Akha Souvenir Sellers in Thailand's Urban Tourist Areas:
Social, Economic, and Political Structures[1]

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Abstract

In recent decades one can observe an increasing percentage of highland ethnic minorities living in Thailand's capital city Bangkok, as well as in medium-sized cities and tourist centres in the North or in the South of the country. This article deals with the ethnic minority group of Akha, and specifically Akha women, who have been migrating into Thailand's urban and tourist areas in order to sell handicrafts and souvenirs. They have become micro-entrepreneurs or self-employed street merchants. The core interest of this contribution lies in analyzing and understanding structural conditions that shape the opportunity structures and economic action of Akha own-account workers in Thailand's urban tourist areas. This includes an analysis of the Akha vendors' social networks as well as their embeddedness in economic and political structures in the field of urban ethnic businesses.

Introduction and Relevance

The evolvement of ethnic minority souvenir businesses was once started by external actors such as tour guides and local business owners and mostly limited to the northern region; but over the last decades, a growing number of Akha have gone into business for themselves and migrated southwards to Thailand's urban and beachside tourist areas. Several difficulties and conditional changes in the highland regions, such as loss of land, destruction of traditional village structures, improvement of transport infrastructure, and the creation of economic opportunity structures in the destination areas in light of international tourism development, set the stage for the development of Akha souvenir businesses. This study explores opportunities and structural constraints Akha minority vendors face in Thailand's urban tourist areas, such as Chiang Mai, Bangkok and the southern beach destinations.

This study is relevant from a social and political perspective, entering fields of tourism, migration, and urban studies. First, the work of Akha own-account workers is situated at the intersection of tourism and migration, the two most central social and economic phenomena of contemporary society.[3] The areas of sale for Akha internal migrants, such as the famous traveler Khaosan road in Bangkok or the notorious Walking Street in Patong on Phuket Island, have become interfaces between ethnic minority entrepreneurs and a wider economy consisting of national and international travelers, expatriates, other business owners and workers, officials, and various members of Thai mainstream society.

Second, due to their active involvement in tourism production and distribution processes along the roads of international urban tourist centers, Akha vendors have become highly visible. While most urban-based hilltribes, as well as other actors of the informal sector, remain mostly invisible to visitors and other outsiders, this particular migrant group stands out visually and has become an integral feature of Thailand's urban and beachside tourist centers. Eye-catching female Akha souvenir sellers, often wearing colorful and richly

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[3] Hall, *Tourism and migration.*

decorated hats, have become part of an informal sector that is linked to the global tourism economy.

Moreover, the ethnic minority group of the Akha represents the most popular ethnic highland group working in tourist businesses in Thailand's urban and beachside destinations. They are prominently featured in tourist media and advertisements in Thailand and international contexts. In a study about "hilltribe postcards from Northern Thailand", Erik Cohen found that the most commonly used minority names on these postcards were Hmong and Akha.[4] Also, when landing at Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, visitors waiting for their luggage can spot advertisements by Thailand's national Tourism Organization (TAT) displaying the country's major attractions, such as pristine beaches, temples, and markets. One billboard shows an Akha woman working in a rice field, fully dressed in the traditional Akha silver headdress and costume, which markets a romanticized minority and Akha image that has probably never existed this way. In addition, Akha and their souvenir products can also be found in the context of international tourism and marketing. For example, the 2013 travel catalogue on Asia of the well-known German tour operator *Meier's Weltreisen* embellishes its cover with a woman wearing an Akha headdress, and even while on holiday in Southern France, I encountered a shop in the center of Saint-Tropez selling a souvenir version of an Akha headdress.

Third, by working as colorful ethnic minority street vendors offering souvenirs,[5] they may enhance the 'exotic' image of the city or urban neighborhood. As economic actors in popular travel destinations, they contribute to the production and consumption of urban and tourist places from which both cities and migrants can benefit.[6] Migrants are carving out their own niches in the tourism industry by entering into self-employment and/or commodifying some of their cultural features.

