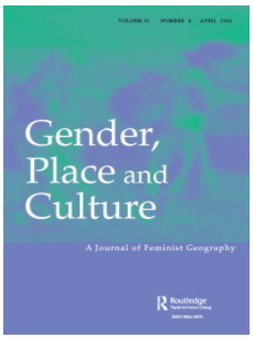

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Jennifer C. Langill

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'I shouldn't have to do this alone': intersectional livelihoods and single Hmong women in Thailand

Jennifer C. Langill

Department of Geography, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

ABSTRACT

Feminist livelihood literature has demonstrated the centrality of gender and other forms of social difference in defining the experiences of making a living. However, to date critical livelihood analysis that goes beyond male-female gendered disaggregation remains quite rare. To address this, I advance a decolonial intersectional approach to demonstrate how livelihoods are produced by the compounding experiences of gender, ethnicity, marital status, and generation. Drawing on fieldwork in an ethnic minority Hmong village in northern Thailand, I present ethnographic case studies to analyze the experiences of four Hmong women who, for different reasons, undertake their livelihoods independently from a male counterpart. These women's experiences demonstrate important intergenerational shifts occurring in Hmong society in Thailand and changing expectations of women's roles, with one woman widowed, one divorced, one unmarried, and one's husband in jail. Moreover, a decolonial intersectional livelihood approach demonstrates how these women's self-identity as Hmong cannot be separated from their gendered positionalities, and how their livelihoods without a male counterpart often render them marginalized from a unitary category of 'Hmong women'. By examining a group of Hmong women's differentiated lived experiences, this paper contributes to feminist livelihood literature beyond traditional male-female analyses, addressing a lack of empirical intersectional studies, while simultaneously reporting gendered intergenerational change in this Hmong village. A decolonial intersectional approach to livelihoods requires close attention to productive and reproductive activities, relationality, plural knowledges, as well as embodied experiences of identity-formation.

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CONTACT Jennifer C. Langill jennifer.langill@mail.mcgill.ca Department of Geography, McGill University, 805 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, H3A 0B9, Canada.

Introduction

Ethnic Hmong have been made an ethnic minority population across the Southeast Asian Massif by the (European and colonial facilitated) demarcation of international borders (Leepreecha 2013). Similar to other ethnic minority groups in Southeast Asia, Hmong have been systematically problematized by local governments and international 'development' actors, blamed for environmental degradation, 'backward' agricultural practices, counter-insurgency, and producing and trading illicit drugs (Culas and Michaud 1997; Cooper 1998; Forsyth and Walker 2008). Recent research on Hmong livelihoods and culture has demonstrated the resilience and flexibility of Hmong traditions and lifeways, which are constantly being re-negotiated across temporal and political contexts (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015; Vue 2018). However, within research on Hmong populations, there exist common depictions of Hmong women as passive victims to patriarchal structures, subservient to lazy husbands, and who are unable to voice their opinions (Young 1969; Cha 2010). Others suggest that 'Hmongness' is synonymous with male knowledge (Symonds 2014). Not only are these portrayals inaccurate, but they silence the voices and agency of Hmong women worldwide, while missing the complexity of gender in Hmong culture and society. This paper thus addresses calls from Hmong academics and activists to question Hmong knowledge and ways of living from women's perspectives and centring women's voices and experiences (Vang, Nibbs, and Vang 2016).

To do so, I propose a decolonial intersectional approach to feminist livelihood studies to demonstrate how livelihoods are co-produced by gender, marital status, and generation, entwined with ethnic hierarchies in northern Thailand. While critical livelihoods scholars have argued that livelihoods are power-laden, place-based, and socially differentiated (Oberhauser, Mandel, and Hapke 2004; Staples 2007; de Haan 2012; Radel 2012), adopting intersectionality is largely outside the scope of this field of literature. I argue that decolonial intersectionality enriches feminist approaches to livelihoods by challenging homogenizing gendered analyses and by capturing fluid and compounding forms of social difference as embodied experiences of the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000). For Hmong in Thailand, this refers to the internal colonization that prevails in the country (Thongchai 1994; Wittayapak 2008).

Research based elsewhere in the Southeast Asian Massif has investigated how gender differences co-produce Hmong livelihoods (Bonnin and Turner 2014; Po et al. 2020). I suggest that for Hmong women, decolonial intersectionality is imperative to understanding livelihoods and lifeworlds, as to them self-identifying as Hmong and self-identifying as woman cannot be separated; they are interwoven. I further unravel Hmong women's experiences as shaped by marital status (broadly defined) and household composition.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in northern Thailand, I present the lived experiences of four women who undertake their livelihoods without a male counterpart, with one woman widowed, one divorced, one unmarried, and one's husband in jail. As I demonstrate in the analysis below, for these four Hmong women, undertaking their livelihoods as single women co-produces both their labour burdens for productive and reproductive activities as well as their self-identities. Drawing on decolonial intersectionality in particular highlights how their subjectivities as Hmong women operate within larger spheres of ethnic oppression and racialization within Thailand. This is an important site for feminist research, with a lack of feminist geography within or about Thailand (see Sittirak and Meksawat 2019).

