

CHAPTER 8

DRESS AND CULTURAL STRATEGY, UPGRADING SOCIAL STATUS

Trade exchange and foreign goods have given rise to a volume of anthropological work. Particularly, the classic work of F.K. Lehman in his 1963 book *The Structure of Chin Society* has suggested that the Chin ethnic group's conception of Burma is incorporated into the construction of their own identity. This construction is connected to the process of materialization through the importation and use of goods of Burmese origin in which goods symbolize a claim on civilization and are powerful symbols of social status. Lehman states,

“[The] Chin chief capitalized on any slight connection they happened to have with Burma...the strength of this link with Burma, or the place of Burma in their view of themselves and their own culture...is to be measured not in quantity of goods that come from the outside but in the structural importance of trade and connections with civilization” (Lehman 1963:169-170).

The academic literature recently has drawn attention to agency and purpose in local acts of consumption (for example, Bourdieu 1984, Appadurai 1986, Friedman 1994). Mass-produced foreign goods entering towns and villages around the world are made meaningful in diverse local assertions of modernity. Global products and images are not passively received but are strategically appropriated for the local (Friedman 1994). However, the academic literature on the creation of cultural identity through strategic consumption tends to see the movement of Western products and images into various non-western localities. It is to suppose that the contemporary constitution of the local rests on an opposition to the Western. The movement of

goods was also less significant in local histories of group distinctions prior to the spread of contemporary consumer culture.

Although the desire for foreign goods is generally recognized as a worldwide phenomenon, foreign goods in Dehong locality, as in the case of this study, are not always connected to Western products, nor are these products only a modern identity fashioned on an orientation to the West. As shown by a case of Wancho Village in northeast India, Borooah (2000) contends that foreign products are not always what Wancho villagers employ in their society (Borooah 2000: 373). The residents in Belize (Wilk 1994), and in Thailand (Mill 1997), have made strategic use of imported consumer goods to forge modern identities. Notions of 'foreign' and 'outside' have also meant different things at different times and it is in the negotiation of such social meanings where groups' identities emerge.

Following this line, this chapter seeks to look into the cultural aspect of the advancement of cross-border trade carried out by Tai petty traders in relation to the existing Thai traditional dress purchased by Dehong Tai customers on the Yunnan-Burma border. It focuses on the role of the petty trade in traditional Thai dress styles that has become increasingly popular among Dehong Tai customers. Importantly, this chapter also pays much attention to the "taste" (Bourdieu 1984) of conspicuous consumers (Veblen 1997), that connects traders and consumers in activities of trade exchange. Petty trade of Thai traditional dress by Tai petty traders and dressmakers (previously mentioned in Chapter 7) in the central markets of Dehong has shifted the desire or taste of Dehong Tai customers. Accordingly, this has shifted the social meaning of such dress (because the practice of Thai traditional dress changes the meaning of social status, identifies a higher status, and so on). Among the Tai styles of clothes, Dehong Tai are satisfied to wear Thai dress. These clothes are valued for social reasons and for fashion by Dehong Tai and are seen as high-quality, luxurious and beautiful. The popularity in wearing Thai traditional dress has pushed the Thai clothing price to three times that of Chinese or Burmese dress.

This chapter will firstly describe the social meaning, social status as well as definitions of friendship for the Dehong Tai of the past that were symbolized by dress. From the traditional social meaning reflected in the social status and membership within Dehong Tai society, the chapter will move to the consumptive activities (specifically of Thai dress) practiced by the Dehong Tai and the shifting meaning of social status and membership in Dehong Tai society. It contends that the dress practices are not merely a transportation of culture which Dehong Tai customers enjoyed wearing. But the dress practices have gained a value and status display of acquired wealth that has resulted in “upgrading social status” and in manifesting their social position to the public. Furthermore, the meaning of wearing certain clothes also becomes a self-identification that the Dehong Tai utilize to maintain group identity that performs the same membership of the group they belong to. As a result, it implies a Tai identity and sense of belonging which is separated from others; particularly the Han Chinese. Hence, the dress practice of the Dehong Tai in this shift becomes a “symbolic manipulation” (Bourdieu 1984) which not only symbolically destabilizes the cultural imbalance and lower-status position between the Tai and the Chinese, but also affirms a sense of Pan-Tainess chosen by the Dehong Tai to enlarge their social world.

