ASEAS

18(1) 2025

Advances in Southeast Asian Studies

ASEAS

Advances in Southeast Asian Studies

ASEAS

Advances in Southeast Asian Studies (formerly, Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies)

Advances in Southeast Asian Studies (ASEAS) is an international, interdisciplinary, and open access social sciences journal covering a variety of topics (cultural and social anthropology, communication, development, geography, cultural studies, regional studies, politics, and tourism) from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Topics are related to Southeast Asia, but are not restricted to the geographical region, when spatial and political borders of Southeast Asia are crossed or transcended, for example, in the case of linguistics, diaspora groups, or forms of socio-cultural transfer. ASEAS publishes two focus issues per year and we welcome out-of-focus submissions at any time. The journal invites both established as well as young scholars to present research results and theoretical and methodical discussions, to report about on-going research projects or field studies, to publish conference reports, to conduct interviews with experts in the field, and to review recently published books.

PUBLISHER

SEAS – Gesellschaft für Südostasienwissenschaften / Society for South-East Asian Studies
ZVR-Zahl 786121796, SEAS – Gudrunstrasse 104/3/41 – 1110 Wien – Austria

PURPOSE

The purpose of SEAS is, among other things, to promote Southeast Asian studies and the education of emerging scholars, as well as the significance and discussion of the Southeast Asian region in Austria and beyond.

DISCLOSURE

SEAS is the full owner of ASEAS. Contributions identified by name contain the views of the respective author(s) and not necessarily those of the editors.

EDITORIAL ADDRESS

SEAS – Gudrunstrasse 104/3/41 – 1110 Wien – Austria; E-Mail: aseas@seas.at

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Dayana Lengauer, Alexander Trupp

EDITORIAL BOARD

Claudia Dolezal, Timo Duile, Rainer Einzenberger, Lukas Husa, Dayana Lengauer, Najib Noorashid, Simon Rowedder, Ahmad Salman, Prachi Thakur, Alexander Trupp

EDITORIAL SUPPORT

Alessandra Culasso

ADVISORY BOARD

Ramses Amer (Stockholm University, Sweden), Birgit Bräuchler (Monash University, Australia), Huong Thanh Bui (Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan), Karl Husa (University of Vienna, Austria), Mustafa Izzuddin (National University of Singapore, Singapore), Harold R. Kerbo (California Polytechnic State University, USA), Rüdiger Korff (Passau University, Germany), Prasit Leepreecha (Chiang Mai University, Thailand), Antje Missbach (Bielefeld University, Germany), Dominik M. Müller (Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany), Melanie Pichler (University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Austria), Oliver Pye (Bonn University, Germany), Patrick Sakdapolrak (University of Vienna, Austria), Kwanchit Sasiwongsaroj (Mahidol University, Thailand), Wolfram Schaffar (University of Passau, Germany), Susanne Schröter (Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, Germany), Rosalia Sciortino (Mahidol University, Thailand), Martin Slama (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria)

ISSN: 2791-531X

ASEAS 18(1) 2025

Advances in Southeast Asian Studies

ASEAS
Advances in Southeast Asian Studies 18(1), 2025

ASEAS 18(1) presents a diverse collection of research articles, workshops, and book reviews, centered around three key themes: sustainability, governance, and conflict. The issue covers four countries in Southeast Asia – Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore – offering insights into emerging regional issues. Sustainability is explored through the lens of tourism, service quality, and food consumption practices. Governance is examined via China's role in Laos' hydropower sector and the use of political memes in Indonesia, revealing shifts in political communication. Conflict is analyzed through the role of language in Indonesia, emphasizing its power to reinforce social hierarchies. Complementary book reviews expand on themes of identity and political transformation in Southeast Asia, enriching the issue's broader geographical and thematic scope.

MANAGING EDITORS
Alexander Trupp & Prachi Thakur

COVER PHOTO
Kosita Butratana, 2013 (Tourism village, Northern Thailand)

LAYOUT
Karl Valent

Contents

Editorial: Sustainability, Governance, and Conflict

Prachi Thakur[a] & Alexander Trupp[b]*

[a]Sunway University, Malaysia
[b]University of Innsbruck, Austria

*corresponding author: alexander.trupp@uibk.ac.at

▸ Thakur, P., & Trupp, A. (2025). Editorial: Sustainability, governance, and conflict. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 1-4.

ASEAS 18(1) delves into diverse and timely topics of Southeast Asia, featuring four current research papers, one research workshop article, and two book reviews. While this current issue covers four countries in the region – Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore – the contributions coalesce around three overarching themes: (1) sustainability, (2) governance, and (3) conflict.

The theme of sustainability is approached from two distinct but interconnected perspectives. One focus lies in the intersection of tourism, service quality, and local communities, continuing ASEAS' engagement with sustainable development and tourism in the region (Rostami et al., 2024; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020). Although the SERVQUAL model (Ladhari, 2009) is widely used to assess service quality, its application in non-Western tourism contexts remains underexplored and little critiqued. Yet, service quality is a key dimension of sustainability in tourism, as it shapes visitor satisfaction, local community benefits, and the long-term viability of tourism products. Addressing this gap, the article by Sroypetch, Rangsungnoen, and Caldicott (this issue, 2025) employs reflective and co-creative longitudinal methods to critically examine how the SERVQUAL framework aligns with ASEAN homestay standards. Their study highlights how Thai homestays often struggle to meet international quality and sustainability standards, initially developed for hotels and guesthouses, and not always appropriate for rural community-based tourism. This disconnect not only affects sustainability certification but also influences guest perceptions, expectations, and ultimately the socio-economic resilience of homestay operators.

The theme of sustainability is further explored in the research workshop article by Jacobs and Chau (this issue, 2025), which shifts the focus from tourism in Thailand to food consumption practices in Singapore. Through an autoethnographic approach, the authors examine how Singaporeans perceive alternative protein foods – products that offer nutritional equivalence to conventional animal-based sources. Their study highlights the complex attitudes toward sustainable diets, revealing curiosity and resistance. Conversations and observations in Singapore uncover several reasons for hesitation, including a perceived lack of necessity for such alternatives and limited knowledge about their production processes. Some respondents also express skepticism about the

motives behind these products, viewing them as a manifestation of hyper-consumerism where marketed innovations are driven more by corporate profit than by genuine concern for environmental or public well-being.

The second theme of this issue is governance and is discussed in the works by Ponce (this issue, 2025) and Ubaidillah et al. (this issue, 2025). Ponce offers a critical counter-narrative to prevailing interpretations of China's engagement in Laos, particularly within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), continuing recent discussions in ASEAS on the role of Chinese infrastructure in the region (Rowedder et al., 2024). Dominant discourses often frame Chinese infrastructure investments as instruments of so-called "debt-trap diplomacy" whereby China uses large loans to exert control over recipient countries. Ponce examines the construction of a Chinese dam in Northern Laos to reveal a more nuanced picture. He argues that Laos has adopted a hybrid governance strategy in its hydropower sector that emphasizes the economic rationale of dam construction and operation, deliberately minimizes the visibility of Chinese actors, and assigns primary responsibility for community relocation to domestic authorities. Despite some governance weaknesses, this approach, according to Ponce, has ultimately strengthened Laos's capacity for autonomous decision-making and planning in hydropower development.

In the second article on governance, Ubaidillah et al. (this issue, 2025) discuss the use of memes in changing politics in Indonesia. Memes and their usage in political campaigns have recently accelerated, and politicians across multiple countries have utilized this medium to influence the younger generation (Anderau & Barbarrusa, 2024; Rankawat, 2023). Ubaidillah et al. explore how digital natives in Indonesia engage with and are influenced by such visual content. By analyzing Indonesia's contemporary 'memescape,' the article uncovers how memes function as both expressions of popular culture and as instruments of political messaging. The authors argue that memes may enhance youth engagement but also risk deepening intergenerational political divides. Furthermore, they suggest that memes are subtle tools of elite control, shaping public discourse and influencing voter behavior through curated and emotionally charged narratives. This contribution offers a timely and critical lens on the intersections of digital culture, political communication, and governance in the region.

The third theme explored in this issue is conflict, approached through the lens of language and its entanglement with power in the article by Udasmoro and Kunz (this issue, 2025). Drawing on interviews and focus groups with diverse stakeholders, the authors investigate how language use in Indonesia reflects and reinforces social hierarchies, marginalization, and everyday experiences of exclusion. The article identifies specific mechanisms through which linguistic practices contribute to the normalization of discrimination, particularly in conflict-prone or post-conflict settings. At the same time, it highlights how language can also serve as a tool for peacebuilding when inclusive and dialogic forms of communication are intentionally cultivated. By foregrounding the socio-political dimensions of language, this contribution enriches our understanding of how power is enacted, challenged, and negotiated in Southeast Asian societies, and invites readers to consider the often-overlooked role of discourse in both perpetuating and transforming conflict dynamics.

Finally, this issue features two book reviews that complement the thematic and geographic breadth of the volume. Joseph Black reviews *A Sense of Place and Belonging:*

The Chiang Tung Borderland of Northern Southeast Asia by Karlsson (2025), which offers a compelling exploration of identity and spatial belonging in a historically complex region at the intersection of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and China. Ladawan Khaikham reviews *Thailand: Contestation, Polarization, and Democratic Regression* by Prajak Kongkirati (2024), a timely analysis of political transformations and challenges to democratic governance in contemporary Thailand.

REFERENCES

Anderau, G., & Barbarrusa, D. (2024). The function of memes in political discourse. *Topoi*, *43*(5), 1529-1546.

Jacobs, G. & Chau, M. H. (2025). Early adopters or forever resisters? Singapore veg*ns' views toward alternative protein foods. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 103-113.

Ladhari, R. (2009). A review of twenty years of SERVQUAL research. *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences, 1*(2), 172-198.

Ponce, F. S. J. (2024). Beyond debt-trap narratives: How the Lao state manoeuvres the hybrid governance of a Chinese hydropower project. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 5-29.

Rankawat, V. (2023). Modi's digital diplomacy: A comprehensive analysis of social media as a political communication and governance tool. *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, *5*(2), 75-80.

Rostami, A., Trupp, A., & Stephenson, M. L. (2024). Female solo travel experiences: An autoethnography on social and emotional challenges with tourism industry stakeholders. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 201-212.

Rowedder, S., Wilcox, P., & Brandtstädter, S. (2024). Negotiating Chinese infrastructures of modern mobilities: Insights from Southeast Asia. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies 16*(2), 175-188.

Sroypetch, S., Rangsungnoen, G., & Caldicott, W. R. (2025). A co-generated analysis of Thai Homestays: Overcoming SERVQUAL deficiencies and sustainability barriers. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 31-58.

Trupp, A., & Dolezal, C. (2020). Tourism and the sustainable development goals in Southeast Asia. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 13*(1), 1-16.

Ubaidillah, U., Santoso, W. M., Widyawati, N., Purwadi, P., & Windarsih, A. (2025). Memes and the Indonesian 2024 presidential elections: Performative politics in an illiberal setting. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 59-82.

Udasmoro, W., & Kunz, R. (2025). Language and de-/escalation of conflict in Aceh, Indonesia. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 83-101.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Prachi Thakur is an expert in inclusion and diversity. Her research includes topics that revolve around making spaces inclusive for marginalized groups within organizations and classrooms. She is currently based at the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Sunway University, Malaysia.

▸ Contact: arpita.prachithakur@gmail.com

Alexander Trupp is currently a Guest Professor in Human Geography at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Before joining Innsbruck, he served as Associate Professor, acting Head of the Asia Pacific Centre for Hospitality Research, and Deputy Dean for Research at Sunway University, Malaysia. His research focuses on social geographies, including (im)mobilities,

migration, tourism, sustainability, digitalization, and microbusinesses, with an emphasis on qualitative and creative methods. He has held academic positions at the University of the South Pacific (Fiji), Mahidol University (Thailand), and the University of Vienna. He is currently Editor-in-Chief of Advances in Southeast Asian Studies (ASEAS) and serves as Adjunct Professor at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA), Mahidol University.

▸ Contact: thithimadee.art@mahidol.ac.th

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Beyond Debt-Trap Narratives: How the Lao State Manoeuvres the Hybrid Governance of a Chinese Hydropower Project

Floramante SJ Ponce[a]*

[a]Univerité Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

*corresponding author: floramante.s.j.ponce@ulb.be

Received: 3 October 2024/ Accepted: 19 October 2024/ Published: 24 February 2025

▸ Ponce, F. S. J. (2024). Beyond debt-trap narratives: How the Lao state manoeuvres the hybrid governance of a Chinese hydropower project. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 5-29.

Over the past years, Chinese debt-financed investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Laos have increased considerably. This development has drawn the attention of many analysts, and consequently, narratives such as the Lao state losing its sovereignty or becoming the recent victim of China's "debt-trap diplomacy" have held sway over international press coverage. Drawing on the case of the Nam Nua 1 (NNua1) Project – the BRI flagship hydropower investment in Laos – this article aims to move beyond the dominant narratives of China's debt-trap diplomacy and sovereignty relinquishment by scrutinizing the Lao state's strength in manoeuvring the NNua1 Project's hybrid governance arrangements. The NNua1 project developer's great concentration on the economics of dam construction and operation, its hands-off approach to local political issues, and heavy dependence on the host state in dealing with relocation concerns have boosted the Lao state's strength in controlling the active engagement of the project's stakeholders in hydropower decision-making and planning. The article argues that the Lao state's strength in governing the NNua1 Project hinges on its capacity to mobilize hydropower resources from the external environment by negotiating relations with powerful foreign entities of hydropower development while maintaining internal control over its remote populations through decentralization techniques. This article contributes to the critical discussion of the influence of multi-stakeholder governance engagement on the Lao state's statehood.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; China; Debt-trap; Hydropower; Laos

INTRODUCTION

A major uptick in Chinese investments in the Mekong Region has been observed for the last decade. This is a corollary of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global strategy officially launched in 2013 by the Chinese state to bolster development projects in its partner countries. Recently, BRI project developers have concentrated on financing infrastructure investments in Laos, such as the Lao-China Railway, Vientiane-Vangvieng Highway, and Chinese hydroelectric dams. One of the latter is the Nam Nua 1 (NNua1) Hydropower Project, the article's

main subject[1]. According to its developer, China Southern Power Grid (CSG), the NNua1 is the BRI flagship hydropower investment in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

Both Chinese and Lao state authorities recognize the NNua1's and other Chinese infrastructure investments' vital role in fostering economic prosperity within Laos, whereas some critical observers articulate concerns over substantial debts that the Lao state has incurred with Chinese financial institutions to pursue such projects (Barney & Souksakoun, 2021; Chandran, 2023; Jacques, 2020; Lintner, 2020). The World Bank's recent report discloses that the external debt stocks of the Lao PDR are 127% higher than its Gross National Income, most of which has been owed to China (51%) (World Bank, 2023, p. 116). This might exhaust the Lao state's foreign exchange reserves and compel itself to cut public expenditure on essential sectors, such as health and education (Barney & Souksakoun, 2022). The Lao state has confronted this debt distress owing to its massive loans from Chinese banks associated with funding not only BRI infrastructure projects (Hurley et al., 2018), but also economic recovery programs during and after the pandemic. Recently, negative impressions about Chinese debt-financed investments in Laos – such as how the Lao state has become the recent victim of China's "debt-trap diplomacy" (Chandran, 2023; Jacques, 2020), or how it has lost its sovereignty by relinquishing a majority stake in *Électricité du Laos* Transmission Company Limited (EdLT) to China Southern Power Grid (CSG) (Lintner, 2020; cited in Barney & Souksakoun, 2021, p. 105) – have held sway over global media coverage (Tappe, 2024, p. 142).

Agreeing entirely with the assertion that the Chinese state ensnares its partner countries of relative indigence in their webs of expensive BRI projects is far from a straightforward endeavour, mainly because it is still a matter of ongoing debate. The debt-trap narratives' critics maintain that BRI investors engaging in the seizure of assets from debtor nations have not existed thus far (Brautigam & Rithmire, 2021). In fact, it has been observed that the Chinese state and financial institutions have undertaken measures to help BRI recipient countries experiencing debt distress renegotiate the terms of their existing Chinese loans (see Chen, 2020; Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Singh, 2020). To prove that since the BRI's inception, the Chinese state has harbored "malicious intentions" (Himmer & Rod, 2022, p. 265) in extending financial assistance for infrastructure projects also poses a formidable challenge. This stems mainly from difficulty gaining access to or interviewing diverse key actors involved in the BRI. Further, the burden of proof is not on China but rather on those making the claims about the Chinese state's malevolent motives for pursuing its debt-financed investments.

The dominant debt-trap narratives often portray the Lao state as an easy prey of Chinese investors or a "weak" actor (Himmer & Rod, 2022, p. 258) that inveigles itself into China's promises of progress. To succumb readily to dominant narratives is, at times, perilous, not because they are misleading or deceptive, but rather because they are deficient in telling and representing other facets of social reality. Although

1 To protect confidentiality, the real names of the hydropower company, the resettlement village, and all research participants have been changed. I also anonymized the outsourced companies that carried out feasibility studies and assessment reports, distributed entitlements, and implemented livelihood programs.

the debt-trap narratives can lay bare the Lao state's weakness in managing its recent public debt (Himmer & Rod, 2022, pp. 258-259), they tend to sidestep the state's relative strength in governing other aspects of Chinese hydroelectric projects. Thus, this article aims to illuminate these areas of hydropower governance that often receive less attention in the dominant debt-trap narratives by scrutinizing how and why the Lao state manoeuvres the NNua1's hybrid governance arrangements. It focuses particularly on the Lao state's power to facilitate or restrict the participation of the NNua1's stakeholders and examines the ramifications of such power on the ground[2]. Investigating how the Lao state fosters power asymmetries among the NNua1's stakeholders can also identify those who face great risks and receive substantial benefits, including those included in and excluded from Chinese hydroelectric projects' development processes.

Not only can this article take up scholars' invitations to analyze BRI host states (Klinger & Muldavin, 2019) and their participation in debt-led development through Chinese investments (Suhardiman et al., 2021, p. 80), but it can also add to the discussion of the intricacies linked to multi-stakeholder engagement in Chinese hydropower projects, alongside the influence of hybrid governance on state's central authority. Critical scholars of international law from the Global South have long argued that once a host state enters an international investment agreement with foreign hydroelectric developers, the latter obtain more leverage in controlling processes and practices related to hydropower governance and "usurping" the host state's "policy-making power[s]" (Kangave, 2012, p. 84; Sornarajah, 2003). In Laos, the interference of a hydropower financier in policy affairs ensued when the World Bank – as the Nam Theun 2 (NT2) Project's country-risk guarantor – compelled the Lao state to enact and enforce national policies on sustainable hydropower development, and to forge partnerships with diverse stakeholders in orchestrating the administration of water resources, large hydropower dams, and resettlement sites. Consequently, the preponderance of hydropower functions is no longer concentrated in the central authority but rather distributed by the Lao state to different hydropower actors and resettlement bodies at multiple scales. Several Lao state and party officials regard the process as "an infringement on sovereignty" (Creak & Barney, 2022, p. 17; Souvannaseng, 2019). This accords with how political geographers and sociologists view the fragmentation of centralized political power (Jessop, 2002; Pierre & Peters, 2019) as "the hollowing out of the state" (Bulkeley, 2005, p. 883), the relinquishment of 'domestic sovereignty' (Krasner, 1999), or 'limited statehood' (Risse, 2011).

The article, however, argues that despite the dispersion of hydropower functions and its central authority, the Lao state remains the domineering political force that controls the engagement of the NNua1's stakeholders. This domination, the article maintains, results mainly from one, the hands-off approach of Chinese investors to

2 Here, the article does not view the Lao state as a monolithic actor; instead, a nexus of heterogenous entities whose creation, maintenance, transformation, or "effect" (Mitchell, 1991) hinges on manifold economic processes, sociocultural practices, and political opportunities (Migdal & Schlichte, 2005). Meanwhile, stakeholders refer to diverse actors or network of actors across scales who gain benefits from, express concerns about, or play crucial roles in hydropower projects, which include but are not limited to hydropower developers and financiers, transboundary environmental publics (Yong, 2021), outsourced companies, national and local state officials, resettlement bodies, and the resettled.

the host state's domestic political affairs; two, the high level of dependence of Chinese hydropower developers on the Lao state in dealing with relocation issues. Both of which are salient features that distinguish Chinese investments from infrastructure projects funded by the World Bank and other non-Chinese financial institutions (Motta & Matthews, 2018, pp. 24-30; Siciliano & Urban, 2018).

In the data collection process, qualitative methods were utilized, encompassing interviews, analysis of secondary sources, and participant observation. The study involved conducting interviews with a range of key actors, including four national and district state officials, fifteen village leaders, along with three Lao staff and two Lao consultants of the NNua1. Additionally, informal discussions were held with the NNua1's two Chinese consultants. The study also conducted a secondary data analysis of documents from the Lao government and the NNua1. Further, ethnographic research was undertaken within Banmai Resettlement in Bokeo Province (see Figure 1) over 12 months between August 2018 and September 2019. This phase included the execution of 128 semi-structured interviews with households. Banmai represents the NNua1's largest resettlement site, accommodating more than 3,100 inhabitants or 560 households. According to my participants, the relocation process was carried out from July 2015 until the final quarter 2016.

In what follows, the article discusses why and how the Lao state has engaged in hybrid hydropower governance. Then, it juxtaposes the NNua1's governance arrangements with previous (non-Chinese) hydropower projects in Laos. Before outlining the article's arguments and key findings, it scrutinizes how the Lao state encourages or inhibits stakeholders' active participation in the NNua1's hybrid governance.

Figure 1. The location of the NNua1's dam site and its largest resettlement community.

THE LAO PDR'S ENGAGEMENT IN HYBRID HYDROPOWER GOVERNANCE

Engaging various stakeholders in governing hydropower projects or hybrid hydropower governance in the Mekong River has gained currency owing to the greater recognition that hydroelectric dams' wide-ranging effects can ripple out through heterogeneous actors from different scales. To examine how these implications have crossed over to manifold spatial borders, recent scholarship has regarded the Mekong River and its natural resources as "transboundary commons" that "traverse jurisdictions and property regimes within as well as between nation-states" (Miller et al., 2020, p. 297). Within hybrid hydropower governance, stakeholders have had diverse positions on hydropower development, because large-scale dams can provide economic opportunities for some and limit access to "the Mekong transboundary commons" for others (Yong, 2023, pp. 2-3). Scholars have already revealed how several hydropower companies and Lower Mekong riparian states prioritize hydroelectricity generation owing to its macroeconomic benefits, while sidestepping the effects of building dams on water systems and food security (Dombrowsky & Hensengerth, 2018; Fullbrook, 2013; Lebel et al., 2020; Ponce, 2022a). The prevalence of hydropower initiatives has posed the risk of rupturing nature-society relations (Mahanty et al., 2023), for they have impeded the Mekong River's current, thereby impinging upon riparian populations (Baird & Shoemaker, 2008; Blake & Barney, 2018; Käkönen, 2023; Ponce, 2022b, 2023) whose lives are dependent on the Mekong's transboundary mobile commons (Miller et al., 2020). To safeguard their interest from this transboundary environmental harm, the affected communities must participate in hydropower-decision making, and "their roles and involvement" need to move beyond "discussions on resettlement and compensations" (Suhardiman & Geheb, 2021, p. 320). Rather than ensuring this participation, the Lao state has engaged in hybrid hydropower governance primarily because of macroeconomic reasons, i.e., overcoming financial and technical inadequacies and distributing risks in implementing hydropower projects.

If the Lao state did not collaborate with various hydropower stakeholders – especially the World Bank and hydropower developers – it would not be able to overcome its financial and technical inadequacies in pursuing and governing hydropower projects, as maintained by Mr. Kham and Mr. Pheng, national state officials from the Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM) I interviewed. Mr. Kham repeatedly extolled the World Bank's contributions not only to the 1,080-Megawatt NT2's "successful implementation", but importantly, to the proliferation of a new "hydropower business model" that helped Laos attract more hydropower investors in recent years: "the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model" (Interview, August 2018). This model, Mr. Kham reiterated, has been promoted by the World Bank to "increase the participation of all hydropower stakeholders," e.g., hydropower developers and financiers, independent power producers (IPP), and international NGOs and CSOs. For critical scholars, however, the World Bank impelled the Lao state to include all hydropower stakeholders and affected communities in hydropower decision-making, because it responded to a barrage of criticisms and pressure from social movements (Goldman, 2001), and it took a high-stakes role as a main financier and sovereign risk guarantor of NT2 (Creak & Barney, 2022). To secure its financial interest, the World

Bank likewise intruded into the Lao state's different regimes associated with hydropower development. While the World Bank transformed the Lao state's hydropower regulatory regimes by bringing forward new social and environmental policies, the former also modified the latter's hydropower financial regimes by introducing the PPP model.

The PPP model of hydroelectric business – as stated in Article 45 of the Revised Electricity Law of 2017 in Laos – means that the Lao PDR awards a concession to a private investor or developer, either from Laos or abroad, to finance, construct, operate, and maintain a hydroelectric dam for a certain period of time (Lao PDR, 2017). The concession period allows the private developer to recoup their investments in facilitating the hydroelectric project and its resettlement programs. When the concession contract ends, the Lao state starts to fully acquire the hydroelectric dam's ownership and operation. To achieve the project's smooth transfer, three years before the concession period ends, the hydropower company must ensure that the dam and other key electric facilities remain in good condition. It must also provide a series of training sessions to the civil servants who will operate and maintain the dam[3]. The concession period is dependent on the PPP model's variants.

	Variants of the Public–Private Partnership Model in Laos	
	Build-Own-Operate-Transfer (BOT)	*Build-Own-Operate* (BOO)
A) Size of the dam by installed capacity	Greater than or equal to 5 Megawatts	Less than 5,000 Kilowatts
B) Concession should be approved by	National government	Provincial governments
C) Financed, constructed and operated by	Private investor/developer	Private investor/developer
D) Maximum years of concession	25 years	40 years
E) Ownership	Private investor/developer during the concession period, then the Lao PDR	Private investor/developer during the concession period, then dam decommissioning

Figure 2. Difference between the variants of the PPP model in Laos. Figure created by the author based on the statements of the MEM official and the 2017 Revised Electricity Law.

There are two variants of the PPP model in Laos: first, "Build-own-operate-transfer" (BOT); second, "Build-own-operate" (BOO) (see Figure 2). The 2017 Revised Electricity Law mentions that the concession period for hydroelectric projects under BOT and BOO should not exceed 25 years and forty years, respectively. The BOT variant, according to Mr. Pheng, applies to hydroelectric dams with installed capacities equal to or greater than 5 Megawatts. The BOO variant is for small hydroelectric projects (below 5,000 kW) that may operate only until the end of the concession period. It is only the national government that can approve BOT hydroelectric projects, whereas provincial governments have the autonomy to permit the operation of BOO hydroelectric projects. According to the 2012 Electricity

3 Usually from the EdL and MEM.

Law of Laos, however, the definitions of BOT and BOO hydroelectric projects are different (see Open Development Mekong, 2018). A dam that has an installed capacity of less than or equal to 15 MW falls under BOO; any dam greater than 15 MW is classified as BOT. Mr. Pheng explained that in 2018, the Lao government revised these definitions to broaden the scope of the dams that should be approved by the national government. This modification was made after the collapse of the 15 MW Nam Ao Dam in Phaxay District, Xiengkhouang Province, in September 2017.[4] The incident, Mr. Pheng emphasized, revealed that provincial governments still lacked the expertise and equipment to scrutinize the technical aspects of dam construction and operation.

Mr. Pheng explained to me that both BOT and BOO aim not only to ensure collaborative participation and transparency, but also to distribute benefits to all stakeholders involved in hydropower projects. Importantly, the PPP model enables the investors and financiers of hydropower dams to disperse their projects' inherent risks. The larger the hydropower project, Mr. Pheng added, the more complicated the potential risks involved. For hydropower developers and financiers, reducing manifold financial, environmental, socio-economic, and political risks posed by building large dams means ensuring a high return on investment (Cruz-del Rosario, 2011; Middleton et al., 2015). Due to this goal of the PPP to minimize risks, the World Bank has encouraged the Lao state to consider all stakeholders involved in making decisions during all phases of hydropower development, i.e., from planning, financing, constructing dams, to relocating and compensating affected villagers, etc. If other countries notice this collaborative or hybrid governance approach of the Lao government, Mr. Kham and Mr. Pheng pointed out, foreign investors will come to Laos to do hydropower business. This hydropower proliferation, they added, might increase the national income and realize the Lao government's goals to become "the battery of Southeast Asia" and be removed from the United Nations' (UN) list of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the 2020s (UNDP, 2017, p. XVIII).

The key hydropower project developers and financiers under the PPP model in Laos have changed over the years. Creak and Barney (2022) have divided this transformation into three phases, and called it "the triptych in [hydropower] practice" (p. 15). The first phase, between the 1990s and 2000s, was characterized by the substantial presence of hydropower investors from the Global North and the World Bank's intrusion into the Lao state's hydropower regulatory and financial regimes. After the full operation of the NT2 in 2010, the World Bank, however, has decided to take a break in financing hydropower projects in Laos. This marked the second phase of hydropower projects under the PPP model, where the Lao state deliberately distanced itself from Multilateral Development Banks and sought new hydropower investors and developers primarily from non-OECD countries, particularly "Thailand, China, Malaysia, and Vietnam" (Creak & Barney, 2022, p. 17). The third and present phase reveals the Lao state's relentless determination to hold sway over the proprietorship of hydroelectric dams in years to come with the aid of Chinese capital (Creak & Barney, 2022). Over the past decade, the number of hydroelectric projects pursued by

4 For more information about this dam collapse, see: https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/nam-ao-laos-compensation-06272019153425.html

EdL and its subsidiary company, EdL-Generation Public Company (EdL-GEN), and whose developers and/or financiers come from China have increased significantly. Apart from the NNua1, 14 Chinese-funded hydroelectric projects in Laos have also been operational since 2019 (see Figure 3, upper table). In 2023, the Lao PDR expects the completion of about seven other Chinese-funded hydroelectric projects (see Figure 3, lower table). All Chinese dams in Figure C adopt the PPP model, specifically the 'Build-own-operate-transfer' (BOT) scheme. How the NNua1's (and other Chinese Project's) governance arrangements differ from those from the first two phases will be discussed in the next section.

Project Name	Status	Year of completion	Installed capacity (Megawatt)
Nam Nua 1 (*Pseudonym*)	Operational	2019	168
Nam Chien	Operational	2018	104
Expansion of Nam Ngum 1	Operational	2018	80
Nam Phay	Operational	2018	86
Nam Khan 3	Operational	2016	60
Xeset 3	Operational	2016	23
Nam Ou 2	Operational	2016	120
Nam Ou 5	Operational	2016	240
Nam Ou 6	Operational	2016	180
Nam Khan 2	Operational	2015	130
Houay Lamphan	Operational	2015	88
Nam Ngum 5	Operational	2012	120
Xeset 2	Operational	2009	76
Nam Mang 3	Operational	2005	40
Nam Lik 1-2	Operational	2005	100
TOTAL MEGAWATTS			**1615**

Project Name	Status	Expected Year of Completion	Installed capacity (Megawatt)
Nam Ngum 3	Under construction	2020	480
Nam Ou 1	Under construction	2020	180
Nam Ou 3	Under construction	2020	210
Nam Ou 4	Under construction	2020	132
Nam Ou 7	Under construction	2020	210
Nam Theun 1	Under construction	Not Specified	670
Xe Lanong 1	Planned	2020	60
Nam Ngum 4	Planned	2023	240
TOTAL MEGAWATTS			**2182**

Figure 3. *Upper table*: hydroelectric projects in Laos that are currently operational and whose funders and/ or developers are from China. *Lower table*: hydroelectric projects in Laos that are either under construction or planned and whose funders and/ or developers are from China. Figure created by the author based on the Ministry of Energy and Mines' Vision 2030, Development Plan 2025; and Five-Year Development Report (2016-2020) (see MEM, 2017) and cross-checked with the data presented by Barney and Souksankoun (2021, pp. 111-113).

THE NAM NUA 1 PROJECT'S GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

The NNua1 Project's formal commencement can be traced back to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Lao PDR and CSG on 28 August 2006, with the mutual objective of building the NNua1 dam in northern Laos. The NNua1 commissioned the Sino-Hydra Investigation Design and Research Institute (SHIDRP) to conduct feasibility studies and safeguard analysis between November 2006 and July 2007. Shortly after the SHIDRP produced the NNua1's impact assessment reports in June 2013, the construction phase began in November 2014. By the final quarter of 2018, the project had finished building its dam and advanced to the operational status of its three generators. In April 2019, the Lao PDR's MEM officially authorized the NNua1 for commercial operation. Similar to numerous hydroelectric initiatives in Laos, the NNua1 also employs the PPP model, specifically the BOT scheme. Under this agreement, the CSG was granted a 28-year concession period, during which it could recoup its investment costs.

The NNua1 claims to be the inaugural venture under the auspices of China's BRI in the Lao hydroelectric sector, as proclaimed by the CSG in various press statements. This declaration also echoes the testimonials of the NNua1's Lao and Chinese staff and consultants I spoke with. A crucial aspect of the project's financial arrangement stems from its affiliation with the BRI, leading to its capital inflow being secured through loans from China's major state-operated banks. Unlike hydropower projects funded by the World Bank and other non-Chinese financial institutions, the names of the Chinese banks that granted loans to the NNua1 were not publicly disclosed.

Financially underpinned by a substantial investment amounting to USD 450 million, the NNua1's equity distribution is marked by a partnership between EdL, which owns a 20% stake, and CSG, which commands the majority shareholding of 80%. The CSG's role in the NNua1 as a project developer has been viewed by critical scholars of Chinese investments as "unusual", for it has been prominent in building grid and transmission infrastructure projects, not in developing nor operating hydroelectric dams (Motta & Matthews, 2018, p. 28). When the Lao government sold a majority share in its newly founded electric distribution company – *Électricité du Laos*-Transmission (EdLT; another EdL subsidiary company founded in 2020) – to the CSG, the latter has also attracted wide press coverage and attention from academic scholars (Barney & Souksakoun, 2021; Hiebert, 2021; Strangio, 2021; Xinhua, 2021; Zhai & Johnson, 2020).

For several analysts, the creation of EdLT served as a means for the Lao state to service its debts to China (Chandran, 2023; Jacques, 2020). The hefty investment in Chinese hydroelectric projects via "Engineering Procurement Construction" (EPC) contracts – which "recycled much of the loan financing into Chinese engineering and construction companies" and are known for their high-cost structures – is associated with EdL's excessively high-debt levels, entailing a risk of precipitating a financial crisis in Laos in 2021 (Barney & Souksakoun, 2021, p. 100; cited in Creak & Barney, 2022, p. 17). As a result, the Lao state has been subject to dominant narratives regarding its engagements in Chinese debt-financed investments. To illustrate, it has been portrayed as the latest victim of China's "debt-trap diplomacy" (Chandran, 2023; Jacques, 2020), a strategy that exploits economic vulnerabilities to exert influence

over poor partner countries (Chellaney, 2017). The Lao state's decision to cede a majority stake in EdLT to the CSG has also been interpreted as a loss of sovereignty (Lintner, 2020; cited in Barney & Souksakoun, 2021, p. 105).

To understand the dynamics of the NNua1's hybrid governance arrangements, this article does not want to concentrate too much on the dominant debt-trap narratives for two main reasons. First, characterizing Chinese debt-financed investments or BRI projects as debt traps remains disputed within global economic discourse and warrants further empirical scrutiny. Contrary to the notion of "debt-trap diplomacy," several scholars argue that there is no historical precedent for Chinese banks or project developers appropriating assets from indebted nations (Brautigam & Rithmire, 2021). Chinese entities involved in BRI project development and finance tend to renegotiate loan terms, enabling debtor countries to restructure their debt (Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Singh, 2020). Between 2020 and 2022, the Lao state also received substantial debt service deferrals from China, giving the former temporary debt relief (World Bank, 2022, p. 15). Further, the World Bank's 2021 and 2022 International Debt Reports disclose that the ratio of Laos' external debt stocks to exports in recent years has been better relative to 2009. The external debt stocks to exports were 428% in 2009 (World Bank, 2021, p. 93); however, more than a decade later, the ratio of external debt stocks to exports was only 237% in 2021 and 215% in 2022 (World Bank, 2023, p. 116). This indicates that the Lao state had been saddled with heavy debts even before it started to obtain Chinese loans to finance BRI infrastructure projects in 2013.

Second and last, while the debt-trap narratives may highlight the Lao state's vulnerabilities in managing its recent financial obligations (Himmer & Rod, 2022, pp. 258-259), they often overlook how the Lao state retains a dominant position in controlling the level of engagement of the NNua1's stakeholders. This dominance stems mainly from two interconnected factors.

One, the hands-off approach adopted by Chinese investors and financiers towards the host state's domestic political affairs has created a power vacuum that the Lao state has been able to exploit. The national state officials I interviewed appreciated how the World Bank guided the Lao PDR in creating and implementing national laws on sustainable hydropower development. However, the NNua1's Lao consultant I worked with, who also acted as a consultant of the NT2 and other Chinese hydropower projects in Laos, viewed the World Bank's interference in the Lao PDR's policymaking negatively. When he worked as a consultant of the NT2, he observed that the World Bank required the project to comply with "many bureaucratic requirements" and to produce "many unnecessary reports" that were "too costly" (personal communication, July 2018). The World Bank supported the production of "many unnecessary reports", the Lao consultant thought conspiratorially, because it was an income-generating activity of "some technical experts and consultants of the World Bank from Western countries" (personal communication, July 2018). The Lao consultant told me that the CSG and other developers of Chinese hydropower projects in Laos with whom he worked were "better", for they "trusted more local consultants from Laos" over "consultants from the United States or Europe" (personal communication, July 2018). Importantly, Chinese investors and financiers took a different approach than the World Bank: the former were "focusing only on completing feasibility studies and credible environmental and social impact assessments" rather

than "producing unnecessary reports that could cause delays" (personal communication, July 2018). This view accords closely with the perspective of the Lao state and party officials interviewed by Souvannaseng (2019, pp. 174-177; 185-176) on how Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) financing "slowed the country's development planning" (cited in Creak & Barney, 2022, p. 17). This hands-off approach of Chinese hydropower developers and financiers to host the state's domestic political affairs was neither a novel strategy nor exclusive to Laos only. The Chinese state has encouraged BRI investors of the world to "oppose acts that impose one's will on others or interfere in the internal affairs of others as well as the practice of the strong bullying the weak" (Xi, 2017, p. 53). Although BRI investors' hands-off approach – based on the principle of "mutual noninterference" – demonstrates its commitment to respecting the right of countries "to choose their own development path" (Xi, 2017, pp. 52-53), it potentially gives the Lao state more flexibility in deciding who can be included in and excluded from Chinese projects' development plans and processes.

