny black. After about three hours, indigo resin will condense at the bottom of the bucket. The resin is then packed and filtered to get dry resin. The dry indigo resin then will be mixed with water in wooden or plastic buckets and filtered to prevent sediment. Each sheet of cloth is dyed multiple times, for at least 30 minutes each. After each dyeing, the cloth is air-dried. If I am not satisfied with the color, I will continue dyeing until the color is correct, usually up to 20 times. When the cloth is finished, I can begin to embroider patterns I like and then make this bag.

After describing this process, Chan adds, “the materials that tourists see in the performances are prepared in advance, and what I show them does not interest or surprise them. They look around the house instead of paying attention to my performance”. Discussing the intricacies of “staging culture”, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that when performance becomes spectacle, authenticity is in question. The producers “present rather than represent that life” (1998: 72–74). The situation is similar in Guatamela where, like Chan, Maya women performers are not able to show tourists the full weaving process (Little, 2000).

Recognizing how boring the performances are, Chan and other women performers try to please tourists by inviting them to visit the rest of the house. By doing this, tourists can acquire a clearer picture of local people’s lives because their homes are real Hmong homes where real Hmong people live. The tourists can see things like feeding pigs and chickens. Opening their homes to tourists is also a way to express their hospitality. This is very advantageous for women performers like Chan because apart from the performances, they also sell products and after visiting the house many tourists end up purchasing their merchandise. Employment like Chan’s is not a reality for the majority of Hmong women because Cat Cat village is the only village-based tourism business owned by a private company, and only five women in Cat Cat village have been chosen to do this work.
Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that this practice of putting homes, work, and culture on display is an option for some Hmong women.

Like Chan, Lanh lives along the Cat Cat main tourist route. When she is not busy with farming work, she runs a small stall outside her house to sell a variety of handicrafts. She keeps an eye out for passing tourists while carrying on with her household duties. If she sees tourists, she runs from her house to talk to them. When she has other work to do, she simply abandons her stall temporarily. Lanh is very busy with four small children and other housework. Her husband works for the Commune People’s Committee, and has very little time to help her. “If you work for the company as a weaving demonstrator, you have to be available all day whenever tourists come and I cannot do it. I have to do a lot of other chores,” she said. In addition, running her stall in her own time is considerably more profitable than working for the company. Lanh goes to Bac Ha market once a month to buy products for her stall. Some of these products are made by other Hmong, while some come from China.

As company employees, Tung and Chan also sell handicrafts, but their stalls have only some bags and wallets. “I cannot sell as much as others because I can only offer a limited range of products. Tourists have different interests and to earn more money you have to diversify the products. I cannot do it because I am already busy with this work and I am quite old and cannot go to Bac Ha market to buy new kinds of products”, Tung said.

The cases of Chan, Tung and Lanh illustrate how personal factors combine with social and economic influences to shape their employment options and decisions. With the advantage of living in a community-based tourism village, Chan and Tung decided to work as weaving demonstrators because they were “chosen.” Lanh decided to be a home-based vendor in order to be able to take care of her small children.

**Being a street vendor**

Many Hmong girls and women from different villages surrounding Sa Pa, like Lao Chai and Ta Van where ethnic tourism with trekking is booming, choose to go to Sa Pa to work. The entry point to this type of work is street vending. As already mentioned, the state and local authorities have designed these locations as ethnic tourism villages. In this economic model of culture and tourism, the local people, especially Hmong, are, in many cases, excluded from money-making opportunities (see Chapters 2 and 4). They do not have the privilege of living in designated tourism-based communities, and therefore cannot be chosen as weaving demonstrators like Chan and Tung. Nor can they open handicrafts stalls at
home like Lanh. Handicraft clubs are not an option, as none of these have been established in their communities. Their employment opportunities are therefore much more limited. It is important to mention that none of the Hmong women, no matter which villages they are from, actually live in Sa Pa. Instead, they are considered “day migrants” (Steel, 2008: 76). Some of the women travel to and from Sa Pa daily, while some return home every few days.

Despite attempts by the Sa Pa local government to control street vending, street selling remains a dominant economic activity, and has many advantages for the Hmong and Dao girls and women who choose it as an occupation. Most Hmong street vendors are coaxed into the job by friends or relatives. The flexibility, low start-up cost, and relatively undemanding workload of the venture make it a desirable job choice. Street vendors do not need to have a strong command of English or Vietnamese, though knowing a little does help. The necessary start-up cost for buying merchandise is an expense that most women can budget for. Their friends and relatives help the new vendors both financially and by teaching them how to approach tourists, what kind of products they should sell, how to deal with different types of tourists, how to decide on prices, how to negotiate and even how to escape from local government agencies. In the early days of a street vending career, newcomers usually go with these friends or relatives in groups to observe how they sell products and also to learn basic Vietnamese and English. This apprenticeship allows them an opportunity to learn tricks to deal with tourists and to understand their expectations.

Lo (aged 18) lives with her husband and three children in Ta Van. Two years ago, she became a street vendor by following her sister who was already established in Sa Pa.

In my first days selling in the streets, I just followed my sister to learn how to sell handicrafts, how to talk to tourists and also how to escape from the police. I also learned how to make handbags, wallets and cushions. My sister lent me VND 200,000 (US$ 10) to buy raw materials like embroidery threads. After two weeks, I had learned my way around Sa Pa, learned how to deal with tourists, and made two wallets and one handbag. At that point, I started to go selling by myself. With the help of my sister, we sold the one handbag, and one of the wallets. In my first day and I earned a VND 30,000 (US$ 1.5) profit, which I used to buy more raw materials and make more products. After a month, I paid off the loan from my sister, and had earned a profit of VND 200,000 (US$ 10) to continue my business. At this point, I do not want to invest any more money or time in this business. I like only having to work part time, and I don’t have any more money to invest in the business.
Lo’s story is a vivid example of how Hmong women begin their street vending careers. She relied on financial and practical help from her relative, which allowed her to become familiar with selling in the street. The low startup cost, which is easy to cover by borrowing, is highly appreciated by street vendors. Many other Hmong street vendors have emphasized this advantage of the work since it does not require a large initial deposit, unlike opening a stall. For street vendors, even if they cannot borrow money, they can borrow goods to sell, as Man (aged 21) states: “I do not have money. I’ve tried to ask some of my friends to lend me money, but this is difficult for them. Instead they were able to lend me some bags. I started my street vendor work by selling handicrafts that I had borrowed from my friend. When I sold them, I repaid my friend, but kept the interest. Gradually, I saved enough to start my own business”. As these examples show, the initial entry into street vending does not require much experience or skill.

![Hmong women selling handicrafts to tourists in Sa Pa](image)

**Figure 10: Hmong women selling handicrafts to tourists in Sa Pa**

---

29 For example, Lanh, who runs a stall at home, told me that it is necessary to have at least VND 1,000,000 (US$50) to set up a stall. She had to buy a variety of goods to display, and if she did not do so nobody would drop in. And in fact Mrs. Lanh could access the money needed thanks to her husband’s income since he worked as government officer for the Commune People’s Committee.
This is not to say that a career in street vending does not necessitate any complex skills, or high levels of capital, but as they learn the nature of the trade, and as will be explained in the next chapter, they develop their own strategies for successful sales. The women start off learning gradually, from one another. As Ly (aged 45) explained, “you do not need to have good English at the beginning. You just go and learn day after day. For me, I could do selling after only one day going with my friends”.

Street vendors in Sa Pa can be divided into three age groups. The first group is girls from 6 to 10 years old who usually follow their sisters or mothers; the second group is adolescents aged 12 to 14, and the third group is married women, generally aged 15 and older. The youngest children who work alongside family members generally sell very cheap handicraft bracelets and use the little money they earn to buy candy because their intake will not impact their family’s main earnings. This practice has come under fire from local authorities and the Kinh in Sa Pa, who say that these children are being exploited as child labor and should not have to work for their families. Parents are blamed for not taking care of their children, not sending them to school, and abusing them. However, according to Hmong people and also from my observation, there are very few cases of children selling in the street on weekdays during school hours. More often, the children selling in Sa Pa do so while the school is closed for the summer vacation. In addition, they do not work to earn money but just for fun. It is an opportunity for children to leave the village and go to Sa Pa to see the exciting atmosphere of a tourist town, and buy some candies with “their own money.” Some children have even said that it is the “first step” to learning English and learning salesmanship skills, which might be helpful for their future.

Selling like this is very interesting. I can see and meet many people, including foreigners. It is really fun, not like in my village where there are only chickens, pigs and buffaloes. If I can sell these bracelets, I have money to buy candies or eat something in the market. I can speak some English and I hope to speak more to become a tour guide like this sister Di [Di is a tour guide sitting next to her] [laughs]. – Lai, 8-year-old Hmong girl.

Having fun, relaxing and doing interesting work are descriptions mentioned by many Hmong street vendors, regardless of their age. Working in Sa Pa means an escape from the daily routine that they are confined to at home. As street vendors, Hmong women not only have frequent interactions with tourists, but they can also gather together to chat and laugh – a pleasure that those working at home do not often have. This is one of the things that has
motivated Hmong women to work in the street, which will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

The second group of street vendors includes adolescents aged 12 to 16, most of whom have already quit or finished secondary school. They work consistently, except for three months a year during crop time. Though they have permission, and sometimes start-up money from their parents, these girls generally work independently without the assistance of any older family members. They usually rent a room in Sa Pa and stay there for long periods of time, caring for themselves and maintaining their vending businesses without financial support from their families. Although they work and live independently for long stretches in Sa Pa without surveillance from their parents, their independence will come to a halt if they do not send money home to help their families.

The last group consists of married women, aged 17 and older. These women are often seen with their multiple children in tow, often carrying their babies on their backs as they work. As married women, they usually work only in their free time and in good weather. Previously, this demographic of married women did not participate in tourist-related activities, but their numbers are increasing. In this shift, the unmarried girls realize that once they have selling skills, they can make more money as guides, which opens up opportunities for more of the married women to supplement their household incomes by working as street vendors.

Street vendors sell mainly products they’ve made themselves – anything from clothes to handbags, pillowcases, earrings, and necklaces. Making these goods is a time-consuming activity, so many street vendors will buy products from villagers who are unable to sell their own items (Pham Thi Mong Hoa and Lam Thi Mai Lan, 2000). It is important to note that unlike street vendors in other countries like Peru or China (Steel 2008) who sell multiple products such as postcards and T-shirts, Hmong women choose to sell only homemade handicrafts and jewelry. Hmong women are well aware of their cultural strength and how to keep their identity as well as do business, as May (aged 16) from Ta Van explains:

Hmong women and I only sell our own handicrafts and jewelry because we can make it and know a lot about it. We can tell tourists how we made them and help them to understand our culture. In addition, I know tourists are very interested in our culture and our handicrafts, so we can sell them. If now we sell other products [not handicrafts] such as postcards, tourists will not see us as Hmong anymore and we won’t earn as much money.

This account illustrates that Hmong street vendors know how to incorporate their
identity into their work. They wear traditional clothes as a manifestation of their cultural identity. While they are talking to tourists, they weave and do embroidering to show them that the handicrafts they sell are indeed handmade. Many of the Hmong women I spoke to emphasize the connection between their handicrafts and their Hmong identity, showing that their handicrafts are special and unique. The experiences of Hmong women illustrate that their behavior is guided by images of Hmong as portrayed in the tourist media. Hmong women have successfully used their identity and stereotypes to their economic advantage. Hmong women also succeed in using and performing gender to achieve their economic goals. Since the making of textiles and clothing is a highly gendered activity and is considered as female work for Hmong, Hmong women in Sa Pa emphasize their “Hmong-ness” in successfully trading with tourists.

Doing double work

After a few years working as street vendors, many Hmong girls and women make great strides in acquiring the language and interpersonal skills necessary to sell to tourists. Following tour groups to villages, Hmong women also learn how to introduce tourists to their culture and how to help the tourists have an enjoyable trip by ensuring a safe and satisfactory homestay. These skills have enabled some women go become freelance tour guides. They act as handicraft peddlers who talk to tourists about everything relating to their villages, and their culture. Their style of guiding is normally conversational, and may or may not include all of the features that tourists would get from a tour booked through a travel agent. These girls act as unofficial guides. Their work has basically stemmed from the tourists’ desire to meet and talk with local people. This practice began with tourists approaching the street vendors and asking to visit their homes in exchange for gifts or money. The women, upon realizing this tourist market, began approaching tourists to offer home visits.

Lai (aged 17) from Lao Chai has worked in Sa Pa for three years. As an unmarried girl, she works as a street vendor every day. In order to make a profit, she approaches as many tourists as possible, and engages them in conversation. In her experience:

Tourists are very curious about our life and our villages – they ask a lot of questions. Even though many tourists have already booked tours to villages, they still ask to come visit my house. The first time I brought tourists to my house was maybe a year ago. A German couple who had bought some wallets from me asked if they could visit my house. We made an appointment for 7:00 the following morning. When I arrived, we all walked the two hours to my house. The couple brought bread with them for
lunch, which they shared with my family. I cooked rice and vegetables and invited them, but they did not eat. At around 1:00 pm, they asked me to take them for a tour around the village. After that, they returned to Sa Pa. They paid me VND 200,000 (US $10) for this tour. That was such a large sum for me – so much more than I would have earned selling in the street. I have done this type of guiding several times since then. Because the tour guide income is much better, I try to ask all the tourists I talk to whether they are interested in visiting my village. I still sell handicrafts in the street, but if I find somebody who wants to visit my village, I always accept. Working as a guide is profitable. Not only do they pay to see your home, they usually buy my handicrafts.

This story highlights how Hmong women end up working both as vendors and guides. Their entry into being tour guides at the beginning was by chance, but now, like Lai, they actively seek out the work on their own. It is worth noting that not all street vendors can do double duty like Lai. To become an informal guide, street vendors must be able to speak
English very well in order to spend the whole day talking with the tourists. For this reason, those doing this double work are usually single girls. Being a tour guide requires a lot of time. It usually takes a whole day. The general itinerary includes visiting a Hmong house, and in some cases perhaps eating a Hmong meal, but never staying overnight in their villages. This is because, in order for tourists to spend the night in a village, the hosts must have permission from the local authorities. This permission is necessary for both foreign and Vietnamese tourists. Because of continued intervention by the state in Hmong affairs, Hmong people are not allowed to host tourists overnight (see Chapters 2 and 4). Therefore, when they receive offers to guide two- or three-day tours, Hmong guides have to go to other villages where homestays are permitted and stay there for the duration of the tour. This is impractical for many women, especially those who are married, because they have to take care of their families.

The importance of stable income

Given that the income for the self-employed guides depends to a large extent on luck, it is highly subject to fluctuations. Working for a company, however, provides a much more stable source of income. For this reason, some Hmong girls choose to work as official tour guides for tourism companies. However, it is important to note that Kinh-owned tourist companies in Sa Pa do not hire Hmong girls out of choice due to the longstanding prejudice against the Hmong in the tourism industry (see Chapter 4). However, the companies feel they have no option but to employ Hmong in order to satisfy the tourists’ demands. Mr. Minh, director of a tourist agency talks about his experiences:

My company handles many trekking bookings from foreign tourists. Initially, our tour guides were Vietnamese/ Kinh peoples who lived in the area, or who came from Lao Cai. Gradually, many foreign tourists came and asked for local (Hmong and/or Dao) tour guides, and we started to hire Hmong and Dao girls and trained them to be tour guides. The girls we choose are the young ones with good English and a friendly personality. We provide them with training about villages, and how to interact with tourists. However, working with ethnic minorities, especially Hmong, is risky. They do not remember their training and often act instinctively. For example, sometimes a Hmong girl who has agreed to guide a group will not show up for the scheduled appointment and will not give us an explanation. In this case, it is very hard for us to find a substitute. Therefore, if there is no specific requirement from tourists for ethnic minority tour guides, we always assign work to Kinh tour guides.
Many hotel and tourist agency owners make complaints about Hmong tour guides. This has created a feeling of distrust and suspicion between the two groups. Sang, Dinh, Di and Sing are four tour guides working for the Van Minh tourist agency. They each have many years of experience working as tour guides, and have been with this particular agency for almost five years. They enjoy their work as guides immensely because it allows them interact and have fun with tourists, and it provides a stable monthly income to help their families. Additionally, they also receive tips. However, the work is not always pleasant. Sang is a twenty-year-old divorced woman who shares a room with Dinh in Sa Pa. She told me that previously she worked for another agency called Mountain View, but the work was hard and frustrating. The company’s rules and discipline structures were alien to her. Expectations like punctuality and never saying no to any offer did not suit her due to her other responsibilities. It was impossible for her to keep to such a schedule, because “I have also work in the rice field, especially during the harvest. And some days, I do not feel well so I need a rest”. This tension led her to quit the job at Mountain View and work as an independent tour guide. Sang explained,

Being an independent guide means you are free. You can work when you want, and when you do not want you do not have to do. However, the income is not stable. For months, I did not earn any money, which made it very hard for me to pay my rent and buy food. After dealing with the instability of being an independent guide, I applied for work with the Van Minh Company. There, I lead at least one tour every day. It is still good.

The more time she has spent working for the company, the better she has come to understand and adapt to the expectations of work and discipline. She realizes that as she becomes “more professional,” she receives offers more frequently, and because she is being paid for her time, she is not able to refuse a tour, and if she does the company will fire her.

Clearly, a stable income is an incentive for Sang to opt for work as an employee over being an independent agent. Having to pay for rent, food and personal expenses compelled Sang to conform to the rules of the agency in order have a monthly income. Aside from working a required number of hours, tour guides need to have good language skills and a broad understanding of cultural and geographic knowledge. They must possess strong organizational, safety, and social skills. Beyond all of these traits, employees are required to obtain a work permit, which they can only earn after attending a training course. Like Sang, those who work for travel agencies are mostly young girls. They usually live in Sa Pa.
permanently and only return to their homes in the village once or twice per month. While many Hmong women are not interested in this work due to the strict requirements, some do see employment like this as a viable short-term option. They work with the companies for a while to earn good money for their families. Then, when it is time for them to get married, they return to the village and take up their traditional roles and responsibilities. This career trajectory is in line with findings of Duong Bich Hanh (2006). This research found that Hmong girls in Sa Pa come back to their villages after they get married, and they get involved in tourism-related activities only when they are free and have permission from their husbands.

Clearly, the gender roles and gender norms which apply to married Hmong women are different from those of single girls. And as I will explain more in the Chapter 7, these norms and roles continue to shape the lives of Hmong women. In the case of Sang, a divorced woman, her life path is full of changes which depend on her marital status. This illustrates the influence of gender norms on Hmong women’s lives. I will come back to Sang and further explain her situation in Chapter 7.