There is, however, also another side of the coin. Frequently, such processes of migrant or minority integration are linked with xenophobic stereotypes (re)produced by dominant societies. Economic advancements

[4] Cohen, "Who are the chao khao?".
[5] Souvenirs offered include self-made wristbands, bags, and hats, as well as mass manufactured products such as wooden frogs, bracelets or plastic souvenirs.
[6] Hall, "Tourism, migration and place advantage".

do not necessarily enhance social status. Furthermore, street vending takes place in a context of competition, risk, and insecurity in informal sectors and often evokes conflicts with authorities.[7]

Finally, this research on ethnic minority street vendors in Thailand's urban tourist areas represents a highly gendered case study. Based on my own fieldwork, it can be stated that the vast majority of Akha souvenir vendors are women leaving their husbands and families behind in the villages. In Southeast Asia, women have often been depicted as more autonomous compared to the social and economic positions of women from neighboring regions in South and East Asia.[8] Yet, as elsewhere, women in Southeast Asia have been traditionally seen to be mainly involved in domestic spheres focusing on housework, child-bearing, and parenting which was segregated from the male-dominated sphere of capitalist production, politics, religious life, and the wider society.[9] Yet, despite the widely acknowledged fact that as entrepreneurs, women make a valuable contribution to local and national economies around the world in terms of job creation and wealth generation, they are still the largest underrepresented group in studies of entrepreneurship.[10] It is the aim of this research to conduct a multi-level analysis by exploring the embeddedness of ethnic minority women in social, economic and political contexts and to contribute to minority studies in Thai urban contexts.

Theoretical Concepts and Literature Review

Ethnic Minority Economy, Street Vending and Informality

In a first simple definition, an ethnic economy consists of co-ethnic, self-employed persons, as well as employers and their co-ethnic employees.[11] I use a non-elitist approach of 'entrepreneurship', where ethnic entrepreneurs are defined as self-employed members of ethnic minority groups, regardless of whether they employ other

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[7] Bhowmik, "Street vendors in Asia"; Etzold, *The politics of street food*.
[8] Hayami, Introduction: "The family in flux in Southeast Asia".
[9] King, *The sociology of Southeast Asia*.
[10] Halkias, *Female immigrant entrepreneurs*.
[11] Light, *Ethnic economies*, 4.

people and regardless of whether they own small businesses on the margins of economy or large multimillion enterprises.[12] It is noted that the literature on entrepreneurship is conceptually problematic because it mainly focuses on firm size, location, proprietorship, capital start-up, and innovation. Most entrepreneurs, however, do not come up with brilliant ideas or new combinations of resources and make a fortune, but rather copy or follow existing models.[13] This does not mean that they lack creativity or agency. In fact, they can open up new horizons but in a more modest way, e.g., producing and selling handicrafts and souvenirs to international tourists. Another important criterion of ethnic entrepreneurs is that they are mostly both owners and managers (or operators) of their own businesses. In this understanding, self-employed souvenir vendors, such as the Akha of this study, can be categorized as ethnic minority entrepreneurs.

A considerable amount of entrepreneurs operate in the informal sector. In Thailand, the share of informal employment in the non-agricultural sector accounts for 51%, whereas two thirds of them are considered to be self-employed.[14] Officially, a self-employed migrant worker is a person who is "engaged in a remunerated activity otherwise than under a contract of employment and who earns his or her living through this activity normally working alone or together with members of his or her family, and to any other migrant worker recognized as self-employed by applicable legislation of the State of employment or bilateral or multilateral agreements".[15] Self-employment in informal enterprises, however, often misses this legal aspect and can be classified into three groups: first, employees; second, own-account operators including both heads of family enterprises and single person operators; and third, unpaid family workers.[16] The informal economy which has also been labeled 'shadow', 'black' or 'hidden' economy has been associated with work-intensive production, simple technology, bad payment, low

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[12] Basu, Ethnic and minority enterprise; Valenzuela, "Day labourers as entrepreneurs?".

[13] Kloosterman, "Immigrant entrepreneurs in advanced economies", 192.

[14] ILO, *Women and men in the informal economy*.

[15] IOM, *Glossary in migration*, 59.

