

## CHAPTER 4

### SITUATING WHITE TAI ETHNICITY AND IDENTIFICATION IN MAI CHÂU TOURISM

In the preceding chapters, I have made two related arguments: first, touristification as a site of “localization” and “negotiation” have transformed White Tai peasant into entrepreneurs in the ethnic tourist market. Second, engagement with tourist market – local people as entrepreneurs – brings about ethnic dignity and pride. In these two arguments, I delineated the process of commodification of hospitality and souvenir goods that blur the boundary between gifts and commodities. In this chapter, I will investigate the implications of ethnic tourism on White Tai’s identity. How they invent themselves or redefine their identity. To do this, one must pan one’s historical lense a little backward in time: so as to make sense of their present discourse of identity and its meaning *vis-à-vis* the Vietnamese tourists, inside and outside market space.

Historically, White Tai has been connected to the Vietnamese court/state for a long time. It would be meaningless to talk about White Tai ethnic identity without placing it in this conext – their long relationship with Vietnamese state. Because it is this relationship – their commercial, political, and social negotiation with state – which have produced their modernity. In order to trace the history of White Tai, it must be juxtaposed against the changing nature of state (in this case Vietnamese state). This is what I propose to do in this chapter: to trace the history and the ways White Tai contract their ethnic identity and delve into the “strategic essentialisms”<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowing from Spivak (1988), this concept helps us to understand culture or ethnicity, which is essentialized not to claim it as “authentic” or to dominate and/or consume ethnic people/cultures. When ethnic peoples are essentialized by the state and outsiders as inferior, they too at the conscious level essentialize themselves. But in improvising this consciousness, subaltern people turn their essentialism into a strategy called “strategic essentialism”, which is then used to negotiate representation and identity, so as to change power relations and position themselves as somebody in the world.

and ethnic boundary expanding to the international level they employ in their claim for ethnic equality, by focusing inside and outside the ethnic tourist market.

More importantly, this negotiation *vis-à-vis* the Vietnamese state and the majority Kinh is simultaneously an attempt at “invention of tradition” – their attempt to change their present political position by trying to invent or retrieve a particular past<sup>2</sup>. This process is not necessarily aimed at production of some sort of objective truth about their past but to produce a discourse about “authentic” White Tai culture – available to be consumed and experienced by outsiders. It is through this discourse of “authenticity”, the White Tai in Mai Châu try to constitute a community, a tourist space (tourist market) and more specifically, outlines a potential threat to the prevailing power structures within White Tai society and the dominant ethnic relations within Vietnam. I want to argue that through their various strategies of authentication, the White Tai produces the self for the “other” (within the tourist market): Striving to become modern White Tai – their culture as repository of the authentic – is a production of tradition or “invention of tradition”.

Ethnic identity, like any other social reality, has been approached as a social construct by social scientists in the process of discrediting the primordialist “given” notion of the phenomenon. Brass (1991) states “Ethnicity and nationalism are not “givens” but are social and political constructions”. They are creation of elites, who draw upon, distort and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well being or existence or to gain political advantage for their groups as well as for themselves. For Brass ethnic identity is manipulated or fabricated by the elites seeking power. For Brass ethnicity is a modern phenomenon, the by-product of the rise of territorial state. On the other hand Smith (1986), attempts to root nationalism to premodern ethnicity. He accepts that nation can not be seen as natural or premodern but, he contends that, its claims are rooted in ancient histories. Moreover, scholars like Wimmer (2002: 1) argue that

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<sup>2</sup> It was Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger who first used the term “invention of tradition” to refer to the ways groups, in their construction of identity; try to establish their connection with a past. Hobsbawm defines it as a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Invention of Tradition”, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, 1983, **The Invention of Tradition**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.1.

“modernity itself rests on the basis of ethnic and nationalistic principles”. Nationalist and ethnic politics are not merely by product of modernization; rather modernity itself is structured according to ethnic and nationalist principles.

These studies takes culture as the most important marker of ethnic identity. Culture as the bearer of symbols, signs and icons which are constantly being “created, neglected, shaped and reshaped as the exigencies of ethnic mobilization demands”. On the other hand, Smith, shows how history becomes a tool in the hand of the ethno-nationalists. Ethno-nationalists almost always engages in reinterpretation and reconstruction of their past. This selective collective memory of the ethnic group constructed by the ethno-nationalist Smith calls, ethnohistory. According to him the need to provide antiquity, continuity and dignity of their nation, the nationalist political archaeologist are bent on discovering and bringing to light the successive layers of community’s past (Smith, 2003: 134). The purpose of this chapter, or for that matter, is not to theorise or enter into debate about ethnicity. I agree that ethnicity is a cultural construct. And it is in this framework I will be discussing about the construction of white Tai ethnicity: their engagement with the past, market, culture and tourism.

#### **4.1. Constructing White “Tainess” in the Before and After Tourist Market**

This section examines the dynamic relationship between Mai Châu and Vietnamese court/state. The story can be divided into three periods – period of Vietnamese monarchy, French colonial period, and the socialist period onward. Mai Châu was earlier known as, “Mường Mùn” (hereafter Mun principality will refer to precolonial Mai Châu), and it had relatively close relationship with the Vietnamese court. The principality was included in the “Sip Song Chau Tai” federation<sup>3</sup>. However, the history of its relationship to the Vietnamese court/state quite different from that of the history of Sip Song Châu Tai, especially Black Tai of Mường Thanh, which presently comprises the Điện Biên Phủ province. It is interesting to note that, although people of Sip Song Châu Tai were considered as Tai, Munprincipality did not have

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<sup>3</sup> Twelve principalities of Tai peoples where nowadays is the northwest region of Vietnam

any accord with other principalities of Sip Song Chau Tai, except its nearby principalities, Mường Mộc, and Mường Khồng. Mùn shared close relationship with the Vietnamese court, instead of other Tai principalities. The history of relationships between the two was perceived as dominant-subordinate relationship. But it was not strict. It was more or less relationship of interdependence. The dominant, the Vietnamese court, could never actually absolutely control the subordinate, the Mùn principality.

According to a White Tai ancient archive written hundreds years ago and copied again during King Bảo Đại era in early 19<sup>th</sup> century (translated into Vietnamese by former head of cultural department of Mai Châu district Mr. Khả Tiến) since early sixteen century, Mùn principality had to pay tribute to the Lê dynasty (Vietnamese state). It consisted of five pieces of cloths annually. People belonging to the principality also had to pay tribute to senior offshoot in Mường Mộc after their new rice harvest every year. It implied the termination of the relationship between senior offshoot in Mường Mộc and junior ones in Mùn principality. Besides these annual tributes, the principality, perhaps, was required send soldiers in aid of Vietnamese court during times of war or rebellion. For example, in the late fifteen century or early sixteen century the lord of Mường Lai principality (Tai), Cần Ngàn lead a rebellion against the Vietnamese court at Hanoi. Mùn principality had to send in troops to help Hanoi suppress the rebellion. After the rebellion was put down, the king of Hanoi conferred the tile, “*Tổng Phạm Bá Hộ*” (meaning *Bá Hộ* baronet) to the chief of Mùn. Instead of acting as an ally of another Tai principality, the Chief of Mùn principality helped Hanoi to suppress the rebellion. This is because the conception of Tai as an ethnic identity was still absent. People were not yet mobilised around identity and other modern categories. Let me give a brief sketch of this history – Tais in the pre-tourist market.

Between 1754 and 1767 Mường Mùn had helped the Vietnamese court twice in suppressing rebellion. On both the occasions, the rebellion was spearheaded by “Hoàng Công Chất”. On his second attempt, Hoàng Công Chất had moved into the northwestern region from Thanh Hoá city and then to Mường Thanh (now the province of Điện Biên Phủ) where he formed an allegiance with the chief of that



principality. He in fact camped at Mường Thanh and tried to gather as much support as possible from surrounding chiefs around Black, Red, and Mã river basins of the northern Vietnam. Today he is remembered for his fights against anti-feudal court of Vietnam (Phichet 2009: 171-173). But unlike other Tai principalities, which formed the Sip Song Chau Tai federation, the Chief of Mùn principality sided with the Vietnamese court.

On its part, the King of Thăng Long (presently Hanoi) kept Mùn principality under his wings. For example, in 1873 it helped the chief of Mùn principality thwart a successful invasion and restore the principality to its chief. It was known as the yellow-flag rebel (a rebellion that originated in Southern China). The invaders attacked Mùn principality, the chief fled to a near by principality. Hanoi then sent its army. After the restoration, the king conferred another title to the chief of Mùn, “*Cửu Phẩm Bá Hộ*” (meaning, the nine-grade of mandarin system, a baronet with advanced feudal honorary rank *Bá Hộ*). What I want to suggest here is that the various Tai principalities were not mobilised around idea of we “Tai”. Therefore it would be preposterous to refer to them as ethnic Tai. For ethnicity is a modern category: it is a modern political construct. I will come back to this point later in the chapter. For now let us see how the idea of “Tai” was taking shape during French colonialism.

As mentioned in chapter 3, Mai Châu was occupied by French in 1945. Mai Châu became a strategic region for production, trade and control of opium. While its (Mai Châu) elites were kept happy by colonial rulers (notoriously by means of money and women), the people of Mai Châu became source for coolies, conscription and women for entertainment. Thousands of people were forcibly taken away to build military post in the ever expanding colony. When Mai Châu became a fierce battlefield between Việt Minh and French troop in 1947-54, local population of Mai Châu helped Việt Minh resist the French. Colonial repression and the resistance against it under the Việt Minh have had important implication for “Tai” identity. In the nascent Vietnam “nation”, “Tai” was being imagined as different, and as well as part of that new imagination. The history of resistance against French colonialism is commemorated by modern Vietnam nation. This is remembered as important event where Tai and Kinh fought together, as one people, against colonialism. The ways this

resistance is remembered in modern Vietnam will elucidate my point about “Tai” more clearly.

