

### CHAPTER 3

#### LIVING WITH TOURIST MARKET ECONOMY

In the previous chapter, I have delineated the character of what I called “awkward” rural economy in Mai Châu: How the transition (socialism to market oriented economy) transformed the rural economy, culture and identity. My intention has been to show how White Tai engage with their culture and ethnicity in the context of global tourist market. In this chapter, I will attend to the ways tourist market reconstitutes the White Tai identity or how White Tai struggle with global tourism market. I argue that the relationship between global flow and local culture is not one way around: They both reconstitute each other in a process that Picard called “touristification” (Picard 2003) or in the other word “localization”. The task here would be to makes sense of the specific ways in which desire, not necessarily rational desire, is constituted by the White Tai in their interaction with the global market. It is in this various strategies of constitution of non-rational desire one can locate the complex politics of the construction of cultural market in Mai Châu.

In touristification, people are actively manipulating tourism instead of just coping and negotiating with global forces. This notion regards the hosts as active agents who are able to take advantage of tourism. This chapter reveals that local people are able to turn global force into “localized process” (Picard 2002: 109) which can be seen through their construction of identity as “entrepreneur”. In the process of cultural constructing tourist market, they are able to transform themselves from peasant to entrepreneur by means of converting social and cultural capital into economic capitals; while in some situations, they can also negotiate for changing the local relationships. This concept is complemented by the notion of “infrapolitics” which views local people as sustaining their “life project” (which is embedded in local history, social structure and culture) as well as their reaction to state and market forces. They are neither resisting nor submissive victim of state and market domination (Michaud 2011).

Geographically speaking, Mai Châu is considered as a place of ethnic and cultural diversity and the gateway to the northwest upland region. It is located in between Hanoi and northwest region (where ethnic majority population is Tai) as well as connected by the national road no. 6, it is also a strategic place of tourist market. In addition, it is only 150 km from Na Mèo and 80 km from Mường Lát border gates with Lao P.D.R. Furthermore, due to its close proximity to Hanoi, Mai Châu has been included in the central administration instead of a part of Northwest autonomous region (see the elaboration in chapter 4).



**Figure 3.1 Valley of Mai Châu**  
*Photo by Achariya Choowonglert*

In the past, Mai Châu was a strategic place for trading and tourist retreat for officials. During socialist period, Mai Châu, with its scenic location, regularly welcomed many government's guests such as ambassadors and the Russian workers of Hoà Bình dam for their vacations as well as learning about ethnic living. According to Tu (2011) and my interview with villagers, Mai Châu was also a hub of opium trade because its mountainous area was a prime area for opium cultivation in the northwest region of Vietnam. In 1947, French troops took control over opium trade by occupying Mai Châu where a fierce battle between French troops and Việt Minh was fought. In early 1990s, after entering into market economy, Mai Châu was promoted

by the government as an area for cultural tourism which made it appear on the tourist map.

This chapter will examine how, with the introduction of commercial tourism into the area, peasant households have gradually transformed themselves into local entrepreneurs. Such transformation involves a certain form of capital accumulation that turns social and cultural capitals into economic capital and vice versa. In the process, peasant households are also actively engaged in tourist services, such as, production of cultural commodity.

### 3.1 Depositing White Tai's Habitus in their Economic World

Before we proceed to the discussion on the cultural economy of White Tai and the ethnic tourist market, it is necessary to take a close look at the connections between White Tai “habitus” and their economic activities in the past. According to Bourdieu's “**Logic of Practice**” (1990) there is a connection or interplay between habitus and practice. Habitus is about the interaction between structure and actors. He sees agency as a mediator and sees structure in conscious (mind) of agency but the structure can be changed when we interact with each other. He conceptualized “habitus” as something which indicates how individuals accumulate ideas through experiences by practicing. Habitus determine the action, thought, understanding, motivation, and perception. It can be interpreted that, habitus is something like cultural or intellectual storage in our head and then it helps us to improvise our action without thinking. It functions as “socializing” practice. Taking a cue from this theory, I would say that structure can be changed by practice. I do this with full realization of the fact that, as pointed out by Jonathan Friedman (1990), Bourdieu's conception of “habitus” cannot take into account non-rational constitutional of desire, which ultimately reducible to economism.

As mentioned in chapter 2, the White Tai based their life mainly on wet rice cultivation, in the plain of valley, for about 800 years. They also cultivated maize and cassava on the terraced hillsides and as well as depended on the forest resources such as timber, firewood, vegetable, barks, roots, animals and so on (Lan 2000). In the socio-political structure, White Tai family was one of extended family and was based

on clan system. There were around six big clans in Mai Châu – Hà Công, Hà Văn, (lower rank) Vi, (higher rank) Vi, Lò, Khà. Each family referred to different political roles. For example Hà Công was the aristocrat family, and (higher rank) Vi was the official family. The latter helped Hà Công family in the political task of rule. The land use rights depended on the political status. For example, whereas each common people possessed a small piece of land, the aristocrat occupied large amount of land. An elderly told me that, in the past, the aristocrat family was called (in White Tai) “*Chao Đin*” (land lord) (interview villagers 2007-2011).

White Tai lived in the village, known in Tai language as “*bản*” which was ruled by a village head called in Thai “*Tao Bản*”. A village consisted of around 40 – 50 households. Several villages were referred together as the “city” or as it was called in White Tai “*Mường*”, which was governed by a lord called “*Tao Mường*” in White Tai. The small city was politically semi-dependent and paid tribute to the stronger city and the Vietnamese court. In the past, among the White Tai in Mai Châu (interview several villagers 2007 - 2011) the clan and political structures and obligation played an important role in natural resource management and its use in economic activities. Such structures were perceived as the underlying factor of such management. For example, as Sikor (2004: 6) found in Black Tai community in Chiềng Đòng, Sơn La province, the villagers had the right to use the resource (wet rice land) once they have met their duties to the village.

More to the point, in order to draw economic habitus of White Tai, I took the information from two studies on natural management of villages in Mai Châu,- the first is “**Water Management Usage and Customs of the Thai in Văn Village**” (Bản Văn) which is 2 km far from Bản Lác, in Mai Châu district, Hòa Bình province (Binh, 2000). The second one is “**The Ritual Management of Natural Resources**” written by Cam (1999). Cam takes Mai Châu district as his research site and his research sample is White Tai. Both studies pay attention to the White Tai customs and habits on natural resource management before the collectivization period; it was subsistence economy. At that time subsistent economy was the main base of White Tai in Mai Châu’s livelihood.

Similar to Sikor (2004) and Hager (2006), in the past the minority peoples’ land was managed and controlled by the traditional institution. Black Tai in Phù Yên



district, Son La province used the land and forest as a common property based on community management (common and public rules). Because according to the natural condition of living in the valleys, surrounded by high mountains (Binh 2000), White Tai people based their living principally on the scarce nature resources, which must be shared for several households in a community. Besides as Sikor (2004: 6) found that the reason for collective control of land was to make sure that household (who engaged in political tasks) would have use rights over wet land; and to prevent them from claiming permanent ownership of wet rice fields. It was these reasons which explained, according to Cam (1999), the importance given to ecological balance in the White Tai traditional practices. There exist a holistic worldview – the connection between human beings, natural resources, and supernatural. People do not act on the environment in order to transform it; rather people participate in a way that the environment is alive and forms part of their society. They perceive that the environment is alive and a part of their society. The ways villagers manage the natural resources here are related seven things: (i) resources (forest, sacred forests, dam, channel, etc.), (ii) knowledge (for preservation of the natural resources), (iii) public opinion and belief, (iv) means (ritual and ceremony to control management of natural resources), (v) customary law and habits, (vi) leaders and organizations, (vii) individual rights. These can be treated as White Tai habitus which continue to exist, passed down through many generations – to protect the environment, practice of sustainable use, and at the same time, maintenance of social institutions (Cam 1999).

Sacred forest, dam (*phái*) and irrigation canal (*mường*) are the essential of community life which must be protected. Customary law and habits are linked to sustainable use and preservation of resources. Similar to what Hager (2006) found in Black Tai community, the duty to protect as well as sustainable use of the forests belongs to all households. For White Tai in *Mai Châu*, public opinion and religious belief acts as means for role-play in guiding and coercing the member to abide by the customs and habits. Since the White believed in supernatural – that every nature has its spirit – people must ask permission from super natural forces before utilizing resources, by means of ritual and ceremony. Therefore, while rituals and ceremony functioned as mechanism to control the management of nature, White Tai people had accumulated vast knowledge for the preservation and use of the natural resources in

various forms and methods. For example, the irrigation system is organized in such a way so as to make sure that there will be water all year round, to enable two-time cultivation for all households. Unsustainable uses are prohibited by customary law and if a person transgresses, public opinion usually condemns him and he must pay a fine. Under the social organization, adult inhabitants of each household are enjoined to provide manpower to construction of the dam and take turn to protect it. It is the responsibility of all households. So water management gives rise to the association of work group.

Natural resource management and traditional law were under the supervision of Hà Công aristocratic family. This leading family had ruled Mai Châu for 800 years; it was only one ruling family of Mai Châu (“Mường Mùn” in the past). The family acted as the lord of principality (in the monarchical period). Hà Công played a decisive role in managing and regulating natural resources, especially managing water for the paddy fields (Binh 2000). The laws pertaining to natural resource management were also laid down by the Hà Công (Cam 1999). To use the natural resources, especially water, the villagers must be concerned with the rights of one another and the whole community. Similarly, as Hager (2006) also found in Black Tai community, there is an overlap between two rights of land tenure – the common property and private (household) rights. For example, people can let the cattle to the forest when trees are grown up enough, not be destroyed by grazing animals there.

This traditional management of commons, among the White Tai, was inherently geared towards sustainable living. The White Tai had attempted to bring about balance between ecological and economic aspects with social coherence and order. It implied that, in the past it was risky for White Tai to live individually. And at the same time, their view and the way they manage the natural resource reflected cultural structures in socio-economic management for a long-term livelihood security.

However, in the period of collectivization, the co-operative committee was in charge of managing and regulating resources, especially water, through the irrigation team’s activities (Binh 2000). At present the management and of use water is quite similar to the period before the collective farming era. It meets the following requirement: (i) The management of water by a group of people helps to protect water resources, and assure the amount of water needed for agricultural and living; (ii) helps

provide manpower and covers the cost of small canals repairs which are hard for any single household to bear. Moreover, it bears communal characteristics and it is a long-term custom in the village (Binh 2000: 138).

