

Household, Village and Local Politics: Gender and the Politics of Common in Rural Transformation

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Abstract

This paper explores rural transformation and how this process constructs livelihood struggle and negotiations among different actors. Empirical data is mainly drawn from the author's fieldwork in a village in the Northeast of Thailand between 1997 - 1999. It will argue that the politics of common needs to consider 'micro political economy', i.e., the politics at micro level where people negotiate relationships in order to sustain their living. It will also argue that negotiations people engaged in respect to the common are also structured by gender. The transformation has resulted in the erosion of common and environmental resources. Households in the villages therefore have turned to earn their living by relying more and more on human resources. However, people compose their livelihoods by utilizing both physical and non-physical common resources. Where social and cultural resources are implicated with development or wellbeing of people, it does not necessarily mean that this type of resource underpins equal access or equal distribution. In the household level, rights, obligations and responsibilities are the land fields of the politics of commons on which households members are constantly negotiated for their personal wellbeing. Gender disparity has been evident in the village affairs that implicated by the state and the market. The exclusion of women from the politics of common is particularly the case in the SAO. Where women are elected into the SAO, they are expected by the male members to perform duties related with domestic.

Introduction

Gender has been highly profile in most topics of development studies, such as gender and health, gender and poverty, gender and household economy, etc. Gender has also been currently included in most social sciences textbooks or treated as one topic under conventional fields of studies, i.e. politics, economics, sociology and anthropology. However, the appearance of “gender” under the topic of “commons”, to my knowledge, is low. Partly, this might be because of the word “commons” are usually attributed to physical aspect of natural resources, such as water, land, forest. Partly, this is also due to the “commons” are always hold to equate with the public, the arena beyond the households sphere.

The debates on commons originated from argument proposed by Hardin, known under the phase of “tragedy of commons”. He argued that natural resources that belong to public are endanger to be depleted. In the public grazing, if one limits his own use of common meadow, he alone losses. The similar ideas of the failure of corporation with public that are prevalent in social science textbooks include;

- A public good such as clean air or safe neighborhoods, can be enjoyed by every one, regardless of whether he contributes to its provision. Under ordinary circumstances, no one has an incentive to contribute to providing the public good, and too little is produced, causing all to suffer.
- In the dismal logic of collective actions, every worker would benefit if all struck simultaneously, but whoever raises the strikes banner risks betrayal by a well-reward scab, so every one waits, hoping to benefit from someone else’s foolhardiness.
- In the prisoner’s dilemma, a pair of accomplices is held incommunicado, and each is told that if he alone implicates his partner, he will escape scot-free, but if he remains silent, while his partner confesses, he will be punished especially severely. If both remained silent, both would be let off lightly (Putnam; 1992, pp. 163 – 164).

There have been huge debates regarding the problem of failure to cooperation to public or ‘the common’ discourse extended beyond the original notion of common, which I will not go into details. But it is sufficient to say that a brief statement of the origin of the commons mentioned above is ‘gender blinded’. Indeed, the original debates of the commons and the debates extended later have relied heavily on the notion of ‘rational individual person’. Men and women, the rich and the poor are treated as the same objects. But on the other side, the notion that is similarly to the notion of common is prevalent within the debates of social scientists concerning the problem of unequal relationships of men and women. At least two streams of thinking regarding the common in gender and feminist theories can be identified.

The first group is the ecofeminist theory. From the viewpoint of ecofeminist, women and nature are closely related, and perhaps the same entity. This is due to the fact that women are by ‘nature’ ‘nurturing’ life, i.e., giving birth, nurturing young baby and giving care to members of their family. Women’s ‘nature’ is therefore contrasting to men’s which is characterized by ‘culture’. Thus, women are more concerned with the sustainability of nature whereas the creation of culture of men results in the destruction of nature. Taking this view, the common shall be managed or dominated by women rather than by men in order to promote sustainability of common resources. However, the ecofeminist viewpoint has been alleged to polarize men and women by basing on biological sex of human.