Another option for a stable income source for Hmong girls is to work as singers and/or dancers in the cultural arts presentations organized for tourists in Sa Pa. There are two different kinds of formal cultural shows: those organized by local government officials at tourist sites, and those organized at hotels in Sa Pa. Shows staged at hotels are usually for their clientele only. These simple shows generally consist of about thirty minutes of musical performances and are small and infrequent. The shows organized by the state, however, have directors, musicians, dancers, a set program and performance theater. The Sa Pa Cultural Center (Trung Tam Van Hoa Sa Pa), a government organization, runs two regular formal shows. One is on the top of Ham Rong Mountain and one is at Cat Cat village. Each of these locations runs up to six shows per day, every day of the week. Although, these shows are advertised as ethnic minority cultural shows, performances are arranged and directed by a Kinh man. The dances, songs, and even musical instruments are not truly from ethnic minorities, and the shows are performed in Vietnamese and English without any local languages (Briain, 2004). Because the Kinh directors are interested in presenting professional shows, they generally recruit graduates from art and culture colleges regardless of their ethnicity. Therefore, the number of Hmong people working in this sector of tourism is small. In 2012, there were only two Hmong working in the Cat Cat show and both of them were children of district government officials. There are cases of ethnic minority girls/boys being recruited for these shows, however, as the next section will explore, they usually quit after a
short time because they feel their culture is flagrantly modified for commodification.

**Minimizing the risk**

In Sa Pa, Hmong women work in the tourist industry to gain cash income to supplement their families’ livelihoods. However, given the power relations inherent in cultural tourism, and given that that tourism is managed and exclusively run by the Kinh majority, the Hmong women find themselves in positions of very little power and control. They have no say in how their culture is managed, bought or sold. To gain some sense of agency, Hmong women utilize their own experiences of their culture to *selectively* involve themselves in tourism (Turner, 2007) and/or resist any unwanted dependency on the market (Turner, 2011). As mentioned earlier, the handicraft market run by Kinh traders is expanding. These traders rely on ethnic minority women to make the handicrafts that they sell. As this market grows though, the minority sellers’ share is becoming smaller. Ethnic minorities, including the Hmong, are becoming distrustful of the Kinh business people, and are increasingly refusing to take further part in this market. Pham (aged 30) from Ta Phin explained her refusal to trade with Kinh people:

> A few years ago, a Kinh shop owner asked me to make 10 pillow cases and 20 small handbags for her. We agreed on a payment of VND 60,000 (US$3) for one pillow case and VND 16,000 (US$ 0.80) for one small handbag. When I asked for money in advance to buy raw materials, she gave me VND 200,000 (US$ 10), which was not enough. In order to make the agreed upon products, I had to borrow money from my mother. When I went to the shop owner to give her the goods and collect my payment, she took all of the handicrafts I had made, but she did not pay me the remaining money. I came to ask her for several times, but I could not get it.

Pham’s story is not the only case. As mentioned previously, the Oxfam Italia project tried to expand the market for handicraft clubs in Ta Phin. Oxfam Italia asked Ta Phin villagers to invest money to make their own products and then sell and/or consign them to shops in Sa Pa but they refused, even when Oxfam Italia provided financial support for them. Chong (aged 55), leader of handicraft club in Ta Phin said “I do not want [to be involved] because I do not want to chase after them to get money”. Although Chong does not explicitly state that she does not trust Kinh people, her refusal to work with Kinh highlights the conflict between Kinh and ethnic minorities. This conflict is not only exclusively in the handicraft market. It exists in other trading markets. For example, Hmong orchid farmers sell their orchids directly to consumers to avoid dealing with Kinh traders.
For the Hmong women who work in tourism, their time is as valuable to them as the money they make. As mentioned previously, all Hmong women have stated that they can only commit to doing this work when their other household chores are finished. For Hmong people, traditional agriculture with rice and maize and livestock are still their main sources of income and sustenance. They participate in tourism for extra cash, but their top priority is their responsibility to their families at home and in their fields. Field preparation, rice transplanting, and rice harvesting are all labor-intensive duties. For a portion of the year, these duties consume the lives and time of the majority of Hmong women. Even for single Hmong girls who work as tour guides and give the money they earn to their parents to hire extra agricultural labor still return home for crop preparation and cultivation. This is supported by Turner’s findings about the Hmong women involved in the textile trade in Sa Pa. Turner finds that Hmong women are not fully reliant upon the textile trade, and they only get involved when the time is right for them (Turner, 2007).

The Hmong women’s selectivity should not be read as a lack of interest in the monetary opportunities they are offered. Rather, as Turner argues “Hmong invoke these possibilities on their own terms – terms informed by cultural understandings of appropriate livelihoods and everyday politics of how to construct and negotiate their everyday lives” (Turner, 2011: 14). This Hmong cultural resistance can also be seen in how they continue to retain their own identity, culture, and beliefs despite working in a context that temporarily separates them from their homes and families. Chan (see previous section) works as a weaving demonstrator, but within the confines of that work, she works to show the true Hmong culture to tourists. This strategy not only makes her business better, but also enables her to resist the state and private tourism development narrative that commodifies Hmong cultural identity and packages it as homogenous and inauthentic.

In most cases, rather than employing the strategy of adapting the job to fit the culture, like Chan, the Hmong people refuse economic ventures that do not fit their culture. As mentioned above, ethnic minorities refuse to participate in song and dance performances. For instance, Lu quit her job in the Cat Cat cultural show because the songs and dances she performed are called Hmong traditional songs and dances but in fact they are modified and not authentic. She says:

I worked for the Cat Cat performance troop in 2006. In the beginning, everything was very good. We sang and danced traditional Hmong and Dao songs for tourists. I was very proud to introduce our culture to outsiders. In 2008, the director of the company
asked us to practice new songs and dances which were very strange to us with the purpose to make the programs more interesting. The songs we sang were in the Hmong language, but I am pretty sure that they were not traditional Hmong songs. The new dances were not Hmong dances. But when it came time to perform them, the presenter always introduced them as authentic Hmong songs and dances. This made me feel very uncomfortable, and I decided to quit the job, even though it paid well.

Clearly, Lu rejected livelihood prospects that she deemed inappropriate. Although Lu did not underestimate the importance of the extra income, she valued her cultural roots and identity more highly. Pham’s refusal to make handicrafts for Kinh shop owners, and Lu’s refusal to perform inauthentic cultural artifacts are in line with what Ortner (2006) calls “resistance”, and it tends to fit with a continuum view of agency. Ortner argues that resistance to domination is undertaken to pursue meaningful goals. In the case of Hmong women this resistance can be seen as a means of acting in support of both Hmong identity and their own livelihoods, as Cohen notes that as ethnic communities become more involved in tourism, they intensify their concern with identity and self-representation, sometimes openly resisting the tourism narrative presented by the industry and the state (Cohen, 2001: 23). This Hmong resistance strategy is visible in other aspects of Hmong everyday life. For example, Hmong in Sa Pa continue to wear traditional hemp-made clothing with natural indigo dyes, even though making this style of clothing is extraordinarily time-consuming when compared to buying the synthetic clothing available in local markets. For foreign and domestic visitors alike, witnessing ethnic minorities in ‘traditional dress’ is part of the attraction to upland markets and tourist towns like Sa Pa. This contrasts with other research on the impacts of tourism on Hmong and other upland ethnic minority groups elsewhere in Southeast Asia, where traditional clothing is no longer worn on an everyday basis and cultural authenticity is often staged for guests (Cohen, 2004; Bonnin, 2012)

Conclusion

In this chapter a diverse range of factors influencing the choices of Hmong women to engage in different work in the tourism market have been presented. This chapter shows that the Hmong women’s involvement of in tourism is part of how they negotiate and define their gender and ethnicity through the work they choose. The life stories and accounts from Hmong women show how they make their own choices by engaging in different tourism-related activities. In making these choices they draw upon many factors, including the available opportunities, their expectations and desires, and their backgrounds. The ways in which these
In connection with this, the variations in women’s situations and characteristics shape their decisions to opt for different types of work. Women with restricted abilities to leave home to work and whose houses are situated in community-based villages choose to work at home, as in the cases of Chan, Tung and Lanh. Those who do not have similar advantages or who have relatively poor language capability opt to work in handicraft clubs. Street vendors are generally women who cannot find jobs in their home villages. Single girls with strong language skills are more likely to work for stable employers such as travel agents. Regardless of their personal backgrounds or marital status, the primary condition for women to self select their work in tourism is flexibility in time and independence so that they can fulfill their familial duties.

As was explained in this chapter, Hmong women choose to exhibit their agency in four ways: 1) by choosing work suited to their interests and situations, 2) by deciding how to do their work best by making products that suit their talents, 3) by sustaining their distinct cultural practices and traditions, and 4) by diversifying their livelihood and resisting economic opportunities that run counter to their beliefs. By exhibiting agency, the Hmong women negotiate and respond to being marginalized. The next chapter will discuss this in detail, along with their strategies for exploring their opportunities in tourism to make business decisions in their best interests.
Chapter 6

Different roads to success and strategies to deal with marginality

The sky is still dark at 4:00 am when Xiu finishes her quick breakfast of rice and vegetables, puts her small eight-month-old daughter on her back and leaves for Sa Pa. Even though her three older children and her husband are still asleep, Xiu has cooked breakfast for them before leaving.

Xiu has to leave her house at this hour in order to catch the very first tourist buses to Sa Pa. Usually, when they arrive in Sa Pa, tourists will rest in their hotels for a few hours to recover from their night on the train. Even though the tourists generally go straight to their hotels, Xiu and the other street vendors like to be at the bus stop to greet them and let them know there is a vibrant street vendor market, when they are ready. During this brief encounter, Xiu tries to spot her potential customers. She greets them and asks questions like “how are you?”, “where are you from?” According to Xiu, tourists from western countries who answer her questions are friendly and generally buy a lot.

After greeting tourists, Xiu waits for them outside the hotels until they get up. She hopes that some of them will remember her face and be interested in her wares. When the tourists are ready to go on their treks, Xiu follows them, often for hours, patiently talking with them about everything they see, hoping they’ll buy from her.

The case of Xiu illustrates one of many strategies that Hmong women use to make sales. The aim of approaching tourists in the early morning is to find potential customers and impress them with their hospitality. They feel that this investment will lead to sales. The tourists are generally friendly, but the environment in which Xiu and others like her work is not. Hmong street vendors find themselves up against discriminatory state polices that exclude them from making decisions about their work conditions and parameters. These marginalizing practices are often based on clear gender and racial prejudices on the part of the Kinh majority who control the formal tourism trade, as well as the state and local governments (See Chapters 2 and 4). This biased, external control has led to unstable and volatile work conditions for the Hmong women. This chapter will explore the different strategies the Hmong employ to deal with this marginalization, discrimination and economic instability.
Historically, tourism in Vietnam has been strictly controlled through state policies and institutions, enforced by the Kinh majority. The state-sponsored tourist imagery capitalizes on the traditional, cultural Hmong stereotypes, while at the same time debasing and devaluing the true spirit of the Hmong culture. To deal with this marginalization and prejudice, the Hmong are involved in a constant struggle to make the best of the situation they are placed in. They do so by striving for economic autonomy within the Kinh-dominated society. This chapter will emphasize three major areas the Hmong use to assert their self-sufficiency within a discriminatory system. These three areas are: (a) their utilization of social networks to take advantage of the opportunities within tourism; (b) their use of hospitality as a commodity for both economic gain and other non-monetary benefits, and (c) the use of marketing in the creation of Hmong identity.

**From dependent jobs to independent activities**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Hmong women working in tourism-related activities can be divided into three main groups: (a) those who are self-employed and work at home by making handicrafts and/or running a small shop from their homes, (b) those who are self-employed and work outside the home as freelance tour guides or street vendors, and (c) those who are employed by others and work outside the home, usually as tour guides for tourist agencies. Each of these career paths has both positive and negative aspects, which will be shown here.

The self-employed women, whether they work inside or outside the home, are generally involved in making handicrafts and retailing. Within this broad category of work, there are two distinct ways of running their businesses: they can work as individuals or as a part of a cooperative. As mentioned in the previous chapter, many Hmong and Dao women in Ta Phin and San Sa Ho work for handicraft clubs set up by Craft Link. The women get orders from Craft Link, do embroidery and weaving at home, give the finished products to the management board and receive their payment. The income from this work fluctuates, depending on orders. Although the women working in these clubs greatly appreciate the support of Craft Link in helping them secure a job and earn extra money, many of them have complained about being underpaid. For example, when a woman makes a necklace for Craft Link, she earns VND 21,400 (US$ 1.07). Craft Link sells that necklace on the national market for VND 100,000 (US$ 5.00), and on the European market for Euro 8 (US$ 11). So, looking just at the price per product, it is clear that the women behind the Craft Link handicrafts receive only a small part of the profits, despite their time and effort. Sai, a member of San Sa
Ho handicraft club, complains, “In order to make that necklace, I have to work eight hours, equivalent to a full working day. I am paid too little”

Hmong women in San Sa Ho, regardless of whether they are members of clubs like Craft Link or not, have expressed their doubts about the effectiveness of textile clubs. They view these clubs as a disguised form of Kinh control and market dominance. They see the Kinh club owners as taking advantage of their labor by controlling their trading and pricing, while they see the women who work for the clubs as being dependent on the Kinh for their livelihoods. To break free from this cycle of dependency, a group of Hmong women who had spent years working for the Ta Phin and San Sa Ho Craft Link clubs joined together to create their own handicraft network. Using the manufacturing and sales techniques they had learned, these women joined the retail sector by selling their crafts directly to the street vendors in Sa Pa. This Hmong-owned cooperative has been very successful and has led to a decrease in Craft Link’s membership from 300 in 2008 to only about 100 in 2011.

Women working as employees in the tourist trade face similar issues. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, despite having fairly stable work, these women must deal with discrimination, unfair salaries and feelings of dependency. To gain their independence from their Kinh employers, women like Tan choose to work as freelance tour guides, gaining them greater independence and less pressure:

Tan (aged 19) worked as a tour guide for a tourist company for two years. During this time, the company sent her to participate in English lessons and tour guide training courses. After two years working on a tour-by-tour basis, Tan was promoted to official staff and given a base salary of VND 1,000,000 (US$ 50) per month. She earned VND 50,000 (US$ 2.5) overtime for each one-day tour and VND 100,000 (US$ 5) overtime for each two-day tour. This brought her monthly income to between VND 3,000,000 to 4,000,000 (US$ 150–200), when tips from tourists are included. “It is a good income compared to doing agricultural work. I live in Sa Pa and share a room with my friend. My rent is VND 150,000 (US$ 7.5) per month, and my additional monthly expenses are usually about VND 1,500,000 (US$ 75). Working at the travel agency, I can generally save about VND 1,500,000 (US$ 75) per month, which is quite good.

“My roommate works as a freelance tour guide. She finds the tourists by herself, but sometimes she will guide tours for a company, if they call her. Her income isn’t as steady as mine was at the travel agency. Some months she gets more, and some months she gets less, but overall her income and savings were not much different than
mine. However, she does not work every day like I did. On holidays like Tet or during festivals, she could go out and celebrate with friends. Working for a company like I did is very demanding, and the salary is not much higher. Last year, I decided to quit my job and work as freelancer like my roommate” Tan said.

Social network in the marketplace

Women like Tan and the women who began a rival handicraft cooperative are able to do so through the social network they foster through in their daily interactions with each other, with tourists, with other ethnic groups and with retailers and merchants. These relations are not merely social relations but are of vital importance to Hmong women as they develop strategies to deal with marginalization and stereotyping. These networks also allow them to get more benefits from tourism. According to anthropologists (Little, 2004; Steel, 2008), marketplaces are not only economic spaces, but are also important arenas where social life takes place.

Hmong women working in tourism operate more or less on an individual basis. However, all of the women with whom I have become acquainted through this study also report having relatives who work in tourism-related activities. This is most true of street vendors. While these women do not formally work together, many of them indicate that they rely on these relatives for some aspect of their work. Most women are introduced to the tourism industry by their relatives, and as analyzed in Chapter 5, street vendors rely on financial and “technical” help from their relatives at the beginning of their work. In some cases, they rely on their family network for protection by working together to protect each other against the police, who often chase the women and seize their merchandise. Some families offer each other economic assistance. And, in other cases, they set up small family cooperatives in which some family members sell each other’s goods. When a specific product is in demand by tourists and is not available on the spot, vendors can ask relatives to find a supply quickly to satisfy the buyers. Because of their limited budgets, this type of assistance is particularly helpful, because they cannot afford to purchase a variety of merchandise to satisfy all tourists’ demands. In addition, it is risky to invest in merchandise because this can increase the street vendor’s vulnerability. As Thao, a sixteen-year-old vendor, pointed out:

It is a risk having many handicrafts with you because if the police catch you, you will lose a lot. It happened to me not too long ago when I was showing handicrafts to an American lady. I wasn’t paying attention to who was around me, and I got stopped by the police. They took all of my goods to the police station. I begged them to let me
keep my goods, but they would not listen. I just sat there and cried. Fortunately, the police finally gave the handicrafts back to me with the warning that if I continued selling in the street, they will confiscate all my wares for good. I was very lucky to get everything back; however, if I am stopped next time, maybe I won’t lucky, and I will lose all. Therefore, I do not invest much money in merchandise.

While handicraft diversity has increased the Hmong women’s chances of selling goods, they have chosen to limit their merchandise to safe quantities to avoid their being seized by police. They rely on their networks, including kin groups and friends instead. By working closely together and by sharing their merchandise in case of a request for a different product, Thao and her relatives, like many other small groups of vendors, are able to offer the tourists these products.

Hmong women also rely on their family networks for more opportunities to earn money. In some cases members of the same family who do different jobs support each other. For example, in some families, the girls who work as tour guides ask their relatives join their tours and come with them to villages to sell their handicrafts. In return, the vendors working in the street meet tourists who want to visit their homes, so the vendors will call their relatives to do the tour.

Throughout her career in the tourism industry, Phinh, an eighteen-year-old freelance tour guide, has gained many years of experience working as both a street vendor and a tour guide. Phinh has established a wide network of tourist acquaintances from different countries. These acquaintances tell their friends who travel to Vietnam to go to Sa Pa and find Phinh and buy their handicrafts from her. Every time she guides a tour, Phinh calls her sister and cousins, who are handicraft vendors, to accompany her. This has proven to be a wise strategy for her because her relatives often return the favor. Phinh shared with me an experience showing the important support she received during one tour she led to Ban Ho:

It was a raining heavily one day when she went trekking to Ban Ho with three men from America. When they reached Ban Ho, the men wanted to visit a site where a hydroelectric plant was being constructed. To get there, they had to cross over a small stream. This would have been no problem on a sunny day; however, it was raining, and therefore quite slippery. One man lost his footing and fell on his face. He was hurt badly, and lost a lot of blood. Phinh and others were very scared. Her sister ran to a house to ask for help. It was quite late, so she could not call a nurse from the communal medical station; however with the help of villagers the bleeding finally
stopped. “I could not imagine what would have happened without my sister’s assistance in that situation. I was so scared. I could not have left them alone to run for help myself, because it was so late. When you go trekking, a companion is very important”, she said.

Although situations like the one Phinh encountered do not happen often, her account illustrates that networks not only help to ensure successful business enterprises, they also help the Hmong women deal with dangerous situations.

Family support is also extremely important for employed married women. Song, a tour guide for a prestigious tourist agency, whose story I told in Chapter 5, said,

when I got married I planned to quit my job because of how busy I was with family chores. As a tour guide, sometimes I have to be away from home for several days, and being a mother to a small son, I am only able to lead one-day tours because my son needs me in the evening. If I refuse to lead tours, my employer will not be satisfied, and I will be dismissed. Fortunately, my husband also works as a tour guide in the same company, so we can help and support each other. We have negotiated with the director that I will take care of short tours (one day tours) and my husband will be responsible for multiple day tours. If you do not have a husband as a colleague in the same company, this negotiation is impossible because as a tour guide you have to take care of both short and long tours.

