Music and Women's Power Negotiation in Local Spaces:
A Case Study of Factory Women and the Creation of New Social Spaces

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Abstract

This article examines how women in local communities, particularly factory workers, use music for power negotiation by analyzing musical events and cultural activities. The study uses theoretical frameworks of social space and everyday forms of resistance to show that music has become a significant space for women to assert their identity and negotiate power in local contexts. This reflects the changing economic and social roles of women in communities. Musical events serve as entertainment spaces and new social spaces that challenge traditional power structures and capitalist cultural domination. The findings highlight the importance of promoting women's cultural spaces in local communities and understanding music's role as a tool for empowerment and social change.

Keywords: Music, Power negotiation, Women's studies, Social space, Factory women

Introduction

The relationship between music and social power negotiation reflects the dynamics of change in contemporary society. Grüning (2024) points out that music is not merely a form of artistic expression but also represents a crucial space for cultural struggle and negotiation, particularly among society's marginalized groups. The use of music in creating identity and negotiating social space thus reflects the complexity of power relations in modern society (Frith, 1996; Knights, 2016; Rice, 2007; Ruud, 1997).

Economic and social changes over the past decade have significantly impacted the roles and status of women in local spaces, particularly throught heir entry into industrial labor systems. Loos (2020) found that women's participation in industrial labor across Asia has led to changes in power relations at family and community levels. This aligns with Testaverde et al. (2017), who discovered that having independent income changes women's economic status and leads to profound changes in lifestyle and cultural expression patterns. These economic shifts have not only altered women's financial independence but also transformed how they engage with cultural and social spaces, making Lefebvre's (1991) concept of social space a valuable analytical framework for understanding these dynamics.

Lefebvre's (1991) concept of social space provides an important analytical framework for understanding the relationship between music and power negotiation. Harvey (2012) expanded on this by explaining that social space in modern capitalism is produced and negotiated through everyday cultural activities. This corresponds with concepts of everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) and popular culture studies (Williams, 1977), which view everyday cultural expression as a form of resistance against dominant power.

In the contemporary context, Manago and McKenzie's (2022) study demonstrates that music and cultural activities have become important spaces for power negotiation among female workers, especially in developing countries. The organization of musical events and festivities serves as recreation and a declaration of identity and demonstrates their capacity

to manage their own social space. Mawa (2020) adds that women's ability to control and manage cultural spaces challenges the patriarchal power structures existing in society.

The phenomenon of factory women in Thai society reflects these changes. Based on additional research, the authors found that women's entry into industrial labor in rural areas has not only changed family economic structures but has also led to changes in community power relations (Bennett, 2004; Oppenheimer, 1994; Wolf, 1992), particularly through the use of cultural spaces and musical events. Lessinger (2002) indicates that factory women's power to manage resources and cultural spaces independently challenges traditional power systems that typically confined women's roles to private spaces.

Factory women's use of music in power negotiation also reflects the adaptation of local culture in the era of globalization. Korczynski (2014) explains that the fusion of popular music with local culture in factory women's festivities creates new cultural spaces that challenge traditional authority and capitalist cultural dominance. This aligns with Kim (2020), who views the consumption and production of culture in female workers' daily lives as a form of resistance against mainstream culture and the creation of their own social space.

However, Rusak (2023) observes that using music for power negotiation by local women faces several limitations and challenges, including economic pressures, resistance from conservative groups, and capitalist cultural domination. Additionally, empowerment through music and culture requires appropriate policy support and infrastructure. While previous studies have explored women's participation in industrial labor and cultural expression, researchers have paid little attention to how music specifically functions as a site of power negotiation among factory workers in local Thai communities. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the intersection of gender, labor, and cultural production in these contexts.

This article thus aims to study the use of music as a tool for power negotiation by local women, particularly factory workers, through analysis of musical events and cultural activities in communities. This study focuses on musical performances and festivities organized by factory women in lower northern Thai communities between 2017-2024, how traditional folk music forms, contemporary popular music, and their hybridization serve as vehicles for reshaping social hierarchies and resisting traditional gender norms. The research investigates cultural events, including annual festivals, informal gatherings, and community celebrations. The study objectives are to understand 1) how people use music to create new social spaces and negotiate power, 2) how these changes affect power relationship structures in communities, and (3) what challenges and limitations women face in using music as a tool for empowerment, using theoretical frameworks of social space and everyday resistance in the analysis.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and participatory observation. Data was collected from three industrial zones in lower northern Thailand over seven years (2017-2024), involving 45 in-depth interviews with factory women, community leaders, and cultural practitioners. I conducted participant observation at 12 community musical events and analyzed audio-visual documentation using feminist critical discourse analysis. This longitudinal approach allowed for tracking changes in women's cultural practices and their impact on local power structures.