In 2011, I attended the annual ancestor worship ceremony in Mai Châu. There was a cultural show which tells about the suppression of the yellow-flag rebel – retold as a collaboration between Tais and Vietnamese state. A popular song, “*Tình Ca Tây Bắc*”, which tells of love relationships between a Việt Minh soldier and a Tai woman, was also performed. A friend of mine, Mr. Long, who was with me at that time, now a university lecturer in Hanoi, interpreted the song for me. In the song, their love is represented by the landscapes of Mai Châu: “I (female) am Mã river, you (male) a Mùòng Hung mountain, I (male) am deep green forest, you (female) a deep mountainous stream, “you (female) live nearby stream, wait for me (male) at nearby “*khuông*”, I (male) make well-fed our mountain village (*mùòng*), you (female) make happy and keep warm our mountain village (*bản*)”. These two themes memorialize the two events I have discussed above. These events have become historicised events – they become proofs of connection, oneness and friendship between modern Kinh and Tai. These performances can also be read as petrification of the implied opposite. They become important historicised events, because the opposite – the conflictual relation between them – implicates their modern life more than the connections. Modern Tai ethnicity has to be seen in this context of the implied opposites. Tai as an ethnic identity – an object of desire, pride, and loyalty – is animated by their antagonistic politics against Kinh. This is the connection, between modernity and ethnicity I was referring to earlier.

These performances, hailing their historical connections, are suddenly upset by the debate about the character of Mai Châu elites who became henchmen of the French. The Vietnam state castigates them as “exploiters”. While some prominent White Tai elders condoned the elites (they had no choice), many others believed that they betrayed the people of Mai Châu. For instance, a former officer of Hòa Bình province (White Tai) living at Bản Lác, whom I talked to, belonged to the group that finds fault with the way Tai elites behaved during French colonialism. Those who belong to the last category see that event as a blot on their proud history, an event best served by being silenced. For the descendents of the elites, this history is an

inconvenient memory. At best they can do is to try to erase that history by erasing their surnames. In the communist Vietnam, for these descendents of former elites, it must be quite unsettling to carry the burden of that history. The communist party of Vietnam, when it came to power, created new elites in Mai Châu and other former principalities.

In Mai Châu, since people in this Tai principality took part in the fight for independence of Vietnam from France unlike other Tai principalities (for example White Tais in Mường Lai sided with French), the central government appointed local people as local officials (Pichet 2009). Nowadays about 70 to 80 percent of all total official workers of Mai Châu district belong to White Tai ethnic group. In fact the chairman and secretary of communist party in Mai Châu district are Tai. In addition, around 20 villagers of both the tourist villages are the district officers. According to the villagers, this should not see as result of pro-ethnic policy of the state, rather it should be seen as the ability of the Tais to patronize political networks.

This data should not be read as success of pro-ethnic policy because policies aimed at Vietnamization of the White Tai and other ethnic groups has been quite successful. I am aware that the White Tai villagers are proud to be part of the struggle for independent Vietnam, both from France and USA. In 2010 I was at a homestay in Mai Châu when Vietnam celebrated their National Day on 2<sup>nd</sup> September. I had just got back from Mộc Châu district of Sơn La province. I was taking rest in the living room, watching TV with my host's family members. The whole day the program was about Nation-state building – the contribution of Hồ Chí Minh. My host's family members were glued to the television the whole time. In between the program, my host chipping in comments about Tai peoples' contribution in repelling the French and American troops. Or why the White Tai love Vietnam. He seems to sincerely admire Hồ Chí Minh: his scarifices for building Vietnam Nation (he did not even marry). He was proud that Vietnam, a small country, could resist and defeat powerful countries like France and USA. In the evening my host family celebrated the national day with a special dinner. They invited a foreigner couple who was their tourist guests. Nation building and emotional integration of its citizens, particularly the ethnic minorities, is an ongoing process. Allow me a short digression here.

In 1955, after the liberation the northern Vietnam from the French, there was an attempt to integrate all ethnic groups into a unified socio-economic framework (socialism) and Vietnam Nation-state (Thang 2007: 99). The policies adopted, to build a monolithic or homogenous society, were radically coercive. Such radically coercive policies were resisted by ethnic minorities and it produces new ethnic boundaries. The Vietnam state, in order to promote monolithic unity established autonomous regions for ethnic minority population. Such autonomous regions were integrated as part of the Vietnam Nation-state. Within these autonomous regions, ethnic minority groups were allowed self-determination insofar as it is compatible with the Vietnam state. This transferred the emotional attachment of people from local to national level, as new citizens of the new Vietnam Nation-state. The majority Kinh had to learn to live with other ethnic groups (Pichet 2009: 177). The traditional system of rule among ethnic groups had been transformed to be on par with the administrative system of the lowland Kinh, no longer governed as principalities, but as commune, town, district, province and state (Thang 2007: 101).

Mai Châu was not categorized as an “autonomous region”. The region came in the category or within the policy of “selective cultural preservation of the nationality” (*Bảo tồn chọn lọc các giá trị văn hóa của dân tộc*). This policy allowed the ethnic minority groups to maintain their culture as long as they did not run counter to the state and to the ideology of socialist Vietnam (Michaud 2009:32). The socialist ideology adopted by Vietnam accorded the ethnic minority groups equal rights (including equal rights for women and men) and duties (Thang 2007: 104). Given these policies and the ideology, it appears that Vietnam state accepted cultural diversity and conferred equal political rights to its ethnic minorities.

However in practice, preservation of culture depended on state interpretation of what is proper and compatible to socialist Vietnam (Thang 2007: 157). On a closer reading, the policy of “selective cultural preservation of the nationality” is contradictory to the policies that blatantly promoted and sanctioned Kinh culture as the officially accepted culture (Michaud 2009: 35). What the state propagated as a “new culture” (to which every community must adapt), in order to eradicate backwardness, superstitions and old beliefs, was in fact the culture of the majority Kinh. Other



cultures were deemed obstacles to economic development (Yukti 2007: 252). In the process of Vietnamization, many White Tai ancient manuscripts had been burned. In the period of socialism, the government prohibited rituals which were allegedly contradictory to building a socialist state. Government funded and ordered local authority to campaign forelimination of superstition and archaic customs (Thang 2007: 120). As a consequence, White Tai rituals pertaining to expensive feast at wedding, lavish funerals, animal sacrifice to spirits, and bride-price considered as “backward” were prohibited (Michaud 2009: 32). It prohibited ethnic songs, poems, and stories which did not support communist economic ideology. For example, the Tai poem “*Sang Chu Son Sao*” (literally means “Teaching Boys and Girls about Love”), a story about impossible love was prohibited because it was a sad poem. If people were immersed in lament and sadness, their competence and productivity would be low. The state had the right to select which traditional songs and performances are to be preserved and funded (Thang 2007: 121). The White Tai accepted these prohibitions, because according to what, at that time they were in profound adversity owing to protracted wars against France, and later America. There was not enough food for household consumption. They had to give up many traditional rituals which did not relate directly to their subsistent living. Consequently, the present generation, the youths, do not know their traditional legends, poems and songs.

Furthermore, only Vietnamese history, language, and culture were taught in local schools, ostensibly to unify its people under common identity (Thang 2007: 110-1). So Vietnam language and culture were introduced to the White Tai intensively. This has not prevented White Tai people from sending their children to schools. A large number of youth have studied atleast upto the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. And many of them go to university for further education. The White Tai parents, especially the households in group “a” do not worry that their children can not speak White Tai language. They told me that Vietnamese language has to be a priority because it can open up job opportunities. Their children will naturally learn White Tai beause every one in the village speak White Tai. Living in close proximity with the Kinh does not mean that White Tai in Mai Châu has lost its cultural self-consciousness. Their ethnicity will always be defined by their distinct culture or their discourse of “distinct



culture”. That discourse reproduces the boundary between them and the “other” (Barth 1969).

The White Tai are not merely inanimate objects of representations; they are active agents, narrators of their own culture. They continuously produce themselves – or the idea of themselves. One day I was talking to a group of female villagers. I happen to be holding a document written in Tai. They asked me, how far I can read Tai documents. I replied that, “I am still learning and after I finish studying White Tai I will study Black Tai language”. They wanted me to read for them. So with my limited knowledge, I proceeded to read love legend titled, “*Khun Lu Nang Ua*” (literally means “Love Story of Lord Lu and Lady Ua”) in Black Tai language (which is not so different from White Tai language). After this, I read the same legend, but in Vietnamese translation. They said, the translated version was not as beautiful as the Tai language. Not because they were not fluent in Vietnamese, but because a story is always best in its original language: the social mores within which it is narrated. I realized, that the prohibition of legends, folktales, poems and songs have denied them access to their past or the way they remembers their past. I have been approached with quite many women who wanted me to teach their children how to read Tai.

Their connection to the past – the way they remember their past – is through their legends, poems and songs. But the irony is that, they can no longer be too concerned with restoration of traditional literatures in the old forms because their life has shifted from living with agriculture to living with tourism. The rituals/traditions which have been reproduced at present are appropriate to contemporary period – economic prosperity in the tourist market. For example, “new rice ceremony”<sup>4</sup> is still practiced. It is way of saying thank you to not only spirits but also relatives and neighbors, and other people who helped them cultivate. But the rite of sacrifice to village spirits has been abandoned, because it is not useful to economy. They are then trying to internalize practices to equip themselves of technologies to grapple with economic renovation. Ethnic identity and culture becomes important technologies. Let us see how.