I begin by outlining the conceptual approach for this paper, drawing on decolonial intersectionality and livelihoods literature. Next, I introduce key elements of Hmong populations and culture, followed by the specific study site in northern Thailand and data collection methods. The empirical section includes four 'mini-biographies' of Hmong women who for different reasons undertake their livelihoods independently from a Hmong man. These four profiles illustrate how women's lived experiences help to complicate a unitary notion of 'Hmong women'. The decolonial intersectional approach in this analysis highlights the co-production of women's livelihoods with their Hmong ethnicity, gender positionality, generational norms, and for these four women in particular, their current marital status.

A decolonial intersectional approach to feminist livelihood studies

Livelihood studies examine the means and agency with which people create and maintain their living, including the activities they undertake and the relevant outcomes (Staples 2007; de Haan 2012). I specifically draw on livelihood approaches that centre people and their lifeworlds within mediating contexts and institutions (Long 2001; Turner 2012). While the focus of livelihood studies tends to be oriented toward productive activities, the role and importance of reproductive and care labour cannot be overlooked (Beall 2002; Hanrahan 2015).

A crucial subset of livelihood research examines the roles of social difference in shaping livelihoods. Gendered livelihoods studies have made important contributions to understandings of gendered time allocations, household decision-making, access to livelihood resources, and the relationships between productive and reproductive activities (Oberhauser, Mandel, and Hapke 2004; Arun 2012; Keahey 2018). Livelihoods are further complicated by (inter)generationality and life stage (Po et al. 2020; Fan 2022), human-environment relations (Radel 2012; Langill 2021), and cultural norms and institutions (Tao, Wall, and Wismer 2010; Forsyth and Michaud 2011).

Feminist interventions in livelihood studies have been essential for capturing social difference and its power and process in co-producing livelihoods. However, livelihood studies that go beyond binaries remain the exception, rather than the norm. To address this, I draw upon intersectionality as a conceptual and methodological approach to livelihoods, as it demonstrates that subjectivities are not additive; the experience of one subjectivity (such as woman) cannot be separated from the experience of another (such as Black) (Crenshaw 1991; Bowleg 2008). Building upon intersectionality's roots in Black feminist theory, feminist geographers have demonstrated the importance of such a perspective in the discipline (Kobayashi and Peake 1994; Sultana 2011; Mollett and Faria 2013; Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018). Intersectionality considers multiple and compounding forces of oppression and social difference, including but not limited to gender, race, class, sexuality, location, age, ethnicity, and religion. Such an approach challenges any notion of universal womanhood or women's experiences, and instead seeks to understand how gender and patriarchy interact with other forms of power and social difference.

While conceptualized based on North American racial politics, feminist researchers drawing on intersectionality have demonstrated the utility of the approach in understanding intersectional subjectivities and lifeworlds in Global South settings, which are otherwise rendered invisible in binary gendered analyses (Braun 2011; Nightingale 2011; Mollett 2017; Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2020). This has often been done through narrative and ethnographic approaches to documenting the deeply place-based and embodied experiences of intersectional identities and positionalities. Decolonial intersectionality seeks to understand the complexity of lived experiences, attending to the multiple 'matrices of domination and oppression' that individuals negotiate within, and critically, foregrounding how they are understood through anti-imperial Southern knowledges (McLaren 2021, 103; see also Santos 2014; Rodríguez Castro 2021). As such, decolonial intersectionality promotes fluid conceptualizations of intersectionality, not as fixed categories, but questioning how the experiences and interactions of multiple interwoven subjectivities shift through time, space, and place as well as the power and meaning of these differences. I further this counter-hegemonic approach in attempt to contribute to feminist Hmong research that problematizes essentialized 'Hmong women' discourse and instead foreground their agency, knowledge, and differentiated experiences (Vang, Nibbs, and Vang 2016).

Despite the importance and applicability of decolonial intersectionality in understanding social relational phenomenon, it remains fairly ignored within livelihood research. Keahey (2018) argues for the relevance and potential of postcolonial feminism in livelihood research, demonstrating the intersections of social identities in post-apartheid South Africa. Complementary to Keahey's

work, I suggest that decolonial intersectionality offers great potential for feminist approaches to livelihoods, foregrounding multiple and coexisting subjectivities and ways of knowing (Santos 2014; Vang 2016). Moreover, a decolonial intersectionality focus on the complexity of the everyday (Nightingale 2011; Rodríguez Castro 2021; McLaren 2021) is well-positioned to enhance people-centred livelihood research.

