

CHAPTER 7

GENDER AND THE TRANSFER OF CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

AMONG TAI PETTY TRADERS

Men and women differ in the kind of restraints and constraints which they experience in their work lives. A sexual division of labor normally exists in any society. For Tai society, however, there is not only a traditional sexual division of labor (Eberhardt 2006: 92-93), but it is also their cosmology formulated by norms, values and Buddhist religious beliefs including an ideology of power that traditionally marks the difference in gender relationship and social status between Tai males and females. Cultural tradition provides for a Tai man to stand on a higher stage of existence than a Tai woman (Yos 2001: 133-149). Among the Tai population, it is believed ideologically that men are naturally and inherently superior to women. That superiority correspondingly causes a definition of the status and duties of a man and a woman in the capacity of a child, husband and wife. As a result, the social roles of the Tai woman are traditionally inclined to have the responsibilities of domestic work (cooking food, child-rearing) as well as agricultural work done daily in paddy field. As observed by Carey (1900: 494), an Englishman and explorer during 1900s, "the men are lazy, good-for-nothing fellows, who never, unless absolutely obliged, do any work. The women toil during the summer in the rice-fields, and when at home are industriously employed weaving clothes".

Additionally, the Tai social tradition values the male as the head of household while it requires women display a respectful manner towards the man (Tien Ju-Kang 1986[1949] :55). The Tai woman is taught and trained from childhood to be respectful and obedient to her father and, after leaving the household following marriage, to also be respectful and obedient to her husband.

Since economic changes and schools are gradually replacing the temples in terms of providing education, these conditions have opened more opportunities to young Tai females and have also seen reading and writing ability and opportunities matching the male. Tai women today seem to have an equal opportunity to any Tai man if they want to continue their education in high school or institutes of higher learning found in the bigger city. Gender roles are changing; conditions have been altered consequently in which Tai males and females in households, especially the husband and wife relationship, have more equality in their social status than before.

In economic life, however, there is no exact tradition that restricts the freedom or hinders women from seeking success. As exemplified by Milne, Tai women were sometimes able to save and accumulate money earned by their own efforts, such as weaving and basket work (1910: 117). Today the economic life of Tai women has no more restrictions than before. Yos observed that the roles of Tai women today that perform trading family products in Dehong market have provided them with a higher standing (2001: 136). Yos writes,

“Experience gained as vendors in the market had turned Tai housewives into experts in bargaining prices with merchants and thus the present-day Tai women’s important roles in production, control, marketing and managing the household economy have resulted in raising their social standing to a higher level. The female as controllers of the money purse is the deciding factors in having control over the husband and his dependence on her. In accepting the duties of supervising the household money, the wife is able to control over husband within the household” (Yos 2001: 136).

As exemplified above, it can be seen that today many Tai females play greater roles in production and trade, resulting in not only their enjoyment of higher standing but also a gain of bargaining power in village society. But changes in women’s roles have also caused gender relationships to change in Tai society; Tai females have begun to exercise the pivotal role in family and the stabilizing force of community.

This chapter sees gender roles in Tai society today as much more open for women, particularly those who work outside home, to become permanent market traders and mobile peddlers. However, this chapter argues, it is significant that in the wake of economic border growth and increased cross-border trade flows conducted by Tai market traders and peddlers, Tai female petty traders and peddlers do not only gain more economic power, enabling them to have more flexibility in their gender roles, but cross-border trade, particularly of dress,¹ has also allowed Tai women be exposed to new forms of cultural knowledge. This is a cultural knowledge in which learning of new cultural skills (about how to design Thai style and varied Tai fashion style of dressmaking) have been acquired and transferred through interrelationship between cross-border trade exchange, and in response to the demand/consumption of Dehong Tai customers preferring these commodities. As a result, the new forms of cultural knowledge that Tai female dressmakers acquire form a channel connecting to fashion style and taste, and thus become an indicator of “alternative modernities” where active Tai agents can find their choice to produce what they deem modern. Moreover, it points to the manifold ways in which Tai people can question their present and have expectations for their future.