Nevertheless, the Thai clothes consumed by the Dehong Tai could not have been popular if the two major conditions had not taken place together as their border lives changed: one, the government itself has changed two of its policies (one is regarding the desire for a unitary multi-ethnic nation¹ aimed at ethnic multiplicity, and the second policy change is in regard to the economic border development). Second, the result of economic development and increasing economic growth have allowed the Dehong Tai to earn more income from their intensive farm and non-farm sources as well as other economic activities facilitated by the border opening.

¹ The “unitary multi-ethnic nation” desire means the relatively new political agenda that aims to build a national desire for a unitary multi-ethnic nation. It is the multiple-ethnic unified state which was promoted during the 1950s era when the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) was being established. Officially, during the 1980s, the PRC recognized 55 ethnic minority groups within China, together with the Han majority. The Dai (or Tai) nationality (one of those nationalities) together with the Han, make up the greater Chinese nationality known as “Zhonghua Minzu”.

8.1 Clothing and Social Meaning in Dehong Tai Society

Dehong Tai society is one of the societies where people are concerned about losing face. As Tien Ju-Kang (1986) states in his work regarding religious cults of the Tai (or Pai-I in his study) along the Burma-Yunnan border, Buddhist festivals are where the Dehong Tai pay much attention to donate their money and food, for social display and to show 'face'. Within Dehong Tai communities, textile arts and traditional dress have marked their ethnic identity and continue to play a traditional role in structuring social life and marking significance. Clothing is one of the ethnic marks which the Dehong Tai use in order to identify their prestige, status, as well as belonging. As Carey observes,

"Their [Tai] costume is very pretty, consisting of a turban embroidered with gold thread, a short tight-sleeved jacket, a long white petticoat, and a colored skirt. Their skirts are so much more becoming than the ugly misshapen trousers of the Chinese women, and it is this difference in costume which strikes the eye of the traveler coming from China... it is remarkable on dress apply particularly to the women's costumes, while the men as a rule wear the blue jacket and trousers common to the poorer classes throughout China" (Carey 1900: 494-497).

The Dehong Tai, especially Dehong Tai women, are similar to many other women in the world who prefer to dress in beautiful and fashionable clothes. But significantly, dress for the Dehong Tai are also an indicator that points to social position, and social status (for example, one can discern youth, the married, elderly or poor, common and rich). Furthermore, it is an indicator of group belonging (for example friend-group, village-group, and township-group).

Regarding social position and social status, Dehong Tai clothes in the past identified the wearer's social age and life passage (young, elderly, single, or married), especially for females. For example, the different styles and colors of *xiaoho* or turbans used to decorate the hair identified whether women were single (*xiaoho pu sao*) or married (*xiaoho pu mea*) and their status as elderly (*xiaoho pu tao*). And

according to whether they were single or married, women wore different styles and colors of *sin* (tube skirts with blouse): *sin fa*, a traditional skirt with a figured pattern around the edge,² and *sin maed*, a traditional skirt with a pitched pattern in the middle. Blouse styles were also social indicators: *soe tong taek*, a blouse or an upper garment with an open front, and *soe wea la* with open sides, also identified the wearer's social age. Brightly colored blouses were worn by single or married women, while elders wore a black or grey shirt and *sin* tube skirt following a more conservative dress-style similar to that used for going to the temple, for meditation and Buddhist participation. Both girls and boys wore trousers with traditional shirts when they were young. To a considerable extent, Dehong Tai still identify their social age and life passage through their clothing (see Figure 8.1, 8.2).

As well as identifying social age and life passage, traditional dress styles have also identified the wearer's social status (upper, ordinary, poor) and to some extent still do so today. Female members of high status (*Sao pha*) families have dressed in *sin fa si tin*, a long skirt with a four-figured pattern around the edge and a distinctive style of golden silk blouse. The four-figured patterns of the *sin*, and golden color and silk for the shirt have denoted the higher status of those who have money and prestige. *sin fa sam tin*, a long skirt with a three-figured pattern around the edge, and a bright or red-colored shirt has identified common level or ordinary people, while *sin fa song tin*, a long skirt with a two-figured pattern around the edge, has denoted poor people.