Hmong populations in the Southeast Asian Massif

Believed to have originated in China (part of the Miao group in China), there are approximately four million Hmong people living in the Southeast Asian Massif (Culas and Michaud 1997; Lemoine 2005). Hmong in this region tend to live in highland areas, and lived relatively autonomously until recent history, only gaining recognition by the Lao, Vietnamese, and Thai governments in the 1970s, and still living without official recognition in China. Hmong have faced marginalization, exclusion, and warfare throughout history, and have responded with persistence and resistance (Leepreecha 2013; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015; Vang 2016). While there is a large Hmong international diaspora and global Hmong literature, in this paper I focus on Hmong populations in the Southeast Asian Massif, and northern Thailand in particular.

Hmong belief systems are traditionally animist, believing that all beings and objects possess a soul, and shamanism is central to many Hmong rituals and lifeways (Chindarsi 1976). Hmong rural livelihood activities often include agricultural production (most commonly rice and maize subsistence production, but increasingly diverse and market-oriented portfolios), animal husbandry, hunting and gathering, trade, and a contested history with opium production (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015; Vue 2018). Hmong have many traditional cultural practices, including embroidery and textile production, life cycle rituals and healing ceremonies, herbalism, alcohol distillation, and blacksmithing (Cooper 1998; Lee and Tapp 2010; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015).

Hmong populations are organized into approximately 18 clans (*xeem* in Hmong, Sé in Thai), which are synonymous with patrilineal surnames (Yang 2004). Clans play an important role in daily lifeworlds, as Hmong often determine settlement location, trade and support networks, and social divisions by clan (Cooper 1998; Vue 2018). With very few exceptions, marriage in Hmong culture follows clan exogamy, meaning a man and woman from the same clan cannot marry (Lee 1988; Lee and Tapp 2010). Marriage between two Hmong people is traditionally instigated through a process variously referred to as 'bride kidnapping' or 'marriage by capture', after which the bride and groom's families begin discussing marriage arrangements. However, this tradition is undertaken differently across contexts, and there is no

consensus on the woman's right to refuse or resist (cf. Chindarsi 1976; Lee 1988; Cooper 1998; Lee and Tapp 2010; Vang, Nibbs, and Vang 2016). As discussed below, this tradition is no longer practiced in the current study site, an important shift in the village since approximately 2010. Upon marriage, the newly wedded couple traditionally live with the groom's family (though with regional variation), creating multi-generational homes, however some couples choose to start their own household when they can (Lee 1988).

Following animist beliefs, after a woman marries, she leaves her family and clan, and joins her husband's clan and respects his family's ancestors (Cooper 1998; Symonds 2014). Many Hmong societies practice polygyny, whereby men may have multiple wives, and is often viewed as indicative of greater wealth and social status (Michaud 1995). The household, usually led by the oldest man, is the basic unit for Hmong productive and reproductive activities (Michaud 1995; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015). Age and gender are very important to Hmong, with respect (and power) usually afforded to elders and males (Cooper 1998; Lee and Tapp 2010).

In general, Hmong men and women occupy gendered roles and undertake livelihood activities along gendered lines. For example, men tend to hold leadership positions, conduct most spiritual rituals, and hunt; women usually do the cooking, cleaning, textile production, gathering forest products, and childcare; and many agricultural activities are similarly divided along gender lines (Cooper 1998; Vue 2018). However, recent scholarship in the Southeast Asian context has illustrated that Hmong gender relations face ongoing negotiation (Bonnin and Turner 2014; Po et al. 2020). Moreover, Hmong scholars have critiqued notions that patrilineality is 'the framework of Hmong society' (Symonds 2014, xxv), with the risk of representing women as powerless victims of a gender-based oppresive society, overlooking other compounding forms of oppression (such as (neo)colonialism, imperialism, and militarism). Feminist Hmong scholars have suggested Hmong women's narrative refusal (Vang 2016), challenged the placing of Hmong women into essentialized categories (Her 2016), and called for more localized and disaggregated analyses that capture Hmong women's power and agency (Julian 2004; Vang, Nibbs, and Vang 2016). This paper seeks to extend these gendered analyses by focusing on differentiation within the category of 'Hmong women', thus offering one of the first intersectional livelihood studies of Hmong populations.

