

FIVE DECADES IN PANG MODDAENG AND ISAN WOMEN STRUGGLING FOR REACHING TO DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF ISAN SILK DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study investigates the multifaceted impacts of historical and socio-economic shifts on Isan women in Thailand, focusing specifically on their political, economic, and social standing. The research pursues three primary objectives: (1) to analyze how these changes have contributed to the differentiation of Isan women's statuses; (2) to examine the evolution of Isan silk production, distribution, and consumption from 1963 to the present; and (3) to explore the diverse ways in which Isan women, categorized according to the first objective, engage with, negotiate, and influence silk development initiatives. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in ethnographic methodology, the research involved fieldwork in Pang Moddaeng village, Chiang Kham District, Phayao Province. Data were collected through participant observation, surveys, focus group discussions designed to elicit historical context, and in-depth interviews with 24 key informants. These informants were strategically selected to represent diverse perspectives, comprising eight individuals providing insights into local history and the history of silk production at the household level, eight representatives from women's groups, and eight representatives of social actors involved in silk development projects. The findings reveal the following key insights: First, historical and socio-economic changes have indeed stratified Isan women's statuses, leading to three distinct groups: (1) women holding comprehensive roles and statuses across economic, social, and political spheres; (2) women possessing social and economic roles and statuses, but lacking political status; and (3) women marginalized from both political and social spheres, focusing primarily on building economic security within their communities. Second, the production, distribution, and consumption of Isan silk have undergone significant transformations since 1963, influenced by the interventions of government agencies such as the Chiang Kham District Community Development Office, the Agricultural Development Office, and the Ang Thong Subdistrict Administrative Organization. These institutions play a crucial role in shaping not only the operational aspects of silk production but also the prevailing ideologies, values, and attitudes surrounding it. Third, the three groups of Isan women engage with and influence silk development in distinct ways. The first group strategically utilizes silk as a tool to negotiate access to development resources, including budgets and projects, within the broader context of promoting cultural identity narratives, such as local Isan identity, environmental stewardship, and contemporary Isan identity. The second group leverages silk to negotiate and maintain women's agency at the household level, viewing silk as a form of household cultural heritage potentially threatened by state-led initiatives to transform it into a public or community-level asset. Finally, the third group perceives silk as a cultural resource that can be independently and competitively exploited within the market system.

Keywords: Negotiating to Development, Anthropology of Development, Isan Women, Isan Silk, Cultural Identity, Cultural Heritage (Property), Pang Moddaeng

Introduction

This research investigates the complexities of development through the lens of Isan women's experiences with silk development (change) in Pang Moddaeng Villages, Ang Thong Sub-district, Chiang Kham district, Phayao Province, Northern Thailand. The study is grounded in a critique of traditional development discourse, which often relies on dichotomies such as West-East, Global North-Global South, good-bad, and modernity-tradition. These dichotomies can obscure the nuanced realities of development and marginalize local perspectives. Furthermore, the study acknowledges the historical marginalization of Isan people, which has limited their access to development opportunities since 1963. Recognizing that women often face additional barriers to accessing and benefiting from development initiatives, the research specifically focuses on the experiences of Isan women, exploring how their diverse social, economic, and political positions shape their engagement with silk development.

The study will examine the evolution of Isan silk development (change) through the dimension of production, contribution, and consumption in Pang Moddaeng Village from 1963 to the present. It will be the “terrain” of development to investigate how Isan women within the village have navigated the changing landscape of silk development, highlighting their struggles, negotiations, and agency. The research will likely employ qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews with Isan women from different social groups, to understand their perspectives and experiences.

The study will address three primary research questions, include 1) how history and socio-economic change in Pang Moddaeng and how it causes to women differentiated in politics and socio-economic positions? 2) how has Isan silk development (explain through the change of production, contribution, and consumption that involve with several social actors) changed from 1963 to the present? and 3) how have Isan women involved, struggled, and negotiated in the terrain of silk development (change on silk)? This last question will finally delve into the diverse experiences of Isan women in the context of silk development, analyzing how their social, economic, and political positions influence their engagement with and benefit from silk-related initiatives.

By addressing these questions, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities of development from the perspective of Isan women in Pang Moddaeng Village, contributing to a more critical and inclusive understanding of development processes.

