

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

This study has considered the varied strategic practices at the border-- reworked in local, cultural meaning -- that are challenging the uneven power and shifting ethnic identity within the context of the advent of the 'economic border'. Particularly, it is the "practice of translocality" within the context of transnational flow of goods, media and people over the border that allows the Tai living along the Yunnan-Burma border, as active agents, to think outside the influences of cultural domination that exist for them under the modern state.

Tai petty traders conducting their cross-border exchanges in ethnic commodities along the Yunnan-Burma border comprise the focus of this study. This study situates these trading activities and the roles of Tai petty traders with respect to state power, and the exercise of power by multiple actors at the border (including regional economic forces, as well). In investigating the Tai trading practices and conspicuous consumption as the consequence of trade exchange, this study has paid attention to notions of constructed images of modernity and identity practiced through ethnic commodity utilization in which the Tai have attempted to instill new meanings for themselves in a particular context. Cross-border trade in ethnic commodities exchanged between the Tai petty traders and Tai clients does not only offer the sale of daily, economic products in economic lives. But cross-border trade, viewed as part of the translocality of Tainess, also offers the Tai border livelihoods a new process of cultural revitalization and formation within a history of ethnic-cultural domination. The major findings of this research can be summarized as follows:

### 9.1 The Flexible Economic Border as an Ambiguous Sphere

Since the 1980s, the Yunnan-Burma frontier has been drastically changed by the growing economic development in this region. Huge amounts of Chinese manufactured goods have been transported through border towns of China, especially Yunnan and Guianxi provinces, into Southeast Asian countries, and have helped establish Chinese markets along the borders of Thailand, Burma, Laos and other countries. The overt design for state-level cooperation by the Chinese state is to deterritorialize the border. But in fact, the deterritorialization as arranged by the Chinese state, is arranged selectively for economic development of a particular section of the economic border. The states' border regulations (including both Burma's as well as the Chinese regulations) need to be more flexibly enforced in order to enrich economic growth supporting not only national economic growth but also global-regional economic connections to Southeast Asian countries. The regional and global economic force of free trade, as exemplified by regional economic integration within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), has partly forced the Chinese state, and other states in Southeast Asia, to re-open their borders, while the states themselves, especially the Chinese state, have been simultaneously pursuing their own economic interests.

The new conditions resulting from the Chinese state launching the opening of borders can be characterized by the idea of a "flexible economic border" which increasingly allows the flow of people and goods, with aims to open a gateway of economic activities across national border which were once strictly controlled by the state. Furthermore, the "flexible economic border" phenomena are conceptualized in this thesis as an "ambiguous sphere" which aims to explain power dynamism of the border. It describes a situation where the state does not maintain absolute power in defining and operating the border. But instead, power at the border becomes ambiguous because the power exercised at the border is challenged by many players; i.e. local inhabitants, foreign investors and local authorities. Although we still see the state concerned with sovereignty and national territory through its many exercises of power — for instance, soldiers patrolling police and border gates — such power is now

negotiated by other agents who recognize gaps in the state's power. A sphere of overlapping, ambiguous power emerges where the power of different groups and of various levels (i.e., regional-global forces, local authorities and particularly local inhabitants) challenge the state's power exercised at the border. Particularly, the ambiguous sphere conceptualizes the agency of local people at the border; as it is evident that border residents and their livelihoods are dialectically shaped by interrelationships between the consequences of nation-states' economic border policies and local resident's own alternative choices (constructed by themselves), in the wake of socio-economic opportunities.

Here, as seen in the cases of Tai petty traders and the associated Tai consumers, these trading practices present the interrelationships between state power and the local inhabitants. On the one hand, we see how the states selectively allow border flows and urge local residents to cooperate with border activities. And on the other hand, we see how the local residents design their border lives within alternative directions, under constraints and new opportunities, engaging with the state's power. For this research, Shan Tai petty traders and Dehong Tai petty traders have illustrated, in comparison, the complexity and dynamism of border traders' lives by the way in which these two groups of petty traders have come into the market. It is found that Shan Tai petty traders in the border market become Burmese migrants in China; their emergence is generally a response to economic depression in Burma and the uneven economic border growth of Burma and China. The emergence of Dehong Tai petty traders, on the other hand, is a consequence of the particular effects of Chinese migration into the borderland, land reform policy in China, and urbanization, as well as economic development in Chinese borderland. However, both Shan Tai and Dehong Tai petty traders regard their occupation in the market as relying on their social capital and varied, new opportunities. Analysis shows that this is due to urban (referring to city centers in border areas) economic opportunities launched by the government and its policies of economic border development which are increasingly offering new economic opportunities. For the Shan Tai, success in their petty trade is dependent on their social capital, mainly their varied "social networks" based on their relatives or friends settling down in Dehong; whilst Dehong Tai petty traders – also

utilizing social capital - employ their bilingual language ability (Tai and Chinese) and their Chinese citizenship to succeed in their petty trade.

To understand these social networks, as a social practice employed by the Tai petty traders for their economic gain at the border, it is found that the Tai petty traders do not merely apply the existing social networks connected via horizontal relationship layers of *Pii Nong* (sibling, kin, or peer), and of friendship, *Taiko*. But they also build up new social network in a vertical layer called *Konlong* or “big man” networks in order for transborder trade, especially on the Chinese side, to be safe and convenient.

## 9.2 The Process of Translocality and Ethnic Identity

My interest in the cultural production of Tai identities under a shifting environment sparked this study; the changing economic and political conditions, the bearing of state policies and actions on how border residents construct communities, and the diversity of responses to the states’ actions. Shifts in patterns of trade activity (and associated shifts in patterns of consumer demand) reveal the Tai residents’ efforts to position themselves in relationship to the hierarchy of other powerful groups (especially the dominant Han Chinese and the social hierarchy in their society) since they are embedded within nation-states.