Today *sin fa sam tin* still identifies ordinary people, who now wear different styles of colorful shirts. The *sin fa si tin* for *Sao pha* families and upper status Dehong Tai people disappeared with enforcement of communist policies after the 1950s.

However, regarding dress styles of the Tai maiden, present day teenage Tai girls in daily life favor T-shirts, jeans and high heels in the Chinese fashion. But after marriage and having a home, Tai females turn to wearing black skirts, open front blouses, hair knotted in a bun with bright colored turban. Dehong Tai males do not have a distinctive clothing style; they have changed their Shan Tai styles clothing and

² I refer to a pattern of small figures, in many shapes of squares, circles or flowers, etc depending on design.

now wear T-shirts, shirts and trousers in their everyday lives. For special occasions, such as during Buddhist festivals, Dehong Tai males usually wear Dehong Tai style clothes with *Tai yai* style *soe wea la pu jai*, a Shan style shirt, and *kon si* pants.

Regarding dress as an indicator of group identity (for example friend-group, village-group, and township-group), the term *Hed Taiko Kan* or making a fellow-group is used among the Tai to refer to a Tai group, both male and female (within village or outside village) who wear the same colored, stylish and fashionable clothes as part of belonging to their friend-group. In constructing group identity, group members in the past would choose the same color, and same style of shirts, blouses and pants or *sin* tube skirts. Then, they helped together to tailor and design a pattern in the same fashion style. Today, the group who wants to wear the same styles to identify their group belonging will go to a dressmaking shop in the market, pick up cloth and order a well-fashioned and designed pattern for their beautiful dress from the dressmaker.

At other levels of group identity, it is the dress practice that identifies which village they come from. You see village-group identity in competitions during the Buddhist festivals where each group shows off their beautiful and fashionable clothes to other villages.

There is also another level of dress practice that shows the township identity. The Tai in different *Muang* or petty states traditionally have their own style of dress, particularly women's dress. For instance, the Tai in NamKham and the Tai in Lashio have different styles of clothes, particularly the females' *sin* or long tube skirts and blouses as well as hats and turbans. Although the Tai in these two townships have the same basic styles of female' *sin* or long skirts, and *kon* or pants, they have particularly unique *soe tong taek* (an upper garment with an open front) and *soe wea la* (upper garment with open sides) that they can utilize to identify their township. The Tai in *Muang Mao* (of Burma) and the Tai in *Muang Khon* (Luxi of China) are another example of groups that have their own dress, ornaments, turbans, etc. to define their belonging. For example, the Tai in *Muang Khon*, particularly women, usually wear a different figured pattern of *sin* and blouse styles with an open front, as well as

different turban and silver or golden buttons of peacock designs, whilst the Tai in *Muang Mao* normally wear a blouse style of open sides and *sin* in a unique figured pattern around the edge, as well as wearing hat (made of bamboo). Therefore, it is not surprising that during Buddhist festivals whenever the Tai gather together, we can see the differences and contrasts of beautiful fashioned styles of varied Tai clothes, as well as the Tai people illustrating their different identities which are usually classified as group identities of companionship, village or township.



Figure 8.1 A group of single Dehong Tai women in the past. Their traditional Dehong Tai styles of *sin* tube skirt and *soe tong taek* blouse with a *xiaoho pu sao* hairstyle set with flowers, identify them as single Dehong Tai females.



Figure 8.2 A group of married Dehong Tai women attend *Poi Aokwa*, the Buddhist Lent festival, in a temple in central Luxi. They wear the traditional Dehong Tai turban, *soe tong taek* blouse and *sin* tube skirt identifying their married status. The fabrics utilized to make their clothes are said to be from Thailand.



Figure 8.3 A group of Dehong Tai people wear the same style and color of clothes identifying that they come from the same village.

8.2. Thai Dress and Commodities as Cultural Strategies

Today, Thai products are popular among Tai inhabitants along the border. Although Thai products, especially Thai traditional dress and Thai materials for making clothes seem to be generally more than three times the price of Chinese or Burmese products, Dehong Tai women usually choose Thai products, commenting on the luxury, modern fashion, nice appearance and high quality as reasons why they choose Thai products. The Dehong Tai male customers prefer to buy Thai T-shirts and slacks and shoes with Thai brand names, claiming that these are better quality than Chinese or Burmese products.