[16] Chen, "Rethinking the informal economy", 2.

formal education, low grade of organization, lack of social security systems, and non-registered, partly illegal economic activities.[17]

Street vendors belong to the largest subgroup of the informal workforce. They can be found in every major city of the world and enrich these urban areas by contributing economic activities and providing services for urban dwellers or tourists alike.[18] Street vendors can be broadly defined as persons who offer "goods for sale to the public without having a permanent built-up structure from which to sell."[19] They may be stationary or semi-mobile by occupying space on pavements or public/private areas or, they may be mobile by moving their stands or pushcarts or by carrying their baskets from one place to another.[20] Street vendors differ from many other actors in the informal economy (e.g., domestic workers) because they are often highly visible in public spaces – a fact that enhances their conflict potential with state authorities. Studies on street vendors in Asia conclude that governments have more or less failed to recognize street vending as a legal activity and that they are viewed as obstacles or irritants to cities' modern development.[21]

Research on Urban-Based Highland Minorities in Thailand

This article contributes to the neglected research on the phenomenon of urban based highland people in Thailand. A lot of village-based research on the hilltribes, even especially concerning the Akha people, has been carried out,[22] but only a few studies have examined the hilltribes in the urban context.[23] There is research on 'urban hilltribes' available in the field of development studies, which has generally been viewed as part of the "hilltribe problems" or as a result of

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[17] Portes, *The informal economy*.

[18] Bromley, "Street vending and public policy".

[19] Bhowmik, "Street vendors in Asia", 2256.

[20] McGee, *Hawkers in Southeast Asian cities*.

[21] Bhowmik, "Street vendors in Asia"; Endres, "Traders, Markets, and the State in Vietnam"; Kusakabe, *Policy issues in Southeast Asian cities.*

[22] Bernatzik, *Akha und Meau*; Geusau, "Dialects of Akhazang"; Kammerer, *Gateway to the Akha world*; Tooker, *Space and production*; Trupp, "Ethnic tourism in Northern Thailand".

[23] Toyota, "Urban migration and cross-border networks"; Ishii, "The impact of ethnic tourism".

uneven development.[24] Existing studies, however, are limited to Chiang Mai only. One of the earliest works by Vatikiotis focused on the complex issue of the roles minority groups play in urban society and the extent of their assimilation with Thai mainstream society.[25] Mika Toyota has written about Akha identity in urban and transnational contexts, finding that Akha migrants maintain several identities that enable them to simultaneously link to more than one locality and social setting.[26] Buadaeng, Boonyasaranai and Leepreecha developed a quantitative and qualitative profile of hilltribe migrants in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, providing an overview on migration motives and fields of occupation.[27] Their research focuses on groups rather than on individuals and neglects the differences and inequalities within the hilltribe groups. A study conducted by Fuengfusakul explores the networks and strategies of vendors and small entrepreneurs in the Chiang Mai night bazaar.[28] Finally, research in the field of souvenirs, culture, and commodification has explained the dynamics of commercialized arts and has shown how crafts initially produced for the own community were transformed into souvenir products for outsiders.[29] This study goes further by following the Akha entrepreneurs' economic activities beyond the northern city of Chiang Mai. This article aims to enrich existing literature by integrating data from empirical research carried out in urban and tourist areas in the capital city Bangkok and the southern beachside destinations.

Social and Mixed Embeddedness
      One of the popular concepts that explains economic and social incorporation of migrant and ethnic minority groups is the notion of social capital. So far, the concept has been used for a plethora of studies: e.g., to explain the differential educational achievements of young immigrants; to analyze the situation of children of immigrants in the US;

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[24] Toyota, "Transnational mobility", 2.

[25] Vatikiotis, "Ethnic pluralism".

[26] Toyota, "Urban Migration and Cross-Border Networks"; Toyota, "Trans-national mobility and multiple identity choices".

[27] Buadaeng, *A study of the socio-economic vulnerability.*

[28] Fuengfusakul, "Making sense of place".