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<sup>4</sup> Celebrating new rice by conducting ceremony which was discussed in chapter 2.

In the middle of July 2007 I arrived for the first time in Mai Châu. I remember having a conversation with my host's relative from Chiềng Châu sub-district. He wanted to know if Thai language has its own character. I replied, "we have, why not?". It was just a conversation starter. He wanted to show me the White Tai script, which he is proud of. Two weeks earlier, he had taken part in a White Tai language course held by the district government. In Vietnam no one is forced to study White Tai, not even Tai government officials. So I asked him, why? His answer puzzled me. It was for the purpose of communication between Tai in Mai Châu, Laos and Thailand<sup>5</sup>. I wondered, why he related himself to the Tai speaking groups outside Vietnam. Then in 2010, I became a student studying White Tai with a retired policeman. His opinion on this matter (why Tai are trying to learn to read and write their script) was that, when foreigners or people who speak Tai asked the people in Mai Châu if they can read and write White Tai they would not be ashamed. They, therefore, had to study White Tai even though they speak White Tai (which is normally mixed with some Vietnamese words).

By doing this, they are not only trying to re-invent their ethnic identity but they are trying to re-imagine "Tainess" by linking themselves with other similar communities outside Vietnam. The attempt at revival of Tai script – to read and write – cannot be understood outside this politics. It should be read as an attempt to reclaim a different past, to serve its new idea of identity<sup>6</sup>. This politics not only upsets the old connections between White Tai and Kinh, but also reproduces the boundary between the two. It reproduces the cultural boundary as an ethnic boundary. It is a hint at ethno-nationalism. This is because, by falling back on their ancient written documents or scripts they can claim to be better than the Kinh who depends on others script. It also justifies their old dictum: people without their own written language are not civilized.

This re-imagination of identity has to be placed within the context of globalization. For as argued by many anthropologists, e.g. Jonathan Friedman (1990),

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps he was not aware of the relatively new Tai identity being invented in northeastern Indian state of Assam. The Tai Ahom is a reimagination or reinvention of their connection to the Tais in Thailand and elsewhere (Yesmin Saikia, 2004, **Fragmented Memory: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India**, Durham and London: Duke University Press.)

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly the invention of Tai Ahoms is drawn mainly from surviving Tai religious texts. In fact the United Liberation Front of Asom, a Tai Ahom dominated armed group, began their struggle by reviving forgotten Tai ritual (YesminSaikia, 2004:207).

ethnic and cultural fragmentation and modernist homogenization are two constitutive trends of global reality. Leo J. De Haan calls this two trends “glocalization”<sup>7</sup>; i.e. the close association between global and local. He writes: this view also identifies the trends towards global markets and politics, but notes an increasing diversity and an increased importance of regionalism and community as well. Cultural fragmentation, for example, with its reinvention of local traditions and identities, is seen as an answer to the loss of identity through homogenization (2000: 355). Both globalization and localization, together, constitute a politics of identity as White Tai – the repository of authentic traditions and cultures. It frames a dichotomous relationship with the assimilative tendencies of the majority Kinh or the Vietnamese state sponsored “Vietnamization”.

To take the discussion a little further, as early as 1990s Mai Châu’s local intellectuals have been giving lessons on White Tai language. Of course these lessons or training courses were informal, but not necessarily illegal, because, Vietnam constitutional law accepts the rights of ethnic minority group in preserving their own language. But it is only recently the interest for White Tai language have become popular. I learn that many people are taking White Tai lessons in Mai Châu. I attended a class arranged unofficially by some people. There were 16 students: it consisted of district officials, commune authorities, government teachers, a tailor (who has Kinh husband), villagers, and a homestay business owner, for instance. They were mostly well to do White Tai or in academic term “middle class”. They are the emerging middle class of White Tai in Mai Châu. The spurt of interest in learning their own language among middle class sends new signals of ethnic politics. Many wanted to know from me, whether “Thai” and “White Tai” have similarities. So I wrote a sentence in Thai which is in the same meaning to Tai on a white board; they said, oh! it is very similar, even though they cannot read it at all. I see this as an attempt to relate them outside Vietnam and invent new imaginaries of self and other.

The mushrooming of unofficial White Tai lessons in Mai Châu contradicts Vietnam state’s attempt to monitor learning of ethnic written languages. State allows

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<sup>7</sup> He borrows the term from Robertson (1995) “Glocalization: time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity”, in M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson eds, **Global Modernities** (London: Sage) pp. 25-44.

ethnic minorities to learn their own language, but it has to come via state authority. Towards this objective Vietnam state make use of professional Hanoian scholars from Vietnam National University and Museum of Ethnology. They are assigned the task of regulating and controlling ethnic minorities' written language. They modified Tai letters by unification of Black Tai characters of Son La province and standardized it (“trở thành chữ Thái thống nhất” in Vietnamese language). I came across many Tai language books written by Hanoian scholars. However, instead of struggling, the White Tai instructors seem to negotiate with national power by mixing a few standardized Tai vowels and tones with White Tai. But the students do not know such vowels and tones that they do not belong to White Tai of Mai Châu. And the instructor is teaching them the standardized Tai written language. I ask the instructor how important they have to know the standardized Tai written language. He replies, because it is a standard Tai, we (the Black and the White Tais) are the same Tai so that we have to be united.



**Figure 4.1 In the Unofficial White Tai Language Training Class**  
*Photo by AchariyaChoowonglert*

White Tai instructors and local intellectuals have accepted the standardized Tai script. I asked an instructor (who is respected for his knowledge of White Tai history, culture and language), “how will the standardized Tai affect the reading of ancient



White Tai documents?” He replies, they can, since it is the same reading system. And for problem in different characters, once they take White Tai language textbooks, they can learn and can read by themselves. So I agree because I experience that. I study white Tai first then for standardized Tai, I just see what the difference of consonants and vowels between two languages, and then remember the difference. After that I can read standardized Tai language. By this reason, I believe what local intellectual said that those who study standardized Tai can study White Tai by themselves.

Local intellectuals and people uses essentialism (being Tai) as a strategy to negotiate with the power at regional and national level, Spivak (1988) terms have called this “strategic essentialism”. They see that they can bring Tai culture in the spot light of the national and international spaces. Of course, they are expanding their place and space to the world by linking themselves to region and national authorities/people. So they try to expand their cultural boundaries as well as ethnic boundary outside Vietnam. But it has not yet succeeded because they do not have strong and/or various social networks outside Vietnam. May be because they are not Buddhists like many Tai/Thai in the Southern China and Southeast Asia. Religious networks of monk link them together. Anyway, there are many attempts to build international networks. For example in October 2011, I had an opportunity to talk to a White Tai scholar, a former associate professor at Vietnam National University. He plans to organize a conference on Tai studies in Thanh Hóa province in the middle of next year. He, in fact intends to do an open conference for foreigners, but the state does not allow it. But he suggested that because my Vietnamese accent looks like ThanhHoá people, I can pretend to be a Vietnamese. I see this as a strategy of negotiating state, so as to build international networks.

People in Mai Châu like to establish connections with the Thai/Tai outside Vietnam. In 2010 when I was learning White Tai in Mai Châu, I told the local people that I am doing so because my grandmother’s ancestoris Tai from Vietnam. Only my teacher seems to understand my emotional need to connect to my grandmother’s ancient tradition. The villagers were concerned about my Thai identity – someone one from Thailand. They introduce me to their friends, even to tourist guests/customers, that I am a Thai who like to study White Tai written language. I read some



manuscripts of ancient documents possessed by my teacher. When the tourists and tour guides are puzzled seeing me speak White Tai with villagers, the villagers tell them that we are the same ethnic as Thai in Thailand; “see ...we speak the same language” (*Minh cùng nói tiếng Thái*), they said. I remember a tour guide asking a villager, “how many percent Thai and White Tai languages are shared?” The villager replies, “99 percent”. Anyway, she knows it is not true. Actually the two languages do not share more than 20 percent. Anyway, it is not only the villager lies to tour guides but also to tourists in several times. As widely accepted by Vietnamese, Thailand is more developed than that of Vietnam. Generally, my Vietnamese friends and teachers have never underestimated Thai; rather they accept that Thai is clever and modern. Moreover, they like many products of Thailand which Vietnamese perceive they are good quality than that from China. Thus, claiming that they are the same ethnic as Thai in Thailand means they are at the superiority than that of the Kinh. Moreover, they tell me that the origin of all Thai/Tai were the same; that is the Southern China. They are really happy once they know that we (Thai and White Tai) share some words. Yes, they are claiming again, we are the same.

Also it is very interesting that, before teaching me the language, my teacher tells me the history of White Tai in Mai Châu, firstly. Then after the first week of studying he keeps telling me the history which shows that White Tai settled there for 800 hundred years especially about the relationships between Mường Mùn chieftom and Vietnamese court, and about White Tai contribution for independent Vietnam. That is, he wants me to know how deep White Tai engaged in this land as well as Vietnam nation-state. He also tells the reporter of a Vietnam magazine the same once she comes there to write an article to publish on her magazine. In addition he tells her about Tai unique culture of poems, legends, scripts, customs and wisdoms especially how to forecast about the weather and fortune-telling subject, which he teaches me. Eventually, before my departure Mai Châu around a week, my teacher shows me all of his White Tai manuscripts of ancient documents and allows me to make copy any archive I want. Many of archives are genesis of the world, history, legend, poem, charm, fortune telling, and medical textbooks.

