

## CHAPTER 5

### HYBRIDIZING THE HOSPITALITY OF ETHNICITY AND REDEFINING HOST-GUEST RELATIONSHIPS

It was Weiner who said “a product is not merely about material resource; it is also about human beings, social relationships and cosmological phenomena” (Narotzky 1997: 51). This study has so far highlighted the images and representations manufactured by outsiders in the production process. I have also identified how the hosts, in relation to various types of tourists and in the context of various kinds of relationships (i.e. hierarchical ethnic relations, market relations and relationships with the state), play an important role in defining the type of hospitality sold on the market. They have negotiated White Tai authenticity and made their own ethnic identity so as to redefine such relationships. In Chapter 3, I discussed the process of the commodification of hospitality – the way in which traditional hospitality (such as gifts) is turned into saleable hospitality (as a commodity). This chapter will probe deeper into this subject - the “hybridizing hospitality”, in which the hosts blend the essentialistic ethnicity with modern elements and intimate relationships to produce hospitality which is perceived as “authentic White Tai”. This chapter also discusses the sites or spaces in which the hosts interact with various kinds of tourists. My hunch is that this form of politics or ethnic relations, where actors come into contact with one another, is determined by and contingent upon the sites of these interactions. A critical reading of the spaces in which local people and tourists interact will perhaps help to elucidate and clarify the cultural economy of hospitality woven around the politics involved in the construction of White Tai identity. This study then, represents an attempt to point out how these processes reconstruct the contemporary identity of the White Tai in the contemporary world.

Digging deeper into this point, this chapter will also analyse the process of negotiation carried out by the authentic White Tai in the space of hospitality, and through the practice of host-tourist relationships. Under the notion of cultural

economy, I will try to draw out the production and consumption processes, and how hospitality is commodified and decommodified, resulting in ambiguous authenticity and authentic relations respectively. These processes then lead to redefined relationships based on the long term transactions of the intimate relationships that exist between the White Tai hosts and the tourists. Explicitly, I will trace the process of “hybridizing hospitality”, and “decommodification”– as a way to move beyond the consumption of “things” (or “cultural commodity”) - the fixed representation of the White Tai. It is also the way in which the hosts transform normal transient transactions within the host-tourist relationship to become intimate relations, in order to redefine these relationships. Therefore, instead of meeting the demands of the various consumers, it is done in order to free the White Tai from the control of the relations of domination, and construct a White Tai identity as somebody in the world, beyond the nation state boundary.

### **5.1. Who Are the Ethnic Tourists (?)**

Various types of tourist visit Mai Châu, for different purposes. According to their perceptions and behaviors, tourists visiting Mai Châu can be differentiated into four categories; (i) Vietnamese tourists (ii) Dependent foreign tourists (iii) Foreigners living in Vietnam and (iv) Backpackers. Vietnamese tourist normally come in groups of about 10 to 40 people. They are at the age group between 18 – 70 years. They can be divided into two sub group: Vietnamese adults and students. The former includes retired government workers coming on government paid holiday.

Adult Vietnamese tourists usually travel during weekend. Some of them have come here more than once. Their main objective is recreation – i.e. reunion of their group. They want this reunion to be set on ethnic minority’s cultural backdrop and thereby consume the exotic culture of the other. The scenic and tranquil landscapes make for a great recreation. Their recreational activities include playing card, partying, sightseeing and enjoying cultural shows. Though they like to see the ethnic culture, Vietnamese tourists rarely make any effort to discover something authentically “White Tai” by trekking out of the villages, as many foreign tourists do. The White Tai local tour guides (who guide foreign tourists) told me, that, Vietnamese tourists

see White Tai life only at the surface, because, they do not try to discover every aspects of “our” life. They do not really try to understand what we are. This is similar to what Tucker (2003) found in a tourist village in Turkey. No wonder that they tend to blame the villagers for not dressing up in ethnic costume; as if they have lost authenticity of ethnicity.

The representation of backwardness of White Tai is quite fixed in the Vietnamese’s mind. For example, in the mid of May 2010, I hired a taxi in Hanoi to take me to Mai Châu. The driver was known to me. He knew that I will be in Mai Châu for four months. He has never been to Mai Châu and is worried about my staying there. He asked me how I will be able to stay there, because it is a primitive place with no electricity. But once we arrived in Mai Châu he was amazed by the modern facilities available there. When I narrated the incident to my host, he lamented that most Vietnamese tourists (not only the taxi driver) come with this prejudice: that White Tai are backward. In Mai Châu their preconceptions tend to be shattered.