[29] Cohen, *The commercialized crafts.*

or to explain development and government efficiency of cities, regions, and even nations.[30] Academics, international organizations, and NGOs make use of the concept and "it has become a key term in development literature since the early 1990s to consider the resources available to individuals and groups through social connections and social relations with others."[31] The main controversy concerns the question of whether the resources are accrued to individuals or collectives.[32] In dealing with social capital as a community feature, the relevant question to be answered is how communities develop and maintain social capital as a collective asset. In my approach, however, I mainly refer to Akha individuals and their personal social networks, and thereby agree with Portes who acknowledges "that the greatest theoretical promise of social capital lies at the individual level."[33]

Kloosterman and Rath propose a more comprehensive concept of (mixed) embeddedness that also acknowledges the economic and politico-institutional environment of the actors in question.[34] Their work follows and further develops the studies of Aldrich, Waldinger and Ward who claimed that in order to explain ethnic entrepreneurial strategies, it is necessary to combine ethnic and socio-cultural factors with politico-economic factors.[35] "In conjunction with the ethnic bias, most scientific researchers have paid little systematic attention to the underlying structural changes of the economy in general and specific markets in particular."[36]

However, the success or failure of an actor within the field of entrepreneurship also depends on their endowment of capital while the various forms of capital can be unevenly distributed among various actors within a field. Capital can be perceived as power and is accumulated, inherited, and transferred individually or collectively.[37] The structure of

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[30] Portes, "The two meanings of social capital"; Putnam, *Bowling alone*.

[31] Turner, "Young entrepreneurs", 1695.

[32] Lin, "Building a network theory".

[33] Portes, "Social capital", 21.

[34] Kloosterman, "Mixed embeddedness"; Kloosterman, "Immigrant entrepreneurs".

[35] Waldinger, *Ethnic entrepreneurs*.

[36] Rath, "Outsiders' business", 667.

[37] Bourdieu, "The forms of capital".

the distribution of various forms and subforms of capital at any given moment "represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances and success for practices."[38] In other words, the endowment of various forms of capital structures the constraints and chances of an agent's practice. Bourdieu highlights the need to reintroduce capital in all its forms by distinguishing four forms of capital – economic, social, cultural, and symbolic – which enter into human agency and the achievements of economic action.

Methodology

This research is guided by grounded theory principles as formulated by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin.[39] Their approach acknowledges the importance of both action/interaction (agency) and structure and thus seems fruitful for the purposes of this study. In order to explore the migrant's agency and mixed embeddedness, I am using qualitative and quantitative data. My collected primary data is based on nine months of fieldwork that took place in Thailand's urban tourist areas, such as Chiang Mai, Bangkok or Pattaya, and is derived from semi-structured interviews, forms of observation, including informal conversations, personal network analysis and photos. In addition to primary data, I use secondary data drawn from technical literature, non-technical literature, including newspaper articles, tourist magazines and brochures, as well TV programs reporting about Akha ethnic minorities, official documents and websites depicting trading regulations, along with official tourism and street vending statistics. Such an approach indicates that female migrants are not entirely controlled by some external structural forces, but have shown themselves to be active agents who pursue their own goals and ideas.

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[38] Bourdieu, "The forms of capital", 242.
[39] Corbin, *Basics of qualitative research.*

Social Dimensions of Akha Urban Souvenir Business

This section analyzes the role of social embeddedness of economic action, thus how Akha vendors generate, mobilize, and transform social relations.

Foundations of Social Capital

One central foundation of social capital is solidarity based on a group identity, which creates a self and an other, and which can lead to group-oriented behavior and a transfer of material or immaterial resources. In the case of Akha migrants working in Thailand's urban and tourist areas, the most obvious common features seem to be a common language – Akha – and a common geographical origin – Northern Thailand, and for some the Shan State in Myanmar. The two most important sources of internal solidarity, however, are collective experiences of outside discrimination or exploitation and a similar socio-economic status.

Most of the Akha migrants working in the urban and beachside tourist businesses have experienced forms of outside discrimination or exploitation during their previous working and migration experiences, as well as during their daily sales activities as souvenir sellers. In the context of previous migration and employment experiences, Akha vendors reported being tricked into prostitution or low-paid and dangerous employment in construction or agricultural wage labor.[40] Toyota reports that members of hilltribe minorities are preferred employees because they accept lower wages, especially those without Thai citizenship.[41] When the first Akha migrated to Pattaya in order to run their businesses, Thai guesthouse owners denied them access. In the context of routine vending activities, Akha vendors are confronted with pejorative exonyms like *meo* by members of Thai mainstream society, including shop owners, business people or domestic tourists, and other forms of disrespect and prejudice. Generally, Akha micro-entrepreneurs have weak relations to the larger business owners at

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[40] There was only one case of a male Akha whose previous job brought clearly higher economic benefits.

