

Thai Traditional Dress Knowledge, Cultural Transfer and Alternative Modernities along the Burmese-Yunnan Border

Aranya Siriphon
Lecturer of Chiang Mai University, Thailand



Abstract

This paper explores cross-border trade carried out by Tai petty traders, an ethnic nationality spread across border area of Shan State and Dehong Prefecture of Yunnan, China. These Tai belong to Tai-speakers, who have long shared cultural and linguistic trait with the Thai in Thailand and other Tai speaking groups in Burma, Vietnam and Laos. The paper focuses on dressmaking fashions of Thai (Thailand) and Tai traditional dresses styles which traders and dressmakers acquire to learn more knowledge for their economic advantage. It contends that advantaging with a condition of transnational goods flowing over the border since Chinese Economic Reform in 1978 onward, Tai petty traders and dressmakers have taken a good chance to revise their cultural connection with the Thai in Thailand practicing and other Tai speaking groups through dress trading and dressmaking. Tai dressmakers today are transferring knowledge of Thai traditional dress fashion style into their trade in order to gain more economic power.

This paper argues that, as a result and within this economic context, it is not only economic power to be gained popularly by Tai petty traders, but it is also the “cultural knowledge” which is significantly combining fashion styles of Thai and Tai affiliated culture, and alternative modernity. Here, alternative modernity is not as such a response to the global influence of dominant Western or Chinese styles. Rather, these Tai have shown their own modernities in diverse ways of choices chosen from affiliated Thai culture. Thai traditional dress and culture, as an image of modernity seen actively by the Tai, are expanding their social world in practice.

Situating the Tai: Place and its Background

The Tai as Tai speaking people in Southeast Asia

The Tai mentioned here is one of Tai-speaking groups who have long been in the Dehong Dai-Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture (later called the Dehong Prefecture) (Figure1),

located in southwestern Yunnan of China. Administratively, the Dehong Prefecture has under it two cities: Ruili City and Wanding City, and four counties: Luxi, Longchuan, Yingjiang, and Lianghe¹, with a total area of 11,526 square kilometers.

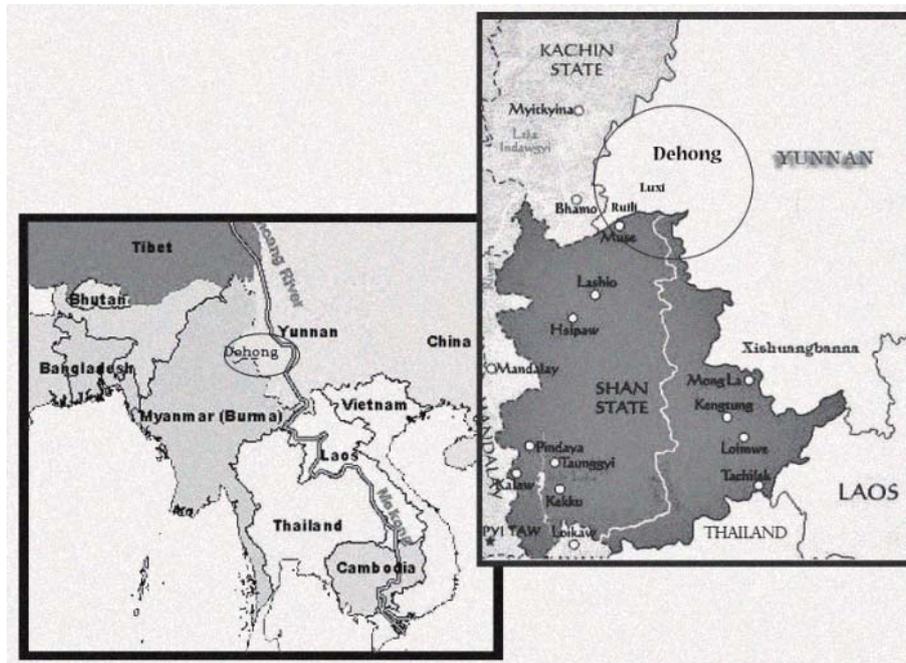


Figure1: Luxi (or Mangshi) is the capital of the Dehong Dai-Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture. Ruili and Wanding are the two main significant border cities on the Yunnan–Burma border, on the main overland route for transporting products between China and Southeast Asia.

About 334,000 Dehong Tai people live in Dehong Prefecture (Dehong Historical Office, 2005). The Tai in China are one of the 56 nationalities in China. The Chinese government officially refers to them as ‘Dai’, which include the Tai Lüe and other subgroups of the Tai in Xishuangbanna and other parts of Yunnan. Historically, the Chinese called the Tai the Jinchi, Pai-i or Bai-Yi. English scholars referred to Tai as Chinese Shan, Dehong Tai and Chinese Tai, while ‘Tai speaker’ is used generally in the English literature.