Without doubt now, habitually, the social relationship and the world view – treating tourists as their guests or friends, not as customers – encourage their business profit and business sustainability, in the long run. It is similar to how they manage natural resources, which are not considered as things that can be exploited for a short term gain. The entrepreneur villagers (doing homestay and souvenir businesses) still respect the rights of each other and avoids social conflict (at least at the superficial level) as they have done for the management of water resources. They do not engage in cut-throat competition with one another to get hold of tourists; rather they set the customs and habits (based on former customary practices) and help each other by transferring tourists to one another's homestay. Besides, to turn into market economy, the characteristics of barter exchange played an important role for their souvenir shop investment. Moreover socialist characteristic is reshaped by trying to control homestay tax and support for team management (cultural show). Thus the tourist market here bears a lot of communal characteristic (of the past) (see the elaboration in chapter 5).

It can be said that the new roles of social ties, evolved for market management, are based on the White Tai habitus, which can be seen through “cultural constructing tourist market” and market management. Forming market here is forming a new social management space, which is not (extremely) closed but based on holistic worldview (among villagers, natural resources, and supernatural). It is also not based on (extremely) individualism – in the form of economic rationality – but it is mixed between social relations in the form of friendship, partnership and kinship and economic rationality so as to make sure that market would secure and sustain as they did in natural resource management in the past (the details will be elaborated in chapter 2). So, it can be said that White Tai's habitus has been deposited in their economic world: the notion of security and sustainability in making a living. And yes, the political status (village leader) as social capital will be converted to economic capital in the market. The following section deals with how villagers improvise their

habitus as well as convert social and cultural capitals in making a living – to transform themselves from peasant to entrepreneur.

### 3.2 Diversifying Economic Strategies and Differentiating Livelihoods

In Mai Châu, tourism connected local people to the global market and it has become an important part of their new livelihood strategies. As mentioned in chapter 2, according to questionnaire survey, presently most of their income (81.53%) comes from tourism activities. Even though, not every villager engages in it, tourism has had enormous socio-economic impacts on lives of majority of the villagers. I will start this section with a simple questionnaire survey of 93 households of two the tourist villages. The question is about the benefit of tourism to the villages. The quantitative information indicates that the villagers generally believe that they benefited from tourism. As high as 74.5 percent responded “strongly agree” that tourism has been beneficial for their village, and 12.9 percent responded “moderately agree”. Of the rest 11.8 percent responded, “no answer”, while 1.1 percent responded, “no idea”. What I found to be very interesting is that, as indicated by the high percentage of (73.7%) of respondent, even households which are not engaged in tourism related activities strongly agreed that their village has benefited from tourism market. It is to their tourism related activities I now turn to.

In general the villagers rely on multiple activities and livelihood strategies<sup>1</sup> for their livelihood. With multiple economic activities, Mai Châu households can be classified into three groups according to their livelihood strategies. They are: (a) tourist market oriented, (b) mixed strategies, and (c) “minimal engagement with tourism” (Table 3.1). The first group is those households which are able to intensively participate in tourism businesses. They have invested their capitals intensively to get high returns, such as, running homestay business and souvenir shop. Most of them take part in cultural show team. They are not vendor or waged laborer. The households in group “b” are more diversified in their business than that of group “a”.

<sup>1</sup> In economic anthropology, “livelihood strategy” is considered in the broader sense. Rather than seeing as a strategic plan to achieve the business’s mission and goal, it is seen as an “economic adaptation” to the environment and material conditions in order to sustain rural livelihood. This meaning is widely acknowledged in several studies in the area of “economic anthropology and sociology” such as in De Hann (2000: 348), Kinsella (2000: 482), and Tao and Wall (2009).



Most of them own souvenir shops and a cultural show team. Some of them are also waged laborers. Only about a half of them own a small homestay business. Generally they have diversified their livelihoods into various economic activities, both in tourism and non-tourism. Households in the last group have minimal engagement with tourism. They take part in small complementary tourism related activities. Their main livelihood activities are subsistence farming and employment as wage laborers.

**Table 3.1 Type of Household's Strategies by Economic Activities**

(Number of household)

Types of household's strategy	Non-tourism activities		Tourism-related activities						Government Salary
	Farming	Waged Labor	Homestay Business	Souvenir Shop	Craft Making	Vender	show	Others*	
<b>Tourist oriented</b> (N = 8)	8	0	8	8	3	0	6	4	1
<b>Mixed strategies</b> (N = 11)	11	7	5	10	4	4	7	4	1
<b>Minimal engagement</b> (N = 5)	5	5	0	1	3	1	2	0	0
<b>Total</b> (N = 24)	24	12	13	19	10	5	15	8	2

Source: Field survey in 2011

Note: Each household engages more than one activity .

\* Others (in tourism-related activities) are (i) motorbike taxi services (ii) local tour guide (iii) temporary employment.

The economic activities of these households are divided into three categories: tourism-related activities, non-tourism activities, and government employee. All households are involved in farming, mainly, subsistence agriculture with some surplus set aside for tourist guests. The main characteristic of this group is that tourism-related activities are increasingly playing crucial role in their livelihood. This is because, at present, even during the low season, Mai Châu still gets tourists every day.

Tourism involves a mix of socio-economic activities. There are job opportunities in tourist market all year round (as shown in table 3.2), making it a diversified economy.

**Table 3.2 Economic Activities in a Year**

<b>Economic Activities</b>	<b>Main Activity Period</b>
1. Homestay Service (accommodation, food and drink)	All year round
2. Souvenir selling/Grocery store	All year round
3. Craft making	July – Sep, Nov – Feb
4. Tourist services (bicycle rental, firewood, tour guide)	All year round
5. Dancer/Musician	All year round
6. Cultivate wet rice	Jun – Oct, Feb - May
7. Waged labor	All year round

Source: Field Survey in 2011

Households in group “a” are considered the richest in the villages. They started their tourist business by providing homestay service and opening souvenir shops. I classify eight households in this category, four of which are the pioneers in this business; their owners are Nhám, Hùng-Nga, Bướng, and Bình. Being relatively better off households, they managed to start their tourism business with only little capital investment. As the first in homestay business, they were able to connect with many tourists at that time when tourist demand was higher than homestay supply. According to my informal talks with several homestay hosts, the tourists started pouring into Mai Châu, en mass, in the mid of 1990s. There were just a few homestays service. My host told me that sometimes, because of lack of homestay supply, he accepted two/three groups of the tourists at his homestay which made the tourists uncomfortable. Through their homestay service, these owners continued to keep contacts with many tour agencies which allowed them to generate enough profit to invest in upgrading their homestay services without any bank loan. But those who later joined tourism business needed a large amount of bank loan to improve their homestay facilities in order to compete with those early established homestay-providing households.

In terms of their income distribution, households in group “a” earn almost 1/3 of their income from homestay business (29.20%). Other tourist related activities also form a high proportion of their income, i.e. souvenir selling (14.06%) and craft making (13.34%). However, some of them also provide some minor tourist services such as selling firewood, bicycle rental, motobike taxi service which allow them only a small percentage of income; 8.86% from tourist services and 6.40% from cultural performances. In contrast, their non-tourist related income is very small, only 10% from salary of their members who work for companies and governments, 9.50% from waged labor, 3.40% from remittance and 7.27% from other income (Table 3.3).

**Table 3.3 Group “a” household’s income distribution by economic activities**

Source of Income	Per cent of household’s income
1. Homestay business (accommodation, food & drink)	29.20
2. Souvenir selling	14.06
3. Craft making	13.34
4. Salary	10.00
5. Waged labour	9.50
6. Tourist services (bicycle rental, firewood)	8.86
7. Dancer/Musician	6.40
8. Remittance	3.40
9. Others	7.27
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field survey in 2011

Number of observation = 24

Beside their high economic capital, these pioneer households in tourism business also have another advantage in social capital endowment, as in the case of Nhâm, and Hùng-Nga, as they are members of local authorities who work for commune cooperatives, village, and district offices. So they can deal directly with state government officers who are their guests. With political officials, these households can establish easier connections with tour guides who became their socio-business networks. This network is considered as some kind of social capital that can be converted into economic capital. At present, members from this group “a” households can gain access to working in local hotels, hotels in Hanoi, and tour

agencies. For instance, a member of the largest homestay-service household is working for a provincial government sponsored hotel, which enables him to connect to various tour agencies in the southern Vietnam and abroad.

In addition to these advantages, location of their homestays at the center of the village makes it easier to attract tourist and tour agency attention and to build socio-business networks. Besides the location, they also own valuable possession, such as, old silverwares and some amount of gold<sup>2</sup>. Some households have a large storage of traditional fabrics woven by them. Sale of these items and profit from selling traditional fabric/handicraft gave them enough money to gradually improve their homestay services, such as buying sleeping equipments and household appliances.



**Figure 3.2. A Homestay in Mai Châu**  
*Photo by Achariya Choowonglert*

Evidently in their gradual accumulation of economic capital no one gets bankrupt. In fact, if they stop doing homestay business because they cannot attract tourists, they turn their business into souvenir shop. It does not hurt their business since they do not dedicate economic capital for homestay business at a single time.

<sup>2</sup> In the mid 1970s there was a gold rush in Bản Lác. Many people from Mai Châu and Hanoi were involved in digging gold. The gold they owned were probably from this rush.



My White Tai teacher told me that the “White Tais are unlike the Kinhs, they are afraid to be indebted”. They do not dare to loan a big amount of money from banks.

Households in group “b” (mixed strategies) know how to manipulate the market opportunity. That is to say, they do various economic activities related to tourism. Usually they do not enter into homestay business straight away, in case they do it is only small homestay. Their strategy is diversification. Since the households belonging to this group entered the homestay business a little late they find the established networks already occupied by the homestay group “a”. They would need to create new networks. One way to build such networks is to invest in their children’s higher education. Their children who are studying at the university function as channels for building networks with prospective tourists, who are mainly students. These students take their friends to stay in their new homestay as guests. Presently, most of households (around 8 to 10 households<sup>3</sup>) have children working for tourist companies or local hotels that can get in touch with the tourists and create networks. This avenue is open because the household in group “a” and some better off households do not concern much in investing in their children’s higher education. It is not part of their strategy in tourism business or making an alternative living since they are secure in business/economic life. But for the new homestay owners, it is crucial to send their children to university for more network and job opportunities.