7.1 The Tai Female Petty Traders and Gender Role Changes

Studies have considered women and the economics of the market, marketing, and the activities of marketers in which market women and non-monetary exchanges (informal economy) are important to transactions in many localities (Geertz 1978, Mintz 1971). Literature on trade in Southeast Asia suggests that women dominate small-scale, local trade in a way which has become paradigmatic for a particular type of economy, which Geertz (1963) calls the “Bazaar economy” in Java, contrasting with a “firm-type economy” in general. Alexander (1987: 3) wrote that the market is the “women’s domain”; this notion has been studied by some scholars in Indonesia (i.e. Alexander 1987, Dewey 1962).

¹ I refer here to the specific skill of decorative dressmaking. Thai traditional styles of clothes are not the clothes that Thai people in Bangkok or elsewhere wear in their everyday lives. Instead, it is *Sin* suits for females (blouse and tube skirt consisting of three sections of *hua sin* (head or top), *tua sin* (body), and *tin sin* (foot or border) decorating with golden necklaces and other golden ornament.) and traditional men traditional clothes made by cotton or silk. For other Tai styles of clothes, it means for example the Tai style in Shan State, in Laos etc.

In terms of women traders crossing the border, some scholars have elaborated on how geographical borders define and label women's work in terms of the role international borders have played in the creation of markets and market hierarchies, and in the definition of women's work. For example, international borders create different scales of places (Smith 1993), and women's ability to access these scales depends on women traders and their household's definition of their work. One example of long-distance traders illustrated by Walker (1999) has shown that Tai Lue people, especially women, have been engaged in long-distance trade of consumer goods and woven material since the pre-colonial era, utilizing the Tai Lue connections scattered over the Northwest part of Laos. Large-scale refugee movements during the wartime era of the 1960s and the early 1970s gave women more exposure to mobility and trade (Walker 1999: 153). Kusakabe (2004: 581-594) examines how the opening of the border trade between Laos and Thailand has influenced gender divisions of labor, and definition of women's work along the border zone. She points out that the production and trading of cotton-weaving and sticky rice box commodities in border areas in Lao PDR - Sayaboury Province and Khammoune Province - have brought crucial cash income to the women and their households. Furthermore, the formalization of the border trade has changed the "sense of space" of Lao women; they have traveled into the new space of the border market of Thailand, traveling, seeing more places outside and as well, they have entered into a new gender status in the household.

As seen in my research, the Shan Tai in Burma nowadays migrate into China because of good choice of economic opportunities on that side of the border. Along with these opportunities are alternative choices, constraints and restraints in their social networks and other horizontal and vertical relationships, as described previously. However, it is found that the younger generation, especially Shan Tai females, come to Dehong looking for jobs as waitresses in Tai restaurants, or wage labor in construction jobs or even as sex workers in the growing service business sectors in the economic border 'boom' of Dehong.

Shan Tai women who migrate to be petty traders in Dehong usually move into the Dehong borderland and run their business, with support from their family or relatives who had worked previously on petty trade. The prior traders who keep doing their trade until today maintain significant social networks that are operated conveniently.

In terms of working period, for Tai female petty traders in the present day, they have changed from those preceding Tai traders who had traded during the off-rainy season and temporary-time trade into full-time working in petty trade in Chinese border. The present day petty traders usually choose to be in the market, leaving their agricultural work for their parents or elderly generation because working in the market during economic border 'boom' and having more their own social opportunities allows them to earn more income than working in agriculture.

While Shan Tai females have been encountering an economic depression in Burma which caused them to move into Chinese land for work, Dehong Tai traders and their communities have been facing another factor which resulted from land reform policy and a consequence of economic border development, as demonstrated in Chapter 4. Regarding these factors and impacts on the Tai livelihoods, some Dehong Tai families have lost their agricultural lands to serve the recent land reform policy whilst some Dehong Tai families, especially who live nearby urban areas, have had to sell their lands to local government in order to support economic projects and development. Some Dehong Tai who have not enough agricultural lands, especially the young generation, are now looking for other jobs outside in order to earn income in new occupations.