Two, how Chinese hydropower developers are heavily reliant on host states in addressing relocation issues has further reinforced the Lao state's dominant position in the NNua1's hybrid governance arrangements. This high level of dependence on Chinese hydropower developers is, I argue, a product (or perhaps another form) of their hands-off approach, or a symptom of the CSG's preoccupation with the business aspects of the NNua1 dam construction and operation. Similar to other Chinese hydropower project developers within and outside Laos (see Motta & Matthews, 2018; Siciliano & Urban, 2018), the CSG is not as intrusive as the World Bank, for the former gives the Lao state more discretion as to how plan, execute, and monitor the NNua1's resettlement programs. During my time in Banmai, a Chinese consultant of the NNua1 explained to me that the CSG trusted the Lao government in dealing with relocation concerns because it had "more experience in implementing hydropower development and resettlement projects than the CSG" (personal communication, October 2018). A Lao staff member of the NNua1 also told me that the CSG "followed the [Lao] government's advice on relocation concerns" without hesitation, because the Lao state had "a deeper understanding of the local situation" of the affected communities (personal communication, November 2018). The CSG's heavy reliance on the Lao state is further evident in its decision to take up the latter's suggestion to broaden the scope of the resettlement area beyond the project's reservoir, notwithstanding that this move made the project unprofitable. Consequently, the expansion brought about the relocation of 1,750 households, or 10,000 individuals, from 37 villages in Bokeo and Louangnamtha Province (Ponce, 2022b). Importantly, the CSG did not intervene in how the Lao state formed the NNua1's resettlement bodies and redistributed hydropower functions. As a result, it opens more avenues for the Lao state to manoeuvre the NNua1's hybrid governance arrangements.

MANOEUVRING STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENT IN THE NNUA1 PROJECT

This section assesses multiple stakeholders' level of engagement in the NNua1's hybrid governance. I argue that the redistribution of hydropower functions/responsibilities to different entities is a way for the Lao state to negotiate its hydropower relationships, rather than a process of "hollowing out" (Bulkeley, 2005). The CSG's

hands-off approach to domestic political affairs and high level of dependence on the Lao state concerning relocation issues also engender a paradoxical dynamic; that is, the Lao state's relative weakness in economic capacity to facilitate hydropower development is transformed into a strategic advantage. This advantage allows the Lao state to maintain its political strength by privileging some stakeholders, while limiting the participation of others. I divided this section into three parts. The first part unpacks how the Lao state formed governing bodies in Banmai. It also analyses other compelling reasons why the Lao state and NNua1 redistributed hydroelectric functions to the project stakeholders. The second part tackles the lack of engagement of NGOs/CSOs. The implication of this form of hybrid governance for the villagers' participation and resettlement experiences will be discussed in the third part.

Redistributing Hydropower Functions to Resettlement Bodies

Since the NNua1 adopted the PPP model, the Lao state refrains from monopolizing the facilitation of relocation programs. Similarly, the Lao state is virtually deficient in financial capabilities it would need to dominate the project's governance. This lack compels the Lao state to adopt decentralization techniques in governing the NNua1's resettlement programs. Cistulli (2002) defines decentralization as the act of sharing some of the power of a central authority in making decisions with other actors. Decentralization can be either geographical (how the physical location of decision-making authority shifts from a central level to a regional or local level) or institutional (how the central authority gives its decision-making power to local governments, public organizations, or private entities) (Cistulli, 2002). Here, I define decentralization as the process through which the Lao state's central political authority and hydropower functions have been redistributed to the NNua1's stakeholders at multiple scales. This conceptualization differs from Cistulli's in at least two ways. One, the decentralization process in hybrid hydropower governance deals not only with the processes of making decisions but also with the stages of implementing and monitoring hydropower projects. Two, unlike in Cistulli's geographical decentralization, some stakeholders involved in the NNua1 transcend Lao administrative borders, e.g., the CSG, the project's Chinese consultants. To unpack the decentralization process in the NNua1's relocation process, I will analyze how the Lao state established various resettlement bodies in Banmai and handed over different functions to such bodies.

According to the NNua1's Lao consultant I interviewed, the project's Resettlement Committee, formed by the Lao state, was comprised mainly of representatives of the central government and the executive departments of the Bokeo and Louangnamtha Provincial Governments (see Figure 4). This committee primarily serves as an intermediate agent between the central and local government in two interrelated ways. First, while the Resettlement Committee collaborated with local government units in formulating a Resettlement Action Plan, it also informed the central government – i.e., the Prime Minister's and Deputy Prime Minister's offices – about how the NNua1 was implementing the plan. Second, the Resettlement Committee joined forces with provincial and district governments to set up the NNua1's Resettlement Management Units, as well as overseeing the performance of such units on behalf of the central government.

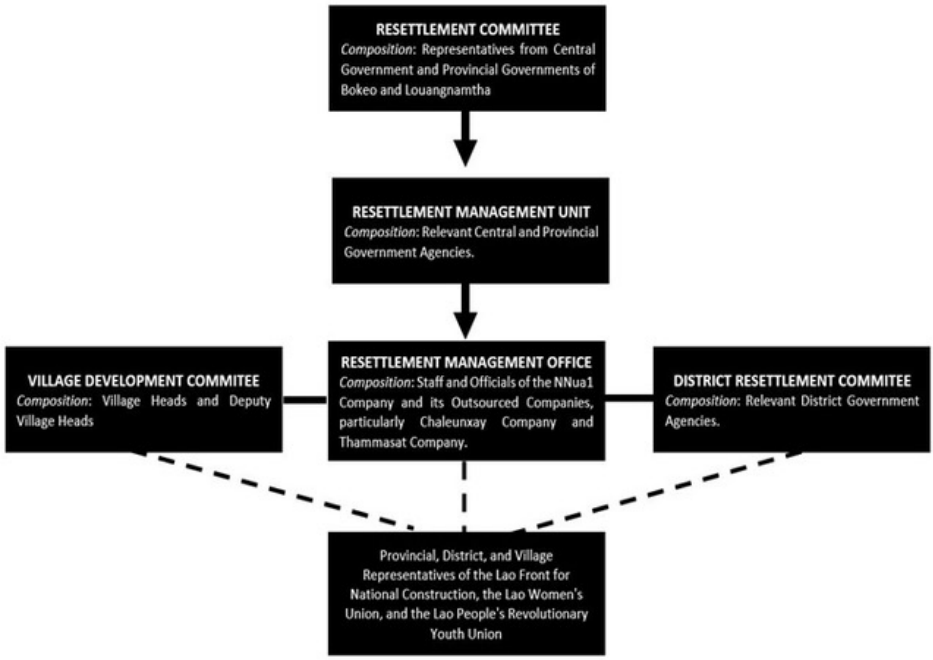

Figure 4. Institutional structure of the NNua1 Project's resettlement bodies. Figure created by the author based on the project's Resettlement Action Plan and the statements of some district government officials and village leaders, alongside consultants and staff of the NNua1 Company and its outsourced companies.

The NNua1 Project has two Resettlement Management Units: one in Phaoudom District, Bokeo (which is in Banmai Resettlement), and the other in Nalae District, Louangnamtha. Although these units have no direct communication with the central government, they consolidate the relationships among the provincial, district, and village authorities, and the NNua1's Resettlement Management Office to facilitate the relocation's administrative, financial, and technical aspects. For some staff and consultants of the NNua1's Resettlement Management Units I spoke with, these units primarily administered the construction of houses and physical infrastructure in all resettlement communities, as well as the distribution of swidden land and livelihood and food support, and the execution of various community development programs. The Resettlement Management Units also supervised whether scheduled activities in the Resettlement Action Plan were carried out on time by responsible resettlement bodies. Likewise, these units played a huge part in guiding and giving a series of technical training sessions to staff and officials of the District Resettlement Committee and Village Development Committee to ensure the seamless implementation of resettlement programs. Importantly, the Resettlement Management Units were mainly responsible for the resettlement budgeting process – specifically for deciding how much funding should be allocated to all initiatives and activities before, during, and after the relocation; financial compensation for the affected villagers; physical infrastructures and houses; and salaries, allowances, and/or honoraria of consultants and

key members of the NNua1's Resettlement Management Office, District Resettlement Committee, and Village Development Committee (see Figure 4).

The NNua1's Resettlement Management Office consists virtually entirely of private-sector actors – particularly staff and consultants of companies commissioned by the NNua1 – that played key roles in facilitating the resettlement process between 2015 and 2016. The NNua1 commissioned the Lao company, Chaleunxay Company, to clear *unexploded ordnances* (UXOs) and construct houses, roads, market buildings, community meeting halls, schools, temples and spirit houses, public health centres, electricity and water infrastructure and other physical infrastructures in eleven relocation sites of the project. Chaleunxay likewise transported the resettled villagers' properties from the former villages to Banmai, distributing food and rice support. Concerning livelihood programs after the relocation, the NNua1 subcontracted Thammasat Company (another Lao company). A Lao staff of the NNua1 added that Thammasat provided "special support for poorer families, widowed mothers, and persons with mental [disorder]" (personal communication, May 2019)[5].

The District Resettlement Committee in Banmai – occasionally called the District Resettlement Working Group by some staff of the NNua1 – is mainly composed of officials of the Phaoudom District Government alongside district and provincial representatives of MEM and Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE). During my fieldwork, the District Resettlement Committee had three full-time staff based in Banmai. In governing the resettlement, the project's Resettlement Committee and Resettlement Management Unit delegated to the District Resettlement Committee and the NNua1's Resettlement Management Office the responsibilities for distributing agricultural lands and compensating the villagers' losses of annual crops and trees. Another district official told me that the District Resettlement Committee and Resettlement Management Unit had helped the villagers redress their grievances about inadequate or unpaid compensation. Upon investigating the demographic composition of individuals responsible for settling the villagers' grievances, I found no involvement of Chinese officials, consultants, or staff from the CSG and the NNua1. This is a manifestation of the NNua1's hands-off approach to domestic political issues and a high degree of reliance on the Lao state to address relocation concerns.

I managed to interview and establish good relationships with all fifteen village heads and deputy village heads in Banmai. These village leaders represent both the Lao state and the resettled. While they serve as representatives of the Lao state at the village level, they may directly express their (dis)satisfaction with relocation programs to the District Resettlement Committee and provincial officials on behalf of the resettled. As in the older settlements, the village heads and their deputies in Banmai also informed their constituents about the programs and propaganda of the national, provincial, and district governments. Carrying out this duty increases not only the local people's awareness about and participation in the projects and activities of the Lao state, but also the latter's presence and visibility.

The village leaders and their deputies are also responsible for appointing village representatives of the Lao Women's Union, the Lao Front for National Construction,

5 A person with mental "disorder" is politically incorrect, however.

and the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union in Banmai. According to the village leaders and district government officials I talked to, the Village Development Committee, the NNua1's Resettlement Management Office, and the District Resettlement Committee should coordinate all relocation programs and activities with the mass organizations mentioned above (see Figure 4). The NNua1's Resettlement Action Plan also stated that the village heads and their deputies should join forces with village representatives of all mass organizations in Banmai to initiate and institutionalize savings-led credit groups, revolving funds, medical expenses funds, and loan disbursements in agriculture and animal husbandry.

The resettlement bodies' effective and efficient organization, according to the District Resettlement Committee's officials I spoke with, aided the Lao state in successfully reaching (*theung*) formerly isolated villagers and making the latter modern (*thansamai*) and civilized (*sivilai*). As Xeng, a senior district official, stated in a conversation sometime in November 2018:

> If the Lao PDR [*SoPoPo Lao*] did not promote cooperation between the NNua1 Company, the Chaleunxay Company, the Thammasat Company, the provincial government, district government, and the village headmen, perhaps the Lao PDR would fail in reaching and relocating the villagers formerly residing in impenetrable forest [*pa*] and hilltops [*doy*]. Even though the Lao PDR did not have much money, it could still facilitate relocation and development programs here in Banmai. The Lao PDR was still able to make the hilltop people [*khôn doy*] modern [*thansamai*] and civilized [*sivilai*]. This is thanks to our hardworking government and party leaders who have been successful in encouraging cooperation in the entire country.

This statement implies that local state officials, as represented by Xeng, do not view decentralization techniques in governing the NNua1's resettlement as the end of the Lao PDR's political authority. Rather, these techniques allow the Lao state to govern once unreachable villagers. It contradicts the theoretical perspectives of political geographers and sociologists who argue that the fragmentation of centralized political power is a symptom of the relinquishment of "domestic sovereignty" (Krasner, 1999), the phenomenon of "limited statehood" (Risse, 2011), or the "hollowing out of the state" (Bulkeley, 2005). James Scott might interpret the decentralization techniques used in governing the resettlement as ways whereby the Lao state expands its "legible state space" (Scott, 2009, p. 77). How the Lao state posted its representatives (i.e., various resettlement bodies) in Banmai could likewise be viewed as the Lao state's mechanism for making formerly Zomian villagers post-Zomian (Sprenger, 2021; see also Stolz & Tappe, 2021). While these representatives could make the Lao state more conspicuous and more available in the most far-flung corners of Laos, they might also increase its surveillance and control of villages. Unlike James Scott's Zomians, who invariably escape this gaze of the state, the post-Zomian villagers I worked with – akin to the uplanders observed by Sprenger – are willing to establish their relations and negotiate with the Lao state and its local representatives (Sprenger, 2021).

When I asked the NNua1's two Lao consultants and three Lao staff about the importance of the participation of private-sector actors and district officials in

facilitating the NNua1, two consultants and a staff emphasized that it enabled the CSG to become more focused on its major tasks: a) the construction of the NNua1 dam and hydroelectric facilities; b) the building of electric transmission lines connecting Laos, Thailand, and China. The remaining two staff mentioned that this decentralization or redistribution of hydropower functions helped the NNua1 not only meet its deadline, but also increase efficiency and avoid additional input costs. As Mi, a Lao staff, explained in a conversation in October 2018:

> The NNua1 has a strict deadline. It is impossible for us alone to facilitate all processes involved in the preparation stage, the dam construction and operation, and the relocation of villagers. We need the help of other companies to meet our deadlines, achieve our goals, and become more efficient. Remember, if we fall behind the schedule, it means additional input costs. Conversely, if the implementation is right on schedule, it is a good thing for the NNua1 in general.

Therefore, the NNua1's hybrid governance has been appreciated by private-sector actors I spoke with because of its economic importance only, rather than its capacity to govern the negative externalities of dam construction and displacement. The statement also implies how these market actors have failed to recognize the potential of the decentralization process to facilitate effective collaboration among all the stakeholders involved at multiple organizational scales. In the remaining subsections, I will discuss the limited participation of NGOs/CSOs and resettled villagers in the NNua1's hybrid hydropower governance.

NGOs' and CSOs' Engagement in the NNua1 Project

When I asked the Lao consultant – who helped me gain access going to Banmai – whether there was a collaboration between the NNua1 and international NGOs/CSOs in assessing cross-border environmental and social impacts of the NNua1 dam construction, he just mentioned that the people working in NGOs/CSOs had "good suggestions, but unfeasible" (personal communication, August 2018)[6]. During my time in Banmai, a Chinese consultant told me he hoped I was not part of any NGOs/CSOs. As he explained the reason: "I've already worked in many Chinese dams in Asia and Africa; I've already seen how they [NGOs/CSOs] attacked hydropower projects to push their agenda. They'll never appreciate the good aspects!" (personal communication, October 2018). He added that NGOs/CSOs should not also worry about Chinese hydropower projects, within and/or outside Laos, because Chinese project developers had good access to the *world-class* expertise of international hydropower consultants and technical experts from China.

The statements above suggest that the adoption of the PPP model as a hydropower financial regime and decentralization techniques in governing relocation programs by the CSG and the Lao state may not be a guarantee of greater civil society engagement and that other factors might be at play in determining the NGOs'/

6 Before I went to the resettlement, he also warned that I should avoid asking these questions to the NNua1 staff and officials so that I could have smooth fieldwork.

CSOs' level of participation. In Laos, as in other one-party states, the regulatory framework for NGOs/CSOs has remained inflexible. Not only is the freedom of expression and assembly of NGOs/CSOs curtailed, their activities and initiatives are also monitored and scrutinized by the Lao state and its apparatuses to check whether they are politically charged, critical of government policies, or challenging the Lao People's Revolutionary Party's (LPRP) objectives (see Baird, 2018). Active participation in hydropower decision-making and planning by stakeholders at the grassroots and environmental publics (Yong, 2021) who voice concerns over hydropower development and resettlement will remain limited as long as the Lao state maintains an uncompromising attitude towards NGOs/CSOs.

Contrary to the above statement of the Chinese consultant, I argue that the quality of the NNua1's environmental and social management plans and assessment reports is not *world-class* for at least four reasons. First, the reports provided inaccurate information about the resettled. This mistake might reduce the quality of the compensation package for affected ethnic minorities. It is also worth pointing out that the Lao-Buddhist, Lamét, and Khmu villagers in Banmai have different sociocultural needs (i.e., some ethnic minorities wish to have spirit houses; others need Buddhist temples). Moreover, some ethnic minorities are more vulnerable than others as they are at a higher risk of being marginalized due to the negative impacts of displacement and resettlement (see Blake & Barney, 2018).

Second, all the NNua1 reports were mainly produced by the SHIDRP with the help of some Lao consultants. There was a conflict of interest here. Ideally, the management plans and their assessments should be done by different entities to guarantee checks and balances. Third, the NNua1 did not include the Standard Environmental and Social Obligations (SESO) of their Concession Agreement (CA) in their assessment reports. The SESO's public disclosure – a mandate of the 2016 SHD Policy guidelines – is crucial because it serves as the basis for monitoring the NNua1's level of compliance in mitigating potential environmental and social impacts of the NNua1 dam.

Fourth and last, all NNua1 reports I accessed failed to tackle the transboundary and basin-wide socio-ecological effects of the NNua1 dam construction. When I asked another Lao consultant about this, he emphasized: "The NNua1 Project does not have transboundary issues, because its dam is located on a tributary of the Mekong, not on the mainstream" (personal communication, May 2019). Unlike the Xayaburi and Pak Beng whose dams are situated in the Mekong mainstream, the NNua1 did not hold PNPCA consultations with all transboundary stakeholders. It indicates that the engagement of the "transboundary environmental publics" formed through the PNPCA (Yong, 2021) in the NNua1 is notably absent. This stems mainly from a lack of recognition that dams within tributaries also have "cumulative impacts on seasonal hydrology, sediment flows and fish passage" at a transboundary and basin-wide level (Hirsch, 2016, p. 67; see also MRC, 2021). If the Lao state and the NNua1 had assessed the transboundary and basin-level impacts of the NNua1 dam and/or reached out or collaborated with NGOs/CSOs, probably the NNua1 dam's negative externalities would have been recognized and considered, and perhaps the quality of their reports would have been improved.

Villagers' Involvement and Resettlement Experiences

Apart from NGOs/CSOs, displaced villagers also have minimal involvement in the NNua1's hybrid governance. This can be observed from the villagers' experiences of livelihood reconstruction programs and the distribution of food support and financial compensation. All households I interviewed in Banmai Resettlement (128 households) claimed that the NNua1, alongside the district government, organized consultative meetings in their former settlements. During those meetings, the NNua1's staff and district officials promised them they would get monthly rice and food support for three years after the relocation. Although all 128 households received sacks of rice two or three times, only 109 households got food support (a dozen eggs, two packets of noodles, and a can of sardines per family member). 103 households obtained food support one time only; six households received it two or three times (Ponce, 2022a, 2022b). When I asked the Chaleunxay Company's staff about this disparity between the promised and the actual food support, he mentioned that their company just followed the changes in the compensation ordered by the NNua1's staff and district officials. None of the villagers I spoke with were consulted about these changes, however. This makes some villagers think that the NNua1 Project is a "secret project" (*khôngkanlab*).

Regarding livelihood reconstruction programs, 46 out of 128 households revealed that the Thammasat Company conducted surveys about their desired agricultural activities and livestock they wanted to raise only after moving to Banmai. Prior to the relocation, the Thammasat did not properly assess the displaced villagers' level of economic dependence on the river and nature, which contributed to the failure to identify and provide effective livelihood alternatives. Such ex-post facto livelihood assessment, or what I call "relocate now, assess later", was also done by other recent large hydropower projects in Laos (Blake & Barney, 2018; Whitington, 2012). Further, the NNua1's social and environmental impact assessment reports failed to account for how the dam construction would adversely affect the river systems after the relocation. This contradicts the claims of Lao consultants and staff I spoke with that they studied carefully the dam construction's social and environmental risks and their impacts on livelihood and food sources. During my fieldwork, many villagers complained to me that they caught fewer fish and crustaceans in Banmai due to the river's low water level induced by the dam construction (Ponce, 2022a). During drought, the water level also precluded a few boat drivers from transporting passengers, leading to their loss of daily income after the relocation. Inauspiciously, numerous villagers I spoke with who relied on the river for food and livelihood, especially the affected fishermen and boat drivers, were not compensated.

Moreover, there were 38 households that felt unsatisfied with the financial compensation for the loss of gardens and tree crops they received. All 38 households thought that their gardens were under-assessed and underpaid. 18 households complained to the NNua1; only four received additional payments (Ponce, 2022a, 2022b). Those whose complaints were unresolved surmised that some parts of what they should have received were allegedly stolen by some Lao staff of the Chaleunxay and the district government. This purported maldistribution of compensation demonstrates how decentralization practices only become an opportunity for some

private-sector and local-state actors to pursue their rent-seeking activities. It just redistributes substantial risks to the displaced villagers, rather than benefits.

The unprovided livelihood assistance and the maldistributed food support and financial compensation left many villagers I spoke with very disappointed. Some of them also mentioned that the local Lao state officials just told lies about the promises of "better life" (*xivitdikouaa*) to compel them to move. Only a few villagers openly criticized the government, however. Most of the disappointed villagers explained that they had "no choice" (*bomithangluak*) not just about receiving insufficient compensation, but importantly about moving to the new settlement. The "no choice" response was usually followed by phrases: "We are just ordinary people, they are big people" (*Haomènpaxaxôn*, *khaomènkhôngnai*), or "The elephant's feet trample the bird's mouth!" (*Tinxangyiappaknok!*) (Ponce, 2022a). These two phrases imply the villagers' feeling of powerlessness in directly resisting the Lao state's decisions on resettlement. In other words, these villagers perceive that ordinary Lao citizens cannot afford to disobey the Lao state's command, so they just decided to be resettled and/or to accept their negative relocation experiences. These villagers' unspoken fear and perceived lack of agency reflect the Lao state's strength in controlling the resettled villagers and manoeuvring the NNua1's hybrid governance on the ground.

CONCLUSION

Investigating the Lao state's strength in maneuvering the NNua1's hybrid governance transcends the dominant narratives of a) China's debt-trap diplomacy; and b) the infringement of sovereign rights linked to foreign hydropower investments. The debt-trap narratives, on one hand, suggest that the recent proliferation of Chinese debt-financed investments in Laos can potentially bring the Lao state to the verge of sovereign default, but if worse comes to worst, it causes "a loss of sovereignty" (Lintner, 2020 cited in Barney & Souksakoun, 2021, p. 105). The account of the relinquishment of sovereignty associated with large dam construction, on the other hand, can be traced back to the intrusion of multilateral development banks, especially the World Bank, into the Lao state's financial and regulatory regimes to govern the first phase of hydroelectric dams under the PPP model (Creak & Barney, 2022). Both dominant narratives overlap and tend to depict the Lao state as an obedient, delicate entity, swiftly giving in to various pressures exerted by external forces. By transcending these dominant narratives, the article does not aim to disprove them, nor to dismiss the Lao state's technical and financial shortcomings in pursuing hydropower projects and its relative weakness in managing its recent massive debts. Instead, it turns the attention to aspects of hydropower governance where the Lao state maintains its dominance, i.e., hydropower engagements.

This article has scrutinized two types of hydropower engagements: a) the Lao state's engagement with multiple hydropower stakeholders and b) the engagement of stakeholders in governing the NNua1 Project. The Lao state negotiates the first type of engagement, whereas it manipulates the second type. Ideally, a state's active engagement in multi-stakeholder governance of hydropower initiatives is paramount in navigating the intricate interplay of economic growth, water resource management, and social equity that reaches diverse jurisdictions and populations. From a

transboundary point of view, this multi-stakeholder engagement can effectively govern the basin-wide harm of large-scale dams and equitably distribute the benefits of hydropower development to all stakeholders, thereby achieving "environmental justice" (Yong, 2023). The Lao state, however, overlooks this importance, for it is too preoccupied with the macroeconomic benefits of its engagement in multi-stakeholder hydropower governance.

To illustrate, it transforms its hydropower financial regime by adopting the PPP model to facilitate hydropower projects and dispense the inherent risks of building massive dams. By and large, the Lao state strengthens its engagements with key external entities of hydropower development to construct more dams, boosting the national economy and attaining its goals of graduating from LDC status and becoming "the battery of Southeast Asia". This strategic action of the Laos state is strongly reminiscent of Bayart's notion of extraversion, or a technique used by a state to mobilize resources by negotiating its (potentially asymmetrical) relations and interactions "with the external environment" (Bayart, 1993, pp. 21-22). How the Lao state depends on "its external environment, especially China", notes Danielle Tan, is a "deliberate strategy" to incite competition among external forces (e.g., multilateral development banks, China, Vietnam, Thailand, etc.) so as "to avoid being drawn into the orbit of just one of them", as well as to improve economic competitiveness, "its control over its territory", and "its bargaining power" with hydropower developers and financiers (Tan, 2015, p. 14).

The article has also examined how the Lao state takes advantage of various economic opportunities and political features of the NNua1 Project to dominate the latter's hybrid governance arrangements. The NNua1's and CSG's great concentration on the economics of dam construction and operation, as well as their hands-off approach to local political issues and overreliance on the host state in dealing with relocation concerns, have boosted the Lao state's strength in controlling the active engagement of the NNua1 Project's stakeholders in hydropower decision-making and planning. The Lao state has exerted significant influence over the establishment of the project's resettlement bodies and the redistribution of hydropower functions to various organs of such bodies. Although the Lao state has decentralized its central authority by sharing hydropower functions with various stakeholders of the NNua1 Project, its statehood has remained integrated, rather than been limited (Risse, 2011) or hollowed-out (Bulkeley, 2005). In fact, the decentralization techniques associated with implementing relocation programs have aided the Lao state in successfully reaching and governing villagers formerly living in isolated forest and riparian communities. In this sense, how the Lao state strengthens its statehood by mobilizing hydropower resources from the external environment, while maintaining internal control over its remote populations through decentralization techniques resonates with how the galactic polity of the Tai Kingdom during the Bangkok period consolidates its position as "the radial center of the network" (Tambiah, 1973/2013, p. 515).

While reaching the peripheries through hydropower development and resettlement may be a feasible means of extending the Lao state's internal control, it does not necessarily translate to safeguarding the interests of marginalized hydropower stakeholders. Rather than to promote the active participation of all stakeholders, especially the displaced populations, the redistribution of hydropower functions

has been primarily driven by the need to optimize efficiency and reduce input costs in the project. This only helps the CSG secure its return on invested capital, even though the project was considered unprofitable due to its extended resettlement area. NGOs/CSOs and other environmental publics – stakeholders that have historically expressed concerns over the basin-wide harm of massive dams on and in behalf of affected communities – had no engagement in the project owing to the ambivalence of the NNua1's private sector actors and state officials towards them in particular; the Lao state's inflexible regulatory framework for civil society groups in general. Consequently, the NNua1 dam's manifold negative social and environmental externalities were largely ignored, and the project's assessment and monitoring reports were of poor quality. Despite consulting with the resettled before the relocation, the NNua1 and district government have maintained a relatively low level of commitment to transparency. The opacity of the resettlement process was evident in the experiences of many villagers, who were not given access to consultation and information about the changes in their entitlements. Furthermore, several villagers received inadequate livelihood assistance, while others were denied food support and financial compensation, highlighting the maldistribution of benefits.

The displaced villagers' negative resettlement experiences – a corollary of their limited participation in hybrid hydropower governance, particularly in making resettlement decisions – imply that the BRI's "green" and "win-win" development has not yet been achieved from below. To fully realize this, the Chinese state, as the BRI's main architect, should enjoin the Lao state and the CSG to facilitate a hybrid governance that secures transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. Without these ideals, the participation of many stakeholders will just serve as a *fig leaf* for continued irresponsible dam construction and relocation. Through *meaningful collaboration* of all affected stakeholders at multiple scales in governing hydropower projects, general welfare might prevail over competitive private interests, and social and environmental sustainability standards improve.

REFERENCES

Baird, I. (2018). Party, state and the control of information in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: Secrecy, falsification and denial. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *48*(5), 739-760.

Baird, I., & Shoemaker, B. (2008). *People, livelihoods, and development in the Xekong River Basin, Laos*. White Lotus.

Barney, K., & Souksakoun, K. (2021). Credit crunch: Chinese infrastructure lending and Lao sovereign debt. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, *8*(1), 94-113.

Barney, K., & Souksakoun, K. (2022, January 6). *Going under? Belt and Road megaprojects and soverign debt in Laos*. New Mandala. https://www.newmandala.org/going-under-belt-and-road-megaprojects-and-sovereign-debt-in-laos/

Bayart, J. F. (1993). *The state in Africa: The politics of the belly*. Longman Publishing

Blake, D., & Barney, K. (2018). Structural injustice, slow violence? The political ecology of a 'Best Practice' hydropower dam in Lao PDR. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *48*(5), 808-834.

Brautigam, D., & Rithmire, M. (2021, February 6). *The Chinese 'Debt Trap' is a Myth*. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/02/china-debt-trap-diplomacy/617953/

Bulkeley, H. (2005). Reconfiguring environmental governance: Towards a politics of scales and networks. *Political Geography*, *24*(8), 875-902.

Chandran, N. (2023, November 8). *Laos is spiraling toward a debt crisis as China looms large*. CNBC Access ASEAN. https://www.cnbc.com/2023/11/09/laos-is-spiraling-toward-a-debt-crisis-as-china-looms-large.html

Chellaney, B. (2017, January 24). *China's debt-trap diplomacy*. Australian Strategic Policy Institute, The Strategist. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy/

Chen, W. K. (2020). Sovereign debt in the making: Financial entanglements and labor politics along the Belt and Road in Laos. *Economic Geography*, *96*(4), 295-314.

Cistulli, V. (2002). *Environment in decentralized development: economic and institutional issues* (Vol. 440). Food & Agriculture Org.

Coenen, J., Bager, S., Meyfroidt, P., Newig, J., & Challies, E. (2020). Environmental governance of China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Environmental policy and governance*, *31*, 3-17.

Creak, S., & Barney, K. (2022). The role of 'resources' in regime durability in Laos: The political economy of statist market socialism. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 1-24. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1525/cpcs.2022.1713051

Cruz-del Rosario, T. (2011). *Opening Laos: The Nam Theun 2 Hydropower project in Lao PDR*. Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Working Paper Series. Singapore: SSRN Working Paper 190589. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/cag/natbma_wp1105.pdf

Dombrowsky, I., & Hensengerth, O. (2018). Governing the water-energy-food nexus related to hydropower on shared rivers—the role of regional organizations. *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, *6*, 1-16.

Fullbrook, D. (2013). Food security in the wider Mekong Region. In A. Smajgl & J. Ward (Eds.), *The water-food-energy nexus in the Mekong Region* (pp. 61-104). Springer.

Goldman, M. (2001). The birth of a discipline: Producing authoritative green knowledge, World-Bank style. *Ethnography*, *2*(2), 191-217.

Hiebert, M. (2021). *Upstream dams threaten the economy and the security of the Mekong Region*. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.

Himmer, M., & Rod, Z. (2022). Chinese debt trap diplomacy: Reality or myth. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, *18*(3), 250-272.

Hirsch, P. (2016). The shifting regional geopolitics of Mekong dams. *Political Geography*, *51*, 63-74.

Hurley, J., Morris, S., & Gailyn, P. (2018). *Examining the debt implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective*. Center for Global Development [CGD] Policy Paper. Washington, DC. https://www.cgdev.org/publication/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective

Jacques, J. (2020). *Laos: The latest victim of China's debt trap diplomacy*. https://www.thetrumpet.com/22925-laos-the-latest-victim-of-chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy

Jessop, B. (2002). *The future of the capitalist state*. Polity.

Jones, L., & Hameiri, S. (2020). *Debunking the myth of 'debt-trap diplomacy'*. Chatham House.

Käkönen, M. (2023). Entangled enclaves: Dams, volatile rivers, and Chinese infrastructural engagement in Cambodia. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, *16*(2), 269-295.

Kangave, J. (2012). A TWAIL analysis of foreign investment and development-induced displacement and resettlement: Lessons from Uganda's Bujagali Hydroelectric Project. *Ottawa Law Review* (*Revue De Droit D'ottawa*), *44*(2), 213-260.

Klinger, J. M., & Muldavin, J. S. S. (2019). New geographies of development: Grounding China's global integration. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, *7*(1), 1-21.

Krasner, S. D. (1999). *Sovereignty: Organized hypocrisy*. Princeton University Press.

Lao PDR. (2017). *Law on electricity (Amended).* 09 May 2017. Number 19. Vientiane Capital: National Assembly.

Lebel, L., Haefner, A., Pahl-Wostl, C., & Baduri, A. (2020). Governance of the water-energy-food nexus: insights from four infrastructure projects in the Lower Mekong Basin. *Sustainability Science*, *15*, 885-900.

Lintner, B. (2020, September 14). *Laos the latest China debt trap victim*. Asia Times Online. https://asiatimes.com/2020/09/laos-the-latest-china-debt-trap-victim/

Mahanty, S., Milne, S., Barney, K., Dressler, W., Hirsch, P., & To, P. X. (2023). Rupture: Towards a critical, emplaced, and experiential view of nature-society crisis. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 1-20.

MEM. (2016). *Policy guidelines for the implementation of policy on sustainable hydropower development in Lao PDR 2016*. Ministry of Energy and Mines, Government of Laos.

MEM. (2017). ວິໄສທັດ ຮອດປີ *2030,* ຍຸດທະສາດການພັດທະນາ *2025* ແລະ ແຜນພັດທະນາພະລັງງານ ແລະ ບໍ່ແຮ່ *5* ປີ ຄັ້ງທີ *VIII (2016-2020) [Ministry of Energy and Mines' Vision 2030; Development Plan 2025; and Five-Year Development Report VIII (2016-2020)]*. Ministry of Energy and Mines, Government of Laos.

Middleton, C., Matthews, N., & Mirumachi, N. (2015). Whose risky business? Public-private partnerships, build-operate-transfer and large hydropower dams in the Mekong Region. In N. Matthews & K. Geheb (Eds.), *Hydropower development in the Mekong Region: political, socio-economic and environmental perspectives* (pp. 127-152). Routledge.

Migdal, J., & Schlichte, K. (2005). Rethinking the State. In J. Migdal & K. Schlichte (Eds.), *The dynamics of states: The formation and crises of state domination* (pp. 1-40). Ashgate.

Miller, M. A., Middleton, C., Rigg, J., & Taylor, D. (2020). Hybrid governance of transboundary commons: Insights from Southeast Asia. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *110*, 297-313.

Motta, S., & Matthews, N. (2018). Rewards and risks of chinese hydropower in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). In G. Siciliano & F. Urban (Eds.), *Chinese hydropower development in Africa: Challenges and opportunities for sustainable global dam-building* (pp. 14-34). Routledge.

MRC. (2021). *The Integrated Water Resources Management-Based Basin Development Strategy for the Mekong River Basin 2021-2030 & MRC Srategic Plan 2021-2025*. Mekong River Commission Secretariat. https://reliefweb.int/report/cambodia/basin-development-strategy-mekong-river-basin-2021-2030-mrc-strategic-plan-2021-2025.

Open Development Mekong. (2018). *2012 Law on Electricity* (*Laos)*. Open development Laos. https://data.laos.opendevelopmentmekong.net/en/laws_record/law-on-electricity/resource/cc2e3c59-a826-44ec-aa9a-de57b4cad3a8

Pierre, J., & Peters, B. G. (2019). *Governance, politics and the state*. Red Globe Press.

Ponce, F. S. J. (2022a). Eating with the people: How a Chinese hydropower project changed food experiences in a Lao community. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, *30*(1), 1-23.

Ponce, F. S. J. (2022b). Moving away from the margins? How a Chinese hydropower project made a Lao community modern and comfortable. In O. Tappe & S. C. Rowedder (Eds.), *Extracting development: contested resource frontiers in mainland Southeast Asia* (pp. 143-171). ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.

Ponce, F. S. J. (2023). Hydroelectric development in 'China's Backyard'? Modernity, market integration, and (im)mobilities in Northwestern Laos. *Asian Anthropology*, *22*(4), 298-302. https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2023.2254129

Risse, T. (2011). *Governance without a state? Policies and politics in areas of limited statehood*. Columbia University Press.

Scott, J. (2009). *The art of not being governed*. Yale University Press.

Siciliano, G., & Urban, F. (2018). *Chinese hydropower development in Africa and Asia: Challenges and opportunities for sustainable global dam-building*. Routledge.

Singh, A. (2020). The myth of 'debt-trap diplomacy' and realities of Chinese development finance. *Third World Quarterly*, *42*(2), 239-253.

Sornarajah, M. (2003). The clash of globalizations and the international law on foreign investment: the Simon Reisman Lecture in International Trade Policy. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, *10*(2), 1-20.

Souvannaseng, P. (2019). *Losing ground: The political economy of dependency and development in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. London School of Economics].

Sprenger, G. (2021). Staying or moving: Government compliance and agency in post-zomian Laos. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, *20*(1), 83-106.

Stolz, R., & Tappe, O. (2021). Upland pioneers: An introduction. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, *29*(3), 635-650.

Strangio, S. (2021). *Laos grants 25-year power grid concession to chinese-majority firm.* The Diplomat Online. https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/laos-grants-25-year-power-grid-concession-to-chinese-majority-firm/

Suhardiman, D., DiCarlo, J., Keovilignavong, O., & Rigg, J. (2021). (Re)constructing state power and livelihoods through the Laos-China railway project. *Geoforum*, *124*, 78-88.