Thus the White Tai are not only putting effort to such language training courses, but also publishing some books written in White Tai. Those books are about genesis of the world, history, legend, poem, magic and charm. In 2001, the people committee of Mai Châu district who are mostly White Tai in cooperation with department of culture and information of Hòa Bình province publishes a book entitled “*Âm Ẽt: Sử thi thần thoại Dân tộc Thái Mai Châu*”– meaning “Genesis: Epic of Traditional Legend of the Tai in Mai Châu”. This book is written in White Tai language with a Vietnamese translation. And the main part was written by two White Tai retired government officials. One of which is the former head of cultural department of Mai Châu district (Mr. Khả Tiên) and the other is the retired policeman of Hòa Bình province (Mr. Hà Công Tín), my teacher. They are also the instructors of White Tai language teaching programs done by local authorities, and groups of interesting people. Khả Tiên told me the aim of publishing this book is for keeping White Tai heritages of wisdoms and White Tai identity (*bản sắc*) permanently. Meaning of *bản sắc* is close to the notion of “ethnicity”. It can be “essential White Tai” or authentic White Tai (at the unconscious level), or habitus improvised in different contexts, relations, and situations. According to the preface written in Vietnamese, the contributors of this book depict Mai Châu as an important place of Northwest cultures (*Vùng văn hóa lớn Tây Bắc*) and remarkable identity of them (*bản sắc riêng của mình*). The contents of this book are about (i) their migration from the north to present Mai Châu since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, (ii) the literatures, and (iii) the ritual chants. This is to say, they present that they have been there for a long long time and they are civilized. They have their own script and literacy. But now they realized that their identity and tradition have been invaded by the modernity and market so that they have to protect and maintain them as point out below:

Nowadays, to Tai Mường Mùn people, their *khắp* folk-song, pop song (country boys and girls sing back and forth) linger just vaguely in their memory. Festivities are mostly withdrawn. The custom of *Cần* wine (wine drunk out of a jar through pipes) is left with processes of drinking and inviting wine, yet already be at the point of death. In wedding occasion, the ceremony of *lên thang* (to go up the stair of stilt-house) and of *ăn thề* [to take an oath] have been neglected by the Thai themselves. That infantility and mistake is

nothing else than wordy and superstitious for which one indeliberately mislays oneself. Nearly a half of the last century, there is no one learning Thai scripts. Women's clothing is Westernized. Some villagers have sold their stilt-house to afford their liking for living in brick-made house. More fashionable language is mixed quite much... This time of gross and impetuous market economy has been evading fiercely into cultural identity of Mường Mùn. To protect and exploit highly valuable cultural capital has been a very essential task that should be issued and practiced thoroughly, never in a way of very vague and abstract incitation. Vietnamese cultural identity would be splendid with all possible perfume and beauty gathered from various cultural zones and subzones possessing morish aromatic flavors. (Translated into English by Mr. Phạm Trần Thăng Long, a university lecturer in Hanoi).

These phenomena can be seen as the process of reinvention of their White Tai tradition in the context of ethnic struggle in constructing their cultural boundary in the new context of economic renovation and globalization so as to establishing and symbolizing social cohesion (Hobsbawm1983: 9). What they attempt to deal with is the discourse about the appropriate social order in contribution to building market national economy. That is, to counter discourse that the market invades their cultural value. They, at the official level struggle over the symbolic of modernity. What they want is the national development policy should accept the ethnic cultural diversity. As policy, Vietnamese government would like ethnic minority groups contribute to modern nation building insofar as it is not the obstacle. At propaganda level, if you go to the Northwest region where the majority people are the ethnic minority groups, there are many sign boards along the main and sub roads about paying tax, and solidarity in building state- nation.

As mentioned in chapter 1, it is in the assumption that the minority groups have to abandon their cultures and traditions which are contradictory to modern market. Whereas to preserve cultural diversity, the government encourage ethnic minority group to maintain their cultures. While Kinh culture is not perceived as the obstacle to modern economic development. Kinh culture and habit are considered as models of development which the minority groups have to follow. Unwittingly of not, by the former reason, the state essentializes the ethnic stereotypes, which are different

from that of the Kinh, is the way of social exclusion the ethnic groups as change agents in the economic development process.



**Figure 4.2 Lương Sơn district - determine to fulfill successfully the national program of constructing new countryside**  
*Photo by Phạm Trần Thăng Long*

#### **4.2. Competing Construction of White Tainess: Strategic Essentialism in Post Socialist Vietnam**

In the socialist Vietnam, the ethnic minorities in general, and White in particular were branded as backward, traditional and uncivilized. The state essentialized ethnic minority groups as steeped in antiquity, and still carrying on tradition and culture un conducive to economic development. In the post socialist period, the White Tai ethnic group turned these essentials on its head: they became boons in their engagement with ethnic tourism. They were no longer treated as obstacles to economic development. How did this happen? That is the concern of this section.



Before moving forward to the politics of ethnic essentialism in the tourist market, a brief discussion on the history of ethnic essentialism in the socialist Vietnam would be useful. I had made a passing remark, in chapter 1, about how the Vietnamese state launched a policy of “selective preservation of the minority culture.” On a closer look, this policy reduced the cultural elements, of ethnic groups selected to preserve their culture, into merely folkloric “forms” (Thang 2007: 145). It can be considered as a form of essentialism that fixed ethnic identity and stereotypes which is then consumed as authentic Tai ethnicity. For example, the museum of ethnology located in Hanoi depicted as authentic Tai life and popularized by several scholars the essentialistic characters of Tai people as cultivator of irrigated wet rice, living on houses of stilts, superstitious traditionalists, and archaic customs etc. While the image or representation of the Kinh is different, they are the urbanized and modernized. Even though there is no Kinh script, Kinhs are praised for adapting and developing the classical Chinese language writing system. The museum, in Hanoi, forgets to point out this fact: Tais are proud bearer of a script handed down from the dim past. But this would militate against the state sanctioned production or representation of Tai as “backward peasant”. In the prevailing state sponsored linear social history of people – primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, socialist – the Kinh are the torch bearers of socialism, and White Tais are at the bottom of the linear world (Thang 2007: 205).

This view of Kinh and Tai or other ethnic minorities in Vietnam as occupying different time, as depicted by the linear history, dominates the scholarship on ethnicity (Thin and Trong 1999, Cam 1999, Trong 2007). Almost every study on ethnic minorities in Vietnam that one stumbles upon reiterates and reproduces this clichéd frames. The notion of Tai is represented by “subsistence economy”, “wet rice cultivation (especially sticky rice)”, “buffalo for plowing”, “swidden agriculture”, “livestock breeding”, “weaving and embroidery”. Apart from these, in terms of culture, the White Tai, like other ethnic groups, is narrated as possessing remarkable artistic values, such as, folk dancing, singing folk songs, and poetic stories. The only positive qualities, repeated often, are their rich cultural attributes and gender equality. But such few positive comments are generally drowned in the long lists of other



negative qualities. Given such representations, no wonder, the socialist Vietnam state wanted to civilize them. What's important for my study is the question: what impact does this type of representation have on Tai-Kinh relations in the post socialist Vietnam?

In 2010, when I was following around a tour guide in Mai Châu, a German tourist asks me if the Tai and Kinh intermarry. I replied that, as far as I know, there are about four or five such couples in Bản Lác. The tour guide interrupted me. I guessed he did not like or agreed with my answer. This is what he had to say on the matter. The Kinh is rich, so every Tai woman would like to marry a Kinh. I was amused. My ethnographic enquiry tells a different story. It is not the Vietnam state or the majority Kinh which have constructed negative images of other ethnic minorities. The Kinh is also a subject of negative representation in the everyday discourse of the White Tai. Tricky, stingy, cunning, deceptive and dirty are just some of the common terms used to refer to Kinh. This competing or mutual negative representation of each other operates in subtlest of ways in their everyday interactions. The example below is a telling commentary on these interactions.

At a bus terminal in Hanoi (I was seated on a Hanoi-Son La bus to Mai Châu) a group of motorbike taxi drivers got into the bus. My Vietnamese accent gave my foreign identity away. One of them sat next to me, trying to flirt he began teasing me and started holding my hand. The experience was quite embarrassing and hateful. But I managed to keep silent. They kept on paying me undue attention. Meanwhile a female Kinh passenger boarded the bus. Seeing that I was surrounded by men, she asked me where I was going. I said Mai Châu. Then she asked about my ethnicity. I answered “*Thái*”. I think she thought ethnic “*Tai*” because according to the language, “*Thai*” in Thailand and “*Tai*” in Vietnam are written and pronounced the same “*Thai*”. She then turned to the group of men and scolded them to leave me alone, that I am just an uneducated (because I cannot speak Vietnamese well) ethnic minority. Perhaps she meant well – an elderly Kinh woman trying to protect an “*uneducated Tai*” from the male stags. But that intention is couched in subtle hints of Kinh superiority over “*Tai*” which is consumed as authentic Tai identity. Such attitude can be considered as deeply political domination.

At the level of micro-relationship, intense interactions between two ethnic groups came into play with the policy to establish new economic areas among ethnic minorities. Since then the White Tai have been living closely with the Kinh for about four decades. Though no serious conflict have occurred so far, the mutual attitude is hardly peaceful. The relationship is made more complex by Tai's continuous efforts to prove their ethnic equality with the Kinh, which at times may border on intolerable gestures. Their lives go on, unencumbered by violent confrontation, yet accumulating sedimented banalities of everyday animosities. This is the realities of the ethnic tourist market in Mai Châu– sedimented banalities which accentuates and animates the ethnic Tai.