A close look at Thai brand-name products that sell well for Tai petty traders and peddlers makes it clear that these products are not among the many types of foreign exports aimed at by the Thai government. The Thai Department of Foreign Trade (2004) notes that the following constitute the majority of Thai exports into China: food products (fresh fruits, frozen sea foods), electrical appliances and agricultural supplies. Instead, however, Tai petty traders and peddlers in Dehong have traded so called “ethnic commodities” relating to cultural materials popular with the Tai. Commodities such as cloth-- *pasin* or garments to make tube skirt, *sin* or tube

skirts and Thai or southern Shan Tai style dress and other fashions -- as well as beauty creams, shoes and entertainment materials such as VCD copies transported from *Muang Taitae* ("southern Tai land" or Shan State in the Dehong Tai meaning), and from *Muang Thai* or Thailand, are more popular among the Tai customers on both sides of the border. *Kamlearn*, a Shan Tai peddler claimed,

"Clothes and beauty creams from Thailand are the most popular items among my Dehong Tai clients. Even though shampoos, beauty creams and perfumes with Chinese brand names are similar to the Thai products and they are cheaper, Dehong Tai buyers usually complain about quality and then choose Thai products instead. So I prefer offering Thai products because they always sell very well in price and quantity" (pers. comm. January 2007).

In their conversations, Dehong Tai informants at several festivals talked about and showed me the Thai commodities they bought. At Buddhists festivals including weddings, new house warming and new temple greeting festivals where the Dehong Tai gather, one can easily find pictures of Dehong Tai women showing off their new shoes and new style of *sin* and clothes to their friends.

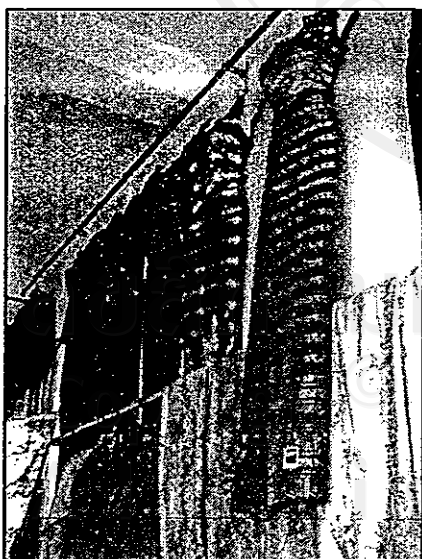


Figure 8.4-8.5 In Kad Mai market, central Luxi of Yunnan, Thai traditional dress are sell very well among Dehong Tai clients. Tai peddlers usually order big packs of clothes transported through both the Mekong River and the Burmese overland routes.

The festivals become a stage for social display (Tien Ju-Kang 1986 [1949]) where Dehong Tai people compete to show off their wealth through the expensive and beautiful dress. It offers an excellent forum for display and conspicuous expression and people usually take care to look their best; it also indicates ethnic belonging of being Tai. A failure to dress well, properly suggests laziness. Both men and women like to present themselves well and devote a good deal of time and money to their appearance. The majority of men wear new attire; mostly Tai styles outfits or Western style suits with Thai brand-names.

Women's dress is more marked than men's by age difference. Single girls are expected to make the most of their looks, and they spend a lot of time thinking about and perfecting their appearance. The single Dehong Tai girls choose traditional dress with specific hair styles with *xiaoho* in bright color, made from silky and shiny materials. In wedding ceremonies, many Dehong Tai brides choose Thai traditional *sin* suits of blouse and skirt because of the connections to beauty, wealthy and ethnic belonging. They wear fine materials, reflecting their families' pride and wealth; this also offers the opportunity to show-off for visitors.