[41] Toyota, "Urban migration", 208.

their market places; neither do they have friends owning a place whose toilets they could use, nor are they allowed to sit down in most of the tourist bars in order to get a drink unless they go there with a tourist who orders for them.

The second source of this form of social capital is based on similar socio-economic status, especially among the group of mobile sellers. The majority of Akha vendors have no or low formal education, limited job opportunities in their home regions, and a responsibility for those 'left behind' in the villages.

> I know so many newcomers for now. But for me it is fine. They need money to survive and support their family that's why they come over. And we don't have high education for applying other jobs so we have to work as souvenir seller like this.[42]

Moreover, they share the same or similar hard working conditions. Akha souvenir vendors migrate to urban and beachside tourist areas in search of better work or independence. They start selling in the afternoon or early evening, and return home around midnight; before or after their sales activities, they work numerous hours to produce souvenirs.[43] In a study on vendors at the Chiang Mai night bazaar in Northern Thailand, Fuengfusakul made similar observations. She notes that "all of them [ethnic minority vendors] share the same fate of being the lowest group of vendors and have often been looked down upon by Thai stall holders."[44]

Under these conditional structures and social antecedents, a feeling of togetherness is embodied that is limited to the members of a specific group which share common experiences or events in a particular time and space. Portes and Sensenbrenner argue that in-group solidarity rises the more distinct a group is in terms of cultural characteristics from the mainstream society and the more prejudice there is towards these traits.[45] Compared to other highland minority

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[42] Interview with Akha seller, Bangkok, 24 Aug 2008.

[43] Trupp, "Rural-urban migration", 295.

[44] Fuengfusakul, "Making sense of place", 122.

[45] Portes, "Embeddedness and immigration", 1329.

groups, it was stated that the Akha have an even more negative image which is related to the lack of (or wrong) information about Akha culture and the fact that they migrated to Thailand later than other minority groups.[46]

The second prevailing form of insider social capital is grounded on internalized values and norms which are learned and embodied during processes of (early) socialization. Established and experienced sellers in the migration destination areas feel an obligation for (extended) family and village members to act in non-selfish ways by providing support and advice for younger or inexperienced fellows.

> If someone from my village calls me, I have to provide information and eventually take care of her when coming to Bangkok the first time.[47]

As a consequence, experienced Akha vendors provide information, especially for business start-up, and take care of newcomers in the migration destination area by letting them stay in their homes and/or providing basic information concerning transportation, accommodation, and selling. In Akhazang, the line and transmission of teaching and technical knowledge is held by specific persons with extensive education and unselfish attitudes.[48] In the urban and beachside tourist contexts, some experienced sellers take over a kind of 'mentoring function' for other younger and inexperienced Akha. These experienced sellers are often contacted by phone to give advice on the souvenir business in general and the souvenir sales places on site.

> I got advice from my mother and Ador who is the first female Akha in Khaosan area. She always gives me advice for how to run this business: Don't be annoyer for tourist, shouldn't sell souvenir to tourist while they having food etc.[49]

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[46] Geusau, "Dialects of Akhazang", 248.

[47] Interview with Akha seller, Bangkok, 7 Sep 2008.

[48] Geusau, "Akha internal history", 145.

[49] Interview with Akha seller, Bangkok, 4 Sep 2008.

Ador, who is mentioned in this quote, is one of the first Akha souvenir sellers working outside of Chiang Mai. She gained sales experience in Chiang Mai, Bangkok, and beachside destinations, such as Pattaya and Phuket. She comes from the same village as the advice-seeking Akha vendor, but is also well-known among souvenir sellers from other villages.

Maintaining Contact and Family Relations

Prior to full nation state integration[50] and intrusion of Christianity, Akha insider social networks were mainly based on concepts of clan and lineage systems.[51] As a result of Christian conversion, Akhazang and the knowledge and importance of the Akha clan and lineage system has faded away.[52] The vast majority of Akha migrants, both female and male, I talked to have converted to Christianity and could not recount their ancestral lineage.[53] Yet, relations to family members and friends left behind in the village are maintained and can be categorized as social ties based on values such as family or friendship.