The second group is the theory of gender relations that views differences between men and women by basing on the ‘social construction of gender’. Inequality relationships of men and women are not only generated by biological sexes, but also the extent to which ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ are socially constructed. In this view, the common politics of gender can be described by the division between ‘domestic’ and ‘public’. In other words, women tend to be excluded from the public due to certain set of social institutions under which they are bonded to

domestic sphere, whereas men tend to dominate the 'common' or the public arena. It is necessary to reemphasize that gender analysis needs to move away from differences pertaining to biological sexes. It focuses on social institutions through which relationships between men and women are structured.

A brief consideration of the concept of gender relations mentioned above has no intention to seek to incorporate the debates of gender relations into the politics of common. What I intend to do in this paper is to argue that in order to understand the politics of commons, it is necessary to take power relations at micro level into account. In order to do this I will rely on materials I obtained from my field study conducted in a village 5 years ago. This paper first charts the transformation process in a village called Ban Don Han and this process constructs the landscape of the common. It then continues to discuss diversity of rural livelihoods. It also discusses social and cultural resources, especially the extent to which this intangible type of common resources is implicated development in the village. It offers an analysis of how people negotiate relationships at household level. Finally, it discusses gender in local politics.

Shaping the Common Landscape; the Transformation of Ban Don Han

Let me first begin from my fieldwork that conducted during 1998 to 1999 in Ban Don Han, a village located 50 kilometers west of Khon Kaen. The first settlement in Ban Don Han began about the same time as the Thai economy began to be incorporated into the global economy, or about 150 years ago. Indeed, the economy of the Northeast was evidently effected by the global economy just when the railroad construction arrived Korat in the early 1900s. The incorporation of the Thai and the Northeast economy resulted in the ways in which people earning their living, albeit subsistence practices persisted, especially rice growing. In 1950s, kenaf, the first important cash crops, was introduced into Ban Don Han economy. This resulted in the depletion of environmental resources, especially forestland. By the end of the 1960s the land in Ban Don Han was already exhausted and most forests were cleared to grow kenaf. In the meantime the increased demand for resources (labour and land) for growing kenaf resulted in the decline of other types of production or cultural practices, such as the decline in cotton production, cloth making, monastery service, etc.

The integration of Ban Don Han into the global economy and the depletion of environmental resources meant that livelihoods in Ban Don Han have been increasingly dependent on wider contexts and global economy. This was evident during the crisis in Ban Don Han between the early 1970s and the 1980s. This crisis was caused by the decline in kenaf growing in Ban Don Han (as the price was plummeted) and intensified by the exceptional drought. Ban Don Han households responded to this crisis in a number of ways and three of these were important. First was to turn to the cultural base, i.e., begging for rice in the villages where rice production was secure. Second was to turn to the common resource base, migrating to encroach on land in the fringe forests or making a living from fishing in the lake of Ubonrattana dam. This happened concurrently with the massive migration of Northeast farmers from lowland to upland that caused the decrease in forested areas of the country. Thirdly, a number of young labourers migrated to seek jobs in the city.

After the crisis, Ban Don Han households have joined the export-oriented industrialisation, current phase of transformation of the country economy, through gemstone production that began from the second half of the 1980s. This was due to the explosion of demand for gemstone products in the world market that resulted in the business owners contracting out some parts of the production line to rural producers. Gemstone production in Ban Don Han at the beginning appeared in a form of factory-based production, but latter turned into a home based industry and was incorporated into household production from the early 1990s. At present, gemstone production is an important means of livelihood in Ban Don Han.

The transformation in Ban Don Han also has shaped the status of the resources of households. The average size of land holding in Ban Don Han is small, about 10 rai per household, compared with the average size of land holding in this region which is above 20 rai. The average cash income per household is about 50,000 baht per year, compared with over 60,000 baht for the region. However, my census did not include sources of income in kind. Cash income in Ban Don Han mostly comes from non-agricultural activities, whereas non-cash sources of living are mostly come from agriculture and common resources surrounding the village. Most of households are in debts. The average size of debt of those who borrowed from the BAAC was near to the average cash income of households in Ban Don Han. This appears to suggest that a large portion of the flows of household income must be used for debt servicing rather than in consumption or investment.

