

CHAPTER 5

TAI PETTY TRADERS:

SOCIAL PRACTICES IN CROSS-BORDER TRADE

Although the states play the key role in initiating, managing and directing the interconnections of the borderlands, the state does not monopolize regulatory practices.

Andrew Walker (1999: 12)

The flexible economic border described in the previous chapter illustrates the border's transformation into an essential space where border porosity and economic fluidity have long been negotiated and encouraged by state regulation and by local inhabitant's practices. This chapter looks at Shan Tai and Dehong Tai petty traders conducting cross-border trade along the border and examines how these Tai petty traders situate their social practices, especially social networks, which provide economic and social advantage in their cross-border trade.

In placing the social practices of Tai petty traders within the context of economic growth and flow patterns over the border, this chapter contends that the border opening and the encouragement of the Chinese state, particularly in allowing border residents' trading activities from the 1980s onward, has satisfied ethnic residents in both economic and social dimensions. It has facilitated the creation of an ethno-cultural area within the border region where trade and people cross the border. Similar ethnic minorities, like the Kachin or the Tai, can now renew their lost kinship ties and re-establish or even enlarge their social networks. Border trade between China and neighboring countries (Burma, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand) has renewed economic as well as social relationships between peoples living at the border. Hence,

the flexible economic border becomes a significant space where border economic life is not only revitalized but also the social life of the border region is resurrected.

To understand these Tai petty traders and their social practices, I begin this chapter by classifying diverse types of Tai petty traders at present. Mainly there are two types of Tai traders: (1) *Maekha Khai Leu Kad*, or market traders, and (2) mobile peddlers who are further subdivided into *Maekha Khai Wan Kad*, or peddlers selling their goods and circulating on market days, and *Maekha Khai Leu Poi*, or peddlers selling their products at *Poi* (festivals).¹ These two groups of traders are separated in terms of their trade mobility and length of time trading among the Tai and other ethnic traders.

This chapter then examines major social practices based on social connections and establishments which provide advantages to their trade nowadays. It is not surprising that social networks have provided the Tai petty traders economic strategies to cope with border regulation and territorial control between the two states. I argue, however, that Tai petty traders do not merely apply old social networks which socially connect via horizontal layers of relationships (*Pii Nong* or sibling by kin and marriage systems, and *Taiko* or friend relationships). They also build up new social networks in vertical layers called *Konlong*, or “big man” networks, so that their cross-border trade - especially on the Chinese side - will be secure and convenient.

5.1 Classifying Tai Petty Traders and Trading Systems

A widespread proliferation of petty traders, peddlers and hawkers (although not necessarily aggressive, these ‘hawkers’ are mobile traders who sell small items easily for carrying by calling out) sell a variety of items - from local agricultural produce to imported consumer goods - and are especially common in Dehong. The selling of small manufactured products in the streets and outside the markets grew rapidly after the advent of liberalization policies from 1978. The petty trading

¹ *Poi* (in the Tai language) means festivals, which usually refer to the Buddhism-related festivals after *Wan Aokwa* (from the Buddhist Lent day) or after the rainy season when there is no the busy agricultural work in the paddy fields, or from October to May (during winter until the dry season). However, *Poi* also includes other ceremonies, for example weddings, housewarmings or new temple openings).

merchants, as described in the previous chapter, represent perhaps the fastest growing economic development resulting from the border opening in Dehong, attracting the unemployed, the displaced, and so on. While petty traders often sell a multitude of items, the emphasis here is on the buying and selling of consumer goods. Petty trade in these commodities becomes a significant component of the border economy. However, it should be noted here that, although trading is an important occupation of the Tai family nowadays, in the past trading was the most important non-farm activity dominating Tai society as well.

Some anthropological literature suggests that five main types of trade may be distinguished: marketplace trade, trading partnerships, intercommunity barter, successive distribution, and ceremonial gift-giving (Salisbury 1972). Schrader (1994) categorized four different kinds of trading in terms of scale and aim: small-scale trade, subsistence-oriented small-scale exchange, profit-oriented small-scale trade and large-scale trade. In any marketplace, the different types of petty trade and types of traders generally are dependent upon what petty traders sell and where the shop is located. Petty traders may sell agricultural products, foods and beverages, or manufactured goods. Some petty traders may sell in rented commercial buildings, or at booths within a formal marketplace; others commonly use open areas inside the markets or in the adjoining streets.

Similarly, petty trading patterns conducted by the Tai can be distinguished based on scale, type of market, type of goods, and geographic location. This study explores the central *Kad*, or market, in Dehong. The market is divided roughly into two main sectors.

The first sector is *Kad Tangkin* (food section) where many petty traders sell agricultural products and fresh foods, as well as prepared foods like noodles, vegetables, rice, curry, and so on. This food section mainly consists of local ethnic petty traders, especially Chinese and Tai. Chinese shop owners have their own commercial building for selling dried and fresh food, while the Tai who set up stalls in the food sections prefer selling prepared foods (noodles and rice with curry).

The second sector is *Kad Koaw* (clothing section) where petty traders usually sell consumer goods such as clothing, fabrics, or cosmetics coming from elsewhere. In the clothing section, a variety of local ethnic petty traders - Han Chinese, Tai and Kachin - usually each dominate a particular market position or type of good. For example, Han Chinese migrants and settlers usually sell mostly Chinese mass-produced products and Chinese brand-name consumer goods in their own or rented commercial buildings. Tai petty traders, both Shan Tai migrants and Dehong Tai, usually sell a multitude of consumer products from Thailand and Burma in rented commercial buildings. Some Tai petty traders do buy wholesale Chinese mass-produced products, like shampoo and soap, in order to sell these products to their Dehong Tai customers. This depends on what different types of products are preferred by their customers.



Figure 5.1 Clothes and cultural products from Thailand and the Shan state join the Chinese mass-produced products that have been transported into the central markets of Luxi for commerce.

Besides these two dominant local ethnic groups, other local inhabitants (Kachin or Jingpo, Achang, Bulong, as well as upland Han Chinese) truck their agricultural products (fresh produce, rice, grain, etc) from their homes in the mountainous areas, to be “on-the-floor” petty traders during *Wan Kad Je* or the market day in the city which is held normally once every five days.