Study site and methods

Hmong are believed to have first entered what is present-day Thailand in the late 1800s (at the time, the Kingdom of Siam), with the most notable migration wave in the mid-late 20th century surrounding the Communist take-over in Laos (Culas and Michaud 1997). Hmong are one of several ethnic

minority groups in the uplands of northern Thailand. As Thai officials worked to promote a 'civilized' national identity in the 20th century, this included silencing ethnic diversity within the country that had existed for centuries and systematically excluding highland minorities (Thongchai 1994; McKinnon 2005; Flaim 2017). While several ethnic minority groups in the uplands of northern Thailand endured the fabrication of 'the hill tribe problem' in the 1960s and subsequently decades of related ill-conceived intervention, Hmong have often borne the brunt of this.

Ideological differences (perceived and actual) have been an ongoing point of tension between Hmong and the Thai state, with Hmong often labelled as unfaithful to the Kingdom of Thailand (McKinnon 2017), and further villainized for their agricultural practices, blamed for being environmentally destructive even despite evidence to the contrary (Delang 2002; Forsyth and Walker 2008). Modernization schemes, withholding citizenship, traditional livelihood suppression, sedentarization, and controversial formal schooling are all part of the contradictory 'Thai-ization' and exclusionary projects that Hmong have been exposed to in Thailand (Hares 2009; Flaim 2017; McKinnon 2017). Therefore, while this paper unravels multiple forms of difference within Hmong populations, this can only be understood within the ethnic politics and racialized systems of discrimination that operate in Thailand, with Hmong people systematically marginalized and oppressed (Thongchai 1994; Wittayapak 2008). Although Thailand was never colonized by a European power, internal ethnic hierarchies and ethnic discrimination occupy a similar complexity in Hmong intersectional identities and positionalities, given the intricacies of ethnicity, race, and colonialism (McKinnon 2005; Vang 2016). Decolonial intersectionality is therefore an important approach through which to study Hmong subjectivities within Thailand's current-day borders that attends to powers of social difference as interwoven between people and place.

The data presented in this paper were collected in Ban Suay (pseudonym), a Green Hmong village with approximately 90 households in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand. Most of the households in Ban Suay fall into three clan lineages: Sé Moua, Sé Li, and Sé Hang. With a history of subsistence swidden agriculture, opium cultivation, vegetable cash crop cultivation, and hosting tourist homestays (Michaud 1995), the primary livelihood activity in Ban Suay today is orange tree cultivation. Previously fallowed fields have been converted into orchards (referred to as *suan*), located around the village in the surrounding government-protected forest. This shift in livelihood orientation occurred over the past generation, and while it is beyond the scope to go into depth here, is closely related to place-based politics, particularly the political economic obstacles to maintaining swidden agriculture. Orange cultivation is physically demanding and requires year-round labour input, particularly during the labour-intensive periods of harvesting and applying

pesticides and medicine. For most households, all working-age adults contribute to orange cultivation, and many rely on wage labourers and/or labour sharing during labour-intensive periods. While orange cultivation is near-universal in Ban Suay, its processes look incredibly different for different households, based on available assets (particularly land, labour, and agricultural inputs). While much of this differentiation stems from intergenerational wealth stratification, particularly along clan lines (Michaud 1995), as I discuss below, intrahousehold dynamics contribute to further complexity.

The data I draw upon in this paper were collected during six months of ethnographic fieldwork, mostly in 2020. Specifically, I use ethnographic methods that centre marginalized worldviews and experiences, learning from participants by living alongside them and the situatedness of embodied fieldwork (McKinnon and Dombroski 2019; Rodríguez Castro 2021). Informal and conversational interviews during stays in Ban Suay covered a diversity of study topics, including livelihood portfolios and trajectories, gender roles and relations, Hmong history(ies) and culture, Thai state-ethnic minority relations, and environmental change. Critical listening to Hmong women as knowing subjects (Vang 2016) allowed for plural knowledges to be shared. I chose the narratives of the four women presented in the results below intentionally to demonstrate the diversity of experiences for women in Ban Suay who locate their experiences as 'without a Hmong man'. This approach builds upon earlier intersectional work that unpacks gender as a social category, de-centering whiteness and singular narratives of women, as well as decolonial approaches to listening in building knowledge (Mollett and Faria 2013; Vang 2016). There are no same-sex couples nor individuals who publicly identify as LGBTQ + or gender non-binary in this village, and therefore these positionalities are beyond the scope of this paper.

The interpretation of findings is mediated by my own positionality, a white educated Canadian woman. Rather than suggesting a fixed positionality for myself, I understand my subjectivities to be fluid and intersectional, and reckon with how I am entangled with the coloniality of power (Rodríguez Castro 2021). I speak decent Thai, and given current Thai language levels in Ban Suay, this enabled me to communicate with most village residents. Older residents recalled my external advisor, who had conducted ethnographic research in the same village nearly 30 years prior (Michaud 1995), and who first introduced me to this specific village. As I have spent three years intermittently living and working in neighbouring Laos, much of which working with Hmong populations there, this provided further context for village residents to understand my background, and often they shared their perspectives of Hmong life in Thailand with me, while asking me to share with them what was similar or different for Hmong in Laos.