To White Tais when they speak of the behavior of Vietnamese tourists, they consider most of them to be very noisy, who drank too much alcohol, and often litter the ground. According to my several observations and formal talks, White Tai villagers do not seem to appreciate their behaviors at all, and feel annoyed about them. A common saying among homestay hosts is, “the Kinh likes to talk too much and too loudly; the Kinh is dirty.” They alleged that many Vietnamese tourists do not respect the hosts. They behave inappropriately in the villages: shooting fish in the host’s pond, using washing machine without the owner’s permission, gambling, trampling on the house’s floor, and shouting at the host for any request.

I observed that, as tourists, many Vietnamese also try to show their political and economic powers. For many of them, being served by the White Tai reinforces their view of the villagers as uneducated and backward people. Such a point of view is determined by biased discourses of “otherness”. They see themselves as not inferior to the Kinh. Some tourist groups come to Mai Châu to give donation. Inevitably they see themselves as more powerful compared to the Villagers. It appears that some Vietnamese tourists have been unable to erase this negative representation or image of the White Tai. As Suvantola (2002: 168) argued that tourist space is constructed from many discourses including discourse of otherness which brings about the negative

image to the tourists. By this I do not mean that there are no Vietnamese tourists who are able break away from this image. There are exceptional cases of Vietnamese tourists who show keen interest in trying to understand White Tai culture. Despite their prejudices, all the Vietnamese tourists, I talked to, expressed Mai Châu in a positive light. They like White Tai stilt houses, hospitality and gentleness.

For a Kinh, the act of touristic consumption re-enacts the superiority of the Kinh over White Tai. As ethnic tourists, their dominance over the ethnic minority is replicated by their ability to buy or consumes tradition and culture. This is the “tourist gaze”<sup>1</sup> (Urry 2004 (1990)) that dominates and permeates the relationship between the Kinh and White Tai, both within and outside tourist spaces. At times this “gaze” is destabilized by what they view as loss of White Tai traditional culture or in harsher term, “backwardness”. This is the reason why most Kinh tourists disapprove of the loss of ethnic authenticity of the White Tai such as not wearing ethnic dress, owning modern facilities, and being clever in tourism business. That is to say, the ethnic mainstream tourists is about searching for authentic ethnicity within the framework of crude stereotypes (Berghe 1994).

The Vietnamese studenttourists, like the former, also usually come to MaiChâu during the weekend. Most of the students have never been to Mai Châu. They imagine that White Tai village is still very backward. They bring along blankets, pillows, and food for survival. But once they arrive, they are surprised by themodern facilities. They cannot imagine that ethnic minority group will own beautiful mattresses, blankets and pillows and cook good food. They behave no differently from other Vietnamese tourists. Their activities are similar to that of adult Vietnamese. Some students are stationary guests. They are confined to the homestay all day long, playing cards. To state in general, the students are least concerned with exploring Mai Châu’s life, cultures and so on. The students like to enjoy night parties, dancing and campfire. These tourists causes the villagers and other tourists some trouble; and so the villagers made a rule that loud party must stop by 10 PM in winter and 11 PM in summer.

Similar to the Vietnamese adult, the students also usuallydrop litter on the ground and homestay floors. After every meal, the host have to sweep the floor. My

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<sup>1</sup> Tourist looks at local people and expect them to appear and behave according to his/her prejudiced perceptions.



host would complain to me that the students show no compassion to him (by not dropping the litter into the garbage bins he provided). I just smile while helping him sweep the floor. Other than the business transactions, most of them do not interact with the hosts. And they have no concern for the hosts. Their late hour parties annoy the hosts and their neighbors. As a result some hosts do not like taking in Vietnamese students. During the the high tourist season, most hosts will not take in Vietnamese student tourists. Of course there are small numbers of student who admire and would like to explore White Tai's life. Some are usually polite and respect the hosts.

The dependent foreign tourists are in between age group of 40 and 60 years. They often come in small groups of between 2 and 15 people. They are the dependent tourist coming under the guidance of the tour companies. Normally they stay just one and half day and a night. They like to explore the differences of lifestyle between the ethnic majority Kinh and the minority people. They also like to see stilt houses and subsistence livelihood of the villages. Their activities are recreation and walking or cycling. Some tourists take 70 km-mountainous-bicycle-ride from Hòa Bình province to Mai Châu and stay overnight. They perceive Mai Châu as a peaceful ethnic place. In terms of history and culture, many tourists like to know how long White Tai group have been living in Mai Châu. As the discussion with them revealed, they are mostly concerned with questions like, if there are inter-marriage (between the Tais and the Kinhs), and why White Tai elderly women have black teeth etc... So, this kind of tourists, according to Cole (2007: 29), does not want to "meet the people". They do not want social interaction.