Most Akha vendors have a mobile phone and are thus well connected to family members, relatives, and friends who stay in the village or work in different tourist destinations. In some highland areas where people cannot rely on stationary communication systems, cell phones have become crucial media for exchange. "Frequent and regular telephone conversations are an important way to keep families together, updating scattered members about what is going on in each others' lives, providing emotional support and even directing and organizing more hands on care from other family members."[54] The use of mobile phones has certainly helped social capital transcend geographical borders and transfer information and capital across greater distances.

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[50] Tooker, *Space and the production.*

[51] Geusau, "Dialects of Akhazang", 271

[52] Kammerer, "Customs and Christian conversion".

[53] Hanks, "The power of Akha women", 25, ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the 1960s and 1970s in Akha villages states that "every male member of the tribe memorizes every name in the sixty or so generations of his complete patriline".

[54] Zontini, "Enabling and constraining", 821.

Strong family ties in reference to frequency and output (social and other forms of capital) were especially identified between mothers and daughters. In some cases, mother and daughter even lived and worked together in the migration destination areas while father and husband stayed behind in the village.

> I came to Bangkok with my mother two years ago. In my hometown I really don't have anything to do and my mom already worked in Bangkok where she can earn some money. So better I work here as well. My mother negotiated everything for me when I started my first sales in Bangkok.[55]

Young souvenir sellers mainly receive financial support for the start-up of their business from their mothers, while a few other vendors receive money from the Thailand village fund. This data corresponds with other research conducted by Fuengfusakul that indicated that highland minority vendors working at the Chiang Mai night bazaar mainly borrowed money from family members and only very seldom from moneylenders.[56] In addition to providing information about the souvenir business (if they had experience themselves) and financial capital, mothers were the first reference persons in case of sickness or personal problems for the young vendor generation. Nee and Sanders argue that the nuclear and extended family constitutes the most important capital asset for migrants by providing financial capital and a "basis for trust that enables individuals to sacrifice their private interests for the benefit of the group, a form of altruism that is more characteristic of the family than larger social groups."[57]

My research has shown that family, especially mother-daughter and husband-wife relations, continues to be highly relevant. In the migration destination areas, however, an internal solidarity among kin and non-kinship-related Akha vendors based on shared experiences of discrimination, hard working conditions, and a similar socio-economic status are at least equally important foundations of social capital which is

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[55] Interview with Akha vendor, Bangkok, 26.08.2008
[56] Fuengfusakul, "Making sense of place", 118.
[57] Nee, "Understanding the diversity", 390.

leading to information transfer for starting up and maintaining a souvenir business. This includes information related to the migration process, such as knowing where to migrate, which transportation to use, information related to the souvenir business, such as knowing where to sell, how to reach the sales spots, where to buy raw materials or manufactured items, how to deal with customers and vending regulations, and information related to daily life, such as knowing where to sleep, to eat, and to shop.

Social relations to international tourists are mainly bridged during the Akha vendors' sales activities and are characterized by an interest in accumulating economic capital, as well as cultural capital in the form of practicing and improving foreign language skills.[58]

Opportunity Structures

Economic Structures

In the previous section, I focused on the role of social relations and their mobilization and demonstrated how economic practices are interrelated with social structures. This section outlines the market or economic conditions, as well as the politico-legal framework the everyday practices of Akha micro-entrepreneurs take place in. By deploying an analysis of economic and political structures in the migration destination areas, I build upon a mixed approach of embeddedness that not only focus on social dimensions, but takes the broader economic and politico-legal structures into context.

On 1 January 2013, Thailand officially adopted a new nationwide minimum wage policy forcing employers to pay at least 300 baht per day. This regulation goes back to a 2011 election campaign promise made by the ruling Pheu Thai Party and was started as a pilot project in seven provinces on 1 May 2012. In addition to the observations that minimum wages were weakly enforced in the past,[59] the new minimum wage secures less than 8,000 baht per month, which still cannot compete with average monthly incomes of most Akha vendors. Their monthly income depends on many factors, but usually varies between 8,000 and 20,000 baht. However, in Chiang Mai where competition is at its edge, monthly

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[58] Trupp, "Migrating into tourist business".
[59] Srawooth, "The minimum wage".

income for mobile or semi-mobile mat vendors can go down to 3,000-5,000 baht, and in beachside destinations vendors reported to be able to earn 40,000 baht per month or more.