Theoretical framework and related concepts

The study of music as a tool for power negotiation by local women requires diverse theoretical frameworks to understand this phenomenon. The main concepts used in the analysis include social space theory, everyday resistance, and feminist theory on cultural empowerment.

For this study, 'power negotiation' refers to the processes through which marginalized groups contest, challenge, and reconfigure existing power relations through everyday practices and cultural expressions. In the context of factory women, this involves leveraging economic independence, spatial control, and cultural production to challenge traditional gender hierarchies. Similarly, 'capitalist cultural domination' is understood as how market-driven cultural products and consumption patterns shape social values and behaviors, often reinforcing existing inequalities while obscuring alternative cultural possibilities.

The concept of social space proposed by Lefebvre (1991) and Gans (2002) suggests that space is not merely physical but is constructed and reproduced through people's daily practices. Soja (2010) developed this concept further by demonstrating that social space is both a product and a tool of power negotiation. This aligns with findings by Gaventa (2006), Gupta & Ferguson (2008), and Nicholls (2009), who discovered that cultural spaces in local communities serve as arenas for power struggles between different social groups.

Contemporary cultural studies have evolved beyond the traditional definition that viewed culture merely as "social prosperity." Current scholars view culture not as a static entity passed down through generations, but as a dynamic process with continuous movement and adaptation. Music, as a form of culture, exhibits similar characteristics - continuously adapting and developing to respond to changing social contexts, in terms of survival adaptation and political instrumentalization. However, Mukdawijit (2021) points out that most music studies often neglect to analyze power relations embedded in mainstream history, which is produced and transmitted by powerful groups, including the impact of such history on the development of music, people, and society. Therefore, studying music history requires an emphasis on analyzing human agency using practice theory as a framework for understanding the role and influence of humans on musical systems in historical processes (Brown, 2016; Hebert & McCollum, 2014; Piekut, 2014).

Figure 1 Musical events organized by factory women in the community, demonstrating the use of public space for cultural expression
Source: Author (2023)

The use of music in creating social space reflects complex dimensions of power negotiation. Cochrane et al. (2013) explain that music is a tool for emotional expression and a mechanism for creating and maintaining social spaces for marginalized groups. Meanwhile, Bennett (2017) indicates that community music events create negotiation spaces that challenge traditional power structures. Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance provides an important framework for understanding how powerless groups negotiate with dominant power. Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) applied this concept to study resistance through popular culture, they found that cultural expression in daily life is effective as it does not directly confront power but creates new spaces and meanings in everyday life.
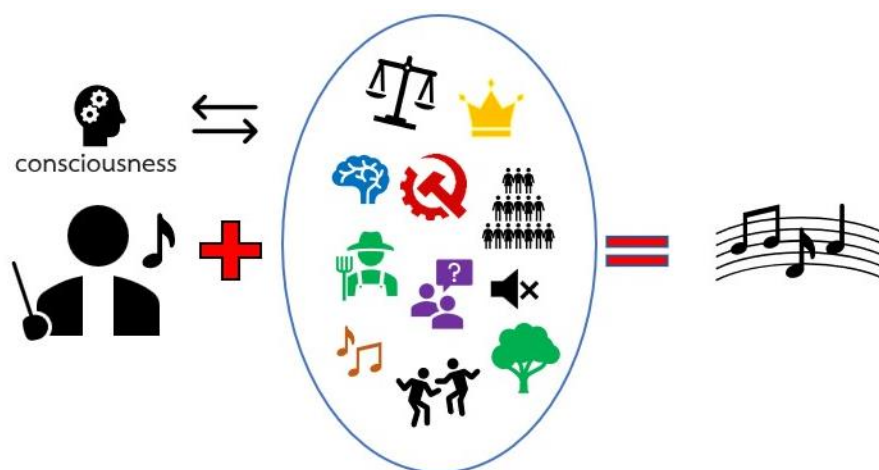
Figure 2 The relationship between theoretical concepts used in the analysis
Source: Author (2024)

Feminist theory on cultural empowerment has continuously developed since Hooks' (1990) work proposing concepts of resistance through art and culture, to contemporary work by Bilge (2010) highlighting the importance of women's cultural space creation in resisting patriarchal power systems. Feminist musicology scholars like McClary (2002) have further demonstrated how musical practices can both reinforce and challenge gender norms, while Koskoff's (2014) work on women and music from a cross-cultural perspective offers insights into how musical performances create spaces where gender relations can be negotiated and transformed. Muñoz-Puig (2024) adds that women's ability to control and manage cultural spaces is crucial in empowering and changing social power relations.