Suhardiman, D., & Geheb, K. (2021). Participation and politics in transboundary hydropower development: The case of the Pak Beng dam in Laos. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, *32*, 320-330.

Tambiah, S. J. (1973/2013). The galactic polity in Southeast Asia. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *3*(3), 503–534

Tan, D. (2015). *Chinese engagements in Laos: Past, present, and uncertain future*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS).

Tappe, O. (2024). Laos in 2023: Debts and doubts. In D. Singh & Hoang Thi Ha (Eds.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2024*. ISEAS- Yushof Ishak Institute.

UNDP. (2017). *Graduation from least developed country status Lao PDR 2017*. Ministry of Planning and Investment and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Vientiane, Lao PDR. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwj-zOah6oX2AhVISfEDHWeKBzYQFnoECAQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.undp.org%2Fcontent%2Fdam%2Flaopdr%2Fdocs%2FReports%2520and%2520publications%2F2017%2F5th%2520NHDR%2520-%2520Lao%2520PDR.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3b_TjZDalTWwR9S6PlPwYU

Whitington, J. (2012). The institutional condition of contested hydropower: The Theun Hinboun–International Rivers Collaboration. *Forum for Development Studies*, *39*(2), 231-256.

World Bank. (2021). *International Debt Statistics 2021*. The World Bank Group. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34588/9781464816109.pdf

World Bank. (2022). *Lao People's Democratic Republic Economic Monitor: October 2022*. World Bank. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/df7b578ac035fe4dad0129a278b8c850-0070062022/original/LaoPDREconomicMonitorOctober2022.pdf

World Bank. (2023). *International Debt Report 2023*. The World Bank Group. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/83f7aadd-dc5a-406b-98d4-9624e93993e5/content

Xi, J. (2017). *Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era*. Speech, 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. 18 October 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping%27s_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf

Xinhua. (2021). *Chinese, Lao Grid Joint Venture signs concession pact with Lao Gov't*. Xinhuanet. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/12/c_139804986.htm

Yong, M. L. (2021). Transboundary environmental publics and hydropower governance in the Mekong River Basin: A contested politics of place, scale, and temporality. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 1-13.

Yong, M. L. (2023). Hybrid governance, environmental justice, and hydropower development in the Mekong transboundary commons. *WIREs Water*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1665

Zhai, K., & Johnson, K. (2020, September 15). *Taking power- Chinese firm to run Laos electric grid amid default warnings*. Discover Thomson Reuters Online. https://www.reuters.com/article/china-laos-idUSKBN-25V15G

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Floramante S. J. Ponce is a postdoctoral fellow at the Maison des Sciences Humaines de l'Université libre de Bruxelles (MSH-ULB). Ponce completed his PhD in Social Anthropology at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Germany). His dissertation project and many of his peer-reviewed papers focus on how a Chinese BRI Project in Laos engenders experiences of modernity, market integration, and geographical, socioeconomic, and metaphorical (im)mobilities.

▸ Contact: floramante.s.j.ponce@ulb.be

DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.

A Co-Generated Analysis of Thai Homestays: Overcoming SERVQUAL Deficiencies and Sustainability Barriers

Supattra Sroypetch[a], Grid Rangsungnoen[a]*, & Rodney W Caldicott[a,b,c]

[a]Khon Kaen University, Thailand
[b]Phuket Rajabhat University, Thailand
[c]Southern Cross University, Australia

*corresponding author: gridra@kku.ac.th

Received: 9 June 2024 / Accepted: 12 November 2024 / Published: 10 February 2025

▸ Sroypetch, S., Rangsungnoen, G., & Caldicott, W. Rodney (2025). A co-generated analysis of Thai Homestays: Overcoming SERVQUAL deficiencies and sustainability barriers. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 31-58.

Post-COVID-19, international travelers have brand assurance expectations that often surpass the benchmark set by the *Thai Homestay Standard*, leaving some operators struggling to position with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thai homestays face significant challenges due to the lack of clear transitional pathways toward sustainability and alignment with international (ASEAN) standards for 'service quality' (SERVQUAL). This study critically examines these SERVQUAL deficiencies and analyzes Thai homestays in comparison with the *ASEAN Homestay Standard*, using frameworks derived from SERVQUAL and the SDGs. It identifies barriers within the standards and proposes actionable tools to bridge these gaps, enabling homestays to support sustainability objectives better. Adopting a reflective and co-creative methodological approach, the research engaged a rural community in Northeastern Thailand to co-generate insights towards homestay quality. Findings show community-identified barriers across three core SERVQUAL dimensions: Tangibles, Responsiveness, and Assurance. However, external observations on SERVQUAL of homestays identified all five dimensions, including Reliability and Empathy, albeit against different items. The internal/external gaze juxtaposition suggests a precarious role of sustainability within Thai ethnic homestays. The study's novelty lies in its longitudinal fieldwork and applying a mutual gaze to embed SERVQUAL principles into homestay practices via a refined standards matrix. Findings highlight the pressing need for revisions to the Thai Homestay Standard, equipping hosts to transition effectively toward internationalization while achieving higher service quality and sustainability.

Keywords: Community-based Tourism (CBT); Ethnic Homestay; SERVQUAL; Service Quality; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

www.seas.at 10.14764/10.ASEAS-0119

INTRODUCTION

As global borders fully opened after the COVID-19 pandemic, nations are rebuilding their tourism markets – with Thailand no exception, as its economy relies heavily on international tourism. The Thai government's recovery plan, thus, includes revitalizing and transforming tourism through internationalization toward greater inclusivity, responsibility, digital integration, and 'sustainability' (Bangkok Post, 2022; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023). Subsequently, lodging operators are encouraged to focus on premium travel experiences, catering services and products for high-value[1] and foreign[2] tourists, thereby delivering *local* to national SDGs. However, of critical note, within the lodging mix of rural Thailand is *homestay*, a model often framed upon ethnic community-based development through tourism (CBT) (Department of Tourism, 2022). Thus, CBT homestay, representing a cluster of village homes, is not solely about accommodation but also community development. Mapjabil et al. (2015) argue that the uniqueness of active interaction with the host family – sharing the house in a traditional ethnic village setting – can offer social, cultural, educational, and economic benefits. However, we argue that advancing SDGs through *local/ethnic* homestay necessitates more significant planning and education interventions at the CBT social-enterprise level.

The CBT approach to homestay tourism recognizes opportunities to disperse burdens more evenly than private operations, fostering awareness of what sustainable tourism can offer to enhance resilience among participating stakeholders (Tran Huu Thuy & Caldicott, 2022). This paper does not purport to present an exposition of resilience or sustainability in tourism, as others do (see Cheer & Lew, 2018; Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Sroypetch et al., 2018; Trupp et al., 2024; United Nations, 2018). However, we recognize that 'cultural sensitivity' (Viken et al., 2021) informs cultural expectations toward baseline 'service quality' in visitor accommodation choices. In the wake of COVID-19, such judgment must consider perspectives beyond *Thailand Homestay Standard* to reflect global and, not least, Western attitudes (Ditta-Apichai et al., 2024). Visitors' different perceptions of acceptable standards have always provided critical challenges to hosts in meeting customers' satisfaction (Wahid et al., 2017); thus, the implications of 'standard' enhancement on homestay sustainability in Thailand remain ambiguous.

Although the Thai Department of Tourism established the *Thai Homestay Standard* in 2012, compliance is voluntary, and registration is not mandatory. Homestay, particularly in rural areas, often fall short of the comfort levels that contemporary visitors expect from sustainable operations (Escolar-Jimenez, 2020). The problem, thus, remains with Thai homestays falling into national policy, practice, and international visitor perception voids specific to lodging standards. Without adequate policy and practice redress, homestay operators may not achieve international 'service quality' nor 'sustainability' in line with their *local* CBT or National government sustainability

1 High-value travelers will likely spend more, stay longer, and disperse beyond hotspots. 'Value,' thus, is not restricted to finances, as travelers can offer a community a social, cultural, or educational benefit (Haugen, 2023).

2 Foreign visitors expect 'new-normal' travel protocols that address safe and sustainable tourism principles (BBC, 2022).

ambitions. One cause of the 'barriers' stems from homestay remaining accredited under a decade-old guideline focused on authentic simplicity, whereas superseded COVID-19-induced lodging protocols influence new normal visitor perceptions of service quality and sustainability. Hence, addressing sustainability requirements is foundational to homestay meeting 'international demand' standards (Pinichchan et al., 2022; Thananusak & Suriyankietkaew, 2023).

Thus, the juxtaposition between homestay 'supply standard' and 'demand expectation' exposes operators to sustainability risk. Hence, uncovering the service quality dimensions that present as 'barriers' for Thai *local/ethnic* homestays to grow and develop their service delivery is essential. A common approach for examining service quality is SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml et al., 1988), which compares customer expectations before a service encounter and their perceptions of the service delivered. Even though homestay studies have touched upon service quality over several decades, the nexus between homestay delivery in Thailand, SERVQUAL, and SDGs is generally void. Additionally, practice variation between Thai (domestic) and ASEAN (international) homestays further highlights a standards' misalignment around SERVQUAL that needs addressing.

Therefore, to understand SERVQUAL deficiencies in Thai *local/ethnic* homestay, we aim to identify the 'barriers' and propose potential solutions. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Analyze the current capacity of *local/ethnic homestay* to meet the *Thailand Homestay Standard*.
2. Explore community-identified 'barriers' to improve *local/ethnic homestay* standards, aligning them with the *ASEAN Homestay Standard,* and provide SERVQUAL reflections on such 'barriers'.
3. Offer recommendations for supporting *local/ethnic* homestays in advancing SDGs, specifically through the application of SERVQUAL.

This study contributes to theory, policy, and practice, with recommendations for local and national homestay administration. First, unlike existing demand-side research (Franisal, 2020; Voon et al., 2017), we focus on the supply-side, co-generating community solutions for aligning Thai homestays with international standards for sustainability. Second, we provide evidence for amending national homestay accreditation criteria. Third, we propose mechanisms to enhance community resilience and raise household incomes, thus aligning with SDG No. 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities. Such alignments can make communities more competitive in present and future crisis recovery (Pinichchan et al., 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is abundant on studies about tourism sustainability (Scheyvens & Cheer, 2022; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020), the effects of COVID-19 on tourism (Lew et al., 2020; Pham Minh & Ngoc Mai, 2023), particularly on the lodging sector and health protocols (Ongsakul et al., 2022). However, less research focuses on homestay operations (Zulkefli et al., 2021), specifically homestay service quality and its nexus with SDGs. Notwithstanding, there are three distinct surfacing themes within the

literature: First, post-COVID-19 era tourists prioritize cleanliness, hygiene, and safety measures within their accommodation choices (Chalupa & Petricek, 2022). Second, foreign tourists often display different perceptions, expectations, tolerances, and willingness to pay (WTP) (Müller et al., 2020) concerning pandemic-driven protocols and global environmental sustainability (social, ecological and economic) practices. Foreigners may also be more critical of their homestay experience, especially the frequent 'surprise' (authentic) hygiene and comfort deficits (Escolar-Jimenez, 2020; Naumov et al., 2021). Third, homestay is often presented as an economic pillar for sustainable CBT development, albeit with little empirical evidence of how tourism, and specifically homestay, can contribute to reaching SDGs (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020). Such themes highlight the importance of homestays pursuing SERVQUAL, which has the potential to close the sustainability juxtaposition between traditional homestay delivery and contemporary customer expectations.

SERVQUAL

With recognized difficulties in defining and measuring service quality, no one measurement consensus emerges (Akhmedova et al., 2021; Wisniewski, 2001). However, the generally accepted theory of SERVQUAL, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), conceptualizes perceived service quality as the degree and direction of the discrepancy between customers' perceptions and expectations. It measures practices through five quality dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance (combining communication, credibility, security, competence, and courtesy), and Empathy (combining understanding and knowing the customer with accessibility and management) (Zeithaml et al., 1988). The founding authors argue SERVQUAL provides a functional skeleton through its product/service expectations/perceptions format. The frame, hence, can be adapted or supplemented to fit the characteristics or specific research needs of a particular destination, organization, or program (Business Bliss Consultants FZE, 2018). With noted relevance to our study, the SERVQUAL dimensions are not too dissimilar in content to the *ASEAN Homestay Standard* criteria. Thus, we deem the model sufficient for this study on 'standards' concerning Thailand's homestay program, specifically the effects of accreditations on homestay sustainability. Economically, an elevated homestay standard may generate and justify premium pricing, increasing host revenues (Qiao et al., 2021). Phongthanapanich and Ouparamai (2021) note that the premiums are generally higher for standard certified than uncertified accommodations. A publicized standard can indicate intangible benefits or attributes to customers to signify status, quality assurance, and adherence to sustainability principles (Sutherland et al., 2021), hence increasing willingness to pay (WTP) (Müller et al., 2020). WTP represents the consumer's evaluation of economic value over product/service utility (e.g., facilities and standards).

The Homestay Concept

Homestay has no global definition because it differs from country to country (Mapjabil et al., 2015). However, generally adopted 'economic' perspectives mainly refer to various independent-entrepreneurial or community-collective-based

lodging types involving guests staying with or near the hosts. Each style allows consumers to "live like a local" (Paulauskaite et al., 2017, p. 625), a theme with significant resemblance and original appeal to Western concepts of Bed and Breakfasts – local hospitality in a "homely atmosphere" (Grandidge, 2023). Similarly, Airbnb promotes the ideal of "living like a local" (Spinks, 2019). However, from a 'socio-cultural development' perspective, homestay within the ASEAN context is a 'top-down' program (Theerapappisit, 2012) of government origin framed upon community development through tourism. It is often classified as ethnic homestay, heritage homestay, or educational homestay (Mapjabil et al., 2015). Visitors are culturally immersed in the local way of life by "living with a host family and understanding community life on a personal level of comfort, rest, and relaxation with the simplicity of a 'homely' atmosphere" (Escolar-Jimenez, 2020, p. 13). Hence, the setting or 'place' (Muschter et al., 2021), inclusive of community-based tourism settings, becomes a third defining factor of homestay beyond hosts and guests (Munasinghe et al., 2022).

Notwithstanding, the nexus between homestay delivery in Thailand, SERVQUAL, and SDGs remains elusive. Tourism promotion agencies neglect the topic, and promotional materials pre- and post-pandemic do not address it. Hence, the perspectives of homestay sustainability through a lens of 'service quality' and 'standards' remain largely overlooked (Ditta-Apichai et al., 2024), with standards' deficiencies often masked by claims of authenticity (Mura, 2015).

Homestay (or Similar Accommodations) and SDGs

Economic, socio-cultural, and environmental attributes are generally accepted as the trilogy pillars or the triple bottom line (TBL) of sustainability (Arowoshegbe et al., 2016; Caldicott et al., 2020). To retain the sustainability balance, all stakeholder roles must be identified with present decision-makers using natural resources wisely to ensure continued provision beyond current users to future generations (Brundtland, 1987). Subsequently, in 2015, following decisive shifts in global concern for the environment (climate change) and socio-cultural inequality (poverty), the United Nations World Tourism Organization adopted 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to guide the development agenda to 2030 (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). Initially, tourism was only explicitly mentioned in three SDGs: 8, 12, and 14.7. Herein, Trupp and Dolezal (2020) argue that its potential to support all SDGs is underutilized. However, other studies (Muschter et al., 2021; Trupp et al., 2024) also warn that while tourism brings benefits, it can also cause unintended socio-cultural and environmental impacts. In this regard, Müller et al. (2020) question the viability of the classical 'top-down' CBT model, suggesting that a 'bottom-up' approach is more suitable to promote sustainable tourism development.

Specifically referencing homestay tourism, Pasanchay and Schott (2021) question homestay's actual capability to advance SDGs through a sustainable livelihoods perspective. These valid questions persist as tourism operations often contradict sustainability principles. Operators have long been condemned (Dahles, 2000; Hinch & Butler, 1996) for focusing solely on economic outcomes. This concern is particularly evident in least-developed countries where CBT is often heralded as a community panacea for broader societal deficiencies. Others further argue that CBT can present

'growth without prosperity' (Janjua et al., 2021), as 'top-down' agencies only provide lip service to social and environmental development while prioritizing economic imperatives. In challenging this lopsided system, the CBT-homestay model, as a component of the broader tourism and hospitality industry, encourages rural communities through the threefold sustainable community-based tourism goals of local environmental, socio-cultural, and economic prosperity (Reimer & Walter, 2013). Hence, developing a rural tourism village (CBT) is mostly inseparable from homestay as an accommodation supplier, and often the only local offer (Franisal, 2020). Müller et al. (2020) further caution that CBT homestay sites should grow organically within resource and capacity limits to remain sustainable.

Thai and ASEAN Homestay Standards and Certification

Homestay's often-stated deficits are commonly described through lower-tier criteria like hygiene, sanitation, safety (see Sangpikul, 2023; Sroypetch et al., 2018) and authenticity (Rickly et al., 2023). However, despite the decisive pull factor of authenticity, the experiential barrier of poor sanitation and environmental degradation prompts Mura (2015) to caution that "authenticity-triggering experiences should not last for long periods as guests seem to be keen to compromise their comforts only for short periods" (p. 230). One could, therefore, extrapolate 'comforts' to encompass elements of all five SERVQUAL dimensions in various manifestations. In particular, Mura (2015) notes that city guests do not want to "replace their comfortable lives with less comfortable 'authentic' experiences" (p. 230). Despite the 2012 formation of the Thai homestay standard, many *local/ethnic* operators may still not reach basic hospitality standards, and not least aspire to the National government's ambition for post-COVID-19 tourism recovery through attracting 'high-value' (Haugen, 2023) and international visitors. Notwithstanding, the *Thailand Homestay Standard* certifies 195 operations (Department of Tourism, 2022), inviting consideration of a suite of 10 items, whilst the *ASEAN Homestay Standard* is divided into nine criteria (Table 1). Each item within the suite is assigned a weighting of importance toward the final accreditation outcome (Singh et al., 2018).

Thailand Homestay Standard	Weight (%)	ASEAN Homestay Standard	Weight (%)
1) Host	10	1) Host	5
2) Accommodation	10	2) Accommodation	10
3) Tour program/ Activities	10	3) Activities	20
4) Management	20	4) Management	15
5) Public Relations	5	5) Marketing and promotion	10
6) Value creation and value of products	5	6) Hygiene and cleanliness	15
7) Safety	10	7) Safety and security	10
8) Natural resources and environments	10	8) Location	5
9) Culture	10	9) Sustainability principles	10
10) Food	10		

Table 1. Comparative criteria between the Thai and ASEAN Homestay Standard (adapted from (Singh et al., 2018)

Superficially, the *ASEAN Homestay Standard* appears to have one less criterion than the *Thai Homestay Standard*. However, a closer analysis reveals other differences, notably ASEAN's higher weighting towards 'hygiene and cleanliness' and 'sustainability'. These indicators closely align with the post-COVID-19 'new-normal' lodging protocols (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2022) and, thus, United Nations (2018) sustainable development goals (SDGs). In contrast, the *Thai Homestay Standard* lacks specific SDG directives.

Without specific regulations governing homestay businesses in Thailand, they often fall short of the standards set by the domestic Hotel Act B.E. 2547 (Lamaiwong, 2014), and international accommodations like Bed and Breakfasts and Airbnb. This lack of legal framework hampers the ability to meet the expectations of high-value visitors who demand clear communication of standards, a robust digital presence, and visible sustainable practices throughout all operations (Lopez Escobar, 2022). Consequently, if the *local/ethnic* homestay product sold to an international audience is not on par with contemporary consumer expectations, the sector will struggle to maintain its brand. Loss of reputation (Janjua et al., 2021) may fail hosts pursuing community SDGs and undermine the Thai government's post-pandemic revival strategy.

ASEAN Homestay Standard – A 'Barriers to Entry' Snapshot

The *ASEAN Homestay Standard* was introduced in 2016 to provide a base-level understanding of homestay, potentially establishing a minimum standard across all ASEAN member states, Thailand inclusive. The *Standard* also facilitates a coordinated approach to the SDGs (United Nations, 2018). It encourages partnerships with relevant stakeholders, creating a positive environment while revitalizing the rural economy and reducing poverty (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). However, despite the successes of many homestay programs, several ASEAN nations beyond Thailand (i.e., Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines) continue to experience challenges with the notion of SERVQUAL and SDGs regarding the internationalization of lodging standards (Adie et al., 2022; Mahato et al., 2021; Zulkefli et al., 2021).

Though the brief purview of the above authors, the ASEAN snapshot exposes a reoccurring lack of 'product and service quality' associated with homestay. As Bhat (2012, p. 1) reminds us, "the complexity and globalization of today's competitive business environments have made quality one of the most important sources of competitive advantage for the tourism [business/enterprise] destination". Homestay in Thailand often face the same common problems as their ASEAN neighbors - "low product quality and service failure" (Saraithong & Chancharoenchai, 2011, p. 112). The ASEAN Secretariat (2016, p. 1) indicates that "homestay program success depends heavily on a deep understanding of the basic needs of a quality visitor experience". Bhat (2012) further cautions that merely maintaining a business is no longer sufficient; continuous improvement is necessary to achieve a sustainable future. Subsequently, accumulative SEVQUAL deficiencies lead to homestay vulnerability – it remains on a sustainability precipice (Phunnarong, 2021), deserving an immediate response.

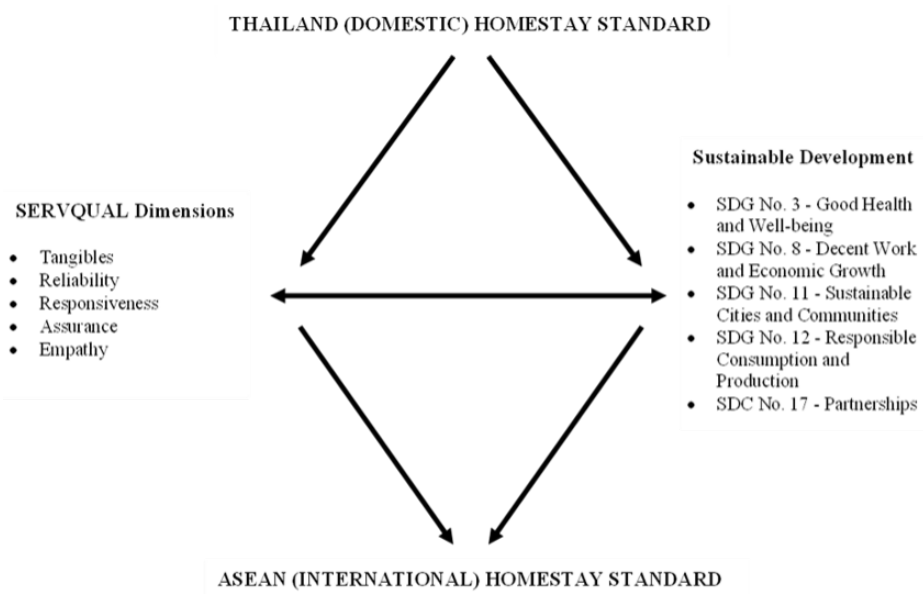

Figure 1. Conceptual framework – transitional pathways for homestay sustainability (figure by authors).

METHODOLOGY

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 guides this study towards homestay internationalization, creating transitioning pathways for Thai *local/ethnic* homestay to embrace SERVQUAL and SDGs on their journey toward sustainability and the *ASEAN Homestay Standard.*

Research Setting

First, we introduce the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* in Northeastern Thailand to examine the 'real-life' *local/ethnic* tourism-enterprise experiences before reporting fieldwork reflections from their long-term CBT initiative, including homestay. Pho Tak Village (pop. 4480) is the largest in Pho Tak District, Nong Khai Province (Department of Provincial Administration, 2022). The province is along the Mekong River, partially forming Thailand's northern border with Lao PDR. As a strategic trade and tourism link between Laos and Thailand, Nong Khai City will soon welcome the Sino-China high-speed railway, linking Beijing to Singapore through Lao and Thailand (Cai, 2017; Scott, 2022). Pho Tak's cultural heritage is of Puan ethnicity originating from Muang Puan, Chiang Kwang Province, Lao PDR, with the migrant group fostering ambitions to preserve their ethnic culture, costume, and dance through tourism. Although villager occupations primarily relate to rice farming and small-crop horticulture, with some retired from education—teaching, and administration, they wish their culture to be known beyond the local to international markets. Hence, they initiated the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* in 2019 to fulfil the development of a One Town One Product (OTOP) Program. They received the *Thai Homestay Standard* in January 2021 with a

six-homestay cooperative under a CBT Thai Puan Cultural Club umbrella. Further, the Club invited a partnership with Khon Kaen University to support their management committee through a further CBT initiative: *Tourism Security in the COVID-19 Era - 'Raising Household Incomes'.* The objective was to enhance their ethnic homestay operation to meet international ASEAN standards aligning with the United Nations' sustainable development goals: SDG No. 3 - Good Health and Wellbeing; SDG No. 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG No. 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities; SDG No. 12 - Responsible Consumption and Production; and SDG No. 17 - Partnerships. Understanding the gravity of such ambition, the university research team acknowledged the need and planned for long-term engagement with this community.

Research Approach

The longitudinal qualitative design (Figure 2) allowed the researchers to engage the same participants over time through multiple data collection points to understand how different actors in Thai homestay evolve. Through 'reflective practice' (Visser, 2010), we endeavored to comprehend and compare accumulative knowledge through continuous CBT engagement. We conducted four qualitative data collection and reflection stages from 2021 to 2022, recurring for 2023 to 2024. The four-stage cycle fosters reflective activity.

We employed co-generation of data (Nowotny et al., 2003; Russ et al., 2024) through participatory inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997) involving all nine Pho Tak Thai Puan CBT management committee members profiled through Table 2, including homestay hosts and our team of four researchers. All four authors (Thai and foreign) engaged in participant/practice observations and reporting of community engagements through eight field visits to understand the real-life context (Fossey et al., 2002). We conducted three workshops, two semi-structured focus groups, multiple interviews with literature-informed protocols/guidelines, and attended the National

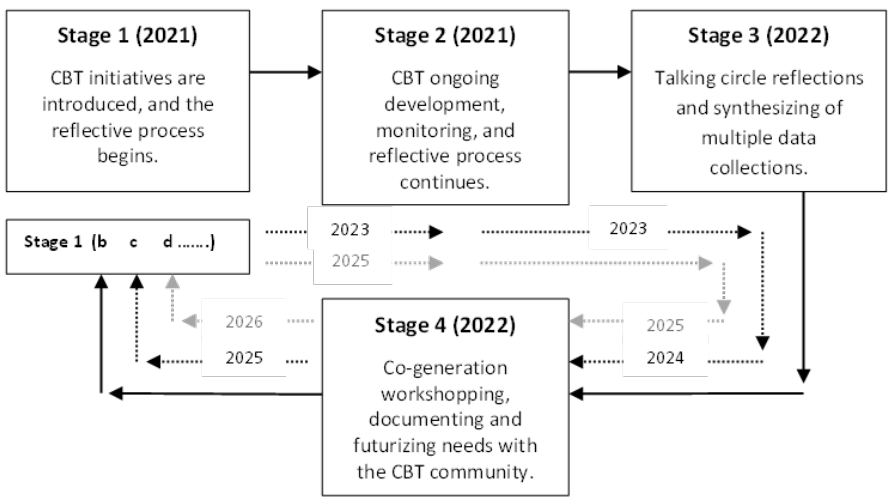

Figure 2. Longitudinal, participatory, and reflective research design (Figure by authors).

Participants	Gender	Age (years)	Function/role/position in CBT community
P1	Male	63	CBT Program Chairperson
P2	Female	61	CBT Program PR Officer
P3	Female	65	Homestay Operator & Group Chairperson
P4	Female	62	Homestay Operator
P5	Female	58	Homestay Operator
P6	Female	58	Homestay Operator
P7	Female	70	Homestay Operator
P8	Female	58	Homestay Operator
P9	Male	51	CBT Arts and Crafts Producer
P10	Female	40	CBT Arts and Crafts Producer

Table 2. Profile of focus-group participants (compiled by authors)

Thai Paun Cultural Festival. All engagements were open and transparent, with the community participants' full knowledge and signed consent. Voluntary attendance records were recorded (signed) at every engagement. Notably, the Thai Puan Cultural Club philosophy of 'sharing for their common ethnic prosperity' was exhibited through the participants' eagerness to volunteer in the co-generation processes.

Notably, the community/researcher partnership has been extended to 2026, which is significant as SDG 17 (Partnerships) stresses the need for comprehensive, ongoing processes and reflective monitoring for effectively implementing sustainable development (Adie et al., 2022). Our methodology aligns with several authors (Rangsungnoen et al., 2024; Tran Huu Thuy & Caldicott, 2022) who argue that CBT enterprises must foster a culture of continuous learning. Hardy et al. (2022) criticize methods that fail "to prioritize longitudinal resident involvement" (p. 2).

Data Collection

Stage 1 (see Figure 2) brings the partners together, allowing for the introduction and discussion of initiatives, goals, opportunities, and barriers to their CBT (homestay) enterprise. Stage 2 supports observations and interviews around current practices. Stage 3 is the chance to reflect and synthesize the multiple data collections. Stage 4 supports shared learnings, identifies enduring issues, and plots action paths for further practice improvement and potential research needs. Recognizing the capacity constraints of a small rural village, the research team understood that desirable outcomes are not always achievable within a single cycle, hence the need for recurrent cycle(s). Thus, our reflection-in-action approach explored initiatives with the CBT management committee members (Table 2) to build strengths from challenges over time (Gutierrez-Montes et al., 2009; Missingham, 2017).

Data Co-generation

The study's iterative processes, reflections, and longitudinal nature allowed us to look beyond snapshot (hot) problems to consider long-term sustainability against the

objectives of the CBT initiative. Reflective synthesizing of community perspectives (internal gaze) and researcher observations (external gaze) were documented for ease of workshopping with, rather than presenting to, the participants. To de-Westernize the standard workshop format, we chose sharing-circles (Drawson et al., 2017) to operationalize the data/knowledge co-generation theme (Bandola-Gill et al., 2023). Such public 'talking/sharing-circle' style knowledge generation facilitated immediate member checking and is considered an acceptable approach to Indigenous/tribal research (Drawson et al., 2017; Lavallée, 2009). Herein, acts of sharing all aspects of the individual – "heart, mind, body, and spirit" - as cultural norms can rebalance power dynamics between participants and between participants and researchers (Lavallée, 2009, p. 29). Sharing, checking, reflecting, and resharing directly with the communities of interest achieved group consensus, thematically consolidating outputs against the five SERVQUAL dimensions. The open-process thematic analysis strengthened reliability, validity, and generalizability allowing the closure of the first research-in-action cycle (Cohen et al., 2017; McNiff & Whitehead, 2016).

FINDINGS

Local Tourism Structure and SWOT

The *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* can accommodate 60-120 visitors. During high-demand seasons (e.g., the Cultural Festival), the members solicit 'open homes' through other village residents who are not necessarily permanently engaged in the 'accredited' homestay program. Most visitors are educational tourists as employees of governmental organizations (officers, retirees, etc.) and, thus, not truly representative of genuine 'free and independent tourists' (FITs) seeking an authentic Thai village experience. Some authors label this as a fake homestay experience (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013). Subsequently, the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* seeks to attract broader target markets, particularly youth and foreigners, recognizing that some hosts may need to improve their Tangible (accommodation) and Reliability (communications) standards to be attractive. Despite the management committee's overall enthusiasm to achieve the *ASEAN Homestay Standard,* some individuals had mixed views regarding their capacity to develop beyond the *Thailand Homestay Standard*. Such insecurity about raising standards exposes present-day homestay delivery challenges. Notwithstanding any shortcomings stated or observed, it is essential to applaud Pho Tak Homestay's current capacity and acknowledge the strengths of the Thai Puan Club management, not least its promotion of inclusivity, notably demonstrated through the majority female committee. Notwithstanding, we heed the members' concerns, and, critically, if left unchecked, they pose significant barriers to group unity and their likelihood of meeting the *ASEAN Homestay Standard*. To document internal and external capacities, Table 3 displays their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT).

The SWOT analysis exposes several criteria that need further consideration from the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay*. Specifically with the hosts (growing confidence in communication with foreigners), location (developing convenient access), activities (creating memorable experiences), marketing and promotion (providing up-to-date

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Outward-facing cooperation among members • Unique culture (food, language & custom) • Service-minded hosts • Safety (police and health infrastructures) • Foreign language skills by some members • (Mandarin, Korean & English)	• Inward-facing divisions over standards' achievement • Lacking destination marketing and promotion • Tourism and hospitality supply-chain knowledge • Lacking public transport access • Limited foreign language skills by most members • Lack of youth involvement (sustainability)
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Support from external organizations • Sino-China speed train • The Provincial tourism policy promotes CBT • Wellness tourism package development	• External support dependency • Turnstile of governmental tourism officers • Competition from neighbouring villages

Table 3. SWOT analysis of Thai Puan Pho Tak Homestay (compiled by authors)

information and more responsive direct marketing), and sustainability principles (relying less on external organizations and planning for succession).

Local Views Towards SERVQUAL Dimensions (Internal Gaze)

Through continuous engagement with the participants and listening to their concerns, narratives mainly pertained to three SERVQUAL dimensions: Tangibles (activities), Responsiveness (communications, marketing), and Assurance (sustainability principles). Villagers expressed mindfulness of their inadequate knowledge of tourism and hospitality - theory and practice. Additionally, they lamented their location's lack of immediate natural attractions and feared for their succession (sustainability). These aspects, each as a significant barrier to meeting the *ASEAN Homestay Standard,* are unpacked against the five SERVQUAL dimensions.

Tangibles (Activities)

During a focus group, several participants agreed they needed to develop a more dynamic tour package. This would help deliver memorable experiences for tourists, as a participant voiced, summarizing several opinions:

> We still need to create new tourism activities that are more exciting and make them enjoyable and memorable for tourists. (P5)

Other participants voiced the recommendations they received from external stakeholders, such as tour companies:

> Recently, a tour company told us to capitalize on our location by bringing in international tourists coming through the Sino-China speed train [China-Singapore route via Lao and Thailand] to stay at our homestay. (P1)

While participants identify the need to develop new activities and tourism services, they also are aware of and highlight their strengths, including their unique cultural capital:

> I think we are good at wellness tourism as we have herbs and massage here. We always provide guests with our cultural cuisine. (P2)

Overall, the participants agreed that their existing tour program narrowly focuses on cultural activities due to the unavailability of natural attractions. They acknowledge the need for more vibrant tour itineraries with English language interpretations to cater to new tourism demands. Inviting new tourist markets, however, brings further implications regarding Responsiveness.

Responsiveness (Marketing)

Some villagers acknowledged the benefits of using social media such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook for marketing. However, they lamented their inability to harness these free and influential tools, specifically in English language formats. Representing the committee, one participant voiced:

> The marketing efforts, mainly social media, that we do now are not yet successful. This is because we have insufficient skills to make it more effective. (P 7)

The results reveal that the current marketing system needs some improvement and updates. It is ineffective in its messaging, mainly due to the limited language skills of the elders in charge. Subsequently, they desire more youth, specifically those with language skills, to join marketing activities, thereby fostering greater Assurance.

Assurance (Sustainability Principles)

The participants identified two main concerns regarding the sustainability of their ethnic tourism and program in Pho Tak. First, for homestays, there is a high dependency on external organizational assistance, and second, the village youth need to be more actively engaged. One participant's voice represents the committee's general expression concerning external assistance:

> We experience extensive bureaucratic processes of the public organizations, high turnover of tourism department staff [3], and a lack of continuous engagement, making the support quite fragmented. (P1)

---

3 A personal communication (14 April 2022) with a provincial officer confirmed that a current key staff member was moving to a new position outside the province.

Another participant critically addressed the questionable role of external organizations for the sustainable development of the village:

> Some organizations bring aid to our village but always look for the return benefits. If they evaluate that the benefits aren't good enough or not worth it, they won't return. Some organizations just come and go - not continuous support. In the end, we do need to help ourselves.

Regarding the second concern of under-participation by the village youth, several participants expressed worry about younger generations' lack of stepping up to sustain the village's fledgling *local/ethnic* tourism and homestay program. The committee's desire for youth involvement in the program, such as for marketing, promotion, and encouragement of a *local* English-speaking tourist guide, has not come to fruition, as one participant states:

> I would like to see our promotional site continually updated. So, it would be better to have the younger generation in charge of our marketing system. (P2)

Although some younger individuals engage meaningfully through dance performances within the Pho Tak CBT Cultural Club program, the management committee consists mostly of senior females over sixty years old (see Table 2). In Thai culture, seniority is highly regarded in decision-making and power influence within a community (Ditta-Apichai et al., 2024), hence often a 'barrier' to youth participation. As such, a participant expressed:

> The youth don't want to engage much as some of us were their teachers in the past - I think they are kind of scared of us. But we need their help in developing the marketing system. As we get older, we tire easily. Unlike youth, they have more energy, creativity, and talents in many ways. (P2)

As several authors allude (Ditta-Apichai et al., 2024; Tran Huu Thuy & Caldicott, 2022), such (under)resourcing can severely impact a community's future development, resilience, and sustainability. Notwithstanding the valued participant voices (internal gaze) from the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* and their genuine concern, several external gaze aspects deserve attention.

Researchers' Observations to Homestay Capacity (External Gaze)

In addition to general CBT homestay observations and the SWOT, the researchers participated in a two-day, one-night familiarization as a 'dummy' tour group (demand-side perspective). Several authors (Fossey et al., 2002; Thananusak & Suriyankietkaew, 2023) advocate such engagement to strengthen understanding of the real-life context. Consequently, our researcher reflections focused on essential accommodation and service development aspects relevant to all nine *ASEAN Homestay Standard* criteria. Specifically, we observed the homestay hosts in their homes overnight to determine if they adhered to *Thai* and *ASEAN Homestay Standard*

criteria. Table 4 exhibits the collected data and its treatment itemized against the nine ASEAN homestay standard criteria.