5.1.1 Trading Patterns of the Tai

In Dehong, the term *Maekha*² refers to the Tai who engage in all kinds of trade and in any location: street trade, on the floor, or in commercial buildings. The term *Maekha* also includes those who sell food and drink, agricultural products, manufactured goods (soap, shampoos, cosmetics, etc.), wood and building materials, and arts and crafts. However *Maekha* often sell items in more than one category. Those with craft skills, specializing in dressmaking, sewing, and silver or gold decorating usually set up small shops or stalls in the market.

Tai trade patterns nowadays fall into two patterns, market traders or mobile traders. The *Maekha Khai Leu Kad* or “market traders” refers to all petty traders who trade mostly in the main central market. This group of Tai shopkeepers usually rent the commercial buildings, establishing their own shops in urban areas where Dehong Tai customers from both urban and rural areas can go to buy merchandise. This group does not necessarily move around to sell their products or follow *Wad Kad* (mobile markets held once every five days and circulate in nearby districts and rural areas). This group usually works full-time, opening their shops in the market and thus becoming somewhat permanent petty traders.

It should be noted that it is possible to see some Tai shopkeepers who sell clothes and consumer goods enjoying their trade in mobile markets during *Wan Kad*

² The term *Maekha* is Dehong Tai language. Normally it refers to female traders because the term *Mae* usually refers to “female”, instead of male, and because *Maekha* in the market usually are female. However, this thesis uses the term *Maekha* to refer to both sexes - male and female - since the Tai usually trade with families, relatives, and couples. There are some cases where Tai female peddlers come alone, but later they sometimes bring their family members to assist in their petty trade on the other side of the border.

in rural areas, or at various mobile markets during *Poi*. They sometimes go to these mobile markets to increase their profits and to participate in social activities.

Maekha Khai Leu Kad can be classified into two sub-groups in terms of capital reserves, the Tai wholesalers and Tai petty traders. The Tai wholesalers are usually those who own or rent commercial buildings in the market; this group usually provides goods to Tai mobile peddlers and petty traders who trade in mobile markets. Tai petty traders are those who normally rent small buildings, and sell goods in the market street, or at booths, tables, or 'on-the-floor' in the market.

Of the different kinds of traders and trading systems that are operating in the border markets of Yunnan-Burma today, this study investigates and analyzes one particular type: the Tai petty traders who trade consumer manufactured goods in *Kad Kaow* (clothing market). This study does not include petty traders whose business is to sell drinks, prepared foods, or vegetables in *Kad Tangkin* (food market).

From my surveys and observations in the central market and *Kad Mai* market of Luxi in Dehong, it was found that there are approximately 100 shops, including commercial buildings and small shops in the markets, selling manufactured goods. They are run mainly by three local ethnic groups: Han Chinese, Tai, and Kachin-Jingpo. While Han Chinese shopkeepers sell mainly consumer manufactured goods, house-wares, and appliances of Chinese and Thai manufacturers brought from the Mekong River, the Tai wholesalers and peddlers sell mainly Thai and Burmese manufactured consumer goods, including Thai and Tai clothing. The few Kachin-Jingpo petty traders sell Kachin-Jingpo clothes and silver decorations in Kachin-Jingpo styles.

Of the total, almost half (about 35-40 shops) are rented by Dehong Tai and Shan Tai petty traders. The rest (about 60 shops) belong to mainly Chinese merchants who had long ago moved from other towns or provinces, and some Han Chinese who had moved recently in response to economic development on the border. Apparently, Tai petty traders competing with Han Chinese rent and establish retail shops in bigger

markets. Some become full-time permanent shopkeepers, operating in commercial buildings and leaving just a few shops for the Kachin-Jingpo dressmakers.

As for the Tai petty traders, of about 40 shops established in the central market and the *Kad Mai* market, there are approximately five shops belonging to the Tai wholesalers whose trade is usually selling manufactured goods from Thailand, China or Burma to Tai petty traders, mobile peddlers, or other local ethnic traders who prefer to sell these manufactured goods. About 35 shops in the two markets are rented by Tai petty traders who sell their manufactured products in the market every day.

The 35 shops of these Tai petty traders sell a multitude of items which can be divided chiefly into two types.³ First, consumer goods which consist of popular items (for instance, shampoos, soaps, shoes, and instant foods such as coffee, tea, candy, instant noodles, sauces, and oils) and include cosmetic goods (for example hair-decorating creams, beauty powder and perfumes). Apart from this merchandise, there are approximately five shops rented by Tai petty traders selling Buddhist items (for example, small Buddha images in Burmese style, gold jars, gold and silver papers, candles, and golden trays with pedestals for Buddhist ceremonies). In brand-name merchandise, mostly petty traders sell manufactured products, consumer goods and cosmetics labeled by Chinese and Thai companies, with a few by Burmese companies or products coming from Burma (such as instant tea, Burmese and Indonesian clothing, candles, and Buddhist items).

The Chinese products traded in Dehong normally are transported from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, while Thai manufactured products are transported from Thailand in two ways, mainly: by Mekong River routes which upload the products in Xishuangbanna and then distribute by truck into China, and by a Burmese overland route into the Muse-Ruili border cities. The latter Muse-Ruili border gate is the route for transporting Burmese manufactured products into China as well.

³ This study pays attention only to manufactured/packaged goods, instead of fresh food products. Therefore, I do not include Tai petty traders who sell fresh vegetables, food, or noodles in the market, although there are some Dehong Tai and Shan Tai who set up many street shops along the streets and in the markets.

Additionally, textiles - clothing, garments and costumes which have the varied fashion-styles of, for instance, modern Chinese styles, *sarong* or Burmese *sin* style (wrap-around skirt dresses), and traditional Thai fashion, including Shan and Dehong Tai fashion style of *sin* dresses – constitute the second main group of products sold.

Of note, the Tai petty traders and peddlers have significant skill in dressmaking. These Shan and Dehong Tai open their shops in order to sell various Tai styles of clothing and for dressmaking of various Tai styles of clothes by custom order. They are Tai female tailors whose shops sell fabric goods and tailor *sin* suits and dresses in varied Tai styles (of Shan Tai, Dehong Tai and especially Thai traditional *sin* styles). Some Tai petty traders become popular designers, decorating *sin* dresses in the beautiful styles of Shan Tai, Dehong Tai and traditional Thai fashions. They are gradually becoming popular dressmakers for Dehong Tai customers in Dehong, noted for their tailored *sin* dresses and their Thai, Tai, Chinese and Burmese fabrics and clothing. These petty traders and peddlers also sell other entertainment materials (for example, VCDs of Thai soap operas, of Shan Tai and Thai songs, and of Buddhist festivals held in Burma and Thailand).