Another strategy employed by these households belonging in this category is to utilize their culture of hospitality. They would invite guests or tourists of other household into their homes and offer them tea, and talk to them. They try to impress by showing them their hospitality and their house. The idea is that these tourists may be in the future, will recommend the new homestay to a friend or colleague when they come to visit Mai Châu.

But most households in this category, because of the difficulties involved in building a big homestay business, tend to focus on souvenir shop, as well as, other tourism-related activities, such as, bicycle rental, motorbike taxi, and local tour guide. Almost all souvenir shops are located at the center and/or on the main roads of the villages where tourists would usually stroll pass. In these locations, almost all

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<sup>3</sup> Some of these households are not included in quantitative survey shown in table 3.1 but I know by informal talking.

households turn the first floor of their stilt house into a shop. It is amazing. Almost a half of households in Bản Lác, the main tourist village and almost 20 in Bản Pom Coong are running souvenir shops. To attract the tourists, some souvenir shops put the loom in their shop and they sometimes weave traditional fabric to show the tourists much more than a mere product: the process of production. This is a kind of tactic that the villagers utilize the culture and representation of Mai Châu for survival in the souvenir market.



**Figure 3.3. A Souvenir Shop on the First Floor of Stilt House**  
*Photo by Achariya Choowonglert*

These souvenir shop owners have the uncanny ability to accumulate capitals by turning cultural and social capitals into economic capital. That is to say, at the early state of the market, since they do not have much economic capital, the owners produced and sold the goods by themselves. They also sold on consignment. At present, they have adopted the modern world. They trade in cash, even if the trade is with close relatives. The relationship in business transaction is really unlike that in social transaction - i.e. as agricultural group working, as group construction the new houses which are based on reciprocal relationship as mentioned in the chapter 2. I asked a 67 year-old souvenir shop owner these questions: why do you not accept the consignment? And I explained to her that it is good for your business, you do not need

to invest for your souvenir good. If you cannot sell them, you just give them back to the producers; she has nothing to lose. Her reply is insightful: if she accepts the consignment, as long as the goods are unsold, she is still in debt to the producers. She does not like to be a debtor. She has to take care of the goods well enough to return them to the producer when unsold. She is not comfortable with that idea. Other souvenir shop owners, I talked to, has similar stories to tell.



**Figure 3.4. Traditional Looms**  
*Photo by Achariya Choowonglert*

So it can be stated that the shop owners do not want to deal with uncertainty (to own good as a retailer is more risky than being a consignee) and uncontrollable relation (since they do not know when they can sell such goods). So, once they have economic power they prefer to purchase such goods instead of being in debt. Thus, to be in debt in terms of “money”, in modern trade, is very different from the social debt (obligation) in their tradition even though they deal with their relatives.

The goods they purchase, come from the villages nearby (if there are local products) and the industrial ones are bought from middlewomen living in Hà Tây. Some villagers go to Đồng Xuân wholesale market located in Hanoi to buy these goods. So their souvenir networks is small, based in their community and in Hanoi. That’s why the souvenir goods in every shop are almost the same, and to me, not

attractive and creative. However, recently a souvenir shop made a contract with “the Japanese International Cooperation Agency” (JICA). In cooperation with local authority, this shop gets technical support from JICA for differentiating souvenir goods and now has an attractive shop. The survey reveals that other souvenir shop owners are waiting in the wings – if this shop succeeds well in this market, they will jump into the bandwagon.

Another tourism related activity taken up the households in this group is the cultural dance troupe. This activity encourages the teenagers and the young adults to make a living inside the villages. They are at the age of 15 - 40 years. There are five cultural show teams in Bản Lác and three teams in Bản Pom Coọng. Each team consists of around 20 dancers/musicians. So, this job is able to absorb around 160 people. Cultural shows are hosted every night, even during the low tourist season, but not all team can get this job every night. Anyway, on average, in the low season, there are 4-5 days per week they get job. To get the job, they are connected with several homestays. Once the homestays get the tourists, they call the cultural team which they are close with or suit for type of the tourists, or take turn. For example, my host chooses the “teenager team” for the male adult tourists; and my former host use the way of taking turn each team. In the high tourist season, the job is done almost every day and 1-3 times a day. The villagers, no matter the rich or poor, like to participate in cultural show team. They do not need to invest much in this, only a slim body (for dancing) does well enough to get one a job.

In the summer, the village is rather vacant from intensive agriculture and tourism works so that I witness many women and few men embroider fabrics. Those are pieces to make Hmong dresses. The villagers sell their work pieces to White Tai middle-women who are from the villages nearby. Selling price at the origin for one of the pieces is VND 70,000, but the price at the Hmong Sunday market, where is far from Mai Châu town up north around 30 km is at VND 200,000. Despite having motorbike, the craft makers do not go to sell their product directly at the Hmong market because, according to their explanation, the Hmong buy only from whom they are familiar with. In addition, they also have not many products for offering to the buyers. Excepting embroidery for sale in Hmong market, as mentioned the villagers also make embroidery and craft for selling in these tourist villages as well as for the



middlemen who come from Lào Cai province, far from there around 400 km up north, and for the Mường (another ethnic minority group) merchants transferring to a tourist place called Kim Bôi, far from Mai Châu around 70 km.

Apart from economic activities related to souvenir businesses, small homestay business and cultural show team, to be a better off family they have to make more variety of living. For the case of some villagers living at the periphery of the village found the difficult to benefit from opening souvenir shop and homestay business. They still can create their variety of living. And the case of Ms. Tuấn's family, she relies both on farming and tourism. In terms of farming, they cultivate wet rice, grow and sell vegetable, raise pig and so on. In dealing with tourism they rent amplifier, service, motorbike taxi and act as local tour guide, sell firewood (for camp firing) and other odds jobs, such as, local foods (such as *anh lam*, a glutinous rice roasted in bamboo joints), local alcohol, ice cream, and jelly.



**Figure 3.5. A Cultural Show at a Homestay**  
*Photo by Achariya Choowonglert*



**Figure 3.6. Making Embroidery at a Free Time**

*Photo by Achariya Choowonglert*

Every weekend we can see big groups of Vietnamese students doing campfire at the playground located in the periphery of the villages. Some villagers living nearby can take advantage from the campfire activity. They sell firewood to the students. They set the standard price even though they sell through the homestay hosts acting as a medium between the sellers and the students. The hosts can take a share around 40 percent of the total cost. If the seller sells directly to the tourists it is also the same price as the tourists buy thorough the hosts, but the seller will get 100 percent of sale price. So the standard price set with whoever you buy from is a kind of sharing each other among the villagers which prevent one party get sole. Apart from selling the firewood, after finishing doing campfire, the villagers who sell the firewood will pour water to the burned firewood and leave it till next morning. It will become charcoal. Then they collect and sell it to the households which need charcoal. In addition, we can see that every weekend when the villages are full of tourists many villagers, especially, who live at the fringe of the villages, become petty vendors selling local food, “*anh lam*”. Most of domestic tourists like to taste and buy it as a gift. They like to sit down at the main village roads or at the ladder of the homestay getting a big group of tourists.

Another example belonging pertains to Ms. Gi's family. Ms Gi's family enters to the homestay business late about over ten years of emergence of the market. That is because the life cycle of this has just been ready. Gi and her husband are at the age of early 20. Entering late her family cannot build any business network with any tour agency. Her homestay rarely gets the tourists. Her tourists mostly come from a big homestay (Đàn-Méch's homestay) located nearby her homestay. They are not relatives of each other but Gi and her husband, normally work as assistant cook, waitress/waiter, and dish washing workers for the Đàn-Méch when Đàn-Méch gets a lot of tourists. So Gi and her husband is close to Đàn-Méch. Once the Đàn-Méch's homestay gets exceeding tourists they sometimes send them to Gi's homestay (and other homestays nearby). Gi's household member is very diligent and knows how to make a variety of living. Her mother sells local alcohol. Her brother and his wife do grocery store. Gi and her sister-in-law hold a souvenir shop. All of family members sometimes are waged laborers doing any job. Gi and her husband are also the dancers of cultural show team. And certainly this family cultivates wet rice, sugar cane, raises pigs and does rice mill business.

Some households, which are rather poor, also try to struggle for the sustainable livelihood. Even occupying fewer capitals, some households have been attempting engaging in tourist market in various ways. For example, to do a petty souvenir shop, do embroidery work, make local alcohol, and to be dancer/musician of cultural show team. Several villagers like to do motorbike taxi service for the tourists. When the homestays get a lot of tourists, mostly at the weekend those who are rather poor are hired by their close relatives and friends for cooking, serving the guests, and washing dishes. Some villagers have been learning English and/or French by themselves for to be local tour guides for both short and long trekking. The short trekking takes around a half or full day, and the long one spends around 3 days and nights. Most of them are women who have not much burden in their domestic work because their children are the youth or adult. The local tour guides have to be a close relationship or to be a close relative with some homestay hosts. The homestay hosts in general do not convince the tourists to take trekking trip and get the guides. But if the tourists ask for that, the homestay host will arrange the trip. Most of homestay host members will not be the local tour guide even they are free. Rather they tend to give

this economic opportunity to their relatives. The homestay hosts who also take a role of tour guide would be perceived by villagers as a stingy family. So, if you live in community, it is not good for a family to take all things in a single (i.e. no sharing to others). Unlike farming, in making a variety of livings in tourist market, all the jobs (except weaving and woodcraft) have not been gender-specific.

Another group of households which I am going to discuss are the households which are minimally engaged in tourism called group “c”. During the first stage, the beginning of ethnic tourist market, to build a homestay business and a souvenir shop locations (of one’s house) and position (local authority) at commune level are important factors. When business becomes intensive competition, economic, social and cultural capitals are required. In accumulating capitals, the quality and quantity of household labor is also a crucial factor. To state in general, the households which succeed in making a living with tourism, such as, group “a” and “b”, depends on labor. There is an example of how a family with low quality and quantity of workforce are not able to make it in the tourist market. They are at minimal engagement in tourism or what I will call household group “c”.