Tai people on both sides of the Burmese–Yunnan border are called ‘Tai Yai’ (the Great Tai) which is classified linguistically and culturally as one of the Tai-speaking groups in Southeast Asia, related to the Lao in Laos, the Shan in the Shan state of Myanmar, and the Thai in Thailand. All Tai are culturally similar, and share the same religion – specifically,

1. All the cities and counties mentioned here are included as MuangTai (Tai principality) by Dehong Tai people because these towns have long been their settlement. These cities and counties nowadays are called in Chinese names. But, for the Dehong Tai, they always call these cities and counties in their own names: Mangshi or Luxi = MuangKhon, Longchuan = MuangWan, Yingjing = MuangLa, Lianghe = MuangTi, Wanding = MuangWanTeng, Jefang = MuangJeafang, Ruili = Muang Mao.

Hinayana Buddhism, as it is practiced in Southeast Asia. Their language is related to Lao, Shan, Thai, and other Tai languages that belong to the Tai language family. Regardless of which side of the border the Shan Tai and Dehong Tai have lived, the Tai of both sides have long shared ethnic, linguistic, and cultural traits with each other and call themselves ‘Tai’ in general. They mark their differences in relation to the places where they live – muang (townships) – which are situated north or south of the Mao or the Ruili River².

The Tai and a History of Cultural Domination

The Tai state was historically organized as a hierarchical system. In the Shan state, there were more than 30 principalities, each ruled by a hereditary chief known as chaofa (Lord of Heaven). In the Chinese kingdom, the Tai chaofa belonged to the tusi system, which incorporated the Chinese authority in Tengyueh or Tengchong. Throughout history, the Tai states have been politically dominated by Chinese and Burmese states including, for a time, British colonizers. In the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Tai chaofa were under the political power of the Burmese and Chinese kings. However, they were able to maintain relative autonomy and various degrees of sovereign status during the period. For example, the Tai chaofa of the Tai states established on the China – Burma frontier accepted the power of the Burmese kings and Chinese emperors by sending them tributes. Subsequently, while the Tai chaofa on the Chinese side were ruling their own principalities and sent tribute to Chinese authorities during the late nineteenth century, and joined the Chinese nationalists during the early twentieth century, the Shan Tai state of Burma in the late nineteenth century was subjugated by British colonial power. The Shan Tai then suffered from ethnic conflicts and violence under the Burmese military during the twentieth century onward.

For the Tai in China, their livelihood changed dramatically during the communist era, which began when the Chinese Communist Party took control of the nation more than 50 years ago. Ethnic assimilation through sinicization, ethnic classification and development projects based on communism forced drastic change upon the Tai and other ethnic borderlanders culturally and socially during the decades of communist control. Particularly in Dehong, the Dehong Tai experienced political conflict and suffering from intensive changes since the Burma Road was built in the late 1930s to link China with Burma (T’ien Ju-K’ang,

2. In this area, the Tai people use ‘Tai Nua’ (north Tai) when referring to the Tai who live north of the Mao River or the Ruili or Shweli River. That includes the Dehong Tai living in MuangKhon, MuangWan, MuangLa, MuangTi, MuangWanTeng and other townships in Dehong and Xishuangbanna in present day China. Tai Tai (south Tai) refers to the Tai who have long lived south of the Mao or the Ruili River, or in some part of MuangJeafang and MuangMao in China, or in MuangMuse, Namkham and other townships in the Shan state of Myanmar.

1986) and after that with the Chinese Revolution (Yos, 2001).

By the 1980s, the Chinese government was increasingly changing its policies to develop and improve life at the border. But some ideas of ethnic assimilation based on sinicization have remained during the past two decades, especially the relocation of Han Chinese to remote areas (Dreyer, 1979). Such policies, along with several development projects organized by the Chinese government, coupled with abundant work and fertile lands for agriculture, have attracted Han Chinese into Dehong as they seek jobs and other opportunities.

As a result of their long cultural domination, Dehong Tai groups living along the border have a poor ongoing relationship with the Chinese, especially officials. As T'ien Ju K'ang observed, 'The Chinese and the Tai do not say that they are friendly to each other, since the Tai have suffered in the past from all kinds of exactions which could not have happened elsewhere' (T'ien Ju K'ang, 1986, p. 6).

Tai Female Petty Traders, Cross-Border Trade and the Changing Contexts of Yunnan-Burma Border

However, the political situation in China has been changed drastically after Chinese Economic Reform in 1980s of Deng Xiao Ping era. Particularly, the Chinese government has aimed to connect their economic opportunities to Southeast Asian countries. It is found that Chinese borders, especially where of Yunnan and Guangxi provinces have been opened after 1992. Since then, the Chinese border opening and Southeast Asian countries have allowed Chinese products flowing into Southeast Asia through the Mekong River and overland routes of Burma and Laos into Thailand. In return, Southeast Asian commodities, especially those from Thailand, are transported into China via the Mekong River and the overland road through Burma and Laos.