The transformation briefly described above shape the landscape of the commons in Ban Don Han. At present major part of lands are occupied by agricultural plots of individual households. But this is not simply meant the end or the absence of commons. Rice fields of individuals usually turn to be common resources during dry season and can be used as common animal ranching. There is a piece of land, approximately 30 rai in size, that has left over and the villagers use this land as the graveyard. This land is also a source of natural food, especially wide mushroom during rainy season. Villagers of Ban Don Han also have access common resources locating far away from the village. They go fishing in Nam Sern, the stream in vicinity of a neighbor village or even go to Ubonrattana Dam, the state man-made lake. The villagers of Ban Don Han go to collect wide mushroom and other wide products in the forest that located 30 kilometers away from the village. There are also other different types of common property in the village, including temple compound, primary school, village pond, village's spirit house's compound. Moreover, the transformation of Ban Don Han has also shaped social and cultural institutions that can be regarded as non-physical aspect of the common. This aspect of transformation is particularly important in two ways. Firstly, the institutions governing the physical common have undergone rapid change. Secondly, the institutions themselves are not only rules constraining actions, but these institutions are strategically employed by actors to achieve their individual goals. These two aspects of non-physical common resources significantly contribute to the unequal distribution of resources within the village, resulting uneven wellbeing among different groups of the population.

From Common Resource Base Strategy to Human Resource Base Strategy.

The transformation of Ban Don Han has resulted in change of livelihood strategies. Significantly, these changes are attributed to the shift from relying on natural or common resources to rely more on human resources. Livelihoods in Ban Don Han are diverse; one household may draw their livelihoods on a number of sources such as agriculture, wage labour, or a member of household may engage in different types of activities during a period of time. The households are able to diversify their livelihoods by basing on human resources they command.

Diversification has also occurred with agriculture. The majority households in Ban Don Han continue to grow rice for their own consumption, and in the meantime adopt some other agricultural activities, such as cattle raising, sugarcane growing, etc. The diversification also initiated by the state as well as NGOs, such integrated farming project (promoted by both state agencies and NGOs). However, the diversification in agriculture is uneven. This is particularly the case for sugarcane farmers. These households are able to diversify agriculture because they are wealthy, commanding good networks such as link with the state, the Sugarcane Farmer Association and the networks within the village.

There are a number of constraints in earning living from agriculture. This is partly due to natural conditions such as insufficient rainfalls, poor quality of soils, and partly due to an increase in

required inputs in agriculture whereas returns from agriculture was not increase in the same extent. It is abundantly clear that agriculture is not a sufficient source to earn living in Ban Don Han.

In facing the limitation of earning a living from agriculture, Ban Don Han households diversify their means of livelihoods. They do so by strategically utilising their human resources in a number of non-agricultural activities, including gemstone cutting, construction work, urban migration, sugarcane plantation work, and casual waged work. Human resources of households in Ban Don Han have been shaped through the transformation process described earlier. For instance, the prevalence of gemstone production for a decade meant that youths in the village acquired skills in gemstone production. This skill is now transferred within the household. Importantly, there are more women than men in Ban Don Han involved in gemstone production. Female labour is therefore strategically important for the households who compose their livelihood by adopting gemstone cutting. In contrast, male labour is strategically important for the households undertaking construction work as this mean of livelihood is dominated by men.

The possession of youth labour is also important for earning a living from city-ward migration. Rural poverty, however, is not only the main cause propelling migration from rural areas to the city, but also a constraint on migration in certain respects. Major constraints include investment in education of the young and financial inputs for funding the young to migrate. The young also employed personal ties and linkages with their friends and relatives in the city to support them in obtaining jobs.

There are a number of households in Ban Don Han draw their livelihoods from working in sugarcane plantations. Some of them are landless. Working in sugarcane plantation is seasonal by nature. This type of work is usually taken place during December and April. Generally landless households are viewed to be engulfed by a number of structural constraints. The case of landless of Ban Don Han, however, shows that they are able to pursue different choices available to them. They are able to do so by basing on different types of skills of human resources. After migrating to work in sugarcane plantation, the members of these households also work in gemstone production, construction work and casual waged labour.