According to Ms. Hiệp’s family, one of the household group “c” in the village, this family has very few members and relatives since her father in law migrated from the high land village. She came from another village, which is about 20 km from Bản Lác. Their household economy is based on only two sources: paddy field and waged labor. Her husband is acknowledged as a diligent wage labor man in the village. My homestay owner’s wife rued that; it is regrettable that her family does not take the opportunity proffered by tourism like other households have done. Ms. Hiệp therefore is considered as lacking know-how to earn a living. She and her husband also have no ability in producing any souvenir product; she is cannot ride bicycle or motorbike. She sold a piece of her residential land, and instead of investing the money in tourism, she built a new house in Kinh style. A house like that cannot be a homestay. Thus, this particular household, and households like this, are at minimal engagement with tourism, because they are stuck with agriculture, subsistence living and waged labor.

Households, which have too many elderly and children, few working adults and, as well as disable person(s) are also in minimal engagement with tourism. Take this example. Ms. Binh’s family consists of four members: old parents, a child, and a



husband incapacitated by accident and currently unable to work. She invested in a souvenir shop but that shop looks unattractive and failed to draw attention of customers. The reason is that she lacks adequate working capital. Eventually, her family leased their house for a Kinh entrepreneur, and they moved to a cottage near their paddy field. These two families are rare example certain types of families are unable to improve their economic condition, despite the opportunities proffered by ethnic tourist market.

But what is important or interesting for this study is the prevailing idea about education among the White Tai. The poor believes higher education to be a critical factor in taking them out poverty. Many of them make investment for their children's university education. These investments are usually aimed at two targets: to make their children local authority and/or to set up a successful homestay business. Education is immensely valued – it is seen as critical or strategic investment. This is not difficult because generally each household has one or two children. They tend to have only one child no matter if their child is male or female. My homestay host explained this phenomenon to me in terms of economic rationality: villagers nowadays occupy a small piece of agricultural land, as such, they do not need much labor (children as labor) as they did in the past. And another reason, especially among the rich and better off families, is that they do not want to invest much in their children's higher education. It is interesting to note that most of the rich and better off homestays do not want to invest in their children's university education. They want them to work in the village, inherit their successful homestay business. This mentality is rather opposite to those households in type “c”.

Anyway, what I want to say is that, even those families which earn their living by doing agriculture and wage labor are gradually entering into the tourism related market. Even if they have not done until now, they do have a plan of doing so in the near future. According to the ways villagers' engage in tourist market, mentioned above, it can be said that the tourist market is an opens, in terms of opportunities and challenges it gives to every household, to accumulate any capital so as to engage with the market. This is a market for household encouragement, in fact. Applying all factors above, I analyze the whole capitals and recourses they occupy in drawing livelihood strategies. The analysis can be concluded as shown in the table 3.4.

**Table 3.4 Type of Households' Strategies and Associated Available Resources for Tourism Business**

(Number of household)

Types of Household	Located at the center of village	Used to/being local authority	Have old treasures/ comfortable houses	Children studying in Univ.	Relatives working for Tourist Agencies	Being a relatives of business pioneers	Labour forces over 2 people	Able to transfer old skills to business realm
<b>Tourist oriented (N = 8)</b>	7	2	7	3	3	3	8	8
<b>Mixed strategies (N = 11)</b>	0	2	1	6	0	0	9	10
<b>Minimal engagement (N = 5)</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	1
<b>Total (N = 24)</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>

Source: Field survey in 2011

The information in table 3.4 shows that even though the villagers seemed to be equal in the period of communism. When seeing all kind of capitals they occupied, they indeed were so different. These capitals put them to the market at the different positions. The households group “a” occupy all of capitals especially the good location (located at the center of village), the quantity and quality of household’s labor. Group “b”, even lack of good location, and the relatives working for tourism business and inserting themselves into the market late, their strengths are the labors. They have enough household labor forces and labor skills/knowledge. They know how to utilize their hospitable skill to build new networks with guests, and tour agency. And of course, they encourage their children for higher education for not only an opportunity of good job but also generating new business networks. Group “c” seems lack of any resources even their labor forces and skills.

Generally, even for households in group “a” and “b”, the culture of hospitality in maintaining socio-business networks is important; i.e., Cultural-business skill in tourism business management is important. It is proved to be true that the underlying factor in homestay business failure is an unawareness of the maintaining such networks. For example, once the father who was the homestay host died, the son does not know how to keep contact with tour agencies through tour guides, drivers, and tourists. It is the fact that the business networks are based on business contact but to maintain them, you have to take care of people involved in the networks such as tour guides, drivers, and tourists. By so doing the culture of hospitality have to be applied to sustain business. There are about good service, modified food, good toilet and bathroom, cleanness, making guests comfortable and warm welcome at the higher level than the host’s livings. These make impressive to the guests (i.e. tour guides, drivers and tourists). Thus, the son who does not know how to satisfy his guests, to make toilet clean, for instance, gradually lost his networks.

The transition is not only from socialism to market economy but also from agriculture-based subsistent economy to cultural economy. As eloquently argued by Friedman (1990: 321) the process of commodification is encompassed by the larger authenticating project. Livelihoods, within this cultural market, are contingent upon White Tais ability to deal with various strategies of authentication of culture. Though it is hard to conclude that the households in group “c” have remained poor because they did not benefit from homestay business, it can be assumed that one of the reasons for their poor economic condition is the failure to engage with the cultural economy. In the cultural economy of the tourist market, the homestay business is the most important economic activity and source of income. It is within this space where hospitality (the ultimate cultural capital of Mai Châu) is experienced. As such its impact on income generation has been significant. It is not surprising that the richest members of the villagers are those who ran the biggest and richest homestays. And ultimately, the goal of other smaller entrepreneurs is to operate a homestay.

### 3.3 Entrepreneurship and the Commodification of Hospitality

In the transition period, as postulated in the previous chapter, the households began to change their mode of economic operation. Market opportunity and White Tai culture worked like alchemy – to transform them into entrepreneurs, no longer living off subsistent agriculture. This transformation was triggered by dynamic households' capital accumulation. To give one example, as seen in the previous section, and also chapter 2, traditional hospitality is transformed from socio-cultural relation into economic relation of commodity. And those who possessed the needed initial capital – location and position – were able to gain access to socio-business network, and accumulate economic capital fast. This success (which is going to be elaborated the way they do in this section) cannot be measured in terms of their location and position alone. But we must also consider their “entrepreneurial attributes” – an attribute that made them see what others could not foresee in the ethnic tourist market.

Entrepreneurship is an important factor in process of peasant transformation from living with agricultural economy to living with market economy (Bull and Corner 1993). Of course, entrepreneurship underlies in the expansion of new small tourism businesses in Mai Châu. Theoretically, the term entrepreneur is firstly relevant closely to the notion of “innovation”; once he or she takes an opportunity to create new business enterprises by individuals or small group (Kent, Sexton, and Vesper 1982), or creating something new, or provide innovation under environment uncertainty (York and Venkataraman 2010). It can be described that the entrepreneur is the innovator who is creative in the process of capitalism. Secondly entrepreneurship indicates the risk-taking propensity. So, by his or her proactive manners, product innovation, and competitiveness, he or she can create new strategy handling with risk (Covin and Selvin 1991).

Importantly, the definition of entrepreneurship is not limited to innovation, creativity, and risk handling, but also about capital accumulation, mobilizing the resources to achieve their entrepreneurial objectives (Bull and Corner 1993). In Bull and Corner's idea (1993), the transition of the peasant family to be the entrepreneur needs the capital accumulation as well as land purchase and economic enterprise. Whereas the freeing of labor from agriculture for industrial work is not a factor. So as



an entrepreneur the household earn income from the two economic activities (agriculture and business). However, to be entrepreneurship in this case is the combination of the traditional capability and ability to adapt to the opportunity. By this process the peasants increase entrepreneurial spirit (in the sense of seeking out the best opportunity, organizing time, and exploiting skills learned independent employment).

More specifically, the White Tai's entrepreneurship is understood as *doanh nhân* ("entrepreneur" in Vietnamese) which, in this case, emerges from villagers' ability to transform traditional hospitality (gift) to be saleable hospitality (commodity) through the process of capital accumulation and transformation. The question is how this transformation of traditional hospitality as commodity takes place? Or, what change villagers' perception of hospitality? As hinted earlier in this chapter, also commented upon in chapter 2, the transformation should be seen in the context of the changing social relation. The culture of hospitality was changing with shifting social relation. In the past, the hosts and the guests get in touch directly or in "pure relationship"<sup>4</sup> according to Giddens (1990). The hospitable relationship is based on kinship, or neighborhood, or reciprocity, or even humanity. Or in the other word, this is the horizontal relationship. Furthermore, customarily, they accept every one passing by their house, even the strangers. They are glad to provide drink; meals and accommodation (see the elaboration in chapter 5). Habitually, the horizontal relationship of hospitality of the White Tai can be considered as an institutionalized social practice binding people with reciprocity. So hospitality is considered as a gift. In addition, this institution is to secure trades and connections among people of the same/different societies and cultures. Far away from the traditional one, the modern hospitality at the first glimpse is in contrast (but indeed, in some practices and contexts, it is undistinguishable between the gift and the commodity which I will discuss later). The commodification of hospitable relationship is made by the "medium". The tourists are not the direct guests of the host. They are the guests of the government officials and/or tour agencies (the medium) who take them to the village.

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<sup>4</sup> Taking from the concept of "reflexivity", people watching the behaviors of both them and other people in the "pure relationship". It is different from the relationship between historians and sources, or between people via medium which is considered as "representational relationship".

So, hospitality as a cultural task becomes political (i.e. diplomacy) and/or economic tasks. The horizontal relations became the vertical relationship which is considered as a power relation of the interplays of host-guest/minority-majority groups. Among them and officials is vertical. But between villagers and kin and among them is still horizontal.

Secondly, what differentiate hospitality as gift and commodity is the purpose of travelling and staying at the homestay. In the past, they accepted guests for humanity reason. They helped the travelers, who travel for trading, or visiting their relatives. The tourists' aims are mostly for recreation, or gazing/consuming the exotic people/culture. In addition many domestic tourists who have purchasing power come to Mai Châu to be served by the minority people. So the definitions of "hospitality" and "guest" have changed. After engaging with tourism, the terms to refer to guests (which in the past they did not distinguish, but called them, "*Khách hươu*" – meaning "(our) home's guest") are differentiated into two kinds. They borrow the terms from Vietnamese. These terms are "*Khách vắng lái*" – meaning the "tourist or visitor" (bring the sense of business transaction) and "*Khách thân tình*" – meaning the "guest" (who are based on socio-cultural relations) (see the elaboration in chapter 5). By changing of relationship, the generalized reciprocity (belated paying back with (un) equitable quantity) of the past became a balanced reciprocity (paying back measured in terms of equitable quantity) in the notion of Sahlins (Narotzky 1997: 46 -7).