Ethnicity identified by Traders →	Chinese	Tai (Shan Tai and Dehong Tai)		Kachin-Jingpo	Total number of shops established
Number established	60	40		3	103
	-	Wholesale Shops 5	Petty trade Shops 35	-	-
	-	-	15 shops sell consumer goods	20 shops sell textile goods and make dresses	-

Table 5.1 Traders classified by ethnicity - Numbers of petty traders who have their shops in the central market and *Kad Mai* market of Luxi, Dehong of Yunnan. This classifies by ethnic type and by Tai trader type.

The second pattern of Tai trade is that of mobile peddlers, the group of Tai trading merchants who usually circulate in mobile markets either on the market days (this kind of traders is specifically called *Maekha Khai Wan Kad* or “traders on market day”), or in the temporary markets at *Poi* during the off (rainy) season (this second kind of trader is specifically called *Maekha Khai Leu Poi*). At other *Poi* (for example, wedding ceremonies, housewarmings, or new temple openings) in rural villages, the mobile traders go to set up their temporary booths or on-the-floor stalls during the festival days in the mobile markets.

They sell products of small size which are not difficult to store. Most products are consumer goods: shampoos, shoes, clothes, perfumes, beauty powders, earrings, ornaments, and entertainment materials (VCDs of Shan Tai songs, Buddhist chanting, Thai soap operas, Thai movies, etc). They hire trucks, and then transport their wares

from their lodgings to the mobile market every day. Truck drivers are usually Dehong Tai who can offer Tai mobile peddlers cheaper truck fare, including advice about selling places. Getting information about where and when the festivals will be held is important to these mobile peddlers. Petty traders and mobile peddlers need to know as soon as possible, and get this information from bus drivers, Dehong Tai relatives, or friends.

Mobile peddlers are usually Shan Tai, and often are newcomers who have small budgets and no fixed selling location in any market. However, one can always find a few Dehong Tai mobile petty traders in mobile markets, especially in the special markets set up at big *Poi* (for example, *Poi Muang* or “Buddhist town festival”), since these traders hope the large numbers of Tai customers participating in these special events will come to buy their products there.

Significantly, the Tai in both the market traders (*Maekha Khai Leu Kad*) and the mobile peddlers (*Maekha Khai Wan Kad* and *Maekha Khai Leu Poi*) are considerably inter-connected. Movement from one type of market to another (mobile peddler becoming stall shopkeeper, tailor or wholesaler) is possible, and is perceived, among the Shan Tai themselves, as “social mobility”, or a change in social status, and upgrading their economic life. For example, Shan Tai newcomers usually rely on the market traders, asking for assistance in advance for supplies and credit, including information about renting cheap and safe accommodations as well as inexpensive booths in the market. Market traders usually like these newcomers (especially those who are friends or relatives from the same villages) coming to buy their consumer goods because it can extend their customer base, and simultaneously assist friends or relatives who they know.

There is significant variation among petty traders, however. Traders range from highly organized, capital-accumulating wholesalers, to permanent market traders, to mobile peddlers. The petty traders are most likely to come from towns or villagers relatively close to Dehong, typically riverside settlements downstream as far as from Lashio, a town over 100 miles from the border. Their trading capital is limited – usually between 500-1,000 Yuan (62.5-125 \$US) as their beginning trade

investment. But they attempt to maximize income by concentrating on high profit items and making regular, everyday trade journeys to mobile markets.

It is also possible for Tai mobile peddlers to upgrade their economic status from that of mobile peddler (*Maekha Khai Wan Kad* and *Maekha Khai Leu Poi*) to market trader (*Maekha Khai Leu Kad*). This depends on the items they sell and the socio-economic networks they have. Many Shan Tai newcomers usually know Shan Tai and Dehong Tai wholesalers in the central big market since they are related to each other; for instance, some newcomers are old friends of the Tai wholesalers from primary school. These Shan Tai and Dehong Tai wholesalers primarily sell consumer goods to the newcomers in periodic markets and to Tai petty traders who have their small stalls or booths in the central markets. The Tai wholesalers thus become creditors who often give cash advances to, or are suppliers of, the newcomers. They also provide information for renting cheap accommodation and inexpensive stalls in the market.

However, petty traders also have alternative ways to obtain supplies. For instance, the Chinese border city of Ruili is the most popular area to transport goods from Tachilek, the Burmese border town between northern Thailand and Shan State, into China. There are two main ways that the Tai peddlers get their manufactured products in Ruili. The first way is for Tai peddlers to go by themselves, or contact the goods suppliers by phone to buy supplies in Ruili. They make the two hour bus trip from Luxi to Ruili, and back from Ruili to Luxi (100 kilometers) returning with stocks for their retail shops. There are big trucks from Burma unloading goods in Ruili cargo terminals; several vans and small trucks come to pick up those supplies, and distribute them to other towns in China. This system is usually used by the retail shops in Luxi which order supplies from the cargo owners in Ruili; in that way the retail shops can get the products regularly within one day.

The second way of getting goods is for Tai peddlers to buy supplies from the Tai or Chinese wholesalers in Luxi directly, since well-organized transportation and order systems exist which are managed by the wholesalers. In choosing Tai or Chinese wholesalers, Tai peddlers depend on their good connections to get lower-

priced supplies. Therefore, being Tai is important in terms of accessing alternative ways to get supplies and as a result, buying cheaper stock and getting credit advances from the Tai wholesalers.

Currently, however, the cross-border trade conducted by the Tai is occasionally obstructed by an “incommensurable border” (Wilson and Donnan 1994) which relates to fluctuating Burmese military policies at the border. Ethnic conflicts sometimes produce barriers through which local and international trade between the states cannot operate consistently. Nevertheless, the Mekong River, as a result of economic policies and the Mekong navigation project, has been opened as a trade-route between China and Southeast Asian states. It is obvious that shipping/transport of manufactured goods from Thailand via the Mekong River has become a more convenient gateway, because this way is more stable politically, unlike in Burma. Consequently, Tai peddlers in Dehong can sometimes order supplies from Tai traders in Xishuangbanna who live near Mekong River ports. Tai traders in Xishuangbanna become one of several decent connections for transporting goods from Thailand into Dehong. As noted by *Aè Yee*, a Shan Tai petty trader in the *Kad Mai*, another channel for Dehong and Shan Tai petty traders in Dehong is to order (by phone) from Tai traders in Xishuangbanna, and then, within a few days, they would truck big-loads of Thai products, especially *pasin* and clothes, into Dehong.