Because of language barrier and being accompanied by a tour guide, the tourists and the hosts do not come into face to face interactions. In fact, the hosts would like to chat with their guests but the tour guides do not want to lose time for translation. Once when I was at a homestay, the host asks me to translate his message to the foreign guests. However, some tourists are active. They say "hi" in Vietnamese to the villagers and then stare at them. And the villagers are happy to hear the greeting from the tourists too. To respond, they reply "hello" in English or just simply smile. Even though some tourists in this category will join the dance of the cultural show team, I see that the relationship cannot move further beyond normal host-visitor relationship since they do not insert themselves for social interaction (Cole 2007: 29).

White Tai culture remains a cultural commodity or simply an object for the tourists' gaze. However, in general, the villagers like them much more than domestic tourists because they are polite and are not noisy.

The other groups of foreign tourists are the foreign tourists living in Vietnam. They are working or studying in Vietnam, so they can speak some Vietnamese and are therefore more familiar with Vietnamese culture. So, the hosts treat them as guests who bring them not only money but also, in the opinion of some hosts, "friendship". Most of them are introduced by the former guest(s). And if they are seen as prospective long term guest by the host they are favored by the hosts. Because White Tai tend to convert the short term transactions attached with moral exchange of hospitality to reproduce of the long term cycle (cf. Bloch 1989). Some tourists go to Mai Châu more than one time. Some like riding motorcycle from their places such as Hanoi or Hải Phòng to Mai Châu. Some guests live in Vietnam for four years and they travel to Mai Châu for vacation every year.

They like to explore White Tai culture. Some tourists have fairly good knowledge of Mai Châu, obtained from travel guide books written in their own languages and from Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi. Traditional stilt house is an attraction for them. Though they love exploring the culture, they do not engage in hard trekking. They prefer soft trekking – walking a half day to the villages nearby. They also do not like watching cultural show. Some tourists take vacation for recreation with a small group of friends – chatting and drinking beer. Some of them also like to be stationary at homestays, gazing at activities of the hosts. Some of them do not care much about interacting with the hosts.

Some tourists are more active; they like to interact with villagers who they meet when strolling around the villages. They know how to say "hi" in Vietnamese. Some of them enjoy cooking with the hosts. Some guests look familiar with the host than other fellow villagers. Some of the tourists seem to care about establishing a long term relationship with the hosts. They seem to understand and interpret what villagers are doing. Some of them participate in daily White Tai socio-economic activities, such as helping villagers in the paddy fields and bathing with the villagers in the local streams. More active than some teenagers, volunteers may spend a week living in Bản Lác and other mountainous villages in Mai Châu - providing a social service.

Apart from independent tourists living in Vietnam, there are some foreign backpackers visiting Mai Châu. Backpackers differ significantly from the second type of foreign guests. The main purpose of their visit is to explore Vietnam (or Southeast Asia) in general. And Mai Châu is one of their important destinations. Mai Châu is able to attract them because it is good for tourist who are traveling on tight or small budget and it is the gateway of Northwest upland region. For French backpackers, Mai Châu is one of the historical sites and falls on the way to Điện Biên Phủ, the last battle field of French colonialism (see chapter 4 for details).

Due to the temporary character of their stay and the fact that they usually do not return to the villages, in the eyes of the villagers the backpackers are not “guests”, but merely “visitors”. It is therefore, in their opinion, useless to try to establish any long-term relationship with them. Importantly, many backpackers bargain with villagers; trying to get more and paying little in return, sometimes they are accused of cheating locals. It is possible to hear a few stories about villagers cheated by backpacker, which shows their mistrust of this group of visitors. Most of them want what is cheapest or beneficial to them. For example, two Japanese backpackers who had just met their host tried to bargain with him. For the White Tai, visitors who have just arrived at the house must sit down, be greeted by the hosts and drink tea; only after that it will be possible to talk business. So the host did not listen to their bargaining, but concentrated on preparing a mat for the tourists to sit down, and took a hot pot of tea to serve them; even though in his mind they were not really his guests.

Normally the guests have to have meal at the homestays they are staying. But some backpackers do not follow this rule because they realize food is cheaper outside the homestay. The hosts do not like this attitude or behavior of the tourists. Some of them complained to me that their visitors stay at the house for three days without having any meal at homestay. “They are very stingy”. Homestay hosts often say in Vietnamese things like: “*họ rất khó tính*”, which means “they are very difficult [to deal with].” Obviously, and especially compared to the foreign tourists living in Vietnam, hosts tend to keep a distance from the backpackers. Apart from money transactions, hosts will rarely become concerned about backpackers. The hosts also like to gossip of backpackers. For example, they would say the backpackers look old, smell bad, do not take bath, wear same dress, and are not friendly.