ASEAN Homestay Standard Criteria	Indicators	Position of Thai Puan Pho Tak Homestay
1. Host	• Welcome • Friendliness • Engagement	• Hosts are friendly, genuine, and enthusiastic about providing guest service • Communications are mostly limited to Thai language
2. Accommodation	• House (general) • Bedroom • Bathroom • Toilet	• Not all houses reflect the traditional architectural style • No air-conditioners but pedestal fans in most bedrooms • Room amenities are basic, often without a bed lamp, working table, privacy curtain/blind, wardrobe/cloth hangers • Mostly communal bathrooms have water heaters, but they don't always work or have very low pressure • Some over-basin taps are not working • A mix of squat and flush toilets in various conditions.
3. Activities	• Village-based activities • Surrounding activities • Authenticity	• Lack of immediate natural attractions with tour packages based on cultural activities (Temples & Puan ethnicity) • Engaging in traditional performances, ceremonies, and food • Note: Nearby areas have natural attractions/activities, i.e., dam, river, waterfall, and floating (raft) dining
4. Management	• Leadership • Organization • Database • Capacity- building • Collaboration	• Lack of tourism knowledge and leadership skills • Social enterprise not practising within a 'Quality Management' paradigm • No database of past tourists • Villagers active in capacity building • Some collaboration with public and private organizations
5. Marketing and promotion	• Promotion and • web marketing • Partnerships	• Inefficient marketing and promotion • Facebook page plus indirect marketing via external pages • Limited local tour operators promote the tour packages
6. Hygiene and cleanliness	• House (bedroom, bathroom & kitchen/ food prep area) • Surroundings	• The cleanliness of some houses needs to be improved, e.g., first appearances, maintenance, spider webs, dust, & mold • The surrounding compound, in some instances, is untidy, e.g., overgrown & rubbish scatterings • Food preparation areas sometimes poorly kept and lack fly/dust covers to protect food preparations and utensils
7. Safety and security	• Safety and emergency proceedures	• The village has an adequate hospital, police, and local municipal office presence • No manual or SOPs regarding safety and security measures
8. Location	• Accessibility	• Lack of public transport limits visitor numbers
9. Sustainability principles	• Economic • Socio-cultural • Environmental	• Homestay generates additional village income • Low youth involvement and high external dependency • Fostering Thai Puan culture through tourism activities preserves culture and raises local pride • Low-level environmental protection measures

Table 4. Summary of Thai Puan Pho Tak Homestay's capacity and position against the ASEAN Homestay Standard. (compiled by authors)

Co-generated Knowledge - Barriers to Improving Local/Ethnic Homestay Standards (Mutual Gaze)

The SWOT analysis (Table 3) and researcher reflections (Table 4), supported by photographic evidence (Figures 3), were workshopped with the CBT/homestay participants through the talking circles. This gave rise to the additional opportunity to explore SERVQUAL dimensions as growth tools for sustainability and international standards – thus continuing data co-generation through a mutual gaze (Maoz, 2006; Sroypetch, 2016) – homestay hosts and researchers (as guests).

Subsequent consensus discussions centered on consolidating the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* position against the nine *ASEAN Homestay Standard* criteria. Through collaborative engagement, all five SERVQUAL dimensions – Tangibles, Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, and Responsiveness – were identified as critical areas, expanding the community-led 'barriers' perspectives. As unpacked below, the specific content of this mutual gaze extends rather than repeats the specific internal/external gaze items reported above. Therefore, while the SERVQUAL dimensions provide the common framework for our presentation, the individual 'need' (bracketed items) may differ from items raised earlier.

Tangibles (Accommodation)

Thai homestay operations are collectivist, promoted, and managed as a single product entity. Despite the multiple participating hosts, *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay*

Figure 3. Homestay bedroom (top left), homestay bathroom (top right), homestay kitchen (bottom left), and homestay public space (bottom right). (all photos by Supattra Sroypetch)

is a sub-program of a broader community-based tourism (CBT) initiative. Though outwardly presenting as a unified and authentic product, the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay's* current form and delivery do not sufficiently reflect contemporary international tourism accommodation demand—certainly not matched with the Thai National COVID-19 tourism recovery strategy promoting high-value tourism, and subsequently, it is not resilient to future shocks.

Reliability (Host Language Constraint)

Some *locals* exhibit various proficiency with foreign languages such as English, Mandarin, and Korean. However, in host communication between them and the guest, they admit a lack of confidence. As expressed by a participant – "Our [hosting] inability to interact meaningfully with the guests hinders the immediate homestay experience". (P8) However, broader communication strategies highlight a Responsiveness deficit as discussed in a later section. Thus, an essential factor in improving *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay's* sustainability is improving the service quality mindset, which extends to communicating confidently in foreign languages (Nomnian et al., 2020). The village management committee has acknowledged language development as an area for improvement and is anticipating necessary adjustments, primarily through greater bilingual youth involvement. The homestay hosts openly desire to grow their household incomes by adapting their service to meet the demands of both the new-normal and foreign markets. Thus, they contribute significantly to their success in aligning with SDG No. 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth.

Assurance (Hygiene and Cleanliness)

The homestay operators must improve primary international standards, not least in bedrooms (beds off the floor), bathrooms (hygiene and functioning amenity), kitchens (prevent vermin intrusion), and public spaces (safety and cleanliness) (see Figure 3). Through the talking circles, the homestay participants suggested continuing the now-well-established international COVID-19 safety protocols introduced and regulated by the government Safety and Health Administration (SHA) program (TAT News, 2021). They agree that such collective aspiration for change is a positive way to generate 'confidence' among tourists concerned about their choice of homestay as an alternate lodging mode and hosts concerned about furthering their sustainable succession. Such compliance aligns with Mohamed and Aminudin (2016), who stress that the "issue of successors, or the next generation, needs to be addressed" (p. 1076).

Empathy (Management Practices)

The management criteria within the *ASEAN Homestay Standard* concern five sub-aspects: leadership, collaboration, organization, database, capacity building, and training. Homestay members in Pho Tak identified their struggles through attempts to set up basic systematic operations such as a members database, a visitors database, and standard operating procedures (SOPs) or guideline manuals to support their operations. Acknowledging these critical challenges, the research team workshopped

business excellence principles through the management committee, co-developing a business performance excellence manual to address their lack of specific tourism leadership and entrepreneurial skills (see Rangsungnoen et al., 2024).

Responsiveness (Online Presence)

To avoid disrespecting the community's expressed wish for a more significant marketing effort, the research team facilitated a further specialized workshop to explore targeted marketing and promotions issues with the committee. By engaging them in the discussion, they grew in awareness of the 'new normal' consumer demands, and hence, acceptance for specific marketing to take a lower priority until their homestay enterprise – accommodation, pricing, quality, amenities, service - matches SERVQUAL dimensions. Product supply, including responsive and secure online access, must meet 'new-normal' market trends[4].

To summarize the internal, external, and mutual gaze perspectives, the evidence exposes elements of all five SERVQUAL dimensions as central areas considered 'barriers' for *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* to meet *ASEAN Homestay Standards*. Subsequently, our discussion ventures beyond our original thesis of questioning which SERVQUAL attributes are deficient in Thai *local/ethnic* homestays and their causes to further reflect on *why* some dimensions are more problematic.

DISCUSSION

This study purposely juxtaposes a community-based local/*ethnic* homestay program in Thailand against the *ASEAN Homestay Standard,* exposing 'barriers' for Thai operators in satisfying contemporary consumer SERVQUAL demand. In unison with Escolar-Jimenez (2020), we argue that authenticity as context can no longer masquerade ahead of homestay conformance to international 'new-world' standards. The ultimate goal for Thailand in building back from COVID-19 and developing resilience against future crises is to promote a tourism model where "everyone involved 'eats well', 'fits well', and 'provides well', resulting in tourism sustainability" (BBC, 2022, p. 6), thereby mirroring the ethos of 'leave no one behind', the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). Following such approaches, as prescribed through the Thai National pandemic recovery strategy (National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023), it remains incumbent on the tourism industry to drive change. As Thailand's key service sector, it must transform into a "quality-focused and sustainable force by promoting quality, value, and sustainability over quantity" (p. 8). Such a change can create added value for services that align with contemporary market directions and trends. Specifically, all five SERVQUAL dimensions require greater attention at the *Thailand Homestay Standard* level for the Government's tourism recovery strategy to have contributable meaning in rural areas.

4 Notwithstanding the broader recommendation to de-prioritize marketing per se, the research team continues to facilitate student engagement with the community to develop a secure homestay booking, payment, and receipting interface that would link through the Pho Tak Village CBT Facebook page and the Thai Ministry for Tourism and Sport.

Researcher Reflection on Why Certain SERVQUAL Dimensions Present as Problematic

Thailand is not unique in its continuing challenges with SERVQUAL and SDGs regarding lodging standard internationalization. Many of their ASEAN neighbors experience the same common problems of low product quality and service failure (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Saraithong & Chancharoenchai, 2011; Trupp et al., 2024).

Our long-term engagement within the Pho Tak Thai Puan village exposed cultural influences on SERVQUAL delivery. Thai culture, specifically less educated rural/ethnic culture, often adopts the *Sabai Sabai* (take it easy) approach to life and hence shows indifference to (does not recognize) the many tangible aspects that an educated society may theorize as failed SERVQUAL attributes. Further, the peaceful nature of the Thai people, greatly influenced by the precepts of Buddhism, guides them in steering away from conflict. Hence, offering a sweet smile with a gesture of apology for any customer-expressed shortfall will often allow Thais to retreat without losing face, but sadly, and frequently, with no remedial action.

Specific examples were raised directly through the participant comments reported earlier, which included a common thread of language and ICT deficiencies. As reinforced by Nomnian et al. (2020), language and tourism are intrinsically interconnected in cross-cultural exchanges, often conducted in the hegemonic *lingua franca* English vocabulary. Janjua et al. (2021) contend that the benefits of ITC competency in tourism are indispensable, with Nomnian et al. (2020) furthering the importance of multi-lingual competency to enhance back-of-house communications development (data-based), customer-facing presence (web-based), and personal communications skills (listening and speaking).

Implications for Local/Ethnic Homestay 'Standard' Development

With the study's hindsight, we provide recommendations against the five SERVQUAL dimensions to assist *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* in reversing 'systemic barriers' to their advancement.

Tangibles (Homes and Tours)

We recommend that homestay introduce a grading (multi-tiered) system where existing and 'new' houses can conceptually position along an 'accommodation standard' spectrum. Such grading offers scope for individuals as 'micro-entrepreneurs' (Rangsungnoen et al., 2024; Trupp et al., 2024) to envision their home within a two-axis matrix (Figure 4). The horizontal axis relates to facilities and services standards - minimalist through premium. The vertical axis refers to price points - low through high. Naturally, the high price will correspond to premier standards.

Conceptually, *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* currently presents within 'A' (Figure 4) a narrow 'existing product constraint' bandwidth - virtually along the horizontal axis. The facilities/standards' range sits toward the lower end even though tariffs (prices) edge into the upper field with the product/service offering not always commensurate with the price. Much homestay pricing is arbitrarily and uniformly set 'top-down' through the CBT cooperative internal system rather than 'bottom-up' by individual hosts premised on external market service delivery drivers (Müller et al., 2020; Theerapappisit, 2012).

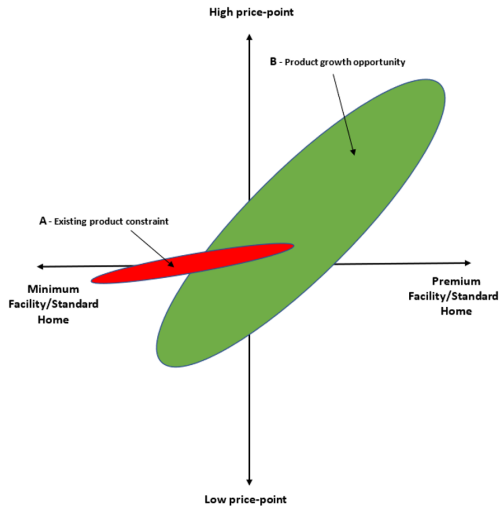

Figure 4. Conceptual homestay growth matrix informed by SERQUAL principles (Figure by authors).

Thus, operators must apply social-entrepreneurial competence within their micro-businesses and collectivist CBT programs. Such a mindset can serve individual- and community-based tourism interests and model sustainable development outcomes (Qu et al., 2022; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024). By repositioning disparate operators across the matrix region marked "B" (Figure 4), motivated individual homestays would diversify and improve their accommodation and service standards accordingly. Offers toward the premium-service/high-price quadrant can more aptly position their homestay to realize local/community sustainable 'product growth opportunity' while delivering on the national government's pandemic recovery strategy through high-value tourism. Regarding tours, *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* should consider collaborations with neighboring Thai Puan villages to expand their offer, delivering greater diversity through 'special' tourist experiences. Such specialties' can extend to health and wellness as tourists in this COVID-19 longtail era continue to prioritize safety, service quality, and sustainability in their tourism purchases (Hekmat et al., 2021).

Reliability (Host Communications)

Language development for *Homestay* is critical. For example, the Sino-China speed train, now terminating in Vientiane (Lao PDR), will imminently continue into Thailand. This central *One Belt And Road* enabling infrastructure (Cai, 2017; Scott, 2022) will come closer to Pho Tak Village, providing opportunities for their *Puan Homestay* to capture a share of new international audiences. To capitalize, thus, 'language' development (Nomnian et al., 2020) in Chinese and English is something *Pho Tak Homestay* can pursue as the medium of marketing, conversation, and tour guiding, potentially through further youth involvement.

Responsiveness (Marketing and Promotion)

Our research recommends prioritizing 'accommodation, activity, and service development' processes with embedded 'quality' and 'sustainability' dimensions to enhance the product suite making it more marketable through electronic media and external agents.

Assurance (Sustainability)

Homestay and CBT programs in Thailand, currently dominated by the elderly, must take more proactive measures to engage the youth. Without planned succession (Mohamed & Aminudin, 2016), sustainability gaps widen, not least in culture and economics. Hence, homestay businesses can falter (Samsudin & Maliki, 2015). Accordingly, we advocate for initiatives like ethnic Puan and cultural tourism awareness programs in local schools and enhanced tourism management strategies in the CBT to improve succession and profitability in the homestay business, thus appealing to and incentivizing the younger generation.

Additionally, external aid must produce internal skills, weaning reliance on outside parties. To become a sustainable social enterprise with a solid future, *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* must work harder on its sustainability and resilience strategy (Trupp et al., 2024), and inner empowerment (Talmage et al., 2022). Subsequently, all homestay operators (not least Thai) must receive training to understand the importance of incorporating SERVQUAL and SDGs into all management and operations to shape experiences differently and target evolving 'new-normal' markets anticipating future crises.

Thus, we recommend inviting a 'youth representative' to the management committee to demonstrate genuine inclusion and empowerment. Connecting young and old in the committee facilitates two-way skill development, knowledge transfer, and sustainable succession while dissipating power imbalances.

Empathy (Management Practices)

In following the above, a lack of leadership skills for tourism and management systems surfaces as a Pho Tak challenge – [dis]encouraging equity with empowerment. The SDGs offer new hope for greater 'inclusion' and 'empowerment' of marginalized communities (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). Many communities often experience internal marginalization (intentionally or not) due to hierarchical power relations. Subsequently, the Pho Tak Thai Puan Club management committee and homestay operators should encourage and support broader community engagement incorporating various ages and statuses, specifically youth.

Summarizing, our reflections offer tri-level perspectives for immediate and future homestay providers, other stakeholders (including local administrators), and national policymakers. Though some hosts may choose to remain with bare minimum standards, our novel findings reveal evidence suggesting others may aspire for accelerated growth by delivering higher standards and moving from A to B on the conceptual homestay growth matrix. Hence, we further the calls of others (Janjua et al., 2021;

Nomnian et al., 2020), who found that essential topics like language and ICT proficiency, homestay branding, operator training, and advocacy for sustainability should be addressed immediately.

We propose that savvy *local/ethnic* homestay operators receptive to the higher standards can present premium products and services to earn greater economic rewards, confirming previous studies (see Kimaiga et al., 2018; Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Qiao et al., 2021) which suggests correlations between CBT and SDGs can improve community welfare (SGD: 3). Subsequently, this study's significance is its demonstration of essential differences in 'service quality' perspectives and thus acceptable 'standards' as viewed through a tri-focal—internal, external, mutual—lens. Further, the conceptual homestay growth matrix provides a practical and theoretical building block for a high-value homestay sector wishing to exhibit resilience and inclusive growth, steering it on a preparatory and sustainable path to responsible production and consumption (SDG: 12) and the 'next' new normal.

CONCLUSION

Our study partially contributes to literary and practice voids. Its novel contribution is the co-generated advancement of 'homestay' knowledge developed through a mutual lens to address SERVQUAL in homestay across all five dimensions as foundational sustainability tools. While such findings further previous studies, including the supply lens (Nomnian et al., 2020; Priatmoko et al., 2021) and the demand lens (Franisal, 2020; Voon et al., 2017), it theoretically advances the mutual lens perspective (Maoz, 2006; Sroypetch, 2016). Such an approach accords with Pasanchay and Schott (2021), who advocate that a holistic livelihood perspective is required for CBT homestays to advance the SDGs. Hence, the study can benchmark further homestay research in other developing countries aspiring to better serve the SDGs.

Notwithstanding the rich empirical evidence, the single destination case study has its limitations – it may not be generalized. Nonetheless, the methods can be replicated across homestays in Thailand and other ASEAN countries, particularly those with some common characteristics, not least in desiring to attract international customers through the homestay brand. More research is needed across Southeast Asian countries to continue narrowing the gap between supply-, demand-, and policy-side perspectives on meeting 'service quality' and SDGs. Subsequent research should extend to canvasing quantitative perceptions and qualitative reasons from post-stay international tourists regarding their experience with ASEAN region *local/ethnic* homestays. Further, a Delphi study facilitated through tourism policy advisors across all ASEAN member states may help them foster sharing-circle decision-making internationally to support *local/ethnic* homestay transitioning toward a genuinely unified *ASEAN Homestay Standard*[5].

~

5 During the research period, Thai Puan Pho Tak Homestay was assessed for the ASEAN Homestay Standard which was officially granted on 22 November 2024.

REFERENCES

Adie, B. A., Amore, A., & Hall, C. M. (2022). Just because it seems impossible, doesn't mean we shouldn't at least try: The need for longitudinal perspectives on tourism partnerships and the SDGs. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *30*(10), 2282-2297.

Akhmedova, A., Manresa, A., Escobar Rivera, D., & Bikfalvi, A. (2021). Service quality in the sharing economy: A review and research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *45*(4), 889-910.

Arowoshegbe, A. O., Emmanuel, U., & Gina, A. (2016). Sustainability and triple bottom line: An overview of two interrelated concepts. *Igbinedion University Journal of Accounting*, *2*(16), 88-126.

ASEAN Secretariat. (2016, January). *ASEAN Homestay Standard*. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ASEAN-Homestay-Standard.pdf

Bandola-Gill, J., Arthur, M., & Leng, R. I. (2023). What is co-production? Conceptualising and understanding the co-production of knowledge and policy across different theoretical perspectives. *Evidence and Policy*, *19*(2), 275-298.

Bangkok Post. (2022, 23 October 2022). *Thailand revitalising tourism locally and internationally for Asia-Pacific*. https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/general/2419736

BBC. (2022, 10 Ocober). *Reopening to more sustainable tourism for Thailand*. British Broadcasting Commission. https://www.bbc.com/storyworks/advertiser-content/amazing-thailand/reopening-to-more-sustainable-tourism-for-thailand

Bhat, M. A. (2012). Tourism service quality: a dimension-specific assessment of SERVQUAL. *Global Business Review*, *13*(2), 327-337.

Brundtland, G. H. (1987, 20 March). *Report of the world commission on environment and development: Our common future*. World Commission on Environment and Development: UN. http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf

Business Bliss Consultants FZE. (2018). *Theories and concepts of the SERVQUAL model*. UKDiss.com. https://ukdiss.com/examples/origins-of-servqual-model.php?vref=1

Cai, P. (2017). *Understanding China's belt and road initiative*. The Lowey Institute for International Policy. Retrieved 26 February 2018 from https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/understanding-china-s-belt-road-initiative

Caldicott, R. W., von der Heidt, T., Scherrer, P., Muschter, S., & Canosa, A. (2020). Airbnb – exploring its triple bottom line impacts. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *14*(2), 205-223.

Chalupa, S., & Petricek, M. (2022). Understanding customer's online booking intentions using hotel big data analysis. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, *Online*, 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1177/13567667221122107

Cheer, J., & Lew, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Tourism resilience and sustainability: adapting to social, political and economic change*. Routledge.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). Action research. In L. Cohen, L. Manion, & K. Morrison (Eds.), *Research Methods in Education* (8 ed., pp. 440-456), Routledge.

Dahles, H. (2000). Tourism, small enterprises and community development. In G. Richards & D. Hall (Eds.), *Tourism and Sustainable Community Development* (pp. 154-169), Routledge.

Department of Provincial Administration. (2022). *Nong Khai Provincial Statistical Report*. Ministry of Interior, Thailand. https://nongkhai.nso.go.th/images/Report_Stsistical-2565-Final.pdf

Department of Tourism. (2022). *Homestay standards in Thailand*. Ministry of Tourism and Sports. https://prachuapkhirikhan.mots.go.th/download/article/article_20200417111756.pdf

Ditta-Apichai, M., Sroypetch, S., & Caldicott, R. W. (2024). A critique of community-based tourism development: The comparative case of Betong and Pho Tak Districts, Thailand. *Community Development*, *55*(1), 67-84.

Dolezal, C., & Novelli, M. (2022). Power in community-based tourism: Empowerment and partnership in Bali. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *30*(10), 2352-2370.

Drawson, A. S., Toombs, E., & Mushquash, C. J. (2017). Indigenous research methods: A systematic review. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, *8*(2), 1-25.

Escolar-Jimenez, C. C. (2020). Cultural homestay enterprises: sustainability factors in Kiangan, Ifugao. *Hospitality & Society*, *10*(1), 63-85.

Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F., & Davidson, L. (2002). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, *36*(6), 717-732.

Franisal, P. N. (2020). Analysis of homestay criteria compliance in tourist village according to the visitor's perception. *Tourism Research Journal*, *4*(2), 133-149.

Grandidge, M. (2023). *What is a Bed & Breakfast and why you should stay in them?* Absolute Escapes. Retrieved 7 September 2024 from https://www.absoluteescapes.com/blog/what-is-a-bed-and-breakfast/

Gutierrez-Montes, I., Emery, M., & Fernandez-Baca, E. (2009). The sustainable livelihoods approach and the community-capitals framework: The importance of system-level approaches to community change efforts. *Community Development*, *40*(2), 106-113.

Hardy, A., Young, T., Cheer, J., Scheyvens, R., & Movono, A. (2022). Humanising research: a citizen social science agenda. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *96*, 103468.

Haugen, J. (2023, 27 March 2023). What defines a "high-value" traveler - and would a shift in perspective make a difference? rootedstorytelling.com. https://rootedstorytelling.com/rethinking-tourism/attracting-high-value-travelers/

Hekmat, N., Ramazanova, M., Marques, J., & Quintela, J. A. (2021). Wellness tourism experience on the rise post-COVID. In R. A. B. Costa, F Brandão, Z. Breda, & C. Costa (Eds.), *Planning and Managing the Experience Economy in Tourism* (pp. 215-237), IGI Global.

Heron, J., & Reason, P. (1997). A participatory inquiry paradigm. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *3*(3), 274-294.

Hinch, T., & Butler, R. (1996). Indigenous tourism: A common ground for discussion. In R. Butler & T. Hinch (Eds.), *Tourism and Indigenous Peoples*. International Thomson Business Press.

Janjua, Z. U. A., Krishnapillai, G., & Rahman, M. (2021). A systematic literature review of rural homestays and sustainability in tourism. *SAGE Open*, *11*(2), 1-17.

Kimaiga, R. K., Kihima, B. O., & Nzioka, A. (2018). Homestay tourist accommodation as a tool for the socio-economic well-being of rural communities in Kenya. *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Management*, *6*(4), 143-151.

Lamaiwong, C. (2014). *Legal problem relating to homestay accommodation business in Thailand* Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand. http://ethesisarchive.library.tu.ac.th/thesis/2014/TU_2014_5401040125_2183_1069.pdf

Lavallée, L. F. (2009). Practical application of an indigenous research framework and two qualitative Indigenous research methods: Sharing circles and anishnaabe symbol-based reflection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *8*(1), 21-40.

Lew, A. A., Cheer, J. M., Haywood, M., Brouder, P., & Salazar, N. B. (2020). Visions of travel and tourism after the global COVID-19 transformation of 2020. *Tourism Geographies*, *22*(3), 455-466.

Lopez Escobar, D. (2022, 7 September). *Planning your 2022 hotel budget? Here are 5 new things to consider*. Pressreader. https://blog.pressreader.com/hotels/planning-your-2022-hotel-budget-here-are-5-new-things-to-consider?

Mahato, S. S., Phi, G. T., & Prats, L. (2021). Design thinking for social innovation: Secrets to success for tourism social entrepreneurs. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *49*(Online), 396-406.

Maoz, D. (2006). The mutual gaze. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *33*(1), 221-239.

Mapjabil, J., Ismail, S. C., Ab Rahman, B., Masron, T., Ismail, R., & Zainol, R. M. (2015). Homestays-community programme or alternative accommodation? A re-evaluation of concept and execution. *Geografia*, *11*(12), 1-8.

McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2016). *You and your action research project* (4 ed.). Routledge.

Missingham, B. D. (2017). Asset-based learning and the pedagogy of community development. *Community Development*, *48*(3), 339-350.

Mohamed, R., & Aminudin, N. (2016). Understanding homestay sustainability through successor motivational factors. In N. Aminudin (Ed.), *Regional Conference on Science, Technology and Social Sciences (RCSTSS 2014)*. https://doi.org/0.1007/978-981-10-1458-1_96

Müller, S., Huck, L., & Markova, J. (2020). Sustainable community-based tourism in Cambodia and tourists' willingness to pay. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, *13*(1), 81-101.

Munasinghe, S., Hemmington, N., Schänzel, H., & Poulston, J. (2022). Hospitality beyond the commercial domain: A triadic conceptualisation of hospitality in tourism from a host-guest encounter perspective. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *107*(Online), 103316. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103316

Mura, P. (2015). Perceptions of authenticity in a Malaysian homestay: A narrative analysis. *Tourism Management*, *51*(Online), 225-233.

Muschter, S., Caldicott, R. W., von der Heidt, T., & Che, D. (2021). Third-party impacts of short-term rental accommodation: A community survey to inform government responses. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *30*(5), 1102-1121.

National Economic and Social Development Council. (2023). *The thirteenth national economic and social development plan (2023-2027)*. The Office of the Prime Minister, Bangkok, Thailand. https://www.nesdc.go.th/nesdb_en/download/article/article_20230615134558.pdf

Naumov, N., Varadzhakova, D., & Naydenov, A. (2021). Sanitation and hygiene as factors for choosing a place to stay: Perceptions of the Bulgarian tourists. *Anatolia*, *32*(1), 144-147.

Nomnian, S., Trupp, A., Niyomthong, W. T., P, & Charoenkongka, A. (2020). Language and community-based tourism: Use needs, dependency, and limitations. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, *13*(1), 57-79.

Nowotny, H., Scott, P., & Gibbons, M. (2003). `Mode 2' revisited: The new production of knowledge. *Minerva*, *41*(3), 179-194.

Ongsakul, V., Kajla, T., Raj, S., Khoa, T. T., & Ahmed, Z. U. (2022). Changing tourists' preferences in the hotel industry amid the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, *13*(2), 296-313.

Parasuraman, A., Zelthaml, V. A., & Berry, L. L. (1985). A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research. *Journal of Marketing*, *49*(Fall), 41-50.

Pasanchay, K., & Schott, C. (2021). Community-based tourism homestays' capacity to advance the sustainable development goals: A holistic sustainable livelihood perspective. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, *37*(Online), 100784. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100784

Paulauskaite, D., Powell, R., Coca-Stefaniak, J. A., & Morrison, A. M. (2017). Living like a local: Authentic tourism experiences and the sharing economy. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *19*(6), 619-628.

Pham Minh, Q., & Ngoc Mai, N. (2023). Perceived risk and booking intention in the crisis of COVID-19: comparison of tourist hotels and love hotels. *Tourism Recreation Research*, *48*(1), 128-140.

Phongthanapanich, P., & Ouparamai, W. (2021). Value-based pricing in contemporary marketing. *Journal of ASEAN PLUS Studies*, *2*(1), 26-35.

Phunnarong, S. (2021). Factors affecting the success of community-based tourism (CBT) in homestay form. *Journal of Community Development Research (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, *14*(4), 14-27.

Pinichchan, G., Maneenin, P., Kamphaengdee, S., Namburi, N., & Raksudjarit, S. (2022). Homestay tourism management model to the new normal in the southern provinces of Thailand. *Journal of Positive School Psychology (JPSP)*, *6*(6), 1789-1802.

Priatmoko, S., Kabil, M., Purwoko, Y., & Dávid, L. D. (2021). Rethinking sustainable community-based tourism: A villager's point of view and case study in Pampang Village, Indonesia. *Sustainability*, *13*(6), 3245-3260.

Pusiran, A. K., & Xiao, H. (2013). Challenges and community development: A case study of homestay in Malaysia. *Asian Social Science*, *9*(5), 1-17.

Qiao, H.-H., Wang, C.-H., Chen, M.-H., Su, C.-H. J., Tsai, C.-H. K., & Liu, J. (2021). Hedonic price analysis for high-end rural homestay room rates. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *49*(Online), 1-11.

Qu, M., McCormick, A. D., & Funck, C. (2022). Community resourcefulness and partnerships in rural tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *30*(10), 2371-2390.

Rangsungnoen, G., Sroypetch, S., & Caldicott, R. W. (2024). Extending the Baldrige excellence model for managing a community-based social enterprise. *Social Enterprise Journal*, *20*(1), 1-31.

Reimer, J. K., & Walter, P. (2013). How do you know it when you see it? Community-based ecotourism in the Cardamom Mountains of southwestern Cambodia. *Tourism Management*, *34*(Online), 122-132.

Rickly, J., Sharma, N., & Canavan, B. (2023). Authenticity: the state-of-the-art in tourism geographies. *Tourism Geographies*, *Online*, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2290017

Robina-Ramírez, R., Medina-Merodio, J. A., & Estriegana, R. (2022). What do urban and rural hotel managers say about the future of hotels after Covid-19? The new meaning of safety experiences. *Cities*, *120*(Online), 103492. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103492

Russ, E., Petrakis, M., Whitaker, L., Fitzroy, R., & Short, M. (2024). Co-operative inquiry: qualitative methodology transforming research 'about' to research 'with' people. *Qualitative Research*, *Online*, 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241234272

Samsudin, P. Y., & Maliki, N. Z. (2015). Preserving cultural landscape in homestay programme towards sustainable tourism: Brief critical review concept. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *170*(Online), 433-441. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.004

Sangpikul, A. (2023). Acquiring an in-depth understanding of assurance as a dimension of the SERVQUAL model in regard to the hotel industry in Thailand. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *26*(3), 347-352.

Saraithong, W., & Chancharoenchai, K. (2011). Tourists behaviour in Thai homestay business. *International Journal of Management Cases*, *13*(3), 112-126.

Scheyvens, R., & Cheer, J. M. (2022). Tourism, the SDGs and partnerships. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *30*(10), 2271-2281.

Scott, B. (2022, 28 October). *Thailand eager to take tourist overspill from Laos-China railway*. Thaiger. https://thethaiger.com/hot-news/tourism/thailand-eager-to-take-tourist-overspill-from-laos-china-railway

Singh, S., Angkura, R., & Euamornvanich, P. (2018, 9-10 July). *Communication of Thailand homestay standard compares ASEAN homestay standard.* The European Conference on Media, Communication & Film, Brighton, UK. https://papers.iafor.org/submission40350/

Spinks, R. (2019, 8 June). *The "live like a local" travel ethos has failed—the question is what will replace it*. Quartz. https://qz.com/quartzy/1298546/the-live-like-a-local-travel-ethos-has-failed-locals-so-what-comes-next/

Sroypetch, S. (2016). The mutual gaze: host and guest perceptions of socio-cultural impacts of backpacker tourism: A case study of the Yasawa Islands, Fiji. *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*, *5*(2), 133-144.

Sroypetch, S., Caldicott, R. W., & Carr, N. (2018). Visitor and non-visitor images of Thailand as a backpacking destination: an Australian perspective. *Anatolia*, *29*(2), 278-281.

Sutherland, I., Sim, Y., & Lee, S. K. (2021). Impacts of quality certification on online reviews and pricing strategies in the hospitality industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *93*(Online), 102776. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102776

Talmage, C. A., Allgood, B., Ashdown, B. K., Brennan, A., Hill, S., Trevan, E., & Waugh, J. (2022). Tethering natural capital and cultural capital for a more sustainable post-Covid-19 world. *International Journal of Community Well-Being*, *5*(Online), 657–678.

TAT News. (2021, 13 January). *Amazing Thailand SHA promotes health and wellbeing in Thailand*. Tourism Authority Thailand. https://www.tatnews.org/2021/01/amazing-thailand-sha-promotes-health-and-wellbeing-in-thailand/

Thananusak, T., & Suriyankietkaew, S. (2023). Unpacking key sustainability drivers for sustainable social enterprises: A community-based tourism perspective. *Sustainability*, *15*(4), 3401-3424.

Theerapappisit, P. (2012). The bottom-up approach of community-based ethnic tourism: a case study in Chiang Rai. In M. Kasimoglu & H. Aydin (Eds.), *Strategies for Tourism Industry - Micro and Macro Perspectives* (pp. 267-294). Book on Demand (BoD).

Tourism Authority of Thailand. (2023, 12 January 2023). *TAT strengthens "Visit Thailand Year 2023" towards a meaningful travel direction*. Thailand Government. https://www.tatnews.org/2023/01/tat-strengthens-visit-thailand-year-2023-towards-a-meaningful-travel-direction/

Tran Huu Thuy, G., & Caldicott, R. W. (2022). Developing resilience for small island tourism planning: A qualitative design infusing the sustainability trilogy with three streams of resilience thinking. *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*, *11*(1), 128-157.

Trupp, A., & Dolezal, C. (2020). Tourism and the sustainable development goals in Southeast Asia. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, *13*(1), 1-16.

Trupp, A., Salman, A., Stephenson, M. L., Chan, L.-F., & Gan, J.-E. (2024). A systematic review of challenges faced by micro and small enterprises in tourism destinations: Producing solutions through resilience building and sustainable development. *Tourism Planning and Development*, *Online*, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2024.2307970

United Nations. (2018). *The sustainable development agenda*. The United Nations. Retrieved 27 September 2019 from https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/

UNWTO, & UNDP. (2017). *Tourism and the sustainable development goals—Journey to 2030*. https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284419401

Viken, A., Höckert, E., & Grimwood, B. S. R. (2021). Cultural sensitivity: engaging difference in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *89*(Online), 103223.

Visser, W. (2010). Schön: design as a reflective practice. *Collection, Parsons Paris School of Art, Design and Psychology*, *2*(Online), 21-25.

Voon, B. H., Hamali, J., Jussem, P. M., Teo, A. K., & Kanyan, A. (2017). Socio-environmental dimensions of tourist service experience in homestays. *GEOMATE Journal*, *12*(34), 96-100.

Wahid, S. N. S., Dangi, M. R. M., Jabar, F., Muhamed, M., & Paino, H. (2017). Effect of tangibility and reliability service quality towards homestay customer satisfaction. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Environment Management*, *2*(5), 44-45.

Wisniewski, M. (2001). Using SERVQUAL to assess customer satisfaction with public sector services. *Managing Service Quality*, *11*(6), 380-388.

Zeithaml, V. A., Berry, L. L., & Parasuraman, A. (1988). Communication and control processes in the delivery of service quality. *Journal of Marketing*, *52*(2), 35-48.

Zulkefli, N. S., Aziz, R. C., & Radzol, A. R. M. (2021). Developing a framework on success performance of community-based homestay tourism programme: Evidence from an insider perspective of homestay *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, *13*(3), 256-270.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Assistant Professor Supattra Sroypetch, PhD, is a Tourism and Hospitality lecturer at the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies, Nong Khai Campus, Khon Kaen University, Thailand. Her research interests include backpacker tourism, tourism impacts, and tourist accommodation management with a specialization in Room Division and Front Office.

▸ Contact: srosup@kku.ac.th

Assistant Professor Grid Rangsungnoen, DBA, is a Finance and Business Administration lecturer at the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies, Nong Khai Campus, Khon Kaen University, Thailand. He is a Thailand Quality Award assessor. His research interests include business performance, high-performing organizations, and total quality management.

▸ Contact: gridra@kku.ac.th

Dr Rodney W Caldicott, PhD, is a visiting scholar at Phuket Rajabhat University, Thailand, and holds additional research fellowship affiliations with Khon Kean University, Thailand, and Southern Cross University, Australia. He has extensive private- and public-sector experience, which informs his research in community-based tourism planning, destination development, and alternate accommodations.

▸ Contact: rod.caldicott@scu.edu.au

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Pho Tak Thai Puan Club's voluntary participation and the Khon Kaen University's Research and Graduate Studies Program funding. Human Ethics References No. HE653007 underpins the international research protocols and local participants' consent for all engagements. Finally, we thank the anonymous reviewers and journal editors for their constructive guidance.

DISCLOSURE

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

Memes and the Indonesian 2024 Presidential Elections: Performative Politics in an Illiberal Setting

Ubaidillah Ubaidillah[a], Widjajanti M. Santoso[a], Nina Widyawati[a], Purwadi Purwadi[a], & Ana Windarsih[a]

[a]Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia

*corresponding author: ubaidillah@brin.go.id

Received: 27 August 2024 / Accepted: 18 April 2025 / Published: 29 April 2025

▸ Ubaidillah, U., Santoso, W. M., Widyawati, N., Purwadi, P., & Windarsih, A. (2025). Memes and the Indonesian 2024 presidential elections: Performative politics in an illiberal setting. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 59-82.