Entering the non-farm working sphere, men and women experience different constraints in that they can only find certain kind of jobs available. Occupations open to men tend to be in agriculture, construction, driving, or transport, or as porters in the marketplace, while fewer occupational opportunities are open to women. This is partly why women become vendors. The marketplace is one of the few places where females can earn income. As a result of the economic border 'boom', it is possible to see many Tai females nowadays leave their farm work, entering into the non-farm

work both temporarily and permanently. Some of them become market traders or mobile peddlers who are selling Thai commodities, especially dress and beauty products to Tai customers in China.

Among Tai petty traders, some Tai female traders have improved their skills, especially dressmaking or tailoring skills, so that they can develop their peddling trade into dressmaking decoration; getting good business and making more profit. Today, among the traders full-time petty trading is said to bring a substantial amount of cash income which is defined as the major income-earning activity conducted by a Tai household. Especially, peddling on the Chinese side for the Shan Tai living nearby the border, is said to be the main income source which gains returns two to three times higher than what they could earn from other farm and non-farm work in Burma.

Upon examination of the trading activities of Tai female petty traders, it seems that Shan Tai and Dehong Tai petty traders are distinctive in terms of their opportunities and constraints when they make their economic choices in the markets. The Shan Tai choose to be petty traders in Dehong depending on the social networks (as social capital) that they have and will form. For instance, the Shan Tai can stay longer on the China side because they have strong and varied social networks in the Chinese borderlands. But the Dehong Tai do not necessarily depend on social networks for their cross-border trade mobility, because they have no problem with their Chinese citizenship or status in China. Rather, their bilingual status (Tai and Chinese) and Chinese citizenship has assisted the Dehong Tai to gain more opportunities in their cross-border trade. As described in chapter 5, the case of *Jaelin*, a 38 year-old Dehong Tai female petty trader who lives in *Man Jiagao* or Jiagao village and conducts her cross-border trade in Burma provides one example.

In order for the Tai household that is affected by trading activities to adapt, I found that Tai female petty traders, both Shan Tai and Dehong Tai involved with non-farm work in the markets, have changed gender roles in their households. The case of *Sangkam* and *Jaimuang*, a Shan Tai couple working as mobile peddler in central

market of Dehong is a good example to show the changing gender roles of a new household.

Sangkam and Jaimuang, , were married seven years ago (in 1998). They have one daughter, living with Jaimunag's parents in Namkham, their hometown on the Burmese side of the border. Since Sangkam, the wife, could not find any good job in the bigger cities of Burma for two years and the land owned by her father and mother-in-law was not enough for the new household, Sangkam and Jaimuang decided to look for a job across the Chinese border. Eventually, they became full-time peddlers in the central market of Luxi of Yunnan, 100 kilometers from the Burmese border. They began their peddling trade by asking a favor from their relatives in China. Sangkam's elder sister and her two close friends who came from the same village assisted them to look for cheap and safer accommodation in the market of Luxi. Sangkam's sister also provided this couple advance credit and supplies, besides information about mobile markets around the Luxi city. Within two months, this couple was able to settle down and become petty traders, practising their trade conveniently.

However, regarding the new occupation of permanent petty trading, the gender roles illustrated by this couple have evidently changed in view of the fact that their work life today has been completely transformed. They have needed to arrange a new division of labor as a consequence of their new, unfamiliar work lives.