The diversity of rural livelihoods in Ban Don Han reveals a complex terrain of social relations that households in Ban Don Han are involved. More importantly, the shift from natural resource base to human resource base of livelihoods means that negotiation to earn living does not happen only in the public, but also at the micro or at the household level. This aspect of rural livelihoods in Ban Don Han suggests that the politics of common can not only considered from the macro point of views; i.e., relationships between the state and people or class struggle. If we are to consider the politics of common in relations to wellbeing of people, we need to recognize the diversity of groups of people due to age, sex, ethnicity and etc. These people constantly negotiate not only with the state and the market, but also with actors and agents that are at the same level with them.

Social and Cultural Resources

The idea that social and cultural aspects of human society are considered as “resources” is particularly apparent in current social sciences textbooks. This idea is usually labeled as “social capital”. The underlined notion contained in the concept of social capital is that people are not earning their livings by only employing physical capital or physical resources they command, but also employing “social and cultural resources”. In Ban Don Han I found that the rich are more able to deploy social and cultural resources to construct livelihoods than the poor. This is because the creation of cultural status and social relations requires material resources. Generally

social cultural resources manifest in terms of social institutions, and therefore are regarded as 'common goods'.

In Ban Don Han there are two fundamental cultural institutions embracing villagers' lives; Buddhism and heet sip song kong sip si (local codes of conduct). Change in Buddhism was evident and perceived by the villagers as the erosion of the local Buddhist ethos. However, Buddhism remains a key cultural repertoire that villagers employed to mobilize common resources. This is particularly the case for Bha Pa, a cultural event that villagers mobilize funds, usually for temple construction. The erosion of Buddhism is thus occurring in contrast to the growth in the material aspects or the infrastructure of the temple. In addition, the concept of merit making or tum bun shapes the villagers' views and actions toward the public. In other word, the concept of tum bun provides the ground for the common (i.e. to mobilize resources or labor). The ability to make merit also constitutes in status of people, enabling those who command certain cultural status to demand helps or resources from others. The important thing is that the rich are more able to enhance their cultural status than the poor as they are more able to create their cultural resources by making material contributions to the monastery than the poor. Cultural institutions have been deployed in development of the village either by the state agency or NGOs. Behind this idea is the assumption that the villagers could rely on social and cultural resources in order to obtain goods and services where their material resources have been subsidized. As cultural institutions are regarded as collective, social and cultural resources are presumed to be somehow public or common resources which the poor could make similar use to the rich. However, the case of the Rice Bank revealed that the utilisation of collective awareness for access to resources is complex. In Ban Don Han, the mobilization of paddy to fund the rice bank is mainly based on the concept of bor ri chak (voluntary contribution). This concept provides an important ground for the village to construct the common through which the rich and the poor are able to join. Moreover, it could also enhance a more equal distribution as the wealth voluntarily donate their paddy to the Bank, whereas the poor could be increased their access through the Bank. However, the bor ri chak notion also potentially disguises the differential needs of households as the rich were given the same access to the Rice Bank as the poor.

Local conception of men and women

The analysis of social construction of the common must pay attention on social institutions. Within this we need to recognize social institutions in two important aspects; the extent to which social institutions constraining and enabling actors. In the constraint aspect we consider institutions as 'rules governing actions'. In the enabling aspect we need to focus more on the actors, i.e., how are categories of actor created by institutions? How rights, obligations and responsibilities are allocated among different actors? In respect to gender relations, one way to understand how institutions enabling men and women is to understand local conception of men and women. First of all, the word 'local' connotes the idea of 'tradition' that usually stands in opposition to 'modernity'. In reality it is difficult to draw the line between tradition and modernity, or local and non-local. In order to identify local conceptions of men and women I will base on the popular texts. In the Northeast the popular texts were previously used for recitation in the celebrations according to heet sip song kong sip si that was discussed above. Later, the popular texts became common in the folk opera (hoh lum). The popular text is one important means through which gender ideology was previously expounded and reproduced. The popular texts that will be discussed further came from both the interviews with key informants in Ban Don Han and printed materials used for recitation by local monks.