Song’s situation is not typical, because not everyone has tolerant, sympathetic employers. However, the story indicates the importance of family support in the lives of working Hmong women.

Hmong women do not just rely on their family networks for success; they also seek economic and spiritual help and support from other Hmong women. The success of their tourism-related activities depends a lot on practical knowledge and skills and/ or tricks like knowing where to purchase merchandise, how to approach tourists, how to convince them to buy their products, how to make their clients happy and even how to deal with local agents. The women learn all this knowledge not only from relatives but also from their friends.

When all of the tourists are busy ordering and eating lunch, the Hmong street vendors have time to gather together and share their own lunch while talking about their jobs and the difficulties and challenges they face. It is a time for them to chat, share their own stories of family and life and seek advice from others. For them, this contact is spiritual support.
Diu is a twenty-two-year-old Hmong woman who has worked as a street vendor for two years. Diu’s husband is a violent alcoholic. He drinks all day and does nothing to help her. He beats her often, and for no apparent reason. Her situation worsened when her daughter was born. Diu’s husband beat her more and said that she did not know how to give birth to a son, only a daughter. After three months, with the help of a friend in the village, she started selling handicraft in Sa Pa. She still struggles with a difficult life, but through her work, she is now more comfortable and happy. Going to Sa Pa everyday helps her to escape from her family troubles.

Diu talked a lot about how her new friends and associates have helped her with business and her home issues: “Working and spending time with them frees me from a lot of the pain and exhaustion that I have suffered at home.” Although Diu has not escaped from an alcoholic, abusive husband, she has found spiritual support in the streets through a social alliance with other street vendors. Diu explained a common sentiment I heard from many street vendors: “in the street, we as street vendors not only talk about our problems, we also share joy. During lunch time, we tell joyful stories and it is very cheery”.

The Hmong also take advantage of their social networks to improve their knowledge and education. Hmong women in general have very low levels of education. Of the women vendors I spoke with, the highest education level I encountered was grade 9, and only a very small number of women had reached this level. Generally, the women learn all of the English, negotiation, and business skills necessary for them to work in tourism from relatives and friends. Additionally, they seek opportunities to access more formal education through their Hmong networks. Sa Pa O’Chau is an organization founded by a Hmong woman, Shu Tan (I mentioned her in Chapter 3). This organization supports ethnic minority children, especially Hmong, to re-enroll in Vietnamese schools to complete their basic education. This organization also offers English classes, Vietnamese literacy classes, vocational training, and arts and handicrafts classes. It acts as a bridge linking students to opportunities offered by other organizations. At the time of my fieldwork in 2012, seventy students were living at Sa Pa O’Chau and were enrolled in their classes. Many of them were also working as street vendors, tour guides and restaurant and hotel staff. A number of other students, who were unemployed when they entered Sa Pa O’Chau, found jobs after finishing their studies.

The success of students in Sa Pa O’Chau not only confirms the importance of the Hmong network in employment, but is a powerful counter to the stereotyping imposed by
Kinh. The Kinh narrative is that Hmong children do not go to school because their families do not understand the importance of education. The eagerness of students in Sa Pa O’Chau center reveals that they do value education, but the existing school system, external prejudice, and geographical factors are significant barriers. Most Hmong people reside in the high mountain slopes, the most remote villages being over ten kilometers from town centers where schools are located. Students must travel three to four hours one way to reach school on foot. Moreover, and since there are no secondary schools, students are not able to further their education. In addition, the school curriculum only provides them academic knowledge without the practical life skills necessary to help them to get jobs that are available in their area and that do not require further education.

The above examples of formal and informal education clearly show the importance of social interactions for Hmong women who participate in tourism-related work. Work-based networks and familial ties give them more opportunities to earn a living, improve their knowledge and provide spiritual support in their lives.

Contact with tourists: The power of hospitality

The success of the Hmong in their work depends substantially on their interactions with the tourists. It is common to see a group of Hmong women – both street vendors and tour guides, chatting with tourists in the streets in Sa Pa. They spend hours sitting in front of the old church talking with the tourists about everything, to find things to laugh about together, and the women even give impromptu embroidery lessons. The ways in which women interact with tourists seem to reflect their understanding of tourists’ expectations and desires. Studies of host and guest relationships in tourism have shown that friendliness, or hospitality on the part of the hosts, is given as a gift (Carrier, 1995; Tucker, 2003; Choowonglert, 2012). They try to be good hosts and make the tourists feel comfortable. What the hosts receive by giving their hospitality is usually monetary: the tourists return the favor of hospitality by staying in their hotel or home and buying their souvenirs (Steel, 2008; Tucker, 2003; Choowonglert, 2012). This strategy of Hmong women in Sa Pa of using hospitality for their own advantage resembles the strategy of both Turkish and Thai villagers (Steel, 2008, Choowonglert, 2012) who use their own hospitality to increase the benefits they obtain from tourism. However, what I want to highlight here is that Hmong women really take pleasure from giving hospitality for economic benefits, but they also know how to deliver it to whom in order to avoid being abused for their kindness.
Hospitality commodification for economic gain

As with Xiu in the description above, most street vendors in Sa Pa greet tourists in the early morning right after they get off the bus, and they then wait for them outside their hotels. When tourists leave their hotels, the street vendors follow them and strike up conversations. They ask the tourists some general questions about their lives, the duration of their stay and the places they have visited. These are practical questions to approach the tourists with at the outset of a host–tourist relationship. If the tourists react in a friendly manner and seem interested in the conversation, the street vendor continues to have a personal conversation with the tourists. They then move on to talking about their family, their children and their community. Hmong women state that these conversations are the most effective “warming-up” technique they can use, both to convince tourists to buy their products and to maintain a long-term relationship afterwards.

The interactions with tourists can last anywhere from a few hours to the whole period of a tourist’s stay in Sa Pa. Hmong street vendors are in tune with the wishes and interests of the tourists, and generally try to make them happy. They are very patient, and realize the necessity of building a relationship with tourists. In many cases, street vendors do not rush into telling the tourists they want to sell them something. The tourist implicitly understands that the vendor has something for sale, but the Hmong vendors have found that by not bringing that fact to the forefront they earn a better long-term payoff. Khu, a twenty-one-year-old, has worked as a street vendor for five years, and shared her experiences saying:

Foreign tourists to Sa Pa really like to have contact with the Hmong and Dao ethnic minorities. They like to talk with us and ask us a lot about our lives, villages, houses, and terrace field farming, among other things. In my experience, if I am able to answer their questions well, they are very happy and in return are very nice to me. Very often, tourists do not buy souvenirs on the first day in town. They wait until their last day in Sa Pa, after they have seen everything that is available, and know what they want. When they are ready to buy, they choose to buy from me because they know me well. Therefore, I try to be patient, nice and friendly to them through their whole stay.

It is not necessary for street vendors to follow the tourists throughout their whole stay in Sa Pa; however, they must spend sufficient time with them to make a connection. I have observed that street vendors usually follow tourists for the first day to make themselves known, and to get basic information about the tourist, including their itinerary. The street
vendors then catch up with the tourists at some point during the day, usually in the morning after breakfast and/or in the afternoon after their village treks. Each time the street vendor sees ‘their’ tourists, they warmly greet each other with hugs and small talk. The relationship and familiarity between street vendors and tourists depend on the time they spend together. This connection is really valuable for vendors, because in many other cases, tourists do not initially have a desire to buy an object, but they often end up doing so as compensation for the time the vendor has spent with them.

From my observations, the friendliness and familiarity between Hmong vendors and tourists are based on real, natural emotions for one another. But included in those real emotions are reciprocal expectations on the part of both the vendors and the tourists. Street vendors get two things from spending time talking with tourists: they get to sell their wares, and they get to practice English. I will elaborate on this further in the next section. According to Steel (2008), tourists plan ahead about where they will spend their money. Their expectations of their relationships with street vendors are to gain an ‘exotic’ experience such as hearing stories about the vendor’s life, or even visiting her house (Steel, 2008: 126).

Xiu, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, told me with great enthusiasm that she had recently sold some cushions to three American girls with whom she had made friends. She said:

These three girls were very nice. I met them in front of the church after Sunday service, but couldn’t talk long because I had to go back home. The next day, I met them in front of the church again and we had a longer conversation. I invited them to buy some of my handicrafts, but they said they had already bought handicrafts the last time they had visited Sa Pa, two years ago. I then showed them some of my cushions, wallets and bracelets with the hope they would buy them, but they refused with a shake of the head. I was upset but I stayed for a while to talk with them. They told me that they had taken a tour to Ta Phin, but it was not interesting because they did not make any contact with the local people or visit any local houses. I invited them to visit my house, and they agreed. We made an appointment for 11:00 the next morning. They came to my house and met my mother, my husband and my children. Afterwards, they then invited me to have lunch, but I refused because I did not want to eat at a restaurant. In return for visiting my house, they bought five cushions and three wallets. It was a wonderful success for me.

It cannot be proven that these three American girls decided to buy handicrafts from
Xiu in return for her inviting them to her house; however, it is very clear that they changed their minds and decided to buy something from her after visiting her house. This opportunity to make a sale may not have occurred if Xiu had not spent time talking with them. Her offer was extended after she heard of their disappointment with their trip to Ta Phin. Xiu’s offer to visit her house can be seen as her gift to the three girls, and their handicraft purchases can be seen as a return gift. Although Xiu and other vendors are not always successful with this strategy, it forms an important component of reciprocal business exchanges disguised as friendship.

Many other vendors spoke to me about the importance of conversations in their relationships with tourists. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, tourists in Sa Pa want an “authentic” experience characterized by “immersion” in another culture that is “untainted” by commercialism like “ordinary tourism” often tends to be. Therefore, contacts and stories from local people are highly appreciated, but to some degree are expected. During their conversations and interactions with tourists, the personal element is very important. Hmong women try to introduce the tourists to their lives and their villages as much as possible. They explain what they do, how they live, and other details of their culture. When the tourists visit the vendor’s village, the woman will talk as much as possible about her village, her family and her house. She tells the tourists how they plant rice, what her daily routine is like, and the tradition of Hmong embroidery. She does her best to answer all the tourists’ questions with enthusiasm. After each trekking tour, the guides stop to have a drink with tourists. During this time, the vendors and tourists often exchange contact information – phone numbers, emails, and even Facebook details.

Although Hmong women never explicitly talk about their motivations for staying connected with tourists, I was able to observe that they hold multi-faceted motives for staying in touch. They strategically explore the possibilities for long-term contact. Sometimes, it is only for the fun of being connected with outsiders, but occasionally, this contact yields economic gains. When tourists return home and talk about their trips, they may mention the Hmong girl they met to others. If the tourist’s friends travel to Vietnam, they often go looking for the same girl. The cycle is continuous, and some women have been able to set up business networks for themselves. These networks are crucial for freelance tour guides who must find customers for themselves. In the case of Phinh, the freelance tour guide I mentioned above, she exchanges contact information with tourists after each tour. She told me “I always ask tourists to introduce me to their friends who plan to visit Sa Pa. Because I treated them very
well during their stay in Sa Pa, I often receive offers to guide their friends.” Although Phinh also explicitly stated that while not all “tourist friends” have been able to help her business, the ones who do are very important to her.

This network is not only useful for word of mouth travel planning. There are also some cases where tourists have supported Hmong women by paying the tuition fees for their children and giving them food and clothes. In other cases, some Hmong women have received generous support to set up businesses or open a shop. During my stay, I witnessed a friendly interaction between old friends who had been returning to Sa Pa for almost a decade. I met an American couple who had sponsored a Hmong girl in her studies. They met this girl when they first visited Sa Pa in 2005. They have been regularly returning to Sa Pa for longer stays with the purpose of visiting their Hmong friend and also enjoying the “ethnic” atmosphere in this mountainous town.

In exploring the dynamics of interactions between people, Mauss (1923) proposes “the gift” theory in which he argues that the giving and receiving of gifts between individuals and groups builds relationships between them. Gifts imply reciprocity. The act of giving gifts, according to Mauss, has three phases: (1) giving (the first step in building social relationships), (2) receiving (you cannot refuse the gift you are offered) and (3) reciprocating (demonstrating social integrity). Refusing to give a gift in return is akin to refusing to accept gift in the first place. Both acts signify a refusal of friendship and communication. For example, in analyzing gift exchanges in Polynesia, Mauss finds that failing to return a gift means losing mana, the person’s spiritual source of authority and wealth. A gift, according to this view, is never free, but implies the obligation of returning something that is economically, socially, politically, or religiously useful. Mauss’s views on the nature of gift exchanges have not been without critics. Testart (1997) argues that there are “free” gifts in the cases of donors and receivers, where the giver and the receiver do not know one another, and they are unlikely meet. In this situation, there is no obligation on the side of the receiver or any expectation on the part of the donor.

While I find Testart’s argument reasonable in the case of anonymous donors, in a wider social and economic life based on human interaction and contact, I support Mauss’s theory that gifts always imply reciprocity. I further argue that gift exchanges are complex and can take a variety of forms. As in the above example with Xiu, the gift exchanged can be time spent with tourists and a feeling of an obligation to buy something in return. In the case of the American tourists supporting their Hmong friend’s education, the tourists exchange financial
support for entre into the “exotic.”

The examples above provide evidence which counter the idea that the contacts between local people and tourists are merely “one-off interchanges” of words and/or goods, or that they take place at “a pure sell and buy level” (Steel, 2008: 123). When Hmong women and tourists establish contacts, they are often quite profound and long-term and they are often beneficial for the Hmong women’s work. Hmong vendors and tour guides have turned the “pure relationship” based on friendliness into an “exchange” relationship. In other words, Hmong women have transformed their hospitality from being purely a gift into a “saleable hospitality” or commodity (Choowonglert, 2012: 1). However, it is important to mention that the economic exchange between the street vendor and the tourist is based on the interactions between them which are established over time. Therefore, what Hmong women sell to tourists, such as handicrafts, and what Hmong women receive from tourists are not just goods or money per se. There are meanings coming from the relationship between two people, (Goddard, 2000) which can be seen as a meaningful and authentic (Choowonglert, 2012: 15). Being friendly and informative is particularly important as this increase the chances for a sale and the possibility of an economically-based long-term relationship. Hmong women see this relationship building as the most important factor in their success because it enables them to build their market networks. These Hmong businesswomen exert their agency through developing long-term relationships that go beyond pure economics to include such things as English language practice or some forms of romantic relationships, both of which I shall further explore in the following sections.

Romantic relationships

Tucker (2003), in her study about tourism in Goreme, Turkey, shows that the relationships between villagers and tourists can be complex and intimate and can be the starting point for romantic liaisons. On occasion, interactions between Hmong girls and tourists in Sa Pa have developed into long-term relationships. One of the love stories I heard come from Peter:

I came to Sa Pa as a tourist in August 2010 and spent a happy week here enjoying beautiful scenery and of course hanging around with Hmong girls. One day before leaving Sa Pa, I heard about Sa Pa O’Chau (the education center mentioned above). I visited it and ended up volunteering as an English teacher for three months. During my three months stay in Sa Pa, I often traveled to the villages and enjoyed outdoor
activities. Through Shu Tan, the founder of Sa Pa O’Chau, I met La, a very nice seventeen-year-old Hmong tour guide in Lao Chai. I spent time with her, went to visit her house and we went out for coffee. I taught her English and she taught me Hmong. We had fun together. When my visa expired after three months, I had to come back to England. We stayed connected through email and phone. I really missed her and I decided to return to Sa Pa. The day I came back I told her that I loved her and she accepted my offer. Now I work full-time for Sa Pa O’Chau and intend to stay here permanently, because I cannot leave my girl for a second, and she is not willing to leave her village. I will marry her when she turns 20.

– Peter, volunteer from England

La is also happy with this love and expresses her wish for a marriage. This story reflects the possibility that Hmong girls can have love and even marriage relationships with tourists. I also met Xay, a Hmong girl in Ta Phin who met her French husband when he traveled to Sa Pa in 2008. They married a year later. They live in Ta Phin and she continues her work as tour guide and her husband is a “real French-Hmong farmer” in Ta Phin. There are also some cases of Hmong girls who have married foreign tourists and moved to live in their husbands’ countries.

It is important to highlight that Hmong girls working in Sa Pa do not intentionally seek love/marriage relationships with tourists like those in Pattaya, Thailand (Lapanun, 2013). Hmong girls are not generally interested in marrying foreigners (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006). When these romantic relationships occur, they are based on friendships. These relationships further develop when tourists stay in Sa Pa for extended periods, or if the tourist frequently returns to Sa Pa. In these cases, the Hmong women’s tactics of using of hospitality to make a sale netted them far larger gains than they had expected. The motivation and desires of tourists and Hmong girls in these romantic relationships is not the subject of my research; therefore is not discussed here. However, it can be said that motivations on both sides are far more complex than solely economic gain (Constable, 2003; Lapanun, 2013).

Through my research, I have heard about ten Hmong–foreigner couples in Sa Pa, though the number may be greater. There have been some cases of marriages ending in divorce or separation. However, in all of the Hmong–foreigner couples I met, the partners emphasized and valued the love they have for each other. As Xa said to me: “I loved him and he loved me; that is why we got married”. The relationships between Hmong girls and foreign tourists began through the desire to make a sale or for opportunities to practice English
(further analysis is provided in the next section). However, these relationships developed over time into long-term romantic relationships. The original economic objective of making a sale seemed not to be paramount. For this reason, the relationships (love and marriage) between Hmong women and foreign men are not relationships of victim and agent, of oppressor and oppressed, of power and powerless or of trafficked women being sold to foreign men (Constable, 2003). Hmong girls have the power to reject foreign men. The case of Din below illustrates this:

Din, who is nineteen years old, was born into a family of four children in Lao Cai. Like many other girls in the village, Din began working as a street vendor soon after finishing grade 6. After five years of working as a street seller, she picked up work as a tour guide as well. When she found tourists wishing to go trekking, she acted as tour guide, while on other days, she continued to sell in the streets. This dual role in the tourist realm ensured her a fairly stable income in a fluctuating and unstable market. One day, she met an Australian man in front of the church and offered him a visit to her house. The man came to her house, met her family, played with her brothers and sisters, explored the terrace fields, and ate what he claimed to be the most delicious meal in his life. Din met with this man several times before he returned home for Australia, and they stayed in contact with each other over the phone. He came back to Sa Pa after three months and expressed love to her. He proposed her after one year. His proposal came with a request for her to leave Lao Cai and follow him to Australia after their marriage. He reasoned that he had a very good job in his home country as a sales manager for a telecommunication company. This would ensure that he and Din would have a good future. Moreover, it was not easy for him to find a suitable work in Sa Pa. He promised her a happy life in Australia, and a yearly return Sa Pa to visit her parents. He also promised to help Din find a suitable job, or further education. These future prospects looked very bright to Din. However, she declined because she could not leave her family and her village. Din told him, “If I leave my village, I will miss it a lot. I will miss my family, my parents, my brothers and sisters. Living in another country means I cannot speak Hmong anymore; I cannot see my Hmong friends. That is heart-breaking.” Though the Australian man had asked her to reconsider the proposal several times, she kept her decision to stay put, which finally led to them breaking off their engagement.
Three months after ending her relationship with the Australian man, Din met a Hmong man at the local market. This Hmong man also lived in Lao Chai but was a farmer in a different hamlet. The two of them began a serious relationship. He often took Din to Sa Pa in the morning for work and picked her up at the end of the day. Two weeks prior to the 2010 Lunar New Year, I received a phone call from Din to invite me to her wedding with this Hmong man. Although I could not attend her wedding, I gathered from our conversation on the phone that Din was happy and pleased with her wedding and the direction her life has taken.