My positionality was further complicated by the presence of my husband in the field. I found that in contrast to my first stage of fieldwork in 2019, accompanied by an ethnic Thai woman for research assistance, both women and men treated me differently when accompanied by my husband. As my husband is Lao and speaks Thai, he had the ability to communicate with participants, but was not perceived as a threat in discussing state-minority relations. In many ways, it seemed that I was a more relatable woman when with my husband and was seen as strange or even promiscuous to be in a foreign country without him. Moreover, in seeing me interact with him, many women chose to explain Hmong gender relations and their own relationships with men as directly compared to me and my husband. This is in keeping with feminist critiques of 'sameness' between researchers and participants, as we enter conversations from different landscapes of power, with different understandings of womanhood and women's subjectivities (Rose 1997; Valentine 2002). However, perhaps this 'differentness' between me and women participants also lent itself to the discussions that led to this paper, as the four women that I introduce below in many ways are 'different' from the way that Hmong women are portrayed both in the literature and in dominant local discussions of gender roles and relations.

A Hmong woman 'without a Hmong man': four mini-biographies

To unravel the intersectional livelihoods of four Hmong women 'without a Hmong man', I present four mini-biographies (using pseudonyms) of women who undertake their livelihoods independently from a male counterpart. To facilitate comparison, I chose four women of similar ages (27–42) who were all born in the case study village, so not to add further complexity of migrant women. A decolonial intersectional analysis of these four women's lived experiences demonstrates how their livelihoods—both productive and reproductive dimensions—are co-produced by the interlocking subjectivities of gender, ethnicity, marital status, and generation. A note to readers that there is explicit discussion of domestic violence in the text below.

Pang

Pang is a 42-year-old woman from the Sé Hang clan. She was born in Ban Suay and married into a neighbouring Sé Li family. Pang and her husband have three children, ages 20, 18, and 13, who are all studying in the lowlands (which is relatively common as Ban Suay only has a primary school). As her husband is one of seven sons, his parents' house was full with many of his brothers living there with their wives and children. In 2010, Pang and her husband decided to separate from this household to have more space to themselves and built a small bamboo house nearby until they could afford

to build a more significant home. This is increasingly occurring in Ban Suay, with married children starting their own households rather than staying with the husband's parents indefinitely as was previously custom. Upon this move, Pang and her husband started their own orange orchard, and therefore the move signified more than living quarters, and encompassed a separation of all productive and reproductive livelihood activities as well.

In 2019, her husband passed away very suddenly, and Pang's life has changed immeasurably since then. In Hmong tradition, a widow marries one of her husband's brothers. However, Pang stressed that this is an old tradition that is no longer observed in Ban Suay. She has no interest in marrying any of her husband's brothers, and says she is not ready to be with another man: 'We don't do that anymore. That was the old tradition but now Hmong people only do that in really remote areas. I wouldn't want to do that. I don't want to move on.'

This decision is indicative of Pang's ability to choose for herself what to do in the event of her husband's passing. However, this autonomy, coupled with the fact that she and her husband had started their own home creates a new positionality previously unseen in past generations. In keeping with Hmong animist beliefs, Pang is unable to rejoin her parent's household or her husband's parents' household. This means that Pang is living as a young widow alone, separated from older generations due to animist beliefs and separated from her children due to their educational migration. She therefore undertakes all livelihood activities, both productive and reproductive, on her own. She cannot afford to hire agricultural day labourers and notes that she is failing to maintain her orange orchard by herself, resulting in the diminishing health of the trees. Moreover, Pang shares the incredible impact that her loss has had on her mental health, and how she struggles to engage in group events. She now spends most of her time either alone at home or visiting outside her parents' or in-laws' houses, embroidering alongside female family members. Not only has her husband's passing had significant impacts for her interpersonally and in terms of her productive livelihood activities, but she also feels less motivated to undertake reproductive activities without her husband or children at home for her to care for. She is taking her time to mourn this significant loss and is exercising newer women's rights to do so without marrying one of her brothers-in-law. However this independence has also created new barriers to her ability to care for herself and maintain her livelihood.

Jhua

Born in Ban Suay, Jhua is a 40-year-old woman from the Sé Li clan. In 2007, she moved to neighbouring Chiang Rai Province upon marriage to live with her husband's family, in keeping with Hmong custom of patrilocality. Jhua's

marriage was extremely abusive; what she referred to as being 'worse than most domestic violence for Hmong people'. She feared for her life and left her husband after four years of marriage.