When I asked the villagers in Ban Don Han what the words men (phu chai) and women (phu ying) mean to them, they usually replied that 'phu ying pen nen phu chai pen pra' (women are compared to novices while men are monks). Novices in the Buddhist temples are the servants of the monks. This notion of men and women connotes the idea that relationships between men and

women are hierarchical. This concept is also inscribed in the cultural practice where women had to pay respect to their husbands by wai at their feet before going to bed, the manner that is similar to the novices paying respect to the monk. However, in practice the relationships between men and women either previously or today is more flexible than that between the novice and monk.

In fact, the local conception of men and women is comprised of the 'class of concepts'. In the popular texts, there are categories of men and women within the class of concepts. For instance, men are classified as son, husband, father, father-in-law, son-in-law, monk, etc. Likewise, women are classified as daughter, wife, mother, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, etc. These categories are valued differently, for example mother is in a higher rank of prestige and authority than daughter. Interestingly, the conception about men is not necessarily valued higher than women. For instance, the son-in-law in the local conception is constrained by the tight discipline of the kin institution. Derived from kong sip si, son-in-law in the popular texts is categorised as follows (Niwat, 1986).

- (1) Those who perform their roles adhering to the kong sip si (obeying their wives' family and relatives).
- (2) Those who are lazy.
- (3) Those who use indirect words harassing their wives' family and relatives.
- (4) Those who humiliate and look down upon their wives' family and relatives.
- (5) Those who do strenuous work.
- (6) Those who are not supportive of their wives and their wives' relatives
- (7) Those who are haunted by gambling or drinking.
- (8) Those who tell lies and cause dispute among their wives' relatives.

These eight categories of son-in-law were held as a guideline for disciplining the son-in-law. The first and the fifth categories of the son-in-law are the ideal type, in which when these son-in-laws commit any wrongdoing they will be forgiven or sanctioned lightly. The second and the third categories of behavior are subject to fine, whereas the fourth category can be held to be a sufficient ground for ending marriage. The sixth, seventh and eighth categories are considered to be serious offensive behaviors and the son-in-law can be expelled from the family. The position of a man as a son-in-law in tradition was apparently lower than that of his wife and his wife's relatives. Moreover, the interests of men in the same household is not necessary to be congruent. In the Northeast there are folk tales telling the story about father-in-laws that are usually bullied by the son-in-law. In my view these folk tales are the mechanisms for the son-in-laws to relieve their stress, resulting from the strict discipline described above and the domination of their father-in-laws.

Let's now focus more on the local construction of men and women as husband and wife. In Ban Don Han and in most villages of the Lao ethnic group in the Northeast, there is a model role for husband and wife. Apart from being inscribed in the popular texts, the model role is also formally told and expounded to married couples by the senior members of the clan at the wedding event. In this event couples present gifts to senior clan members (som ma), while the senior clan members give them instructions on the ways to manage marriage life. The local conception of the model role of the husband and wife revolves around the following principles.

- (a) Five principles of the model role of husbands
 - Always give your wife respect and honor as 'a wife'.
 - Avoid committing promiscuity and adultery.
 - Avoid looking down on your wife.
 - Let your wife take a leading role in household affairs (home chores, financial management, etc.).

- Provide your wife with adornments.
- (b) Five principles of the model role of wife
 - Keep the house properly maintained.
 - Be supportive and faithful to your husband's relatives.
 - Avoid committing promiscuity and adultery.
 - Maintain and manage the property properly.
 - Conform to the 'ruen sam nam si' duties of women (including, (1) keeping the bedroom neat, (2) keeping the kitchen neat, (3) keeping their hair neat, (4) keeping the jar full of drinking water, (5) being talented in cooking, (6) speaking of right and beautiful words, and (7) showing respect and gratitude to the parents and relatives of her husband).

It is clear that the model role of husband and wife described above is much more elaborated than the analogy of women and men as monk and novice as mentioned earlier. To apply this model role in enacting relationships, more arrangements were needed and added. In a book composed by a local novelist, the roles of husband and wife are further delineated as follows (Thechawaro Bhikhu, 1996):

- (1) Husband or wife who behaves as a robber, robbing assets of the households and spending in the wrong way (for gambling, drinking).
- (2) Husband or wife who behaves cruelly, beating or physically violating his/her partners.
- (3) Husband or wife who behaves lazily in his/her work.
- (4) Husband or wife who performs roles as a good father or mother.
- (5) Husband or wife who performs roles compared to brother or sister.
- (6) Husband or wife who performs roles as a close friend.
- (7) Husband or wife who performs roles as a servant of his or her partner.