Din’s story exemplifies the process by which Hmong girls and women negotiate their encounters with others, and how they carefully consider their possibilities and chances for a secure and happy life. Her story also reveals her worries of being displaced from her Hmong community and culture.

Din’s concerns about leaving her Hmong community were formed under the influence of parents and community. Hmong girls working in Sa Pa often suffer criticism from their parents and communities (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006; Bonnin and Turner, 2013). From the community’s perspective, it is difficult to accept their daughters, granddaughters, nieces, and cousins selling in the street. Parents fear that their daughters will not learn or master the skills they need to become desirable marriage partners (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006: 125). Another fear is that Hmong girls will lose their traditions and stop doing housework or learning to make traditional handicrafts (Bonnin and Turner, 2013). The phenomenon of getting married to foreigners is likely to meet with more drastic opposition from parents. They are afraid that their daughters will decide to no longer be Hmong. In addition, they fear losing their daughters forever when they leave Sa Pa for their new husbands’ countries. I talked with La’s mother about La’s future as a wife. La’s mother expressed her worries about La’s life after marriage. She said explicitly that it would be better if La married a Hmong man. “Hmong girls should marry Hmong men, as they are both Hmong,” she said. If La marries a Hmong man, she will continue to live in Sa Pa. This fact may be one of the main reasons that these couples get the approval from the bride’s parents. La’s mother hopes for a husband who can support her daughter financially so she may have a better life, and not have to work so hard. However, she stresses that Hmong girls in any circumstances should know to do household work, embroider and take care of their families. In fact, in six out of the ten foreigner–Hmong couples that I know about and are living in Sa Pa, the wives perform traditional gender work for the households, despite having a foreign husband. Xa (aged 23) shares her story about...
life with a foreigner:

After marriage with Marriot (her French husband) I am still Hmong. I work on the farm, raise pigs and chickens, embroider and make clothes for my husband, just like other Hmong wives. My husband helps me with my work. The only change is that I do not work as a tour guide anymore because I am too busy.

Parents’ fears regarding Hmong girls marrying foreigners can get internalized by their daughters, as can be seen with Din above who worries that she could not speak her own Hmong language and meet her Hmong friends if she moved to Australia. This was too much for her, causing her to refuse the proposal and find a suitable Hmong husband.

Din and other girls and women’s actions and negotiations highlighted their agency, not only in their work but also in other aspects of their lives like love and marriage, as illustrated in the above accounts. While hospitality is used intentionally for economic exchange, love and marriage that Hmong may get from their hospitality are quite coincidental and accidental; however, as these stories show, Hmong women do take every possible opportunity to live a good life.

Language skills

Apart from the economic benefits and relationships acquired through the Hmong women’s commodification of hospitality, this practice also allows Hmong women to gain one very important, non-monetary benefit, which is the opportunity to improve their English proficiency. The better a tourism worker’s communication skills are, the better their opportunities to interact with foreign tourists. Interaction with foreigners provides women not only with opportunities to get customers and to make sales, but also to further develop relationships which might eventually enable them to expand their businesses, or possibly change their lives as described above.

Language skills are particularly important in the early stages of the tourism work. As mentioned in Chapter 5, street vendors in the early days of their work just follow experienced sellers to learn English, while selling almost nothing. Thao, a sixteen-year-old Hmong girl recalled her early days working as a street vendor in Sa Pa, following her cousin and observing how to sell and how to talk with foreign tourists. Even after a month her contact with customers was still limited because she only knew a few English words. She could greet them and tell the prices of products but could not extend the conversation. She could not entertain tourists with stories about her village, about the Hmong, or even about herself.
Tourists often ignored her entreaties, meaning that she could not sell anything. Thao relied on help from her cousin to communicate with customers. Gradually, she learned more English from her friends and especially from foreign customers. She said that interactions with foreign tourists were extremely helpful in acquiring English. Speaking with tourists improved her English vocabulary and her pronunciation. She called these interactions “gifts.”

Thao believes that this gift from foreigners was the result of her spending time with them during their visits to Sa Pa. The closer she was to the tourists, the more English practice she got. Thao highly valued the friendship and hospitality that she shared with the tourists, and she is highly appreciative of what she received from tourists in return. After one-and-a-half years working in Sa Pa as a street vendor, she was able to interact and negotiate better deals for herself and she continued to use her hospitality as a strategy for business.

Before engaging in tourism-related activities, very few Hmong women know any words of English, but all of the Hmong girls and women I met in Sa Pa can speak English very well. They can communicate with tourists confidently and use slang fluently. This ability surprises many Kinh tourists, who quickly become jealous of the women’s language skills because many young Kinh cannot speak English as well. When I asked them all where they learned English, their replies were the same: “I learnt from the street, from friends and from tourists”. The Hmong women who work in tourism are extremely aware of the importance of English in their work. These women do not hesitate to approach tourists as much as possible, not only to make sales, but also to practice their English. It is rare to see a Hmong-only group in Sa Pa. More often, they are engaging in a group with tourists. Sitting with them, I listened to a wide range of English and communication styles in conversations between the Hmong and the tourists. They use their friendliness and hospitality by telling stories to tourists and this helps them improve their pronunciation and enrich their vocabulary. In my case, my ability to speak English was an advantage for me to make friends and interact with the Hmong during my time doing fieldwork in Sa Pa.

Although Hmong women never explicitly asked, I realized that they expected me to teach them English, even if it was only a few words. Whenever I met Hmong women, they usually asked me questions such as “How do you say ‘x’ in English?” or “How do I say I want to receive a higher price?” Hmong girls also wanted to talk with me in English rather than in Kinh. I think this was in part due to their negative feelings toward the Kinh, but also, they saw me as another person to practice their English on. These interactions regarding language between myself as a researcher and the Hmong as my research participants implied
reciprocal expectations. The Hmong’s endeavors to learn English emphasized to me their strategy of using hospitality for their own benefits.

“Restricting the hospitality”30

The practice of offering hospitality with expectations of getting sales and other gains has been explained. The Hmong women in the tourism industry have gradually developed a system to realize when tourists are abusing their hospitality. With the expectations of meeting with local people, and visiting local people’s houses, western tourists in many cases take the initiative in approaching and making the acquaintance of Hmong girls and women for free stories or even free house visits. In other cases, western tourists show their interest in buying something from the women, but after visiting their houses, the tourist bargains the price of the item down to such a low level that the women cannot afford to sell it. Hmong narratives are filled with tales of how their hospitality is “used” and even “abused” by tourists. Liu, a fifteen-year-old street vendor from Hau Thao tells a story to illustrate this point.

It was a nice day in August when I met a tourist couple in the street and as usual we talked together and walked around the town of Sa Pa. When we left each other, the tourists said they wanted to meet up with me again later. At around 3 pm, I met them after their tour of the museum. During our conversation, we talked about everything and I tried to entertain them with stories about Sa Pa and my Hmong people. They also took a look at my handicrafts and said that they certainly would buy a scarf from me. They had one more day in Sa Pa and would see me the next afternoon before leaving. The next day, I waited for them in the street, but did not see them. I then went to the hotel where they were staying, but they had already left. I was very disappointed.

It seems to be a matter of luck when the Hmong women manage to either sell something or receive gains in exchange for their hospitality. However, in the case of Liu, the tourist couple clearly made a promise but did not honor it, which hurt her a lot. The couple clearly did promise to buy a scarf from Liu after several conversations, but they broke their promise. They probably did not want to buy because they had some handicrafts already, or simply did not want a scarf. Liu saw their actions as “cheating” and abusing her hospitality. She told me, “If they had not promised, it would have been fine with me. However, they made a promise, but did not keep it. I was so sad”.

To deal with this issue, the street vendors watch the tourists first to make an initial selection before deciding to make contact with them. This initial selection happens when they first meet tourists in the early morning right after they get off the bus. In the case involving Xiu described in the first paragraph of this chapter, Xiu selects her potential customers based on their friendliness, openness, their outward signs of wealth, and their nationalities. For her, tourists from the US, England and Australia are good tourists because they are fun, open and generous, while Germans are annoying because they are too miserly. Asian tourists are generally stingy, they seldom buy and pay for anything even when they receive help from her. Many other women in the tourism industry in Sa Pa share the same stereotypes. Based on their experiences and feelings about tourists, Hmong girls and women decide whether they will “offer” them hospitality or not.

The strategy of Hmong women in providing or withholding hospitality illustrates the Hmong’s gaze upon tourists. Tourists visiting a place have a set of expectations of the local population. They look for an “authentic” experience that Urry (1990) terms the “tourist gaze”. The “tourist gaze” is made up of a “primary tourist gaze” and a “secondary tourist gaze.” The first gaze comprised images and myths represented in the tourist promotional materials as extraordinary and worth seeing. The secondary gaze, in contrast, entails “a drive to provide narrative accompaniment to what is seen which always goes beyond descriptions of the visible” (MacCannell, 2001: 32). The tourists, however, are not the only group able to “gaze.” Local people also “gaze” upon the tourists. During the contact with tourists, Hmong women develop their own views and create their own images of tourists in response to their gaze which is called the “local gaze” or the “mutual gaze” (Maoz, 2006). Through their experiences, they have come to decide how to react to different kinds of tourists in order to avoid being abused. Women who have worked in tourism for some time are able to discriminate between those who are “good tourists” and those who are not. They become increasingly intolerant of those who are not (Tucker, 2003).

One illustration of this is the attitude of the Hmong toward Kinh and Chinese tourists. Hmong people do not want to have relationships with Kinh people or the Chinese. Hmong street vendors only approach the Kinh and Chinese tourists when they have determined they cannot find any other customers. Through my conversations, I found that the Hmong never seem to have a motivation to foster a long-term relationship with Kinh and Chinese tourists. This was a very difficult issue for us to talk about explicitly though, because I am Kinh. However, I observed their relationships when I spent time with them in the street and watched
how the vendors interacted with other Kinh. The women told me that Kinh people always
drive a hard bargain. The Kinh do not trust the Hmong and always think Hmong people are
cheating them by giving them very bad prices. Si, a street vendor stated “I only approach and
ask Kinh to buy my products if during the day I was not able to sell anything. Selling to Kinh
people is tiring and I do not like how they bargain. They do not value our products or our
efforts to make these handicrafts.” From my observations, street vendors give priority to
westerners and only when there were no westerners in the street did they fall back on Kinh
and Chinese people.

The stereotypes the Hmong women hold of the Chinese is more serious. They describe
the Chinese as impolite, annoying and rude. Dinh told me, “Chinese are so loud. They talk too
much and they use unpleasant language and an unpleasant tone of voice. They have teased
street vendors.” Dinh’s judgment is in line with what Chan (2005) found about Chinese
tourists coming to Lao Cai. According to her research, Chinese tourists were “bargaining too
much; impolite; speaking too loud; dirty” (Chan, 2005: 134). Hotels in Lao Cai refuse
Chinese tourists if there are other guests available to choose from.

Hmong tour guides report similar experiences with Kinh people. The Kinh seldom go
on tours, they usually prefer to go trekking by themselves. Khu, a street vendor whom I
mentioned earlier in this chapter complained,

If the Kinh go on tour, they usually ask a lot of questions, but when we talk to them
about our culture, life, and villages they usually pout and speak scornfully of our
culture as ‘backward’ and of our lifestyle as ‘dirty.’ They do not believe what we tell
them, as they think they know everything, they know our lives better than us, and what
we told them cannot be true.

Many Hmong tour guides said that they do not like acting as tour guides for Kinh
individuals or groups. If they work for the tour agencies, they are required to lead the tours,
but as freelancers they would never choose to do so. This highlights that the distrust between
Hmong and Kinh is not confined to their day-to-day interactions but extends to their work.

From my observations, Hmong girls and women are not willing to give their
hospitality to Kinh, as they are aware of how Kinh see them. The tourist gaze is about the
tourists’ expectations of the local people and landscapes that they are visiting; therefore,
tourists want to explore the local culture of the places they visit. However, for domestic Kinh
tourists, the state narrative of the Hmong is that they are “backward” compared to Kinh. This
perception, as mentioned earlier in this study, is perpetuated not only by traditional images of Hmong and their lives in promotional tourist material, but also by Kinh ethnocentric thinking toward ethnic minorities. Hmong people, based on these bad experiences, develop their own “local gaze” toward Kinh people.

During my fieldwork in Sa Pa, I usually accompanied Chu, Xay and Do. Chu and Xay, who were freelance tour guides, and Do, who was a street vendor, but they formed a team to support each other. We usually walked around Sa Pa along the main street, and up to the mountain road leading to the Victoria Hotel. Sometimes we walked to the artificial lake on the other side of Sa Pa. We would sit under a tree or on the stairs leading to the stadium in the center of Sa Pa and chat. Kinh tourists who saw us sitting together usually stopped and stared at them, commented about them and of course admired their ability to speak English fluently. Kinh tourists also asked questions about their families, their work, their clothing and their hair. However, their replies to Kinh tourists’ questions were often silence. The Hmong women said nothing and focused on what they were doing like embroidering or hemp joining. I never asked them why they reacted like that; however, I could see their discomfort and their unfriendly attitude toward Kinh tourists.

Cultural Strategy: Marketing identity in the “tourist space”

Goldin (1985) in exploring the socioeconomic relations between Maya people and people of other ethnic minorities in marketplaces in Guatemala, found that the differences between the two groups play an important role in how the Mayans frame their ethnic identities. In Sa Pa, this phenomenon can be seen in the different actors in the tourist industry. The street vendors are either Hmong or Dao. The Kinh own shops, stores and boutiques. The vendors in the Sa Pa market and the vendors from neighboring districts are a mix of ethnicities. The competiveness in the tourist market is fierce and requires each actor to develop a unique strategy for success. Through their contact with tourists, Hmong people are aware that tourists want to consume the traditional, ethnic culture. Because the Hmong “own” this commodity, they use it to attract tourists for their business.

Tourists appreciate and seek “authentic” local customs, rituals, feasts and handicrafts. Authenticity, according to Richard Handler is the “modern”, “western” desire and search for “authentic cultural experience for the unspoiled, genuine, untouched and traditional” (Handler, 1986:3). Tourists’ appreciation for authentic culture leads to culture commoditization. Local people and their cultural traits become touristic services or commodities that get produced for tourist consumption (Cohen, 1988). Accordingly, the
boundaries between the “real” thing and a “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1973) blur and the staged gradually becomes accepted as authentic. Cohen (1988: 379) proposes that “a cultural product, or a trait thereof, which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic, may, in the course of time, become generally recognized as authentic, even by experts.”

In the case of Hmong women in Sa Pa, they are aware that certain aspects of their lives and culture, like their handicrafts, are what tourists find different and interesting. They have compromised with what has been represented in the tourism promotional material. I call this “cultural self-branding” and it involves exploiting the strategic value of their culture. Hmong people seek to “capitalize on tourists’ curiosity and money” (Allan, 2011: 214) by using the cultural value-added differences between what they sell and what they introduce to tourists. In negotiating with tourists about prices for handicrafts, Hmong vendors try to show them what is “real Hmong-made” and what is not in order to earn a better profit. Street vendors often sort their products into two types: industry-made and handmade. When showing their products to tourists, they always highlight the differences between their products and those of the Kinh. One of their strategies is to show tourists the similarities between their products and their clothes in terms of materials, color and embroidery patterns.

When the women deal with handicraft retailers, they usually negotiate with them about how long it will take to make a specific product. They manipulate the details of the design in order to be contracted for more money. Usually, the retailers order them to make products according to their designs, and they usually pay Hmong women based on their own subjective estimations. The Hmong women negotiate about the payment by saying that the products are too complicated to make and take a lot of time.

These examples show how The Hmong women involved in tourism assign a cultural value to their commercial products for competition in the marketplace. This is done consciously by the Hmong in response to the Kinhs’ marketing of their ethnic authenticity. This strategy of commercializing culture also supports the conclusion that female artisans are economically successful in tourism if they sell their handicrafts as indigenous women (Henrici, 2002; Stronza, 2008; Babb, 2011)

**Conclusion**

Hmong women hold a relatively weak political and economic position in relation to other actors in the marketplace. Yet they have employed multiple strategies in order to achieve their desired goals. Since tourism in Sa Pa is dominated by Kinh people, Hmong girls
and women seek to escape from Kinh control and influence by working independently. Tour
guides, after years of working for companies, gain knowledge and experience, and then quit
to work independently, liberating themselves from the exploitative structures in the local
market.

Working independently, both Hmong street vendors and tour guides build and develop
networks to cope with insecurities, and make their work more profitable. They cultivate both
a Hmong network and a tourist network for themselves. They rely on their Hmong network
for opportunities to earn money and to be able to bear insecurities such as police intimidation
and tourist emergencies. The contact with other Hmong provides them with opportunities for
success in their work and spiritual support. Hmong street vendors and tour guides foster a
commercial network of tourists to improve their socio-economic positions. As I have shown
in this chapter, Hmong women’s economic opportunities, especially as tour guides, depend
largely on their tourist networks. Their contact with tourists is usually based on reciprocal
expectations, and Hmong women know how to invest in their networks to be able to benefit
from them. Some tour guides I met successfully sustained a stable number of customers based
on the networks they formed with tourists.

Competing with other actors in the market, Hmong women working in tourism use
their own resources as a vehicle to reach their desired goals. They are able to convert cultural
capital (a culture of hospitality, their identity) and social capital (relations with tourists) into
economic capital. They also have the power to manipulate their opportunities, control their
desires and avoid being taken advantage of. Hmong women draw clear boundaries around
themselves by developing a “local gaze” upon tourists. They define their potential customers
and “bad” tourists based on their ideas of how wealthy they think they are, how they look and
how they behave. Such practices and strategies are indicative of the women’s determination to
overcome their inferior positions within local and global hierarchies dictated by gender,
ethnicity and class (Lapanun, 2013). The actions of Hmong women reflect a high degree of
intentionality geared toward their goals. Clearly, in engaging with tourism, instead of
considering Hmong (ethnic minorities) as powerless people coping with global forces (Picard,
2003), it should be recognised that they have at times successfully turned this image on its
head.
Chapter 7

Continuity and Change in Hmong Gender Relations

On a very cold, foggy late December afternoon in 2011, after several missed appointments, I finally managed to speak with Diu. Diu (aged 22) a mother of two young sons, works as a freelance tour guide. Before I met up with her, she had been on a trekking tour to Cat Cat village with an American couple. “It was a good day”, Diu said, because the couple was very nice and generous. Even though it was only a half-day tour, they paid Diu VND 300,000 (US$ 15) and gave her VND 200,000 (US$ 10) as a tip to buy an overcoat for her little son. After their tour, the couple treated her to a nice lunch and promised to introduce their friends to her if they ever came to Sa Pa.