Research Objectives

1. To understand how history and socio-economic change have influenced women's differentiation in political and socio-economic positions.
2. To understand how Isan silk production, contribution, and consumption have evolved from 1963 to the present.
3. To understand the diverse groups of Isan women and their unique circumstances, which have shaped their relationships with silk development issues.

Scope of Research

Population Scope: This study employs a multi-level approach to data collection from three target groups. Firstly, household-level data will be gathered through interviews with at least eight households to reconstruct the history of silk production, contribution and consumption in the Pang Moddaeng community. Secondly, in-depth interviews will be conducted with eight women representatives from each of these households. Finally, the study will include interviews with eight representatives from the key social actors, including Ang

Thong Sub-District Administrative Organizations (SAOs), the elderly from the local elderly schools, and the heads of four villages.

Time Scope: The time scope of this study encompasses the period from 1963 to the present.

Literature Review

This research reviews some relevant literature which could be divided here into three groups, firstly the post-development school of thought, secondly it is the school of anthropology of development and lastly, there are some studies that master on the heterogeneity of social actors in the development field.

the post-development (or the post-structuralist or deconstructionist)

This school of thought, often employing critical discourse analysis, challenges the prevailing narratives of development. They argue that development is not a neutral or objective process but rather a construction of the West, used to exert power and influence over other parts of the world. There are several key thinkers like Arturo Escobar (1984), who claims that the West creates "other part of the world" by "development discourse" since the end of WWII, while Wolfgang Sachs (2010) who describe various discourse through "the development dictionary", Gilbert Rist (2014), who blames development discourse from the more specific anthropological perspective, while Jame Ferguson (1994) more specific displays how development discourse works in development plan of Lesotho, and Chairat Charoensin-o-larn (2006 and 2011) who employ "critical discourse analysis" to displays how "Development Discourse" has created and worked in Thai context. These thinkers have critiqued the inherent biases and power dynamics embedded within development discourse. While acknowledging the limitations of this perspective, it's important to recognize that development is not a monolithic concept and varies significantly across different contexts. It's a dynamic process that evolves and changes in response to local realities.

Anthropology of Development

This school focuses on understanding development within specific social contexts, drawing heavily from ethnographic methods and insights from disciplines like ethnomethodology. They emphasize the diversity of development experiences and reject simplistic dichotomies like "West vs. East" or "Global vs. Local." Scholars like Thomas Yarrow, Soumhya Venkatesan (2012), John T. Friedman (2012), Arce, and Long (2000), and Oliver de Sardan (2014) highlight the agency of local actors and the complex interplay between state, market, and local communities. They also suggest approaching to development as "differentiating development (or multiple modernities)". Moreover, they offer to emphasize the importance of recognizing the social actors of experiences and power relations within development processes.

Heterogeneity of Social Actors in Development Field

This perspective emphasizes the diverse roles and experiences of different social actors within development. It highlights the heterogeneity of interests and perspectives among groups like peasants, women, and men. Scholars like Thitiya Laoan (2010) (study with peasant class), Paiboon Hengsuwan (2019) (study with women group), Emma Crewe (1997) (study with women), Yukon Pitaksa (2015) (study with women) Panpat Plungsrichoensuk (2009) (study with male) have explored how peasant class, genders, and other social factors shape individuals' experiences of development. This perspective calls for a more nuanced understanding of how

development impacts different groups within society and the need to address the specific needs and concerns of marginalized populations.

Research Methodology

1. **Research Methodology:** This study employs a qualitative research approach, drawing upon ethnographic methods such as surveys, observations, and participant observation to conduct fieldwork in Pang Moddaeng Village.

2. **Research Steps:** The research proceeds in three stages aligned with the study's objectives. First, it establishes a comprehensive understanding of the historical context and the differentiation of women within the community. Second, it examines the historical evolution of silk production, contribution and consumption. Finally, it analyzes how women's differentiation intersects with and influences their engagement in the changing landscape of silk development.

3. **Data Collection:** Data collection for this study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, including focus group discussions (for historical context), interviews, and in-depth interviews with key informants.

4. **Data Analysis:** To address the research questions, the study primarily relies on historical analysis, drawing heavily on oral histories to reconstruct the past. For the third research question, which explores women's differentiated engagement with silk development, the analysis will employ interpretive methods to uncover both explicit and implicit agendas (hidden scripts) of various social actors, particularly different groups of women.