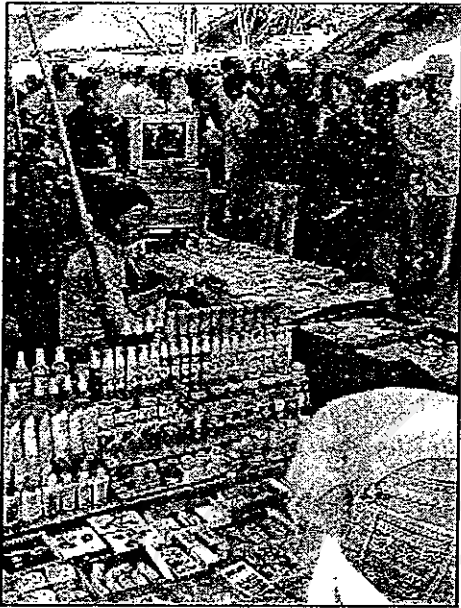


Figure 5.2 A Shan Tai mobile peddler is selling shampoo and beauty creams from China, Burma and Thailand at a *Poi* (festival). Among these products, Thai products like beauty creams, perfumes, and, especially, entertainment materials in the form of VCDs, are said to be selling well among the Dehong Tai.



Figure 5.3 During *Wad Kad* once every five days in the *Kad Mai*, the Dehong Tai always come to buy new clothes for the *Poi*. They always shop at the retail shops rented by Shan Tai or Dehong Tai peddlers in the market.



Figure 5.4 During religious Tai festivals, Shan Tai mobile peddlers usually sell Thai and Chinese products in mobile markets. Among these mass-produced products are Thai commodities, for example copied VCDs, lotions, cosmetics and clothes - the most popular items for Dehong Tai customers.

5.2 Social Networks: Providing Strategies for a Better Economic Life

Much research on petty traders and peddlers for two decades has focused on social and cultural aspects (for example, Silin (1972), and diverse articles edited by Seligman 2001) which mainly contributes to knowledge of social relationships and their distinctive networks (in several different forms of friendship, kinship or acquaintances) that have aided petty traders and peddlers. Milgram (2001), Alexander (2001), and Seligman (2001) all note that social relations constitute a rich source of capital, especially for market women.

Tai market traders and mobile peddlers have applied social networking strategies to gain better economic life at the border through various ways. It is found that these groups have been using diverse layers of social relationships for better trading, for instance, to get better and less expensive rental arrangements for booths and commercial buildings, to help find safer and cheaper accommodations, to help gather information about buying cheaper supplies and selling locations, and to assist connecting with local authorities on the Chinese side of the border. Without the social inter-connections, their peddling trade would not succeed well; to gain more economic opportunity on the Chinese side of the border, they use strategies based on social relationships to develop further economic opportunity.

Furthermore, their social networks are not simply connected in their own locales or within one country. They can connect to their friends, brothers and acquaintances across borders, especially in China. Hence, their social relationships become “cross-border linkages” connecting the Shan State and China, and sometimes extending further into Thailand.

To build up their social networks and to use them strategically for a better economic life, Tai petty traders and peddlers have developed them in both horizontal and vertical layers. The horizontal layer is based mainly on two types of social relationships: *Pii Nong* (sibling) relationship and *Taiko* (friend or peer) relations, which usually connect within the same ethnic group whilst the vertical level is shown

in *Konlong* (big man) relations in which inter-ethnic relations and hierarchies are improved and developed.

5.2.1 Horizontal Layers of Social Relationships: *Pii Nong* (Sibling) and *Taiko* (Peer) Relationships

Generally, *Pii Nong* is the relationship between older and younger siblings of the same generation. *Pii* means older sibling in Tai, and *Nong* the younger. In this sense, *Pii Nong* is a special organization among a single generation in which general mutual aid system can be observed in the Tai communities. As noted by Eberhardt (2006: 96-97), the general principle of sibling relationships in Shan Tai society is that older siblings (including cousins) are supposed to be helpful advisors of younger siblings (including close relatives of their generation).⁴ Practically, it means older siblings (and cousins) are supposed to share or surrender anything they have that a younger sibling (and close relatives of their generation) wants. The phrase *give it to your nong* is the most frequently heard utterance in households referring to the good behavior of an older sibling to a younger one, whilst *nong* in response is supposed to show the respect and deference toward an older sibling. This is because the younger learn to depend on the older for help and advice in all sorts of matters.

The *Pii Nong* relationship has played a crucial role in Tai societies for a long time, in a society where cooperation and mutual aid have been essential among families and villagers. Mostly it operates as an economic function, helping in house construction, hunting and fishing, rice growing, and labor exchange. According to Berlie (1990, 2003) *Pii Nong* is the guiding rule of the young to middle-age groups used for organizing major work in communities and major harvests. This Tai social organization is operative from cradle to grave through close residence, shared experience, proximate age, and similar work; it has survived for centuries. The

⁴ There are also other scholars: for example, Moerman (1966), Hanks (1962, 1975), Keyes (1975) who studied about kinship and siblings as social organization and hierarchies of the Tai communities. They use several spelling: for example, *Pinawng*, *Phi – Nong*, *Pi-Naung*, or *Pii-Nong*. All these spelling words are the same meaning: brotherhood or sibling used in Tai societies of the Tai speaking peoples of Southeast Asia.

nuclear family also includes a daughter-in-law or son-in-law which comes from other villages.

Among the Shan and Dehong Tai, the *Pii Nong* describes the relationship between those of the same family and kinship. During the past hundred years, these groups have been well-connected by intermarriage. The similar ethnic, linguistic and cultural traits of the Tai of both sides of the border have long been exchanged with each other, separate from other ethnic groups along the frontier. A Shan Tai family, living in Burma and peddling in Luxi, generally consists of relatives, families, and parents' brothers or sisters who came to Dehong prior to the present traders. Some of them (both male and female) get married to Dehong Tai or Chinese, and then settle down on the Chinese border. The converse phenomenon has also happened to Dehong Tai on the Burmese side. Often the Dehong Tai, both elite and common, fled into Burma during the Cultural Revolution and other previous periods of economic and political hardship. Whilst they lived in Burma, some Dehong Tai men married Shan Tai women. It was not until the improved political situation after 1978 that Dehong Tai "refugees" went back home; they still keep in touch with relatives on the other side.