Thirdly, the frequency of by which guests are accepted is also one of the factors for commodification of hospitality. Long ago, villagers rarely accepted the guests compared to that in tourism business nowadays. Another factor points to the number of guests they accept. Just one or two years before getting money from homestay service, the villager received mass tourist, which is about 30 to 40 tourists for overnight stay. In the past, they accepted just one or few guests. For this reason, plus the frequency of the tourist's arrival, the host (without compensation) felt there was too much burden for them to take care of guests who they do not know in a "pure relationship".

Finally, what leads to commodification of homestay is the behavior of the local authority. As discussed in chapter 2, even entering to the tourist market since 1986, the villagers were not allowed to get money from homestay service till 1994.

At that time they just got income from souvenir selling, whereas according to the descendent of the pioneer homestay, the local authority charged from the tourists. The host realized that in fact their homestay service was saleable. Afterward, they put an effort to negotiate with local authority to let them take the service charge.

The pioneer homestays had experienced the changing relation (from horizontal to vertical plus ethnic power relations), saw the market demand and realized that their hospitality can be sold. As acknowledged earlier, business investment is risky. How could they, as farmers take business opportunity with risk? Again, taking the information from the chapter 2 let me elaborate this point. The first homestay have been converted into a homestay, for political reason, for years without any economic benefit. Meanwhile the second homestay had a long vision and invested for their daughter to take tourism degree at the university. Then, of course after graduation she worked for the government hotel and is able to build contacts with many tour agencies.

Therefore, being local authority, the first homestay (and his sons' homestays) as well as other local authorities' homestay, they can monopolize the governmental networks of tourists by opening up the connection, whereas the second homestay grabs the network of tour agencies generated from the provincial government owned hotel. These networks become "property" for commodification of hospitality which enclose them in the tourist market; and meanwhile of course, exclude others from such market. This property cannot be accessed for all. So, at the early stage of market formation, the entrepreneurship is the result of power relation or nexus of political-market relation (Nevins and Peluso 2008). Moreover, the notion of benefit (see the detail in chapter 2) converts the homestay service into a commodity. And in the power relation, the homestay owners did not want the authority to take advantage of their culture and take control and benefit from commodity they produced. Instead, they are in the process of negotiating for their new identity as entrepreneurs.

The new identity is also a way in which they can negotiate the authentic White Tai, which henceforth should not be understood only within the agricultural realm, but also as part of a frozen White Tai cultures and language, as if they were in a primitive world. However, they are now asserting themselves within the business realm; practically negotiating their authenticity as modern people - linking themselves to the

global market and with other people in the world. In short, the authentic White Tai people at the moment are more like entrepreneurs and “modern people”, than “primitive peasants”

What I would like to point out is, when a host in Mai Châu claimed to offer “authentic White Tai”, such as, local foods (like steamed fish known as “*Pa Tra Ot*”), traditional stilt houses with local mattress, blanket and pillow, traditional fabrics as well as ethnic cultural atmosphere, what they sell is not these things per se. It is not the meaning added to these things (Appadurai 1986) either. Rather, the meaning comes from the relationship between the two people (Goddard 2000) – i.e. hosts and the guests through their practices. That is to say, the relationship of the two, which goes beyond the meaning of things per se, constructs the “meaningful relation” of the host and the guest. It can be called “authentic relation”. That is similar to what Goddard (2000) found in the distinction between gifts and commodities in relation to praxis and intention rather than exchange. Even though the commodity has its own meaning, in the other way, the meaning comes from the relationship between two people. So, it can be a conflict or a coincidence of meaning or anything else. In this case, to transform the hospitality from the gift to be commodity, the meaning constructed through host-guest relationships is a vital factor (see the elaboration in chapter 5). The authentic relation of warm hospitality and impression as something abstracted can be sold. However, if the abstraction of hospitality is sold, therefore, the commodity White Tai sell (i.e. food/drink, staying overnight) is entangled with a gift (warm welcome and friendliness and so on). This means that in the process of commodification of hospitality, the boundary between gift and commodity is blurred.

However, as discussed before, many other members of villages began to participate in the tourist market. But the problem is most business connections were already monopolized by the pioneer homestays. So a daunting task for these newcomers into the business is how to create new forms of network. Political and economic networks are already exhausted avenue: they need to tap on other avenues in order to be successful entrepreneurs. In the villagers’ perspective, they are *doanh nhân* (entrepreneur), the business owners who are innovative, able to invest and handle the risk. In the following discussion I will discuss the ways the new homestay owners (or what I called “the social-tie homestays” in the chapter 2) transform the



culture of hospitality (gift) to building the homestay business (commodity). And conversely, how the gift is interwoven in the commodity. This is not to say that the commodity is socially alienated from the producers (the hosts) as visualized by Marxist tradition. Moreover, there is no clear distinction between gift and commodity. Gift can become commodity and commodity can be a gift (Goddard 2000).

What I am trying to draw attention, so as to make my argument more cogent is about the strategy a White Tai employs to make friend with a potential guest for his/her future homestay (who is currently a guest of an established homestays). My anthropological curiosity is aroused by the ways they struggle for share (i.e. exactly is market segment) in the ethnic tourist market. Normally, villagers are embarrassed to approach a tourist directly or explicitly. Customarily, a White Tai always welcome guest in a friendly way. It is very easy for them to make friend with outsiders or customers of their souvenir shops. Some guests are invited to have tea in their houses, which is a gift (normally in Vietnamese society there is no free tea in business space). Such habit makes it easy for them to strike up friendship for future business connection. This is just a positive impact of being friendship, not really intended consequence of the White Tai. Additionally, according to their structure of sentiment, getting guest from other homestays, in the villager's world view, is not a sin as long as they do not say something negative to the homestay where the guests are staying. By inviting the tourists who are strolling pass or buying souvenir at their homestays to drink tea, and/or chat with them, if the tourist appreciate them, they can be the guests of the new homestays for the next time.

The villagers perceive this phenomenon as “the tourists’ choice”. They have rights to stay with any homestay they prefer. So, what they do is to reconstruct the meaning of hospitality so as to struggle for taking tourists of another network (market segment). It is interesting that according to interview with tour guides, generally the villagers do not invite them, like they do to the tourists. That is because, if they invite tour guide to drink tea, it is obvious that they are hijacking the network. Thus, in general, the cultural of establishing market network is acceptable among villagers, and is not perceived as a hard competition once anyone can interpret and practice their cultures for their own purposes. In so doing, the struggle to create market segment is a “creative competition”, which can be perceived as mutual construction of market

(network) between culture of hospitality and economy; meanwhile it also leads to developing a creative production (giving choices to tourists).

The question then is: what type of practices adopted by homestay owners gives hospitality an ambivalent identity – as a sold commodity or as a gift? It is a commodity, in the sense that the villagers provide extra deal (tea and talk) to the customer buying the souvenir. And it is a gift in the conscious praxis that the tourists appreciate what the souvenir seller offer. The point is, in such a business transaction, which at the first glimpse is considered as a transient transaction, however the social integration/obligation, as argued by Marcel Mauss, emerges (Graeber 2001). Habitually, the homestay hosts also try to make an moral impression upon their guests to keep them in the business network by giving some gifts, such as, discount on goods, free motorbike taxi ride, and so on. Therefore, in the homestay business, we cannot separate the commodity from the gift and vice versa.

Another point about market competition i.e., what makes homestay owners in type “b” take advantage of market segmentation is their ability to see gaps in the market. As new comers in another market segment, they are also in the process of constructing their identity as entrepreneurs. That is, most of the guests of the pioneer homestay are foreigners and also dependent domestic tourists who are the rich. Their competition is usually for the domestic tourists. They offer them cheaper accommodation if case they would come second time or suggest to them that they would cheaper rate to tourists recommended by them. By making market segmentation, they can gain a lot of domestic tourist whereas the pioneer homestays is confined to the segment of foreign and dependent tourists.

Table 3.5 shows distribution of tourists by homestay type and their network. It is found that the share of the new comers (the social tie network) is more than half of the total tourists visiting Mai Châu. Explicitly, the homestays depending on tour company network, which are 36.0% or 1/3 of total homestays, gets 43.1%, of the total number of tourist or almost a half; whereas the homestays based on social ties network, which are 64.0%, gain approximately 61% of the tourist. In a very rough calculation, the homestay which depend on tour company network get the tourists more than that of the homestay based on social ties network around one time. This means the homestay based on social tie network can obtain 1/3 of the market share.

However, if we calculate the percentage of profit share, since they do not need to divide profit with any tour agency (unlike the homestay connecting with tour company), we can say that they are rather successful in engaging with tourist market. And because these two types of homestay uses different market strategies and position themselves in different market segments, intense conflict seldom occurs.

**Table 3.5 Distribution of Tourists by Type of Homestay's Networks (%)**

Type of Homestay's Networks	Types of Tourist			
	Foreign & Dependent Tourists	Foreign &Independent / Backpackers	Domestic Independent Tourists	Total
Tour Company Network [9 [36.0%]]	(29) 70.7%	(11) 40.7%	(7) 17.1%	(47) (43.1%)
Social-Tie Network [16 [64.0%]]	(12) 29.3%	(15) 55.6%	(34) 82.9%	(61) 56.0%
Total [25 [100%]]	(41) 100%	(26) 100%	(41) 100%	(108) 100%

Source: Field survey in 2011

Notes: Figures in ( ) are percentage of tourists

Figures in [ ] are percentage of homestay networks

Secondly and importantly, as mentioned previously, these type of homestays interpret and practice their culture of hospitality (as a gift) to gain access to the market to bypass the networks in which they are excluded by the pioneer homestays. So, by interpretation and practice of culture, culture become mechanisms for free entry into market. They can get around the already closed political-business network. Therefore, this study argues that in the “cultural economy” no one is excluded from the (cultural) capital, resource (network) and market (economy). These new entrepreneurs, who belonged to similar culture, therefore by their ability to see the market gap and positioning themselves in proper market segment, can transform their cultural capitals to be a resource (network) called “social-tie network”. Also, by this phenomenon, the boundary between the gift (perceived as things to build social obligation) and the

commodity (things alienated from the producers, and fetishism) are blurred. They may be seen in mutually interchangeable relationship.