Research Results

The results could be divided into three parts. The first part is about a history in Pang Moddaeng which is described about the change of women's positions in economic, social and political through time change. Which is as a result women differentiation into three groups differently. The second part is related with a history of Isan silk in Pang Moddaeng. For this part, it shows how change on Isan silk production, contribution and consumption that relevant to several social actors. The last part illustrates how the three groups of women related with the change of Isan silk, which is shown how each of them negotiate to development differently in the terrain of silk development.

A Historical and Socio-Economic Context in Pang Moddaeng: From the Isan Women's Perspective

In this part, the result shows the four periods of time that cause to differentiate the social, economic and political positions of women. This part shows a history from the perspectives of women, which is meant that the target group of data collection was mainly taken from women. From the chart below outlines the historical progression of Pang Moddaeng community, likely an agricultural one. It is divided into four distinct periods, each marked by a significant shift in activities and development.

The first period, spanning from 1963 to 1970, is characterized by the initial settling down of the community and the securing of land access. This phase lays the foundation for subsequent development. The second period, from 1971 to 1980, sees the community engaging in household-based economic activities. These activities likely revolve around subsistence farming and other small-scale ventures, building on the land access established in the previous period. The third period, from 1981 to 2000, witnesses a significant change with migrations and capital accumulation. This suggests a shift towards more market-oriented activities, potentially involving out-migration for work and the reinvestment of earnings back into the community. Finally, the fourth period, from 2001 to the present, is marked by a return and a

focus on intensive agriculture. This could indicate a renewed emphasis on agricultural production, possibly with the adoption of more advanced techniques or the utilization of accumulated capital. Overall, these changes through time depicts a dynamic community that has undergone transformations in its economic activities and social organization over time, adapting to changing circumstances and opportunities. As a result, they cause to differentiate Isan women into three groups, variously.



Chart 1: A Chart of the Four Period of a History of Pang Moddaeng

Three distinct groups of women are identified in the table below, which analyzes their social, economic, and political standings, diverse income-generating activities, and capital accumulation patterns through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's framework of capitals, *Bourdieu* (1997).

The first group, comprised of Rujira, Nattaya, and Jiraporn, occupies prominent social, economic, and political positions. Their diverse occupations, ranging from local politics and village leadership to managing beauty salons and grocery stores, and engaging in agricultural hiring, have enabled them to accumulate substantial social, economic, and cultural capital. Their political connections further amplify their social capital.

The second group, consisting of Malee, Jumpee, and Rusamee, holds social and economic positions as community or local philosophers and wisdom instructors. While they also participate in agricultural work, wage labor, and household-based work, their primary roles as wisdom instructors contribute significantly to their economic and cultural capital, with their expertise considered a valuable cultural asset.

The third group, encompassing Bousri and Ratre, focuses primarily on economic activities. Engaged in agricultural work, wage labor, and household-based work, their current focus is on income generation to build economic capital, with less emphasis on accumulating social or cultural capital at this stage. This categorization highlights the diverse pathways individuals pursue to secure livelihoods and accumulate various forms of capital within their communities.

Table 1: The Table of Three Groups of Isan Women in Differences of Social, Economic and Political Positions, Their Varieties of Works and Types of Capitals

Groups	Social, economic and political positions	Varieties of works	Earning in various types of capitals
group 1: Rujira, Nattaya and Jiraporn	Social, economic and political positions	Local politician, Village Leader, Beauty salon, Grocery shop, and Agricultural work (Hire)	Good in all economic, cultural and social capitals (as social capital, it relates with political connections)
group 2: Malee, Jumpee and Rusamee	Social and economic positions	Community or local philosopher (as local wisdom instructors)	Good in economic and cultural capitals (as cultural

Groups	Social, economic and political positions	Varieties of works	Earning in various types of capitals
		Agricultural work, Wage labor, and Household-based work	capital, they are as a local wisdom instructors)
group 3: Bousri and Ratre	Economic positions	Agricultural work, Wage labor, and Household-based work	Not much well in all types of capitals, they are now focus on earning for economic capital

A History on Isan Silk in Pang Moddaeng

In this section of a history on Isan Silk in Pang Moddaeng would like to present how change of Isan happened and relate with essential social actors and their ideologies. As from the diagram below has appeared to summarize the evolution of silk production, contribution and consumption (and development) in a specific context of Pang Moddaeng. It is divided into four distinct periods, each representing a significant phase which is relevant to social actors.