After her successful tour excursion, Diu spent the rest of her afternoon in Sa Pa chatting with her Hmong friends, sharing the details of their working day. I met Diu at 4 pm in front of Sa Pa ethnic minority history and culture museum, and from there we went to her house. Diu stopped off at the market to buy some vegetables and meat. Knowing that the meat she bought was for the special occasion of having me as a guest, I asked her to let me pay for the groceries, but she refused. I respected her hospitality and did not push the issue. Instead, I bought candy for her children and fruit for dessert. When we left Sa Pa at around 4:45 pm, it was so dark and foggy that we were not able see each other clearly. We walked the seven kilometers from Sa Pa to her commune Lao Chai and then another three to her house outside of the village. After six months of living in Sa Pa, I thought I was used to walking, but I found the 10 kilometers to be a challenge. We talked a lot, though, so the distance seemed shorter.

Diu told me about her life. She got married at the age of 14 to a seventeen-year-old farmer. They met each other at the commune New Year festival and were married a year later. After her marriage, her in-laws gave her and her husband a plot of land and a rice field. They lived independently and worked to make a living for themselves. Life was quite difficult when they were first married and it became even harder when their first son was born. Their income was totally dependent on the rice field and Diu’s husband started looking for other jobs to improve their life. However, the only work he could find was occasionally collecting cardamom for a pittance. When her son turned one, Diu followed her neighbor into Sa Pa to become a street vendor.
We finally reached Diu’s house at around 7 pm. The house was still locked. Her husband was not at home and her elder son was out playing with friends at a neighbor’s house. Diu asked me to look after her younger son, while she started preparing dinner. She scurried in and out the house, cooking and feeding pigs and chickens at the same time. About thirty minutes later, her husband arrived home. Diu stepped outside with her husband to discuss something in Hmong outside the house. I could not understand the words, but the tones of their voices made it seem as though they were not happy and were arguing. It seemed to me as though Diu’s husband was not aware that I was in the house, because he continued to raise his voice as he spoke angrily to Diu. A few minutes into the conversation, I got the sense that Diu told him that I was inside. At that point, he entered the house and greeted me. He looked shy and apologized to me for their loud discussion, which he repeatedly explained was about their children. He asked me some questions about my family and my work. After that, Diu asked him to go to the neighbor’s house to pick up their older son.

Diu went back to her work of feeding poultry and cleaning the house, while I helped by taking care of her son and cooking. At 8 pm dinner was finally ready, but Diu’s husband and her elder son were still not home. She went outside to find them, and ten minutes later, they all returned. Diu looked very angry, but she tried to calm down. We were all able to overlook the tension and enjoy a delightful meal. After dinner, Diu’s husband explained that there would be a prayer service at their house that evening. He then left to go gather the neighbors. Diu and her husband, along with many Hmong in their village, are Protestants. The Protestants observe three masses every week: one on Thursday evenings, one on Sunday mornings, and the third one on Sunday afternoons. Because there is no church in the commune, the Protestant community members who have larger houses offer their homes up as places of worship. (See Chapters 2 and 4 for information on Hmong conversion to Christianity.) I helped Diu wash the dishes, while she bathed her sons. The boys then went out to play with other children. Diu continued her household work by chopping fodder for the pig and cleaning the house. The neighbors began to arrive around 9 pm. The prayer service lasted about one hour. When it finished, most people left, but some women stayed to talk to Diu and me. We talked about many things, and the women seemed quite excited and surprised to learn that I would be staying overnight in Diu’s house. While we talked, Diu concentrated on her work of spinning hemp, stopping occasionally to join our conversation.

It was about 10:30 when the last of the women left Diu’s house. Diu made up a bed
for me, and then for her family. She went outside to check the livestock while her husband watched a drama on television. All of us went to bed at around 11 pm. The house sank into darkness. It was midnight, but Diu and her husband were still awake. It seemed that they continued to criticize each other about something, and although they spoke softly and in Hmong I could feel the discontent in both their voices. I fell into deep sleep after a hard day of walking without knowing how long their conversation lasted.

Diu, like the majority of Hmong women involved in tourism-related activities who participated in this study, are doubly burdened with the work of earning a living for their families and attending to household duties, usually without any help from their husbands. Tourism has opened up economic and social opportunities for Hmong women in Sa Pa. In doing so, it has built up the women’s confidence, which has led to them to question the complex gender-related norms of their traditional society. Their employment and participation in tourism highlight both the continuity and change in gender relations in Hmong families. Interviews and observations from the field suggest that the women have mixed feelings about the impact of their activities outside of the realm of housework. Their responses center around five main themes: (1) the physical and moral fatigue; (2) the twin burdens of earning money and keeping up with domestic chores; (3) difficulties and challenges in family life; (4) better status in negotiations with men; and (5) more freedom.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the literature on gender relations in families point out that it is not easy for men to accept power redistribution in the family and to be willing to do household work (Anderson, 1972; Harrison, 1992; Timothy, 2001). At the heart of this is the argument that changes to gender roles reduce the power of the husband in the family (Timothy, 2001; Rothschild cited in Bui Phuong Dinh, 2006). In this research the term “power”, based on the work of Foucault (1976) and Ilcan (1996), refers to the economic, social and cultural strategies, and the traditions and moral discourses, that individuals use to act in their own interests. Drawing on Foucault’s and Ilcan’s understandings of power, in this study I focus on discourses around gender and moral cultural strategies to explain how these discourses result in the legitimization of gender-based divisions of labor, and ultimately direct people’s actions. In the context of Hmong communities, cultural gender norms continue to be used to justify the women’s excessive workloads. These norms hold the key to women’s and men’s acquiescence to cultural expectations of what is appropriate gender behavior and work.

Hmong women, as I will show in this chapter, continue to act out the traditional
gender discourses and moral imperatives that confine them to behaving according to the cultural expectations of their roles and responsibilities as women. Within these limitations, however, they use strategies to organize against gender constraints and to negotiate for changes in their daily lives. Examples of this phenomenon have been also been documented in communities in the Philippines, Zaire and Turkey (Aguilar, 1996; Mianda, 1996; Ilcan, 1996). In this study, I have found that the gender roles of Hmong people are shaped in part by the diverse motivations and desires of both men and women. Hmong women have distinct views about their own and their husbands’ positions and status within their families. In some cases they feel they can challenge their husbands’ authority, yet will not deny his status as head of family, a traditional, male gender role. By knowing when and how to challenge gender norms, Hmong women use these discourses of gender relations to gain power in their relationships.

This chapter presents an analysis of how working outside the home affects Hmong women’s lives and discusses the extent to which their status at home changes in the context of discourses on the morality and traditions of gender and work. I will show how opportunities provided by working outside the home influence cultural beliefs and norms about gender and work. In what follows, I shall discuss (1) the physical and moral impacts that working outside the home have on Hmong women; (2) the consequences of working outside the home; and 3) the ways in which these women adopt particular coping strategies in negotiating their power in the family.

**Intensified work: Physical and moral fatigue**

Many international studies on women who work outside the home have emphasized that regardless of what field of employment they participate in, working women bear a double work burden (Garcia-Ramon, Canoves and Valdovinos, 1995; Tran Thi Que, 1996; Do Thi Binh et al., 2002; Gentry, 2007). They are responsible both for their contracted work and their household chores. In addition, their double workdays mean that women have no free time to rest, which leads to stress and health problems (Gentry, 2007). The interviews and narratives of the Hmong women in this study indicate that they are no exception to this rule.

As mentioned before, the women who participate in tourism in Sa Pa are self-employed and work in the home, or they work outside the home, or they are employed by someone else. The stories I tell in this chapter indicate that regardless of the type of employment, all of these women face an increased workload. The women who work at home making handicrafts, giving weaving demonstrators, or selling handicrafts find themselves
working late into the night, after they have finished their household chores. It is important to note that both men and women view handicraft production or selling at home merely as an extension of women’s domestic tasks. Because Hmong women have always done sewing and embroidering, the work to be sold is viewed merely as an extension of the work they are already doing. And tour guides, even though they are often not at home for large periods of the day, are still responsible for household work. Additional work is seen as fitting into the existing construction of gender relations in Hmong culture and is considered culturally appropriate for local women, as demonstrated in the following conversation I had with Diu’s husband, Xo

Xo: Before she started working my wife did embroidery, she embroidered and made clothes for family members, just like all Hmong women do. Now she does the same things, only she does a little more.

Me: Doing a little more means that she requires more time for it, right?

Xo: Sure, but it is still her work. All Hmong women have to know how to embroider and make clothes for their children and husband. She can do it when she looks after the children, before going bed, after lunch. It was her job as a girl, and it is something she continues to do as she gets older. It is Hmong women’s work. How can I help her? I do not know how to do that job.

Me: But you could help with other household work, so she could make more handicrafts to sell.

Xo: If I can, I will. But it is female work. As a man I am responsible for field plowing. When I finish plowing my fields, if somebody hires me to plow their field I will do it. It is my work as a man and I do not ask my wife to help because I know that she does not know how to do that. Men have men’s work and women have women’s work.

By emphasizing “her work”, “Hmong women’s work” and “female work,” Diu’s husband clearly expressed his understanding that even though his wife’s embroidery is an income-generating tool, it is still domestic work that she is expected to do. He also gave an example about his role in family affairs. It can be seen in this interplay that the distinction between women’s and men’s work is very clear in Hmong families, and the distinctions between work in and outside the family is firmly constructed. Even as the nature of the work is changing, as shown in the conversation above, and embroidery is now not only for family use but also for generating household income, it is still considered domestic work.
For women working outside home, for example as street vendors and tour guides, their home–work balance is equally difficult. Take the case of Xiu (whom I mentioned in Chapter 6) as an example of the anxiety and physical pressure that Hmong women bear due to their dual work roles:

Xiu, 25 years old, was the mother of two sons (aged ten and two) and two daughters (aged eight and five). Her husband, a farmer, was five years her senior. In addition to his own fieldwork planting rice and cardamom, he also did work for others when it was available. This outside work ranged from building houses to felling trees and clearing land for rice planting. However, there is never much work, and he was only truly busy six months out of the year: from February to April and from September to November. Although his work was physically challenging, he was not over-burdened physically, mentally, or in terms of time. Xiu started her work as a street vendor when her second son was two years old. The work, as she described it, was quite physically demanding: I had to leave my home very early with my son on my back, walk the six kilometers to Sa Pa and follow the tourists all day, and then I walk six kilometers back home. This totaled about eighteen to twenty kilometers per day. Although I, as Hmong, am used to being a walking person, at first the working day was exhausting. Though tired from her vending work in Sa Pa, Xiu could not neglect her household duties. She got very little help from her husband. I have to work from 4 am until late at night with all kinds of work such as preparing breakfast for my family, feeding my children, the livestock and poultry, and doing gardening and other farm work. I leave early in the morning to go to Sa Pa for work, and usually come back home at around 7 pm. It is already very dark, but my husband is still sitting with his friends and drinking. Although he will occasionally cook dinner, normally, he neither helps me with cooking, nor cleans the children even when he has time to do so. Before working as a street vendor, I only did household work, but I have to do both jobs now. My husband does not help me. He does not even get up to drive me to Sa Pa in the early morning on his motorbike.

Xiu’s narrative reflects the workload that she has had to endure. The reason that Xiu’s husband does not share in the household chores is not that he does not love her, or does not agree with her working outside the home as a street vendor. He does not help her, and she

---

31 Hmong women mainly go on foot; they go to rice fields which can be dozens of kilometers from their house, go to the market, go to visit relatives, etc., all on foot. Recently, some Hmong girls have started to learn to ride motorbikes; however, women of thirty and older still go on foot.
accepts this burden of extra work, because subconsciously, they both accept the gendered discourse about roles and division of labor.

In most societies, labor divisions, which determine the tasks that different types of people perform, are more or less gender based. The degree of gendered division of labor in each society depends on specific socio-cultural patterns, and environmental and social conditions. Each individual culture has restrictions on what kinds of work men and women should do, and there is no global, overarching determination of which work tasks are male and which are female (Coltrane and Shih, 2010; Coltrane and Adams, 2008).

Studying the Hmong in Laos, Lindeborg (2012: 12) finds that traditional, gendered labor is divided into “hard work” and “a lesser amount of hard work,” as well as “public” and “private” work (Lindeborg 2012: 210). Lindeborg’s analysis of the Hmong in Laos holds somewhat true for the Hmong in Sa Pa. Though the concept of gendered spheres is enduring and persistent, small changes have been slowly occurring. Hmong men consistently hold the perception that they do the “heavy” jobs and that they are the ones who work in the public sphere. However, given the nature of their work in tourism, Hmong women in Sa Pa are increasingly active in the public sphere. As mentioned in Chapter 4 though, this public sphere of tourism is considered as a female one because the activities performed (e.g. embroidery and making handicrafts) are considered traditional female work.

The Hmong definition of “heavy” work does not necessarily mean physically demanding work, but simply those jobs that are culturally viewed as masculine. For example, rice harvesting includes cutting the rice plant, paddy threshing and transporting rough rice home from the field. Women cut the rice plants and thresh the paddy. From my own experience, I know that paddy threshing is a physically demanding task. It is heavy work, as it requires a lot of physical strength to separate the seed rice from the rice plant. Men sometimes help women with this task but not often, as it is seen as women’s work. Men are responsible for transporting rice. Explaining the concept of “hard work,” both men and women indicate that although paddy threshing is hard work, it is not as hard as carrying rice home. Transporting rice requires being able to ride a motorbike, which is something very few Hmong women can do. In this example it is not physical strength that is the basis for the division of labor, but skill sets.

This description of labor division is generally consistent with Lindeborg’s analysis of the Hmong in Laos, and Cooper’s (1983) analysis of the Hmong in Thailand. Across countries, the Hmong’s definitions of hard work are associated less with physical strength
than they are with views of what kinds of labor men and women are suited for (Lindeborg 2012: 211). According to Cooper (1983), although Hmong women in Thailand are capable of doing certain physically demanding work such as felling trees, hunting and sacrificing animals, they are not allowed to do them. The cultural constraints are predicated the belief that if they were meant to do such physical work, women would be more powerful than men. In addition, women’s physical strength is not valued in the same way as men’s strength (Symonds 2004). Even though Hmong women across all three countries do physically demanding work, it is considered less hard than men’s work. Even though the men’s work may not seem to be as physically demanding as some of the women’s work, it is considered hard work. As seen from the example above, it is clear that carrying rice home is valued as hard work, even though it is not as physically demanding as threshing the rice paddy, because it implies a capability to perform the special task of riding a motorbike.

Categorizing work as “hard” or “female” or “male” implies that some kinds of work can be done only by men while others can only be carried out by women. This work ranges from the rice example above to embroidery and handicraft work, and household chores (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006). Hmong men are willing to help their women by doing household chores in their wife’s absence, but they view their involvement in these tasks only as “helping.” Their definition of “helping” is that their involvement is voluntary. Some of the Hmong women I interviewed acknowledged that their husbands had begun to look after the house and children. But these women view their husbands’ assistance as a stopgap intervention that requires the men to do something that they are not supposed to do. It is a common belief among Hmong men that if they do household work, their power and status will be diminished. Sinh, whose wife is a street vendor, shared his perspective:

The household is the woman’s sphere. Household work includes childcare, cooking, weaving, feeding the livestock and all other work necessary to run the daily activities of the house and family. It is a woman’s instinct to do such kinds of work. I can help my wife do such work, but only occasionally. It is improper for me to do it every day. I am a man and I cannot do my wife’s work very often as others will start to wonder what is wrong with my family and will think that my wife is not a good wife.

All of the examples provided in this chapter show that the discourse of tradition and gender roles not only functions to organize and impose constraints upon women’s lives, but also becomes normalized. Tradition underpins people’s lives, yet provides a way to make the domain in question (gender, family, work) susceptible to evaluation, criticism and
intervention (Ilcan 1996: 126). Hmong men in this study use tradition as a “power instrument” (Ilcan 1996: 126) and as an important cultural strategy to speak about women’s and men’s work and their roles in the family. It provides an explanation for why Hmong men are unwilling to help women with household work. Hmong men in Sa Pa clearly rely on the traditional discourse about “men’s work” and “women’s work” to rationalize their reluctance to help.

Apart from the increased physical demands placed on Hmong women who are employed in tourism, these women also suffered from psychological anxiety and stress. As more street vendors join the market in Sa Pa, the competition is increasingly fierce. Diu explained:

Previously I could sometimes sell five to seven handbags a day and earned a profit of VND 100,000 (US$ 20), but now it is very difficult. If I sell one to two handbags a day, I am lucky. I have to move around more often and run faster; otherwise, the others will approach tourists first.

Earning money on a daily basis is crucial for street vendors, because they need it to pay for their lunch. Women usually bring rice and vegetables with them, but they need money to buy some meat or tofu. In addition, the women are in the habit of bringing home daily groceries for the family, or wine for their husbands. In my analysis, bringing home daily treats is how women have been able to ensure that their husbands agree to let them continue working. Although they work in tourism to satisfy their own personal desires and intentions, Hmong women need daily permission from their husbands to be able to do so. For example, the night I stayed with Diu, we had made plans to return to Sa Pa together the next morning, but when the time came for us to leave, she told me that she could not go because her husband said that she had to stay home to do some farming work. Men’s decisions to let their wives go to Sa Pa depend on the day’s household workload and the subjective opinions of the husband. Diu explained that in her case, “Even when there is nothing to do at home, my husband sometimes does not let me go to Sa Pa. Generally, if he is happy, he lets me go, but if he is not happy, he refuses without giving any reasons”. The women, therefore, must use many tactics to get consent from their husbands, and one of them is buying them something at the end of each work day.

Some men consider the women’s practice of being gone from early morning till late afternoon as laziness because they are “escaping from household work.” According to Hmong men, Hmong women should stay at home to do household work and take care of their
families. It is men who should leave home to look for work and make money. The fact that women in many Hmong families leave home more often and earn more money than men makes men feel their work is devalued. This causes some of them to hold negative views and attitudes towards their wives’ work. Many Hmong women told me that while they are busy and doing very hard work selling in the street, their spouses usually think that they just hang out with friends doing nothing. When men see the results of their wives daily work, they are happy; otherwise, they scold their wives for wasting time and not caring about their families.

**Being abused and exploited**

For Hmong women, their work in tourism leads to a wide range of opportunities, but also subjects them to additional difficulties. As explained above, Hmong men use traditional gendered discourses about feminine and masculine work to reject household chores and react negatively to their wives’ frequent and prolonged absences from the house. Men’s negative reactions to their wives’ work lives take various forms, ranging from mockery to outright confrontation. Every time Liu, a street vendor from Hau Thao, went to work selling handicrafts in Sa Pa, her husband would repeatedly call her cell phone to tell her there was something urgent that required her to come home immediately. Liu took this to mean that her husband was unhappy with her absence. Other husbands sometimes spend all of their wives’ earnings on alcohol or gambling. Some women, in order to gain their husbands’ favor, will buy alcohol for them, but often when the men drink, they beat their wives.

In many Hmong families the more work the wives do outside the home, the lazier their husbands tend to become. “From the moment I started to work as a street vendor, my husband has been unhappy and he drinks more. He is drunk almost every day. He wouldn’t care if the pigs were hungry or died. He doesn’t know where the kids are. He forces me to give him money every day to buy drinks. If I don’t, then he beats me.” (Chu, twenty-eight-year old Hmong).

Reasons for men’s reactions to women’s work are rooted in the power dynamics within the family. Research has shown that some men feel threatened when women enter the labor force, destroying the power and status of the men in the family (Timothy, 2001). Hmong men in Sa Pa derive their economic, political and cultural power and status from four sources: (1) their leadership in the family as breadwinners and decision-makers; (2) their roles as representatives of the family in the public sphere; (3) their capacities of judgment and reasoning; and (4) their authority over their wives and children.