So, as a citizen in the state White Tai are just minority people who are backward and poor. But in the tourist market, the White Tais, reconstruct their identity as “moral entrepreneurs”. The discourse of the “poor” but the “moral entrepreneur” is positioned against the “rich” and “cunning” Kinh business men. Moral entrepreneur in this case is quite different from moral economy of peasant which Scott (1976) found. That is to say, according to Scott's findings, peasants resist market forces because they saw market as a risk. He looks at patronage and reciprocity of “moral economy” as institutions to reduce the risk. But in this case, in engaging the market economy, the moral sentiment and decision in market relationships (Sayer 2004: 2) which economic actions are embedded in cultural value (Polanyi 1957) bring about the identity reconstruction as “moral entrepreneur”. In their opinion, their subsistence livelihood and living with spirits of the land make them more “moral” and “peaceful”. The consciousness of being moral and peaceful White Tai is activated when they judge the Kinh or compare themselves to the Kinh. In that realm they are better human beings than the Kinh. It is quite humorous how these subtleties work. For example, when I had to pay an exorbitant price for a Tai traditional bourse to a White Tai villager, my host explained that the seller's husband is a Kinh. The implication is that her husband taught her to cheat and deceived customers. But when I bought a Tai traditional dress from a White Tai tailor woman (whose husband was a Kinh) at a low price, my host avers that it is because the dress maker is a White Tai woman.

What they consider to be “bad behavior”, like the woman who sold to me souvenir at high price (market price, actually), is always transmitted by the Kinh; Tais who live with Kinh or have Kinh husband or wife will become like the Kinh. Some villagers said that it is difficult to find a good Kinh (to deal with). A Tai bus driver, on the Hanoi-Mai Châu bus route, once demanded a higher price for bus ticket since I am a foreigner. I refused to pay the extra price and told him in White Tai language that I am also a T(h)ai (in Thailand), the same ethnic as you, not a foreigner. After arriving in Mai Châu, I told my host’s neighbor about the incident. In his opinion the driver has become bad because he lives in Mai Châu town, surrounded by the Kinh. In another instance, a homestay host whose husband is a Kinh allowed her guests to have annoying parties. The villagers condemned her as wife of Kinh who has become like a Kinh. Her homestay was a Kinh’s homestay, not White Tai. So as stated a moment ago, according to White Tais’ perception, every bad behavior is Kinh’s or comes from the Kinh. The villagers also discern that the Kinh thinks they are the best in doing everything compared to other ethnic groups in Vietnam. That is why the Kinh generally underestimate other ethnic minority groups, they explained. Therefore to White Tai the real Tai is a moral person – a strategic essentialism utilized in many situations even when a Tai is not really moral. That is a way that the White Tai negotiate the essentialistic representations which are consumed by the state as authentic identity.

According to the White Tai, they are essentialized as superstitious people because they are concerned with sins and merits. Sin and merit are also (intangible) *bản sắc* (identity) of White Tai. To make people dislike you is a serious sin for White Tai. Mr. Khả Tiến (or what I call him “Pù Tiến”), a retired director of cultural office of Mai Châu district had this to say on this aspect. “White Tai is afraid to commit a sin, or what they call in White Tai “*báp*”. According to him, in White Tai’s perception sinful acts are, theft, killing people, saying against/curse/disparaging others, and lying”. Then I asked him if homestay owners compete for guests, is it *báp*? He replied that “it is not *báp* as long as he/she does not say something negative to another homestay host”. Then I asked again, if it is a sin to operate motor (to make electricity since the electricity in Mai Châu is occasionally cut off and homestays have to

generate power by themselves) late into the night which annoys the families nearby. He said if the motor is not used during the sleeping time (around 10 PM), it is not *báp*. I realized that it is sin to negatively bother other members of the village.

In addition, what is more interesting is that once somebody commits a *báp* against you, you have to be patient. If you are not patient and you respond badly, say pick a quarrel, you would have committed a *báp* as well. The ways to cope with negative thing, someone does to you, is by just being patient, or unfriend them by keeping a distance. You must not show negative feedback, even at the superficial level to them. That is why; many villagers said that White Tai really remember what people do something negatively to them. And, yes, this habit lessens the superficial conflict among villagers who are doing tourist business. Moreover, the meaning of sin is flexible and changeable according to situations. It depends on whether or not you make negative effect to community. For example, opium, in the past was perceived as a remedy so that selling opium was not *báp*. But nowadays opium is perceived as a drug. However, it is a *báp* in selling opium not because it is a drug per se but because it makes the society unhappy and the society does not like it, Pù Tién explained to me.

Another sin related to culture of hospitality is that when a traveler(s) stops at your house, you should welcome him/her/them. You are required to serve him/her/them a drink, at least. If you do not do this, you are derided as stingy. Stingy is also a kind of sin. If the god sees what you have done, he would curse you. When you talk, the snakes will run out from your mouth. But if you are hospitable, gold will run out of your mouth. This means that, according to Pù Tién, you make people happy and you will repayed in same kindness. Reversely if you do bad things, you will repayed in evil (*Hét phúc, đai phúc, hét sồi, đai sồi*). Besides, as habits, White Tai does not like those who are stingy. In other words, they do not like those who are more individualistic, not social. I heard many negative gossips about stingy behaviors. For instance, because the villages have several social activities which are rewarded by lavish parties (the thank you parties to neighbors and spirits) and if you do not go to the parties you are invited (even you do not contribute to their task but you are their relative you have to take part in that); and when you have a party you do only among your family members, you will be considered as a stingy person. As



villagers said in White Tai, “*kân kee teè, bào ao nóng pí, bào mee péang*”, meaning those who are stingy even to relatives will have no friend. That is the same as the case of sin stated above; you are not hospitable, people do not really like you.

The sin is opposite to what they call “*bun*” (merit). I am talking about *bun* in a sense of altruism, not reciprocal relationship acknowledged widely in economic anthropology studies. This is the topic I discuss informally with a few villagers. Altruism, in this sense, carries a meaning of selfless care for other by making merit. For example, as the villager said, we help people (even those whom we do not know), such people may not be able to pay us back. But we, when facing something difficult, will get help from other people who may not know us. That is a kind of “a chain of goodness” (or “Karma” in Buddhism) which goes beyond the notion of Sahlins’s “generalized reciprocity” (Nartozky 1997: 45) since the people in such relations may be not be from the same community and perhaps they do not know each other. Throughout our life, even though we are the rich, we still need helps from other people, says Anh Học, a villager. I pretended that I did not understand what he said and respond that the rich does not need free help because they can hire someone to help them. He argues against me by saying that money cannot purchase everything; for example if you lose the way, you need someone to advise you which cannot be purchased. There are so many things/matters in which even the rich needs help. Anh Học explains about this in White Tai mixed Vietnamese language. That is “*Ku hết phúc cần nêe, se cần nờ hết phúc hao, chưa thấy trước mắt, cần thibào hên kór thòi lok*”. This means, “I make someone happy, I will get the happiness from someone else, (anyway) it has never manifested immediately, so that someone cannot see the impact (even it exists), (however) it does not matter”. He gives me an example, the Hanoians come here, we welcome them with a drink, so when we go to Hanoi, other Hanoians will help us when we face with a problem.

Another *bun* is about what they call “don’t take all” (*Nhaao sia mắt*) or do not be greedy. You should not take much if you invest/contribute less, or not contribute. If you get free, you will lose something; as White Tai maxim tells “*Đai lá, sia lai, mác đai khong, có sia khong*” (meaning getting much free and liking to get free, (you) would be lost something). For example, if you find money dropped on the way VND



100,000, you would like to take it, you should not take all; just take 2/3 or 1/3 is enough, said Pù Tiển. He also tells me that if you take all, of course, people do not see but the deity sees. Then you will lose something without the reason. *Bun*, actually is about our mentality, our worldview, and the way to deal with other people/society, said my homestay owner. If we are optimistic and a good person, we will have *bun*. When we have a lot of *bun*, “*Phí Khoấn*” (our spirits) will always be with us. If we have no or have a little bit *bun*, *Phí Khoấn* will be out. Then we will be sick severely or death. Lastly, *bun* applied to transaction in tourist market is about “morality of money” (see next section) plus modesty (as mentioned above). That is applied in setting prices for homestay services and selling souvenir goods, which the prices are not high compared to other tourist places. As **lonely planet** (the world famous travel guidebook) informs, at Mai Châu “polite bargaining is the norm”. *Bun* is surly related to culture of hospitality in constructing tourist market, market morality that is less in cheating tourists. White Tai *bản sắc* is complicated depending on what situation, relation, and context. As stated, if White Tai people did not engage in the global tourism market, they would be identified simply as marginalized people; inferior to the Kinh or even as “nobodies”. But in the market space, the White Tai have been able to construct an identity as “moral entrepreneurs”, which is counter to the discourse created by the Kinh. In other words, they have become “somebody” within the Vietnamese nation state, revealing that their newly authentic White Tai identity is relevant to their business and marketing abilities. In addition, in the context of a global marketplace, the representation of the White Tai is not about “cheating people”, but about being able to attract tourists in an effective manner.

Overall, the chats between me and the villagers remind me that even acknowledged by anthropologists that social/ethnic relation is power relation mainly, the description of making merit of White Tai in the sense of “pay it forward” is like something beyond power relation. Because we do not know that we will give to whom and who will take from us. Unwittingly or not, it is the same as Bourdieu’s “symbolic capital” concept. Anyway, unlike the Lao, and Thai in Thailand, Laos, and Southern China, White Tai’s religious is not Buddhism. They pray to the gods who created the world (*Thành*) and the spirits of land, forest, water, ancestors. It is

interesting for me that we share the meaning what we call the same word “*báp and bun*” which are conceived among Thai in Thailand that it is teachings of Buddhism.

What follows from these discussion is the question, do the White Tai really accept, at the conscious level, that they are backward and inferiority to the Kinh? In the autumn of 2011, when I went back to Mai Châu again. I saw a group of Kinh tourist who work for a private company bringing a lots of stuff to donate to the Bản Lác’s children. There were many children and their parents eagerly getting the donation. Those who get the things donated are very happy. They really appreciate those who give them a gift. Even those who are better off like to accept donation or gift from others, even if it is from the Kinh, despite the fact that the Kinh looks down upon them. The point is, they love to receive gifts, more so from foreigners. They feel proud when they get gift from the foreigner. Thus it can be said that the strategy to gain a benefit is used with some kinds of sentiment (of being inferior and backwardness) (Spivak 1988, Leshkovich 2011).