The local conceptions of men and women described above correspond to the essential contested concepts suggest by Gallie (1968). However, there are some points from the discussion above which I would like to highlight here. Firstly, the local conceptions of men and women are complex. The conception comprises of a set of categories of men and women, such as father, son, son-in-laws, mother, daughter, wife etc. Each category is not necessary valued on the same basis (i.e. the analogy of men and women as novice and monk). Secondly, although the local conception of men and women delineates expected behaviours, it does not specify all aspects. As a result, the local conception of men and women in each category can be variously defined in specific contexts. Thirdly, the gender construction is an ongoing process through which 'meanings' are contested and arrangements and new categories of conception were added. In this respect, it is sufficient to argue that "negotiation' is in fact inscribed in the local conceptions of men and women. The local conceptions were constructed and reproduced through the processes in which classes of concept were interpreted and new arrangements and meanings were added.

Negotiating relationships within households

The local conception provides a repertoire for men and women to negotiate their relationships, and the land fields for which relationships are negotiated are not limited only in public arena. In other words, negotiations of relationships also happen at the household or micro level. As mentioned earlier, the transformation of Ban Don Han at present is characterized by the shift from natural resource base livelihoods to human resource base livelihoods. In this respect negotiations between parent and children within household are essential and these negotiations are also structured by gender. I will continue to discuss case study from Ban Don Han regarding this matter below.

First of all, we need to understand the 'joint awareness' on which parent and children negotiate their relationships. In Thai society, parents or older generations are highly valued. According to Isan culture, parents are regarded as the god in the house, while in the Thai Central Plain culture, parents were held to be in the same category as Brohm (a category of god in Hindu religion).

Children and younger generations are regarded as the property or resources of their parents. These cultural values are inscribed in the notion of bunghun, as Akin (1993) states: 'Bunghun is the favor or benefit which has been bestowed, and for which one is obliged to do something in return. ... Bunghun of parents over their children, particularly that of mother, is so great that whatever favors the children do for their mothers, they will be never sufficient to repay bunghun' (p. 16).

Although the notion of bunghun gives paramount authority to parents, both parents and children are bounded with certain obligations. In the popular texts, the obligations of parents toward their children include (Techawaro Bhikkhu, 1996):

- Preventing children from committing wrong-doing
- Encouraging children to commit good deeds and making merits
- Supporting children in acquiring knowledge or qualification
- Supporting them to marry good persons
- Providing them with assets when they form new households.

In a similar vein, children are also bound with certain obligations, including:

- Caring for parents in their old age, to pay back bunghun
- Helping parents in their work
- Maintaining the dignity of the clan
- Being 'good children' to be entitled to parents assets
- Performing and dedicating merits (tum bun) to parents after their death

There are gender differences between son and daughter in rights, obligations and responsibilities which are predicated on the notion of bunghun. The differences are largely manifested by the means through which son and daughter return bunghun to their parents. There are two ways for son and daughter do to return bunghun to their parents; caring (liang du) and making merits (tum bun) for them. The first involves with material resources, whereas the second involves non-material resources. The most important non-material means to return bunghun to parents is to ordain in the monkhood. This means was highly valued by the villagers, as Poh Muan, an old man of Ban Don Han said,

'To ordain as a monk is to act like a bridge leading our mothers to heaven. This provides more merit than providing them care or material needs (liang doo). It is a duty of a man to become a monk to compensate for the bunghun of his mother who raised him.'

As women are denied the right to ordain, the economic burdens of the household are likely to be on the shoulders of the daughter rather than the son. Most researches in Thailand confirm that material supports from daughters to their households are more than from sons (Bencha, 1992; Curran, 1995). Presently, although becoming a monk is held as a means to return bunghun to parents, the value given to this practice has declined, as witnessed by the small number of men ordaining and the short time they stay in the monastery service. Parents have been increasingly using the notion of bunghun to claim material support from both sons and daughters, as returns from agriculture are insufficient to satisfy their needs. But the expectations of parents on daughters are higher than on sons, because of the cultural notion of bunghun.