To illustrate some of the facets of relationships and the connection to trading, two examples are presented here. *Aeyee*, a 35 year-old Shan Tai woman petty trader who has her family and relatives on both sides, and *Maesao*, a 65 year old Dehong Tai woman peddler who lives on the Chinese side and has a sister in Burma, illustrate how the *Pii Nong* relationship has played a significant role in trading.

Aeyee, from Namkham, 22 kilometers from the Burmese border has established a small shop to sell ethnic commodities in Luxi a few years ago. As recalled by *Aeyee*, she said that without her father's sister who has long been living in Luxi, she could not have established this shop, or have rented cheap and safe accommodation and eventually settle down in the central market of Luxi. *Aeyee*'s social connection is that her father's sister married a Dehong Tai urban male thirty years ago. Subsequent to her marriage, *Aeyee*'s aunt moved to Luxi, living with her Dehong Tai husband, and set up a retail shop in the central market of Luxi. Her

settling in China was supported by her relatives and by other Shan Tai newcomers in Burma. Today, Aeyee's father's sister is a wholesaler who provides Thai, Chinese and Burmese products to Shan and Dehong Tai newcomers. Apart from supplies, she also helps Aeyee and other Shan Tai newcomers search for rental accommodations, credit-loans for peddling, and places (in festivals) or mobile markets for peddling.

In Luxi, not only Aeyee's family has this kind of social relationship and residence; Shan Tai petty traders have been settling within the *Kad Mai* and other market elsewhere in Luxi for many decades. Closely-knit, many of them are old acquaintances or members of the same villages or communities. These close relationships have assisted them all in gaining greater economic opportunities in Chinese land.

Maesao, a 65 year-old Dehong Tai woman peddler, sells her ethnic commodities in the *Kad Mai* as a result of her relationship with her elder sister, who married a Shan Tai male of Muse, Burma. Through her elder sister connection, *Maesao* nowadays can order cheap supplies from those who helped establish her wholesale shop in Muse, and who also provide cheaper commodities transported from the borders of Thailand and Burma.

The *Pii Nong* relationship is not only an intra-ethnic/family connection; the *Pii Nong* relationship can also be built and developed between the Tai and other ethnic groups, such as the Chinese, the Jinpo, or the Balung. This extension of the *Pii Nong* relationship depends on how deeply "respect" and "trust" can be extended to the "outsiders", and how you will be treated directly depends on how close your relationship is. In this sense, the trust and respect the Tai give to and get from each other become significant criteria in forming such *Pii Nong* relationships. Furthermore, the establishment of *Pii Nong* relationships can be extended through inter-marriage with other ethnic groups. For example, there is an increasing tendency today for Shan Tai females to wish to marry to Chinese males (both Han Chinese and Dehong Tai males who have Chinese citizenship); this is seen as a desire to settle down in China permanently. Dehong Tai females hope to get married to Han Chinese or Thai males, instead of to Dehong Tai males. This is related to the image among Dehong Tai

females that Han Chinese males are diligent and hard-working. By marrying Thai males, Dehong Tai females believe they could then go to Thailand where their life would be better.

Pii Nong relationships can be also generated among those who originate from the same locality. For instance, the Tai usually treat other Tai people as cousins or siblings if those persons come from the same *Man* (village), or the same *Muang* (town). Today, it is found that Dehong Tai peddlers can often buy cheaper supplies in Burma if one tells the Shan Tai marketplace suppliers where they live or with what locales they are connected to.

With *Pii Nong* connections, people have *Tam Jai Kan* or a special level of trust, and are obligated to reciprocate favors. Hence, trust becomes a major factor in obtaining credit and other resources needed to better the Tai's economic life. For example, *Aeyee's* father's sister provides cheaper supplies and credit to *Aeyee* and other Shan Tai newcomers, without necessarily signing any paper. Favors also include informal credit systems which are often granted among relatives and friends coming from the same community. Trust generates mutual respect in both verbal agreements and written contracts.

Although Tai societies have many hierarchical relationships, a second type of horizontal relationship, the *Taiko* (peer or friend) relationship, also exists in Tai society. Eberhardt (2006:95) reports Tai of all ages talk about "being friends with each other" (*Pen Ko Kan*) in which particular individuals (and their friendships) are highly valued.

For Tai petty traders and mobile peddlers of Shan and Dehong Tai, the *Taiko* relationship is applied often to those who are of the same age and generation. For instance, the relationship between *Aeyee* and *Kamlearn*, two Shan Tai women peddlers who come from *Namkham*, fall into the *Taiko* relationship. *Aeyee* and *Kamlearn* were classmates in the same high school and at the same Mandalay University. After finishing their bachelor degrees in 2002, they kept in touch and finally decided to do peddling in the same market. However, *Aeyee* came to trade in

the market two years (2002) before Kamlearn, who came later in 2004. Because of the trade experience of Aeyee, and the *Taiko* relationship between Aeyee and Kamlearn, Aeyee became a great helpful resource for Kamlearn, as a newcomer. Aeyee performed favors for Kamlearn, by helping Kamlearn look for a cheap and safe rental accommodation, by helping her search for booths in the central and periodic markets, and by giving her supplies in advance and offering her credit. Kamlearn, as the newcomer, has applied the *Taiko* relationship she has with Aeyee, asking for valuable information from Aeyee.

5.2.2 Vertical Layers of Social Relationships: *Konlong* (Big Man) Relationship

This is a vertical dimension of social relationship which links to a hierarchical layer that attempts to connect to several political layers of Chinese authority systems. This social relationship is particularly observed in some specific cases of Tai petty traders.

For example, there are some Shan Tai desiring permanent residence on the Chinese side. They aim to stay longer on the Chinese side for business and for living, hoping to own a house, build a business, and enjoy more flexible commerce in their private enterprises. The *Konlong* facilitates their application for a longer stay on the Chinese side, could provide benefit in trade, and offer a safer life as compared to living in Burma.