Clothing is one of the first areas marking ethnic belonging and social prestige in which the Dehong Tai have introduced complex change. The term *Soe Khoaw Thai*, or "dressing in Thai clothes" among Dehong Tai inhabitants indicates Dehong Tai males who wear T-shirts and trousers showing Thai brand-names and denotes Dehong females who wear *sin* suit in Thai traditional fashion style. This is in contrast to the old-type attire, mostly cheap Chinese trousers, open-necked shirts, sweatshirts or sweaters favored for working wear. The term *Soe Khoaw Khea*, or "dressing in Chinese clothes" is used by the Dehong Tai elders to criticize young Dehong Tai people who attend the ceremonies or festivals in these cheaper clothes. Dressing in Chinese clothes or particularly dressing like Chinese in the Tai Buddhist festivals is more or less unacceptable, brings shame to families; a connotation that they do not belong to the group and that they are Chinese, not Tai.

This phenomenon of wearing Thai clothing as well as the associated economic exchanges in ethnic commodities can be seen as a social value reflecting what people gain or value through these object(s). As asserted by Simmel (1978), "Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged". Hence, reflection on the social values of products defined by the Tai and their dress practices in Dehong is connected to the approach of "cultural strategies" (Friedman 2002). This approach assists us in understanding the shifting social meaning and subsequent reshaping of the border-cultural life of the Dehong Tai in a particular context where they have been dominated in both culture and class by the Chinese hegemony under the state control for so long.

As asserted by Friedman (2002), commodities and the way people consume can be seen as an aspect of cultural strategies of self identification and self maintenance. He presented two cases of Congolese people: (1) their consumption of Coke (imported from outside Brazzaville) as a display of well-being and fertility and a sign of power; and (2) their wearing of "La Sape". He asserts, "It is not a symbol of social position but it is a concrete manifestation of such a position" and "its goal, for those Congolese, is to overcome a lack in the present via an importation of life-force from the outside" (Friedman 2002: 237). In this sense, neither Coke nor La Sape simply show the Congolese symbolizing a new social meaning through commodities. Consumption and display of both products is a cultural strategy of accumulating prestige for success, and it poses a potential threat to the real power structure within Congolese society (Friedman 2002: 237-238). Also, Bourdieu (1984) connects "taste" and consumption to a particular aspect of social distinction in which people acquire higher cultural forms in order to produce their identities accordingly.

Through these viewing lenses, we see that Dehong Tai people and their dress practices are distinctive in the sense that Tai peddlers trading Thai commodities to Dehong Tai customers have created a new meaning for the transaction for both the product and people involved. Purchasing these Thai products becomes a cultural strategy of prestige accumulation that displays their self-identification. Through this form of self-identification, Dehong Tai people attempt to manifest that their social position differs from that of others, especially Han Chinese people.

Since the popularity of Thai clothes from the 1990s, Thai clothes, *sin* and Thai fashion have partly replaced the old meaning of traditional clothes among the Dehong Tai. *Sin fa sam tin* and traditional clothing styles still identify ordinary people today, but the Dehong Tai have reclassified the meaning of “wealthy” through Thai dress. Dehong Tai people who can afford Thai clothes, particularly luxurious and expensive Thai dress, are called *khon mee so* (a rich person), because Thai clothes are three times more expensive than Chinese or Burmese clothes.

Today, Dehong Tai people who wear Thai clothes do so to display publicly their wealth and prosperity, especially during festivals. Hence, apart from Buddhist materials and money donated to temples, Thai clothes become a signifier of wealth that Dehong Tai people use to express their prosperity socially to the public. Referring to a Dehong Tai person as *Mi la ya la long* or one who has a proud face implies that the person has gained prestige and wealth. The term is used for a Dehong Tai person who dresses proudly in Thai clothes to display publicly their wealth and higher social status at festivals. In contrast, the phrase *Am mi la* or losing face refers to a Dehong Tai person who attends festivals dressed in Chinese clothes or clothes with a low-quality Chinese or other brand name.

There are two main reasons why Thai clothes have been made a public signifier of wealth in Dehong Tai culture. First, for the Dehong Tai, Chinese clothing is a cultural alienation to Tai cultures -- the culture that has invaded and displaced their own -- and is thus an unwelcome and negative presence. Second, Chinese clothes with cheap prices and poor quality are seen to imply the low position and social status of those who wear them. This is because the Dehong Tai usually wear the cheaper clothes during work days and not on special occasions such as festivals when they wear their better-quality clothes.