### **3.4 Conflicting Engagement with Tourism Business and White Tai's Habitus**

White Tai traditional fabric is the first thing the villagers sell when they engage with tourist market. In the changing social relation, as a material culture, it is easier to transform traditional fabric from a gift to commodity. I asked a pioneer souvenir seller if she felt embarrassed to sell the fabric (perceived as a gift, according to their age-old culture) to the tourists. She simply replied that she did not sell it to her relatives and friends so that there was no embarrassment. However, even in the context of changing relation in the global market world, as mentioned in the previous section, the commodity which is transformed, from gift (plus social integration/obligation) is something else, it cannot be seen as just a commodity sold in transient transaction. On seller-customer relationships, the gift is used to transform transient relation to be relation of friendship, which leads to business contact in the long term relation. Beside by the interaction of seller and customer, which is apart from exchange relation itself, the new (further) relationship can be constructed, which also initiates the changing of power relation of the two ethnic people. Thus, in the gift exchange, the meaning of gift does not matter. What matter is the meaningfulness of the seller-customer relation beyond the gift. And of course the sellers can utilize it for the business purpose in the long term as discussed in the previous chapter. In addition, it is necessary to convert gift to commodity since Vietnam was modernizing its economy where material culture, like traditional fabric, fades out. White Tai people gradually abolish wearing of traditional dress and use of it. So the policy of Vietnamese government to preserve ethnic culture and tourist development promoted Mai Châu as a handicraft village. The traditional fabric is turned into a commodity and sold in the market. That is to say, culture is preserved by selling it.

Anyway, in selling souvenir goods, it is interesting that I do not see political violence of exclusion of getting access to the souvenir materials, producers, middlemen, even though some villagers can connect to the middlewomen. The market mechanism works in this kind of business well. That is to say, it is free for the



sellers and buyers to insert themselves into the souvenir market because, unlike homestay business, this business is not based on high risk - high return. According to White Tai style of houses (the stilt house where first floor can be transformed into a shop), and handicraft making skills, many people can do this business; and all tourists can get access to the shops they want. To survive in this business, depends on SWOT analysis<sup>5</sup> and make marketing mixed strategy (mixed on product, price, place, promotion) which means the ability to manage the business. The souvenir business is rather a perfect competition run by market mechanism. So, logically, for the villagers, there are two choices for taking a market share. The first one is the “hard competition” of one-to-one relationship, and the second is the cooperation between the neighbor shops.

White Tai's habitus are main mechanisms on business cooperation. The reciprocity (mutual aid) and trust improvised by souvenir shop owners to help each other, since they do not have enough household labors in taking care for their businesses and other activities, is worthy illustration. They help each other in selling their commodities, despite the fact that they sell almost the same things that portray them as competitors. As the villagers have more than one job, they are absent from the souvenir shops sometimes. In that case they have to leave their shops with other neighbor shop owners. Once tourists stop at a souvenir shop, if the owners are absent but still inside their house, their neighbors shout in White Tai to hail the owners. Then the owners will know and run to their shop. Sometimes, if the owners are absent from both their houses and souvenir shops, their neighbor shop owners would take care for sale without convincing tourists to buy their own similar goods. Only if tourists ask for more kinds which those shop does not have, the neighbor shop owners will offer their own goods. With trust, therefore, they can let their souvenir goods in the care of their neighbors. Importantly, there is no profit share. In general they have generalized reciprocal relationships that one will take turn in taking care of goods for sale, or even taking care for other matters of the house. At the low risk - low return and small scale of business, souvenir selling seems as an exceptional case of market exclusion. And those who are the cultural owners can gain access to the market freely.

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<sup>5</sup>Analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threat of the business to make a strategic plan.

Apart from being entrepreneurs, another small trade runs on gender and low class sellers. In Vietnamese society, the perception of the female vender is that of low class of trade. Women who sell local food, “*anh lam*”, are not considered as *doanh nhân*), they are only considered as petty vendors (*tiểu thương*). By class and gender bias, they are excluded from the public space and treated by the buyers badly (Leshkovich 2011). They struggle for space in the trading arena and they have minimal capitals, in the general perception, they can be the tactical persons. During weekends, at the tourist villages we can see a lot of female vendors selling *anh lam*, scattering around the main lanes of the villages, invading spaces in front of homestays.

However, the White Tai’s habitus tend to lessen their suffering. That is, at the superficial level the image of the White Tai female vendors in Mai Châu is quite different from the Vietnamese female vendors in general; they are more peaceful and cooperative. When they sell in the same places they will not compete by calling the customer to buy their food, as other female vendors do. Those who cannot sell well because there are a lot of vendors at that place, they will move out. Also we can see few vendors who are sits together near homestay ladder waiting for the guests without any sense of competition. Once I pretended to be a vender (when she went home to get more stuffs from her house) for two hours, to get a feeling in the real situation. I tried to act like vendors around me. Because I am sitting at a position far away from tourists, sitting with a group of vendors, the tourists after buying some *anh lam* from other vendors see me with lots of *anh lam*. One of them points at me and tells his friend, “*see, see, she has a lot of com (anh) lam*”. Then they came over to where I sat. One of them asked me, “why don’t you compete one another (by calling for their attention)?”

I observed how vendors call for attention of the tourists. I realized once a tourist gets closed to one of the vendors, others will stop calling out for attention. They let the tourists make free decision who they like to buy from. They would call out once they feel that a tourist wants to buy more. Then they will call the tourists to come to them. This is a kind of hidden competition which by their habitus the villagers attempt to avoid conflict. The Kinh tourists see White Tai vendors doing business in peaceful manner. They like the way vendors relate to them. White Tai

venders are polite and unlike Vietnamese female venders who tend to cheat and bother customers with their selling tactics. The practice of White Tai *tiểu thương* is different from other *tiểu thương* in Vietnamese society in general as they try to distinguish their identity as “polite venders” (*tiểu thương lịch sự*).



**Figure 3.7 Anh Lam Venders and the Tourists**  
*Photo by Achariya Choowonglert*

A sketch of the relationship between Kinh and White Tai entrepreneur, in the ethnic tourist market, can also be illustrative given the fact that Kinh is the minority in this White Tai dominated market. In such a situation how do the ethnic animosities between the two play out? In Bản Lác, there are two Kinh men and four Kinh women married to White Tai men/women. Besides them, a Kinh, in cooperation with a White Tai household, have set up a new homestay business. There is another Kinh entrepreneur who rented a house and set up homestay business. The modus operandi is, the Kinh finds tourists, a White Tai (who can be a wife/husband or hired labor) serves the hospitality. After all, what the tourists are seeking is consumption of White Tai hospitality and culture. What is interesting is, White Tai entrepreneurs do not see them as a real threat to their businesses and culture, as long as the Kinhs do not take market share from White Tai’s homestay networks. This is strange because a Kinh

who is always considered as the smart businessman always better than tradition enconced White Tai. They operate based on market rationality; not cultural rationality like the White Tai.

There is no doubt that by creating new networks, Kinh entrepreneurs bring more tourists to the villages. This may be reason why Tai villagers do not see them as threat to their business. By this I do not mean the relationship is free from occasional jealousy, conflict, clash of interest and values. For example, the Kinh who has a White Tai wife and became rich has tendency to separate himself from other normal homestays and members of the village. Though a White Tai finds this offensive, they believe that the land belongs to White Tai; the land has its own spirits. Those who live with the White Tai must follow their custom; only with such people the spirits of the land will be compatible with them.

This belief has an uncanny ring to it. Take this story told to me by a White Tai. Some years ago, a few Kinh entrepreneurs invested in homestay by renting White Tai house in Bản Lác. One of the entrepreneurs disappered. And another transformed her homestay business into internet and food shop. Many like them, after failing in homestay business at the early stage of doing business, have left the villages. White Tai interpret this failure in the realm of culture. That is, these homestay businesses are not the authentic White Tai homestays – meaning that what the Kinh do are not in a manner of spirit of White Tai. Anyway it is the consumer's interpretation of authentic White Tai which take the Kinh out of the market, not the violent politics of ethnicity which has never occured in tourist market. Tourists are tending to see such homestays as fakes. Though it is the White Tai who serve hospitality, the fact that the homestay is owned by a Kinh, that service no longer constitutes authentic hospitality. As I have, and will continually stressed, throughout this study, the line between (hospitality as) a gift and a commodity is blurred and complex. Its experience or consumption from a homestay owned by a Kinh merely makes it a commodity. Hospitality as a gift can only inhabit the cultural world of White Tai – infused in their spirits, their spaces and their bodies.

I would like to reiterate that the commodification of White Tai hospitality is not just a transformation the gift to the “commodity” completly. In other word, it is not commodity of hospitality in business transaction per se; rather commodity is



mixed with the gift (warm welcome, friendliness and so on) made by habitus and spirit of White Tai. In such host-guest relationship which is apart from the commodity exchange, it is the link of the host (giver) in expression of giver's subjectivity and the receiver (guest)'s consciousness (Goddard 2000: 147). The meaning of authentic White Tai hospitality is constructed through the "meaningfulness" of host-guest relationship. So, the Kinh business selling the hospitality concerning only the commodity, which at the superficial looks likes White Tai's hospitality. This study insists that the commodity of hospitality is apart from "things"; rather it is the host-guest relationship constructing the meaning of authentic White Tai. So, in this way, the White Tai villagers are not worried much about this competition (as they said this land belongs to White Tai's spirit).

But the Kinh are savvy entrepreneurs. After their initial failure in homestay business in Mai Châu, around five years later, two new Kinh investors entered the homestay business. This time the Kinh do not own the business alone or directly. It is co-owned by a White Tai. They seem to interpret better on the "spirit of White Tai" in doing homestay business. As long as they can interpret and practice White Tai culture appropriately, although they are not White Tai, they can survive in this business arena. Therefore we can see that under the notion of cultural economy the stranger like the Kinh can get along with "spirit of White Tai" through business "joint venture". In details, for example one Kinh has rented and repaired villager's house while another one joins venture with White Tai villagers. The first Kinh investor is working as a tour agency in Hanoi so that the guests are from their own connections. To take care of homestay business there, he hires both the Kinh and the White Tai workers to make foods and carter the tourists and also to interact with the tourists. The Kinh owner hires a villager to be a local tour guide. In March-April 2011, the high tourist season, when I went back to Mai Châu again, the homestay business was doing quite well.