In my opinion, it is well established that this category of tourist are not much liked by the hosts. I came across a homestay host whose business dealings with this category of tourist are quite harsh. His primary technique is control– confiscating their passports. Normally other homestays do not demand the tourists to deposit passports. This reminded me of Erb (2000: 722) who pointed out that the relationship between a host and a guest is one of power relation and control. But this particular host – he also operates motorbike taxi – knows about the ways the backpackers behave. When they try to cheap out he will convincethem to buy his trekking tour, and to use his motorbike taxi service. Instead of getting cheated, he cheats them. On another occasion, narrated elsewhere, a homestay owner cheated a Singaporean backpacker by getting him to pay almost twice the usual price for the service.

Perhaps the backpackers actually may have tried to relate themselves to the villagers. But they failed to interpret the locals' behaviors. May be because, unlike the foreign guests who are living in Vietnam (who know the behavior and how to relate themselves to the villagers), they are apprehensive about offending the hosts. For example, a Dutch woman said she would like to convey her feelings of gratitude to the villagers, but she was afraid of acting inappropriately and end up offending the villagers. Eventually, she decided to keep silent, and did nothing other than stick to the usual economic exchange. She did not understand villagers' actions; for example, because only a few people had said "hello" to her, she felt she had received a generally cold welcome from the villagers. The host-backpacker relations (in the case when they are unable to interpret and communicate to each other) can be interpreted not only in terms of power and control (Erb 2000) but also as a moral conflict and as mistrust between two different perspectives. This is because the relationship is based on short term exchange between two strangers (Erb 2004).

In summary, tourists visit Mai Châu for many purposes; it varies depending on the tourist category. In terms of ethnic tourist purpose, it can be concluded that the Vietnamese tourists, dependent foreign tourists, and backpackers regards Mai Châu ethnic tourism to be just for gaze – gazing the authentic White Tai as a primitive and natural place. What they consume is the tourist objects or things. Yet things are almost disassociated from producers (i.e. White Tai) and contemporary contexts. At this point, the meaning of objective authenticity is fixed and can be referred to as a



standard of making judgement on what is authentic. However, the purpose of visit of the independent foreign tourists, living in Vietnam, seems to be intended for relationships with ethnic minority, much more than things. In this case instead of a one-way and transient interaction (as in the first two categories of tourists) there is an interaction between the host and the guests. So such interaction goes beyond the transient transaction of product exchange and consumption of fixed sign (representation). In the next section I will reveal the ways the hosts engages with the hybridization of hospitality and the way they invent traditions as market strategies for sale according to the tourist categories.

## **5.2 Hybridizing Hospitality in Negotiating White Tai Ethnicity**

In my conversation with many tourists and the tour guides (in 2010), the latter would be usually uncomfortable when I raise the subject of commodification of the White Tai hospitality. On one occasion, a visibly uncomfortable tour guide friend of mine reasoned this way. Over the past ten years, the villagers have become cleverer and rational in business dealing. Ten years ago a homestay owner would merely want to make friend and establish reciprocal relationship. When a guest comes for a second time the hosts gave him/her some gift. Things no longer work this way. The host knows how to bargain, with tour agencies and tourists, the price, and no (objective) gift is given. Those who sell souvenir, they know how to obtain higher price for things. This perspective, of this particular tour guide, may be seen as the mainstream view on ethnic tourism; he feels disappointed when seeing that White Tai authenticity is ambiguous – a mixture between essential White Tai and modern elements and ways. This section will therefore discuss “if and how hospitality is commodified as authentic”.

Local people normally knew how to sell their tradition (Zakia 1996: 167), ethnicity and so on to attract tourists. In Mai Châu, the “traditional hospitality” sold in the market, in the contemporary world, is a mixture of ethnicity considered as a resource (Hitchcock 2000: 210) or in the other words, social input to marketing (Mandel and Humphrey 2002: 13), modern elements and other resources. Again, to survive in the global market, the hosts negotiate “White Tai ethnic images” by



hybridizing “hospitality” in various way, and sell it as authentic White Tai to each categories of tourists (or each market segment) differently. Thus, the creation of various types of hospitalities depends on White Tai’s resources (i.e. ethnicity and other resources), and on who they are dealing with and the site of interaction. Because hosts see various tourists differently, and treat them differently and engage with their own ethnicity (while selling hospitality to tourists) differently too.

The types of tourist I will examine are (i) domestic tourists (ii) dependent foreign tourists and (iii) independent foreign tourists living in Vietnam. They will be cross-tab by the types of households discussed in chapter 3. However, the analysis excludes the backpackers and the household type c. That is because, as mentioned previously, households belonging to this category are in “minimal engagement” with tourist market. And the backpackers, based on their purpose of visit, are not ethnic tourists.