Williams' (1977) work viewing culture as a space of meaning contestation has significantly influenced the study of popular culture in the context of power negotiation. Hall (1997) developed this concept further by showing that cultural struggle is part of broader political contestation. Contemporary studies by Ferguson et al. (1992), Hesmondhalgh (2013), and Martiniello and Lafleur (2008) demonstrate that music and cultural expression in daily life are important tools for power negotiation among marginalized groups in modern society.

Gramsci's concepts of power and cultural hegemony remain important in understanding power negotiation through culture. Crehan (2016) indicates that resistance to hegemony does not necessarily require direct political movement but can occur by creating alternative cultures daily daily life. Evans (2000) and Ferrer and Retis (2019) add that marginalized groups' ability to create and control their own cultural spaces challenges the hegemony of powerful social groups.

Like other art forms, music is a human product in society and must have its structure. However, this structure cannot exist by itself, and we can only understand it by studying and comprehending human behavior - specifically those who produce music. We must closely examine why and how people have arranged concepts or biases about certain behaviors into forms that produce melodious sounds in each society. For instance, Thai music reflects social structures influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism (traditional beliefs), which shape attitudes toward life as samsara (cycle of rebirth) (Phukhao-Thong, 1996).

The study of music and social movements has highlighted music's role as a political and cultural tool. Pedelty (2009) demonstrates that music reflects social conflicts, provides space for struggle, and creates new social imaginations. This aligns with Turino (2018), who found that using music in social movements creates spaces of hope and change.

Figure 3 Power negotiation through music and culture in local communities
Source: Author (2017)

Studies of music about language and identity have revealed important dimensions in cultural power dynamics. Carter-Ényì and Carter-Enyi (2019) indicate that singing in local languages is a form of resistance against colonial thought and revival of indigenous identity. Using local languages in music also helps preserve endangered languages, suggesting governments should promote local language use in popular music. Additionally, Berger and Carroll (2003) observe that language choice in music raises complex issues about expression, audience accessibility, and cultural authenticity.

Golež Kaučič (2020) points out that code-switching or language mixing in songs can create cultural hybridity, potentially leading to intercultural dialogue or reflecting power dynamics between majority and minority groups. Using specific language codes, such as dialects or supra dialects, in songs influences community identity formation and collective consciousness at both local and national levels.

The integration of these theoretical concepts helps reveal that women's use of music for power negotiation in local spaces is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. James (2015) indicates that analyzing such phenomena requires consideration of spatial dimensions, everyday resistance, and cultural empowerment. Nerland (2007) suggests that studying

power negotiation through music must prioritize each area's social and cultural context. This review of theoretical concepts helps create a comprehensive analytical framework for studying factory women's use of music in power negotiation, encompassing the creation of new social spaces, everyday resistance, and cultural empowerment.

Creation of new social spaces through music by factory women

The phenomenon of factory women using music to create new social spaces reflects significant changes in local community power relations. The transition from agricultural to industrial society has changed women's roles and status within communities, particularly their ability to create and control their social spaces. Ngai (2005) found that women's ability to earn independent income through factory work has allowed them greater freedom in managing resources and social spaces. The phenomenon of factory women using music to create new social spaces reflects significant changes in local community power relations. The transition from agricultural to industrial society has changed women's roles and status within communities, particularly their ability to create and control their social spaces. Ngai (2005) found that women's ability to earn independent income through factory work has allowed them greater

freedom in managing resources and social spaces. Beyond economic independence, spatial control is another critical aspect of power negotiation, as evidenced by how factory women strategically appropriate and transform public spaces through musical events.

The organization of musical events and festivities by factory women is not merely for entertainment purposes but also represents a declaration of identity and the creation of new social spaces that challenge traditional power structures. Hanson and Pratt (2003) indicate that factory women's ability to organize events and control public spaces challenges social norms that typically confined women's roles to private spaces (Corngreat, 2016). For example, at annual post-harvest celebrations observed in the Phitsanulok industrial zone, factory women organized performances that combined traditional 'Saw' (northern folk music) with contemporary pop elements, creating hybrid musical forms that symbolically bridged their agricultural roots and industrial presence. These events featured local artists but were entirely financed and organized by women's collectives formed of factory employees, representing a significant departure from traditional male-dominated festival organization structures.