Five Decades in Pang Moddaeng and Isan Women Struggling for Reaching to Development: A Case Study of Isan Silk Development



Chart 2: Chart of a Four Periods of Change on Isan Silk in Pang Moddaeng

Period 1: The Past Forms of Production, Contribution, and Consumption on Silk

This period focuses on the traditional methods and practices that are associated with silk production, contribution and consumption that are related to the three institutions include household, religion and community (through ritual and ceremony). Thus, this period likely highlights the historical significance of silk in Pang Moddaeng community, its role in household and community activities, and the cultural values associated with it.

Period 2: Change of Production, Contribution, and Consumption on Silk (Since 2000)

This period marks a transition in silk production. It likely explores the introduction of new ways of consumption (concern with meaning and value), changes in production methods, and shifts in the consumption patterns of silk products. The year 2000 seems to be a significant turning point in this transformation, when OTOP. (One Tambon (sub-district) One Product) began to engage in silk development, as an OTOP. product.

Period 3: Social Actors and Ideologies (such as meanings and ideas) on Silk

This period delves into the social and cultural aspects of silk production and consumption. It likely examines the role of various actors involved in the development process, such as producers, traders, and consumers. Additionally, it explores the cultural meanings and values associated with silk, which may have influenced its production and consumption. The influence of central administrative agencies on these aspects is also highlighted when they could manipulate various significant ideologies such as culturalism (local traditionalism), modernism, royalism, and environmentalism.

Period 4: Ang Thong Sub-District Administrative Organization and Localism on Local Culture

This period focuses on the role of local governance in shaping silk change and development. This period explores how the Ang Thong Sub-District Administrative Organization (ATSDAO.) as a local organization has influenced on silk production, contribution and consumption in Pang Moddaeng community. It could be highlighted that the ATSDAO has taken the important role of localism and Isan cultural identity in preserving and promoting silk traditions.

Overall, this part provides a framework for understanding the historical evolution of silk production, contribution and consumption in a Pang Moddaeng context. History highlights the interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors in shaping this silk development over time. Next, the study would display how three groups of Isan women in the topic of 5.1 engage themselves with silk change or development, variously.

Isan Women and Negotiating to Development

In this part, I identify Isan women into three groups differently. Because they have engaged with development in different parts which depend on their social, economic and political positions, they have ability to negotiate to development, differently.

The First Group of Women: Silk as Cultural Representation of Identity

Relevant to their cultural social and politic conditions, the first group of women enjoys the unique set of circumstances that influence their approach to silk development. Firstly, their political positions provide them with a platform to advocate for and implement policies that support silk development. Also, their economic stability allows them to promote and sustain silk-related initiatives. Lastly, by their strong social connections they serve as valuable social capital, enabling them to mobilize resources and build partnerships to support silk development, especially from several state agencies.

Moreover, for these women, silk development is not merely an economic endeavor but also a cultural politic of identity. They recognize silk as a powerful symbol that could represent the local, national, and global identities. They believe that embracing with the "mixed identities" – as a blend of local traditions and contemporary influences - can enhance their access to development opportunities.

Thus, based on this understanding, the first group of these Isan women actively engages in various initiatives to promote silk development. These include participating in cultural events to showcase Isan silk and its cultural significance, actively promoting Isan silk products and supporting their conservation efforts. Additionally, they strategically utilize their political influence to advocate for policies and discourses that can attract subsidies, funding, and loans for silk production, thereby fostering the growth of silk development.

The Second Group: Silk as a Household-based Heritage (Property)

The second group of women's involvement in silk development is shaped by their distinct economic and social circumstances. Unlike the first group, their livelihoods are not directly tied to political positions. However, they hold a unique social status as silk experts,

often acting as local instructors and sharing their knowledge as "local silk philosophers." While they maintain economic stability, silk production primarily serves as a supplementary income source for them.

Then, for these women, silk development is intricately linked to the preservation of their cultural heritage. They view silk-related skills, knowledge, and tools as valuable cultural property and often engage in discussions and negotiations regarding their ownership and transmission—whether they should remain within the household or be shared more publicly. They are particularly wary of initiatives that they perceive as threatening to take away their "silk heritage" from the household-based production system.