Though at times, an established homestay may see a Kinh as a threat to his business since the Kinh are considered good in business. A homestay owner while talking to me alleged that the Kinh are untrustable, insincere and has a tendency to exaggerate. Anyway, by White Tai habitus of handling economic activity in sustainability and belief of land's spirit, and economic rationality, the villagers generally are comfortable living with the Kinhs as long as they are compatible with

White Tai culture and spirit or are condescending towards the White Tai. The general opinion is that Kinh are better businessmen, but the land is inscribed with White Tai identity, spirits and culture. On my reading, this attitude is product of cultural economy – it empowers the local in the ethnic tourist market to easily monopolize the business and withstand the onslaught of global capital or market savvy Kinh.

### **3.5 Negotiating with the Market, Bypassing the State**

Since Mai Châu's entry into the tourist market, the local authority has been attempting to control the market and villagers have been struggling to be free of that control. This market space seems like a social arena. After Đổi Mới (1986) but before 1994, although Vietnam promoted market-orientated economy, the local authority still does not allow the homestays to collect any money from their homestay services. They can only sell souvenir. According to the granddaughter of the first homestay owner, instead of the host, the local authorities took money from the guests even though it was the homestay owners sometimes had to sacrifice their own vegetables, fish, and poultry. This was the initial attempt by local authority to control tourist market. In 1994 things changed. Homestay owners were allowed to charge guest for homestay services, though local authority still tried to control tourism business in various ways. Firstly, they tried to set a standard price for accommodation. They could not do so. The price was deliberately kept flexible, depending on the condition of homestay and service, by the homestay owners. So in reality, the villagers determined the price instead of local authority. And of course because of (Mai Châu) market mechanism, the prices shaped are reasonable and rather cheap. Many articles written in Vietnamese which introduce Mai Châu mentioned that the prices of each homestay were almost the same (standard price, in fact). Market mechanism in this case (completed competition among various homestays) is about being free from the monopoly under the notion of political economy.

Then the state tried to control tourism via another route – the district authority wanted the villagers, who do tourism business, such as, homestay service, souvenir shop, and cultural show, to wear White Tai traditional dress. However, the villagers do not really conform. Their argument with the local authority was that they have many

tasks to do, not only tourism but also agriculture. And they do not have money to buy the traditional dress which is very expensive compared to the industrial made dresses.

The district officials, therefore, realize that they cannot control business by making and imposing rules. They made another attempt by offering money as loan with certain set of conditions to those who want to set up homestay business. The district officials planned to build Bản Lác, Bản Vãn, and Bản Pom Coọng as tourist villages, then manage, and control them. But, still, the villagers refuse to accept the loan from the district's project. They said they can borrow the money from the national agricultural bank. As mentioned, the crucial factor of constructing business is not money; rather there are social and cultural capitals. The authorities have no idea how to manage and control ethnic tourist market. Mai Châu cultural market economy is quite unique since culture play a crucial role in interaction and in constructing the market. The villagers accumulate and utilize their own economic, social, and cultural capitals. It is a case of self-reliance in contrast to other ethnic tourist markets which is controlled by the government-owned company, especially in the case of Dai (Tai) people in Xishuang Banna, Yunnan, China (Li 2004). Besides, because most of the local authorities are White Tai, they cannot force the villages (who are the same ethnic group) and most are their relatives/neighbors. It appears that local authority have given up all hopes of controlling tourist and are restricted to levying small tax from tourist related business. This phenomena points to the new identity of White Tai who are able to determine their business as "able entrepreneur", free from dependence on the state.

Even its good intention seems unable to withstand the competition in the cultural market. With all good intention, to promote tourism, the district authority constructed a luxury hotel in front of two main tourist villages. That investment was an embarrassing failure. Elsewhere, such a luxury hotel could have been a good investment, but in competition with cultural economy. The district had to sell the hotel to a foreign investor. Surprisingly, nowadays the hotel business is going well. The failure in business of local authority demonstrates that it has no ability and merit to control any tourism business. In all, it indicates that local authority and state have failed as an actor in the tourist market of Mai Châu. What they can do is only to construct the images/representations of Mai Châu and promote in the mass media.

The local authority tend to give up in business competition but the provincial government does not. Recently Thiên Minh Hòa Bình Tourism Joint-stock company in approval of Hòa Bình Provincial People's Committee by resolution No. 1091/QĐ-UBND dated May 20, 2008 has planned to build project name “Mai Châu Eco-tourism and Sport Zone” at Mai Châu Town, next to Bản Pom Coọng. What they are going to do is to build small resort which has 40 rooms plus tourist services. This resort is a method of mitigating environmental impacts. As a result, on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2008, in order to develop the potential of “mountainous eco-cultural tourism”,<sup>6</sup> the Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism in Thanh Hóa and Hòa Bình Provinces, published a contract regarding sustainable corporative tourism. According to the General Directorate of Tourism, the contract contains three main points: (i) to establish connected tourist routes, (ii) to develop advertising and marketing activities, and (iii) to build those human resources working on community-based tourism.



**Figure 3.8 The Sign Broad of Provincial Government Promoting Environment Protection in the First Phase of Implementation of Mountainous Eco-cultural Tourism**

*Photo by Achariya Choowonglert*

<sup>6</sup> This purpose and the terms of this are shown at: [www.vietnamtourism.gov.vn](http://www.vietnamtourism.gov.vn), as used by the government and the sign broad located in front of Bản Pom Coọng.



Recently, a foreign investor has been buying land from the villagers in order to invest in homestay with a plan to build a resort under a concession from the local authority. Additionally, under the latest Land Law 1993 and its revised versions in 1998 and 2003, paddy land was allocated to each household for twenty years, counting down from 1993. Villagers therefore understand that 2013 will be the year when the twenty years of granted paddy land end, at which time a new round of land allocation will begin, so they are afraid of losing their paddy land, which is their ancestral agricultural land, as well as a place for them to develop tourism. A few villagers I have talked to realize that their tourist business and livelihoods will be threatened and they are very worried.

In the same period, the state government put effort in contributing in Mai Châu ethnic tourism again. First attempt is for five years they have constructed an ethnic tourist village at “Bản Bụa” where is 20 km away from Bản Lác. They moved the villagers living in the mountainous areas to a small valley by giving them some incentives such as a small plot of land, compensation, tourist infrastructures. They make connection with an Australian-own tourist company to take the tourists there. However, as I witness, for five years this village still gets an insufficient tourists. Also Bản Lác villagers do not see Bản Bụa as their threat; rather they perceive as another node of tourist attraction integrated into the trekking trip. It is the new trekking route they can take tourist to take a nap or even stay overnight. By their habitus seeing things in holistic view, they turn the threat into an opportunity, perceiving Bản Bụa as a business partner, the homestay hosts in Bản Lác and Pom Coọng can get more tourists and they will become a hub of Mai Châu ethnic tourism.

Furthermore, what is happening in Mai Châu has diverged from what Lloyd (2003) and Bennett (2009) found regarding the tension between economic liberalization and political control during economic transition in Vietnam. They see tourism from the side of state’s control and negotiating the control. However, the villagers in Mai Châu tourist market can easily overcome the control, even without much tension. That is because cultural constructing tourist market leads to the negotiation for their every day life. Besides, local people’s success and local government’s failure in doing tourism businesses demonstrate the power of the local people sense of identity in the management and control of markets. The struggling to

control tourist market between state and villagers seems to end up with the villagers' bypassing themselves from the state's domination. These are the evidences that, by utilizing culture and their habitus the villagers have the ability to manage their tourism business by themselves. Thus by identified themselves as "able entrepreneur", they can claim for self-management. That point is different from the government's perception considering minority culture as development obstacle in economic renovation (Taylor 2008: 4). Engaging more with tourist market helps villagers to bypass the state mechanisms that completely controlled their economy in the socialist period, and allows White Tai livelihood more freedom in the determination of their living under post socialist period.

Moreover, freedom of livelihood and self-determination bring about the ethnic dignity and change ethnic power relations. In the early April 2011, villagers in Bản Lác, invited me to join the banquet in *Lễ đón nhận huân chương lao động hạng ba, Xóm Lác, Chiềng Châu* – meaning "ceremony for the Third-Ranked Labor Medal Award for Bản Lác, Chiềng Châu commune", which they got from state government. This is an award for successful local economy by the national government. Before starting the ceremony, Anh Học, a Bản Lác villager referred to White Tai and Kinh ethnic relationship in Mai Châu. He said in White Tai that "*can keo Mai Châu khao bao du ngai can Tai ka lo*" (the Kinhs in Mai Châu district do not underestimate the Tais anymore). He proudly said to me since the Kinhs living in Mai Châu acknowledge that White Tai people have succeeded in developing tourist market. That comment was spoken out when Mai Châu people have been recognizing effects of tourist market growth with an example of the enlargement of the town's market building to another bigger building. That observation looks strange from the situation during the socialist period in the past (1958-1979) when state, in general the majority Kinh, look down on other ethnic minorities. At the macro level, then, there were often contradictory relationships between ethnic minority groups and the majority Kinh.

This is the White Tai ethnic identity that they are smart and better (or at least equal) than the Kinh in doing businesses and in their contributions to developing economy at the district level. Consequently, their economy is claimed to be an essential part of Vietnamese national economy. Their arrangement for big party and pride of attaining the third-ranked labor medal at the national level for Bản Lác

emphasizes the villagers' enjoyment of engaging in the national economy as *doanh nhân* who are innovative, and able to handle the risk, not *tiểu thương* or peddlers who hold the image of pariah entrepreneurs in Vietnamese society (Leshkovich 2011: 281). For entrepreneur, the businesses they hold are rather big. The business needs many resources and innovation for investment. Also there are many risks. "*Tiểu thương*" is quite different, their scale of business are quite small. They are just small traders (i.e. vendors or peddlers) who have quite less capital, innovation, and risk.