The selection of musical forms and festive performances reflects the negotiation between local and modern cultures. Factory women often blend popular music with local music, creating new cultural spaces reflecting their identities and tastes. The selection of songs and arrangement of musical bands is thus not merely about entertainment but demonstrates power in defining and controlling their cultural space.

Furthermore, musical events create social networks and mutual support systems among factory women. These events and festivities provide spaces where women can exchange experiences, build relationships, and encourage one another. Interview data revealed that these networks often extend beyond cultural activities, including financial support systems, childcare arrangements, and labor advocacy. As one 32-year-old factory worker explained, 'We started by organizing music for entertainment, but now we discuss everything from workplace conditions to community development. The music brings us together, but our bonds go much deeper.' The social networks that emerge from organizing cultural activities play a crucial role in empowering women in the community.

Figure 4 Social networking of factory women
Source: Author (2023)

Music in public spaces also announces the presence and power of factory women groups. Bennett (2017) points out that music resonating throughout the

community is not just entertainment but declares the existence and power of women's groups in public spaces. Control over sound levels and music timing thus

becomes a negotiation of power with traditional community power structures.

Changes in patterns of public space use through music have also affected community perceptions and attitudes toward women's roles. Factory women's ability to efficiently manage and control public spaces has helped change community perspectives on women's capabilities and roles. However, factory women's creation of new social spaces through music faces several challenges. Sharpe (2008) points to resistance from conservative groups in communities who view women's musical events and festivities as challenging traditional customs. Additionally, Chatterjee (2002) found that economic limitations and interference from cultural capitalism are significant challenges in maintaining the independence of factory women's cultural spaces.

Despite these challenges, factory women's use of music in creating new social spaces continues to have power in changing community power relations. Women's ability to create and control their cultural spaces is crucial in empowerment and changing social power structures. Negotiating power through music and culture is a continuous and dynamic process leading to long-term social change (Mosedale, 2005; Sahay, 1998).

The transformation of public space utilization through musical activities also represents a significant shift in gender roles and power dynamics within these communities. The analysis shows that factory women's musical events are strategically scheduled and located to maximize their impact and visibility while working within existing social constraints. This careful balancing act demonstrates their agency in navigating and gradually transforming traditional power structures.

Moreover, the economic independence gained through factory work has enabled these women to invest in sound equipment, hire performers, and organize events independently, further solidifying their control over cultural production and dissemination in their communities. This financial autonomy has been crucial in establishing their cultural authority and creating sustainable platforms for ongoing social transformation.

The study also reveals how these new social spaces serve multiple functions simultaneously: as sites of entertainment, platforms for cultural expression, spaces for community building, and arenas for subtle political resistance. The multifaceted nature of these spaces contributes to their effectiveness in facilitating social change while minimizing confrontation with established power structures.

Power negotiation through music in local contexts: Analysis of everyday practices

The power negotiation through music by factory women in local contexts manifests at multiple levels and forms, including resistance to capitalist culture, challenging patriarchal power structures, and creating autonomous spaces for expression. Factory women's choices of musical forms and event organization often carry implications of rejecting cultural domination from the center, with the fusion of modern music with local rhythms and dialects representing an expression of identity and autonomy.

Self-financing musical events represents a declaration of economic independence and rejection of traditional patronage systems. Factory women groups' ability to mobilize funds and manage resources reflects changing community power relations. The emergence of women as primary financial supporters and event organizers challenges traditional roles that typically limit women to being mere participants or spectators.

The selection of venues and timing for musical events further reflects power negotiation regarding public space control. Factory women often choose locations with symbolic significance, such as village squares or public spaces traditionally controlled by established power groups. The selection of post-work hours for events demonstrates control over their time and life management.

Forms of expression through music and dance at festivities reflect negotiation with social norms regarding women's public expression. Davis (2002) found that factory women's ability to dance and sing freely at festivities challenges social restrictions traditionally governing women's physical expression. Musical expression becomes a form of liberation and asserting rights over their bodies.