White Tai ethnic images are generally essentialized by outsiders into two types of representation. The first type is rather negative like backward peasant (such as cultivator of irrigated wet rice, living on stilt house, superstitious, traditionalist, practicing archaic customs, and poor). The White Tai themselves may sometimes accept such image and then utilize it as “strategic essentialism” according to Spivak (1988). But in the tourist market, the White Tai tend to contest such negative image with their own essentialistic identity which is represented more positively as “moral entrepreneurs” (as well as “peaceful people”, and “modesty”). They are moral and peaceful, because, they believe in superstition like “*báp* and *bun*” (see the elaboration in chapter 4) which to them is understood as no stealing, no killing of people, no speaking against others, no cursing or disparaging other, no lying or bothering others and not greedy. They should be patient, generous and honest. Importantly, they should practice hospitality with altruistic sense. The second type of representation which is more positive is newly invented. This new image is essentialized as “authentic” lifestyle especially in the White Tai locality, Mai Châu which is seen mainly in terms of tangible cultures as a scenic valley of rice fields, romantic place for couples, eco-sightseeing (trekking and hiking), houses on stilt, local textile weaving, cultural show, local food (such as *anh lam* and steam-cooked fish). However, the White Tai villagers turn their own essentialistic representations mainly to intangible

culture in terms of cleanliness, exotic way of life (with the sense of otherness), hospitable people (friendly and gentle) as well as authentic hospitable experience of feeling comfortable, being served by ethnic people and sense of family.

Now let us proceed to examine how do the hosts of households type “a” and “b” mixes these various ethnic images with modern elements and other resources in relation to various tourist types. I choose homestays of “Nhằm”, “Hùng-Nga”, “Bưởi”, and “Bình” as sample of the homestay type “a”, and Linh-Sôi’s, Khự’s, Xuân’s, and Yên’s homestays as sample of the homestay type “b”. Even though they engage with all type of ethnic images, some images are considered more prominent in constructing their ethnicity which can be seen as “strategic ethnicity”. In the tourist market, three types of strategies can be identified through various types of homestay services as follow: (i) comfortable homestay (ii) intimate homestay (iii) intimate and tranquil homestay.

The first type (comfortable homestay) is represented by the homestay type “a” in relation to all types of tourists. It is also represented by homestay type “b” in relation to dependent foreign tourists. The second strategy (intimate homestay) is represented by homestay type “b” in relation to Vietnamese tourists. The third strategy is represented by homestay type “b” in relation to “foreign tourist living in Vietnam”. Anyway, the strategies do not vary based on the low or high tourist seasons.

**Table 5.1 Homestay Strategies by the Tourist Types**

Type of Homestay	Types of Tourists		
	Vietnamese Tourists	Dependent Foreign Tourists	Independent foreign Tourist Living in Vietnam
Type A	Comfortable homestay	Comfortable homestay	Comfortable homestay
Type B	Intimate homestay	Comfortable homestay	Intimate and tranquil homestay

Source: Field survey, 2011

Homestay type “a” launch the market strategy of “comfortable homestay” to all type of tourists, and the homestay type “b” also present this strategic ethnicity to dependent foreign tourists. Homestay type “b” promotes the intangible culture of

“intimate (friendly) homestay” to the Vietnamese. In relation to foreign tourist living in Vietnam, they promote “intimate and tranquil (close to the nature) homestay”. Because their homestay’s location is not really in the center of the village; rather they are near the paddy field or located at the foothill. These locations entail the sense of living close to the nature and peacefulness to the foreigner who, according to their worldview, care for the green and health (See the table 5.1). All type of homestay engages with some aspects of strategic ethnicity in hospitality in different degree. In such engagement, some aspects of strategic ethnicity are the basis for all homestays and in relation to every tourist type; whereas some aspects depend on who they are and in relation to other conditions.

According to White Tai culture, the guests should be welcomed warmly by the hosts. As mentioned in chapter 3 and 4 that White Tai hospitality is run by spirit or heart of White Tai, as it is constructed as White Tai’s identity. According to their custom (apart from business realm), once a guest comes into the house, the host will welcome them in a specific way. According to the White Tai villagers, first, the host cannot ask a question such as “What’s the matter, why have you come here?”; second, the host should greet the guest and enquire about his or her wellbeing such as “How are you?” before the guest do so and; then invite the guest into the house and serve tea or plain water. To let the guest(s) greet the host before the hosts does is considered impolite. Third, if the guests are likely to stay long (one hour or more), the host is supposed to invite the guest/s to stay longer and prepare a meal to be eaten together. Fourth, once the guests/tourists have finished their meal, the host should invite them to take a nap in the house. Fifth, if the guests are travelling to a distant destination, the host should invite them to stay overnight and provide them dinner and a takeaway breakfast. For all of these, they are forbidden to charge the guest. They are bounded by custom to enjoy talking, taking care of and serving the guest. For example, I see the host blows to the guests (also to me) when there is a power cut and the electronic fan does not work. As for the guests, if they know in advance that they are going to eat with a host, they may bring some food or fruit to the house, however if they have nothing to share with the host family, it is not considered impolite by the White Tai.