Like Chu, other Hmong women reported instances of abuse from their husbands that stemmed from their involvement in tourism-related activities. Some wives, like Xiu at the
beginning of this chapter, recounted that not only do their husbands require that they take on the household burden alone, but they also expect the women to shoulder the responsibility as the main economic contributors of the family. Xiu said:

Since the time I started working in Sa Pa, my husband has spent his earnings from cardamom farming on drinking (he drinks more now than before), buying expensive mobile phones and doing other things I do not know about. When I ask him about money, he always says that his is gone, but that I have money now, so why do I bother him for his money. His actions disgust me.

While not all working women report that their husbands act like this, most women stated that their husbands spend money more frivolously than before.

Working in tourism has posed new challenges for both unmarried and married Hmong women. Unmarried girls find that working in Sa Pa is damaging their relations with local men. The local view of unmarried Hmong girls working in Sa Pa is that they frequent tourist destinations such as bars and night clubs, and present themselves as exotic, charming seductresses. They seduce tourists with stories about Hmong mythology in indigenous dresses. The younger generation of Hmong men expressed their hesitations about making friends or having long-term relationships with Hmong girls who work in tourism. These young men believe that girls who work in tourism are different from traditional Hmong girls. They speak English and Vietnamese very well, they live independently, they earn money, and they like to go to Sa Pa rather than stay in the commune to do household work. These young men have more conservative expectations of how men and women should relate to each other. They report feeling inferior to girls working in tourism, because of their language abilities, and because these girls have foreign friends while they do not. They think that those Hmong girls will not make good wives. Chinh, a seventeen-year-old man from Lao Chai said to me:

I do not like Hmong girls who work in Sa Pa, because they are too different. They leave their home from morning until late afternoon. They meet a lot of people, go out with them, and laugh with them. If my friend is like that, I can't accept it.

I said to him: “But I think those girls still come back home to help their parents with household work and they still do traditional work such as embroidering. Don’t they?”

and he replied:

Yes, they do. However, please imagine how the life will be if they get married. Now those girls are still living with their parents and they can lean on their parents for
household work. After you get married, you have to do everything by yourself. If she goes out from morning till late afternoon, who will she take care of the housework? Hmong people have a lot of things to do in the house and in the family, not like Kinh people. We have to spend time in the field, in the forest and in the house. No no, I do not want a wife who is not at home all day. In addition, it is not good that your wife hangs around all day with strange men and leaves her husband alone at home.

The views about married women are not much different. In some cases husbands are suspicious about their wives who leave home all day, especially when there are rumors about romantic relationships between Hmong women and male tourists.

Various studies in the literature show that gossip and rumors perform five different functions that are relevant to this study. They can act as forms of: social control (Bergmann, 1993), political resistance by weaker groups (Turner, 1993) or a mechanism for influencing others in a social group (Bourdillon and Shambare, 2002; Hafen, 2004), witchcraft to cause people harm (Stewart and Strathern, 2004) and channels through which people stand to gain (Chan, 2009). How gossip functions depends on the motives of the agents who use it. In Sa Pa, both Hmong men and women use gossip and rumor as weapons to pressure women. Hmong women working in Sa Pa have to face many challenges and difficulties ranging from police raids, to vendor competition and cheating, to being ill-treated by tourists. In light of such high risks and challenges, gossip is a warning for other women against working in Sa Pa.

I interviewed a number of women who did not work in tourism because of the rumors they heard about women who do work in Sa Pa. The most common type of gossip is in regards to sexual and romantic relationships between Hmong women and tourists. Tuoi’s story exemplifies the lasting impact gossip may have on Hmong women. Tuoi, who is 16 years old and lives in Lao Chai commune with her parents, is the elder sister of four siblings. Tuoi stated that:

My family is poor. I finished my elementary school and stayed home to help my family with farming and household work. As the eldest daughter in the family, I not only help my family take care of my younger brothers and sisters, but I am also responsible for helping my family make money. I used to want to sell handicrafts, but I gave up. I’ve heard people in the commune tell stories about Hmong girls/women working in Sa Pa. There was one Hmong girl who got pregnant, and the father, an Australian man, left her. She could not stay in the commune anymore because it would have ruined her parent’s reputation, so she left and nobody knows where she is now.
Many Hmong women working in Sa Pa are accused of infidelity. The gossip spreads fast and widely. I do not know if there is any truth behind the gossip, but it makes me nervous. My parents feel the same. I am unmarried, so I have to keep up a reputation for my family and myself in order to be able to have a good husband.

In Hmong society, a family’s reputation and lineage is important because it symbolizes their social status in the community. For a single girl, her reputation is highly significant, and is used as the “identity card” that determines whom she can marry (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2010). Hmong girls and women working in Sa Pa live with the fear that people will gossip about them, and that this will affect the way others in the community and in the commune view them. Gossip serves as a means of social control over Tuoi’s employment decisions – she wants to earn money for her family, but not at the expense of their reputation.

Husbands cite gossip about romantic relationships between Hmong women and tourists to prevent their wives from working in Sa Pa. “Going to work in tourism can easily spoil women’s virtue” (Sau, thirty-five-year-old Hmong man). In her analysis about gender and transnational gossip, Dreby (2009) argues that in the case of migration, gossip expresses gender ideals in a very specific way, as it articulates social norms about motherhood and fatherhood. This analysis holds true in the case of Sa Pa. A common gossip story line criticizes mothers who are involved with other men because of how such relationships impact on the mother’s duty to her children. The traditional discourse emphasizes that the role of the mother in caregiving is paramount. The gossip warns women that going to work in Sa Pa will lead to relationships with other men and jeopardize their ability to care for her children. The community, and men in particular, use this gossip as means of social control over women’s behavior, to ensure they uphold societal expectations of wives and mothers as caregivers.

This gossip benefits men, because they use the societal pressure to dissuade women from leaving the home to pursue their interests, which often causes conflict and tension (Frank 2005; Dreby, 2009). The use of gossip in this way places a heavy burden on Hmong women. When husbands use gossip to control their wives’ decisions about whether to work in tourism, they do so by jealously implying that the main impetus behind their wives’ decisions work is not to earn money, but to follow tourist men. As I will analyze in the following sections, to avoid or minimize their husbands’ groundless, jealous doubts, Hmong women feel pressured to bring home money every day to prove their commitment and fidelity to their family by fulfilling their duties as wives, mothers and income generators. Sinh a twenty-year-old woman, said that this makes her feel exploited:
Every day I work, I have to buy something like meat or alcohol for my husband. Of course, the meat is not just for him, but also for the whole family; however, as you know I can’t afford to do it every day. Doing street business in Sa Pa becomes more and more difficult. There are many days that I can’t sell anything, so how can I get the money to buy meat or fish or alcohol? If I do not buy anything, my husband accuses me of just going out to have fun. He even beats me for it when he gets drunk. When he goes around the commune and talks to the men whose wives stay at home, sometimes they tell him that I follow foreign men. I know, of course, that at first he didn’t believe this gossip, but the more he hears it, the more he believes it, which leads to him drink more and beat me more often.

From previous chapters, and from the story of Sinh, it can be seen that earning money working in tourism in Sa Pa is not easy. Quite often, the women are not able to sell anything. Not only are tourists fickle in what they buy and from whom, but they are also seasonal. During the winter, there are months with few tourists, which lessens the earning opportunities and increases the opportunities for gossip. Sinh, for example, said that even though there are few tourists during winter, she still goes to Sa Pa because she does not have much work to do at home. She explained, the harvest ends in September, so we have very little farming to do. Selling in Sa Pa is not good during the winter, but I still go, and hope to earn some money. New Year is coming, so I would like to earn some money to buy new clothes for me, my husband and my children. I am not guilty of cheating on my husband, but I still have to pay the price for the gossip that says I am.

In some cases, working in tourism is teaching women to form critical views of their home lives. Because of their contact with other people and cultures, they learn new ideas and knowledge about gender and gender equity, though many of them feel they cannot bring these ideas home. Exposure to tourists seems to have raised awareness that women have the capacity to travel without men, to make major family decisions, to ask for help in household chores, to refuse their husbands’ unreasonable requests, to speak out, and to ask for legal assistance in the event of domestic violence. The handicraft clubs and Oxfam Italia (a non-governmental organization mentioned in Chapter 3) in Ta Phin and San Sa Ho provide gender equality training. In these training courses, Hmong and Dao women are given information about gender equality in the family, including sharing household work, the roles of husband and wife in child rearing, negotiation and family decision-making. As a result, many women say they now understand that as women they should raise their voices and participate in the family decision-making, but in reality they feel they cannot do so.
Acting as a volunteer for Oxfam for a period of time, I was assigned to help Hmong do a training exercise about the household division of labor. I went to every house to speak with the women about how labor is divided and ask them to put a duty chart on the wall. In most cases, women would only speak with me when their husbands were not at home. If I came while their husband was at home, they refused to participate, saying they were busy with other work and asked me to come on another day. When they did agree to speak with me, they asked me not to talk with their husbands about their work. Most women refused to put the duty chart on the wall when I asked them. Sa, who participated in the training and practiced the exercise, but refused to share it with her husband, explained: “I’m doing this exercise as part of the training, but I do not want my husband to know about it. I do almost all of the household work, and if I asked him to follow this chart, he would be angry. I do not want that.” Sa’s explanation indicates her desire to keep the peace in her family.

When the Hmong women talk about their relationships with their husbands, they often say that for their own sake and for the younger generation, they do not want to break traditional patriarchal rules. They are well aware of the implications of breaking with tradition. Ho told me a story about a girl in her commune to illustrate how dangerous it is for a Hmong woman to break with traditions:

Sang, a divorced woman that I mentioned in Chapter 6, like many other Hmong girls, got married at a very young age. She was 14 years old. In 2001, she started selling handicrafts in Sa Pa, and her husband was unhappy with that. He banned her from going many times, but she still continued her job. After just one year of marriage, they got divorced because her husband could not accept her absence from the family, and she could not accept her husband’s refusal of her request to work. Although Sang tried to work and fulfill her duties as a wife, her husband could not accept it. After her divorce, Sang moved back to her parents’ house, because with the divorce all of their common property belonged to her husband. She continued selling handicrafts in Sa Pa and working as a freelance tour guide. She wants to marry again, but it is not easy for her. Men are afraid that she will not listen to them or care about having a family. So many Hmong girls in my commune are afraid of ending up like Sang.

“For me,” Ho said, “my husband also forbade me from going to Sa Pa to sell handicrafts. I tried to persuade him to let me go, but my husband insists on me staying at home. In this case, I accept his ideas.”

I met Sang one day in Sa Pa after she had spent a day trekking with two Australian
girls. She picked up her story where Ho had left off. After her divorce, she decided to move out of her parent’s house to live in Sa Pa, simply because she could not bear the reproaches from her family and her ex-husband’s family. She rented a small house near Cat Cat commune at the rate of VND 300,000 (US$ 15) per month. She only stayed there for five months before returning to her parents’ house, because, “it was very hard to live alone without family. Every evening when I came home after a hard working day, I had nobody to talk with me and I had to eat alone.” There are many other girls who rent houses in Sa Pa, and they spend time together; however, most of them they only stay in Sa Pa for a few days, then go home to their commune to visit their family. Now, Sang is back living with her parents in Lao Chai. “As time has passed, people have forgotten my story. They have stopped talking about me, and my parents also ask me to come home,” she said. Both she and her parents want her to get re-married, but it is not easy. She said, “if a Hmong woman gets divorced, then it is not easy to re-marry. Many people think that a divorced woman is not a good woman. After everything, I now think that maybe it is better that Hmong women just do embroidering, raise pigs and take care of family and children, and don’t try to leave home to earn money.”

For Hmong women, divorce is not socially acceptable, but it does happen. A man can leave his wife and find another one, but for women that is an unacceptable practice. Life for a divorced woman, regardless of whether she initiates the divorce, is very hard. The underlying reason for this lies in the perceptions about marriage and the position of women in the family. As was detailed in Chapter 2, married Hmong women are economically dependent on their husbands’ incomes and lineages. Only sons have a right to inherit, so an unmarried Hmong woman has no inheritance of land or money. This lack of access to family resources, and the perceptions about divorce, put women like Sang in a very vulnerable position. In Vietnam, the Land Laws of 1993 and 2003 granted the right to own land to both men and women. However, different systems of customary laws still remain deeply embedded in old Hmong traditions that inhibit women’s access to and ownership of land. In fact, the Land Law in Vietnam has not solved any inequalities in access to land for women (Hong Anh Vu, 2010). According to a report on the implementation of the Land Law 1993 in Sa Pa, women’s rights to land ownership are not fully recognized in practice. The report shows that in Sa Pa, inequality in land ownership is due to traditional practices that are intentionally and/or unintentionally legitimized by the procedures specified in the state granting of land. For example, in 1998 80% of certificates of land use rights in Ta Van commune were made out
solely to men, even when the men were married (Hong Anh Vu, 2010). Traditional practices, together with procedures of state grants of land, have created a “privilege” for men and limited opportunities for women in the access to and use of land, making women dependent on men (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam 2006: 43)

As a divorced woman, it is difficult for Sang to remarry or plan for a future as a single woman. Hmong men fear she will not be a good wife. She probably would not marry a Kinh man, because of the cultural tension between the two groups. The Kinh look down on Hmong people and their ways, and Sang herself does not like Kinh men. And the likelihood of finding a foreign man is not very high, because like many other Hmong women, Sang does not want to get married to a foreigner (see more in Chapter 6). Sang’s livelihood prospects for the future are grim. She has no land for agriculture production, and is forced to remain dependent on her parents. Her income from work as a street vendor and tour guide is often not adequate for her expenditure. Living with her parents is not a sustainable solution because, as she said, “my brother will grow up and he will get married. After that I cannot live in the same house with him and my parents. My parents will get older, they will have to rely on my brother and then I will have to live on my own independently.”

Both Sang’s and Ho’s stories highlight the constraints that gender norms impose on Hmong women. They are unable to maximize their employment opportunities for fear of their husbands’ reactions. Like Ho, many women in Sa Pa are well aware of the cultural rules of marriage. They are stuck in a struggle to balance their place in the new moral order of modern society, and the cultural certainties and traditions embedded in Hmong society. As more Hmong have converted to Christianity, specifically Protestantism, new understandings of morality related to family, personhood and marriage have permeated their traditional beliefs (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011). Lee and Tapp (2010) claim that in Thailand, as the Hmong convert to Christianity, they stop practicing some of their traditional rituals and ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. It is different for the Hmong in Sa Pa. Conversion to Christianity has not meant that Hmong people are ignoring the past. Ngo Thi Thanh Tam (2011) argues that the Hmong’s sense of community continues to connect them to Hmong traditions. The stories of Hmong women relating to household work, to marriage, and to land in this section support Tam’s conclusion. Traditional discourses are used to confine women to particular gendered roles. Even single girls who enjoy the freedom of working in Sa Pa find their lives fraught with conflict and stress when it comes to discussions of marriage and possible in-law relations (Bonnin and Turner, 2013).
Negotiation for change: Women’s strategies

Hmong women undertake tourism-related activities in the hope of earning additional income to meet their family’s financial needs. In doing so, they experience the joy of a freedom that they have never had before. This autonomy is offset by a minimal income that fluctuates and comes at the risk of resistance from their husbands. Women find themselves subject to the traditional moral values their community attaches to their subordinate role to men, while at the same time experiencing the decision-making and self-sufficiency that comes with their employment. Hmong women are developing strategies to gain advantages over their husbands in order to change the power structure in the family, enabling them to continue their work and enjoy a better life.

Bargaining with patriarchy in the home

Kandiyoti (1988, 1990) suggests that women and men in any society should negotiate and adapt to a set of rules that guide and constrain gender relations. Both women and men possess resources they use to negotiate and maximize power and opportunities within patriarchal structures. This phenomenon is called “bargaining with patriarchy” (Kandiyoti, 1990: 9). The advantages and bargaining power of Hmong men have been outlined above. And, despite some very harsh circumstances, the Hmong women in Sa Pa have their own bargaining strategies that rely on discourses of gender norms and gendered divisions of labor. To explain this further, I will focus on married Hmong women and mothers, but not on single Hmong girls. Married women, particularly those with children, are more bound to traditional gender roles and responsibilities than young, single girls who have fewer restrictions preventing them from leaving home and have less responsibility to their families.

The first strategy that Hmong women use rests on the man’s authority in the family. This strategy is rooted in the social and cultural obligations that Hmong society give to the man as the head of the family. Women take advantage of this situation by using the notion of obligations toward the family to emphasize the roles of men as making the main economic contribution to the family, supporting women morally, and maintaining order and parental authority over the children in the family.

The income that most women bring in generally pays for a small portion of their family’s grocery budget, and provides money for the women’s personal needs, such as special materials like silk, to make her clothing. The family’s main income is the husband’s earnings which come mainly from cardamom farming, and which are used for savings or buying
expensive items such as motorbikes or TVs. When I asked Dinh to estimate her family income from different sources, she mentioned that her income from selling handicrafts makes up less than 10% of their household income. She and her husband attribute the majority of their income generation to cardamom and agriculture. Dinh reported that her family owns two fields that they inherited from her husband’s parents. These fields yield about 70 kg of dried cardamom in one season, roughly equivalent to VND 5.6 million (US$ 280), which is 20% of their total household income. Wet rice makes up an important part of their family income (40%), and comprises a minor part of the family’s diet (10%). In addition, Dinh’s family owns one water buffalo, two pigs, chickens and ducks (10%) and a vegetable garden providing them with daily vegetables (15%). See Figure 12 for a visual breakdown.

![Figure 12: Sources of income for Dinh’s family, Lao Chai commune](image)

As seen in Dinh’s livelihood income sources, although cardamom accounts for only for 20 per cent of household income, it is their main source of cash earnings. It is with these earnings that Dinh and her family can buy a TV or motorbike. Dinh explained that her family’s cardamom income is not nearly as high as that made by some families who live closer to the forest line. Those families’ yields from cardamom are much higher, up to 200 kg

---

32 Percentages here reflect the importance of each activity to the basic survival of the household.
per season.

For families in Ta Phin, where land is more suitable for growing orchids than for cardamom, orchids bring in a large proportion of the family income. Figure 13 below illustrates the income for Sung’s family in Ta Phin. In an interview, Sung’s husband explained that cardamom provided his family with the majority of his earnings in cash – 25% of the total household income, while orchids contributed 23%. Sung’s handicraft income comprised only 2%.

Although, there are differences in the compositions of the individual livelihoods, it is clear that cardamom brings in the majority of both families’ cash incomes. While cardamom is currently the main cash crop, this distinction was held by opium and timber before the Vietnamese Government imposed bans on the sale of those two items.