For Jaimuang, a routine day of peddling begins with Jaimuang helping his wife load stock into a truck in the early morning, preparing to go to mobile market. Sangkam has her own daily work; going to the market for selling their products, getting information about market places from their friends, and checking the stock. If the supplies are running out, she would ask friends or relatives for advance-credit or supplies. Normally, Sangkam goes to mobile market for selling their products alone, leaving her husband in the rental house using the excuse that he is not talented in selling and is ashamed of price negotiations with customers. However, Jaimuang sometimes goes to the mobile market with his wife, if Sangkam requests it or when she feels obviously exhausted or has to go to bigger festivals where huge amounts of

attendants come to the temples. Jaimuang also goes with Sangkam when he would like to visit festivals, from times to time. However, whenever school is out, the couple often brings their daughter with them to the market. Jaimuang is the one who takes care of their daughter whilst Sangkam works in the market. If their daughter would like to visit the marketplace where her mother works peddling, Sangkam and Jaimuang are happy to bring her along.

During a routine day when Sangkam goes to mobile market, Jaimuang who is somewhat skilled in woodcarving often makes decorative wood goods (chopsticks, hats made from bamboo, etc), and asks his wife to sell them in the market. However, Jaimuang, when he does not have much work, often goes with his new Shan Tai or Dehong Tai friends for leisure time. They love to play cards or Majiang (Mahjong).² Sangkam often plays in her leisure time as well.

When market peddling does not bring enough cash income, particularly during the rainy season, this couple needs to find additional jobs. Whilst Sangkam continues her peddling by setting small stalls in the central market of Luxi, Jaimuang goes back to Lashio where he has relatives, in order to rent a small paddy field for cultivating cash crops; for instance watermelon.

As described by the case of this couple, it is evident that Sangkam and Jaimuanng, as a new couple, have had to re-arrange the division of labor in their household since they decided to do peddling trade in China. However, it is not only them, but a number of Shan Tai and Dehong Tai families as well as individuals, who are petty traders in the Chinese borderland, who are also facing the same circumstances. In the daily life of labor allocated between male and female, whilst the Tai husband may slightly assist his wife to open the store, lift the truck door and help setting up the booth, (or in case of mobile market load stock into the truck and prepare products for selling), female traders usually take care of trading activities during the entire day. The women issue cash and in-kind advances to other mobile traders, and when required, negotiate their own loans for both business and personal purposes with

² Majiang is a four-player game that originated in China, requiring skill, intelligence, calculation and, like other gambling games, a certain amount of luck (see more detail at <http://www.majiang.net>).

other peddlers. Female petty traders or peddlers often communicate with truck transporters and wholesalers, negotiating the purchase order, the delivery date and extension if necessary, as well as traveling to bigger cities (Kunming or Ruili) to follow up on orders and payments.

Another illustrative case is that of a Dehong Tai couple – *Maisaeng*, a 35 year-old wife, and *Jaikam*, her 38 years-old husband – originally from a rural village 10 kilometers from the central market of Luxi. As a result of the land reform policy, the new couple has only a small amount of agricultural land, apart from their parents' land. *Maisaeng*, who is skilled in dressmaking and weaving, skills inherited from her mother, views the market as an alternative choice to earn more income for her household. She routinely leaves her 10 years-old son with her husband's family in their rural village and asks her mother-in-law to look after her child.

Whilst *Jaikam* continues working in a small farm of their family, growing rice during the rainy season and cash crops such as wheat and watermelon during the other seasons, *Maisaeng* rents a commercial building in the central market of Luxi, opening a clothing store, selling clothes which are mostly the clothes in Tai and Thai styles transported from Thailand and the Shan State. Moreover, she does not only open the clothing shop for selling those clothing products, but she also applies her dressmaking skills to orders from Tai customers who want decorative dressmaking in different fashion styles of Shan Tai, Dehong Tai and Thai *Sin* skirts suits and clothes. *Maisaeng* normally leaves some space in her shop for her bed. The commercial building, for *Maisaeng*, becomes the shop and temporary accommodation at the same time. During times of low demand, fewer dressmaking orders and customers, she often goes back home to her husband's rural village to visit her son and family. However, *Jaikam* often brings his son to visit his mother in the central market when he is not busy with the farm.