Memes played a significant role in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, particularly in shaping illiberal and elite discourse. This study focuses on Gibran Rakabuming Raka, the eldest son of President Joko Widodo (2014-2024) and, since October 2024, the 14th vice president of Indonesia, a controversial figure who benefited from illiberal law and politics. Using digital observation of Gibran's Instagram and X accounts, this study examines how his humorous engagement with digital-native language mobilizes voters while intensifying intergenerational political conflict. The findings suggest that memes have evolved beyond digital campaign tools to resignify elite legitimation in an illiberal state. Furthermore, this study argues that technology consumption patterns have replaced the traditional class-based division of 'people versus elites' in populist narratives, signaling a shift toward digital nativism in Indonesia. By questioning whether memes function as grassroots resistance or elite control mechanisms, this research contributes to broader discussions on digital politics in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Elections; Illiberal; Indonesia; Meme; Performative Politics

INTRODUCTION

Using memes in political campaigns has become a global phenomenon, with politicians leveraging humor and simplicity to reach broader audiences, particularly younger generations (Anderau & Barbarrusa, 2024). In the United States, Donald Trump used memes to attack political opponents and promote his agenda (Praditya, 2018), while Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez utilized them to convey her political messages and engage with supporters (Rodriguez & Goretti, 2022). In the UK, Boris Johnson simplified complex political messages using memes, particularly during the Brexit campaign (Beck, 2024). Ukrainian President

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, drawing on his background as a comedian, has used memes as a political communication tool (Semotiuk & Shevchenko, 2022), while in France, Emmanuel Macron has used memes to attract young voters (Carrejo, 2017). In India, Narendra Modi has strategically employed memes to reinforce his image as a modern leader and to connect with young voters (Rankawat, 2023; Rastogi & Kashyap, 2019).

Moving to Southeast Asia, cases illustrate the use of memes in political movements. For example, the #MilkTeaAlliance exemplifies a transnational memescape that has expanded initial discussions on Taiwanese sovereignty and criticism of the Thai monarchy into a broader global struggle against authoritarianism (Schaffar & Praphakorn, 2021). Studies from Singapore indicate that memes serve as a tool for political participation, particularly among youth who are often apathetic or cynical toward politics (Ahmed & Masood, 2024). Observations of the 2014 and 2019 Indonesian presidential elections show that memes also serve as a tool for political mobilization (Duile & Tamma, 2021; Hanan, 2017; Rahardi & Amalia, 2019; Santosa et al., 2018). The presence of memes is closely tied to Indonesia's political elites (Baulch et al., 2022).

Initially associated with grassroots culture as a means to critique populist hypocrisy (Bratich, 2014; Mozdeika, 2023), memes are transforming into instruments of political performativity, often referred to as "memeing politics", which means as a process of transforming political discourse or action into memes (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). In doing so, they successfully capture the attention of young people in their function as a native digital language (Chagas, 2023). In correspondence with recent research, this article examines the memes produced by Gibran Rakabuming Raka (hereafter Gibran), which illustrate explicit individual involvement in political campaigns. Gibran is the first son of ex-President Joko Widodo (2014-2024; hereafter Jokowi) and, since October 2024, the 14th vice president of Indonesia. His candidacy as vice president stirred controversy. However, unlike the two other candidates, Gibran utilized memes to engage Indonesian youth, who formed the majority of voters in the 2024 presidential election. Theoretically, memes are usually related to subversive counter-narratives. However, this article exhibits memes as mechanisms of elite-driven voter mobilization. By examining Indonesia's unique intersection of dynastic politics, youth digital nativism, and online engagement within an illiberal ecosystem, this study argues that Gibran's memes actively negotiate power dynamics and reconfigure them within illiberal settings. This approach goes beyond conventional discussions of memes as mere instruments of political legitimacy but instead positions them as performative acts embedded in the evolving structures of Indonesia's illiberal democracy.

Hence, this study contributes to the growing literature on memescape, performative politics, and illiberal political structures. Memescapes are the dynamic digital environments where memes circulate, evolve, and influence sociopolitical discourse (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), while performative politics broadly refer to political actions, discourse, and strategies that emphasize spectacle, symbolism, and public performance rather than substantive policymaking (Leeker et al., 2017). Illiberal democracy is a government system that blends market liberalization with authoritarian policies, where nepotism, money politics, and political violence highlight the tension between market demands and state control (Bourchier, 2015; Hadiz, 2004). Gibran's candidacy reflects patterns associated with such a system. His candidacy began when the Constitutional Court (hereafter, MK) granted a lawsuit changing the minimum age

requirement for presidential and vice-presidential candidates as stipulated in Law Number 7 of 2007 concerning Elections. The ruling of this election law introduced an exception to the 40-year age minimum, allowing candidates who currently hold or have previously held positions obtained through general elections to qualify. This amendment enabled Gibran to run at the age of 36. The lawsuit concerning the age requirement was overseen by a panel led by Anwar Usman, Gibran's uncle, and was initiated by a student from Solo. The close personal ties among key figures involved in this constitutional process sparked public criticism over allegations of nepotism. Ultimately, Gibran was elected vice president alongside President Prabowo Subianto in the 2024 presidential election.

This article is based on data collected through digital observation. Data collection was conducted from early 2023, when the discourse surrounding Jokowi's potential successor began, until the presidential election in February 2024. The meme data were obtained from Gibran's X account (@gibran_tweet) and Instagram account (@gibran_rakabuming). Data on speech, talk shows, documentary films, and press releases were gathered from authoritative sources such as mass media, YouTube channels, official state agency websites, and prominent media sites. The analysis of meme data was performed using performative politics as a tool, guided by four main contextual gradations of discourse: 1) co-text, language, or direct internal text; 2) intertextual relationships between speech, text, genre, and discourse; 3) sociological/social variables outside the scope of language that indicated the situational dimension of the text; and 4) the broader historical socio-political context and its relationship to discursive practices (Titscher et al., 2000). With this analytical approach, we examine Gibran's memes as the primary text and the memes of Jokowi and his youngest son, Kaesang Pangarep (hereafter Kaesang), as contextual references. The memescape perspective enables a deeper analysis by positioning memes within the political ecosystem, revealing their intertextuality with other illiberal political phenomena. Jokowi effectively utilized social media by producing memes, controlling political discourse in Indonesia by deploying cyber troops and influencers, and attacking his critics (Sastramidjaja & Wijayanto, 2022; Tapsell, 2021). Gibran leveraged his father's success by using social media to produce memes highlighting his political position. When Gibran faced public criticism, Kaesang responded by creating memes that transformed negative sentiment into an advantage, ultimately helping him gain political support. However, Jokowi's regime was also highly disputed on social media towards the end of his administration.

The analysis of memes as texts is conducted within the context of the 2024 presidential election and the broader framework of Indonesia's political landscape. The first section presents memes as a framework for performativity and discursive power. The second section highlights intergenerational conflicts by analyzing memes produced by Jokowi, Gibran, and Kaesang, utilizing humor to attract the attention of young voters. The third section situates this phenomenon within the framework of illiberal politics, which exhibits ambivalence: on the one hand, the circulation of memes should foster more inclusive political participation, but on the other, they can also function as instruments for maintaining or reinforcing existing power structures. The conclusion wraps up this argument after looking at a neighboring country, indicating regional similarities.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: PERFORMATIVITY AND DISCURSIVE POWER

Performative politics refers to political actions, gestures, or discourses that are primarily symbolic or theatrical, designed to shape public perception, reinforce identities, or mobilize support rather than achieve concrete policy outcomes (Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014). It emphasizes the role of performance, rhetoric, and spectacle in political engagement. The concept of performativity emphasizes how authority, traditionally derived from external sources (e.g., institutions and societal norms), has shifted to internal or individual autonomy. This shift allows individuals and groups to actively construct and redefine their own identities through expressive acts, including the creation of memes. In this context, performativity suggests that identity is not fixed but continually shaped and reaffirmed through actions and expressions, which challenge traditional authority structures (Butler, 1997, 2010).

This article adopts the discursive approach developed by Wiggins (2019) and Wiggins and Bowers (2015), who build on Butler's (1997, 2010) theory of performativity to analyze memes as iterative, identity-constituting acts embedded in ideological practices. Wiggins (2019) demonstrates how memes operationalize Butler's concepts of performativity and resignification, processes through which repeated sharing and remixing of digital artifacts (re)construct meanings and identities. Performativity elevates memes from seemingly random and trivial expressions to meaningful ones. In this case, what is built is a significant process of creating meaning, even reshaping the meaning of existing texts. Related to that is the notion of resignification – a discursive strategy used to propose or refute arguments by contextualizing the internal logic of a text, not just linguistically but also visually or audibly (Butler, 1997, 2010). In memes, resignification operates through rapid de/recontextualization, where images, phrases, or symbols may be stripped of their original intent and imbued with new, often subversive, meanings through collective repetition and remix. The meaning of a text, similar to the identities above, is not fixed and is always in a process of construction. In addition, performatives function as texts that can be analyzed in relation to other texts (Butler, 1997).

Like Butler, Wiggins and Bowers (2015) treat the memescape as a public sphere where power circulates through discursive repetition. However, they extend this framework by foregrounding digital participation: Memes materialize as tools of collective meaning-making, where users simultaneously cite and subvert norms through platform-driven practices (e.g., algorithmic virality, remix culture). The memescape is grounded in structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), which Wiggins (2019) adapts to analyze meme dynamics, emphasizing the recursive relationship between structure (e.g., platform algorithms, cultural norms) and agency (users who create/share memes). This perspective argues that the existence of a meme is not merely coincidental but reflects the active involvement of agents who simultaneously utilize and reproduce structures recursively. When agents interact within the memescape – the environment where memes are created, shared, and transformed – they do more than create memes. They simultaneously shape and are shaped by the structures associated with those memes.

In this article, we conceptualize the memescape as a virtual, mental, and physical hybrid space where agents produce, reproduce, and consume memes. Accordingly,

memes circulating in public spaces, such as digital environments, contribute to the construction of identities, formed through repeated behavior, words, and actions. In the context of performative politics, the memescape also functions as a political arena where existing power relations are rendered visible, both through their discursive positioning and civil society's responses to them. We can uncover insights into digital illiberality by analyzing the interplay between structural constraints (e.g., algorithms, institutional power) and user agency. This framework allows us to critically examine memes produced by elite political actors without neglecting how marginalized groups reclaim memes as tools of resistance.

INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICTS AND GIBRAN'S SELF-OTHERING

Memes and Indonesian Youth

When ex-President Jokowi, Gibran's father, recognized the power of social media to spread information and shape public discourse, he began to share his agenda and views on specific issues regularly. One of his unique approaches incorporated cartoon illustrations that consistently featured an orange cat as a visual element (such as in the National Doctor's Day congratulatory illustration shown in the upper left corner of Figure 1). This choice reflects careful monitoring of social media trends and popular topics among Indonesian youth (Nugraheny & Asril, 2022). Cats frequently appear in digital conversations, such as those moderated by the X account @kochengfs, a well-known platform facilitating discussions about cats among young people. By leveraging this familiar visual icon, Jokowi intended to build an emotional connection with younger audiences while strengthening his digital presence.

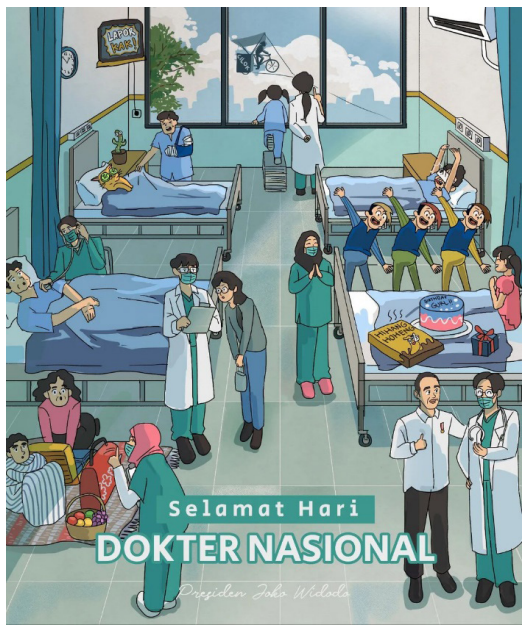

Figure 1. The National Doctor Day cartoon. (Widodo, 2022)

Virality has become crucial in public discourse and politics, as seen in Jokowi's adoption of the orange cat symbol from social media. Achieving virality involves a series of small, strategic actions that build up to create a significant impact. These small actions are interconnected through words and language, creating a chain of ideas – a narrative – that characterizes social movements (Jones, 2021). Social movements often begin with institutions or groups that lack power and gain momentum as more people join them. Like public demonstrations that bring cities to a halt, these movements depend on mass participation and collective momentum. Gibran harnesses the power of the masses by creating memes and adopting a mass segmentation strategy that helps him make them viral. This condition becomes evident in the characters and visual sources he uses for his memes, which resonate with the childhood experiences of Indonesian youth, such as Patrick Star from *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Figure 2), *Upin & Ipin* (Figure 3), and *Thomas & Friends* (Figure 4). In other words, he employs mass targeting by segmenting audiences based on age and their familiarity with childhood audio-visual media.

Figure 2, 3, and 4. Gibran's memes on his social media account. (Marendra, 2023; Putranto, 2023)

Based on a cartoon series with characters still regularly broadcast on Indonesian television, the three memes in Figures 2, 3, and 4 have a complex intertextual relationship. They are used as symbolic elements in Gibran's humorous self-representation, which sets him apart, although interdiscursively still connected to the older generation of politicians who tend to be stiff and solemn. A recent online survey revealed that many young Indonesians still hold negative perceptions of politics (Katadata Insight Center, 2023). The survey, which included 1005 respondents from across Indonesia, found that 42.8% of young people perceive politics as evil, while 8.8% think it is terrible. The survey also found that 31.3% of respondents believe corruption significantly influences these negative perceptions. The older generation of politicians is often considered responsible for the corruption problem. Because of this intergenerational conflict, it has become significant to catch the attention and persuade young Indonesians of one's 'innocence' – an act that is largely based on performative politics, as the figures above indicate.

Gibran uses humorous memes to distinguish himself from older generations of politicians. This technique, also known as *self-othering* (Chowdhury, 2022; Orkibi, 2022), is often used by marginalized groups to challenge those in power. However, unlike marginalized groups who deploy self-othering to resist authority,

Gibran uses it as a strategy to attain power from within the establishment. However, Gibran's memes share similarities with populist discourses that denounce the elite, foster a sense of shared identity, and utilize symbolic elements (Barát, 2018; Macaulay, 2019). By incorporating intergenerational tensions, Gibran's memes attempt to build a populist discourse. In a talk show hosted by Rosianna Silalahi, a prominent female journalist, in July 2023, Gibran commented on his profile picture:

> *Ada gak walikota, gubernur yang profile picture-nya seperti saya? Kalau yang sudah tua, pasti [mereka akan bilang]: Ini ngapain seperti itu? Harusnya pakai peci, terus kaya gini [salam namaste], Mas!* (Is there a mayor [or] governor whose [social media] profile pictures are like mine? If [politicians] are old, that is for sure, [they'd say]: Why are you doing something like that? You should wear *peci* [a skull cap], then like this [namaste greeting], bro!). (KompasTV, 2023a)

He used this situation to explain why he chose a photo of Patrick Star with his own face edited onto it as his Instagram profile picture.

Gibran's populist message adopted intergenerational politics to adapt to the demographic composition of voters, which in 2024 was dominated by young people. Young people comprised 55% of the 204,807,222 registered voters. The electoral law stipulates that individuals must be at least 17 years old to be eligible to vote. According to data released by the General Election Commission, 55% of voters belong to Generations Z and Millennials, based on a generational breakdown of the electorate (Muhamad, 2023). Herein, Indonesia's recent presidential elections show a shift from Jokowi's 2014 and 2019 campaigns that emphasized social class politics. In terms of his appearance, Jokowi was known for wearing low-quality white shirts and black trousers, similar to those worn by low-level employees in the industry and offices. His campaign slogan was "*Jokowi adalah kita.* (Jokowi is us.)". Törnquist (2014) noted that, at that time, Jokowi's strategy represented a form of participatory populism. Gibran has followed in his father's footsteps, making textual modifications that focus on commodifying intergenerational sentiment. Age turned into an essential element in Gibran's political marketing strategy. To some extent, this aligned well with the strategies of those political elites who also support Jokowi and who widely circulated the statement that they now want to "give opportunities to young people" (Dirgantara & Maullana, 2024; Fauzi, 2023a). Conversely, the intergenerational narrative was also supported by famous religious authority Habib Lutfi bin Yahya, who has long supported Jokowi (Alatas, 2021; Anggrainy, 2023). Hence, Gibran's intergenerational politics eventually succeeded in aligning the political elite's strategies with the demographic composition of the 2024 presidential election.

Memeing Politics

Two factors make the resonance of Gibran's memes stronger than the strategies of the other two presidential candidates. The first is the historical context of the last two presidential elections, during which Jokowi benefited from the widespread circulation of supportive memes on social media (Hanan, 2017; Rahardi & Amalia, 2019; Santosa et al., 2018). The efficacy of memes as an expression of support cannot be

separated from the popularity of memes in Indonesia, which is the second factor that benefits Gibran's digital presence. The popularity of memes can be traced in the journey of the Meme & Rage Comic Indonesia (MRCI) page on Facebook since January 2013, which now has more than 5 million followers. MRCI has meanwhile expanded to X (@mrcipage), Instagram (@mrci.id), and TikTok (@mrci.tv), which is becoming increasingly popular. Meme & Rage Comic Indonesia is similar to the 9Gag site globally. The 9Gag site also features a special page for Indonesia alongside other thematic pages, including anime, sports, and gaming. These two meme sources convey how popular memes actually are among Indonesian youth. The existence of these meme producers is accompanied by the emergence of a culture of 'stealing memes', which is downloading memes that are considered interesting to use as resources in digital interactions among Indonesian youth.

Equivalent to a declaration of *memeing politics*, Gibran depicts memes as the right response in any situation. Rather than being merely the visual targets of political messaging, political elites like Gibran demonstrate how politicians can effectively use memes to engage with young Indonesians via social media. Gibran's meme in Figure 5 is more than telling: "*Saya selalu punya meme yang pas dalam segala situesyen* (I always have a suitable meme for every occasion)".

Figure 5. Declaration of *memeing politics*. (Raka, 2023)

In Figure 5, Gibran presents himself as an alternative source of memes, always having "a suitable meme for every occasion". Consequently, he presents himself on social media as a politician and a source of content that entertains young people. These political and entertainment strategies then combine in the idea of 'joyful politics', which particularly informed the campaign strategy of the Prabowo-Gibran team. This strategy is conveyed by Arief Rosyid, one of their team leaders, in the following news:

> We need to clarify that, in today's democratic era, everyone is equal. The president's children, doctors, business friends, and meatball traders are all the same. So, we should not discredit them. We are sure the friends present are here to convey the same (aspirations). Together, we, all professionals, are all young Indonesians who want Indonesia to progress and prosper, along with Mr. Prabowo and Mr. Gibran. One of them (our aspirations) is that we want to bring politics with cheerful politics. ... That's why young people get angry if one candidate is slandered, cursed, or sent hoaxes. They get angry. In the form of their anger, they convert it into a vote. That's why, thank God, our survey went up, and the other (candidates') went down. (Kompas.com, 2023)

Memes and intergenerational narratives have infused Indonesian youth with ideas of cheerful politics, which form part of a bigger picture of how politics is flexed and softened. This condition starkly contrasts the political style of the older generation, which emphasizes ceremonial rigidity, as symbolized in the profile photos of politicians' social media accounts wearing *peci* caps and displaying namaste greetings, as Gibran frequently mentioned in interviews. Despite their age, Anies Baswedan, Muhaimin Iskandar, Ganjar Pranowo, and Mahfud MD – the other four candidates – also innovatively presented themselves on social media. Anies Baswedan, for example, actively did live streaming via TikTok, and Ganjar Pranowo even asked for input from the public on the theme of the presidential candidate debate in X. Both candidates were present on social media as politicians. Yet, Gibran strategically positioned himself as part of the digital community by producing memes that can be 'stolen'.

Figure 6 and 7. Memes on stealing memes. (@cmewewewewe, 2024; @tanyarlfes, 2024)

In sum, Gibran shifted the political discourse from a conflict between the people and the elite to an intergenerational debate, emphasizing the role of young people as a major political force. In his cheerful politics strategy, he utilized memes as an effective communication tool to attract the attention of Indonesia's younger generation. He used memes to convey political messages in a relaxed, humorous, and easily shared way on social media. His approach made politics feel closer to the daily lives of Indonesia's

youth. In this way, Gibran attracted the younger generation's support by emphasizing his youth and drawing on their youth identity. He also created a more flexible and accessible political space within the social media ecosystem. This phenomenon, however, complicates the relationship between structure and agency. It questions the unequal political structure typically understood to produce memes as ideological tools through which marginalized groups or individuals voice resistance and attempt to challenge dominant power dynamics. Therefore, political memes are seen as a social media genre that uses incongruous humor to expose the contradictions, conflicts, and hypocrisy of populist politicians (Kristensen & Mortensen, 2021). However, this study reveals that memes become commodities and tools for those in power to gain more power. Gibran appropriated meme culture as a populist strategy while overlooking – or deliberately sidelining – its ideological roots as a form of marginal popular culture.

Memeing Gibran

The involvement of young politicians in electoral competition does not change the illiberal trend in Indonesia. This assumption is evident in how various organizations use democratic institutions to pursue undemocratic objectives. One such example is the Indonesian Solidarity Party (hereafter PSI), which claims to be a youth-oriented political party. The PSI was among the first political parties to endorse Gibran's candidacy despite its earlier support for Ganjar Pranowo's presidential bid. This sudden shift in political allegiance is noteworthy, especially since the party had previously pledged its support for Ganjar even before his political party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), declared his candidacy. Moreover, Kaesang, Gibran's youngest brother, was appointed general chairman of PSI only two days after he registered as a party member. On 23 October 2023, PSI officially announced its support for the Prabowo-Gibran team in the 2024 presidential election. During this announcement, Kaesang made a series of memes supporting Prabowo and Gibran.

Figure 8. Memeing Prabowo and Gibran by Kaesang. (KompasTV, 2023b)

Figure 9. Memeing Prabowo and Gibran by Kaesang. (KompasTV, 2023b)

In Figures 8 and 9, Kaesang utilized memes featuring Prabowo and Gibran to bolster his speech in the narrative:

> *Kalau ada yang fitnah, jogetin aja. Kalau ada yang nyebar hoaks, yah kita senyumin saaja. Ojo nesu. Kalau perlu kasih jempol!* (If someone is slandering, dance. If someone spreads hoaxes, smile at them. Do not be angry. If necessary, give them a thumbs up!)

Kaesang's speech exemplifies Wiggins' idea that memes can be used to present or challenge arguments through visual and verbal elements (Wiggins, 2019). However, Kaesang's speech used visuals and words to mock negative feedback by exposing it to false accusations and rumors while showing his support for Prabowo and Gibran. He employed intertextuality by using memes featuring Gibran and Prabowo to express his views amid the political turmoil. Additionally, his speech highlighted Gibran's transition from being a 'meme producer' to becoming an object and target of memes.

In her work, Butler discusses how people are liberated through resignification, legitimizing different forms of representation (Butler, 1997, 2010). However, since performativity is a process that values openness and continuous change (Leeker et al., 2017), dominant groups are able to twist texts to their advantage. We suggest that Gibran's use of memes and his populist discourse are examples of this dynamic. Gibran used the cultural experience and realm of marginalized groups to consolidate his power and promote his agenda.

The relationship between Gibran and Kaesang is not just that of siblings, but also reflects the intertwined political interests between election candidates and party leaders who play a central role in candidacy during an election. Allegations of nepotism became stronger when Kaesang, who had just joined PSI, was suddenly appointed chairman and immediately directed his party's support to the Prabowo-Gibran pair.

Since then, Jokowi has increasingly shown his closeness to PSI, as evidenced by his dinner with party cadres just days before the 2024 election, which appears to emphasize the political ties that benefit his family. Considering this series of political events during the election, memes need to be seen as a strategy to normalize dynastic politics, disguise institutional co-optation, and strengthen family dominance in Indonesia's democratic landscape.

MEME CULTURE IN ILLIBERAL SETTINGS

Democratic Backsliding, Dynastic Politics, and the Constitutional Court Controversy

This section starts with a discussion of the development of democracy during the era of Jokowi as the broader political backdrop for Gibran's use of memes. This context forms an essential part of the *memescape*. Gibran's involvement in meme culture is not an isolated phenomenon. Instead, it is shaped by existing political structures. Gibran benefited from the democratic backsliding in Indonesia during Jokowi's administration. Many scholars note that this condition arises from several factors indicating illiberal tendencies, such as partisan manipulation of key state institutions (Power, 2018), including law enforcement agencies (Siregar et al., 2020) and the mass media (Tapsell, 2020), as well as repression and criminalization of the opposition (Mietzner, 2018) through treason charges or the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law (Tapsell, 2019).

This democratic backsliding has occurred unevenly at the sub-national, sectoral, and contestation levels (Diprose et al., 2019). Indonesia's illiberal turn aligns with what Smith (2014, 2020) calls a thin typology, where democratic institutions are maintained but repurposed for undemocratic aims. The MK's decision to change the age requirement for presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the Election Law also falls within this typology.

The decision of the MK has sparked a debate about the prevalence of dynastic politics in Indonesia. The term "dynastic politics" carries two meanings in contemporary Indonesian politics. The first one refers to the emergence of discussions around Jokowi potentially seeking a third presidential term despite the constitutional limit of two terms. This speculation then led to the second meaning, which raises the issue of Jokowi's political dynasty.

The MK's decision stirred controversies as it enabled Gibran to run as a vice president candidate alongside Prabowo, the former defense minister in his cabinet. The controversy deepened when it became evident that the MK's chairman, Anwar Usman – who presided over the trial – was Gibran's uncle. This situation led to public criticism and ridicule. For instance, an unknown individual altered the MK's label on Google Maps to read *Mahkamah Keluarga*, or "Family Court" (Farisa, 2023), and an edited photo of the MK building circulated online with a similar caption (Figure 8). The title of the Constitutional Court (*Mahkamah Konstitusi*) was twisted to underline the importance of family relations.

Tempo, a weekly magazine well known for its investigative reporting, published an article discussing the political dynamics and lobbying that resulted in the decision allowing Gibran to run alongside Prabowo Subianto constitutionally. In this article,

Figure 10. Photo of the Constitutional Court Building edited to become Family Court. (Oesman, 2023)

Gibran is called the "Illegitimate Child of the Constitution" (Tempo, 2023). The whole process leading to the elections has been criticized as *Javanese Machiavellianism* (Sukidi, 2023) – the strategic use of political, business, and legal resources to benefit oneself, one's family, and oligarchic networks. Although Sukidi (2023) does not explicitly name specific political figures, his critique symbolically points to the herein-discussed actors and their entanglements.

The controversy surrounding Gibran's political career can be traced back to his victory in the Solo mayoral election of 2020. Jokowi had held the election at that time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The public speculated that this decision paved the political path for Gibran and Jokowi's son-in-law, Bobby Nasution, who was vying for power in Medan, North Sumatra. The Solo's 2020 mayoral election was marked by controversies, particularly regarding Gibran's candidacy against the independent pair Bagyo Wahyono-FX Suparjo (Bajo). Most political parties backed Gibran, while Bajo ran independently, gathering 63,028 ID cards as political endorsements despite allegations of unauthorized data collection from citizens (Syambudi, 2020).

Additionally, there were allegations that an Election Commission commissioner in Solo had distributed money to election officials to facilitate the verification of Bajo's endorsements, allowing them to qualify as candidates. This situation was to prevent Gibran from running unopposed (Amali, 2020). Although these accusations were denied, the practice raised concerns about the integrity of the local election. Ultimately, Gibran won the election by a landslide with over 85% of the votes, while Bajo secured only about 15%, reinforcing suspicion of legitimacy issues behind the political process.

Money Politics, Corporate Networks, and Public Frustration

The illiberal political pattern in Indonesia is rooted in the logic of money politics and political violence (Hadiz, 2004). Money politics is not just a fraudulent way of using

money for power but also a complex intersection of money and politics that needs to be examined to expose its ambiguous and nuanced nature. This dynamic is vividly captured in the documentary *Sexy Killers*, released just before the 2019 presidential election. The film reveals the murky supply chains of Indonesia's coal industry and the political interests behind the construction of coal-fired power plants. Among the companies involved are those with ties to powerful politicians. Gibran, for example, was a shareholder and commissioner in PT Rakabu Sejahtera, a company established by his father in 2009. This company is connected to PT Toba Sejahtera, owned by Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, a key minister in Jokowi's cabinet and shareholder in the conglomerate, which includes subsidiaries like PT Toba Bara active in the mining sector. Meanwhile, political violence is defined as violence closely related to the dynamics and struggle for political power within the framework of an illiberal democracy (Hadiz, 2004). In his article, Hadiz includes in this definition the violent acts committed by political actors, including 'henchmen and thugs', who previously operated under authoritarian regimes and are now adapting to formal democratic systems.

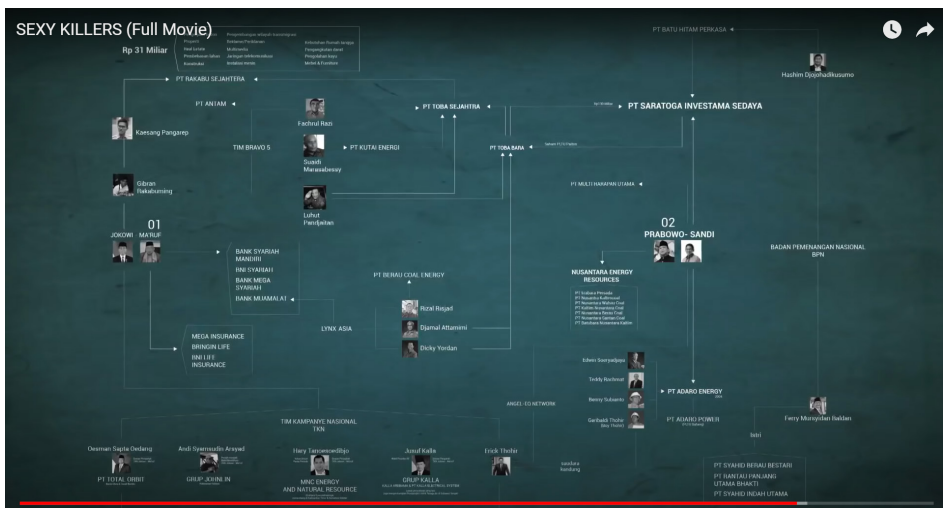

Figure 11. Network of politicians and entrepreneurs in the coal and Steam Power Plant industry in Indonesia. (Laksono & Suparta, 2019)

Regarding politics and money in Indonesia, we need to consider the increasing wealth of public officials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even during these difficult times, officials like Gibran continued to amass wealth, with his net worth going from IDR 21.2 billion in 2020 to IDR 25.3 billion in 2021 and finally reaching IDR 26 billion in 2022 (Annur, 2023). This increase in wealth, coupled with the holding of regional elections, highlights the paradoxical nature of the restrictions imposed by Jokowi's government during the pandemic. In 2021, Gibran was appointed mayor of Solo after winning the 2020 regional head election, which was held amidst the pandemic. This condition raised concerns over fairness. At the same time, pandemic restrictions worsened most people's economic conditions; by contrast, public officials

experienced economic gains. This asymmetric nature of wealth accumulation has fueled tensions in public discourse.

Gibran has always been a subject of public debate due to his wealth. Even before the pandemic, his start-up company received an investment of IDR 71 billion from Alpha JWC Venture to expand *cendol* traditional beverage products in 2019 (Primadhyta, 2022). However, this investment came under national scrutiny after an academic accused Gibran and Kaesang of money laundering. The situation implicated a business relationship between Gibran and Kaesang and a company suspected of being involved in forest burning. The Corruption Eradication Commission initially investigated the case. However, it later stopped. On top of it, Gibran and Kaesang were not seen as state officials and, therefore, fell outside its jurisdiction (CNN Indonesia, 2022).

Under Gibran's governance, the region of Solo has received more money for infrastructure development than any other similar region in Indonesia, raising further questions about money politics and democratic inequality. Between 2021 and 2023, Solo has witnessed remarkable growth in infrastructure development with plans for 32 projects worth over IDR 2 trillion (Pahlevi, 2023). One example of transnational funding for infrastructure investment is the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. The United Arab Emirates has granted this Mosque to Indonesia, which shares similarities in architecture and name with the Grand Mosque (Fauzi, 2023b). Also, the Solo City Government has received grant funds worth IDR 236 billion (Zamani & Rusiana, 2022).

The advantages and achievements of Gibran, both as an individual and as the mayor, are opportunities that only a few people can get. The amount of money circulating in Gibran's involvement is unimaginable for most young Indonesians still struggling to meet their basic needs. According to Erick Thohir, the Minister of state-owned enterprises, as many as 81 million young Indonesians do not have a home (Rahayu & Pratama, 2023). This issue can be traced back to labor market transformations during President Megawati's administration and the regulations on outsourcing workers introduced through Law No. 13 of 2003 Article 64 concerning employment. This regulation was further intensified by the controversial Job Creation Law (Law No. 11 of 2020), which, although ruled unconstitutional in 2021 by the Constitutional Court, was reinstated in the form of government regulations under back then President Jokowi. These regulations further raised the levels of uncertainty for young people in their careers (Dwi, 2023). The memes in Figures 12 and 13 illustrate young people's frustration and hopelessness as they try to enter the job market. The prevalence of nepotism aggravates this problem. Job opportunities are believed to be limited to small exclusive circles known as *orang dalam* or "insiders". Gibran's perceived political and economic privilege has become emblematic of this "insider politics", pointing at the barriers faced by ordinary citizens. In the 2024 presidential debate, Anies Baswedan challenged this practice by lamenting that "*fenomena orang dalam ini menyebalkan* (this insider phenomenon is frustrating)" (Singgih & Ihsanuddin, 2023). Humorous memes serve as escapism for ordinary young people facing economic frustrations. However, for Gibran, they function as a political tool. The disparity in meme usage between ordinary youth and Gibran represents a form of symbolic political violence, as it may generate social jealousy. This

article argues that, despite all odds, Gibran's humorous persona and strategic use of memes have contributed to his political advancement and furthered his prosperity.

Figure 12 and 13. Insider Memes. (Amarilisya, 2020)

Digital Populism: Memes, Media, and the Illiberal Turn in Southeast Asian Elections

To some extent, the public protests and political disputes that emerged after Gibran's appointment as vice presidential candidate centered on the issue of dynastic politics, which exposed the advantages the MK's and his father's political decisions had created for him. However, during the 2024 presidential election campaigns, Gibran also faced insinuations that he was only chosen as the vice-presidential candidate due to family nepotism (Llewellyn, 2023). In a way, the humorous memes in Gibran's performative self-othering strategy match the criteria of digital or techno-populism (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018). He produces memes that strip away the elements of asymmetric power relations associated with his origins. Memeing politics may appear trivial and playful, but it has a significant impact. The fact that Indonesian elite politicians have started using memes shows that they are aware of the advantage of using memes as tools for subduing the awareness of Indonesia's young generation. These young people have faced economic turbulence in the labor market and welfare inequality. In memeing politics, these politicians compensate for these antics. Gibran's meme appropriation shows that digital technology does not always amplify marginalized voices (see Hindman, 2009), and social media still benefits elite groups (see Schroeder, 2018).

The political events surrounding the 2024 presidential election in Indonesia are similar to those in the Philippines. Bongbong Marcos, the son of former Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, has been paired with Sara Duterte, Rodrigo Duterte's daughter, in the 2022 Philippine presidential election. This pair's win is inextricably

linked to the legacy of the bulk of their parents' supporters while they were in power. Ferdinand Marcos has been regarded as a highly influential figure in Philippine politics (Dulay, 2020). However, his administration was characterized by crony capitalism (Manapat, 1991), which created a new elite of rent seekers by granting contracts, concessions, licenses, and monopolies (Hutchcroft, 1991). He also extended his rule after two terms in office by employing a martial law policy. Bongbong has inherited a smooth career, beginning with three straight years as governor of Illicos Norte and progressing to senator and congressman. In rural areas, Bongbong received assistance from the farming community.

Meanwhile, Sara inherited Duterte's popularity in the southern Philippines. Both Bongbong and Sara's approach is reported to be based on social media and influencers rather than a war of ideas or programs. Mendoza (2022) reports that Bongbong is heavily invested in building his digital presence on social media, especially on TikTok, due to its popularity among Filipinos before the 2022 presidential election. Social media contributes to distorting historical facts through disinformation that is insufficiently countered by fact checks because it involves a corrupt information ecosystem and society's authoritarian fantasies that benefit Bongbong (Ong, 2022). This comparison between the latest Indonesian and Philippine elections shows the increasing role of social media in navigating electoral victory. This article argues that digital culture compensates for the decay of the democratic system in these two Southeast Asian countries.

In Indonesia, two notable figures (Jokowi and Prabowo) show how mediated populism has transformed following the emergence of new media alongside traditional media. Jokowi's victory over Prabowo in the 2014 presidential election, influenced by the collaboration of both media types, was a significant example. Traditional Indonesian media in 2014 was alerted by the figure of Prabowo, a prominent figure in the military power of the New Order regime, which suppressed freedom of the press. They actively reported on Prabowo as a candidate who could threaten Indonesia's freedom of expression. In Indonesian history, Prabowo represents an opposing force to internet development in Indonesia, which became known as "a technology of freedom" (Hill & Sen, 2000). This article, however, shows that the development of the internet in Indonesia in the past twenty years, following the political reformation, has changed what was back then considered a technology of freedom into a technology of populism within a highly illiberal setting.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how Indonesia's 2024 election reflects the evolution of digital populism through the lens of memescapes and performativity, where elite political actors like Gibran Rakabuming Raka harness meme culture to simultaneously subvert traditional gatekeepers and reinforce illiberal power structures. His father, ex-President Jokowi, rose to power through positive coverage and comments on traditional and social media. In contrast, Prabowo was associated with the return of the New Order regime. The interaction between traditional and social media in the 2024 presidential election shows a different pattern. Gibran's candidacy as vice president next to Prabowo as president received critical coverage in the traditional

media because it was considered a scandal that threatened Indonesian democracy. This article showed, however, that digital media provided greater autonomy for Gibran to compensate for the traditional media deconsolidation. Digital technology has given access to more diverse actors who can surpass the authority of gatekeepers. Within an illiberal context, people would use this autonomy to create memes with discursive capabilities. Building on Wiggins' (2019) structuration approach to digital discourse and Butler's (2010) theory on performativity, we reveal a paradox in Gibran's case: While digital platforms ostensibly democratize political participation by enabling resignification practices (e.g., meme remixes), they also facilitate what Lim (2018) terms algorithmic legitimation, where elites co-opt grassroots aesthetics to naturalize dynastic politics.