Nowadays, even though some of the hospitality practices have changed, some customary rules are still observed. Despite this non-observance of some of the

traditional practices, a prospective tourist is still welcomed warmly. Some of the traditional welcoming practices for guests have been modified according to new conditions and factors. For example, a homestay is a type of business based on the vertical relationships formed by short term transactions, so that the hosts rarely greet the guests. At present also, in general the hosts rarely eat with the tourists, only with the tour guide and driver, and no free food is provided for the tourists.

In general, homestays type “a” are bigger and more beautiful than that of type “b”. In addition, there are many toilets which appear more modern than those of type “b”. Some homestays type “a” also provides the private rooms for couple. However, in the market competition under post socialist era which market rules have not yet established firmly. The homestays type “b” which face with more uncertainty and risk (see the details in chapter 2) tend to engage more intimate relationship with tourists than that of type “a” because their business was established firmly in connection with tour companies. That is to say, the homestay type “b” normally expand their network via the tourists who stroll pass their houses and/or those who buy their souvenir. This intimate relationship with tourists reflects the White Tai’s habitus in the same way as they treat their own neighbors. They like to invite the tourists strolling past their houses to have free tea (this phenomenon is so unlike in another cultural/ethnic tourist village of other ethnic group. I had this experience. I was invited by a villager to drink tea in his house while I was strolling pass his house. When I got out, he asks for money which is much more than the village entrance ticket I had bought earlier).

The following example is a kind of “strategic intimacy” practiced by the homestay type “b”. When I was at a homestay in summer in 2010, my host (homestay type “b”) saw three foreign tourists sitting and taking a rest under a tree next to her house. She asks me to beck on the tourists to come inside her house and rest (sit, and drink water) free of charge. She said the hot weather made her feel sorry (pity) for them. Later on she told me that “the tourists may be afraid of being charged once they take a seat at our houses”. Because in Hanoi wherever people sit, it is not free of charge. My host’s action cannot be interpreted (in single angle) as White Tai is kind or that they do it without any intention of trying to sell souvenir goods and homestay service to the tourists. Her action should be interpreted in the market domain, that, free gift (free seat) she offers is a process of “symbolic accumulation” of “hospitable



White Tai” as intimacy which can be turned into economic capitals. Gift (intimacy) can also be a starting point of reciprocal relationship. Materially thinking according to her strategic intimacy, she sees a chance to sell her souvenir or such tourists can be her future guests. Even in relation to the stranger (like tourists), the gift exchange is not opposed to market transaction as Carrier (1990) argues. In terms of politic of ethnicity, it is a highlight case of White Tai’s identity, as a kinder people compared to the Kinh.

To take the discussion further, homestays type “b” utilizes ethnic culture of “friendship” as strategic intimacy to bind the tourists to them. For example, Xuân manage to keep her guests coming back in various ways – by being friendly to the guests, having meal and chatting with them, and providing them mattress for a nap after lunch. She also gives White Tai bracelet as a gift by putting it on the tourists’ hand in a ritualistic gesture, as if it is a holy thread, as a symbol of friendship and hospitality (cf. Erb 2000: 720). In this sense, the bracelet is used as strategic intimacy and cannot be not considered purely as a gift because it is more like commercial binding with the recipients (guests) which Erb (2000) termed as “a relation of dependence and debt” to their host. So the next time when the tourists come back or introduces someone to Mai Châu, they would stay at her homestays. The meaning of hospitality tends to be mixed between the essential White Tai (*habitus* and giving gift) and the economic purpose of selling hospitality service (commodity). I would argue that gift and commodity are in mutual support (not contradictory) and the boundary between the two is blurred.