> He beat me up. He beat me up every single day, usually two or three times per day … He beat me so hard it made me almost crazy. If I stayed there even one more month he would have killed me. I talked to my mom and my brother, and my brother came to save me. I went to the Head of the Village's house there and my brother and three other men came to save me and my son. They brought machetes in case my ex-husband tried to fight them. I needed to leave. I couldn't do anything anymore and I was scared I was going to die.

In reflecting on this terrifying past, Jhua went on to articulate the intersections of Hmong gender-based violence within broader spheres of ethnic and racial discrimination in Thailand. As she notes, this includes differential access to women's rights and policing domestic violence:

> If it was Thai people, the police or neighbours would have helped, but with Hmong they say it is a domestic affair and it's nobody else's business to interfere. He learned it from his dad. His dad always hit his mom and he learned to be the same. I knew if I didn't take my son away, he would grow up and be like his dad.

While domestic violence is in no way limited to Hmong populations, Jhua suggests how ethnic discrimination in Thailand singles out Hmong domestic violence as a cultural norm, which she felt forfeit her ability as a Hmong woman to receive help from Thai police.

The fact that Jhua could leave an abusive marriage is a significant generational landmark. However, it was not without repercussions for Jhua's livelihood. Observing Hmong animist beliefs, Jhua was unable to rejoin her parents' household, and instead built a small home for her and her young son and planted a new orange orchard on a small *suan* her brother gave her. Jhua has found it very difficult to undertake agricultural production on her own. She participates in labour sharing with other women in the village as she cannot afford to pay agricultural labourers but needs additional labour input at her orchard. Despite keeping her costs to a minimum, Jhua has been unable to make sufficient returns and is accumulating growing debt. Furthermore, she shared how she is often afraid for her safety to drive to and from her orchard by motorbike alone as a woman, and tries to plan what days and time of day she goes to her *suan* so that she can drive there at the same time as other single women. Jhua notes the additional constraints this places on her agricultural productivity, as she often feels she has to choose between what is optimal for her orange trees and her embodied safety.

Jhua also highlights how she has been challenged during particularly difficult times, such as falling ill and not having another adult in the household to care for her, or for her son if something were to happen to her:

> [Being single] is really fun. I like being alone. But it is hard when I get sick because there is nobody to take care of me or cook for me and my son. Normally I like it, but I get worried when I'm sick. What if something happens to me? I worry about my son.

Therefore, while she maintains the reproductive and care labour for her household as married women do, being a divorced woman means that Jhua does not have other adult household members to lean on in times of need.

Chee

The youngest daughter of her father's second wife, Chee is a 27-year-old single Sé Li woman, one of the only adult women in the village who has never been married. Chee shares that her decision not to marry largely stems from her relationship with her father. Quite unique from other women in the village's experiences, Chee's father used to encourage her to stay in the family home for a better life. Indeed, he had her quit school in the lowlands so that she could move home:

> I liked studying there, but my dad didn't let me stay. He said it was dangerous for a girl to be there by herself. He didn't let me stay. He gave me whatever I wanted, bought me whatever I wanted, a motorbike, a phone, food, took me to eat where I wanted to, as long as I would come back to live with my parents. He didn't want me to be there, he wanted me to come live here with them.

Since her father passed away, her brother is now the head of the household. Chee maintains selective flexibility on when and how to participate in the family's productive activities, just as her father had afforded her when he was alive. Moreover, as per Hmong custom, most of the reproductive work in the household is now done by her sister-in-law, thereby freeing Chee from this responsibility. Chee explains how much she prefers being single over the alternative:

> It is so much better being single. I have freedom. I can do what I want, go where I want. I don't have to work hard cooking and cleaning and working in the *suan*. If you get married, you have to work really hard in the *suan*, you have to watch the kids, you have to cook, there are so many things you have to do. But I don't have to do that.

Most often, Chee contributes to the household by looking after her nieces while her brother and his wife are at the *suan*, or working there herself during labour-intensive periods. However, she also enjoys more 'freedom' as she says, such as getting to visit her sister in another village, watch television in the evening, and chat with neighbours who are around the village during the day.

While single by choice, this has created challenges for Chee's social life. All of her friends her age are now married with children, and she often stands out as the only one not married.

> I used to have friends here, but not really anymore. They are all married now and have kids, so they don't come hang out anymore. They all have to stay home and work in the house and at the *suan*. They only come to hang out around once per year, usually at Hmong New Year. That's the time they don't work so we can see each other.

Therefore, while Chee prefers her independence, this leaves her isolated from most other women her age and generates mixed opinions from others in the village regarding her lifestyle.