This behavior comes together with the self-consciousness of modesty (*kiếm tồn* in White Tai). White Thai like to be modest among them and in relation with the others. In the lavish party of rice ceremony and house warming ceremony I witness, every time the hosts have to say to the guests “*bào me ăn máng ka ló, thông cảm nó*” - meaning “(we have) nothing for you to eat, please forgive me”. Then the guests reply “*cha ón lai nó, đái lao yón*”; this means “thank you very much, we have a meal (because of you)”. Another example is, they always say to the tourists that they are poor people living in small houses, even though they own many modern materials such as washing machine, satellite TV, video, motorbike. The retired director of cultural department of Mai Châu district who is White Tai explained why Tai is always modest (*Kiểm Tồn*) in relation to whomever inside and outside community. Even if they have much/many, they try to show that they have a little or nothing.

At first glance, and according to the culture of hospitality, it appears, within the context of multi-ethnic relations inside the economic realm, that the villagers are subordinate to others, but in fact they have utilized their essential “inferiority” and turned it around in order to gain a superior situation. At first, there was a power imbalance (Bourdieu 1977), but since then the villagers, through gift exchange, have

been able to create a balance in obligations and grow the level of reciprocity. Even though sometimes it may seem to be the perfect gift (given without thought of reciprocity) and the exchange is not based on an intense social relationship or on kinship, these are not impersonal transactions (Carrier 1990: 29). That is to say, *bản sắc*, as the structure of consciousness around morality, is used so as to place them in a superior position, and this happens even with short-term business transactions. Admittedly, in terms of power relations, the receiver's thought is inferior to the giver's. When the White Tai vendors ask tourists to help them by buying *anh lam*, it can be interpreted that in this transient business transaction, the vendors use their inferiority as strategic essentialism – in order to sell. If at first I refuse to buy, then they give me free *anh lam*, and the inferior position (asking for help with buying) is turned into a superior situation immediately (giving a free *anh lam*). Of course, the essential of local hospitality is utilized in the space beyond the transient business transaction; so that long term relations can be established. Thus, this long term relationship is dependent on a short term transaction. Also, the individual involved in the short term transaction is transferred to the social domain (of relations in debt or reciprocity). Of course, the long term cycle (apart from for individual purposes) is always associated with the morality of exchange (Bloch 1989: 26). Through practicing business, these vendors are able to construct their identity as moral sellers (showing kindness) in relation to the tourists.

I am also impressed by another strategy. Once an old woman asked me for my silver earring and the hat I was wearing. I took them off and gave to her immediately since I thought she must be poorer than I am. Maybe she never had valuable accessories. I was also wondering, at the back of my mind, how she dared to ask something for free from a foreigner/stranger. After four months, when I was leaving the place, her family arranged a farewell banquet for me. This time she offered me her ancient silver bangle (conceived by villagers as a valuable thing). The old woman, at the first was perceived by me as the poorer, in the inferior position, turned around herself to be a giver giving me much more valuable thing.

According to the cases here, the White Tai at first glance would seem to be subordinate to others, but actually they do not position themselves as such in the short

term transactions. That is to say, if they deny the donation, do not ask for gifts and do not give free *anh lam*, the relationship between them and others would end in the short term. As a result, they try to construct a long term relationships through their short term transactions; this is the way to sustain their business - based on long term relationships. What the villagers want is not a “thing” (to fulfil their short term economic advantage), but rather an “intimate relation” with the customer; an intimacy as a human in society, as someone who can be both a giver and receiver. This is unlike what Appadurai found (1986), that in such relations to us things actually have no meaning - the meaning is separate to the things - it is in the experience of give-and-take relations. The villagers, in fact; therefore, want the “relations in debt” (beyond things) or in other words, the “generalized reciprocity” which transforms the “cold” or “transient” relationship into “cool” or “long term” relationship. But relations in debt go beyond objects in monetary terms. As a result, the meaning of gift relations goes beyond the use value, sign value or exchange value – it is indicative of the identity of the givers (Carrier 1990: 25). The identity of the White Tai in the context of the competing construction of their White “Tainess” is “poor but generous”. Through the cases shown here, it is evident that the boundary between gift and commodity relations, as well as the impersonal and personal objects, becomes clear. These “objects” are just a vehicle for new relationships to develop; therefore, gift relations are about “affection” and/or “love”, whereas commodity relations are linked to the “values of thing”, even the sign value (Carrier 1990:22-23). Love or affection, instrumentally, can be used to make friends and develop solidarity for political and/or market purposes.

In summary, the Vietnamese state essentializes Tai groups in a fixed ethnic image as backward peasant and generally consumes as their authentic identity, which reinforces their marginalization as nobody. Competing with such construction of authentic ethnicity, the White Tai are essentializing themselves in different ways mainly as “strategic essentialism” in order to transform themselves into somebody. By reproducing their cultural values of *bun* and *báp*, they redefine their micro-relationship between two ethnic groups, outside the tourist market space in terms of various aspects of morality (i.e. honesty, modesty, and hospitality).



Within the tourist market, the White Tai as homestay hosts negotiate for their own authentic identity as “moral entrepreneurs”, while the souvenir shop owners see themselves as “less cheating people”, and the *anh lam* vendors as “polite seller”. By negotiating with such state constructed ethnic images in terms of their ethnic morality, the White Tai have never perceived themselves as inferior to the Kinh. Only in short-term exchanges, they may accept their inferiority to the Kinh by occasionally receiving the Kinh’s donation. But their feeling of inferiority is understood in the context of long-term relationship as “strategic intimacy” because they also give others their gifts for long-term exchanges.

#### **4.3. Strategic Essentialism and Negotiating White Tai Identity with Representation in Tourism**

Throughout last two decades Mai Châu have increasingly been constructed and represented as a tourist landscape. According to **Lonely Planet** guide book, Mai Châu is one of five highlighted tourist attractions of the Northwest region of Vietnam. It represents the beautiful landscape and traditional White Tai stilt houses. Four other places are Sa Pa – old French hill-station town, Bắc Hà – Ethnic minority market, Fansipan – Vietnam’s highest peak, and Điện Biên Phủ – the last battle field of French troops in Vietnam.

To commodify Mai Châu, the agencies and state have manufactured its representations. The early representation of Mai Châu in 1990s in travel articles has long been well-known for Tai traditional custom and weaving (Lan 2000: 4). The government has chosen Mai Châu to use tourism as a means of development, which includes promoting villages as handicraft centers (Lan 2000: 118). However, because of occupying beautiful landscape, an idyllic valley of paddy field, as well as traditional stilt houses of White Tai minority group. The villagers open their houses to welcome tourists to have meals and stay over night. Thus Mai Châu is known as ethnic tourist attraction and the homestay villages. Besides, for foreign tourists, Mai Châu is known as a place for trekking to minority villages.

The representation of Mai Châu in tourist market is same as other tourist places in Vietnam. It has been promoted by tour agencies as an “ethnic tourism community” by many tourism organizations, including state and local authorities, hotels and tour agencies located in the old city of Hanoi, the national television channel for ethnic minorities (VTV5), websites, and even by **Lonely Planet**. In this promotion, Mai Châu is often romanticized as the beautiful valley of rice fields where the White Tai people live. It is nature trekking. Furthermore, as the main tourist villages of Mai Châu District, Bản Lác and Bản Pom Coọng are promoted as homestay villages where visitors can enjoy the Tai stilt houses, local fabric weaving, and cultural performances. At present, Mai Châu is known as a romantic place for couples, a site of eco-sightseeing (trekking and hiking), an ethnic cultural attraction for Vietnamese and foreigners, and a research site for university lecturers and students. Every weekend, Kinh couples and large groups of Kinh and particular Hanoi students, as well as foreigners including backpackers, flock to the villages. This section focuses on the articles published on websites, leaflet, and travel books/magazines writing about Mai Châu. Of course, Mai Châu representation has been constructed by them. There are two main representations of Mai Châu – first as cultural landscape and the second as homestay villages.

The issue is the representation of Mai Châu as “a peaceful ethnic cultural landscape” by **Lonely Planet** (2010). Mai Châu is represented as beautiful, tranquil, and peaceful place in the landscape of idyllic valley and rice field. It is a good place to stay overnight, in ethnic minority people’s house, be soaked yourselves in countryside’s atmosphere, trekking and hiking around minorities villages. Besides this, it mentions about White Tai’s art or technic of selling. Anyway, they are not represented as masterful weavers in traditional fabric. The image of handicraft tourist village is still just a part of tourist attraction of Mai Châu.

Many websites (written in Vietnamese) bring out the same image of scenic Mai Châu. But more than that, some websites are more loaded with cultural values, aimed at promotion. It offers advises to tourists on the ways to perceive and interact in the cultural landscape atmosphere. Because it is not only peaceful valley but also mired intraditional ways of life. The activities that domestic tourists are allowed to do

in Mai Châu are also different from Western tourists' activities shown in **Lonely Planet** (i.e. trekking). That is, Vietnamese articles are about enjoying Tai traditional homestay and cultural show, being catered by White Tai foods and drink, shopping local souvenirs like decorative fabric wall hanging, woodcraft, and scarf. And, certainly, to gaze at local people' daily exotic life activities such as weaving, cross-itching. But many articles show their disappointment that White Tai people do not wear traditional dress, especially the young generation. That is the consequence of imagine of ethnic stereotype as domination of social relation (Tucker 2003). In the Vietnam airline's magazine circulated among flight passengers (15/12/2008 – 15/01/2009) written in both Vietnamese and English languages carries Mai Châu's images of pleasant village with not only beautiful scenery but also Tai traditional stilt houses and hospitable people. Yes, it describes villagers' life bringing the sense of peace and simpleness. The constructing tourist place of Mai Châu is consistent with cultural characteristics of White Tai.