There are, for instance, three cases of restaurants in Dehong launched by Shan Tai families originally living in Muse. They attempt to manage their social connection with the Chinese immigration office, as well as with police whom they see as their friends. The Shan Tai restaurant owners sometimes provide “goudui” (a minor practice) (Zhang 2001) like karaoke, gifts, and so on to please “big men” (i.e., immigration, police). This depends on how well they know each other and on what connections the Shan Tai need. If the Shan Tai know some *Konlong* through their close Chinese relatives or friends, this relationship assists the Shan Tai in getting more useful information, for instance, information about where the local-level

government will launch a new market, how to rent cheap shops in the new market, and how to get legal identity cards and permanent registration permission.

In one case, a restaurant established in Luxi on Chinese land needed to be examined by the public health department every year. This examination was to be signed by a Chinese officer and then approved annually. The restaurant owner, whom I spoke with, was examined by Chinese officers of the public health department, who check cleanliness, restaurant environment, and so on. It is not surprising that she would have informal talks with, and be friendly to, the Chinese officers. She also welcomed them with lots of food and drink. Friendly greetings and an informal relationship between shop owners and Chinese officers made it possible to quick approval and extended certification, as shown by this case.

Chiefly, the three aforementioned social relationships (*Pii Nong*, *Taiko* and *Konlong*) involve trust and reciprocal favors, such as credit advances, favorable prices by traders in return for a steady supply of products, and gifts as reciprocity for favors. The Tai term *Tamjai Kan* (trust in each other) is significant in the sense of trade involvement with one another. *Tamjai Kan*, for the Tai, is normally expected to be experienced through *Pii Nong* relationships, and expected to facilitate trade and reduce economic risks and uncertainty. Overall, it was found that retail shops rented by Shan Tai petty traders and peddlers in the *Kadmai* and the central market are usually managed by Tai owners with the assistance of family members, close relatives or others (preferably members of the same ethnic group). The formation of trading networks and credit relationships central to the trade among the Tai petty traders relies on trust based on *Pii Nong* relationships. There is evidence that there are many small communities (of the Shan Tai and the Dehong Tai of the towns of Muse, Namkham of Burma, and Luxi of Yunnan) within the market, where all Tai peddlers know each other and recognize members who are related to relatives, friends, kin or members of their original villages. It is trust in fellow kinsmen and villagers that is essential in coping with a sometimes hostile environment and unreliable livelihood.

5.3 *Bianmin Ren* and Negotiating Strategies

As explained in Chapter 4, at all levels - central, provincial and local – the Chinese government encourages border trade for ethnic residents. In the 1990s, economic zones were established as an important part of its development strategy that encourages more active cross-border trade. The Chinese government aims to use the ethnic connections on both sides, as an economic strategy, to increase border economic growth.

The government encourages border residents to search for their own markets, and to be responsible for their own dealings. In Yunnan, the provincial government has encouraged the minority groups living along the border to engage in trade. As Eng notes, the border residents are expected to “straddle the border and ethnic boundaries” and are encouraged to engage in trade and business and to become actively involved in the economic development at the borders (2000: 94-95).

This ‘encouragement’ is embodied in the *Bianmin Ren* (border resident) policy, which allows border residents of both sides to participate and cross the border without strict regulation. Border residents, especially those from the Burmese side, can use an identity card in order to apply for a green-colored card or “border pass” (so-called *Bianmin Ren* card, showing their house registration in the border area) which allows border crossing every day. To legally cross the border through the border gates, local residents need to show this border pass and their ID card, and then pay a two to five Yuan border gate fee every time they cross the border. If they would like to stay overnight, they have to pay an overnight charge of about 10 Yuan per night. The border patrol at the border gates check the border passes and stamp them every time the local residents cross the border. The following three cases illustrate how the *Bianmin Ren* policy has been locally applied and utilized or taken advantage of by traders.

First, I present the case of *Jaimuang*, a 45 year-old Shan Tai male who lives with his family in central Muse, a border town in Burma opposite Ruili. He and his wife opened a Thai restaurant in Ruili with the permission of the Chinese authorities.

They also have the “green-colored card” which allows local *Bianmin Ren* to conveniently cross the border for economic and social activities. It seems that “going across the border”, for this couple, has become an everyday practice, driving their car every early morning through the border gate, paying the crossing fee, and getting into Ruili to open shop. The Chinese border patrol sometimes recognizes them; then, they have no need to pay the fee every time they cross the border - the couple is allowed to come back to pay the fee later.

Jaimuang and his wife usually go home to Muse every night; they do not stay overnight often in Ruili. They have a good record that is noted on the green card and also in the records of the Chinese immigration border patrols. Therefore, to cross the border, they do not need to use the local ferries waiting at several piers near the border, like many Tai and other ethnic migrants do to cross the border every day. Being *Bianmin Ren* who cross the border in accordance with all regulations, *Jaimuang* and his wife are simply legally practicing their *Bianmin Ren* “everyday livelihood”.

Next, *Sangkam* is a 30 year-old Shan Tai peddler who has a house in Namkham, about 22 kilometers from the Chinese border. The case of *Sangkam* illustrates how she takes advantage of her *Bianmin Ren* status, negotiating with the Chinese state and complex regulations. *Sangkam* has an elder sister who married a Dehong Tai male in Luxi. In 2002, she decided to leave her agricultural work in Namkham, to find a better job in Dehong. She chose to be a temporary mobile peddler in Dehong, on Chinese soil.

She came to the Chinese border for the first time in 2002. Being the first time, she chose to cross the border at the official border gate, although her elder sister had assured her that using the local ferries was the usual way in which local residents usually crossed the border every day. When *Sangkam* went to the border gate, one Chinese official asked her what she intended to do in China. She replied, “I want to visit my sister. My elder sister lives with her Chinese husband in Luxi.”

After giving this “visitation” reason (instead of the real objective of peddling in Dehong), Sangkam could simply cross the border at the border gate. Allowing local residents to visit their cousins and relatives, including for social activities, is one of the *Bianmin Ren* policies for which the local residents are eligible. *Kao Laen Poen*, or “I lie to them”, is the tactic Sangkam was applying in order to deal with the state’s regulations. By such tricky and slippery strategies, she finally got into Luxi, stayed with her elder sister for awhile, and then looked for marketplaces in the downtown area while making new connections with old friends. She eventually ended up plying her mobile trade in the mobile markets of the Dehong Tai festivals all around the city.