Factory women's choice to create their own entertainment forms rather than consuming centrally-produced entertainment media demonstrates the rejection of cultural domination. The production and exchange of songs within local networks create an alternative cultural economy that challenges capitalist cultural systems. Using local dialects and accents in

singing and communication at musical events affirms identity and resists linguistic domination. Field observations revealed how factory women in Phichit province deliberately incorporated northern Thai dialect lyrics into mainstream Thai pop songs during community performances, creating linguistic hybridization that affirmed regional identity while ensuring broader accessibility. This code-switching represented a celebration of local cultural identity and a subtle challenge to central Thai linguistic hegemony. Similarly, the conscious decision to feature all-female bands at several community festivals observed between 2020-2023 stood in stark contrast to traditional performance contexts where men typically dominated instrumental roles. Carter-Ényì and Carter-Enyi (2019) indicate that singing in local languages is a form of resistance against colonial thought and revival of indigenous identity, while also helping preserve endangered languages.

Moreover, creating networks among factory women through musical events builds social and political negotiating power. These networks often develop into groups advocating for rights and welfare in other areas, aligning with Danaher (2010), who indicates that group formation through cultural activities is the beginning of long-term social movements.

People also reflect power negotiation through music in the use of technology and modern media. Manago and McKenzie (2022) explain that factory women's use of social media to promote and share music performance clips extends power negotiation spaces from physical to digital realms. Creating online communities around musical activities further increases negotiating power and mutual support.

However, power negotiation through music in local contexts faces challenges from various directions. Economic pressures, including the precarious nature of industrial employment and limited disposable income, constrain the scope and frequency of cultural activities. Interview data indicated that factory women often face criticism from traditional community members who view their cultural expressions as inappropriate and from urban-oriented peers who consider local cultural forms backward or unsophisticated. Additionally, the commodification of folk culture by the tourism industry has sometimes depoliticized women's cultural expressions, transforming potentially subversive

performances into marketable entertainment. The research indicates that power negotiation through music requires appropriate policy support and infrastructure to achieve sustainability.

Conclusion

This study of music as a tool for power negotiation by local women, particularly factory workers, reveals several significant findings. First, the research demonstrates that women's economic independence gained through industrial employment has fundamentally altered their capacity to create and control cultural spaces. Women's ability to self-finance and organize musical events represent a significant shift from traditional patronage systems that reinforced male authority in cultural production.

Second, the strategic hybridization of musical forms— combining traditional elements with contemporary influences— allows factory women to create cultural expressions affirming local identity while challenging traditional gender constraints. This musical hybridization mirrors their liminal social position between rural traditions and industrial modernity.

Third, the spatial dimensions of musical events are crucial to their transformative potential. By appropriating public spaces traditionally dominated by male authority and reconfiguring them through female-led cultural activities, factory women materially transform power relations in ways that extend beyond symbolic resistance.

Fourth, the networks formed through musical activities have demonstrated remarkable sustainability and evolution, developing from entertainment-focused groups into multifaceted organizations addressing labor rights, community development, and gender equality. This evolution suggests cultural activism can serve as a foundation for broader social and political engagement.

This study is not without limitations. Focusing on lower northern Thailand means that findings may not be generalizable to other regions with different cultural traditions and industrial development patterns. Additionally, while the seven-year research timeframe allowed for tracking certain changes, longer-term studies would be valuable for understanding the sustainability of these transformations. The research also faced challenges accessing certain factory environments due to corporate restrictions, potentially

limiting the full representation of women's experiences across different industrial settings.

Drawing from these findings, several significant policy and practical recommendations emerge. Primarily, government sectors should play a crucial role in promoting and supporting that cultural activities of local women's groups, both in terms of public space allocation and essential infrastructure development. Local administrative organizations should develop policies that facilitate women's participation in cultural space management and support networking among women's groups in communities. Communities should develop mechanisms to protect cultural spaces from capitalist cultural domination while promoting sustainable local cultural economies.

For future research directions, studies should expand in multiple dimensions. These include comparative studies of music use in power negotiation by women across different local contexts to understand the diversity of power negotiation forms in Thai society. Long-term impact studies of music and culture use in women's empowerment are needed, particularly regarding changes in community power relationship structures. Analysis of the relationship between women's cultural movements and macro-level economic and social changes would also prove valuable.

This study demonstrates that music is not merely a form of entertainment but serves as an important tool in negotiating power and driving social change. Therefore, understanding music's role as a tool for women's empowerment is crucial for developing effective policies and support mechanisms, ultimately creating a more equitable and just society.

Acknowledgments

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