For this paper, the Kad Mai market and Tai petty traders in the market will be a case study to illustrate how these Tai ethnic petty traders involve their trade within a new context of change over the border. The Kad maî market (in Dehong Tai language) or Peng ou kai (in Chinese), is located in central Muangkhon (Luxi), the capital of Dehong prefecture within Yunnan province of China since 1997 after border opening³. It is a big market where local

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.

people come to buy and sell, particularly during Wan kad or market day on the every fifth day. Within this market, products are separated and sold in distinctive areas by ethnic traders and product categories. While Han Chinese migrants and settlers mostly sell Chinese mass products, Kachin, Jinpo traders sell their ethnic clothes and Tai petty traders usually sell many products (sin -long skirts), traditional Thai dresses, beauty cream, shoes and slippers) transporting from Thailand and Shan State. It is not only the Kad Mai market where sell many products transporting from Thailand and Shan State, but also many other markets in MuangMao (Ruili) and Wanding of Chinese border cities are places where Tai petty traders sell commodities from Thailand and Shan State (figures 2-3).

In terms of female petty traders crossing the border, it is found that the Shan Tai in Burma nowadays migrate into China because the border-opening offer the better choice of economic opportunities in China than economic depression in Burmese side. To get more economic opportunities in China, the Shan Tai petty traders often apply their social networks and other horizontal and vertical relationships. For example Pii Nong⁴ or sibling by kin and marriage systems, and Taiko⁵ or friend relationships (Aranya 2008) become a social equipment to facilitate them their trade mobility and social activities. Many cases of the 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.

4. Generally, Pii Nong is a 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). 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. 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, particularly the Pii Nong relationship. However, 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.

5. the Taiko (peer or friend) relationship 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.



Figure2: A Shan Tai mobile peddler sells products such as shampoos and beauty creams from China, Burma and Thailand at a poi or festival of Dai nationality. Here the products from Thailand are beauty creams and perfumes. Entertainment materials, particularly VCDs, are said to sell well among Dehong Tai customers.



Figure3: During Wad kad market day on every fifth day of the Kad Mai market, Dehong Tai customers come to buy new clothes for attending poi or festivals. They shop at retail shops rented by Shan Tai or Dehong Tai peddlers in the market.

Among Tai petty traders, some Tai female have improved their skills, especially dressmaking or tailoring skills, so that they can develop their peddling trade into dressmaking decoration; getting better 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.

T(h)ai products; Cultural Commodities and Ethnic Intimacy

A close look at Thai brand-name products that sell well for these Tai petty traders, it is not the most prolific of Thai exports into China aimed at by the Thai government (i.e. food products (fresh fruits, frozen sea foods), electrical appliances and agricultural supplies) (Department of Foreign Trade, 2004). Instead, Tai petty traders in Dehong have traded so-called 'cultural products' relating to cultural materials popular with the Tai, for example;

garments - sin (long skirts) and Thai or southern Shan Tai style dresses and other fashions— beauty creams, shoes and entertainment materials such as VCD copies from MuangTaitae (southern Tai land, or Shan State in the Dehong Tai meaning), and from MuangThai or Thailand, are more popular among the Tai customers on both sides of the border. Although these Thai products seem to be generally more than three times the price of Chinese or Burmese ones, Tai customers usually choose Thai products, commenting on luxury, modern fashion, looking good and good quality as reasons why they choose Thai over Chinese products. Tai male clients prefer buying Thai T-shirts and slacks and shoes with Thai brand names, claiming that these are better quality than Chinese or Burmese products (figure 4-5). At poi (Religious ceremony and festivals) where the Tai gather, these places become social spaces where Tai people come to have social display (T'ien Ju-K'ang, 1986) among themselves in order to compete their wealth through these expensive and beautiful dresses. Moreover, a feeling of 'ethnic and cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 2005) is being forged through the consumer choice of Thai products over Chinese and Burmese products. It involves 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.

The Process of Cultural Knowledge Transfer

Dressmaking Fashions and Cultural Knowledge as cultural resource



Figure4-5: not only dressmaking the Dehong Tai and Shan Tai customers like, but also ready-made Sin and clothes imported from Thailand through Mekong River and Overland route of Myanmar they enjoyed consuming. These clothes are said by Tai customers that the Thai fabric and fashion styles are better and nicer in comparison to Chinese or Burmese clothes.