The cultural strategies that the Dehong Tai customers perform in wearing Thai dress should be read within the context of a history of cultural hegemony of the Han Chinese. The dress practices are attempting to challenge the Chinese hegemony which has been dominant for long. In the past the Dehong Tai, who were once proud of having their own kingdom, have lost that pride through losing their lands and

livelihoods and facing the superior numbers and power of the incoming Chinese (see the detail in the previous chapter).

Nowadays, the phrase *Muang Tai leu Muang khea*, or “Dehong Tai soil ruled under the Chinese nation” as used by Dehong Tai elites in urban Luxi has recently come to acquire a second meaning of feelings of inferiority through displacement from their homeland. In light of the history of cultural hegemony of the Chinese culture (as contextualized in Chapter 6), here we see a new development in the history of cultural hegemony in which they are now challenging the uneven power in the relationship to the now dominant Chinese through the higher quality given to the Thai products that they bring into the land where they live. More importantly, these Thai products that the Dehong Tai bring into China are a clear expression of a marker of “alternative modernities” which is chosen because the Dehong Tai feel attached to their ethnicity and culture. It is in a sense of *Pii Nong* images or the images of culture of brotherhood (Suthiwong, 2004), that create an intimacy with their own culture. Here a feeling of “ethnic and cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld, 2005) is being forged through the consumer choice of Thai products over Chinese products, and this also reinforces “face” in the traditional Tai sense of social display. It involves, on the part of the consumer, first the assertion of ethnic difference between the commodities on sale, and then the placement of a higher cultural value on the Thai products through the languages of consumption: luxury, quality, beauty and the like.

Interestingly, here a culture of sibling or brotherhood is claimed and created within an economic world; through choosing Thai products the Dehong Tai are forming an allegiance as consumers with Tai or Thai producers in opposition to Chinese manufacturers. By borrowing culture from the Thai and through a feeling of cultural intimacy with Tai or Thai, the Dehong Tai people have appropriated a new meaning through, and mapped it onto, Thai commodities.

The way in which Dehong Tai customers compare Chinese products with Thai products in terms of quality and modern style has become their “cultural strategy”. The Dehong Tai are attempting to accumulate “cultural prestige” and to transpose wealthy images from Thai culture, in order to manifest and improve their own self-

identification in their encounters with Chinese people and Chinese products. In this sense, the meaning of the high quality of Thai commodities is extended to manifest the “highness” of Thai and by extension Dehong Tai culture, in comparison with the low quality and low position of Chinese commodities and hence Chinese culture. As a result, the meaning of wearing certain clothes implies that the Tai identity and their ethnic and cultural belonging are separate from each other; particularly the Han Chinese. Hence, the dress practice of the Dehong Tai does not only symbolically destabilize the cultural imbalance and lower-status position between the Tai and the Chinese. But it also affirms a sense of Pan-Tainess where the Thai products are used as the marker of alternative modernities in which the Dehong Tai think about their modernity and expectations for the future. Thai products become a marker of alternative modernities that offer the Dehong Tai diverse ways and choices in enlarging their perspectives and experiences with the outside world.

8.3 The Challenge to Cultural Hegemony: Under What Conditions?

In recent years, people of Dehong Tai nationality have sought to challenge Chinese hegemonic power by asserting their difference from the Chinese. Over the last decade, Dehong Tai people have revitalized their Tai cultural activities such as by participating in Buddhist festivals, reading Buddhist scripts and practicing their own religious beliefs.

Two conditions in particular have enabled this Tai cultural revitalization to be practiced possibly by the Tai. One condition derives from the changes that the Chinese government has made to two policies; the “unitary multi-ethnic nation” and border areas regulations. The first policy I refer to is the relatively new political agenda that aims to build a national desire for a unitary multi-ethnic nation. It is the multiple-ethnic unified state which was promoted during the 1950s era when the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) was being established. Officially, during the 1980s, the PRC recognized 55 ethnic minority groups within China, together with the Han majority. The Dai (or Tai) nationality (one of those nationalities) together with the Han, make up the greater Chinese nationality known as “Zhonghua Minzu”. Ethnic classification and recognition of ethnicity by the PRC government focuses in part on

traits of ethnicity; it is closely related to the assumptions of Communism and the secular character of the country but does not consider some important traits, such as religion (in particular superstition). The second policy I refer to is an economic policy concerning border areas where the Chinese government has alleviated the border regulation, allowing international trade outward to Southeast Asia. These policy changes have enabled Thai products to be brought across the border and put on sale legally for consumption by the Dehong Tai inside China.