According to both cases, it is evident that trading in the border market has generated regular cash income in a place where few cash income sources are available. Along with generating cash income, it also means changes and a greater flexibility of gender roles which is simultaneously taking place among the Tai male and females.

This change, of earning more cash income and arranging a new division of labor within the household in which woman sees more economic opportunities, has positively made the shifting of gender roles for Tai females within the Tai society possible

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Tai females, when entering the market, gain more economic power because the female becomes the main income-earner within the household. Because income from farm work today is seasonal and income from non-farm work (i.e. chopstick-making, temporal labor) is irregular, income from peddling in the market on the Chinese side is therefore seen as stabilizing the household economy. As a result, it is possible to see more the flexibility of the gender role, as in the cases where, for example, family members of the Tai often do not allow women to help in the paddy fields or to do domestic work when they could be earning more income outside, as cooks or wage laborers, for instance. Another marked change is that Tai males are sometimes willing to share domestic activities in order to allow women time to do their trade.

While Tai females increasingly gain more economic power, more control over the economics of the household by their better opportunities for peddling trade in China, Tai males, conversely, have no actual non-farm work available to them except to enter into wage labor both on the Chinese side or Burmese side of the border. Although some Tai males have their lands in Burma (case of the Shan Tai) or in China (the Dehong Tai case), the production does not provide a high yield over the whole year. Particularly Shan Tai males on the Burmese side are today encountering low prices for cash crops. The young Tai males have to look for better work, in order to earn more income for feeding their family; work as wage labor, drivers, or construction are their choices. Within the present day Tai household, therefore, it is obvious that the economic position of women and the shifting division of labor are explicitly taking place while contradictions and new tensions are formed with regard to gender and family.

It is possible to connect the diverse perceptions of femininity and gender norms among the Tai household in part to the results of economic border processes of

the present time. Hence, in the advent of the “flexible economic border”, encouraged by the state (particularly the Chinese), an alternative opportunity to cope with economic struggle in the Tai household has been made available to Tai females. Additionally, cross-border trade conducted by Tai female petty traders and the economic encouragement of the state does not only provide Tai female traders a means to find their own way, gaining successful choices in the market in which more income is obtained. But also, having more income has consequently equipped Tai females with an economic power, enabling them to have more flexibility of gender roles in negotiating with males in different hierarchies of Tai society. The changing economic practices have indicated a shift in women’s priorities and, moreover, show the gender imbalance present among the Tai people is more even, more alleviated, than in the past.

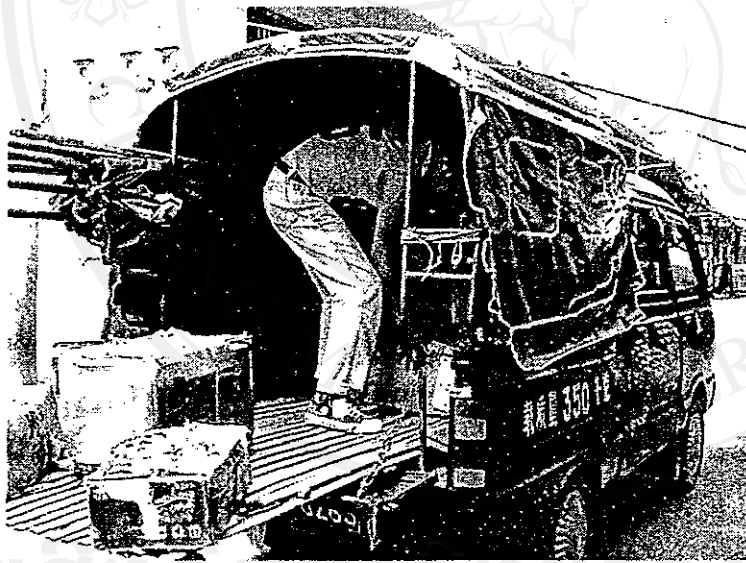


Figure7.1 A Tai male helps his wife load the stocks into truck in every early morning, preparing to go to a mobile market. Tai females will usually be the one to go to mobile markets for selling their products, often leaving their husbands in the rental house, saying that husband is not talented in selling and ashamed of price negotiation with customers.