Regarding international tourism development, Thailand has experienced remarkable growth rates on the national level over the last decades. Thailand's fifth national economic and social development plan (NESDP 1982-1986) further marked Chiang Mai as the economic center of Northern Thailand by putting special emphasis on tourism promotion,[60] but also successfully aimed to decentralize tourism development by fostering beachside destinations such as Pattaya or Phuket. International tourism growth has continued despite several political crises – the PAD airport closure in Bangkok and Phuket 2008, UDD protests at Ratchaprasong intersection in 2010, PRDC protests in 2013-2014 – or ecological disasters – Tsunami 2004, Bangkok floods 2011 – to just name the major events of the recent years. While the early decades of Thai international tourism development was aimed at developing relatively inexpensive facilities, governments since the early 2000s have promoted tourism policies targeting 'quality tourists' spending greater amounts of money within relatively short stays.[61] Yet, many Akha vendors state that they have fewer customers compared to the past. This fact is related to increasing competition among Akha vendors, a saturation of demand as Thailand receives a high percentage of returning visitors – 63.7%,[62] and the increasing importance of non-Western tourism markets who, according to the Akha vendors' assertions, with the exception of Japanese and Arab tourists in certain sales areas, do not represent the main clientele of Akha vendors.

Legal and Political Structures

The vast majority of Akha micro-entrepreneurs work as ethnic minority street vendors in Thailand's informal urban and tourist sector. They have become part of the country's tourist and commercial landscape, but their work is neither formally recognized by state institutions, nor supported by NGOs. To see how Akha vendors are

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[60] Toyota, "Transnational mobility", 12.

[61] Cohen, "The permutations of Thai tourism".

[62] Alpha Research, *Thailand in figures,* 511.

embedded in politico-institutional structures and how they respond to them, it is necessary to look at the relations, interactions, and power relations between minority street vendors and state agencies. Two lines of policies clearly shape the politico-legal opportunity structure of ethnic minority street vendors, the Thai government's policy on citizenship and laws and regulations concerning street vending.

Until the 1980s, hardly any registration of highland minorities took place,[63] and recent studies assume that 40-60 percent of ethnic minorities in Thailand have a legitimate claim to Thai citizenship but remain without it.[64] Citizenship applicants have to prove that they were born in Thailand and that at least one of their parents possesses Thai citizenship or live with a registered place of residence in Thailand. The majority of highland ethnic minorities were not included in Thailand's national census from 1956 that recorded Thai origin and nationality and therefore obtaining proof and the required documents has become cumbersome. In addition, corrupt local officials who encounter highland ethnic minority applicants with negative preconceptions have impeded the process.[65] Lacking citizenship, they are forbidden to leave their district or province, vote, work legally, or buy land; they are excluded from the social security and health care systems and have no access to higher education. For those Akha who remain without Thai citizenship, the pure act of migration from the northern provinces of Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai to Bangkok or a beachside destination puts them at risk. Several of the Akha vendors I interviewed did not have Thai citizenship when they first migrated, but eventually received it over the last ten years. Absence of citizenship limits their spatial mobility and therefore prevents them from starting a business outside of their own district or province. Yet there are a small number of Akha vendors in Thailand's urban area who pursue their businesses without formal residence and citizenship status and therefore live in constant danger of detention or even deportation. In contrast to 'regional Thai migrants' from the south or northeast who also work in the informal sector, minority hilltribe

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[63] Chayan, "The Thai state and ethnic minorities", 161.
[64] Toyota, *Securitizing border-crossing,* 1.
[65] Chayan, "The Thai state and ethnic minorities", 162.

vendors remain under suspicion of living illegally in the country, which makes them even more vulnerable in conflicts with state authorities.