The homestay type “a” strictly follows the business contracts between them and tour agencies, in terms of acceptance of guests and money. But sometimes, for the host of homestay type “b”, money does not matter. As mentioned earlier, White Tai’s hospitality is carried out by heart – i.e. *habitus* – and also by morality of money, *báp-bun*, depending on social tie network of their homestay business and intimate relationship between them and the guests. The hosts do not think in short term. This means the hosts are normally not greedy. For example, in 2008 when I was a tourist, I experienced that my former homestay host would not take any more guests (because I and my Vietnamese friend were guests) even though their house was large enough to hold around 40 persons. On one occasion, on the day just before I left the village, my



friend and I heard the host on phone refusing to take a group of 40 tourists. They were to arrive the next day, and only 1-2 hours before I was about to leave. After hearing his refusal on phone (translated by my friend), I insisted that he should accept the 40 guests. He responded that, if I allowed him to take in more guests he would accept them. In terms of economic rationality of profit, my former host could have negotiated with me – to accept more guests and offered me a discount. But my former host did not do that. Our conversation made me realized that it is the business moralities of hospitality of homestay type “b” (actually type “a” too, but it is run by business contract, not intimacy): homestays tend to be not so greedy and maintain business ethic of not embarrassing the guests. They do not want to make the guest uncomfortable. Interestingly, this morality was strictly followed by my host, who is considered by some villagers to be a stingy man. According to their culture, my current homestay host’s mother told me that, it is not good if guest feel uncomfortable or do not enjoy his/her stay in the homestay. By taking in more guests my host did not want to make me feel uncomfortable. My current homestay host’s mother concluded by saying that in the long run they would only loose guests. So, I would argue that White Tai habits of moral economy, involved with economic relations and respects individuals’ rights (see White Tai economic habitus in chapter 3 section 3.1). This practice again suggested that the White Tai are quite conscious of negotiating their identity as a moral entrepreneur.

In general, hospitality is aimed at bringing about a sense of comfort in the guests. To elaborate further, based on the publicized articles and my formal talk with some tourists it is quite clear that they feel comfortable staying in traditional stilt houses with neatly folded traditional blankets, mattresses and pillows. And when the meal is served, the tourists get a warm welcome from the host who offer free drink. Even in different degrees of hospitality they provide to the guests, the White Tai hosts are successful in created senses of warmth, friendliness etc.. into the business that suits the market.

Reinforcing White Tai authenticity in the outsiders’ eyes, all types of homestay hosts do not only commodify their hospitality but also utilize their essentialistic representation to attract more tourists such as strictly keeping stilt houses in traditional style, both inside and outside the houses. Thus, there are no modern

furniture and bed inside the homestay. The hosts and guests have to sit on the cushion on the floor. It is unlike some houses in the villages nearby which put some modern furniture inside the house.

Additionally they have also invented the “cultural show” for entertaining the guests at dinner time, or any time when the tourists makes a request. As a new cultural invented commodity, the cultural shows, performed for the tourist, are utterly different from those in the past, in terms of setting, dressing, music, dancing style, and performers. Earlier White Tai’s performance existed in different forms. The dance neither had a pattern nor was performed as a team. In the past, they only danced in village and city worship ceremonies. According to the elderly people, in those ceremonies, villagers danced, sang, and played music whenever they felt like doing. There is neither training nor audience; everyone was doing their own things both as the audience and performer. In the new invention, even though they use the traditional music instruments (plus modern stereo), several musics are mixed with the melody of modern Vietnam, which some Vietnamese tourists complained as not an authentic White Tai. While some tourists, including my friend who use to be a tour guide perceive it to be a real White Tai culture.

In the modern Vietnam (since socialist period) any performance is constructed as a tool of propaganda in the process of nation building. Most performances convey the sense and feeling of solidarity and diligence among Vietnamese people in the nation-building process. Their solidarity and diligence are depicted through various social differentiations among Vietnamese people such as official, soldier, policeman, industrial worker, famer, teacher and student. Generally, in any party, banquet, and ceremony cultural show/performance is indispensable. It is an unexceptional case for Mai Châu in entertaining the guests during or after dinner.

The invented cultural show is a mixture between the White Tai tradition and the modern dance which is taught in the government owned collage. The first cultural show team of Bản Lác, which is the first tourist village, began in 1985, and the second team was formed in 1999. Presently, there are five cultural show teams in Bản Lác and three teams in Bản Pom Coọng. The latest team was formed in 2010. Each team consists of around 12-15 dancers and a few musicians. Each team has both men and women dancers. However 70 per cent of the total dancers are women. The first team

was established after a few pioneer homestays hosted a performance on the request of tourists who were government officials. The first trainer of the cultural show team of Bản Lác is a White Tai man who graduated from the collage of dramatic arts, Hòa Bình province. After him, there were some White Tai trainers who took the responsibilities for setting up many cultural show teams.