7.2. The Process of Cultural Knowledge Transfer: Dressmaking Fashions

In the past, Tai women learned weaving and all domestic work from their mothers. When a girl grew up, she became the mother's successor - following her mother's way - knowing how to weave, do needle work and make baskets for home use. The skill of weaving inherited from the mother has paved the way for Tai female petty traders to learn about dressmaking in different decorative styles. Tai females traditionally are able to weave and make their clothes, preparing the clothes for home use (particularly the clothes woven for her husband and children to wear during special occasions). Tai women who do weaving often take their weaving stuffs to local market to sell, if there is any extra remaining.

In the present day, many Tai female traders who do peddling and trading in the Chinese borderlands use their weaving skills learned from the old days. They modify the weaving skills of the old days, however, and extensively combine sewing skills from different styles of Tai clothes.

Among Tai female petty traders in *Kad Mai* market and the central market, cross-border trade of Tai clothes has encouraged their dressmaking skills to extend their clothes stores, allowing customers to obtain decorated fashions and new styles of dress. Similar to the case of *Maisaeng*, a Dehong Tai female petty trader and dressmaker in the central market mentioned above, Tai female petty traders who have dressmaking skills are mostly both Shan Tai and Dehong Tai, who open their stores to sell several styles of Tai clothes, and sew designated dress by order. This includes some Tai newcomers inspired by the preceding Tai traders who obtained good profits.

Since 1996, when the Yunnan-Burma border was functionally opened for the border residents,³ some Shan Tai dressmakers (migrating from a village in Namkham

³ Although the Yunnan-Burma border was officially opened in 1978, practically or functionally, the border was opened for the border residents after the year of 1996. The economic border was open slowly for the following reasons: (1) the border economic zone was not established in Ruili until 1993 and operated officially in 1996; (2) the daily border market was full of foreign goods transported from Thailand and other parts of China during the time; and (3) this includes, at that time, the political atmosphere between the Burmese and Chinese states which have the greater relationship in their economic and politic cooperation.

that is well-known for weaving and dressmaking) specializing in dressmaking in different fashions or styles of *Tai Sin* skirts and suits have seen a new range of economic opportunities and benefits. They began their trading work as well as profiting from their dressmaking skills, by crossing the border into Chinese territory during the year of 1997 in Luxi (when this market was established). Since then they have been selling clothes products in border markets and in mobile markets of the Chinese borderland. Their dressmaking expertise is particularly well-known for different styles of decorative and distinctive *Tai Sin* suits (for example; *Sin* style of Namkham, *TungMao* or southern Shan *Tai*) worn by *Tai* females and males in various places.



Figure 7.2 Dehong *Tai* dressmaker who set up a clothes shop in the central market of Luxi. The process of cultural knowledge transfer can be seen from the trading practices in which *Tai* dressmakers transfer their skills in both male and female fashions of Thai and *Tai* styles.

Beginning with the Shan *Tai* petty traders who initially took up their trading work with dressmaking skill in 1997, the dressmaking activities spread quickly among *Tai* women in Namkham and nearby township; with many traders traveling to the Chinese border market. This is because there were few income-earning opportunities available in those areas. The Shan *Tai* dressmakers who sell their dressmaking and

clothing products well in Luxi become great role models for other Shan Tai and Dehong Tai female dressmakers who then set up their own clothes shops.

Moreover, recently Tai clothing traders and dressmakers, to further develop their economic opportunities, have attempted to learn more dressmaking skills; for example, Thai traditional clothes, decorating fashionable styles of Thai and other Tai clothes for Tai both males and females. They have extended their dress-making skills and knowledge in order to market their business to more customers. Therefore, the opening of economic border has not merely facilitated economic opportunities for Shan Tai and Dehong Tai petty traders (particularly dressmakers), indeed, it has helped support the process of learning new dressmaking skills which have been transferred from the more flexible product flows from Thailand and other Tai-lands of Shan State. This circumstance does not only bring ethnic products from Thailand and Shan state but it does also create a process of cultural learning. This situation can also be viewed as a shifting sort of cultural knowledge transfer among the Tai females who are doing their Thai and Tai fashion and clothing products trade. They have shifted their cultural knowledge by transferring dressmaking skills of the different Thai and Tai clothing fashions.