The work of Hmong women in Sa Pa, as mentioned above, is therefore subject to considerable resistance from Hmong men. One area of male resistance is their refusal to do their male work and neglecting their duties to the family income. In order to force their husbands to continue doing such work, Hmong women employ a strategy that rests on the gendered division of labor. For example, rice farming and collecting cardamom are important
sources of income and livelihood in Hmong life, and specific aspects of these activities are culturally male activities. Hmong women therefore manipulate this gendered division of labor by asking their husbands to uphold their duty to perform these tasks by pointing out the men’s obligations as providers for their family. The women demand that their husbands meet their family’s basic expenditure needs. They also demand that the money derived from cardamom be used for the good of the whole household. However, when they do not succeed in getting access to this money, they try to hand over household expenditure to their husbands. For example, women reason that because they are not able to ride a motorbike, their husbands should go to Sa Pa to buy necessities for the family. In another example, when women have to pay for services such as electricity and school tuition, they pass the bills on to their husbands as the ones who provide the money. In this way, Hmong women support their husbands’ status as providers. By acting in this way, Hmong women not only emphasize the responsibilities of their husbands but also their importance in the family as the main breadwinners, and thus in some ways promote their husbands’ pride. This is a pragmatic strategy because, as many Hmong women emphasize, Hmong men are well aware of their position and status, as well as their responsibilities in the family. However, their pride plays an important role in deciding what they do for the family. They are more willing to uphold their familial duties if they feel valued and appreciated by their families. If they lose their pride, and are made to feel powerless, they will respond by not contributing to the household.

This strategy is also applied in the education of children. Hmong women conform to the traditional rules that govern the power and the authority of fathers over children. Mothers urge their husbands to carry out their responsibilities to care for and educate their children. By keeping this tradition of the family, Hmong women invite their husbands to share child-rearing responsibilities with them on the one hand, and on the other hand to educate their children. Women do not want to lose their own authority or the father’s authority over their children. For them, parents should be good examples for their children, and reversing traditional norms and values is not seen to be setting a good example. More importantly, women feel they must behave according to the order and norms of the family in order to help their children have a good, happy future.

Chu, a married Christian Hmong woman who works for a textile club in Ta Phin serves as a case in point as she is concerned about harmony in her family and sustaining her husband’s role. She referred to the role of men as the foundation of the house to keep it stable. She emphasized:
I am a woman and though I am very strong, I am still a woman. I cannot do hard work and important things. The woman is created from the man’s rib, so her fate is tied inseparably to the man. The man is always the head of the family and as a woman you must let him be the head of the family. Women must respect their husbands in order for their children to understand the roles in the family; for example, the smaller and younger members of the family must follow and respect the bigger and older ones. Every time my children make a mistake my husband will scold them, or even hit them to teach them a lesson. So, of course, my children listen to their father because he is strict, and they look to me for pampering because they know I won’t hit them. My husband is very serious and strict when he is angry, even toward me. He makes my children and me afraid, and therefore we respect and comply with his requests. As his wife, I sometimes find that unfair because he imposes his power on me. However, I want to keep this rule for the sake of my children.

Chu’s perspective highlights not only the dominant role of her husband in the family, but also her own responsibility to act as an example for her children. Chu’s Christian influence can be seen in her biblical reference. The Hmong interpretation is that the Bible does not mention the compliance of women with men’s requests; however, it emphasizes the role and responsibility of each member in the family’s happiness. Chu strongly believes in both Christian and Hmong morality, and works to ensure that her actions reflect her beliefs. Many women I spoke with shared these perceptions. Despite suffering from having unequal positions in the family, many women shared a feeling of being secure and safe and they respected their husbands. These women reasoned that by respecting and following their husbands’ requests, they will be rewarded with a harmonious, happy or even violence-free family. And felt that if they respected their husbands and complied with their wishes, their husbands would be more likely to grant their consent for them to work. Chu, for instance, said that her husband was a hard-working man. He usually brings money to the family and thanks to him her family has a decent life. However, whenever he is angry and they quarrel with each other, he drinks a lot and does nothing. Chu also openly said that her husband demands that everybody in the family follows his orders. “If we don’t follow his orders, ‘war’ will happen”.

The above discussions show that Hmong women’s strategies toward their husbands are developed around the cultural and gender norms of male roles and authority. Women encourage men to provide material and moral support to their families, in exchange for submission and respect. Using this as a technique of obtaining power, Hmong women
reinforce traditional female and male roles, which makes them more strongly tied to household duties. From another perspective, when successfully applied, this technique affords the women benefits such as assistance with child rearing, and avoiding resistance from their husbands in their bids to work in tourism. Such practices and strategies are indicative of the women’s determination to overcome their traditions and moral constraints and overcome their inferior positions and the power hierarchies within their families which are dictated by gender.

Influencing the decision-making process

Although Hmong women work to support the power of men in their family and adhere to traditional rules and roles that favor men, they manage to use aspects of these traditional rules for their own benefit. The confidence they get through their work in their contact with tourists, their experiences in dealing with the police and difficult vendors, and their business negotiation skills have in turn helped them to deal with their husbands. Now Hmong women, like Chi, a twenty-one-year-old street vendor, assert their rights to have more involvement in family decisions:

My husband wants to buy an expensive, new mobile phone that costs more than VND 7 million (US$ 350). It is a huge expense for us because we have to save for a long time to have such an amount of money. I told him that he should not spend so much money on a mobile phone because we had a lot of other expenses such as buying fertilizer for new crops and new warm clothes for winter. He then decided to postpone buying the mobile phone, and will continue to save money to afford it.

Chi’s case shows that although she was not able to dissuade her husband from purchasing the mobile phone, she was able to convince him to delay his purchase. Hmong women in Sa Pa are increasingly becoming a part of the familial decision-making process. More often, family decisions are now discussed between the husband and wife. However, it is important to mention that women’s involvement in decision-making processes only occurs when issues arise within their households such as reproduction, children’s education, and family budgets. This situation is in line with what is found in Hmong families in Laos, where men are the heads of the family and act as the public face, making the major decisions regarding economic activities and community involvement (Yuang, 1992). Symonds, in her study about Hmong in Thailand (2004) also points out that the separation of production and reproduction and public/private spheres are relevant to gender and decision-making in Hmong society. Women are more bound to the reproduction and the private sphere, while men are
connected to production and the public sphere. This dualism of public/private, as Domosh and Seager (2001) point out, recreates patriarchal structures and increases the power of men. The power and importance of Hmong men in Sa Pa in decision-making processes are illustrated in the following example:

I participated in a meeting of Ta Chai hamlet, Ta Phin commune. Eighteen people participated in this meeting, including 17 men and only one woman. The meeting was to discuss state guidelines and policies on poverty reduction. I was sitting next to Sa, a 35-year-old Hmong woman, the only female in the meeting. She was in attendance because her husband had left town for a cousin’s funeral, so she had to participate in this meeting. She was sitting separately from the men, next to the cooking fire. However, she listened intently to the explanation of the policies. One of the important policies that the head of the hamlet mentioned was the State Bank of Social Policy’s low interest lending scheme. All of the men actively participated in discussing it and asking about the conditions and interest rates for this policy. Sa did not ask questions publicly, but moved next to a man and privately asked him some questions. The head of the hamlet required participants to register immediately as to whether they would like to borrow money or not. Sa registered her name. After the meeting, I asked her: “So did you decide to borrow some money?” She said, “No, I just registered and I will discuss with my husband for the final decision. We can ask the head of the hamlet to remove my name from the list if we do not need the loan.” She added that her husband had a “‘big head’, so it is better that I should consult him before deciding important things. I am a woman; I do not know much about big issues in the community.”

This story illustrates several aspects of the power dynamics and decision-making in Hmong families in Sa Pa. Firstly, representation in the public sphere is not solely the realm of men. Women are granted access in certain circumstances. However, it is still a male dominated activity. Secondly, although women can decide on certain things within their families and at a commune level, they nonetheless want to confirm and discuss their decisions with their husband. In addition, once again we can see an instance of Hmong women working to keep men in positions of decision-making although the women are capable of making these decisions.

Not only are Hmong women becoming more active in participating in family decision-making, but as they earn money through their involvement in tourism, they are also earning autonomy and freedom from being completely dependent on their husbands. Although the
money they earn from tourism is minimal, the women can generally keep it for themselves. They can use it to buy clothes for themselves and for the family. They can also use that money to purchase daily family necessities without having to ask their husband. However, for large expenditures, the husband has the final say because men earn most of the income in the family. It is important to note that in Hmong families, women and men manage their money separately, but neither husband nor wife takes on family budgeting. This practice is different to the Kinh tradition and that of Hmong in other countries such as Laos (Lindeborg, 2012) where the woman acts as the family bank, keeping the money. Before women started working, they had no money of their own, so every time they wanted to buy something, they had to ask their husbands. Now that they are earning extra money, they can spend it without having to ask their husbands. For women, managing their own extra money is important in changing their role in the family to some extent.

I just bought a new shirt with my own money. My husband saw it and said it was beautiful. I keep all the money I earn selling handicrafts. I use it for food, for clothes, and for materials to make handicrafts. Sometimes, when my husband needs money to buy something such as seeds, fertilizer and even for alcohol, he asks me. If I have money, I will give him some. Before, it was only me who asked him for money, now both of us ask money from each other [laughs].

– Thuc, 32, from Hau Thao

Thuc’s story demonstrates a re-negotiation and re-calibration of gender relations within households based on the women’s new income position. This gives women more feelings of pride and also more power in their relationships, as many Hmong women have expressed. For Hmong women in Sa Pa, working outside home has great value not only for their status within the family, but also for their emotional satisfaction, which I will describe below.

Fun and relaxation: the escape from boredom

Despite the cultural traditions and gender constrains that inhibit Hmong women from experiencing empowerment, their participation in tourism-related jobs helps them move outside their community, amuse themselves, and enjoy their lives in a way that they could not before. Many Hmong girls and women expressed a distinct feeling of joy at the mobility that tourism work offers them. As mentioned in Chapter 6 and in the previous section, working in tourism is an opportunity for Hmong women to interact with other women and tourists. Establishing friendships with other Hmong is not only of importance for their business but also for their
spirits. Many women said they got bored when they were at home, and they would cheer up when they were out in the street, where they could have fun and be with friends. Some others emphasized the importance of the moral support they received from being with friends in Sa Pa. Lung, a thirty-five-year-old explained to me “During lunch we can talk with each other about everything, about family and personal problems. Others can give you advice to solve your problems. But even without advice, talking with others is always good to release pain and stress.” With friends, they share their life and family problems. Sharing problems helps them to alleviate their individual stress and worry.

By participating in tourism work, women are able to enjoy their lives in a way that they could not before. While they are working in Sa Pa, they can take time off to go to the weekend market in Sa Pa without having to ask their husbands. Saturday and Sunday mornings from 7 am to noon, ethnic minorities from neighboring districts gather in Sa Pa market to trade goods. Products for sale include hemp, indigo dye, baskets, and forest products such as bamboo shoots and mushrooms. People also come to the market to have lunch and meet people. For many Hmong, the weekend market is a good opportunity to have fun and enjoy themselves. Often women gather to talk about their husbands, complaining about their affairs with other Hmong women. For young people, the weekend market is a time for them to date, to make new friends and to find and meet their boyfriends and lovers. Unmarried girls go to the markets to look for a lover, a stable and committed relationship which can lead to marriage, while married women are looking for boyfriends. A boyfriend for a married Hmong woman is simply a married or unmarried man that women can talk to, and have a drink or meal with.

Before working in tourism, Hmong women seldom had the opportunity to go to the weekend market, but now they tell their husbands they are going to town to work, and they can use their own money to meet up with their friends and boyfriends. By doing this, women feel that they have more worth, and are more equal to their husbands.

I attended the Sa Pa market with Tuoi’s on her boyfriend’s birthday. We went to a souvenir shop to find something for him. Tuoi asked what I usually buy for my husband or boyfriend for his birthday. I told to her that it depends, maybe a rose, maybe candy. After some hesitation, Tuoi decided to buy a fabric rose and a pair of socks. She explained to me: “a fabric rose was better than a natural rose because he can keep it for a long time, and socks will keep him warm.” They were significant and practical gifts. I was planning to say goodbye to Tuoi and let her go alone with her
boyfriend; however, she asked me to go with her because she wanted to introduce me to her boyfriend.

We met Tuoi’s boyfriend in a small beer shop behind the church. He was a nice, friendly man. After exchanging greetings, he offered me a glass of beer. We all drank to celebrate his birthday and talked about a lot things. Tuoi’s boyfriend came from Bac Ha, a district about 80 km from Sa Pa. They met each other three years ago in Sa Pa. He is also Hmong and like Tuoi, he is also married. They only see each other at the market on Saturday or Sunday. Each time they meet, they spend time eating, drinking and sharing stories about their lives, children, and families. Their meetings usually end around 2 pm, when each of them goes to the market to buy groceries for their family.

The day I joined Tuoi, she bought some meat for her children. When I asked her whether her husband knows about her relationship with her boyfriend, she said, “No, if he knew, he would be angry and would not let me go selling anymore. I only meet my boyfriend once a week and we just talk and eat together. It’s nothing more than that. I fulfill my wife and mother duties and do nothing wrong. I am not improper toward my husband”, she added.

So, from Ban Ho, who works as a street vendor, shared her feelings on how working outside home made her life more interesting. So said that before she started working, she was often anxious about her husband’s relationship with other women. Sometimes he would stay away overnight without a good reason, and she knew that he was spending the night with someone, but she could never do anything about it. This made her feel jealous, tired and stressed:

My husband has a lot of girlfriends, and he usually goes out with them. I am very angry and disappointed, but I can’t do anything because he has money and usually tells me that he is going to work. He sometimes spends the night somewhere without letting me know. Before, I did not have money to take a motorbike to follow him. I did not have money to go to Sa Pa to meet people and find boyfriends. I felt undervalued and unappreciated. But now, I can go to Sa Pa every Saturday and I tell him that I’m working, but instead I’m meeting people. Having my boyfriend gives me a feeling of revenge, and my life has become much easier for me.

Married women like Tuoi and So never allude to these relationships as being sexual, because they are aware of the importance of fidelity for women. As mentioned above, for married women, a “boyfriend” is a man that they can meet during the weekend market to talk
to, to have drink and meal with. The way they meet each other and then become “boyfriends” and “girlfriends” is very natural. Hmong women’s boyfriends are Hmong men from different villages, from other communes of Sa Pa and from even different districts of Lao Cai such as Muong Khuong or Bat Xat. As mentioned above, like many other Hmong, they come to the Sa Pa weekend market to trade goods. Social interaction, of course, is part of their activities during weekend market in Sa Pa. So shared the following story with me:

After following some foreign tourists around Sa Pa, I and some other Hmong women sat in a group near Sa Pa market. Fifteen minutes later, a group of three Hmong men who had just finished selling their rattan baskets came to sit next to us. Though we had not known each other before, we talked to each other comfortably as we were all Hmong. We talked about work, about the market and many other things. Then we gave each other our mobile numbers. I had the mobile numbers of all three men, Liu, Lung and Cua. We talked to each other until midday and then went to the market for lunch. Since I had to continue my selling work to get some money for the day, I said goodbye to them. At the end of the day, I received a message from Liu, one of the men that I had met in the morning. He said that he would like to see me again at the weekend market the following week. On the days after that, I sometimes received his messages again. We exchanged messages, and by appointment we met again at the Sunday market of the following week.

Whenever I mention Liu, So always calls him my boyfriend and this relationship has already lasted for two years.

If Hmong women hear that their husbands or other women’s husbands have girlfriends, they assume that these girlfriends are Hmong and that the relations are sexual. Apparently, Hmong men have sex with their Hmong girlfriends, but married Hmong women who have boyfriends deny that their relationship is sexual. When I asked So about her relationship, So expressed that she does not see this as love but only a form of social relationship, though she called him “boyfriend”. For So, love is about looking after each other, and it is understood as complementary and self-sacrificing. The relationship between So and Liu, as So said, does have these kinds of attributes. Every Sunday or Saturday market, they try to meet each other, usually for lunch, eating together and chatting. They usually meet each other privately, but sometimes with other friends. However, their relationship has other elements that Hmong women and men see as features of dating. They exchange messages and calls on weekdays to inquire after each other’s health, work and life. Small gifts for their
“boyfriend” and “girlfriend” on their birthdays gave them happiness and emotional satisfaction, as Tuoi said:

I never receive any gifts from my husband and nor do I give anything to him. A hairclip was the first gift I got in my life; it came from my boyfriend and I am very happy. It is broken now but I keep it. We usually give each other presents on special occasions such as birthdays, New Year and even Christmas.

Emotional satisfaction clearly plays a large role in these relationships. The sexual element is not obvious, and I did not find evidence of any exchanges of money or other material goods. Buying lunch and drinks is shared between couples and birthday gifts are paid for by each in turn. The “boyfriend–girlfriend” relationship is based on emotional need and on satisfaction from a sense of dating, taking care of and being cared for, especially in a culture in which, for most men and women, marriages are arranged at an early age.

The refusal to talk about the sexual and romantic elements of these relationships can be explained by the fact that Hmong women are scared of being seen as unfaithful. As I have analyzed above, the gossip about Hmong women working in Sa Pa is a fact that Hmong women cannot ignore if they are to ensure that they can continue their work in Sa Pa and more importantly, ensure that their marriages and families do well. Obviously, fear and desire are integral parts of these “boyfriend–girlfriend” relationships.

The relationships between married Hmong women and their boyfriends have some commonalities with relationships formed by Dai women in Southwest China who migrate to work in Thailand, in the way that the “caring” aspects are emphasized over the sexual aspects. In addition, although Hmong women in Sa Pa may or may not involve themselves in sexual relationships with their boyfriends and do not receive money from their boyfriends as Dai women do, having a boyfriend is “part of the ‘freedoms’ away from home” (Deng and Lyttleton, 2013: 8). These relationships are emotional attachments, and they signify liberation from the social and cultural constraints of their home lives (Deng and Lyttleton, 2013). These relationships with emotional attachments can be also found, for example, in Ghana where young Ghanaian women spend their days chatting to foreign men online. There may be some vague hope of actual meetings and economic benefits such as financial support for school and even marriage, however the satisfaction they get from these from conversations is far beyond these calculations because they feel socially and experientially broadened by these encounters (Slater and Kwami, 2005).

Thinking more generally of aspirations and the affective aspects of relationships,
Lyttleton (2014) points out that the growth of intimate relationships that are physically and emotionally close are very important changes brought about by economic development and the cash economy. Lyttleton examined relationships in the Greater Mekong sub-region through case studies in the rubber fields of North Laos, in the garment factories on the Thai/Myanmar border, in gay encounters in Vientiane, in massage shops in Southern Thailand, and in casinos near the China border. He finds that “[the] affective dimensions of human life inevitably and inseparably dovetail with more concrete life changes brought about by economic and infrastructure development” (Lyttleton, 2014: 6). Clearly, the emotional engagements made possible by development or “progres” have profound implications for the choices people make as they seek to take advantage of lifestyle changes.

Married Hmong women who are involved in extra-marital relationships see these relationships as a form of therapy which helps them cope with the hardships associated with their marriages. These hardships include the difficulties they have in getting married, the hard work in the rice fields, the house work, and the stress of dealing with their husbands’ extramarital relationships. Mu was born in the Year of the Pig, probably 1970, in Ta Phin commune. Her marriage arrangements were made by her parents and she had never met her husband before the wedding day. When she got married, her life was consumed with her work as a housewife and a daughter-in-law. After the early challenges of her marriage Mu grew to love her husband dearly. This strong bond of love between Mu and her husband developed after years of marriage. But, recently Mu discovered that her husband has a relationship with another woman. Mu said she was extremely sad.