Indonesia can be a fertile ground for studying digital populism, considering its political landscape is centered on individual domination. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in the nation's history, where the centrality of personal authority often characterizes leadership. From Indonesia's independence in 1945 until the reformation era in 1998, the highest executive figure had enormous power, often exceeding institutional frameworks, such as laws, regulations or democratic institutions. This historical precedent of person-based leadership continues to persist and thrive in the digital age, where political narratives are increasingly shaped by individual leaders leveraging social media platforms to build personal appeal and mobilize supporters. According to multiple scholarly reports, this illiberal pattern has continued under Jokowi's presidency. Gibran's vice-president candidacy is a product of that pattern.

This article finds that technology consumption patterns have effectively replaced the traditional social class division of people versus elites in populist narratives. The rise of digital populism in Indonesia has moved to nativism. During the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, the political narrative positioned young people as crucial change agents, emphasizing their potential to lead the nation toward a progressive future. This narrative utilizes the language and aesthetics of digital culture that aligns with the preferences and behavior of the younger generation of digital natives. By portraying young Indonesians as innovative and adaptable, this approach appeals to their aspirations and ideals. The memescape has significant credit for strengthening nativism in Indonesian digital populism.

In this respect, memes are uniquely positioned in digital communication, blending representation and performativity. As representations, memes objectify specific meanings, turning abstract ideas into tangible symbols. However, they also possess performative power, acting as agents of discourse that influence networks, amplify voices, and shape public perception. Drawing on Butler's concept of performativity, memes can be seen as dynamic subjects that reflect and create meaning. This dual role is evident in the case of Gibran, who strategically employs memes to advance his political agenda by exploiting intergenerational conflicts. In Indonesia's illiberal democracy, memes have shifted from their countercultural and subversive origins to tools of populist reinforcement. Rather than challenging entrenched power structures, they enable elites to craft populist narratives that mask undemocratic practices. Memes promote an inclusive image within a nepotistic system. Paradoxically, this approach mitigates social conflict while maintaining the status quo.

~

REFERENCES

@cmewewewewe. (2024). Izin kan saya mencuri meme meme kalian Terima kasih [Allow me to steal your memes Thank you]. X.

@tanyarlfes. (2024). Drop meme yg kalian punya , ak mau mencuriinya , thank youu >< [Drop the memes you have, I want to steal them, thank youu ><]. X.

Ahmed, S., & Masood, M. (2024). Breaking barriers with memes: How memes bridge political cynicism to online political participation. *Social Media + Society*, *10*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241261277

Alatas, I. F. (2021). *What is religious authority? Cultivating Islamic communities in Indonesia*. Princeton University Press.

Amali, Z. (2020). Dugaan Komisioner KPU Solo bagi-bagi duit untuk mengamankan Bajo [Allegations that KPU Solo commissioners shared money to secure Bajo]. In *Dinasti Politik Keluarga Presiden Jokowi* [*Dynasty politics of President Jokowi's family*] (pp. 17–24). Tirto & Kurawal Foundation.

Amarilisya, A. (2020). 10 Meme lucu "orang dalam" ini bikin fresh graduate senyum kecut [These 10 funny "insider" memes will make fresh graduates smile wryly]. *Brilio*. https://www.brilio.net/ngakak/10-meme-lucu-orang-dalam-ini-bikin-fresh-graduate-senyum-kecut-200617b.html

Anderau, G., & Barbarrusa, D. (2024). The function of memes in political discourse. *Topoi*, *43*(5), 1529–1546.

Anggrainy, F. C. (2023). Habib Luthfi soal Gibran jadi cawapres: Pilihan Pak Prabowo tepat [Habib Luthfi regarding Gibran becoming vice presidential candidate: Pak Prabowo's choice was right]. *Detik.Com.* https://news.detik.com/pemilu/d-7000644/habib-luthfi-soal-gibran-jadi-cawapres-pilihan-pak-prabowo-tepat

Annur, M. C. (2023). Digadang jadi cawapres Prabowo, berapa kekayaan Gibran Rakabuming? [Expected to be Prabowo's vice presidential candidate, how much is Gibran Rakabuming's net worth?]. *Katadata*. https://databoks.katadata.co.id/ekonomi-makro/statistik/1d6e05883e6a0f5/digadang-jadi-cawapres-prabowo-berapa-kekayaan-gibran-rakabuming

Barát, E. (2018). Populist discourse and desire for social justice. In K. Hall & R. Barrett (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of language and sexuality*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190212926.013.72

Baulch, E., Matamoros-Fernández, A., & Suwana, F. (2022). Memetic persuasion and WhatsAppification in Indonesia's 2019 presidential election. *New Media & Society*, *26*(5), 2473–2491.

Beck, D. (2024). Humorous parodies of popular culture as strategy in Boris Johnson's populist communication. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *26*(3), 830–847.

Bourchier, D. (2015). *Illiberal democracy in Indonesia*. Routledge.

Bratich, J. (2014). Occupy all the dispositifs: Memes, media ecologies, and emergent bodies politic. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *11*(1), 64–73.

Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politic of the performative* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Butler, J. (2010). Performative agency. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, *3*(2), 147–161.

Carrejo, C. (2017). 17 French election memes to laugh about. *Bustle*. https://www.bustle.com/p/17-french-election-memes-to-laugh-about-while-you-breathe-a-sigh-of-relief-56288

Chagas, V. (2023). Chapter 22: Memes as vernacular politics. In *Research handbook on visual politics* (pp. 298–309). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800376939.00031

Chowdhury, N. (2022). The affective-discursive 'pruning' of neoliberal selves: introducing the notion of self-othering. *Subjectivity*, *15*(4), 205–222.

CNN Indonesia. (2022). KPK setop laporan dugaan KKN yang seret Gibran dan Kaesang [KPK stops report on alleged KKN dragging Gibran and Kaesang]. *CNN Indonesia.* https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20220819172437-12-836650/kpk-setop-laporan-dugaan-kkn-yang-seret-gibran-dan-kaesang

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2016). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity Press.

De Blasio, E., & Sorice, M. (2018). Populism between direct democracy and the technological myth. *Palgrave Communications*, *4*(1), 15.

Diprose, R., McRae, D., & Hadiz, V. R. (2019). Two decades of reformasi in Indonesia: Its illiberal turn. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *49*(5), 691–712.

Dirgantara, A., & Maullana, I. (2024). TKN sebut anak muda anggap Prabowo Pahlawan, sedangkan Gibran bisa cari solusi zaman "Now" [TKN said young people considering Prabowo as a hero, while Gibran can find solutions in the "Nowadays"]. *Kompas.Com.* https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2024/02/17/07463641/tkn-sebut-anak-muda-anggap-prabowo-pahlawan-sedangkan-gibran-bisa-cari

Duile, T., & Tamma, S. (2021). Political language and fake news: Some considerations from the 2019 election in Indonesia. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, *49*(143), 82–105.

Dulay, D. G. C. (2020). *Traditional institutions and the political economy of the Philippines.* Duke University. https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/items/6344f127-9035-4d9b-89ef-7b8ee3c7f576

Dwi, A. (2023). Mengenal sistem kerja outsourcing yang dihidupkan Jokowi lewat perpu cipta kerja [Get to know the outsourcing work system that Jokowi has activated through the job creation perppu]. *Tempo*. https://www.tempo.co/ekonomi/mengenal-sistem-kerja-outsourcing-yang-dihidupkan-jokowi-lewat-perpu-cipta-kerja-231442

Farisa, F. C. (2023). Bagaimana MK diplesetkan jadi "Mahkamah Keluarga" di tengah gugatan usia capres-cawapres? [How was the Constitutional Court twisted into a "Family Court" amidst the lawsuits over the ages of presidential and vice presidential candidates?]. *Kompas.Com.* https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/10/11/05150031/bagaimana-mk-dipelesetkan-jadi-mahkamah-keluarga-di-tengah-gugatan-usia?page=all%0A

Fauzi. (2023a). Nusron Wahid: KIM pilih Gibran untuk beri kesempatan ke anak muda [Nusron Wahid: KIM has chosen Gibran to give opportunities to young people]. *Antara*. https://www.antaranews.com/berita/3799167/nusron-wahid-kim-pilih-gibran-untuk-beri-kesempatan-ke-anak-muda

Fauzi, H. (2023b). Kilas balik 2022, Masjid Raya Sheikh Zayed dan Persahabatan Indonesia - PEA [Flashback to 2022, Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and Indonesian - UEA Friendship]. *Kemenag.go.id*. https://kemenag.go.id/nasional/kilas-balik-2022-masjid-raya-sheikh-zayed-dan-persahabatan-indonesia-pea-ynvhvw

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of theory of structuration*. Polity Press.

Glass, M. R., & Rose-Redwood, R. (2014). *Performativity, politics, and the production of social space* (1st Ed.). Routledge.

Hadiz, V. R. (2004). The rise of neo-Third Worldism? The Indonesian trajectory and the consolidation of illiberal democracy. *Third World Quarterly*, *25*(1), 55–71.

Halversen, A., & Weeks, B. E. (2023). Memeing politics: Understanding political meme creators, audiences, and consequences on social media. *Social Media and Society*, *9*(4), 1–11.

Hanan, H. (2017). *Meme culture sebagai kritik terhadap capres & cawapres pemilihan presiden 2014 di Twitter* [*Meme culture as critics toward presidential and vice 2014 presidential candidates in presidential election in Twitter*]. Airlangga University.

Hill, D. T., & Sen, K. (2000). The internet in Indonesia's new democracy. *Democratization*, *7*(1), 119–136.

Hutchcroft, P. D. (1991). Oligarchs and cronies in the Philippine state the politics of patrimonial plunder. *World Politics*, *43*(3), 414–450.

Jones, R. H. (2021). Introduction: Are discourse analysts 'essential workers'? In R. H. Jones (Ed.), *Viral discourse*. Cambrigde Unniversity Press.

Katadata Insight Center. (2023). Politik di mata anak muda [Politics in the eyes of young people]. https://cdn1.katadata.co.id/media/files/2023/11/15/2023_11_15-13_43_11_f6659cffe5beb220f147547a901e78a1.pdf

Kompas.com. (2023). Tim Prabowo-Gibran: Politik riang gembira, kalau diserang dikit sambil nyinyir tak apa [Prabowo-Gibran team: Politics is joyful, if we are attacked a little while sneering, it's okay]. *Kompas.Com*.

KompasTV. (2023a). Memiliki gaya komunikasi yang berbeda, siapa konsultan Gibran? [Having a different communication style, who is Gibran's consultant?]. *Kompas TV.*

KompasTV. (2023b). Pidato Kaesang Pangarep di deklarasi dukungan untuk Prabowo-Gibran [Kaesang Pangarep's speech in the declaration of support for Prabowo-Gibran]. *Kompas TV.*

Kristensen, N., & Mortensen, M. (2021). "Don't panic people! Trump will tweet the virus away": Memes contesting and confirming populist political leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. *Information, Communication & Society*, *24*(16), 2442–2458.

Laksono, D. D., & Suparta, U. (2019). *Sexy killers* [Documentary].

Leeker, M., Schipper, I., & Timon, B. (2017). Performativity, performance studies and digital cultures. In M. Leeker, I. Schipper, & B. Timon (Eds.), *Performing the digital: Performativity and performance studies in digital cultures* (pp. 9-18). transcript.

Llewellyn, A. (2023). Indonesian leader's son brushes off 'nepo baby' tag in feted debate showing. *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/23/indonesian-leaders-son-brushes-off-nepo-baby-tag-in-solid-debate-showing

Macaulay, M. (Ed.). (2019). *A short introduction to populism BT – Populist discourse: International perspectives*. Springer International Publishing.

Manapat, R. (1991). *Some are smarter than others: The history of Marcos' crony' capitalism*. Aletheia Publications.

Marendra, P. (2023). 5 foto profil medsos Gibran Rakabuming yang selalu unik, akui ingin tampil beda [5 Gibran Rakabuming's social media profile photos that are always unique, admits he wants to look different]. *Liputan6*. https://www.liputan6.com/hot/read/5430759/5-foto-profil-medsos-gibran-rakabuming-yang-selalu-unik-akui-ingin-tampil-beda

Mendoza, M. E. H. (2022). Philippine elections 2022. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *44*(3), 389–395.

Mietzner, M. (2018). Fighting illiberalism with illiberalism: Islamist populism and democratic deconsolidation in Indonesia. *Pacific Affairs*, *91*(2), 261–282.

Mozdeika, L. (2023). Nudges, emojis, and memes: Mapping interpassivity theory onto digital civic culture. *Communication and Democracy*, *57*(2), 252–274.

Muhamad, N. (2023). KPU: Pemilih 2024 didominasi oleh kelompok Gen Z dan Millenial [KPU: 2024 voters dominated by Gen Z and Millennials]. *Katadata*. https://databoks.katadata.co.id/politik/statistik/faf64350269d0c8/kpu-pemilih-pemilu-2024-didominasi-oleh-kelompok-gen-z-dan-milenial

Nugraheny, D. E., & Asril, S. (2022). Jadi kesayangan netizen, ternyata ini maksud "Kucing Oren" sering tampil di medsos Jokowi [Becoming a favorite of netizens, it turns out that this is the meaning of the "orange cat" that often appears on Jokowi's social media]. *Kompas.Com.* https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2022/10/24/15270111/jadi-kesayangan-netizen-ternyata-ini-maksud-kucing-oren-sering-tampil-di?page=all

Oesman, D. W. (2023). Heboh plesetan mahkamah keluarga [Family Court Prank Sensation]. *MerdekaNews*. https://m.merdekanews.co/read/24346/Heboh-Plesetan-Mahkamah-Keluarga

Ong, J. C. (2022). Philippine elections 2022: The dictator's son and the discourse around disinformation. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *44*(3), 396–403.

Orkibi, E. (2022). Self-othering to power: vilification, ridicule and moral claims in the Israeli right 'underdog' discourse. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, *17*(2), 158–172.

Pahlevi, R. (2023). Cek data: Benarkah Solo 'diguyur' proyek pemerintah karena Gibran? [Check the data: Is it true that Solo is "showered" with government projects because of Gibran?]. *Katadata*. https://katadata.co.id/cek-data/653eff6ab3941/cek-data-benarkah-solo-diguyur-proyek-pemerintah-karena-gibran

Power, T. P. (2018). Jokowi's authoritarian turn and Indonesia's democratic decline. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, *54*(3), 307–338.

Praditya, M. D. (2018). Meme culture as political propaganda in the Donald Trump presidential campaign. *Center for Digital Society (CfDS),* 24. https://cfds.fisipol.ugm.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/sites/1423/2021/01/24-CfDS-Case-Study-Meme-Culture-as-Political-Propaganda-in-the-Donald-Trump-Presidential-Campaign.pdf

Primadhyta, S. (2022). Gibran soal suntikan dana bisnis es doger Rp. 71m: Biasa [Gibran regarding the IDR 71 billion ice goger business fund injection: Normal]. *CNN Indonesia.* https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20220119092624-92-748454/gibran-soal-suntikan-dana-bisnis-es-doger-rp71-m-biasa

Putranto, W. G. (2023). Foto profil nyleneh hingga cara komunikasi berbeda, Gibran akui punya konsultan politik [Gibran admits that he has an odd profile photo and a different way of communicating, he has a political consultant]. *Tribunnews*. https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2023/07/28/foto-profil-nyeleneh-hingga-cara-komunikasi-berbeda-gibran-akui-punya-konsultan-politik

Rahardi, H. R., & Amalia, R. M. (2019). Meme as political criticism towards 2019 Indonesian General Election: A critical discourse analysis. *Studies in English Language and Education*, *6*(2), 239–250.

Rahayu, I. R. S., & Pratama, M. M. (2023). 81 Juta Anak Muda Belum Punya Rumah, Erick Thohir Minta Kurangi Gaya Hidup [81 Million Young People Don't Have a Home, Erick Thohir Asks to Reduce Lifestyle]. *Kompas.Com.* https://money.kompas.com/read/2023/08/08/191000326/81-juta-anak-muda-belum-punya-rumah-erick-thohir-minta-kurangi-gaya-hidup

Raka, G. R. (2023). Saya selalu punya meme yg pas dalam segala situesyen [I always have the right meme for every situation]. X.

Rankawat, V. (2023). Modi's digital diplomacy: A comprehensive analysis of social media as a political communication and governance tool. *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, *5*(2), 75–80.

Rastogi, S., & Kashyap, S. (2019). Political memes and perceptions: A study of memes as a political communication tool in the Indian context. *Proceedings of the 5th World Conference on Media and Mass Communication*, *5*(1), 35–48.

Rodriguez, N. S., & Goretti, N. (2022). From hoops to hope: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and political fandom on Twitter. *International Journal of Communication*, *16*, 65–84.

Santosa, H. P., Lestari, S. B., & Ayun, P. Q. (2018). The reception of memes as political information in the media. *E3S Web of Conferences*, *73*, 14014.

Sastramidjaja, Y., & Wijayanto. (2022). *Cyber troops, online manipulation of public opinion and co-optation of Indonesia's cybersphere*. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TRS7_22.pdf

Schaffar, W., & Praphakorn, W. (2021). The #MilkTeaAlliance: A new transnational pro-democracy movement against Chinese-centered globalization? *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, *14*(1), 5–16.

Schroeder, R. (2018). *Social theory after the internet*. UCL Press.

Semotiuk, O., & Shevchenko, V. (2022). To make fun of power: political cartoons and memes about President Zelensky. Quantitative and qualitative analysis. *European Journal of Humour Research*, *10*(4), 82–98.

Singgih, W., & Ihsanuddin. (2023). Anies: Fenomena orang dalam ini menyebalkan, negeri ini rusak [Anies: This insider phenomenon is frustrating, this country is broken]. *Kompas.Com.* https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/12/12/21313151/anies-fenomena-orang-dalam-ini-menyebalkan-negeri-ini-rusak

Siregar, N. R., Raffiudin, S., & Noor, F. (2020). Democratic regression in Indonesia: Police and low-capacity democracy in Jokowi's administration (2014–2020). *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik*, *26*(2), 197–212.

Smith, C. Q. (2014). Illiberal peace-building in hybrid political orders: managing violence during Indonesia's contested political transition. *Third World Quarterly*, *35*(8), 1509–1528.

Smith, C. Q. (2020). Liberal and illiberal peace-building in East Timor and Papua: establishing order in a democratising state. *Conflict, Security and Development*, *20*(1), 39–70.

Sukidi. (2023). Machiavelli Jawa [Javanese Machiavelli]. *Tempo*. https://www.tempo.co/kolom/siapakah-machiavelli-jawa--819438

Syambudi, I. (2020). Pilkada Solo: Dugaan makelar KTP agar Gibran tak melawan kolom kosong [Solo Pilkada: Alleged KTP broker so Gibran doesn't run against empty column]. In *Dinasti Politik Keluarga Presiden Jokowi* (pp. 1–16). Tirto & Kurawal Foundation.

Tapsell, R. (2019). Indonesia's policing of hoax news increasingly politicised. *ISEAS Perspective*, *75*, 1–10.

Tapsell, R. (2020). The media and democratic decline. In T. Power & E. Warburton (Eds.), *Democracy in Indonesia: From stagnation to regression?* (pp. 210–227). ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.

Tapsell, R. (2021). *How Jokowi won the internet: Influencers, buzzers and reducing opposition voices online*. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep33994.10.pdf

Tempo. (2023). Demi demokrasi, Gibran seharusnya mundur sebagai cawapres [For the sake of democracy, Gibran should resign as vice president candidate]. *Majalah Tempo*.

Titscher, S., Meyer, M., Wodak, R., & Vetter, E. (2000). *Methods of text and discourse analysis.* SAGE Publications.

Törnquist, O. (2014). Stagnation or transformation in Indonesia? *Economic and Political Weekly*, *49*(50), 25–27.

Widodo, J. (2022). Terima kasih para dokter dan segenap tenaga kesehatan untuk pengabdian tanpa pamrih, juga keteguhan untuk berada di garis depan menghadapi pandemi [Thank you to the doctors and all health workers for your selfless devotion, as well as your determination]. Facebook.

Wiggins, B. E. (2019). *The discursive power of memes in digital culture: Ideology, semiotics, & intertextuality*. Routledge

Wiggins, B. E., & Bowers, G. B. (2015). Memes as genre: A structurational analysis of the memescape. *New Media & Society*, *17*(11), 1886–1906.

Zamani, L., & Rusiana, D. A. (2022). Dapat hibah Rp 236 miliar dari pemerintah UEA, Gibran: Alhamdulillah [Received a grant of IDR 236 billion from the UAE Government, Gibran: Thank God]. *Kompas.Com.* https://regional.kompas.com/read/2022/12/30/085817878/dapat-hibah-rp-236-miliar-dari-pemerintah-uea-gibran-alhamdulillah

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ubaidillah Ubaidillah is a researcher at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. He focuses on how language interacts with culture and society, exploring its role in identity construction, self-promotion, self-othering, resistance, and (de)legitimization in various socio-cultural and spatiotemporal contexts.

▸ Contact: ubaidillah@brin.go.id

Widjajanti M. Santoso is a research professor at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. Her research focuses on sociology, media, and gender, with a keen interest in how theory and method evolve within local contexts.

▸ Contact: widj001@brin.go.id

Nina Widyawati is a senior researcher at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. Her research interests include media and minorities, disinformation, political communication, and comparative studies between Indonesia and Malaysia.

▸ Contact: nina001@brin.go.id

Purwadi Purwadi is a researcher at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. His research covers new media, communication technology, digital society, cultural studies, and communication policy. He is also a communication practitioner with over a decade of experience.

▸ Contact: purw015@brin.go.id

Ana Windarsih is a researcher at the Research Center for Society and Culture, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia. Her research experience spans mass and social media, with interests in digital society, media, and cultural identity.

▸ Contact: anaw001@brin.go.id

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was supported by the Research Organization for Social Sciences and Humanities, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), by Decree 7/III.7/HK/2024. BRIN's Social Humanities Ethics Commission approved Decree 415/KE.01/SK/05/2024. The research and manuscript preparation were carried out by Ubaidillah Ubaidillah, Widjajanti M. Santoso, Nina Widyawati, Purwadi Purwadi, and Ana Windarsih. Thank you to Athiqah Nur Alami,

Ph.D., Head of the Research Center for Politics at BRIN, for providing valuable advice for this article. Additionally, artificial intelligence tools (Grammarly and ChatGPT) were used with human oversight to refine the language in the article.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Language and De-/Escalation of Conflict in Aceh, Indonesia

Wening Udasmoro[a]* & Rahel Kunz[b]

[a]Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia
[a]University of Lausanne, Switzerland

*corresponding author: udasmoro@ugm.ac.id

Received: 17 July 2024 / Accepted: 10. April 2025 / Published: 29 April 2025

▸ Udasmoro, W., & Kunz, R. (2025). Language and de-/escalation of conflict in Aceh, Indonesia. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 83-101.

This article examines the role of language in the de-/escalation of the Aceh conflict. Our analysis is situated at the crossroads of the literature on language and conflict and the literature on the micro-dynamics of violent conflict and everyday peacebuilding. We suggest that language, as a fundamental element of social engagement, although often overlooked in peace and conflict studies, plays a pivotal role in intensifying and alleviating conflicts. Through a case study of the conflict in Aceh, this article asks how power relations, discrimination, and violence are played out through language in the context of micro-level everyday realities. The analysis draws on interviews and focus group discussions conducted from 2014 to 2020 with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including village heads, religious and cultural leaders, businesspeople, civilians, and former combatants. We employ vignettes to illustrate the various ways in which language has been used for conflict de-/escalation in the conflict in Aceh. Our analysis identifies several mechanisms through which language contributes to de-/escalate conflict.

Keywords: Aceh; Conflict; De-/Escalation; Everyday Peacebuilding; Language

INTRODUCTION

Violent conflict has long been perceived primarily through a sociological lens, emphasizing the social practices that embody conflict management and peacebuilding, alongside the origins of conflicts (Azca, 2006; Pamuji et al., 2008). In this context, a substantial body of literature has investigated the link between conflict and language, encompassing aspects such as everyday linguistic practices, language within media landscapes, the interplay of nationalism and linguistic contestation in conflict zones, and the issues surrounding national identity (Csergo, 2007; Huang, 2000; Suleiman, 2004; Trijono, 2002). Furthermore, more pragmatic research avenues have delved into language's role in the mechanisms of conflict resolution, underlining the participation of social actors in conflicts with the aim of fostering resolutions and preventing future discord (Udasmoro &

Kunz, 2021; Udasmoro & Rahmawati, 2023; van Tongeren, 2023). Scholarly work has also analyzed the ways in which linguistic representations contribute to constructing social and political realities with strong implications for conflicts (Chiluwa, 2024).

Yet, less has been written in scholarly research regarding the mechanisms through which language acts as a catalyst for conflict escalation and de-escalation, in particular at the micro-level in the context of the everyday lives of civilians. While there is a growing literature on the micro-dynamics of violent conflict and everyday peacebuilding (Randazzo, 2016; Rigual, 2018; Rigual et al., 2022), the role of language has not received much attention in this literature. This article is situated at the crossroads of the literature on language and conflict, and the literature on the micro-dynamics of violent conflict and everyday peacebuilding. We suggest that language, as a fundamental element of social engagement, plays a pivotal role in intensifying and alleviating conflicts.

This article investigates the particular role language has played in de-/escalating conflict in Aceh. Through this case study of the conflict in Aceh, we show how power relations, discrimination, and violence are played out through language in the context of micro-level everyday realities. Our analysis identifies several mechanisms through which language contributes to de-/escalate conflict. The findings reveal firsthand accounts of how linguistic factors have played a critical role in escalating or de-escalating tensions. This exploration into the linguistic dynamics at play in the conflict of Aceh offers insights into the complex interplay between language and conflict.

The next section presents our methodology followed by a concise overview of the broader linguistic landscape in Indonesia. It is followed by a section that provides the background on the conflict context in Aceh. Thus, we introduce the conceptual framework that we draw upon in section six to investigate language as a social practice in the micro-level realities of conflict de-/escalation in the Aceh context. In the conclusion, we reflect on the broader implications of our findings in terms of the ways in which our analysis challenges the binary understanding of conflict escalation and de-escalation and suggests a more nuanced conceptualization of the fluidity and interconnected character of de-/escalation to understand the complex role of language in conflict settings.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger collaborative research project entitled *The Gender Dimensions of Social Conflict, Armed Violence & Peacebuilding*, which focused on the dynamics of conflict de/escalation in different regions of Indonesia and Nigeria at the micro-level.[1] The research was conducted between 2014 and 2020 and involved a team of researchers from Indonesia, Nigeria, and Switzerland. In the context of Indonesia, the province examined was Aceh, with a specific focus on conflict dynamics and peacebuilding efforts. Several areas were selected as case studies, including Pidie Jaya, Banda Aceh, Aceh Besar, East Aceh, and Bireun.

1 For more information regarding the research activities and outputs see the project website: https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/gender-centre/gender-dimensions-social-conflicts-armed-violence-and-peacebuilding

For this article, the sub-district of Idi Rayeuk in East Aceh was chosen as the focal point, as it was one of the most severely affected areas during the Aceh conflict and experienced some of the highest levels of conflict escalation. This area was also considered a stronghold of the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) – the guerrilla movement that fought a war of independence against the Indonesian State – and featured the second highest concentration of GAM members after North Aceh. For instance, in a key incident, GAM reportedly took control of this region from the Indonesian military for approximately 14 hours (Tempo, 2003). The high concentration of GAM members in Idi Rayeuk prompted the Indonesian military to impose stricter security measures, leading to frequent armed clashes between the Indonesian National Armed Forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia,* TNI) and GAM in several villages. The local communities selected for this study all experienced high-intensity conflict. As a result, the inhabitants in these communities developed an in-depth understanding of the complex ways in which language is linked to the de/escalation of conflict and mobilized various strategies to draw on language to contribute to de-escalating conflict situations.

In this article, we draw on an overall dataset of 112 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and twelve focus group discussions with civilians.[2] From this dataset, we selected four villages where we found particularly interesting insights into the role of language in conflict de-/escalation. In these villages, a total of 26 interviews and five focus group discussions with 15-20 participants each were conducted. Interview respondents and focus group participants were selected in a way that guarantee a wide array of perspectives and experiences. Thus, respondents represent various segments of society, including religious leaders (*teungku*), village heads (*geuchik*), customary leaders (*imeum mukim*), youth leaders, former GAM combatants, business owners, and civilians. The village heads, community leaders, and GAM representatives were contacted for individual interviews. Local peace activists provided us with relevant contacts of youth leaders and businesspeople. For the interviews and focus group discussions with civilians, we used a snowballing technique. We made sure to sample respondents in a way that guarantee a diversity of population groups in terms of gender, age, etc.

For our analysis, we draw on vignettes as a methodological tool to examine the critical role of language in conflict de-/escalation. Vignettes are defined as concise narratives depicting individuals or situations, presented in either textual or visual form, that illustrate representative scenarios (Barter & Renold, 1999). This method allows to extract, to concentrate, and to analyze narratives derived from in-depth interviews and it enables the illustration of typical scenarios in which language plays various roles in the processes of conflict de-/escalation. Common themes observed across interviews were connected to identify overarching themes for further analysis. In the analysis, we paid particular attention to word choice, phrasing, and rewording which provided us with crucial insights not only into the content of events but also the language use of informants to convey these events.

---

2 We would like to thank our respondents for taking the time to speak with us. We use pseudonyms to refer to all respondents to guarantee anonymity. The names of the villages have been anonymized as well. We would also like to thank the local researchers who helped us conduct the interviews and our research assistants, Tabrani Yunis and Raihal Fajri, for their support during our fieldwork in Aceh.

INDONESIA'S LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Indonesia, a nation encompassing over 17,000 islands and a multitude of ethnicities, boasts a rich linguistic tapestry. While *bahasa* Indonesia serves as the unifying national language, over 700 local languages persist across the archipelago. The selection of *bahasa* Indonesia, rooted in Malay, as the national language during the 1928 Youth Pledge marked a pivotal moment in Indonesian identity politics (Cribb & Kahin, 2004, p. 38). This act, as outlined in the Youth Pledge itself, aimed to transcend ethnic divisions and foster a unified Indonesian identity. The Dutch colonial power, established in the seventeenth century, had actively sought to maintain these divisions through a divide-and-rule strategy. Thus, the embrace of a shared national language served as a powerful counterpoint to this colonial legacy, emphasizing unity over difference.

Required in public spheres, including education and governmental sectors, Indonesian has experienced substantial grammatical developments, evolving into a constructed language that markedly diverges from its Malay roots (Sularto, 1986, p. 27). Despite its widespread use as a *lingua franca*, Indonesian exhibits significant regional variation in its spoken form. This phenomenon stems from the influence of local languages and dialects, leading to a prevalent code-mixing between Indonesian and these vernacular varieties (Udasmoro et al., 2023, p. 60). Sociolinguistic factors further contribute to this variation. Social class and educational background influence language use, with higher strata demonstrating a distinct register compared to their lower-class counterparts. Similarly, urban and rural populations exhibit differences in their Indonesian proficiency, with younger generations generally possessing greater fluency due to formal education. Literacy also plays a role, with older, less-educated individuals often encountering difficulties in speaking Indonesian fluently. Regional adaptations are particularly noticeable in areas beyond Java, such as Aceh, where residents have integrated Indonesian into their existing linguistic repertoire. Notably, certain demographics, such as the elderly in Aceh, may not speak Indonesian at all.

The Indonesian language is not characterized by gender distinctions in its grammar, semantics, syntax, or morphology, except for a limited number of words borrowed from Arabic or Sanskrit that incorporate gender forms. This study does not dwell on these exceptions. Instead, it concentrates on the ways in which social actors, both male and female, utilize language in manners that can either escalate or de-escalate conflict. Accordingly, the focus is placed on the varied application of language by these actors within the context of conflict dynamics.

Indonesia's rich linguistic landscape can pose challenges in conflict resolution. The multifaceted nature of Indonesian, with its regional variations and interplay with local languages, can lead to misunderstandings (Istianah & Suhandano, 2022). These misunderstandings can escalate tensions, particularly when actors manipulate language to exacerbate existing divides. Conversely, language can also serve as a tool for de-escalation and peacebuilding efforts. The complexities of this interplay are evident in analyzing past conflicts within Indonesia, such as in Aceh.

THE CONFLICT IN ACEH

The conflict in Aceh has a long and complex historical trajectory. What started as a secessionist conflict later became a vertical conflict between the Indonesian military and the Aceh Free Movement (Siapno, 2013). Conflict and violence have occurred continuously in Aceh under the various regimes in control of the Indonesian archipelago, from the Dutch colonial forces (before Indonesian independence in 1945) to the so-called Old Order under President Sukarno (1945–1966) and through President Suharto's New Order (1967–1998) and the Reform period (from 1998 until the 2004 tsunami and subsequent Helsinki Accord 2005) (Shaw, 2008). Shortly after Indonesian independence, the politics of Aceh had been dominated by calls for its independence from the Unitary Republic of Indonesia, demands that led to repeated armed insurrections. Since the 1970s, the independence movement led by Hasan di Tiro became the basis for the formation of the Free Aceh Movement, which waged an armed struggle against the central government from 1976 until 2005 (Zuhri, 2015). The GAM also involved women combatants, called *Inong Balee* (Kunz et al., 2018; Rahmawati, 2019; Schulze, 2006).[3] In the political arrangement that ended the conflict, the province remains part of Indonesia with wide-ranging political autonomy and a political scene largely dominated by former GAM members.

Acehnese demands for independence first from the Netherlands and then Indonesia were fueled by a range of issues, including the historical legacies of the Sultanate of Aceh and subsequent wars of independence, socio-economic grievances, political differences, and perceived differences in the understanding of Islam in Aceh and the rest of Indonesia (Reid, 2004; Schulze, 2003; Shaw, 2008). The latter point was highlighted in our interviews with a former GAM member (Interview with SB, March 2016) and echoes the findings of Hastings (1997), Schulze (2003), and Siegel (2000) who highlight the role of an Acehnese understanding of local practices of Islam as different and more 'pure' than 'Javanese' practices in Acehnese nationalist discourses.[5] Historically, certain segments of Acehnese society, particularly among the political elite, differentiate themselves from other regions of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (*Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*, NKRI). This differentiation is often linked to their Islamic affiliation, earning Aceh the epithet *Serambi Mekah* (the Verandah of Mecca), which reinforces a sense of uniqueness when compared with other provinces in Indonesia. Additionally, the fact that Aceh ranks among the five poorest regions in Indonesia has fueled aspirations for independence from NKRI (Setyadi, 2022).

Language politics have played a crucial role throughout the years of conflict in Aceh. The Acehnese population, prioritizing their distinct Acehnese identity, often eschewed the Indonesian language, which they did not regard as their own, choosing to speak Acehnese instead. In addition, many Acehnese, especially the adults, did not speak Indonesian because they did not go to school. Economic disadvantage and widespread poverty were key factors shaping access to school education and are partly responsible for the low literacy rate in the Indonesian language in Aceh, especially among the older generation (Dinas Perpustakaan dan Kearsipan Aceh, 2021).

3 The number of *Inong Balee* troops recorded until 2005 was as many as 2000 to 2500 women, composed of young women and widows, carrying out military training and living in the forest and mountains (Rahmawati, 2019).

LANGUAGE IN CONFLICT: CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS

Within the context of social practices, language can be understood as operating in two fundamental ways: firstly, as a substitutive tool that depicts or reflects social realities, and secondly, as an interactive, constitutive element of social interaction (Mottier, 2008, p. 184). We follow the latter perspective, to conceptualize language as transcending its role as a mere communicative device or *lingua franca*, embodying a social practice integral to the construction of identity (Fairclough, 2001). Thereby, language is both constitutive and constituted, shaping and being shaped by social realities (Bourdieu, 1991).

In order to analyze the role of language as a social practice in conflict dynamics we draw on Mottier's framework that identifies three key dimensions of language: its capacity to forge meanings; its role in constructing identities and demarcating identity boundaries through naming and labeling; and its potential to reproduce, challenge, or transform power relations (Mottier, 2008, p. 192). The examination of language's influence on power relations underscores its dual significance: it reveals how language can contribute to reproducing conflictual power relations and escalation of conflict, while simultaneously harboring the possibility to challenge or transform these relations, and to support de-escalation efforts. Collectively, these aspects are linked to the production and reproduction of meanings, identity construction, and power relations, thereby affecting the processes of conflict escalation and de-escalation.

In the context of Indonesia, various examples illustrate the constitutive role of language and its potential to shape meaning, identities, and power relations. In the case of Aceh, conflict narratives have been used to transmit narratives of conflict across generations. For example, conflict narratives have entered not only the realm of literature, such as in the *Hikayat Prang Sabi* (An Epic Tale of Holy War), but have also been woven into the fabric of everyday life, for example through lullabies (Hardiansyah, 2010). The *Hikayat*, with its language of violence and calls for revenge framed as a religious duty, contributes to the normalization and justification of conflict within Acehnese society. Notably, the phrase *prang sabi* (holy war) itself may have originated with the male author of the *Hikayat*. However, through seemingly innocuous lullabies, conflict narratives are reproduced and transmitted across generations. This process of cultural transmission has a significant impact (Rizki, 2019).

Language also plays a crucial role in constructing the social reality of conflict. A single word can sometimes suffice to ignite conflict, as demonstrated in a poignant incident within the Indonesian landscape. A case in point involves Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, the former Governor of Jakarta, whose remarks during a 2016 gubernatorial campaign event sparked significant unrest between Islamic and nationalist factions. Ahok, a Christian of Chinese heritage, referenced a Quranic chapter in a manner that was perceived by Muslim groups as blasphemous: he cautioned against being misled by religious leaders using a verse in al-Maidah (*Al-Quran*, n.d., Chapter 5:51). This statement catalyzed both legal and societal upheaval due to dividing interpretations along communal lines. The Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam,* FPI), a hardline Islamic group, construed Ahok's words as casting doubt on the integrity of the content of the Quran itself, as if he were saying that people should not be deceived *by* al-Maidah. Conversely,

supporters of Ahok interpreted his statement as a warning against the manipulation of the text for deceitful purposes, that people should not be deceived *using* al-Maidah. This controversy led to a profound societal rift lasting at least six months, even dividing Muslim communities into factions supporting and opposing Ahok. Spearheaded by the FPI, a series of protests ensued, culminating in the mobilization of millions demanding Ahok's prosecution. The episode concluded with Ahok's conviction and a two-year prison sentence, underscoring the potent impact of language in precipitating conflict and societal division (Wangge & Wijanarko, 2023).