At one level, this process of cultural learning has taken place as a result of two major conditions; one, it is partly a result of the process of migration into Thailand for economic aims and two, it results partly from the flow of Thai manufactured goods and other ethnic commodities into China.

Through the process of Tai migration into Thailand, Shan Tai dressmakers have learned traditional Thai dressmaking skills from their relatives or friends who had been in Thailand, and had been involved with dressmaking training in Thai styles. Those Tai migrants - skilled as tailors or dressmakers – who are moving into Thailand are usually Tai females who normally began their initial jobs as waitresses, housekeepers or laborers in Thailand. Apart from learning Thai language provided by non-profit organizations or NGOs run for Burmese displaced people, they often look for other short courses to obtain more skills. To become better at their craft, the Tai female migrants sometimes choose to go to dressmaking shops, as dressmaking

assistants, in order to gain training and expertise. Some of them looked for tailoring/dressmaking schools, taking a short course during off-regular work. These Tai migrants, upon return to Shan State, become a channel of training and knowledge transfer in which their skill have helped their friends or relatives make dress using the craft of sewing Thai styles dress.

The second process of cultural learning is a result of Thai manufactured goods flowing into Chinese borderland. Recently, an increase of cross-border trade of Thai manufactured products, including information about Thai clothes, has spread widely into border markets of the Yunnan-Burma border. These Thai manufactured clothes and textile garments, as well as new information about fashion and style, have become raw materials with which the Shan Tai and Dehong Tai dressmakers decorate varied Tai and Thai traditional fashionable dress styles.

I have witnessed many Tai dressmakers enthusiastically learning how to make dress in Thai traditional styles and other Tai styles (partly because of income earning opportunities, partly out of sheer interest). During my fieldwork in Dehong, I was involved with the process of knowledge learning, as a Thai person, because they assumed that as a Thai person I knew about Thailand and dressmaking. Many times as I undertook interviews with Shan Tai and Dehong Tai dressmakers, I was in turn interviewed by my informants. They always asked me about Thai fashion dress. However, what they asked me was nothing to do with new fashion styles in the sense that Thai people wear their modern western costumes nowadays. Instead, they wanted to know how to sew Thai dress in the varied styles of Thai traditional *sin* skirts and suits (blouse and skirt) with golden necklaces and other golden ornaments. Sometimes, during my visits to their shops, we had long talks about my ideas on the clothes they made in Thai traditional style, and they asked me for my opinions. Some Tai dressmakers showed me beautiful fashion-style books that their friends or relatives had bought from Thailand. From time to time, we talked also about Thai traditional fashion styles and I often translated the Thai language instructions, written in Thai, for them. When I was about to go back home to Thailand, they often asked me to

bring them back these kinds of Thai fashion books. They wanted to see more new pattern fashion styles, and learn more how to do more dressmaking.

As dressmaking increases in popularity, demand for training has increased. During 2004, a Shan Tai dressmaker informally launched a training course for Tai newcomers who wanted to learn how to make Thai fashion styles of dress. I was told by *Fangpin*, a Dehong Tai dressmaker whose shop is in the central market, that she took a one-month dressmaking course on varied Thai styles of clothes-dressmaking from the Tai woman. This woman mastered her dressmaking skills when she was staying in Thailand several years ago, and particularly as she worked as tailor/dressmaker in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. She made Shan Tai styles of clothes which are similar to the fashion styles of Northern Thai *Sin* suit, and moreover, she learned how to make dress in a variety of Thai fashions. Since she went back home and got married to a Dehong Tai male, she moved into Dehong in China to follow her husband. While in Dehong, she has a small dressmaking shop at home, receiving orders from Dehong Tai and Shan Tai customers who live nearby her house. Recently, she was asked by some Dehong Tai friends (who want to open a dressmaking shop in the market) to teach them how to make Thai clothes. *Fangpin* was one among other clothes traders and dressmakers who asked for her assistance in learning Thai and Tai dressmaking skills.