Although this cultural construction of relationships between parents and children is hierarchical, and daughters are in the marginal position regarding their means of paying bunghun to parents, daughters are constantly negotiating their relationships. The negotiation involves a range of resources and revolves around the household networks that are centred on parents' the household. This will be illustrated by the case of Nang below.

Nang is a daughter of Plang and Phan, the family that provided me with housing when I was in Ban Don Han. When I arrived in Ban Don Han in June 1997, Nang was not in the village. I met her during the New Year vacation when she returned home to visit her parents. She is 33 years

old, married to a man from the neighbouring village. Nang has two brothers and both of them are married. Her elder brother moved to live with his wife's family whereas her younger brother separated from the parent's household and stayed in the village. Her parents own 8 rai of land. As she is the only daughter of the family, she is supposed to stay with her parents and care for them in their old age. After marriage Nang and her husband resided with her parents.

Nang's husband is not healthy so he cannot perform strenuous work on the farm. Therefore they earned their income mainly from gemstone cutting. When the price of gemstone products fell Nang and her husband could not maintain the household from gemstone cutting. They therefore decided to migrate to seek jobs in Bangkok.

Nang and her husband got jobs in Bangkok. However, surviving in Bangkok is not easy, as living expenses are high. For this reason Nang and her husband could not send regular remittances to her parents. Nang's parents rebuilt the house in the expectation that Nang would be responsible for the construction cost. Nang's parents were disappointed with her failure to send remittances. They demanded that Nang return home and stay with them in the village. Nang, however, ignored this demand by continuing to work in Bangkok with her husband and still maintaining a relationship with her parents.

Nang and her parents appear to belong to the same household. But in terms of economy, Nang and her husband maintain some degree of independence from her parents. Meanwhile, Nang's parents do not entirely rely upon Nang and her husband. They maintain their own production (agriculture) in which Nang and her husband play no part. At the same time, her parents also maintain the ties with both of her brothers' households who separated and have their own households independently. In this scenario, the parties involved in negotiation cannot be captured by the two-person case of negotiation, it involves four households together with their members and all the features of these parties are implicated in the negotiations in which Nang engages.

The resources of the household come into play in all negotiations that parents and children engage in. For Nang's parents, the land they own at present is already too small. In order to avoid fragmentation by dividing it among three of the children, her parents supported Nang's two brothers to marry women of households where their land and other resources are secure. The resourceful households usually require a high bridal price and gifts (cash and gold). As Nang's parents were unable to fund the whole cost of bridal gifts, her two brothers must work and save the money for their marriage. This arrangement results in the differences in the obligations of men and women toward their households. This can be explained with the notion of 'taking out' (ow ok) from the household for men and 'bring in' (ow kao) for women at their marriage that Ban Don Han villagers always use to distinguish between the obligation of men and women. In this notion, men migrate to 'seek money for their marriage' (ha ngoen tang ngan) whereas women migrate in order to maintain the wellbeing of the household.

The negotiation for Nang's parents to avoid fragmentation of the land is in the interest of Nang who will eventually inherit the whole piece of land and the house after the death of her parents. However, her parents' possession of land underpins the authority of claims over assistance from Nang. The loss of control of land, therefore, could undermine the bargaining power of parents. It is in part for this reason that Ban Don Han households have attempted to hold onto their land and maintain agriculture even though material returns from agricultural work are low. The land has values for parents which underpin the claims to goods and services from their children. The control of land by parents in the present context where their children are working outside agriculture is particularly important.

Women in local politics

In Thailand it has been argued that the polity is traditionally dominated by men whereas women dominate in the household economy Kirsch (1975). This gender ideology has been conveyed and implanted in rural areas by the state bureaucracy in the transformation process. It is evident that women were disproportionately under represented in the key posts within the state administration at local level such phu yai ban, kamnun, or bor tor, etc (Juree, 1997). On this point, it appears to be legitimate to argue that the construction of gender constrains women in the public domain more than men. Despite such constraints, some women are able to play an active role in local politics, and their ability to act in the public domain is much related to their resource-base. This can be illustrated by the case of the Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO) election in which two women in Ban Don Han joined the contest.