In Indonesia, language has also been used as a tool for manipulation and domination among different groups. A prime example is the sectarian conflict in Ambon, Maluku (1999-2002), which pitted (Christian and Muslim) indigenous populations against (predominantly Muslim) immigrants (Bertrand, 2004; Schulze, 2017). Although based on a long and complex history of conflict on the island, the violence was triggered by a fight between two young people, a Christian man from Mardika and a Muslim man from Batu Merah, a neighbourhood of Ambon City (Azca, 2006). During this conflict, the use of inflammatory language served as a flashpoint for violence (Schofield, 2010). According to reports, in this inflammatory context, the mere act of yelling "A mosque has been razed!" (*masjid dihancurkan*) by a Muslim person could trigger attacks on Christian communities, and vice versa, demonstrating how language can be strategically deployed to incite violence and escalate intergroup conflict.

Yet, in the context of the conflict in Ambon, language was also used strategically in multiple ways to de-escalate tensions and build peace. The impact of conflict triggered by linguistic choices has instilled a heightened sense of vigilance among the Ambonese regarding their language usage. Concerns that even slight misuses could lead to an escalation of tensions have led to a deliberate and cautious approach in communication. For example, a local youth group deliberately chose *baku bae* (meaning "to make peace") as their name. This choice was strategic, as they rejected the Indonesian terms "*damai*" or "*perdamaian*" – both of which also signify peace – yet, in the Ambonese context, these terms carried connotations of surrender, potentially hindering the peacebuilding message of the group. The phrase *baku bae* while conveying the same meaning, resonated more with the local understanding of peace as a mutually beneficial compromise. This demonstrates the significance of language selection in peacebuilding, as it allows for culturally and contextually appropriate messaging that can bridge divides between parties with differing experiences.

The strategy of employing language conscientiously to de-escalate conflict was also embraced by young local journalists during that period. They observed that the intensifying conflict in Ambon was often aggravated by the language choices in newspaper coverage, in particular reports originating from Java and international media, which lacked direct experience of the conflict in Ambon. Such media outlets frequently opted for sensationalist journalism, utilizing provocative headlines and language to captivate readers, thereby contributing to the tension. In response to this concern, young journalists in Ambon devised a strategy to mitigate the impact of external newspapers. They pursued more balanced sources of news, occasionally extracting and photocopying articles that portrayed positive stories, which they then disseminated without charge to a range of recipients within Ambon, for example in a journal called *Kanjoli* under the title *Provokasi Damai* (Provoking Peace). This

approach was labeled as peace journalism, contributing to de-escalate tensions and promoting peace (Interview with E, Ambon journalist, 17 September 2016). As these examples illustrate, language works to forge meanings and identities and contributes to reproducing or challenging power relations. Thereby, it plays a crucial role in de-/escalating conflict. The next section analyzes how language contributed to de-/escalate conflict in the context of the conflict in Aceh.

LANGUAGE AND CONFLICT DE-/ESCALATION IN ACEH

During the conflict, Acehnese civilians found themselves caught between two armed groups: the Indonesian military and the Free Aceh Movement. In their interactions with civilians, both parties frequently resorted to violence over seemingly trivial matters, such as when civilians did not respond to their questions or when civilian responses to questions did not align with the expectations of the armed actors. Even when providing answers, the honesty of civilians was frequently doubted and they were often blamed regardless of how they answered questions posed by either side. This predicament placed civilians in an impossible position, forcing them to carefully consider their use of language.

The clash of languages added an additional linguistic complexity in this particular context. The communities where we carried out our research all share a common experience of village residents facing aggression from soldiers for failing to respond to inquiries in Indonesian. This created instances of misunderstandings that sometimes contributed to the escalation of conflict and resulted in violence. This violence was largely attributed to the disconnection between the soldiers, who communicated in formal and standard Indonesian, and the local residents, who employed a mix of local Acehnese language and Indonesian language, either out of choice or because they did not speak Indonesian. In this conflict, language emerged as a critical factor in de-/escalation and the deployment of language was intricately tied to the politics of identity.

Drawing on examples from our field research in Aceh, we explore key mechanisms through which language contributed to de-/escalate conflict in this setting. Language plays a crucial role in constructing both the self and the other within a political context. The sense of otherness fostered through language use can be a significant driver of conflict escalation. The gendered use of language may also serve people to position themselves within the conflict, shaping their identities as linguistic subjects. Ambiguity or misinterpretations in communication can exacerbate tensions. Studying conflict dynamics in Aceh reveals how seemingly innocuous statements can be misconstrued, leading to violence. Selective use and manipulation of terminology can also contribute to de-/escalate conflict. Finally, we also analyze the ways in which silence is linked to the de-/escalation of conflict.

Miscommunication

Miscommunication is frequently cited as a factor in triggering violence during the Aceh conflict (Siapno, 2013). Almost all informants we interviewed highlighted that their lack of proficiency in Indonesian frequently led to violent encounters with military aggression. The Acehnese population, particularly the older generation, often

struggled with the Indonesian language due to limited educational opportunities and a long history of secessionist sentiment. Following the deployment of the Indonesian military by the New Order government to quell the separatist movement, this language barrier proved problematic. After the military's arrival, checkpoints were established to control movement and to identify potential members of the GAM. GAM fighters retreated to their mountain strongholds, leaving behind primarily women, children, and older men in the villages. These older men, lacking fluency in Indonesian, were particularly vulnerable to violence at checkpoints, risking victimization due to miscommunication during questioning by Indonesian soldiers.

One checkpoint incident, recounted by a woman from a village in the sub-district of Idi Rayeuk, exemplifies the tragic consequences of such miscommunication. Her husband, a fisherman unable to comprehend the soldiers' questions, fell victim to brutal violence. She told us:

> "At the time, my husband was hurt as he was beaten by the Indonesian military. In Kuala Laut Idi, there was fighting, and the houses were burned. My husband had just come back from the sea and he was bringing back the fish. At the checkpoint, he was examined. My husband couldn't speak Indonesian, he was confused and didn't understand the soldiers. They asked in Indonesian: 'What is this?' He answered in Acehnese: '*Eungkot*' (fish). They replied: 'How can fish bleed like this?' You know, the big fish were forced into a basket. Yes, there was water there, and blood. There was a razor in there and a sewing needle and a thread. The Indonesian military said that these were tools for slitting the throats of soldiers. They said: 'This is to bind the soldiers'. My husband replied: 'No, *Pak*, I'm just returning from the sea.' But the Indonesian soldiers didn't believe him. It got to the point that my husband was told to take off his clothes, and they poured out half of the 15-kilogram basket of fish onto the street. A week after being beaten, my husband was stressed. He was brought to *Bang* Min's home (the house of brother Min), and then they healed him." (Interview with R, a village woman, Idi Rayeuk, 16 September 2016).

The story of this Acehnese man, unable to speak Indonesian and targeted and humiliated by the military, shows how language functioned as a tool of power during the Aceh conflict. This aligns with Fairclough's argument that language use can be an exertion of power (Fairclough, 2001). In this context, the Indonesian military's awareness of the Acehnese language barrier seemingly led to the use of violence. While Indonesian and Acehnese are distinct languages, they share a Malay root, facilitating some mutual understanding. Therefore, a complete lack of comprehension of the Acehnese language by the soldiers is unlikely. Fairclough suggests this phenomenon might be attributed to the "embodiment" of power within language use (Morley, 2004, p. 20). This concept highlights the ways in which social context and power dynamics influence communication. In this specific conflict zone, the hierarchical relationship between the authoritative Indonesian soldiers and the Acehnese men lacking Indonesian fluency created the conditions for the abuse of power.

Another instance of linguistic misunderstanding occurred during an operation by Indonesian troops to track down GAM members and became a popular example, often recounted with irony by the Acehnese, to highlight the absurdities of conflict

situations. We learned about this story during our interview with TY, a peacebuilding activist in Aceh. As the narrative goes, GAM members, in their flight, passed a security checkpoint where several local men were present. Following the passage of the GAM members, an Indonesian soldier approached the local men for interrogation. One soldier asked: "How many people passed by?" and one of the men replied: "*Tak kubilang*". This reply pushed the soldier to assault the man. This assault was provoked by a linguistic misunderstanding. In the formal Indonesian language used by the soldier, "*Tak kubilang*" was interpreted as "I won't tell you." However, in the Acehnese dialect, the same phrase means "I didn't count" (Interview with TY, activist, 20 September 2019).

This incident raises questions beyond mere linguistic miscommunication. It raises the question of whether the event represented a genuine misunderstanding or if it was a manifestation of the power dynamics between the dominant (the Indonesian soldier) and the subordinate (the Acehnese civilian), or both. Language is inherently contextual, and even when identical words or phrases carry different meanings, speakers usually discern their meanings based on context. This case of the Indonesian phrase *tak kubilang* exemplifies this phenomenon. For clarity, in Indonesian, to express the intention of withholding information, the phrase *takkan kubilang* (*takkan* being the contracted form of *tak akan* meaning 'will not') would be more precise. Thus, if the soldier had wanted to understand and encourage a successful communication, the misunderstanding could have been clarified. Yet, in a context of conflict, mutual suspicion and enmity between the communication partners, language can be used to escalate conflict.

Such incidents render visible the complex history of language politics in the context of Aceh, which included among other dimensions the imposition of the Indonesian language. In this context, the use of Acehnese is understood as an act of resistance, even if not always necessarily intended by the speaker. Thereby, language serves as a mechanism for exerting control. In both examples, the issue at hand was not necessarily the Acehnese individuals' proficiency in Indonesian per se, but rather the opportunity their perceived linguistic shortcomings presented for the soldiers to justify acts of violence. The limited ability of the Acehnese civilians to communicate in Indonesian was exploited by the military as a pretext to legitimize violent actions, situated in broader structures of domination in the context of this conflict.

Lexical Choices

The selection of terminology, as a facet of group identity, played a significant role in the escalation of conflict and violence. Wulan et al. (2006, p. 137) highlight the significant role of terminology in escalating violence during the Aceh conflict. A prominent example is term *cuak* (spy) which served as a potent label of identification, denouncing civilians as traitors collaborating with the Indonesian military or GAM. In 1976, GAM leader Muhammad Hasan Tiro on Mount Halimun reportedly accused slain GAM members of being *cuak* who had leaked information to the Indonesian military. Similarly, following the revocation of the Military Operation Zone in 1998, many victims labeled *Orang Tak Dikenal* (Unknown People) were reportedly targeted and killed based on accusations of being *cuak*.

In our research, this was also relevant. Interviews with Acehnese respondents, particularly civilians, revealed a pervasive fear of being labeled *cuak*, with men being targeted more frequently. Some recounted instances of family members killed by unknown individuals after being branded *cuak.* Such an incident was mentioned in an interview with a fisherman in one of the villages in the sub district of Idi Rayeuk. He told us:

"B	When I got married, there was someone from Seunebok Baroh who came to my wedding. He was accused of being a *cuak* by GAM. I said, "No, he's not a *cuak*. Look, is this not a cell phone number from the soldiers, and the police? I've got a lot of phone numbers too. Look at this. These are the phone numbers of the commanders, they are my friends… I didn't have any connection at all, not with them (soldiers) there." I was in the middle, I told them.
Interviewer	How did the story go, *Pak*? Was one of your friends accused of being a *cuak*?
B	Yes, he worked as crab seller buying crabs in Seunubok Pangou and selling them by going from village to village. Sometimes when he passed, the soldiers would come to the village on their operations and talk to people. One hour later, GAM passed through, because they knew that the soldiers had come into the village.
Interviewer	So, they considered him a *cuak*?
B	Yes. He was caught there by GAM. I told them to let him go." (Interviewed with B, fisherman, Idi Rayeuk, 5 May 2016)

The label *cuak* could be weaponized beyond genuine suspicion of collaboration. Interviews revealed instances where accusations were deliberately leveled at disliked individuals. Personal animosity could motivate such accusations, potentially leading to deadly consequences. For example, a villager might falsely accuse a neighbor of being a *cuak* out of spite, potentially leading to the accused's death at the hands of unknown actors (Tiwon, 2000). The following testimony from a village head in Idi Rayeuk, interviewed in May 2016, exemplifies this phenomenon:

> "Maybe their mothers were killed by the military, or their fathers were kidnapped. In Aceh there were many *cuak*. So, if there was a post (checkpoint) here, and I was angry with someone, I could go to the post and say '*Pak*, he's helping GAM. Last night he hid a GAM member. Last night he gave cigarettes to GAM.' The person would be dead. Taken. It didn't just happen once, but it happened often. In my village, in 1990, there was a corpse. After we looked into it, we found out 'Oh, he was from Perlak. He was a crab merchant'. Because he had a debt to someone, that person reported him to the soldiers and said that he was involved with GAM. The person was taken, shot in the head, missing from his village only to end up here." (Interview with J, village leader, Idi Rayeuk, 10 May 2016)

The label *cuak* not only fueled conflict but also instilled immense fear among Acehnese civilians. Caught between the warring factions of the GAM and the TNI, civilians faced the constant threat of being labeled *cuak* by either side. This designation often resulted in violence. Paradoxically, civilians were more likely to be targeted with such accusations than actual combatants. This is certainly linked to the fact that many civilians come from lower-class groups with limited education and proficiency in the Indonesian language, and without access to weapons and affiliations with power structures. This illustrates the ways in which language creates meaning and identities, shaping power relations and conflict dynamics with very severe implications for the everyday lives of civilians.

Silence and code-switching

Caught between two armed groups during the conflict, Acehnese civilians were forced to carefully consider their language use and whether to speak or keep silent. Different strategies and approaches were adopted, depending on whether they were dealing with the Indonesian military or GAM. *Silence is golden* became a common strategy for Acehnese civilians when interacting with the TNI. Speaking minimally and answering questions concisely and factually was another method of self-protection. One civilian explained that they would only respond based on what they had personally witnessed because they understood that many questions served merely as tests; the military often already knew the answers. He explained:

> "To protect ourselves from the TNI, we just surrendered. To protect ourselves, the key was not to talk too much. We only spoke based on facts. For example, if GAM [members] passed through and we were asked about it, we'd answer, 'Yes, they did pass through.' If we said they didn't pass through, we'd get beaten because they already knew GAM [members] had passed." (Interview with M, a small entrepreneur, Idi Rayeuk, 25 July 2015)

A similar experience was shared by a female shop owner. Cautious speech became vital when answering questions from soldiers. She reported that if she withheld information, she feared that she would be blamed. To protect herself, she feigned ignorance, repeatedly using the phrase 'no idea' (*tidak tahu*) as a defensive tactic — a form of safe language aimed at de-escalation. In one particular incident, a village post had been burnt and the Indonesian soldiers were inquiring about the perpetrators, asking her for information:

> "Yes, if we didn't report it, we'd be blamed for not reporting it. But after reporting it, if they asked us who burned it, we'd answer that we didn't know. We'd always say, 'If we knew, we would've told you.' The important thing was we reported that the post in our village had been burned. If they asked who burned it, we'd simply say we didn't know." (Interview with a female entrepreneur, Idi Rayeuk, 19 July 2015)

Meanwhile, in relation to GAM, the group emphasized the importance of civilians speaking truthfully about their observations. GAM strongly advocated for

transparency and accuracy in civilian accounts, as their primary concern was the presence of military forces in their territories. In conflict situations, GAM often found itself pursued by the military, prompting them to retreat to mountainous areas while occasionally descending into local communities. To maintain their strategic security, GAM urged civilians to refrain from withholding information, as such actions were perceived as highly dangerous and potentially escalating tensions or triggering armed confrontations. A man who owned a shop in Idi Rayeuk shared his experience:

> "GAM told us not to hide anything. They'd say, 'If you see soldiers passing, just say so' If we told them the truth, like 'Yes, soldiers passed', they would stay alert. If we said 'No one passed', they wouldn't be cautious, and this often led to clashes. That's why they'd get angry with us. So, we just told the truth. If they asked if the soldiers carried heavy weapons, we'd tell them the truth if they did." (Interview with M, a small entrepreneur, Idi Rayeuk, 25 July 2015)

Acehnese citizens also told us how they carefully selected their words during interrogations by the Indonesian military about the whereabouts of GAM operations, aiming to avoid aggression or endangerment. For example, M, a woman from a village in Ida Rayeuk told us:

"M	Aye, they came by and interrogated me. We used to have a house over there, a *ruko* (shophouse). We sold things there; we used to sell coffee. When there was a combing [operation], they asked where [the GAM members] went and who [the individuals] were. Question after question.
Interviewer	What was your reply then, *Ibu*?
M	I replied that I didn't know: 'No idea, no idea!' (*tidak tahu, tidak tahu*) That was it! We tried to play it safe." (Interview with M, a village woman, Idi Rayeuk, 26 May 2016)

In this context, subordinate language, particularly the use of the phrase *tidak tahu* was strategically employed as a means of signaling surrender to avoid provoking the Indonesian military, which appeared to focus on identifying faults within the Acehnese community.

Interestingly, in this context, gender dynamics also play a key role in the use of language to de-/escalate conflict. Our respondents explained that when a woman used the phrase 'no idea' in response to inquiries, it did not arouse suspicion by the armed actors. Conversely, an Acehnese man providing the same answer (either in Indonesian or in Acehnese) was often perceived as concealing information, regardless of whether the questioning came from the Indonesian military or GAM. This was motivated by the fact that men were generally disproportionately targeted and held accountable by both armed actors in Aceh's tense environment. Women on the other hand were generally viewed as posing lesser threats[4] and were perceived as more

4 Although women were considered as posing lesser threats, during the conflict, women also joined GAM, including as combatants (Rahmawati, 2019).

likely to avoid violence. Several women respondents explained how they used language strategically to adopt a subordinate stance in order to avoid escalating conflict. Women thus strategically mobilized gendered social expectations regarding language use in order to protect themselves, diffuse tensions, and de-escalate conflict.

Another linguistic strategy employed to de-escalate conflict and prevent violence by either the military or GAM involved adapting language to suit the interlocutor. Code-switching served as a crucial strategy to de-escalate tensions and avoid confrontations that could escalate into armed clashes between the two parties. This approach is exemplified in an account of an incident shared by a *tengku* (religious leader) that occurred during an interaction with a battalion commander. Recognizing that the commander was from Sulawesi — a region in Indonesia where people are generally perceived as straightforward and less likely to take offense at direct communication — the *tengku* used to convey his observations in a candid manner, including discussions about the atrocities committed by both the Indonesian military and GAM. This approach is further elaborated in *tengku* IA's account:

> "We had to assess individuals. If someone acted in a certain way, we adjusted how we spoke to them so they'd listen. At one point came a battalion commander named *pak* AM, likely of Sulawesi origin. We were talking about the brutality of GAM. During that discussion, if I stopped talking, they might suspect us of being political with the TNI. So, I kept talking and even added more to the stories, discussing the brutalities of both GAM and the TNI. Some of my friends turned pale as I spoke about these things, but I stayed calm. I thought, if I stopped, I'd definitely get beaten because they'd think I was withholding information. They'd ask about what we had just talked about. *pak* AM seemed like an intelligent man. His response was very serious. He was so happy to receive the information I shared that he even gave me Rp 20,000." (Interview with *tengku* IA, a religious leader, Idi Rayeuk, 25 July 2015)

In this account, *tengku* IA demonstrated no fear in speaking openly about the violent acts committed by both sides, while his companions grew fearful of the battalion commander's reaction. Whereas in other situations, silence would be the most suitable strategy, in this case, silence carried more risk than speaking candidly. Moreover, the courage and confidence of a *tengku* are partly derived from their crucial role within Acehnese society as a religious authority. Religious leaders are highly respected not only within the Acehnese community but also across Indonesia, including among TNI members stationed in Aceh.

From the above analysis, it is evident that language (both as spoken words and as and silence) served as a crucial tool for Acehnese civilians to protect themselves in everyday life from potential acts of violence perpetrated by both the military and GAM. The use of precise and cautious language became an essential skill among civilians, rooted in their understanding that both parties relied heavily on extracting information through them. Aware of the tactics employed by both the military and GAM in their search for intelligence, civilians strategically employed various linguistic approaches. These included deliberate silence, truth-telling, minimizing speech, feigning ignorance (for example through repetition), or, conversely, speaking candidly to avoid raising suspicion of withholding information or lying. The

instrumental use of feigned ignorance can also be seen as a form of subtle resistance—by strategically withholding information, civilians can avoid compliance with factional demands while minimizing the risk of violent reprisal. This delicate balancing act requires simultaneously projecting deference to authority, as any perceived linguistic transgression could mark civilians as targets for violence. Through their sophisticated deployment of linguistic strategies, these individuals utilize subtle yet effective communicative practices to navigate and defuse potentially volatile situations. Thus, language can also be used to de-escalate tension and to create space for constructive communication instead of using provocative rhetoric, making it a crucial tool in the prevention of violence and conflict.

CONCLUSION

During the conflict in Aceh, civilians found themselves caught between two armed groups – the Indonesian military and the Free Aceh Movement – capable of deploying violence at any moment and frequently over seemingly trivial matters. In this context, language played a double role through various mechanisms: in some situations, it contributed to an escalation of the conflict through miscommunication, in others, civilians were able to use language to de-escalate conflict drawing strategically on lexical choices, silence, and code-switching. Our analysis illustrates the complex ways in which language interacts with conflict in the context of Aceh. More broadly, our analysis shows that the use of language shapes the micro-level everyday dynamics of conflict, playing a significant role in de-/escalating conflicts. Recognizing the critical importance of language is a key component in efforts to manage conflict and to support and foster everyday forms of peacebuilding.

Much of the existing literature on the conflict in Aceh has analyzed conflict de-/escalation through the lens of the primary belligerents (Tiwon, 2000; Schulze, 2006; Siapno, 2013; Zuhri, 2015). This article contributed to the study of the Aceh conflict by shifting the focus from the study of major actors at the macro level (Shaw, 2008; Zuhri, 2015; Rahmawati, 2019) to examining the everyday micro-level processes of conflict de-/escalation linked to language. Thereby, our analysis illustrates several linguistic survival mechanisms employed by civilians at the grassroots level navigating daily life in Indonesia's longest-running conflict zone. In an environment where conventional moral frameworks offer minimal protection, civilians must constantly modulate their communication approaches based on careful psychological assessment of their interlocutors when engaging with GAM and TNI forces. Importantly, our analysis challenged the prevalent characterization of Acehnese civilians as passive victims (Tiwon, 2000; Hardiansyah, 2010; Zuhri, 2015), revealing instead their agency as active participants in conflict mitigation. We illustrated the complex ways in which civilians in conflict zones actively and strategically employed their linguistic capabilities as tools to avoid provocations and de-escalate conflict, both individually and collectively.

Studies examining language in conflict situations have investigated extensively how language functions as a mechanism for expressing speaker identity (Huang, 2000; Suleiman, 2004; Csergo, 2007). Thereby, language serves as an instrument for positioning both the self and the other, and has the potential to contribute to conflict

escalation. Research has additionally emphasized power dynamics as fundamental to language use in conflict situations, particularly how language operates as a means of power assertion during periods of violence and conflict (van Tongeren, 2023; Chiluwa, 2024). This article contributed to this literature by examining language's multiple roles as an instrument of control and power, and as a factor in quotidian conflict dynamics. Our analysis showed that processes of conflict de-/escalation are intimately connected to how individuals at the grassroots level—spanning diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, and age groups—engage with and develop linguistic strategies for survival in contexts of conflict and violence.

Our analysis highlighted the ways in which intersectional dynamics are linked to language and conflict. As the vignettes demonstrated, dynamics of gender intersecting with social class and age particularly affected elderly men from lower social strata lacking cultural capital, such as proficiency in the Indonesian language. This made them especially vulnerable to language-related violence by authorities and armed groups. Conversely, in certain contexts, the social perception of women as a lesser threat allowed them to use language strategically to diffuse tensions and avoid conflict. Further research is needed to explore in more detail how these intersectional dynamics shape the ways in which language is connected to conflict.

Beyond the scope of our analysis, our vignettes challenged the binary understanding of conflict escalation and de-escalation and suggested that a more nuanced conceptualization of the fluidity and interconnected character of de-/escalation is more helpful to understand the complex role of language in conflict settings. Anecdotal evidence from our research in Aceh suggested that in certain situations, individuals may decide to, or feel they have to, make concessions or endure forms of non-physical violence, such as submission or humiliation, to de-escalate a conflict through language and avoid physical harm. Further research could explore the complexities of these everyday conflict management strategies through language.

REFERENCES

Al-Quran. (n.d.). https://quran.com/id/5

Azca, M. N. (2006). In Between Military and Militia: The Dynamics of the Security Forces in the Communal Conflict in Ambon. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *34*(3), 431–455.

Barter, C., & Renold, E. (1999). The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Research. *Social Research Update*, *25*. https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU25.html

Bertrand, J. (2004). *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia*. Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press.

Chiluwa, I. (2024). Investigating the Language of Conflict and Peace in Critical Discourse Studies. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2024.2331160

Cribb, R., & Kahin, A. (2004). *Historical Dictionary of Indonesia* (Second edition). Scarecrow Press.

Csergo, Z. (2007). *Talk of the Nation: Language and Conflict in Romania and Slovakia* (First Edition). Cornell University Press.

Dinas Perpustakaan dan Kearsipan Aceh. (2021, August 15). Budaya Literasi di Aceh, Kadis DPKA: Membumikan Kesadaran Membaca di Generasi Mendatang. *Dinas Perpustakaan Dan Kearsipan Aceh*. https://arpus.acehprov.go.id/?p=2941

Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and Power*. Longman.

Hardiansyah, H. (2010). Ontology Hikayat Prang Sabi. *Substantia: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin*, *12*(2), 329-342. https://doi.org/10.22373/substantia.v12i2.3874

Hastings, A. (1997). *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism.* Cambridge University Press.

Huang, S. (2000). *Language, Identity and Conflict: A Taiwanese Study*. 143), 139–150. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2000.143.139

Istianah, A., & Suhandano, S. (2022). Appraisal Patterns Used on the Kalimantan Tourism website: An ecolinguistics perspective. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, *9*(1), 2146928. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2146928

Kunz, R., Myrttinen, H., & Udasmoro, W. (2018). Preachers, Pirates and Peace-Building: Examining Non-Violent Hegemonic Masculinities in Aceh. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, *24*(3), 299–320. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2018.1495348

Morley, J. T. (2004). Power and Ideology in Everyday Discourse: The Relevance of Critical Discourse Analysis in Pragmatic Linguistics Today. 順天堂大学スポーツ健康科学研究, *8*, 20–25.

Mottier, V. (2008). Metaphors, mini-narratives and Foucauldian discourse theory. In Terrel Carver & Jernej Pikalo (Eds) *Political Language and Metaphor: Interpreting and Chnaging the World* (pp. 182–194). Routledge.

Pamuji, N., Horiba, A., Miqdad, M., Gogali, N., & Sipasulta, L. (2008). *Success Story Mekanisme Komunitas dalam Penanganan dan Pencegahan Konflik: Studi kasus di Desa Wayame (Ambon) dan Desa Tangkura (Poso)*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Rahmawati, A. (2019). *Gender Contestation in Time of Reintegration: The Case of Female Ex- combatants of Aceh—The Inong Balee* [Dissertation]. Universitas Gadjah Mada.

Randazzo, E. (2016). The Paradoxes of the 'Everyday': Scrutinising the Local Turn in Peace Building. *Third World Quarterly*, *37*(8), 1351–1370.

Reid, A. (2004). War and Peace and the Burden of History in Aceh. *Asian Ethnicity 5*(3), 301-314 https://doi.org/10.1080/1463136042000259761

Rigual, C. (2018). Rethinking the Ontology of Peacebuilding. Gender, Spaces and the Limits of the Local Turn. *Peacebuilding*, *6*(2), 144-169. https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2018.1453640

Rigual, C., Prügl, E., & Kunz, R. (2022). Gender and the Micro-Dynamics of Violent Conflicts. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *24*(3), 345–367.

Rizki, S. (2019). Hikayat Prang Sabi: Acehnese Jawi as a Medium of Successful Da'wa. *Proceedings of International Conference on Da'wa and Communication*, *1*(1), 170-183. https://doi.org/10.15642/icondac.v1i1.287

Schofield, B. (2010, December 16). Boy Soldiers: Using Children in Warfare is Not a Modern Phenomenon. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/boy-soldiers-using-children-in-warfare-is-not-a-modern-phenomenon-2161593.html

Schulze, Kirsten E. (2003). The Struggle for an Independent Aceh: the Ideology, Capacity and Strategy of GAM. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 26*(4), 241-271. https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100390209304

Schulze, K. E. (2006). Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency: Strategy and the Aceh Conflict, October 1976 - May 2004. In A. Reid (Ed.), *Verandah of Violence: Aceh's Contested Place in Indonesia* (pp. 225–271). Singapore University Press.

Schulze, K. E. (2017). The "Ethnic" in Indonesia's Communal Conflicts: Violence in Ambon, Poso and Sambas. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *40*(12), 2096–2114.

Setyadi, A. (2022, February 2). Data BPS: Aceh Masuk 5 Provinsi Miskin di Indonesia. *detiknews*. https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5925014/data-bps-aceh-masuk-5-provinsi-miskin-di-indonesia

Shaw, R. (2008). Aceh's Struggle for Independence: Considering the Role of Islam in a Separatist Conflict. *Al Nakhlah Journal on Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilisation 10*, 1–14.

Siapno, J. A. (2013). *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State in Aceh: The Paradox of Power, Co-optation and Resistance*. Routledge.

Siegel, James T. (2000). *The Rope of God.* University of Michigan Press.

Sularto, B. (1986). *Dari Kongres Pemuda Indonesia Pertama ke Sumpah Pemuda*. Balai Pustaka.

Suleiman, Y. (2004). *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819926

Tempo. (2003, 23 Oktober). Idi Rayeuk Dikuasai GAM selama 14 Jam. *Tempo*.

Tiwon, S. (2000). From East Timor to Aceh: The disintegration of Indonesia? *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, *32*(1–2), 97–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2000.10415792

Trijono, L. (2002). Peran Komunikasi dalam Konflik dan Untuk Perdamaian. In L. Ispandriarno, T. Hanitzsch, & M. Loeffelholz (Eds.), *Media-Militer-Konflik, Crisis Communication: Perspektif Indonesia dan Internasional* (35-46). Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Galang Press.

Udasmoro, W., & Kunz, R. (2021). Art-for-Peace in Ambon: An Intersectional Reading. *International Development Policy /Revue Internationale de Politique de Développement*, *13*. https://doi.org/10.4000/poldev.4630

Udasmoro, W., & Rahmawati, A. (2023). Masculinities in Literary Works on Indonesia's Post-Conflict Ambon Island. *Kritika Kultura*, 40,442-466.

Udasmoro, W., Yuwono, J. S. E., Sulistyowati, S., Firmonasari, A., Astuti, W. T., & Baskoro, B. R. S. (2023). The Preservation of the Javanese Language in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. *Indonesian Journal of Geography*, *55*(1), 59-68 . https://doi.org/10.22146/ijg.68183

van Tongeren, P. (2023). Language and Violence. In E.-H. Kramer & T. Molendijk (Eds.), *Violence in Extreme Conditions: Ethical Challenges in Military Practice* (pp. 17–27). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16119-3_2

Wangge, G. L. L., & Wijanarko, R. (2023). Politik Identitas Era Post-Truth di Indonesia dalam Perspektif Language Games Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Jurnal Filsafat Indonesia*, *6*(2), 152-161. https://doi.org/10.23887/jfi.v6i2.53628

Widjajanto, A. (2006). *Negara, Intel, dan Ketakutan*. PACIVIS, Center for Global Civil Society Studies, University of Indonesia.

Zuhri, M. A. (2015). *Membayangkan Aceh sebagai Negara Bangsa: Sejarah Gerakan Nasionalisme Lokal*. Universitas Gadjah Mada.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Wening Udasmoro is a Professor of Literature and Gender at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. Her main research interests are literature, gender issues, violence, identity politics, and critical discourse analysis.

▸ Contact: udasmoro@ugm.ac.id

Rahel Kunz is a lecturer at the Institute of Political, Historical and International Studies of the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. Her main research interests are conflict, peacebuilding, and gender.

▸ Contact: rahel.Kunz@unil.ch

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research leading to this publication was carried out in the context of the collective research project 'Gender Dimensions of Social Conflicts, Armed Violence and Peacebuilding' (2014-2020). We would like to thank our project colleagues Mimidoo Achakpa, Jana Krause, Joy Onyesoh, Elisabeth Prugl, Arifah Rahmawati and Christelle Rigual for their very valuable collaboration. The project was supported by the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Swiss National Science Foundation), Grant Number 400240.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Early Adopters or Forever Resisters? Singapore Veg*ns' Views Toward Alternative Protein Foods

George Jacobs[a] & Meng Huat Chau[b]*

[a]Kampung Senang Charity and Education Foundation
[b]Zhejiang International Studies University

*corresponding author: chaumenghuat@yahoo.co.uk

Received: 19 July 2024 / Accepted: 02 April 2025 / Published: 29 April 2025

▸ Jacobs, G. & Chau, M. H. (2025). Early adopters or forever resisters? Singapore veg*ns' views toward alternative protein foods. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 103-113.

Alternative protein foods, which provide significant quantities of protein but do not use conventional animal sources, can be an important component of sustainable diets. This paper presents the results of an autoethnographic study by an activist reflecting on their efforts to move people in Singapore closer to animal-free diets, with an emphasis on present and future consumption of alternative protein foods. The findings suggest that the majority of Singapore veg*ns are not early adopters of such foods and may resist consuming them in the future. Reasons for this resistance include the perception that such foods are unnecessary, do not support spiritual needs, are not part of healthy lifestyles, are produced by companies driven by self-interest, and are not seen as a tool for promoting veg*nism. Implications are discussed in light of recent advances in understanding how to effect change.

Keywords: Alternative Protein Foods; Early Adopters; Future Foods; Singapore; Sustainable Diets

www.seas.at 10.14764/10.ASEAS-0121

INTRODUCTION

Solutions to the climate crisis include changes in diet to what have been termed sustainable diets (Beverland, 2014; Canseco-Lopez & Miralles, 2023). Sustainable diets for humans and their companion animals (Knight, 2023) emphasize foods that exclude ingredients derived from conventionally raised nonhuman animals. Such sustainable diets can include traditional foods, such as fruits, vegetables, grains, beans, nuts, and seeds, as well as novel foods that have been recently developed through technological innovations. Some of these foods, both traditional and novel, are especially rich in protein, a key nutrient for humans (Malila et al., 2024).

Terms differ when describing the foods included in sustainable diets. The following definitions are used in the current article. "Vegetarian" is defined by the absence of foods from slaughtered animals (Victoria State Government, 2023).

"Vegan" extends this to exclude foods, such as eggs and dairy, taken from animals without immediately killing them (Victoria State Government, 2023). The term "veg*n" is sometimes used to encompass both groups, and vegans can be considered a type of vegetarian. "Plant-based" refers to foods from plants and may also include fungi, such as mushrooms (Ostfeld, 2017, p. 315).

Veg*ns may also differ according to their motivation for their diets (Fox & Ward, 2008). Ethical veg*s are motivated by their concern for the animals trapped in the factory farming process (Braunsberger & Flamm, 2019). Health-conscious veg*ns seek to avoid the high cholesterol, high blood pressure, lack of fiber, and other harms associated with meat-based diets (Cramer et al., 2017). Last but not least, some people opt for veg*n diets as a way of lessening their carbon footprints (Chai et al., 2019).

"Alternative protein" is another term frequently discussed in the context of sustainable diets (Sexton, 2019, p. 47). Alternative protein involves foods that people eat instead of those taken from animals forced to live in Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), less decoratively known as factory farms. While many traditional foods, such as legumes and grains, provide sufficient protein (Chen et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2020), not to mention providing antioxidants, fiber, and other nutrition necessities (Greger, 2018), media attention has focused on what have also been called "future foods," sometimes called "novel foods" or "smart foods" (Bhat, 2022). These include foods made from fungi, fermentation, seaweed, insects, cell cultivation, and upcycling of waste food (for example, using waste from tofu production to make chips; see Feng et al., 2021).

This study examines how veg*ns in Singapore perceive alternative protein foods and the factors that shape their views. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: What are Singapore veg*n's views on alternative protein foods? What factors might impact those views? To contextualize these questions, the following section provides an overview of veg*n food trends both globally and within Singapore before presenting the study's findings.

BACKGROUND ON VEG*NISM AROUND THE WORLD

Data on the number of vegetarians and vegans worldwide are difficult to obtain for at least two reasons. First, data are not collected in many countries, and when they are collected, they are typically gathered through individuals self-identifying as vegan or vegetarian (Vegetarian Resource Group, 2022). Available data suggest that India has the largest number of vegetarians, with at least 29.5% of the population identifying as vegetarian and 9% as vegan (World Population Review, 2024). Vegetarian Resource Group, with a more rigorous data collection protocol but data only for the U.S., reported that in 2020 in the U.S., 6% of the population were vegetarian and 3% were vegan (Vegetarian Resource Group, 2024).

Bentham et al. (2020) found that, except for Sub-Saharan Africa, most of the world has experienced a significant increase in the quantity and variety of its food supply since the 1960s. This increase included both more meat and more vegetables, thereby making it easier for omnivores and veg*ns. Greater internationalization of food has increased the availability of veg*n-friendly cuisines, such as Italian, Japanese, Middle Eastern, and Mexican (Ozbun, 2024). Moreover, the internet has

greatly increased access to information on the benefits of adopting veg*n diets and the locations of eateries with veg*n offerings.

BACKGROUND ON SINGAPORE AND VEG*N FOODS IN SINGAPORE

The present study was conducted in Singapore, a country with a population of 5.6 million, of whom 4.1 million are classified as residents, that is, citizens or permanent residents (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024). Of these 4.1 million people, approximately 74% identify as Chinese, 14% as Malay, 9% as Indian, and 3% as other races (Statista, n.d.). One estimate placed the percentage of vegetarians in Singapore at 7% (World Population Review, 2024), although the methodology supporting this estimate was not explained. The rigorous methodology employed by Vegetarian Resource Group (2024) which asks respondents to list what they eat, rather than to label themselves, might have resulted in an estimate below 7%. Lok (2024) cited a 2023 Singapore government survey which reported that 5 % of Singapore consumers self-identify as veg*n, a decrease from 7 % three years earlier.