The situation and analysis of the cross-border trade and trade exchanges conducted by Tai petty traders with the Tai consumers does not merely illustrate daily commerce of economic products. Instead, it is also evidence that the process of ethnic commodities’ circulation transmits constructed images of other places, and then creates “translocal imaginaries” which exist among the Tai residents within the specific transnational contexts of commodities exchange.

Although there is no physical border between Thai and China, Tai residents along the Yunnan-Burma border feel attached to Thai products and varied Tai ethnic products, and then preferably trade and consume them. Hence, the trading exchange practices of the Tai petty traders with their Tai customers transmit images of connectedness in which ethnic commodities transported from Thailand and the Shan

state play an important role in constituting translocal imaginaries. Mainly, the constructed images come about in two ways, in the sense of *Pii Nong Tai* or Tai siblinghood which is attached to an ideal of “ethnic and cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2005) and second, in the particular sense that the Tai regard Thai clothing products as “high quality and fashion” in comparison to lower-fashion and lower-quality characteristics seen in the Chinese products. Hence, the translocality of Tainess in which the Tai are involved becomes a significant process in which the Tai, as active agents, attempt to utilize and improvise constructed images of Tai siblinghood and affinity with Thailand and other Tai-lands, in order to upgrade their own ethnic identity in relation to their hierarchical status and the Han Chinese. The translocality of Tainess, therefore, becomes a cultural-strategic practice utilized among Tai petty traders and has follow-on effects on Dehong Tai consumers in Dehong.

Through trading activities in ethnic commodities, I argue that for the Tai, ethnicity is playing a crucial role in their daily lives at the border. The Tai residents use their ethnic status for their own socio-economic benefit. Although local communities along the border which share ethnicity and culture have been declining for decades while under state control, the economic forces of globalization, cross-border trade, and regional economic growth have reversed that trend. Ethnicity nowadays becomes the social basis of a “translocal community” where we see social connections between the Tai speaking people in different and distant places of “here” and “there”.

### 9.3 Cultural Strategies and Alternative Modernities

The translocality of Tainess practiced through trading activities mentioned above has become a strategic practice for the Dehong Tai consumers, in particular. For this analysis, the dress practices of Thai and varied Tai styles traded among the Tai petty traders and the Tai customers are not merely a transportation of culture which Dehong Tai customers enjoy wearing. But the dress practices have become a cultural strategy in which the Dehong Tai utilize the signs and symbols hidden in the wearing and displaying of Thai dress in order to manipulate or negotiate with several hierarchical layers of power. To expand, firstly, the practice of dressing in Thai



clothes has gained value and status as a display of acquired wealth resulting in an “upgrading of social status” and hierarchical positions among members of Dehong Tai society. Thus, the meaning of wearing certain clothes becomes a self-identification that the Dehong Tai use to display their social position in public. Secondly, the dress practices of the Dehong Tai are symbolically breaking down the cultural imbalance and lower-status position between the Tai and the Chinese. The Tai are now challenging the uneven power and lower-status position between the Tai and the Han Chinese by the practices of translocality. The translocality of Tainess by the Tai aims to break away from long-term feelings of inferiority in the face of an increasingly powerful Chinese chauvinism as the Chinese economy and Chinese nation grows ever more powerful. At the same time, the dress practice of the Dehong Tai is affirming a sense of Tainess in which Thai products are used as the marker of alternative modernities which the Dehong Tai use to think about their modernity and expectations for the future.

Here, ethnic commodities, particularly Thai products, and translocality practices as seen in trading of ethnic commodities become an alternative that in turn provides alternative notions of modernity. It reflects alternative modernities in which the Tai people utilize ethnic commodities as an aspect of their alternative to choose their own modernities. Here, modernity does not necessarily mean following those of the dominant Chinese or the West. Instead, it is chosen within a particular sense of ethnicity. Importantly, modernity here does not trap the Tai in a realm of cultural domination and alienation played out under state hegemony. Instead, we see an alternative modernity emerge that gives the Tai alternative choices to enlarge their outside world; they are able to gain access to the outside world (more perspectives, a bit more practice).

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#### 9.4 The Flexibility of Gender roles and the Process of Cultural Knowledge Transfer

The development of cross-border trade facilitated by the flexible economic border and flexible regulations rearranged by the Chinese state, has granted Tai female petty traders, in particular, the opportunity to sell more of their manufactured products in the border market, to serve Tai and other groups of customers. Importantly, the advent of cross-border trade in ethnic commodities nowadays does not only allow the Tai female to play a greater role in trade, earning major income for the household and consequently more bargaining power, but also to obtain a noticeable, increased flexibility in gender roles between male and female within Tai society. Moreover, the trade of particularly specific skills of decorative dressmaking in Thai traditional fashion and varied Tai styles of clothing has created a process of transferring cultural knowledge in which training and skills regarding design have been acquired and transferred through interrelationships of cross-border trade exchange. The demands for such design skills are also in response to the conspicuous consumption of Dehong Tai customers preferring such clothing commodities. As a result, the Tai female dressmakers engaged with the process of transferring cultural knowledge through their cross-border trade exchanges become a channel to combine fashion styles and modernity. Here, modernity is not a response *as such* to the global influence. Rather, Tai female dressmakers involved with the process of cultural knowledge transfer are an indicator of so-called “alternative modernities” that have resulted from Tai-constructed alternatives which continue to enlarge their world – in possibility and in practicality.