Additionally, the villagers' better-off living and the economic growth at the market town is the evidence of their contributions in building Vietnam economy at the local level. However, considering the state's reward deliberately, it is found that the state tend to give up its mechanism in controlling the market. Since Vietnam has just entered to the market economy, by supporting local economy the state has to focus on utilizing the market mechanisms. The government puts together market mechanism and local contributions for economic development by generating the law of emulation and reward as a discourse of encouraging local people to work hard for their gains in both economic benefits and being proud of contributing to the national economy.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Engaging with the tourist market has had tremendous impact on the villagers' livelihood and ethnic identity. As shown in the households type "a" and "b", tourism development fits and links with existing economic system (agriculture in particular) and culture (i.e. craft making, and hospitality). The global market forces are manipulated into people's life project, increasing livelihood options even for the poor people. Tourist market provides the diversification of both farming and non-farming economic activities which are not contradictory but of mutual support. On the other side, tourism helps to reinforce agricultural economy and culture while the agricultural products are used in homestay businesses. Besides, the three types of households' strategies points to the difference of capitals accumulation which leads to uneven of livings and economic differentiation. Anyway, global market tourism per se is not the cause of uneven income distribution in the tourist villages since the villagers, by the quality and quantity of labor forces, and ability to transfer the social and cultural capitals to economic capitals can take any opportunity in improving their lives.

Engaging with tourism makes villagers realize that, more than diligent, creative thinking in marketing and managing business as well as making a diversified living, is important. This means that in contemporary times, villagers have to know how to deal with trade and business; the elderly who used to be a head of the commune cooperatives, I talked to, insisted on this point. He said, those who work for homestay can get more money by investing less time and energy than those run farming. In not so distant future, those who worked hard would get more; but at this moment the lazy ones (who have business connections) are able to become richer than the diligent ones (working on agriculture) as shown in the case of Ms. Hiệp's family, the poor family, For that reason, he claims for changing perception of work as seen through dealing with tourism. Thus, it is generally acknowledged among the villagers that farming activities is for only households' consumption while engagement in tourism business or any kind of business is for money and prosperity. So, manipulating and living with tourism is a new (livelihood) strategy of White Tai in Mai Châu.

However, tourism has not undermined cultures and local patterns of resource consumption, use, need and management. In contrast, drawing on a sustainable culture and natural resources, local people have intergrated them into the realm of tourism which is shown in developing tourist market, business management and livelihood strategies. In addition, tourist market development in Mai Châu helps people utilizing their customs, moralities and habits to develop strategies of living with tourism. That is rather than coping with globalization; tourist market of Mai Châu can also be seen as the localized process.

As part of the commodification of hospitality and in a situation of changing social relations between the villagers and outsiders, the villagers have re-constructed their identity from being *nông dân* (peasants) to *doanh nhân* (entrepreneurs). They have been able to do so by converting their social and cultural capital into economic capital. The homestay business founders in Mai Châu were the first to do so and were then followed by several villagers who claimed themselves to be entrepreneurs. The newer/later comers, or type "b" villagers were able to spot a gap in the market and as a consequence create a market segment of their own. In the end, they entered the tourist market through the interpretation and practice of their hospitality culture. They



have since; therefore, had the ability to transform cultural capital into a “business resource” called a “social-ties network”. In addition, the souvenir shop owners have also constructed their identity as business persons. These new identities among the White Tai have brought-about an ethnic dignity in relation to the Kinh.

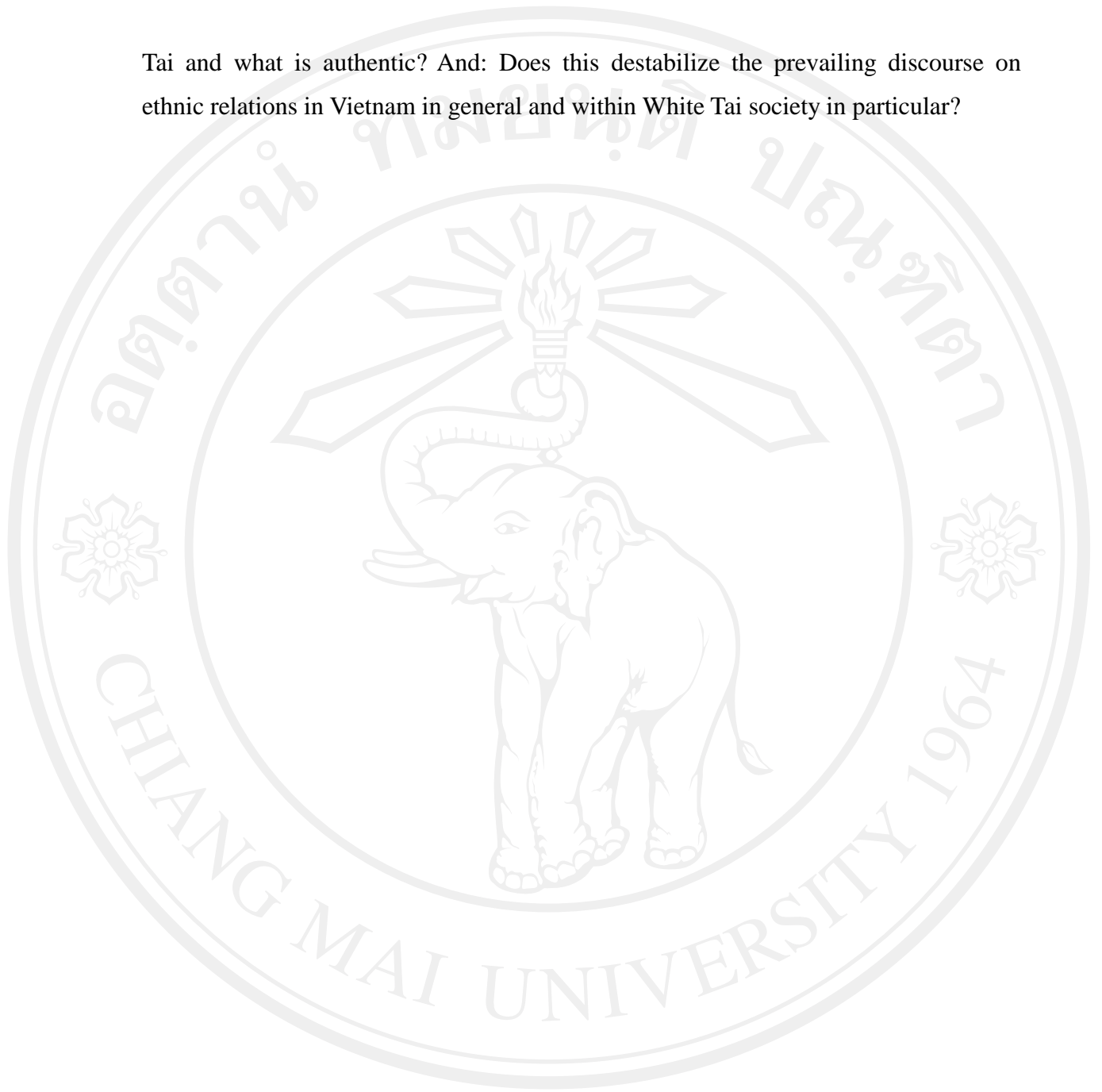
The commodification of culture in the tourist market implies a change in the social structure (Miller 1995) that exists between the villagers and outsiders. Firstly, among the villagers, this change has led to their social exclusion from business connections, though by improvising their habitus of hospitality they have been able to stay free from the violent politics of social exclusion and also state domination, and have gained access to the market. Secondly, in relation to the state and the Vietnamese tourists, constructing their identity as entrepreneurs in the tourist market has allowed the White Tai people to change the relations of domination. Mai Châu tourism, with its construction of White Tai identity, has led to the creation of a variety of choices within people’s lives, and has freed them from the political economy of social exclusion. Specifically, when the villagers are engaged with the market as part of the “cultural economy”, no one is excluded from the resources (networks) and business opportunities due to cultural interpretations and practices, or economic rational thinking. Interpreting and practicing culture therefore leads them to engage freely with the market.

Within the process of the commodification of hospitality, the boundary between gifts and commodities is blurred, for they are not a part of the objectification process, but reflect the subjectivities of the givers and receivers (Goddard 2000: 147), who construct not the meaning of the gift/commodity; but construct “meaningful relationships” (intimate relationships) that go beyond the gift/commodity exchange per se. These meaningful relationships can also be perceived as “authentic relations”. The authenticity is thus not about the “thing”, but rather is about “relations”. Such meaningful relationships in the long term can be utilized to build market networks, and villagers see these relationships as a priority; providing access to material wealth or money. All of the study entrepreneurs cite the building of “socio-business networks” (which are based on intimate relationships) as the most important factor in developing their businesses. Without such a network, having the money to build a business is meaningless.

In contrast to Walker *et al.* (2001: 301), this study concludes with the assertion that local people can shape, define and manage the tourist market. Entrepreneurial ability leads those villagers who are local entrepreneurs or business persons to negotiate with the market, to an extent bypassing the state. Thus, this tourist market is relatively free from the control of the local and state governments, and as a result, their resulting dignity and feeling of being free from state control mechanisms has empowered them. This phenomenon is in contradiction to the normal representation of ethnic minority groups in highland areas, who are seen as being apart from the national economy and as being backward farmers. This supports what Fforde and Vylder (1996) have argued; that market reform in Vietnam is largely a bottom-up process. However, it is also evident that the global process itself is contradictory. On the one hand it is widely acknowledged as a threat to indigenous cultures, whilst on the other it can lead to the construction of local identity – as a part of the wider world (Friedman 1990) and as a recognized spot on the Vietnamese tourist map, certainly in the Mai Châu case. Thus, the negotiation of White Tai authenticity with global market forces has actually reinforced local culture and allowed local people to understand themselves and their position in relation to others in the world.

Finally, the authentic White Tai is not necessarily the “essential White Tai” in terms of the vernacular language or an ethnic/unique culture, as further elaborated upon in Chapter Four, or a cultural commodity to be sold in the marketplace. The White Tai have not frozen themselves in a primitive world; hence, we should see them as being part of the contemporary world. Explicitly, they have negotiated their “White Tai authenticity” as part of the process of constructing their identity within the tourist market space. Thus, the “authentic” White Tai in the realm of the cultural economy can be seen as entrepreneurs able to articulate their culture and market and as a result make a living in the contemporary world. If they were just simply primitive, they would be nobody in the modern world, so the fact that they have a presence is because they are entrepreneurs. The villagers do not cage themselves in, in terms of being “authentic White Tai”, sitting behind a locked door and taking a primitive perspective. In the next chapter, I will make an attempt to analyze the ethnicity and self-identification strategies used by the White Tai, asking the questions: What is White

Tai and what is authentic? And: Does this destabilize the prevailing discourse on ethnic relations in Vietnam in general and within White Tai society in particular?



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