Third, *Jaelin* is a 38 year-old Dehong Tai female petty trader who lives in *Man Jiagao* (Jiagao village), an economic zone. She is an ethnic Tai who has Chinese citizenship. She began her petty trade in 1993 when the local government launched the Jiagao economic zone project. Since then, she, her parents, and other Jiagao villagers have had to sell their lands to the local government and get monetary compensation.

The border economic zone project has changed the Jiagao villagers’ way of life. They could not continue their agricultural work since they no longer own agricultural land. They looked for new jobs. Whilst some villagers try to rent land for agriculture or for cattle or pig farms, some males become bus or truck drivers. Some females go to the market, becoming sellers of noodles or other prepared foods. They spend their money subsidies on new houses and job searches.

Jaelin began her petty trade by going to Kunming to pick up good-looking Chinese T-shirts and clothes to sell to wholesale traders in the Muse markets on the Burmese side. Her petty trade business for is doing well for her since Burmese and Shan Tai wholesalers and traders in Muse need cheaper Chinese mass-produced products to be sold and distributed in Burma. The Chinese products (especially clothing) are in demand from Burmese customers in Burma because Burmese and Thai clothing is more expensive than clothing from China. The Chinese clothes, competing with other brand-names, become another choice for Burmese customers.

Jaelin was asked by the *Maekha* (Muse traders) whether she could get the Chinese products for them. She recognized this economic opportunity and thought that she could reap a large profit from the scarcity of Chinese products on the Burmese side, and from the social advantage of being a Chinese resident - including her *Bianmin Ren* status at the border. Therefore, she simply invested in the business by ordering Chinese goods, especially trendy clothing styles from Kunming, to sell to the Tai wholesalers in Muse. The wholesale traders in Muse then sold these products in Muse and other parts of Burma, and in markets along the borders of Thailand and Laos.

Using this tactic, *Jaelin* takes advantage of her Chinese citizenship, traveling to Kunming and getting the Chinese products back to Dehong. Then, taking advantage of her *Bianmin Ren* status, she crosses the border conveniently and distributes the products to those wholesalers. Nowadays, because of good transportation between Kunming and Dehong and better telecommunications, *Jaelin's* petty cross-border trade is much easier to operate than before. Currently, she receives orders by phone from her regular wholesale customers in Muse and then gives a call to the wholesalers she knows in Kunming. It takes only one night from the call for a truck from Kunming to transport the products she ordered into Ruili and pass the products into Muse on the next day.

For *Jaelin*, not only did *Bianmin Ren* status help her with cross-border trade, but also being Chinese and speaking bilingual Tai and Chinese have allowed her to do business more easily than other ethnic traders. Being a Chinese living near the border, she can travel freely to Kunming and order the Chinese clothing which the non-mobile Shan Tai and Burmese cannot. Moreover, speaking Chinese in China and speaking Tai in Muse helps *Jaelin* to communicate with both sides.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter describes two main topics, Tai trading patterns and the multi-layered social networks and strategies that ethnic Tai merchants have in place to gain a better economic status and livelihood at the border.

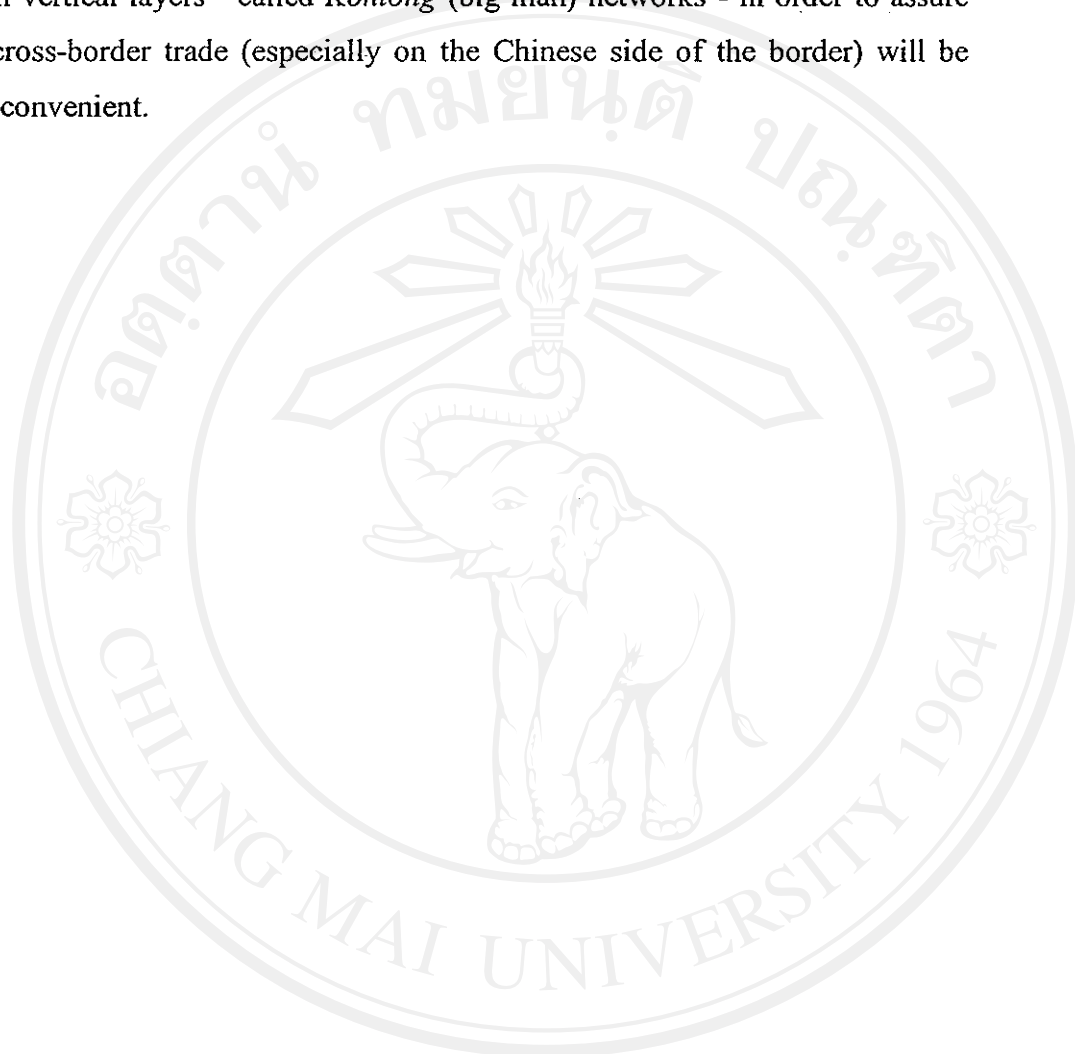
Thereafter careful analysis of trading patterns is made, two chief categories emerge, classified according to trade mobility and timeframes for trading activities; that of *Maekha Khai Leu Kad*, the market traders, and *Maekha Khai Wan Kad* or *Maekha Khai Leu Poi*, the mobile peddlers.