According to a Vietnamese website, Mai Châu is a place of ethnic minority group with its unique custom and practices for instance, the stilt house with bamboo floor, local food like glutinous rice roasted in bamboo joints (*anh lam*) and steam-cooked fish (*pa nung*), traditional handicraft, weaving on the loom, and cultural performance. In many articles, White Tai stilt house is considered as clean. That makes image of White Tai people as a clean people considered as civilized people.

Anyway they interpret cultural differences as something exotic and the driving ideology behind is on "otherness". In short, the success of Mai Châu's commodification lies in its representation in terms of a traditional and exotic culture and way of life, a representation determined by the notion of "otherness" (Berghe 1994, Suvantola 2002: 21). However, what seems to be ignored by most of articles is that the representation of Mai Châu as a peaceful ethnic cultural landscape does not link to historical specificity. Representation of the past is concerned by a few Vietnamese travel articles published on websites. They say Mai Châu is represented as a historical place (over 700 years) of White Tai inhabitants. Also an article says about history of homestay regarding villagers who are the homestay owners. This

information (homestay business is constructed by villagers) is hard to accept by many domestic tourists that villagers are the main agents of constructing tourism businesses.

In the representation of ethnic homestay villages- the main feature of commodification of Mai Châu is “authentic homestay experience”. It is sold with the good image of Mai Châu people. This place is less deception to tourists. The tourists visiting there will feel comfortable because the villagers are friendly, gentle, hospitable that is an article published on website written in Vietnam describes that Mai Châu is a special product (*đặc sản*). Most of tourists are impressed by community tourism (*làm du lịch cộng đồng*). An article written in Vietnamese, which talks about homestay carry a sense of being comfortable since they are served by ethnic people as well as the sense of family. The representation of hospitality seems to attract tourists to interaction with local people. However, even within these interactions, they are still limited in the realm of objectification of human relation (Bunten 2008: 384). These representations fixed authentic White Tai only in terms of “thing” while White Tai villagers try to situate their ethnicity and identity in their relations with both tourists and the Kinh majority.

As in the case of White Tai hospitality, it is not only seen in market relation but is a common practice in their everyday life; the White Tai always welcome outsiders who pass through their villages. So, their villages are more likely to be chosen for a homestay than other ethnic sites in the same area. In the past, villagers offered visitors a night in their houses and a meal for free even if they were strangers. When I asked the villagers how to say “hospitality” in White Tai, they told me “*hách peng khach ma huon*”, which can be translated literally as “love whoever visits your house.” According to White Tai custom, if someone arrives at a house, the house owner must first ask “How are you? And how is your family?” and then serve the visitor a drink. While talking with their visitors, White Tai people always ask them, “Could you have a meal with us?” According to Trong (2007: 27), after this, if the visitors show their desire to eat, the host will be happy to serve them food, and family members and guests will sit around the table and have a meal together. Sharing good food and drink is the best way to get acquainted and cement a lasting friendship (Trong, 2007: 91). Anyone who shares a meal with a White Tai family is considered to be their guest.



This means that foreign tourists brought by tour agencies are not treated as guests, because they usually do not share meals with their hosts.

Hospitality may seem to be an essentialistic character of White Tai in Mai Châu. Many White Tai villagers told me that their hospitality business is run by the “heart” (or someones say “spirit”). That is, hospitality is part of the traditional culture of the White Tai. This is unlike other ethnic groups living in the same district who do not welcome strangers: only relatives, friends, and people introduced by relatives and friends are welcomed. For White Tai, they like welcoming guests, even if the guest have no bussiness matter. They perceive that welcoming guest and/or meeting someone and talk among to each other are like a kind of enjoyment and relaxation. The famous phrase *pai inn* captures this attitude well. It conveys a sense of entertainment of talking with someone.

The villagers are practicing their culture of hospitality once they enter into a relationship with the Kinh. Many told me that if you go to Hanoi, or any Kinh society, you are tired; you want to take a rest for a while. You are not welcomed even only for free sitting at their place for a while. A villager told me that over ten years ago, he went to Hanoi, he got tired because of strong sun. He asked for sitting at the street drinking shop for a while. The shop owner ousted him from her shop. He felt bitter and concurrently he was so proud of his hospitable culture. He said, even at present, (as I also witness) anyone even Vietnamese tourists can take a seat for a while in White Tai people’s grocery & drinking shop in the tourist villages although he/she do not buy any drink. By this he implied that the White Tai, even in their business spaces, are more hospitable than the Kinh. Hospitality, in this sense, is situated more or less as strategic essentialism since the White Tai have, in most cases, less power in relations to the Kinh.

Generally, in dealing with money in the market, White Tai souvenir sellers usually are polite to any tourist. When they asked customers to buy their goods, they usually use their “inferiority” saying “*ao chuy nom mế*” – meaning “*help me buying*”. And after getting money from the customers, they say “thank you”. I have tried to use these White Tai idioms when dealing with the Kinh selling food in the Mai Châu market: they sneered at me and they felt it was strange because they understood I was

saying “helping a vendor sell their bread”. Kinh vendors do not usually say “I beg you” and rarely say “thank you” after taking the customer’s money, unless they are much younger than their customer. From these (“I beg you” and “helping buy for me”) I assume that money is not just a symbol of wealth for the White Tai, but can be the basis of a relationship that expands beyond mere business.

Talking about this, an old and educated man explained to me that the White Tai perceive that their goods should actually be sold at a cheaper price, or even given for free to guests whom they appreciate. When they sell goods at market price, they feel obliged to thank the buyers for the extra money. If the buyer does not bargain, the seller should return some money to them. For instance, knowing that I did not have much money, after buying two traditional pillows, the seller returned some of the money to me (the White Tai usually give pillows as presents to guests they appreciate). The old man also noted that the White Tai have a saying concerning the handing over of money: “(I) do (sell goods) similar to the Mùòng and Kinh (sell at the market price) in this way; (I) beg you,” in order to make clear to the buyer that the transaction is an economic and not a social one and thus takes place at the correct market price and not at a lower price. By this morality of money practiced in the market, the White Tai are situating their identity in terms of “less tactic marketer” as mentioned in **Lonely Planet** as something that can attract many tourists.

In addition, White Tai sometimes counter the discourse that the Kinh are more skillful in the realm of market economy. According to my long-stay observation in the village, compared with other merchants, White Tai merchants are quite honest even though in some cases, the backpackers who are precieved in just engagement in transient transaction (see the elaboration in chapter 2 and 5), are cheated by Whtie Tai hosts. They are less shrewd at selling, and they usually do not inflate prices. Some of them even protect foreign tourists from being cheated by Kinh tour guides. Many tour guides think that villagers cannot understand English or French; then they normally translate the prices asked by villagers to their customers increased two or three times. Some villagers understand what the Kinh tour guides say, but pretend otherwise. Then, there are also many ways in which a host may respond to this misbehavior on the part of the tour guides. On one occasion, the host wrote the correct price on paper

to inform the tourists when the tour guide was absent. As a result, the tour guide got involved in a quarrel with the tourists; then came back to argue with the host, who simply pretended that she did not understand English, so she had no way to tell the truth to the tourists. Encountering with foreign tourists, this seller is situating her White Tai identity as moral people in contrast to the Kinh tour guide as a cheating people.

In business dealing, especially with the household's type "a" and "b", White Tai villagers do not acknowledge that they are at the lower level of any skill than the Kinh. This is insisted by many villagers and Tai national scholars. Because they can achieve a high level of education as the Kinh does. In addition, due to success in tourist market in Mai Châu, they are so proud of themselves in business skill and morality compared to Kinh. They are not being left at the margin of the economic change as other ethnic minority groups are. In addition, most White Tai teenagers can at least graduate with grade 12. It is a trendy for the teenagers there to study in university. In terms of education, villagers situated their identity as equal to that of the Kinh.

White Tai villagers have also made political achievement at the district level. After its unification with other highland regions into modern state of Vietnam, the first chairman and the secretary of communist party of Mai Châu district were the Kinh. Subsequently, because of their higher education as well as the policy giving priority to ethnic people to be an official in their homeland, the position has been taken over by White Tai. Many villagers said that the Kinh cannot govern Tai people, since this is the land of Tai. Kinh does not know our cultures and habits. So, it does not work if we get Kinh rulers. And so, nowadays, 70 to 80 percent of White Tai make up the local authorities in the district.

Within the tourist market space, White Tai villagers tend to situate their identity in closed relations with their ethnicity. In selling hospitality in the "homestay" and the cultural atmosphere it is always infused with ethnic images, as tourist and guest I get a feeling that essentially what they try to sell is ethnic "impression". So, the villagers have to improvise their being patient by not showing that they are greedy in the market, and not annoying the tourists. By essentializing the superstition of

“*báp*”, conflicts have rarely occurred among homestay owners. White Tai are patient towards one another. It is still true even if some of them struggle against the others for taking a “market share” by persuading the guests of the other homestays to stay at their homestay for their next visiting, or for their friend’s visiting.