The second condition, enabling a revitalization of Tai culture, concerns the response of the Dehong Tai to national policy changes. The government's transfer of new agricultural technology and extensive opening of land for cash crops have presented the Dehong Tai with new economic opportunities which have improved the livelihoods of people in the border areas (see Figure 8.6). The Dehong Tai in rural areas have generally gained more money from cash crops, which they spend on new commodities, including the more expensive Thai clothing discussed in this study.

Also, it should be noted that the way in which the Dehong Tai choose to appropriate Thai commodities to manifest their self-identification connects to the local histories of the Tai and their images of cultural intimacy with the wider Thailand. Therefore, the argument is that rather than buying contemporary western dress products, consuming Thai products represents a high value as compared to Chinese products.

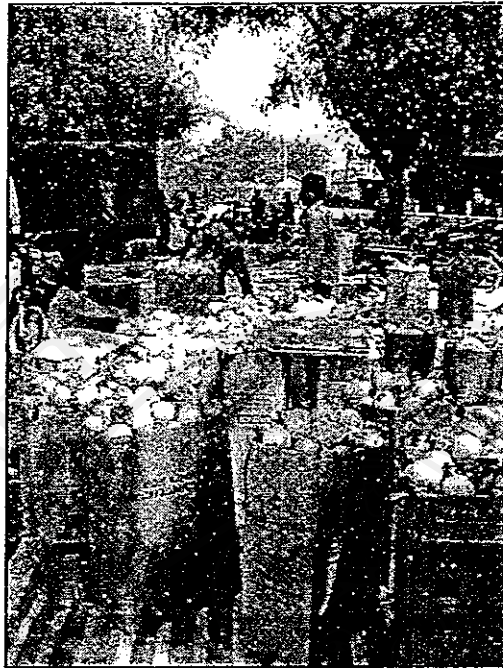


Figure 8.6 Apart from rice, melons and watermelons are the most popular cash crops that the Dehong Tai cultivate for income. Producing cash crops enables them to generate income that they use to buy expensive products and invest in cultural activities.

8.4 Conclusion

The Han Chinese dominate multiple sites along the Chinese national border. We see some of the consequences and responses to development as supported by the dominant Han Chinese in this discussion of Dehong Tai in Dehong Prefecture on the Chinese border where Dehong Tai were formerly the dominant group. Many of the Dehong Tai have attempted to break away from the hegemonic tendency of Chinese aspirations for nationhood and have created a new site for distinguishing themselves to negotiate with cultural domination by the Chinese. These attempts by the Dehong Tai not only problematize the unity of Chinese culture, but also seek to create an alternative way of imagining and creating their own revitalized and re-imagined Tai culture.

We have seen here how the Dehong Tai people have responded to the more flexible flow of cultural commodities, especially Thai goods distributed by Tai petty

traders and peddlers, on the Chinese side of the border. The Dehong Tai have appropriated Thai traditional clothing and varied Tai fashion styles to identify themselves distinctively, as a way to create new cultural meaning for themselves. This constitutes a cultural response in their search for “alternative modernities” as a way to re-imagine and reconstruct their cultural life as part of the larger Tai brotherhood while living in a Chinese border area.

Fuelled by Tai petty traders seeking to expand their profits, dress practices in Dehong Tai societies have become replete with new social images of gaining “wealth” through commodities, images that the Dehong Tai have drawn into their own ethnic imaginary. Appropriating Thai commodities into the Dehong Tai culture conveys meanings constructed through consuming and parading the products of a related “brotherhood” culture. The context is one of historical suppression. The purpose is above all to (1) destabilize the uneven power between the Tai and the Han Chinese, shifting the long-term feeling of inferiority in the face of an increasingly powerful Chinese chauvinism as the Chinese economy and Chinese nation grow ever more powerful, and (2) affirm a sense of Pan-Tainess, reproducing the feeling of “ethnic and cultural intimacy” through the consumer choices of Thai products over Chinese products. Hence, at the same time, the Thai products are also used as the marker of alternative modernities that offer the Dehong Tai a diversity of choices in creating their world at large.