Zhong

Zhong is a 41-year-old woman of Sé Moua lineage married to a Sé Li man from the same village. In 2013, Zhong's husband was arrested for drug-related charges and has been incarcerated ever since. She was consequently left alone to raise their three sons (aged 17, 14, and 10 when their father was taken away), undertake all household reproductive activities, and cultivate oranges with the help of her oldest son:

> It is hard to raise my kids alone. I have to do everything by myself. For example, I have to go to the *suan*, after the *suan* I have to come home and cook, I have to clean, I have to make enough money for my kids to go to school.

Unlike the other three women, Zhong remains married. However, she shares many of the same challenges of undertaking her livelihood without a male counterpart. As she explains, this has deeply affected her wellbeing over the years:

> It is so much work for just one person. For most people, the husband does this work, and the wife does that work, and then if one of them needs help they can help each other and share the work. But I don't have anybody to help me. To do all the jobs by myself is so much work. I'm so exhausted … Sometimes when I am loading oranges onto the truck and try to tie the orange baskets in, I can't reach. You need two people for that job and I can't do it by myself. I think to myself 'f*** this' and just sit down and cry.

Zhong shares that she has more financial independence than most other women in the village, with control over her money and other resources. However, she finds the burden of undertaking her livelihood alone outweighs this: 'I shouldn't have to do this alone.'

Zhong's livelihood has started to become more manageable since her oldest son married and she has a daughter-in-law to help with reproductive labour. However, Zhong shares that she still lives with the pain of being separated from her husband and has had to overcome a lot of adversity since he was taken away. In turn, Zhong has become a common 'go-to' person for advice and emotional support for other women in the village whose husbands get arrested for drug-related charges. While this is much

less common today than a decade or two ago (with signs posted all around the village that it is now 'drug free'), many women have turned to each other for support through this specific shared life experience that has redefined all aspects of their home life and livelihoods.

Intersectional livelihoods: beyond gendered livelihoods

In direct response to calls for more feminist interventions in Hmong studies (Julian 2004; Vang, Nibbs, and Vang 2016), this paper has centred Hmong women's voices and experiences. While women are silenced or ignored altogether in much Hmong literature in Thailand and beyond, in this paper I challenge this tendency by not only sharing the lived experiences of four Hmong women, but also drawing upon decolonial intersectionality to understand how gender is interwoven with ethnicity, generation, and marital status, specifically focusing on women who undertake their livelihoods without a male counterpart. The decolonial intersectional approach to livelihoods I proposed in this paper advances three key contributions to Hmong studies and feminist livelihoods literature.

First, this is one of the only ethnographic studies on Hmong populations in Thailand in recent years, and has identified many generational changes that are generative from existing studies on Hmong in Southeast Asia. Even one generation ago, all four of these women would have had a male counterpart in the home; however, no longer observing several traditional Hmong gendered practices in Ban Suay has created these four women's new subjectivities. 'Bride kidnapping' has been banned in this village over the last decade, allowing someone like Chee to remain single by choice. Women of this generation are also choosing not to marry their husband's brother in the event of his death, and as Pang and her husband had separated from his family's household, his death generated immense livelihood constraints for her as she is unable to rejoin either of their families' homes. While gender-based and domestic violence is still prevalent in Ban Suay, Jhua views the village as 'more developed and modern' than more remote Hmong villages and was supported in leaving an extremely abusive marriage in a village that she refers to as 'following old traditions'. Moreover, a politicized history of drug use and policing in Thailand (Hares 2009; McKinnon 2017) has left women like Zhong to undertake livelihoods alone while her husband is incarcerated. Each of these women's experiences exemplify recent gendered and generational changes in this village that contrast most Hmong cultural and livelihood literature, and yet there is minimal research exploring these shifts in Hmong society in Southeast Asia, nor how they are reshaping women's identities and gendered societal expectations. Further studies are required to understand how these generational changes and shifting subjectivities are unfolding—or not—for

other Hmong women elsewhere in Thailand and more broadly in the Southeast Asian Massif.

Second, undertaking livelihoods without a male counterpart, for these four women, has shifted what their identity as a Hmong woman means to them. The decolonial intersectional intervention I presented here demonstrates that gender disaggregation—which is still incipient in Hmong literature based in Southeast Asia—is not enough. Each of these women's experiences fall beyond any essentialized or singular 'Hmong women' category, which still dominates the literature on Hmong in Southeast Asia. Interlocking with larger ethnic discrimination in Thailand (Thongchai 1994; McKinnon 2005; Wittayapak 2008), these women face marginalization and at times exclusion within their village for being outside the 'norm' of society's expectations of the roles that Hmong women can and should occupy. While being indicative of broader societal shifts and generational change, these women do not view themselves nor were they seen by others to be 'progressive' within their village, but instead as pitied or even rebellious. This is an important contribution of decolonial intersectionality, which highlights the coloniality of power as interwoven with the complexity of the everyday, shaping individual lived experiences of compounding forms of social difference as well as the plurality of knowledge (Santos 2014; Rodríguez Castro 2021; McLaren 2021). Therefore, decolonial intersectionality underscores more fluid conceptualizations of intersectionality, demonstrating how processes of identification and sense of self are not stable or fixed, but are repeatedly being done and undone over time and space (Valentine 2007; Nightingale 2011; Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018). This is particularly evident through using marital status (broadly defined) as an entry point, which is inherently an evolving subjectivity as exemplified through the mini-biographies.