Food in Singapore reflects the diverse cultures of the people who migrated to the former British colony, which gained independence in 1965. Principal influences are from various Malay, Indian, and Chinese cultures, as well as fusion foods, such as those from Peranakan (a mix of Malay and Chinese) culture. While Malay food is not represented by any all-vegetarian restaurants, several Malay dishes, such as *mee rebus* and *sambal goreng,* easily lend themselves to plant-based versions. Given the prominence of vegetarianism in India, the presence of Indian vegetarian restaurants in Singapore is no surprise. The first, Ananda Bhavan, was founded in 1924 and remains in operation ("Ananda Bhavan", 2016). Tan (2022) traced Chinese vegetarian eateries in Singapore to the 1940s and credited Buddhist women from China as key founders:

> These women hailed from southeastern China and migrated to Singapore in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They observed a strict vegetarian diet and spent much of their time in temples. … Most of these women belonged to a tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, with some practicising a syncretic form that combined Daoism and Confucianism. (paragraph 4)

METHODOLOGY

In an autoethnography, a person reflects on and tells stories about their experiences in a given political, social, or cultural setting (Cohen, 2011; Rostami et al., 2024). Autoethnography attempts to show "people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, cited in Adams et al., 2017, p. 1). In the case of the present report, the first author was trying to figure out their own views on alternative protein foods and how to influence fellow veg*ns to accept and promote such foods. By doing so and through observations, they also gained insights how Singaporean veg*ns view alternative protein foods and which factors might impact those views. The findings are based on the first author's recollections of interactions with fellow veg*ns. Utilizing memories as important data

links, this study is grounded in an important form of qualitative, feminist research known as memory work (Lapadat et al., 2010).

The first author became a vegetarian in 1980 while living in the U.S. They have lived in Singapore since 1993. However, they were not a part of any veg*n communities, in Singapore or anywhere else, until 2002, when they joined Vegetarian Society (Singapore) (VSS), now called the Centre for a Responsible Future. In VSS, they met vegans who gently encouraged a shift toward a vegan diet, which was completed by 2014.

From 2003 to 2018, the first author served as president of VSS, which overlapped with a few years when they were also president of the International Vegetarian Union. During that time, they helped coordinate many local and international education events, working closely and exchanging ideas with many other veg*n activists. They continue to participate in veg*n activism, although most of their energy is now devoted to the Kampung Senang Charity and Education Foundation, which promotes plant-based diets alongside its many other charitable efforts. While initially skeptical about alternative protein foods, as something they did not need, having survived just fine for many years without meat, they came to see alternative protein as something that added variety to their diet and, more importantly, as a tool to reduce animal suffering. Unlike in most qualitative studies, in this autoethnographic study, the first author did not take notes, collect artifacts, or record interviews with others. Instead, the first author relied entirely on their memories and the recollection of interactions (Lapadat et al., 2010). However, this approach is inherently subjective, and the reliability of the recollections may be influenced by personal biases or selective memory. To enhance reflexivity and mitigate bias, the second author served as a critical friend, that is, a trusted colleague who provides rigorous questions and constructive critiques (Costa & Kallick, 1993).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the article discuses responses to alternative protein foods that the first author encountered among Singapore veg*ns. Each response is then discussed. The overall response of the Singapore veg*ns sampled was one of resistance to such foods. Reasons included those given by the general Singapore public: higher price, lack of availability, and inferior taste. However, in this article, the focus lies on perspectives that may be unique to veg*ns.

Generally, alternative protein foods of all types face numerous and substantial obstacles in achieving the scale, price, taste, and other criteria necessary to helping humans make their diets more sustainable. Fortunately, reasons for optimism exist, including participation in alternative protein research and production by some of the world's largest food manufacturers (e.g., Nestlé, 2023), the world's largest fast food restaurants (e.g., Burger King; see Sozzi, 2020), and the world's largest meat producers (e.g., Tyson; see Ellis, 2021). Furthermore, technological advances in other areas, for example, cell culturing for medical purposes (Cardoso et al., 2023), benefit alternative foods development.

Alternative Protein Foods Are Not Necessary

Singapore has long had veg*n versions of popular meat dishes, including *ba kut teh* (an herbal soup containing pork, literally translated as pork rib tea), chicken rice (perhaps Singapore's signature dish, featuring boneless chicken, rice cooked in chicken stock, special chili, and cucumber or other vegetables), and *char siu* (roasted pork). Why pay more for slightly better versions? What is all the fuss about eating these supposedly novel foods? They are not new at all to Singapore veg*n cuisine, as veg*ns adopted them decades ago ("Plant-based meat has thrived", 2021).

Related to the view that alternative protein foods are unnecessary, a frequent response of veg*ns when asked if they want to try alternative protein foods is, "Why do I want to pretend to eat animals?" This is a highly subjective response, one that the first author never shared. Government inspections and product labeling confirm that although alternative protein foods may have the taste, mouthfeel, and other qualities of food from exploited animals, these foods contain no ingredients of animal origin. Thus, eating these foods does not contribute to the suffering of nonhuman animals. Alternative protein companies may want to take additional steps to make this clear in their product labeling.

Spiritual Reasons

Many Singapore veg*ns have expressed that they were at least partly motivated by spiritual reasons. For instance, some Buddhists may eat vegetarian on the first and 15th day of the lunar month, with some Hindus having other days set aside for meatless eating. Of course, spiritually motivated people may adopt veg*n diets on a more ongoing basis. Controversy surrounds this practice. For example, what was the stance of Buddha on eating meat? Does consumption of eggs, widespread at vegetarian stalls owned by Buddhists, run afoul of the Buddhist injunction against harming sentient beings? The first author is an atheist, although they are close to many religious people, including their spouse.

Some spiritually motivated veg*ns resist alternative protein food because they believe that consuming these products is akin to pretending to eat animals. For these individuals, intention and other forms of thought hold significant importance. On a more literal level, there are concerns regarding animal welfare in the production of cultivated meat. These concerns center around two issues (Yang et al., 2023). Fortunately, as research has advanced, both concerns are well on their way to being alleviated. First, can cells be obtained from animals in a minimally invasive manner? The hope is that these cells can then be used repeatedly, thus earning the name "immortal cells lines" (Guo et al., 2022). The second area of concern involves the medium in which the cells grow. The goal is to transition to alternatives that do not rely on animal-derived substances, such as fetal bovine growth serum (Flaibam et al., 2024). The first author is a techno-optimist who believes that technology will solve many seemingly intractable problems, but their examples of how technology has led to animal-friendly changes have fallen mainly on deaf ears (Danaher, 2022).

Health Concerns

The claim that alternative protein foods are "ultra-processed" was raised by many Singapore veg*ns, including a medical doctor. Perhaps, one cause of this concern lies in veg*nism's roots in advocacy of more natural ways of life, which lead veg*ns to reject industrial farming of animals. Such farming deprives the animals of access to natural behaviors. For example, chickens raised for consumption spend their entire lives indoors, cannot dust bathe or roost, and are completely separated from their families (Prisco, 2022). At the same time, the chickens are genetically modified and fed growth hormones and antibiotics. Additionally, CAFOs are significant sources of pollution and are often situated near low-income communities (Son & Bell, 2024).

Many veg*ns' rejection of anything unnatural extends beyond industrial farming of animals to the industrial production of all food. According to Mridul (2024), approximately 70% of foods in the U.K. and U.S. can be classified as ultra-high-processed. Some veg*ns are fine with that. A visit to Singapore's only vegan grocery store, Everyday Vegan, reveals a wide selection of vegan foods on the shelves, alongside a range of less processed and unprocessed options. Indeed, the term "junk food vegan" (Aavik & Velgan, 2021, p. 8) has been coined to refer to people whose rationale for choosing a vegan diet does not prioritize health benefits.

As noted earlier, whether food can be classified as processed, highly processed, or ultra-high processed is tricky. Yet many veg*ns observed in the present study did not seem to differentiate. However, such differentiation might change their perception of alternative protein foods. For instance, Mridul (2024) compared Beyond Meat patties (a plant-based alternative) with Oscar Meyer conventional wieners (a traditional meat-based product). The two products were both high in salt and protein, but the Beyond Meat products had no or less cholesterol, sugar, saturated fat, and calories and had more fiber. Chapman (2023) warned governments, the public, and other stakeholders that:

> The discourse [about processed foods] is approaching a point of hysteria, has become worryingly detached from nutrition science and is at odds with health and sustainability goals. Urgent and decisive action is needed to confidently quell fears and address misconceptions. (p. 7)

To the first author, veg*ns who raised the issue of processed foods were falling for a trick by supporters of the status quo, similar to groundless scare tactics used against soybeans (Vaughn, 2022), but repeated by many veg*ns. More needs to be done to clarify this for veg*ns and the general public.

Distrust of Leaders of the Alternative Protein Industry

Another reason some veg*ns may lack enthusiasm for alternative protein foods is due to negative attitudes toward those who could profit financially and gain fame should this industry thrive. Perhaps, these concerns arise from comparisons with those IT innovators, such as Mark Zuckerberg, who became rich and famous from the Internet. Originally, they were seen by many, including the authors, as visionaries building a

better world where everyone would be part of one community. That dream turned into a nightmare (Bilton, 2019), and the IT innovators morphed into villains in the eyes of much of the public. If many internet owners turned into 'ogres' who deceive the public and ruthlessly suppress competition, could perceptions of alternative protein companies and their owners follow the same path? The first author hopes not. However, just as the first author acknowledges the many advantages of companies like Google, despite their drawbacks, they remain optimistic that the pro-social benefits of alternative proteins' eventual success will outweigh their inevitable negatives.

Alternative Protein Foods as Activist Tools

Even though many veg*ns have little interest in alternative protein foods for themselves, if asked, they often say that such foods have a role to play as "transition foods" for meat eaters who cannot seem to give up their omnivorous diets, despite the growing evidence of the harms caused by conventional animal-based foods, including harm to human health (Ford et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, too many veg*ns seem to see people moving away from conventional animal-based foods as everyone's individual choice. For instance, when the first author suggested that veg*ns be early adopters (Catalini & Tucker, 2017; Henderson, 2023) who seek out, buy, post about, and otherwise promote alternative protein foods in order to speed these foods' role in moving humans away from conventional animal-based foods, little enthusiasm was exhibited. Veg*ns seemed unexcited by the possibility that buying alternative protein foods could be seen as a form of activism, creating a virtuous cycle where increased demand boosts supply, which in turn lowers prices, leading to even greater demand. The first author's decision to leave the leadership of CRF was in part due to disillusionment with the views of the members, and for a short time, the first author was involved in an unsuccessful startup that promoted alternative protein foods. As the multiple horrendous impacts of meat production become even more overwhelming, perhaps veg*ns will be more willing to take up alternative protein foods as a valuable tool for ameliorating these impacts.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This autoethnographic study explored the views of vegans in Singapore toward alternative protein foods and the reasons behind those views. Results suggest that Singapore veg*ns are more likely to reject alternative protein foods. These foods are viewed as unnecessary, incompatible with spiritual goals, unhealthy, products of individuals motivated primarily by wealth and fame, and not useful for promoting veg*nism.

Future research may utilize other qualitative tools, such as interviews and observation, as well as creative methods like photo elicitation. Data could also be collected on actual eating habits, including variations in the consumption of alternative protein foods by different individuals. Future research may well explore the potential of targeted educational campaigns to address the concerns of Singapore veg*ns regarding alternative protein foods, particularly focusing on the health benefits, environmental impacts, and ethical considerations of these foods. Additionally, studies could investigate the role of cultural and spiritual beliefs in shaping dietary choices and

how these can be respectfully integrated into the promotion of alternative proteins. Longitudinal studies tracking the adoption rates of alternative protein foods among veg*ns and the general population could provide valuable insights into changing attitudes and the effectiveness of various outreach strategies. Finally, research could also examine the impact of policy interventions, such as subsidies for alternative protein products or public awareness campaigns, on the acceptance and consumption of these foods in Singapore and beyond.

The above notwithstanding, we remain optimistic that evidence supporting the need for alternative protein and other future foods will continue to grow. Perhaps more importantly, it is likely that, as with so many previous paradigm-shifting innovations (e.g., electric vehicles), the relative price of alternative protein foods will fall, their quality and quantity will increase, and they will become an increasingly integral part of people's everyday lives, eventually being viewed as normal, rather than alternative, protein sources.

~

REFERENCES

Aavik, K., & Velgan, M. (2021). Vegan men's food and health practices: A recipe for a more health-conscious masculinity? *American Journal of Men's Health*, *15*(5), https://doi.org/10.1177/15579883211044323

Adams, T. E., Ellis, C., & Jones, S. H. (2017). Autoethnography. In J. Matthes, C. S. Davis, & R. F. Potter (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods* (pp. 1-11). Wiley.

Ananda Bhavan. (2016, November 9). *TimeOut*. https://www.timeout.com/singapore/restaurants/ananda-bhavan

Bentham, J., Singh, G. M., Danaei, G., Green, R., Lin, J. K., Stevens, G. A., Farzadfar, F., Bennett, J.E., Di Cesare, M., Dangour, A.D., & Ezzati, M. (2020). Multidimensional characterization of global food supply from 1961 to 2013. *Nature Food*, *1*(1), 70-75.

Beverland, M. B. (2014). Sustainable eating: Mainstreaming plant-based diets in developed economies. *Journal of Macromarketing*, *34*(3), 369-382.

Bhat, R. (Ed.). (2022). *Future foods: Global trends, opportunities, and sustainability challenges*. Academic Press.

Bilton, N. (2019, November 6). "He's f--king destroyed this town": How Mark Zuckerberg became the most reviled man in tech. *Vanity Fair*. https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/11/how-mark-zuckerberg-became-the-most-reviled-man-in-tech

Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. S. (2006). Communication as autoethnography. In G. J. Shepherd, J. St. John, & T. Striphas (Eds.), *Communication as …: Perspectives on theory* (pp. 110–122). Sage.

Braunsberger, K., & Flamm, R. O. (2019). The case of the ethical vegan: Motivations matter when researching dietary and lifestyle choices. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, *31*(3), 228-245.

Canseco-Lopez, F., & Miralles, F. (2023). Adoption of plant-based diets: A process perspective on adopters' cognitive propensity. *Sustainability*, *15*(9), 7577. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15097577

Cardoso, B. D., Castanheira, E. M., Lanceros-Méndez, S., & Cardoso, V. F. (2023). Recent advances on cell culture platforms for in vitro drug screening and cell therapies: From conventional to microfluidic strategies. *Advanced Healthcare Materials*, *12*(18), 2202936. https://doi.org/10.1002/adhm.202202936

Catalini, C., & Tucker, C. (2017). When early adopters don't adopt. *Science, 357*(6347), 135-136.

Chai, B. C., Van Der Voort, J. R., Grofelnik, K., Eliasdottir, H. G., Klöss, I., & Perez-Cueto, F. J. (2019). Which diet has the least environmental impact on our planet? A systematic review of vegan, vegetarian and omnivorous diets. *Sustainability*, *11*(15), 4110. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11154110

Chapman, J. (2023). *Processing the discourse over plant-based meat*. The Churchill Fellowship. https://media.churchillfellowship.org/documents/JChapman_-_Processing_the_discourse.pdf

Chen, Z., Glisic, M., Song, M., Aliahmad, H. A., Zhang, X., Moumdjian, A. C., Gonzales-Jaramillo, V., van der Schaft, N., Bramer, W.M., Ikram, M.A., & Voortman, T. (2020). Dietary protein intake and all-cause and cause-specific mortality: Results from the Rotterdam Study and a meta-analysis of prospective cohort studies. *European Journal of Epidemiology*, *35*(5), 411-429.

Cohen, E. (2012). Flooded: An auto-ethnography of the 2011 Bangkok flood. *ASEAS-Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, *5*(2), 316-334.

Costa, A. L., & Kallick, B. (1993). Through the lens of a critical friend. *Educational Leadership, 51*, 49-51.

Cramer, H., Kessler, C. S., Sundberg, T., Leach, M. J., Schumann, D., Adams, J., & Lauche, R. (2017). Characteristics of Americans choosing vegetarian and vegan diets for health reasons. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, *49*(7), 561-567.

Danaher, J. (2022). Techno-optimism: An analysis, an evaluation and a modest defence. *Philosophy & Technology*, *35*(2), 54. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-022-00550-2

Ellis, J. (2021, December 20). Brief: ADM, Tyson back cultivated meat company Future Meat in record-breaking $347m round. *AgFunder News*. https://agfundernews.com/future-meat-nets-347m-from-adm-tyson-in-largest-cultivated-meat-round

Feng, J. Y., Wang, R., Thakur, K., Ni, Z. J., Zhu, Y. Y., Hu, F., Zhang, J. G., & Wei, Z. J. (2021). Evolution of okara from waste to value added food ingredient: An account of its bio-valorization for improved nutritional and functional effects. *Trends in Food Science & Technology*, *116*, 669-680.

Flaibam, B., da Silva, M. F., de Mélo, A. H. F., Carvalho, P. H., Galland, F., Pacheco, M. T. B., & Goldbeck, R. (2024). Non-animal protein hydrolysates from agro-industrial wastes: A prospect of alternative inputs for cultured meat. *Food Chemistry*, *443*, 138515. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodchem.2024.138515

Ford, H., Gould, J., Danner, L., Bastian, S. E., & Yang, Q. (2023). "I guess it's quite trendy": A qualitative insight into young meat-eaters' sustainable food consumption habits and perceptions towards current and future protein alternatives. *Appetite*, *190*, 107025. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2023.107025

Fox, N., & Ward, K. (2008). Health, ethics and environment: A qualitative study of vegetarian motivations. *Appetite*, *50*(2-3), 422-429.

Guo, D., Zhang, L., Wang, X., Zheng, J., & Lin, S. (2022). Establishment methods and research progress of livestock and poultry immortalized cell lines: A review. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, *9*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2022.956357

Greger, M. (2018). *Benefits of lentils and chickpeas*. https://nutritionfacts.org/video/benefits-of-lentils-and-chickpeas

Henderson, S. (2023). *How successful startups find their early adopters (and how you can too)*. https://www.antler.co/academy/early-adopters

Huang, J., Liao, L. M., Weinstein, S. J., Sinha, R., Graubard, B. I., & Albanes, D. (2020). Association between plant and animal protein intake and overall and cause-specific mortality. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, *180*(9), 1173-1184.

Katz, D. L., Doughty, K. N., Geagan, K., Jenkins, D. A., & Gardner, C. D. (2019). Perspective: The public health case for modernizing the definition of protein quality. *Advances in Nutrition*, *10*(5), 755-764.

Knight, A. (2023). The relative benefits for environmental sustainability of vegan diets for dogs, cats and people. *Plos one*, *18*(10), e0291791. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0291791

Lapadat, J. C., Black, N. E., Clark, P. G., Gremm, R. M., Karanja, L. W., Mieke, L. W., & Quinlan, L. (2010). Life challenge memory work: Using collaborative autobiography to understand ourselves. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *9*(1), 77-104.

Lok, C. (2024, April 21). Sprouting food option for vegans. *The Straits Times.* https://www.straitstimes.com/life/vegan-dishes-continue-to-sprout-in-singapore

Malila, Y., Owolabi, I. O., Chotanaphuti, T., Sakdibhornssup, N., Elliott, C. T., Visessanguan, W., Karoonuthaisiri, N., & Petchkongkaew, A. (2024). Current challenges of alternative proteins as future foods. *npj Science of Food*, *8*(1), 53. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41538-024-00291-w

Mridul, A. (2024, January 29). Not all UPFs are equal: Green Queen unveils FAQ Guide for plant-based meat & ultra-processed foods. *Green Queen.* https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-list-plant-based-meat-guide/

Nestlé. (2023). *Plant-based portfolio*. https://www.nestle.com/brands/plant-based-portfolio

Ostfeld, R. J. (2017). Definition of a plant-based diet and overview of this special issue. *Journal of Geriatric Cardiology, 14*(5), 315. https://doi.org/10.11909/j.issn.1671-5411.2017.05.008

Ozbun, T. (2024). *Italian cuisine worldwide - Statistics & facts.* https://www.statista.com/topics/12802/italian-cuisine-worldwide/#topicOverview

Plant-based meat has thrived. (2021, February 16). Plant-based meat has thrived in Asia for centuries—and it's still going strong. *Food & Wine*. https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/plant-based-meat-thrived-asia-222803091.html

Prisco, A. (2022). The rise of concentrated animal feeding operations, their effects, and how we can stop their growth. *Dickinson Law Review, 126*(3). https://ideas.dickinsonlaw.psu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1155&context=dlr

Rostami, A., Trupp, A., & Stephenson, M. L. (2024). Female solo travel experiences: An autoethnography on social and emotional challenges with tourism industry stakeholders. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 201-212.

Sexton, A. E., Garnett, T., & Lorimer, J. (2019). Framing the future of food: The contested promises of alternative proteins. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, *2*(1), 47-72.

Singapore Department of Statistics. (2024). *Population and population structure.* https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/population/population-and-population-structure/latest-data

Son, J. Y., & Bell, M. L. (2024). Concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) in relation to environmental justice related variables in Wisconsin, United States. *Journal of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology*, *34,* 416–423.

Sozzi, B. (2021, February 11). CEO of Burger King owner: 'We are all in' on plant-based foods. *Yahoo Finance*. https://finance.yahoo.com/news/ceo-of-burger-king-owner-we-are-all-in-on-plantbased-foods-181019701.html

Statista. (n.d.). *Resident population in Singapore as of June 2023, by ethnic group*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/622748/singapore-resident-population-by-ethnic-group

Tan, K. (2022). *How Chinese Buddhist women shaped the food landscape in Singapore.* https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-18/issue-2/jul-sep-2022/buddhist-women-vegetarian-food-singapore/

Vaughn, R. (2022). Queer, toxic soybeans and estrogen panic: Gendered food fearmongering. *Media+ Environment*, *4*(2). https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.37271

Vegetarian Resource Group. (2022). *How many people are vegetarian or vegan.* https://www.vrg.org/nutshell/faq.htm#poll

Victoria State Government. (2023). *Vegetarian and vegan eating*. https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/vegetarian-and-vegan-eating

World Population Review. (2024). *Vegetarianism by country.* https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/vegetarianism-by-country

Yang, M., Wang, Q., Zhu, Y., Sheng, K., Xiang, N., & Zhang, X. (2023). Cell culture medium cycling in cultured meat: Key factors and potential strategies. *Trends in Food Science & Technology, 138*, 564–576.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George M Jacobs teaches at Kampung Senang Charity and Education Foundation, Singapore, and for universities around Asia. Their research interests include student-centered learning, ecolinguistics, and animal welfare. Among their recent publications is *Cooperative Learning and the SDGs*, a free online book from Peachey Publications.

▸ Contact: george.jacobs@gmail.com

Meng Huat Chau is Professor of Applied Linguistics and Language Education at Zhejiang International Studies University. They have delivered graduate courses and given invited

lectures at universities around Asia. Their research interests include student-centered education, ecolinguistics, and issues of social justice and environmental justice. Among their recent publications is *Cooperative Learning and the SDGs*, a free online book co-authored with George M Jacobs and several other colleagues from China and Japan.

▸ Contact: chaumenghuat@yahoo.co.uk

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Editor and reviewers for their most helpful comments and suggestions throughout the revision process of this paper.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no competing interests.

Book Review: Prajak Kongkirati. (2024). Thailand: Contestation, Polarization, and Democratic Regression.

Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9781009517690. 86 pages

Ladawan Khaikham[a]*

[a]Kasetsart University, Thailand

*corresponding author: ladawan.kh@ku.th

Received: 8 December 2024 / Accepted: 14 March 2025 / Published: 29 April 2025

▸ Khaikham, L. (2025). Book Review: Prajak Kongkirati. (2024). Thailand. Contestation, polarization, and democratic regression. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 115-118.

Thailand: Contestation, Polarization, and Democratic Regression (2024) provides an in-depth examination of Thailand's political instability, focusing on the recurrent struggles for power, the influence of elite actors, and the increasing divide between the ruling classes and the general populace. Across four well-structured core chapters, Prajak Kongkirati examines military interventions that have disrupted Thailand's democratization efforts. With a historical analytical approach, Prajak explains that military elites maintain political control by aligning with the monarchy to gain their legitimacy. He also explores "chronic political instability" (p. 1) as the central aspect of modern Thai politics since Marshal Sarit Thanarat in the 1950s to the present-day conflict (2023). The book's theme revolves around three main concepts: contestation, polarization, and democratic regression.

Firstly, the concept of 'contestation' demonstrates the persistent and intense struggles for political power in modern Thai politics. Prajak highlights contestation as reflected in the ongoing conflicts among different political actors such as the monarchy, military, and politicians. In Chapter 2, Prajak begins his argument with Marshal Sarit Thanarat's creation of a formidable alliance between the monarchy and the military in the 1950s. Since then, the royal-military alliance gradually became a dominant force, influencing regime changes, and hindering democratic consolidation in Thai political institutions. The patterns of political repression in Thai history are evident in several key events and practices. These include the student-led demonstration on October 14, 1973, the subsequent brutal massacre of students on October 6, 1976, and the manipulation of democratic processes. This manipulation is characterized by practices such as "dirty elections" (p. 7), "money politics" (p. 14), electoral fraud, and the dominance of local provincial bosses, known as *Jao Pho* (p. 17).

In addition, the discourse of "Thai-style democracy" (p. 62), which prioritizes harmony and order over strong political institutions, strengthens elite control while encouraging political conflict and an illegal economy. Prajak argues that

Thai politics is unstable, with military coups repeatedly obstructing democratic progress to protect the elites' political power. The contestation of political power extends beyond mere elite rivalry to include widespread social conflicts, especially between pro-establishment forces and reformist groups demanding democratic change. Consequently, the royal-military alliance contributed to a turbulent political situation marked by the military coup in 2006. This followed the 1997 economic crisis, the introduction of a new constitution and electoral system in 1997, and the rise of the populist party, *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT) Party, in the 2001 election.

Secondly, in Chapter 3, Prajak employs a multilevel framework both at the national and local levels to investigate the complex, reciprocal relationship between local and national political struggles and elite power. The 1997 economic crisis eroded public trust in the traditional political elite and created opportunities for ambitious capitalists. At the same time, new organizations, mechanisms, and rules had been set in the 1997 constitution with an effort to establish a stable government, strengthen the checks and balances system, promote strong executive power, encourage party-based competition, and eliminate vote-buying and money-driven politics. Altogether, it paved the way for Thaksin Shinawatra and his allies to join politics to protect and advance his interests and capitalize on the public's desire for change. Through its successes in the 2001 and 2005 elections, Thaksin's TRT Party transformed Thai politics into people-centered policies. It formed a single-party government that challenged the patronage networks of local strongmen and royal-military alliances.

In Chapter 4, Prajak describes the 2006 to 2014 Thai political crisis as a period marked by polarization, inequality, and violence. Polarization was evident in the "color-coded" (p. 23) street politics, with the yellow-shirt movement supporting traditional elite structures, often aligned with the monarchy and military, and the red-shirt movement supporting Thaksin Shinawatra and the TRT. Prajak argues that this polarization stems from socioeconomic inequality, urban-rural divides, and competing political ideologies. This ideological divide turned political disagreements into deep social fractures that affected daily life, institutions, and public discourse. This polarization escalated political violence and social unrest, such as hiring thugs and gangsters to incite hatred, destroying property, and clashing with opposing groups. The violence weakened collective trust and complicated efforts toward political reconciliation between 2006 and 2014.

Thirdly, Prajak examines 'democratic regression' as a recurring setback in Thailand's transition to democratic governance in Chapter 5. This regression is primarily caused by elite interference, military interventions, and the strategic use of laws to limit political freedoms. For example, the 2006 and 2014 military coups were a deliberate strategy of royal-military elite actors to protect their interests and maintain their power. Unlike previous coups, the 2014 coup occurred to ensure an orderly and peaceful transition from King Bhumibol (Rama IX) to King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X) in 2016. At this point, the royal-military elites maintained their control through the 2017 "undemocratic constitution" (p. 50), institutional manipulation, co-optation of certain civil society groups, and efforts to depoliticize Thai society. Likewise, media censorship, restrictions on freedom of expression, and judicial actions against political dissidents and opposition parties also reinforced the regression.

Prajak suggests that democratic regression in Thailand results in weakened democratic institutions, increased political violence, and persistent polarization. The rise of a new generation of younger, urban voters challenges traditional power structures by voting for the progressive *Future Forward Party* (FFP) in the "unfree and unfair" (p. 50) election in 2019. Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court's decision to dissolve the FFP in 2020 sparked a wave of student-led protests throughout the country. The protests criticized the monarchy, challenged traditional institutions, and called for democratic reforms. Unfortunately, the victory of the pro-democracy parties in the 2023 election does not promise political power due to the use of undemocratic means by royal-military alliances to consolidate their power and the pushback from pro-democracy forces.

Finally, Prajak emphasizes the potential for change among the younger generation of politically active citizens. Consequently, while the country's democratic future is uncertain, there is still hope for democratic progress.

Thailand: Contestation, Polarization, and Democratic Regression (2024) presents clear, original arguments beyond summarizing existing knowledge. It offers a critical perspective on Thailand's political trajectory. Prajak's analysis focuses on three main ideas: contestation, polarization, and democratic regression, shaped by themes of political instability, the monarchy's role in politics, and identity struggles with mass mobilization. These interrelated themes provide a holistic framework for understanding the complex interplay of historical, institutional, economic, and social factors shaping Thai political instability.

This book highlights significant political transitions. The book provides an in-depth, detailed historical analysis of Thai politics based on a broad range of academic sources and debates. Prajak provides readers with a strong foundation for further study. He lays out how the monarchy has legitimized military rule since the Sarit Thanarat era and shifts in political and economic structures. This approach emphasizes the formation of the royal-military alliance since the 1950s and its influences throughout Thai politics. Furthermore, Prajak uses multiple factors, such as elite, institutional, structural, and ideological factors, to investigate the complexities of elite persistence, polarization, democratic backsliding, and social movements. This approach offers a more comprehensive view to understand Thailand's political dynamics and democratic challenges.

As part of the *Cambridge Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia* series, it offers concise overviews and original ideas. Despite these strengths, however, the book reveals some limitations. It assumes readers already have a basic understanding of Thai politics, as it does not follow a traditional chronological approach and often mentions key historical events only briefly. Readers who are unfamiliar with Thai history may find it challenging or need to use it as a starting point for further research.

Furthermore, due to space constraints, Prajak chose not to address external influences such as Cold War dynamics, US economic assistance, and Thailand's alliance with the US, which had profoundly shaped Thai politics from the 1950s to 1970s. In fact, during the Cold War, Thailand became a key US partner in Southeast Asia and received substantial financial aid for infrastructure, military support, and anti-communist efforts. Sarit's government – for example – used this support to restrain leftist ideologies and restore the monarchy's symbolic role as 'a central soul of the nation'

for Thai identity and stability. As a result, excluding these aspects limits the overall context of Thailand's political developments within global dynamics.

Overall, the book is a valuable resource for those with some background in Thai political history. It is particularly useful for scholars and researchers focusing on democratization, authoritarianism, and Southeast Asian politics. Graduate students of political science and Asian studies would benefit from its in-depth analysis of Thailand's political democratization, elite power struggles, and sociopolitical conflicts. It provides a solid framework for comprehending the elite rivalries, mass mobilization, and democratic challenges that have shaped modern Thailand's political landscape. This book is an excellent choice for readers looking for deeper insights into contemporary Thai politics.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ladawan Khaikham is an Assistant Professor of Political Science in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand.

▸ Contact: ladawan.kh@ku.th

Book Review: Karlsson, K. A. (2025). A Sense of Place and Belonging: The Chiang Tung Borderland of Northern Southeast Asia.

Northern Illinois University Press. ISBN 978-1-5017-7976-3. 246 pages.

Joseph Black[a]*

[a]King's College London, Chiang Mai University

*corresponding author: joseph.black@kcl.ac.uk

Received: 27 February 2025 / Accepted: 11 April 2025 / Published: 29 April 2025.

▸ Black, J. (2025). Book Review: Klemens Karlsson (2025). A sense of place and belonging: The Chiang Tung borderland of northern Southeast Asia. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 18*(1), 119-121.

Situated at the intersection of China, Laos, and Thailand, the Shan State has historically served as a cultural and commercial crossroads of civilizations, where trade, religion, and migration have woven an intricately textured fabric of identities. In contrast to Myanmar's predominantly Bamar heartland, the history of Shan State is inextricably linked to Tai cultural heritage and unique configurations of local autonomy. Among its many culturally diverse regions, the city of Chiang Tung (Keng Tung) exemplifies a dynamic borderland culture – shaped by fluid identities, cross-border exchanges, and a long history of local autonomy that defies easy categorization within national frameworks.

Klemens Karlsson's *A Sense of Place and Belonging* is a timely book about Chiang Tung that illuminates its cultural and historical significance beyond the conventional narratives of Southeast Asian nation-states. In *A Sense of Place and Belonging*, Karlsson explores how the region's indigenous people, particularly the Tai Khuen, construct sense and belonging through religious practice, sacred geography, and memory.

The book is thematic, with each chapter dealing with different aspects. In the introductory chapter, Karlsson lays out the historical and cultural context of Chiang Tung, framing it as a contested borderland marked by shifting sovereignties, diverse ethnic communities, and deep-rooted struggles for autonomy. He introduces the Tai Khuen as a distinct ethnic group within the broader Tai world and the region's complicated relationship with its neighbors, including Lan Na. The subsequent chapters look at local belonging, myths and memory, and the region's history. Karlsson also looks at the impact of colonial and foreign rule, as well as the significance of sacred spaces in local conceptions of place.

One of the most intriguing chapters is about the Songkran Festival in Chiang Tung. In this chapter, Karlsson weaves together many of the book's previous themes – ritual, memory, sacred space, and ethnic plurality. Songkran in Chiang

Tung is anything but a simple New Year celebration; it is a layered spectacle of often conflicting religious symbolism, ancestral memory, and land ownership. Karlsson shows how ritual drama rehearses a mythic history that binds the Tai Khuen and indigenous Tai Loi together in a symbolic contract rooted in premodern land rights. That contract is what Clifford Geertz (1980) calls a "theatre state", in which ritual becomes the performance of sovereignty and belonging.

Particularly noteworthy is how Karlsson uses colonial sources – namely, the writings of J. George Scott, William Clifton Dodd, and C.M. Enriquez – to underscore the performative nature of earlier Songkran processions. Colonial voices highlight the "indecent" figures and "obscene" antics, which may suggest how ritual space allows for temporary inversion of social norms. In turn, we perceive how colonial agents othered other cultures and peoples, obtaining insights into past transnational spaces.

Beyond the rich historical and ethnographic insights, *A Sense of Place and Belonging* contributes to the field of ethnology by shedding light on a cultural landscape that has been understudied. Karlsson's methodology, based on fieldwork and oral histories, gives an intimate view of how the Tai Khuen navigate their historical and spiritual world. This focus on lived experiences sets the book apart from broader regional histories that often ignore the agency of local communities in shaping their own narratives.

While the study offers several notable strengths, it also presents a few weaknesses that merit discussion. One of the book's greatest strengths is how it frustrates methodological nationalism, a concept coined by Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002) and largely tied to contemporary area and borderland studies. Western scholarship on Southeast Asia, such as David Wyatt's (1984) *Thailand: A Short History* and Robert H. Taylor's (2009) *The State in Myanmar* tends to focus on the Thai, Lao, Burmese, or Khmer state. Such a focus, inevitably, marginalizes the borderlands and open, interconnected societies that existed prior to the formation of the colonial state. Like Mandy Sadan's (2013) *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderlands of Burma*, Karlsson's study serves as a valuable antidote to this dominant trend. It sheds light on Chiang Tung's unique cultural, religious, and historical individuality, which has very little in common with the rest of Myanmar and cannot be easily subsumed under contemporary Thai historiography.

Karlsson's approach is commendable in that it contextualizes Chiang Tung through a local perspective rather than imposing Western academic frameworks onto its history and culture. This is particularly noticeable when Karlsson writes about sacred space and religion. The book explores how myth and memory construct the Tai Khuen people's sense of origin and unity with the earth. In his examination of Chiang Tung's Buddhist monasteries and literary tradition tied to Tai Khuen culture, Karlsson demonstrates how the region's religious and intellectual life is deeply entwined with the broader Theravāda Buddhist world, particularly Lan Na and other parts of northern Thailand.

The author's description of religious culture is especially illuminating, pointing to the ubiquity of both Buddhist monastic orders and spirit shrines in each village. This dual religious system, where animist practice coexists alongside Buddhism, presents a compelling example of Shan syncretic spirituality. Karlsson's focus on how myth and ritual determine the sacred geography of Chiang Tung serves to inform readers about how these create local identity despite historical disruptions.

While Karlsson provides a rich ethnographic and historical account, there are some limitations. One limitation is the lack of critical discussion of gender. His treatment of religious culture and sacred space could have been stronger with an examination of who is included and excluded (e.g., women or queer folk) across these spaces, how gendering is articulated in the spiritual and social institutions of Chiang Tung, and what that could tell us about power relations in society.

Another limitation is the absence of discussion on innovative research methods that could be applied in a war-torn region, such as Myanmar. This would be highly valuable to individuals seeking to complete research on Myanmar or specifically the Shan State in the light of a general lack of discussion, which is also mirrored by the paucity of literature on this problem. Such missing debate is perhaps surprising given Karlsson's use of a qualitative, ethnographic approach, combined with historical analysis, which should allow space for discussion of unique methods. Karlsson could also have critically noted ethical concerns related to doing research in a country where trauma and displacement are persistent issues. From my experience, this is a major blind spot in many researchers' experiences, and Myanmar offers the best opportunity to discuss this.

In conclusion, Karlsson's study successfully projects a historically overlooked community, offering a compelling account of Chiang Tung's unique place in the history of northern Southeast Asia. Although certain aspects could benefit from further development, the book is an excellent read for anyone looking into borderland societies, religious syncretism, and the historical forces which have constructed one of Southeast Asia's most intriguing but least appreciated regions.

REFERENCES

Geertz, C. (1980). *Negara: The theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali*. Princeton University Press.

Sadan, Mandy. (2013). *Being and becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the state in the borderworlds of Burma.* Oxford University Press.

Taylor, R. H. (2009). *The state in Myanmar*. NUS Press.

Wimmer, A. & Glick Schiller, N. (2002). Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration and the social sciences. *Global Networks*, *2*(4), 301–334.

Wyatt, D. K. (1984). *Thailand: A short history*. Yale University Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Black is a graduate student in the War Studies Department at King's College London and the Women's Studies Center at Chiang Mai University. He is also a research officer at the University of New South Wales.

▸ Contact: joseph.black@kcl.ac.uk