One example is the case of a sister of a homestay host who was renting the first floor of her brother’s stilt house to run a souvenir shop concurrently with getting familiar with the tour guides. When she offered her own homestay service, she contacted those tour guides to take the tourists for her household, rather than her brother’s. This means that her brother loses his guests. However, good relationship between the two families still carries on. They do not quarrel. The brother is patient while forgetting his sister’s conduct and moves on expanding his business by looking for new guests. Similar matters between the villagers also occur frequently within the villages. Nonetheless, the patience does not stand-alone. It goes along with the right (virtue) way that the villagers customarily accept one homestay’s rights in taking the old guests from the other homestays. In their viewpoint, it does not matter if one does not blame others, but only gets familiarity with tourists, gives them a name card, and lets them make decision for the next time of their or their friends’ staying.

Generally, villagers realize that outsiders consume some of their ethnic images as representation. But without tourist market, White Tai as an ethnic group at the margin is nobody in the eyes of the state. In this sense they learn to strategically utilize the “essential White Tai” images to attract tourists which, in turn, make them somebody both in Vietnam and in the world. As stated, there are a lot of good images of White Tai like “less in money tactic, cleanliness, and warm welcome” and so on. The villagers appear to be proud of being villagers of famous tourist villages. When they are outside Mai Châu, and people ask them, “where are you from?”, they love to reply that they are from a famous tourist place, Mai Châu. “Do you know Mai Châu?” they would usually ask back. If the reply is “no”, they will be disappointed and respond “why you do not know?” because they are satisfied with their good representation as a large number of foreign tourists from France and US come from so far away just to visit Mai Châu.



While going along with some good ethnic images that can be sold, for example the traditional stilt house, traditional fabric and loom, the villagers also selectively negotiate the representation of being primitive and exotic. They construct their ethnic identity as differentiated from the Kinh by presenting themselves as more than just another different and exotic ethnic group and culture. In their interactions with tourists, the White Tai here tend to claim that they are better than the Kinh. They will say, for instance, “We are better-hearted and more moral.”

Negotiating with a representation of backward people, villagers also construct themselves as modern people: in the villages, there are satellite dishes, washing machines, cars, concrete roads, and modern toilets with water heaters. Certainly, they are reluctant to dress in White Tai traditional costume when government officials or other guests ask for it. The elderly villagers, who are the retired official of Hoà Bình province, thinking about contemporary White Tai told me in White Tai mixed with Vietnamese that “*ho hao mo mắt sa ma noi*” – meaning “let us open our face for new things”; of course we keep our traditions but concurrently we accept and add the new things. That because we live in the modern world, he said. That is a kind of counter-ethnic representation of highland non-Kinh village perceived as non-civilized people. Engaging in this tourist space, villagers are both situating and negotiating their identity with a combination of essentialistic White Tai (moral values) and modern people. In this way, villagers are able to reproduce their old ways of hospitality, while at the same time diversifying their products and services.

Rather than directly countering their ethnic representation consumed by outsiders, villagers turn, instead, to reconstruct their White Tai identity as honesty, modesty, and hospitality especially in the case of the homestay type “b”, which the hosts build and run their business based primarily on “strategic intimacy”. So by the structure of sentiment of White Tai (seen as essentialism) improvised once the interaction between host-guest occur, these representations reveal that tourism in Mai Châu is constructed from inside-out and as well as outside-in. Because, as discussed before, “consuming Mai Châu” is not only about the consumption of the “meaning of the objects/commodities” but also “the experiences of host-guest interactions” which allow for a meaningful relationship.

This commodification of ethnicity is not only aimed at making money, but also at constructing identity with power to keep the villagers' authority over the management of their places as both tourist spaces and agricultural lands. Certainly, that construction is not based on temporary transactions which depend on the mechanisms of the market; rather it is on a more elaborating and complex relationship in the various contexts and relationships (for these please see the elaboration in chapter 5).

To view this from another angle (White Tai identity) lets take the following data. In the course of my field work I had interviewed 16 tour guides. I asked them what the salient features of Mai Châu are. Six of them (one tour guide can express more than one feature) spoke about hospitable and friendly habits of White Tai people. Three of them talked about civilized White Tai cultures referring to their lifestyle, strong sense of community and their written language. This perception indicates "share understanding" of cultural differences (Tucker 2003). There are two tour guides who emphasized on beautiful natural scenery. And two of them were impressed by business skills of villagers, in building tourist market through social ties and connection to tourist companies in Hanoi. Three tour guides held negative images of Mai Châu in terms of dirtiness, being poor, and becoming more touristic place (too much of commodification). And only one tour guide had nothing to say about the topic in discussion. Besides, as mentioned before, Mai Châu has been represented as a tourist place through the production of certain images constructed by several travel articles. Taking all these images together, they indicate that Mai Châu people are quite successful in situating their new identity with strategic essentialism in order to negotiate with their representations in both realms of economy and politics of ethnic minority.

However, it is interesting to me that some villagers do not care much about the images consumed by the outsiders. In the middle of August 2010, an American man living in Hanoi brings books to sell. One of which is about "Tai ethnic minority in Vietnam" written in English to sell in Bản Lác. In this book, there are a lot of pictures of them and their villages. A villager walks pass his stroll and then stops me and sees the pictures of her, her friends, and some houses in the village. This is the first time

she sees this picture. Her immediate response was startling. She started telling me about the exact location of the houses, and the people in the picture. She did not care what the book says about Mai Châu, Bản Lác and them. Then another villager asked me what the book is about or what does it say about them. I replied that it was about their life. When I went back to my homestay and narrated to my host's family about the book, they just listen, no response. It occurred to me, that, in practice, some villagers do not bother about how they are represented by others (i.e. foreigner since the book is in English). Most of these people belong to the household group "c" (the minimal engagement in tourist market) and some belong to group "b" (mixed strategies). In the summer, at vacation time, normally we can see men, belonging to this group, play card, gamble, and the women are lazy to weave, they do not care for tourists or the image of the White Tai. Whereas the household group "a" and some of group "b" are conscious about the representation of White Tai and Mai Châu and their identity as "entrepreneur" and "civilized people" and takes the matter seriously. Therefore, it is suggestive to the fact that the negotiation of ethnic representation and identity, in relation to Vietnamese tourist, in Mai Châu is complicated depending on the types of household.

In summary, to deal with fixed representations of authentic White Tai as being primitive, exotic and hospitable perceived in terms of "thing", the White Tai opt to situate their ethnicity and identities through different kinds of relationship in various ways. They are reproducing and situating their ethnicity as strategic essentialism in their relations to the Kinh and the tourists. In the context of their relationship with the more powerful Kinh, they are negotiating their identity in terms of their culture of hospitality and morality. Encountering with the foreign tourists, they are also defining themselves as more moral than the Kinh tour guide who tries to cheat the tourists. In everyday life trading, they are presenting themselves as honest merchants.

However, the White Tai identities are also situated apart from tourist market space which tends to focus mainly on strategic essentialism. To negotiate with their representation of inferiority and backwardness constructed by the state, the White Tai define their identity as modern as the Kinh by emphasizing that they are educated

people in the context of modern world. And in the political space, they can also become the capable official and administrator in their own localities.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

It is clear that the representation of the White Tai by the state, the majority Kinh people and tour agencies, essentializes certain attributes which are considered “authentic” White Tai. These representations are primarily about their primitiveness, backwardness and exotic “other”, based on a dominant-subordinate relationship. Therefore, these representations, formed within the realm of the “state”, place the White Tai at the margins, as “no bodies”, whereas in the tourist market space, they are entrepreneurs to the rest of the world. Negotiating these representations, which they claim as authentic Tai, the White Tai have situated and identified their own identity in a variety of ways. First, they have constructed cultural and ethnic boundaries, to distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups. Though they perceive themselves as Vietnamese citizens, they have also constructed an identity as “civilized people” (by re-inventing their written language, attending international conferences and publishing books), not only at the local but also the international level.

Second, within the market space, the White Tai villagers have used essentialism as a strategy to situate their ethnicities and identities in relation to the Kinh and the tourists. In the tourist market space, the homestay hosts have reconstructed their identity as “moral entrepreneurs”, while the souvenir shop owners have reconstructed themselves as “honest people”, and the *anh lam* vendors as “polite sellers”. In other words, they are moral but in various aspects and in different situations. To apply strategic essentialism effectively in the hospitality space, they form their short term business transactions in order to turn them into long term ones. This means that their authenticity, at the representation level, which at first glance seems to be about “things” (or services), for the White Tai is about “relations”, which can be constructed in varying situations and within different relations. Outside the market space, they have constructed an identity as moral (i.e. honest, modest and hospitable), modern and educated people, plus as capable officials.



These identities have been constructed in order for them to be “somebody” in Vietnamese society and the world. As Vietnamese citizens, they take-up a position equal to the Kinh - as contributors to building the national economy (at the local level), and as White Tai people, they are proud and have ethnic dignity, which they claim gives them the right to rule and manage their land. Theoretically, more or less, and unwittingly or not, this new identity as people who are equal to the Kinh, has been used to bridge the “ethnic gap” between them and decrease the violence of ethnic exclusion at the micro level, plus lessen the ethnic tensions of which the Vietnamese state has never been concerned.

Finally, the practices of the White Tai reveal that the “authentic” White Tai is neither a representation fixed in the realm of essentialism, nor a “thing” (or service) for sale. Authentic White Tainess is fluid and situated in the relations between the hosts, the tourists and the Kinh. These are; therefore, the constructed authenticities of a contemporary White Tai, those situated and varied depending on the identities they wish to use. Thus, when they are engaged in hospitality, the White Tai tend to construct an “authentic hospitality” in term of “relations” instead of “things”. So, the authenticity the tourists and the Kinh consume in this case is the “relations”, not the “things”. The construction of authentic relations is thus used to redefine relationships in order to become somebody in Vietnamese society and the world. For these reasons, the authenticity created is not fixed in terms of both meaning and form, and because it is constructed based on various kinds of (long term) relationships, no one can dominate its meanings and forms.