Last, while livelihood research has made important contributions to understanding livelihood transitions and continuities (Beall 2002; de Haan 2012), employing decolonial intersectionality uncovers how differentially this is experienced within contexts. In Ban Suay, productive livelihood activities have switched nearly exclusively to orange tree cultivation. While this has created new economic opportunities for many, it is also impossible to undertake with only one working adult. Jhua and Pang have no other adults in their household, and both are facing growing debt as they are unable to make the returns necessary to meet ongoing input costs, and for Jhua, this is despite assistance from labour sharing. Zhong has been able to maintain her orange production with the help of her oldest son, though not without a notable emotional toll on her. I have further demonstrated the explicit connection between productive and reproductive livelihood activities in contrast to the overwhelming tendency of the livelihood literature to focus on productive activities and the economics of livelihood. An intersectional approach demonstrates how differential livelihood outcomes encompass

much more than economic disparities, and are closely related to household composition, reproductive activities, and labour sharing within the household. Building on livelihood approaches that centre lived experiences and individual lifeworlds (Long 2001; Turner 2012), I propose the potential and importance of decolonial intersectional analyses to expand feminist livelihood studies.

Conclusion

In advancing a decolonial intersectional approach to livelihoods, I have explored gender-disaggregated roles and responsibilities, and the individuals and circumstances that exist beyond these binaries. Such an approach goes beyond typical homogenizing accounts of women's experiences, not just identifying gendered differences, but questioning the power of this difference and how it interlocks with other systems of oppression (Vang, Nibbs, and Vang 2016). In this Hmong village in northern Thailand, I have identified how the interlinkages of gender, culture, ethnicity, generation, and marital status (broadly defined) *together* shape marginalized experiences of livelihoods for women who do not have a male counterpart. This approach requires close attention to productive *and* reproductive activities as well as the plurality of knowledge and embodied experiences of identity-formation.

Gendered livelihoods research has made important contributions to rendering women visible and challenging uncritical conceptualizations of the household as a singular 'unit'. However, if not done from a feminist foundation, gendered disaggregation poses the risk of contributing towards fallacies of any 'universal' or 'shared' womanhood. In this paper, I have illustrated the importance of critical disaggregated approaches, demonstrating how essentialized or homogenized understandings of 'Hmong women' can overlook difference within that identity, and the potential of decolonial intersectional livelihood approaches to better capture social difference and multiple knowledges. The results presented here illustrate that Hmong women who undertake their livelihoods independently from a male counterpart are not only overlooked in most Hmong literature, but face unique challenges and constraints in undertaking their livelihoods. Moreover, the lived experiences of these four women highlight many important cultural shifts that have occurred in this Hmong village in northern Thailand, iterating the need for more intergenerational culture- and gender-sensitive livelihood research.

I suggest that a decolonial intersectional approach to livelihoods enables human-centred studies of the 'ways of living', rather than the tendency to focus on 'making a living' (Staples 2007:12). Drawing on decolonial intersectionality is integral to this understanding, highlighting how the 'everyday' of pursuing livelihoods operates within the 'everyday' of multiple scales of social relations, power differences, and knowledge bases (Valentine 2007; Santos

2014; Keahey 2018; McLaren 2021), and deserves further attention in developing intersectional livelihood approaches. Moreover, through presenting four mini-biographies, I have illustrated how decolonial intersectionality's attention to the embodiment and situatedness of human experience enhances actor-based livelihood studies. Decolonial intersectional approaches to livelihoods thus invite critical feminist livelihoods research that captures individual lifeworlds and experiences as embedded within power and social difference.

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Notes on contributor

Jennifer C. Langill is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Geography at McGill University. Her work falls at the intersection of feminist geographies and development geographies, drawing on feminist approaches to livelihoods and political ecology. She is specifically interested in the relationships between social and political marginalization, livelihood activities, and individual lifeworlds. She has recently published in *Global Environmental Change, Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography,* and *Ambio*.

ORCID

Jennifer C. Langill http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5463-8681

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