Maekha Khai Leu Kad, the market traders, are all kinds of petty traders whose trade is mostly in major central or urban markets. They are the Tai shopkeepers who usually rent the commercial buildings, establishing their own shops in the cities. This group does not necessarily move to sell their products, following the *Wad kad*; they usually work full-time, opening their shops in the market. Thus, they are the fixed-location petty traders.

The mobile peddlers, *Maekha Khai Wan Kad* and *Maekha Khai Leu Poi*, operate their mobile markets wherever they choose to go. *Maekha Khai Wan Kad*, the market-day traders, are the Tai peddlers who usually ply their trade in the mobile markets on specific market days of each place, normally circulating in both urban and rural areas. The *Maekha Khai Leu Poi* hawk their wares in markets during the *Poi* (festivals) which are usually held after the rainy season. Tai merchants from both groups interact with each other considerably. Transition from one type of trader to another is possible, and is perceived by the Tai themselves as a means of social mobility, or a change in social status, on their road to upgrading their economic life.

For the second topic, this chapter has described traders' social networks and *Bianmin Ren* (border resident) status. The Tai traders of both aforementioned groups have used these two particular social practices to cope with border regulations and state territorial controls. In using their social networks and *Bianmin Ren* status, Tai petty traders do not merely apply the old social networks which socially connect via

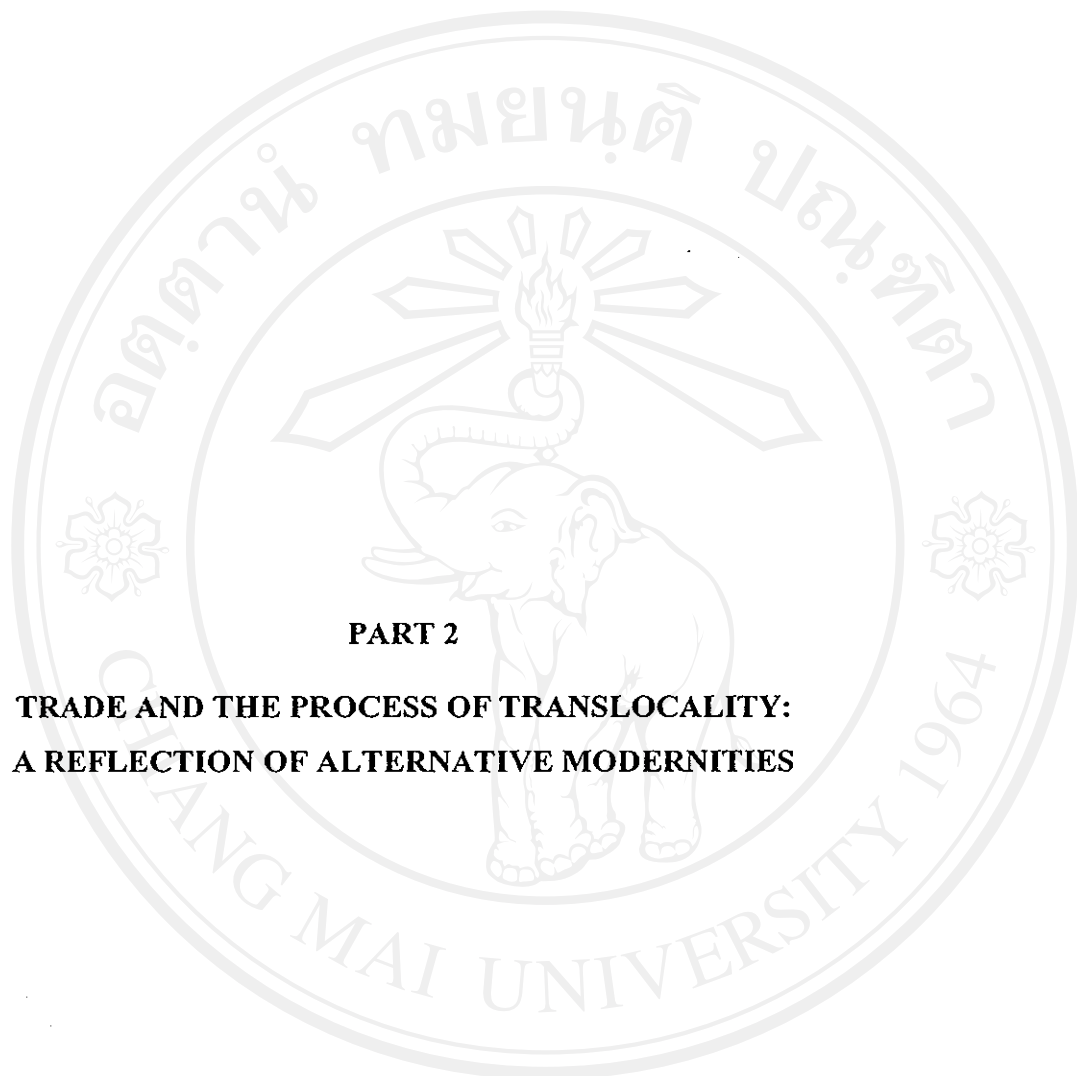
horizontal layers of relationship; mainly, *Pii Nong*, or sibling, by kinship and marriage, and *Taiko* (friend or peer) relationships. They also build new social networks in vertical layers - called *Konlong* (big man) networks - in order to assure that their cross-border trade (especially on the Chinese side of the border) will be secure and convenient.



ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่

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PART 2

**TRADE AND THE PROCESS OF TRANSLOCALITY:
A REFLECTION OF ALTERNATIVE MODERNITIES**

ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่

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