My husband had another woman. I did not know who she was. People told me that she was from a commune very far from Ta Phin. He was gone several nights a month and I could not do anything. If I asked him about it, I would be beaten. I told my parents-in-law, but they could help me either. My husband continued going out with that woman, and I just cried. Then I started to work for handicraft clubs. I had my own money and I went to every Sunday market in Sa Pa, and met my boyfriend. Nobody knows about this, except you [laughs].

She explained that her relationship with her boyfriend made her feel strong and released.

Like So and Mu, other Hmong women more or less expressed feelings of being free and happy thanks to their work in tourism and thanks to the money they earned. Working outside the home creates a social space that helps them to enjoy a new life with romantic
relationships, freedom, fun, and relaxation. Even though they suffer from more work and additional difficulties, Hmong women still express their desire to work in tourism, and have developed different strategies to deal with the resistance from their husbands.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown how working outside the home has impacted on Hmong women’s lives and gender relations within their families. Their participation in tourism-related activities has given Hmong women some of the pride and power associated with earning money. They are also able to enjoy freedom, fun, relaxation, and in some cases, romantic relationships. However, they cannot totally escape from the traditional gender norms embedded in their culture. The socially embedded constructs of gender are reproduced in the daily realities of both Hmong men and women. Cultural norms of masculinity and femininity continue to inform their perceptions of work and their roles in the family. Because men still see their involvement in household chores as inappropriate, they reluctantly take on these tasks and think of them only as assistance rather than as doing their share of the work. Because the women’s absence from the home for work shakes the traditional cultural constructs of masculinity, more tensions arise between spouses, which in turn puts pressure on Hmong women.

While they are bound by wife and mother roles, which are structured according to moral imperatives, it appears that Hmong women manipulate these discourses to gain power in their relationships with their husbands, and to overcome the socio-cultural, economic constraints imposed on them by their culture. The manner in which women strategize to deal with their obligations is linked to the gendered division of labor and men’s authority in the family. By using this discourse of power, Hmong women are successful in mobilizing the means available to them to mediate and regulate resistance from their husbands and to continue working in Sa Pa. Hmong women referred to the importance of respecting the men’s roles as primary breadwinners in order to maintain harmony in the family and to avoid the financial burden that men put on them. In addition to this power play, Hmong women also use the resources they gain by participating in tourism to negotiate with their husbands to gain a better position in the family. More importantly, Hmong women working in tourism have found their own ways to enjoy their lives in ways they have never been able to do before. The strategies and tactics that Hmong women develop in order to be successful in the marketplace and to enjoy a better life demonstrate the desires and aspirations of Hmong women for personal transformation. Hmong women have developed different strategies to deal with the
resistance from their husbands and to negotiate with them in order to continue to work and find new ways to satisfy their emotional needs. One of the ways they do this is by engaging in romantic relationships with their boyfriends. Hmong married women, at times, feel happy while engaging in romantic relationships with their boyfriends. We see how emotional satisfaction is central to Hmong women’s motivations for these romantic relationships. Although the fear of being discovered by others exists in Hmong women, we can see in this chapter that the strong desire and agency of Hmong women helps them to overcome their fears and constraints imposed on them.
CONCLUSION

The research presented in this study explores Hmong women’s experiences working in tourism in the Vietnamese tourist town of Sa Pa. It focuses on how their work outside the home shapes and influences their personal lives at home. Tourism development has brought a new set of social, cultural and economic dynamics to Sa Pa and its inhabitants. These dynamics challenge a number of existing social, political and cultural relationships; they also challenge traditional gender roles. The Hmong women working outside the home find themselves caught in conflicts caused by the tensions these challenges cause, and through their efforts to resolve these conflicts, they are experiencing newfound freedoms and power. As shown throughout this dissertation, Hmong women’s choices in their work and lives are complex processes of articulating and fusing the traditional and the modern worlds by subtly transforming their roles and relationships.

Hmong women’s choices to work in tourism are framed by the dynamics of gender and ethnicity. A more thorough understanding of the involvement of Hmong women in tourism can be obtained by examining the relationship between the Vietnamese state and the Hmong as an ethnic minority. Looking at the social attitudes toward the Hmong, as can be witnessed in the state’s political decisions regarding tourism, I have shown that stereotypes and prejudices perpetuated by the state restrict Hmong opportunities in tourism in Sa Pa. This restriction of opportunities began when foreign backpackers spontaneously engaged in ethnic tourism in Sa Pa in the early 1990s. It was at this point that the state realized the benefits of controlling the development of tourism in Sa Pa and the surrounding villages. Government interventions have taken various forms. They have included selective preservation of specific cultural features and locales for tourist consumption, the marginalization of the Hmong people who sell textile handicrafts in Sa Pa, and the labeling of Hmong culture as backward and primitive. The Hmong are also victimized by the authorities because many of them have adopted evangelical Protestantism. These policy prescriptions reflect the tenacity of stereotypes and misconceptions in the minds of the majority about ethnic minorities. These persistent stereotypes portray Hmong participants in the tourism sector as “backward”, “ignorant”, “illiterate”, “unaware of the economy” and “insensitive toward market indicators.” Policies based on these stereotypes, as I have shown in this study, for the most part work to favor certain groups of locals over others, and often end up favoring the Kinh and constraining the Hmongs’ economic and other opportunities. In addition to the state narrative,
family responsibilities are another sphere of influence that shapes Hmong women’s participation in tourism. The roles of mother and wife are culturally the most important aspects of the lives of Hmong women. Therefore, ensuring their families’ needs are met is the principal consideration of Hmong women when making the decision to work outside the home. In light of the limitations placed on tourism-related work by the state and the family, it is no surprise that Hmong women choose to do their business in their own way by selectively engaging in some tourism-related activities, while refusing to take part in others.

To link the findings of my research to the larger body of literature on gender and work: my focus has been on agency. I have shown through this dissertation that the choices Hmong women make are influenced by a diverse set of factors including the available opportunities, personal characteristics, local norms and practices regarding gender and work, and the obligations shaped by the women’s responsibilities as wives and mothers. What all of these factors share is their impact on women’s positions within power hierarchies, or what Mahler and Pessar (2001) call “social locations.” Factors such as age, marital status, economic status and Hmong ethnic identity define Hmong women’s “social locations”. Therefore, married Hmong women prefer to participate in jobs that offer flexibility and independence, such as performing weaving demonstrations, operating shops out of their homes, and being street vendors. In these occupations they are able to work as well as take care of their families and children. Although working as a tour guide generates a much higher income, it is not a popular employment option, as it requires much more time. Hmong women participate in tourism for extra cash, but need the freedom to give priority to their responsibilities in the home and fields when needed.

The development of tourism is closely linked to the processes of economic development and globalization, and has transformed the economy of the Hmong people. Their economy has been changing from a subsistence economy to a market economy, in which Hmong women have begun to play a role in contributing family income after the opening up of the country to tourism. As economic agents in their own right, Hmong women have developed their own unique strategies in order to achieve their financial goals, despite their relatively weak political and economic positions in relation to other actors in the marketplace. The responses of Hmong women in this study take different forms depending on their particular contexts and circumstances. Faced with market uncertainty and risks in the tourism market, Hmong women have created their own commercial practices to sustain their distinct cultural institutions, while diversifying their livelihoods and minimizing their risks. Working
Hmong women have sought to free themselves from the control and influence of Kinh people and work independently from them. They have also formed a network of Hmong women that they rely on to organize and control their resources. Competing with other actors in the market, Hmong women use their own resources and networks as vehicles to reach their desired economic goals. They have been able to benefit from their cultural capital (i.e. their culture of hospitality and ethnic identity) and social capital (i.e. their relations with tourists and also with each other) for economic gain.

Hmong women have also been able to capitalize on the identity that the state has created for them, which makes them out to be traditional people rooted in the past. In this case, Hmong women navigate the interventions of the state by exploiting this stereotyped image, and they have been successful in attracting tourists and negotiating with Kinh traders and businessmen, thereby maximizing their benefits from tourism. In their interactions with tourists, as vendors they stress their indigenous heritage to sell “real Hmong” handicrafts to get better prices, and as guides they present themselves as Hmong and provide stories about their culture and lives. They have successfully converted their cultural capital, understood as qualities of the individual (e.g. appearance, dress, language, and femininity) into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Their actions reflect a high degree of “intentionality” geared toward their economic, social and emotional goals.

The Hmong women exercise their agency not only to choose appropriate and relevant employment for themselves, but also to disengage from the market economy if they feel it does not represent their culture, or if they believe they need to do so in order to minimize risks and avoid exploitation. The women in this study showed this by their refusal to trade in textiles with Kinh people due to negative experiences in the past. They also resisted the commoditization of their identity by not following the mandates of the Kinh people, as in the cases presented in Chapter 5 in which Hmong women resisted the efforts of the state and the private tourism sector to sell the Hmong identity as a homogenous, inauthentic construct. This is also evident in Lu’s (Chapter 6) refusal to participate in song and dance performance teams because what the Kinh organizers call “traditional Hmong song and dance” are in fact not authentic. Such practices and strategies are indicative of the women’s determination to overcome their inferior position within local and global hierarchies dictated by gender, ethnicity and class (Lapanun, 2013).

The phenomenon of Southeast Asian and Vietnamese Hmong women’s agency as they deal with marginality, stereotypes and discrimination has been examined in a number of
studies in the fields of religion, livelihood and tourism (Schein, 2000; Turner and Michaud, 2008; Duong Bich Hanh, 2006; Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011). My analysis builds on these studies by reaffirming that the Hmong attest to their roles as protagonists by participating actively in their socio-economic development while protecting their traditional ways of life. By “turning back the gaze” (Stronza, 2001: 272) and concentrating on the origins and motivations of tourism from their own perspectives, the local people are not passive and powerless under the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 1996). Rather, as shown in this dissertation, despite the fact that tourism in Sa Pa is market-driven and state-mediated, Hmong people are engaged in articulating their intentions, making decisions and strategizing about their employment options. Hmong women are no longer seen as victims exploited by the state and the globalizing force of tourism, but as agents with “the wherewithal to play a significant role in participating in those processes that will shape their lives” (Chambers, 2000: 99).

Much has already been said about the impact of tourism on the economic, social and cultural perspectives of local people, including ethnic minorities in Sa Pa. My research reveals the desire for emotional satisfaction, among other factors, as a motive encouraging Hmong women to work in tourism. This satisfaction outweighs the challenges that their involvement in tourism-related activities poses for them. Firstly, working in tourism allows Hmong women to move from the limited social relations and interactions of their homes to negotiating the risks and benefits of the public sphere for the first time. They engage in tourism-related activities, not only for economic gain, but also because these activities are creative and fun. They enjoy the contact they have with tourists, the pride they feel in their work, the new skills they learn and the lifestyles they acquire. They welcome tourists, because in them, they find new relationships that enable them to acquire status and ensure more successful negotiations with their Kinh business owners. These friendships with foreign tourists in particular help to create a new Hmong image in the eyes of Kinh tourists and Sa Pa locals. Hmong people involved in tourism tend to speak English that is superior to that of their Kinh counterparts, and they are therefore are able to better communicate with foreign tourists, giving them a competitive edge in the tourist market. As the stories in Chapter 6 indicate, the Hmong women can establish, develop and maintain relationships with foreign tourists for their long-term, economic and emotional goals. These relationships are symbolic of the growing status of Hmong women as they challenge traditional, patriarchal notions of the domestic sphere as a female space and the public sphere as a male space (Duong Bich Hanh, 2006). Hmong wives and mothers in Sa Pa are no longer confined close to home taking care of household tasks. The Hmong women of today are much more mobile, taking part in
economic activities and representing themselves in the public sphere.

The second benefit women enjoy from working in Sa Pa is the adventure of engaging in romantic, extramarital relationships that develop through their work, as I showed in Chapter 7. I do not know whether these relationships include sexual involvement because Hmong women never mention it explicitly. Hmong married women seek ways to deal with the hardships they endure in their marriages, including the difficulties they experience in getting married, their hard work in the rice fields, their housework, and the stress of dealing with their husbands’ extramarital relationships. They do so by engaging in romantic relationships with their boyfriends. We see how emotional satisfaction is central to Hmong women’s justifications for their engagement in romantic relationships, and this has profound implications for how we understand the choices Hmong women make as they seek to take advantage of changes to their culture. These romantic relationships are secrets that make them happy and symbolize their newly acquired status of being equal to their husbands. Although it is not formally acknowledged, these secret relationships liberate the women from the confinement of the traditional demands of gender-specific, domestic obligations and roles.

The Hmong women’s fun, adventurous, working lives do not necessarily mean they have broken free from their traditional ways of life. Participation in tourism-related activities has given Hmong women the pride and power associated with earning their own money. Even though the amounts they earn are small, they provide them with freedom, fun, relaxation, and romance. Despite this, they have not totally overturned the traditional gender norms of their culture. The socially embedded constructs of gender are still reproduced in the daily reality of Hmong men and women. Cultural norms of masculinity and femininity continue to inform their perceptions of work and their roles in the family. Some Hmong men have reluctantly taken on some of the women’s household chores, but only when necessary, and only to help, not as part of a shift toward doing equal shares of household work. This is not the case in most households, though. In many cases, Hmong husbands leave their wives to take on the household burden alone. When wives are busy working in Sa Pa, their husbands seem to just be at home playing. When they see their wives bringing home income, they may start spending their own earnings for their own pleasure, ignoring their responsibility to support the family. Hmong women thus face an increased volume and intensity of work inside and outside the home. When women are absent from the Hmong household for work, this shakes the traditional cultural constructs of masculinity, causing tensions to arise between spouses, which puts more pressure on Hmong women.
Many factors make it difficult for Hmong women to act as the vanguard for new gender relations in their culture. Among these factors are: (1) discourses about the “good Hmong woman”; (2) stories about divorced women (like Sang in Chapter 7); (3) perceptions about marriage; (4) traditional Hmong rules on inheritance; and (5) the negative stereotyping, proactive discouragement, and restrictive government policies which constrain their economic and social opportunities. These impediments deter Hmong women from taking risks to change gender norms. However, as this dissertation has shown, some Hmong women are using and manipulating views of gender relations to gain power in their relationships with their husbands. They are overcoming the socio-cultural, economic barriers to increase their power in their families while continuing to work and enjoy a better life. In doing so, they influence their husband’s sense of obligation, which is linked to the gendered division of labor and male authority in the family. The Hmong women continue to play a subordinate role in their patriarchal society, while undermining the system through their subtle power struggles. By using this discourse of power, Hmong women are successful in mobilizing the available means to mediate and regulate resistance from their husbands, and continue their efforts to leave the homes for work. Hmong women referred to understanding how important it was for their husbands to continue to feel powerful and dominant in order to maintain harmony, and to ensure their husbands continued to support the family. To do so, Hmong women use their newly learned negotiation skills to deal with their husbands and gain a better position in the family.

The stories of these Hmong women show they seem to be living in two different worlds at once and are full of contradictions and tensions. In one world, they fulfill the roles of mother and wife and submit to the traditional, gendered discourses in order to be “a good Hmong woman”. In the other world they have found freedom, excitement and pride. In this new world, they throw off patriarchal constraints to enjoy life. Although Hmong married women face more difficulties within their patriarchal communities than single Hmong girls in Duong Bich Hanh’s study (2006), Hmong married women have been able to negotiate the divide and accommodate the contradictions between the two worlds to find their own ways to enjoy their lives as they could never have done before. In particular, as I have shown in this research, Hmong women express their strong agency and desire for personal transformation despite their fears and despite the constraints imposed on them.

This dissertation contributes a more nuanced understanding of women’s agency. It is based on the understanding that this agency must be seen not only in relation to cultural meanings and structural arrangements (Ortner 1996: 2), but also in relation to women’s own
personal characteristics, what Mahler and Pessar (2001) call “social locations.” Hmong women have historically been denied agency by their male kin, and by Kinh officials and traders. They have used their encounters with foreign tourists to (re)capture some measure of agency in a variety of ways. In addition, this study contributes to the understanding of how desires play a part in developmental transformation. The Hmong women express two different types of agency: One is their agency in dealing with their unstable political and economic status as they attempt to benefit from tourism; the second is their agency of desire, which includes their desire to escape boredom, pursue relationships outside the home, and continue their work despite challenges. This study demonstrates the complexity of emotional needs which encompass both fear and desire, and Hmong women have ended up negotiating with themselves and other actors to effect personal transformations. This dissertation contributes to the study of tourism by making the point that local people are not impotent, suffocated and voiceless victims of the Vietnamese state and its control over the tourist market. Tourism does not destroy the ethnic identity of the villagers, and nor does it mean the death of Hmong culture. On the contrary, by “turning back the gaze” instead of conducting an “impact” study, this dissertation finds that competition in tourism, the state and market intervention make the Hmong more aware of who they are. They have a strong identity which they are attached to and proud of. They also “use” and appropriate their identity for their own purposes. By recognizing the power and agency of ethnicity, strategies developed by Hmong women remind us that state–minority relations are far more complex than merely being areas of domination and resistance. Rather, these relations can involve “navigation”, in which local people initially “try out” the government policies. The “try”, as I have shown in this study, may be successful as Hmong women use the state’s tourism representations for their own benefits. It also may also lead to negative outcomes, as in the case of the street vendor who initially agreed to move her operations to new markets but was unsuccessful. However, Hmong women are able to use the state’s discourse as a justification for their refusal to go selling in newly constructed markets. This dissertation adds to the study of gender, insofar as it questions the assumption that traditional gender norms and ideologies, and the patriarchal system, have negatively affected the status, the agency and power of women. Rather, women in strict, traditional cultural and social settings, such as the Hmong, can use these traditional norms to help them attain their own goals.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Choowonglert, A. (2012) *Commodification of hospitality: The localized process of*


between Vietnam and Thailand. Amsterdam: Paper presented at the 7th International Conference on Thai Studies.


Mai Thanh Sơn, Bùi Văn Đạo, Khúc Thị Thanh Vân, Nguyễn Trung Dũng, Trần Thị Thanh Tuyến (2007). *Bước đầu tổng kết các phương pháp phát triển và tìm kiếm cơ chế nhằm nâng cao tiêng nói của cộng đồng dân tộc thiểu số trong quá trình ra quyết
đình. (Summarizing development methods and proposing mechanisms aiming at raising voice of ethnic minorities during decision-making process). Unpublished


Michaud, J. (1997). *A few observations on tourism in Sa Pa District, with special attention paid to ethnic minorities.* UK: Hull

The montagnards and the state in northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975: A Historical Overview. Ethnohistory 47:2


Gender planning in the third world: Meeting practical and strategic needs. In R.Grant and K.Newland (eds) Gender and international relations (pp.83-121). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Dancing fools: Politics of culture and place in a “traditional nationality festival”. Modern China. 28(3): 3-38.


Một số nét về bình đẳng giới ở các Dân tộc thiểu số (qua khảo


Oxfam Italia (2010). Enhancing cultural continuance, economic prosperity and political participation of the indigenous people in the Lao Cai province through the involvement of surrounding communities, local authorities and international actors. Research proposal. unpublished.
Pham Hoang Hai (2004). Sapa tourism travel handbook. Sa Pa Tourist Information and services Center.


______ (1997). The king of fire and Vietnamese ethnic policy in the Central Highlands. In:


Cambridge University Press.


livelihoods in Lao Cai province, Northern Vietnam. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3(3):158-190