Thus, these women play a crucial role as the primary silk producers in their Pang Moddaeng community. They possess specialized skills and techniques in silk production, which they often share with others for a fee, which is paid by state agencies. However, they often express reservations about initiatives such as establishing a "silk community center" in the village, fearing that it might disrupt their traditional practices and undermine their role as knowledge keepers.

The Third Group of Women: Silk as Individual Cultural Resource

The third group of women differs significantly from the previous two. They do not actively participate in political affairs or hold any recognized social status within the silk industry. Their primary engagement with silk is as independent producers, often supplementing their income with silk production. Their approach to silk is driven by market realities. They view silk production as a valuable cultural resource, recognizing the need to adapt and evolve their techniques to meet the demands of the market to ensure their economic survival.

Then, for these women, silk development is primarily about navigating and succeeding in the market. They understand that the silk market is dynamic and requires flexibility. Therefore, they are willing to adapt their production methods, using different materials and techniques to create products that are both marketable and culturally relevant.

Therefore, as independent producers, they rely heavily on the silk market mechanism to guide their production decisions. They may not possess the specialized skills or techniques of the second group and often purchase most of their raw materials. To remain competitive, they may utilize lower-cost materials and incorporate innovative designs to appeal to the market while still maintaining a connection to their cultural heritage.

Discussion

This research identified two key areas of discussion relevant to development studies. Firstly, it emphasizes the need to move beyond simplistic dichotomies that often frame development discourse, such as the West-East divide or the Global North-South dichotomy. Contrary to the post-development school's emphasis on the West as the sole origin of development (Arturo Escobar, 1984), this research argues that development is a multifaceted and context-specific phenomenon. In line with the concept of "differentiating development" (Thomas Yarrow, Soumhya Venkatesan, 2012), or "configuration of development," (Oliver de Sardan, 2014) or "reconfiguring development and counter tendencies" (Arce, and Long, 2000), it emphasizes the importance of examining development processes as they manifest in specific local contexts.

As for evidence from this research, the research evidence suggests that the development of Isan silk has manifested in multiple forms, each with distinct implications for the women involved. Firstly, silk development has become a site of cultural politics, where it is used to represent and reinforce cultural identities. Isan silk is seen as a symbol of local, regional, and even national identity, and its promotion often involves narratives of cultural preservation and

revival. Secondly, the development of Isan silk has raised questions about the politics of cultural heritage (property). As silk production evolves, debates arise around the ownership and transmission of traditional knowledge and skills. Concerns are raised about the potential erosion of household-based production systems and the preservation of unique local techniques. Finally, the development of Isan silk has transformed it into a valuable cultural resource for individual women. Silk production has become a means of economic survival, with women navigating the market to generate income and support their livelihoods. This perspective emphasizes the agency of individual women in adapting and evolving their silk production practices to meet the demands of the market while maintaining a connection to their cultural heritage.

The second point of discussion expands upon the concept of "Heterogeneity of Social Actors in Development Field" by acknowledging that even within specific social categories, such as women, significant diversity exists. While the "Heterogeneity" school emphasizes differences between social groups like peasant class (Thitiya Laoan, 2010), women who marginalized from development (Emma Crewe, 1997), women with the modern selves in the development world (Yukon Pitaksa, 2015), women in the field of politics of natural resource management (Paiboon Hengsuwan, 2019), and men who return from oversea and taking places of local developers in their hometown (Panpat Plungsrichoensuk, 2009), it may not fully account for the internal diversity within these groups. This research addresses this limitation by analyzing Isan women, not just as a homogenous category defined by gender, but as individuals with intersecting social, economic, and political positions. By exploring how these multiple factors shape their experiences and agency, the study aims to gain a more nuanced understanding of how Isan women engage with the development process.

Suggestions

For Academic work: Development Studies should adopt methodologies and conceptual frameworks that effectively account for the diverse experiences and perspectives of social actors within their field of study. A crucial aspect of this approach is to recognize and analyze the "heterogeneities" that exist within social groups. By intersecting economic, social, and political positions, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of how these factors shape individuals' experiences and agency within development processes.

For Development Work: Development workers and agencies must be mindful of the "sense of ownership" when promoting community-based development initiatives. It is essential to ensure that local communities feel a genuine sense of ownership over these projects and have a meaningful voice in their design and implementation.

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