As shown by this ethnographic account of Tai dressmakers involved with the process of knowledge learning, it is evident that dressmaking expertise in Thai and Tai clothes has increased in terms of acquirement of the dressmaking skill from other places; particularly Thailand. The Tai traders and dressmakers who once did dressmaking for home use or selling in small amounts now hope to increase their knowledge of dressmaking in varieties of Tai and Thai fashions. This is partly in order to fulfill the increasing dressmaking demand by Tai customers nowadays, and partly in order to give more choices to Tai customers'.

As for the phenomena described above, the formalization of a flexible economic border which allows an increase in the flow of people and goods crossing the border, has promoted an increase in the process of knowledge learning; in

particular of Thai fashion style of dressmaking among the Tai female petty traders. The major result of this increase of the dressmaking knowledge is that it has shifted the process of cultural knowledge; a knowledge transferred among Tai females. Both the petty traders and customers are interconnecting with each other by trade/exchange of varied Tai dress styles. The Tai female traders in the new commercial activity of dressmaking have created a process of knowledge exchange, enabling them to work well in their economic activities and to serve them well for trade at the border market. For this reason, they have crossed the small, local scale of weaving and dressmaking learning processes which were taught within the small household and community over to the larger scale where they have learned to connect interest and opportunities.

Moreover, the connection of Tai dressmakers to Thai clothing fashion and Tai fashion has illustrated that Tai female dressmakers have become a channel that integrates fashion styles in general. But the Tai female dressmakers do not simply select the fashion style that is popular elsewhere. Instead, they choose fashion styles connected to the cultural and social aspects of their own livelihoods and expectation which they hope to perform in their own world. The way they choose these also furthers the idea that what they want to design for themselves is their modernity which then becomes an indicator of “alternative modernities”. The Tai women dressmakers and their dressmaking skills, including the fashion styles chosen by Tai traders and consumers, have reflected an active Tai agency and their ability to produce what they think is modern. Importantly, it points to the manifold ways in which the Tai, as active agents, can question their present and have expectations for their future.

7.3 Conclusion

Today, the development of cross-border trade facilitated by the border opening, has granted particular Tai female petty traders the opportunity to sell more manufactured products in the border market, serving the Tai and other groups of customers. The popularity of Thai clothes and varied Tai fashion styles that are popular among the Tai customers in Dehong today have influenced Tai female petty traders to undertake this economic activity. This brings Tai female petty traders and

dressmakers a stability of regular income. By earning more cash income for the household (more than the man, for instance), Tai females alter Tai female roles and gain more economic power, and consequently more bargaining power, within the household.

However, the advent of cross-border trade today does not only allow the Tai females to play a greater role in their trade, earning major income for the household and consequently more bargaining power, but the flexibility of gender roles between male and female in Tai society is also evident. The cross-border trade in dressmaking and design of Thai traditional styles and varied Tai styles of clothing has created a process of cultural knowledge (of such dressmaking skills) transfer that is necessary to be learned in order to extend trade. In this sense, training, skills and knowledge demand (about the design of Thai style dressmaking and varieties of Tai fashion styles) have been transferred through the interrelationship of cross-border trade exchange and the consumption of Tai customer preferences. As a result, the Tai female dressmakers involved with the process of cultural knowledge building through their cross-border trade exchange become a channel combining fashion styles and modernity. Here, modernity is not as such a response to the global influence. Rather, Tai female dressmakers are involved with the process of cultural knowledge transfer which indicates “alternative modernities” and diverse ways and choices to expand their world are seen in practice.