Street vending constitutes a highly contested and controversial field in Asia's urban areas.[66] In Thailand, and especially in the capital city Bangkok, every visitor notices the presence of street vendors who provide food, drinks, accessories or souvenirs to tourists and the local population alike. Petty trade aimed at reducing poverty and defined as "a means for economic self-reliance" has also been positioned in Thailand's Economic and Social Development Plans since the 1980s.[67] On the one hand, state authorities and urban planners tolerate street vending to a certain extent because they acknowledge it as an economic necessity for the urban poor, and on the other, they view street vending as an obstacle to urban development which should be prohibited by law enforcement.[68]

Generally, it is important to distinguish between registered and non-registered vendors because the second category faces stronger and more frequent conflicts with law enforcement.[69] The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration has officially assigned 713 street vending zones and registered 21,094 street vendors in the capital city.[70] However, even the department's officials, in the context of informal conversations, admit that these numbers only reflect a minor share of Bangkok's street vendors. Concerning the Akha vendors, none of the mobile sellers throughout the country obtained official registration and also the majority of semi-mobile vendors remain without it. Permanent vendors running a fixed stall at one of the markets have to register with the specific responsible urban institution. Moreover, Akha mobile and semi-mobile street vendors are tolerated in certain vending areas, but are currently not allowed to enter other popular tourist areas, such as Bangkok's Chatuchak weekend market or the famous beachside resort of Krabi in Southern Thailand.

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[66] Etzold, *The Politics of Street Food.*
[67] Nirathron, *Fighting Poverty from the Street,* 23.
[68] Informal conversations with officials of the Department of City Planning, Bangkok, December 2013
[69] Walsh, "After the 1997 financial crisis".
[70] Department of City Law Enforcement, *Number of assigned vending zones.*

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed the role of social, economic and political structures informal Akha ethnic minority souvenir vendors are facing in Thailand's urban tourist areas. Social capital generated within the vendor's group and their families represents a prerequisite for gaining information and financial support. Based on collective experiences of discrimination in the context of previous migration and work, as well as on a similar socio-economic status among Akha entrepreneurs, an internal solidarity has been created that shapes altruistic forms of support for community members. Under these conditions and contexts, Akha vendors can mobilize their social relations for information transfer relevant to potential migrants, as well as current migrants. Furthermore, strong ties to family members and a tacitly required 'mentoring function' of experienced sellers facilitate further mobilization of social capital resulting in information transfer and advice and 'supervision' for newcomers. Through the widespread use of mobile phones among Akha vendors, information transfer regarding souvenir business start-ups and changing opportunity structures transcends geographic boundaries.

While social relations on a horizontal level within the group of souvenir vendors are rather strong, vertical relations between actors characterized by unequal socioeconomic or political status are weak. Thailand's internal tourist areas are dominated by traditional local and new economic elites, and most of the market places are owned or rented by Thais who can transfer the legal rights of use to friends and family or employ workers in their shops or stalls. The lack of bridging vertical relations to other Thai members of the market place, as well as the lack of financial capital, has led to the peripheral position of Akha vendors who mainly find themselves working as mobile sellers in Thailand's urban and tourist areas.

Moreover, interactions between law enforcement and Akha vendors reveal unequal power relations between the state and highland minority vendors, which also unfolds spatial variations because of regional geographical and politico-historical developments. In the southern beach destinations, such as Phuket or Pattaya, where Akha vendors constitute a rather new phenomenon, laws and regulations are enforced stricter than in the northern city of Chiang Mai where

highland ethnic minorities have a long history and represent part of the tourist landscape.

However, street vending in Thailand has a long history going back to King Rama IV when the construction of major roads was completed,[71] and continues to be highly relevant in the 21st century. Today, one can identify a somewhat ambiguous division of responsibilities between the local, regional, and national levels. On the one hand, the overall power of the BMA is limited by the central government and, on the other, there are unclear responsibilities between district offices and agencies.[72] Eventually, most of these laws and regulations remain fuzzy, especially concerning their enforcement by local authorities. Local practice of law enforcement significantly differs according to time and space and often contradicts official guidelines. Despite barriers on politico-legal levels, Akha micro-entrepreneurs have successfully mobilized and transformed forms of social, cultural and economic capital and have become active agents in Thailand's urban tourist areas.

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[71] Nirathron, *Fighting Poverty from the Street*.

[72] Paisarn, "The vendor and the street", 72.

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