Figure 6: In Kad Mai market, central Mangshi, Thai traditional dresses sell well among Dehong Tai clients. Tai peddling traders usually order big packs of clothes transported through both the Mekong River and the Burmese overland routes

Specifically in regard to Tai women and their dress knowledge, Tai women learned weaving and all domestic work from their mothers in the past. 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 petty 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, 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. 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 of border opening, some Shan Tai dressmakers (migrating from a village in Namkham 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.

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 petty 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



Figure 7 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.



Figure 8 Shan Tai petty traders, renting a clothes shop in Kad Mai market, are selling Thai fabric to Tai customer. This Shan Tai is dressmaker, migrating from Namkham, border town of Burma. She is keen in dressmaking. Today, she is the one among other Tai petty traders who learn more knowledge of Thai traditional styles of dress in order to make good fashion styles of clothes for the Tai in Dehong.

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 and knowledge transfer. 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. Moreover, knowledge shown by applying Thai traditional dressmaking styles of the Tai petty traders become “cultural resource” that does not only secure their economic profit. But the Tai petty traders also consider Thai traditional dressmaking styles as valuable knowledge of affiliated ethnicity and feeling of cultural intimacy which become their “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986) Here, valuable cultural knowledge, as cultural resource is utilized by the Tai traders which is well understood within the scheme of hegemonic domination by Chinese and Burmese power, and the expectation of modernity in their social world.

Cultural Knowledge Transfer and the Socio-Economic Conditions

At one level, the 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 key informants, all Tai traders. 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 petty 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’.

Defining “Modernities”: What is “modern” for the Tai Social World?

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 dressmaking fashion style 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; 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 petty 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 cultural and social aspects of their own livelihoods and expectation which they hope to perform in their own world.

The popularity of Thai traditional styles of dresses and the knowledge transferring acquired by the Tai dressmakers to response to Tai customers have proved that a sense of modernity to build up their social world are not always connected to Western products, nor are these products only a modern identity fashioned on an orientation to the West or a response to the global influence. In addition, it is not necessarily connected to Chinese products or Burmese goods which the hegemonic power of nation-states has attempted to dominate their ethnic minorities in Chinese or Burmese land. But rather, the desire for foreign goods, for the Tai people, connecting to modernity can be possibly seen through what they define locally as modernity (Friedman 2002) — which they have activities to clothes. They have used Thai product, in a sense of product representing the ethnic intimacy to define what they think about “modern”. The way they choose these styles of clothes can go further the idea that what they want to design for themselves is about their understanding based on modernity. Rather than modernity as such, it becomes “alternative modernities” (Rofel 1999, Gaonkar 2001, Hanchard 2001) in which active Tai agency can produce what it thinks of as modern in their own right.

It points to the choice that Thai materials provide, in contrast to conventional choice of other Western or Chinese cultural materials. The Thai products are used as the marker of alternative modernities which the Tai use to think about their modernity and expectations of the future. Here, 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 within the socio-economic conditions provided.

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. 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 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.

Reference

Aranya 2007 Dress and Cultural Strategy: Tai Peddlers in Transnational Trade along the Burma - Yunnan Asian Ethnicity, Volume 8, Number 3 pp. 219-234 (16)

Bourdieu, P. 1986 The Form of Capital. John G. Richardson ed. Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education. New York, and London: Greenwood Press.

Dehong Historical Office 2005 A Brief Introduction of Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture. Yunnan Province, Dehong: Dehong Nationalities Press.

Dreyer, J. 1979 *China's forty millions: minority nationalities and national integration in the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Eberhardt, Nancy. 2006 *Imaging the Course of Life: Self Transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Friedman, Jonathan. 2002 "Globalization and Localization." In *The Anthropology of Globalization: a Reader* edited by Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo. Malden, 233-246. Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.

Gaonkar, Parameshwar. 2001 *Alternative Modernities*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Hanchard, Michael. 2001 "Afro- Modernity, Temporality, Politics and the African Diaspora." In *Alternative Modernities* edited by Parameshwar Gaonkar, pp. 272-298. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Hanks, Lucien M. 1962 "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order." *American Anthropologist*, 64, pp. 247-62.

Hanks, Lucien M. 1975 "The Thai Social Order as Entourage and Circle." In *Change and Persistence in Thai Society: Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp* edited by William Skinner and Thomas Kirsch, pp.197-218. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Herzfeld, Michael. 1997 *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York: Routledge.

Keyes, Charles F. 1975 "Kin Groups in a Thai-Lao Community". In *Change and Persistence in Thai Society: Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp* edited by William G. Skinner and Thomas A. Kirsch, 275-297. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Moerman, Michael. 1966 "Kinship and Commerce in a Thai-Lue Village" *Ethnology* 5: pp. 360-364.

Rofel, Risa. 1999 *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearning in China after Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tien Ju-Kang. 1986 (1949). *Religious Cults of the Pai-i along the Burma – Yunnan Border*. New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University,