The first woman aged 38, belongs to the considerable rich resource-base household. She is married and has two children, both of whom have migrated. She also belongs to the same kin group as the phu yai ban, the biggest kin group in Ban Don Han. Before marriage, she was a leader of the youth group of the village and joined several development activities organised by the NGOs. Being part of the biggest kin group in the village she was spotted by a politician who sought to establish a linkage and extend his base in the village. She was approached and later became the broker (canvasser) of the politician. At this point she was effectively included in the vertical network, the orbit of local power which is generally dominated by men. In return this network provided her with a personal channel and access to other resources. Her mother said to me that the local politicians now have increasingly established their link to women in the village for the reason that women are more effective than men in distributing money for vote buying, and the turnout can be more reliable and predictable than those done through men. In the election to the SAO this woman was partly funded by the local politician, but she failed.

The second woman that contested in the election was a wife of a schoolteacher in Ban Don Han. Her husband was born in the village. She is 33 years old, born outside Ban Don Han and moved to reside there with her husband after marriage. She holds some educational qualifications. As she had no job, her husband encouraged her to contest the election. Her election campaign was partly supported by the friends of her husband. She won the election and became a member of the or bor tor.

It is evident from the cases above that the two women used 'relationships' from different sources that they have to underpin their actions in the public domain. The first woman drew resources from the relations she has with her kin group, whereas the second woman drew her resources from relations with the state. Certainly, these women are faced with more limitations than men as the first woman recounted her roles in the public domain to me in the interview:

At the beginning when I was the leader of the youth group and joined the training program I had to stay overnight outside the village several times. Most villagers as well as my Mum did not like it. They think that women should avoid staying overnight (non wan san kha). But this depends on me. I go outside to gain experience, not for any other thing else. For women it is more difficult than men to take this role.

To put the contest of the two women in the SAO election in the wider context, it appears to suggest that the two women deployed different kinds of discourse to underpin their actions in the public domain. The repertoires that the first woman deployed revolve around 'traditional discourse'. As mentioned in previous chapters, women in the lower class traditionally maintained a high status in kin groups. In contrast, the second woman deployed 'modern discourse' to underpin her actions. The modern discourse is partly disseminated by the state that evolved the sakdina ideology of gender relations. In this discourse, the significance of women is apparently

lesser than men. In addition, the contest of the second woman can be linked to the action of the state agent at local level. From the middle of the 1970s, schoolteachers played a chief role in the Sub-District Council - SDC (the secretary of the SDC was appointed from the schoolteachers within the sub-district). The role of schoolteachers in the SAO is replaced by the elected members. The contest of the second woman therefore can be seen as the attempt of the schoolteachers to create the channel providing them with access to the source of power.

However, we should not overplay the distinction between 'state' and 'kin', or the state and community institutions, in the contest of the two women. In actual situations, it is difficult to draw the line between 'modern' and 'traditional' discourses. Both women in fact used relationships they have with both the state and the community to underpin their actions. For instance, the first woman commands relationships with the state through the phu yai ban while the second woman has a linkage with the community, as her husband is a native villager of Ban Don Han. The view that both women are 'actors' drawing resources and relationships they have with different constituencies to underpin their actions in public domain seems to provide a better understanding than being viewed as the collision of modern and traditional discourses.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion I pursued in this paper lies in the problem which can be understood as relationships between the structure and agency. If we admit that the common is also socially constructed, it follows that we need to understand social institutions, not only in terms of the rules of governing, but also the repertoires enabling action of the actors. Actions are convened by social institutions, but there are also certain spaces for actor to move around or to maneuver. In other words, social and cultural institutions can be regarded as public goods or common resources. In this paper I propose that the politics of common shall be unveiled through studying the process of struggle of people to earn their livelihoods, and negotiations are central to such process. Social institutions, thus, shall not be entirely considered from the view of 'structural determinism' in which the politics of commons can be seen only in a form of power relations manifested in the structure (i.e. the state politics). The process of struggle shall be viewed from the 'micro-political economy' where negotiations of involved parties regarding the politics of common can be put into light.

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