The cultural show mainly conveys traditional culture of White Tai in Mai Châu even though they are just recently invented. Every villager recognized that fact but they are still very proud of their cultural performances as their negotiating authenticity when they claimed to have their own while the Kinh (except in Bắc Ninh province) do not have. So they consider themselves to be more civilized than the Kinh. Many dancers proudly said to me that “*Mình có văn nghệ, nhưng người Kinh không có*” meaning we have cultural performance whereas the Kinh do not have. They claim the show as authentic White Tai for tourist attraction despite the fact that in the cultural show dances from other ethnic minority groups are also added. This is because the trainers come from the government college. As such a cultural show set consists of the dances of various ethnic minority groups in northwest upland region apart from the White Tai – i.e. Black Tai, Mường, Hmông and Dao. In addition, in my interpretation, the show also conveys the message of White Tai’s participation in the nation-building process. There are some music and dance related to nation building, like the song about “Vietnam-Hồ Chí Minh” or “Tình Ca Tây Bắc” - the Kinh soldiers falling in love with Tai ladies during war time and their love brings about peace in the country for instance. No matter what kinds of guests are, Vietnamese or foreign tourist, the cultural shows are the same but with different meanings; political meaning to the Kinh while only entertainment for the foreign tourists.

One more thing which they reinvented, for selling hospitality in the modern market, is the local food which is recently modified. All types of homestays try to attract tourists via the ethnic foods to some degree. Although the hosts’ name cards (given to the tourists) is about promoting “ethnic food”, the hosts, in practice do not serve tourists the ethnic White Tai food, which are distinctive from Vietnamese daily food. In their everyday life they also eat the modified foods, plus ethnic food, but modified foods are different from their ethnic food. The hosts like to serve, to both domestic and foreign tourists, Vietnamese food such as spring roll, boiled or fried

chicken, fried pork, boiled vegetable, soup with beer and soft drinks. If the ethnic food is served to Vietnamese tourists, it would be mixed with Vietnamese ingredients and compromised for Vietnamese taste. For foreigners, they do not provide mixed ethnic food, rather the Vietnamese food and some Western food such as toasted bread with jam and butter, fried eggs and coffee are catered. Anyway, Mai Châu hosts can modify their local food to serve to Vietnamese and Westerners because they are trained by the tour companies. They also learn by themselves, by imitating the pioneer homestays and observing what food the tourists prefer. From these examples, it may seem that no one cares about having authentic ethnic food. Even when they take trekking tours to Black Tai village and stay overnight there, instead of hiring Black Tai hosts, the tour agencies hire my host to cook for the tourists because Black Tai hosts do not know how to modify ethnic food suitable to the tourists' taste.

Rather than being disappointed by the modified/fake ethnic food, Vietnamese tourists are surprised by White Tai's cooking abilities, while the foreign tourists also enjoy the food without/little worry. Thus, the food per se may not be authentic but the cook has to be. However, the hosts compensate the (fake) modified local food by providing real local liquor which is called "*rượu cần*" in Vietnamese; and some local food (like "*anh lam*") apart from the main course. And "*rượu cần*" and "*anh lam*" are known as the famous local drink and food of Mai Châu which are promoted by many articles and publicized in tourist brochures. This means that White Tai are cunning in doing business in terms of improvising food and drinks catered for tourists. They have managed to make some representation of their local food and drink. In fact a director of the project for promoting ethnic tourism in the nearby district brought 30 Mường ethnic people to the homestay I was staying – to train them on how to cook (modify) local food appropriately.

Apart from invention of culture as commodity, hospitality still requires some modifications adaptable to the modern contexts. That is, some cultures/customs/habits have been abolished or modified. For example, in the homestay though shaking hands is not their tradition, they have to follow this contemporary Vietnamese and Western mode of greeting. Additionally, in the past they separated spaces of the men and women; the men sat outside (in the living room) and the space of the women was inside (in the kitchen). But presently, except in the ritual ceremony, there is no



separate space of gender. The eldest men of the village who were the pioneer homestay owners told me that things keep changing not because of state or authority forces, but because their community has been opened to market and modernity.

Another modification which both homestay type “a” and “b” apply to hospitality is modern toilets and bath room with water heaters. Without modern toilet homestay cannot get tourists. For all homestay hosts, these amenities are considered vital for building a homestay business. For example, I noticed that some French backpackers looking for homestay did not bother about other aspects of the house; all they wanted to check was the toilet amenities. Once they saw my host’s toilet, which looks modern and clean, they decided to stay there without checking the sleeping place. So this means the hosts have to compromise their traditional culture for the modern culture and sell it in the hybrid form to meet the various demands of the global market. There is a government supported tourist village (in cooperation with a foreign company) which has few modern toilets and bath rooms as well as other modern facilities like television (also modern ways of greetings). This is the reason why this government supported village, despite having business alliance with two main tourist villages very rarely gets tourists. Therefore, I would contend that, to be a successful tourist village, it is not sufficient to be only “pure” primitive or exotic other – on its own these cannot be sold in the tourist market.

In the modern world, “cleanliness” in Mai Châu has been standardized. Outside the tourist villages, the White Tai are also clean when compared to other minority groups, for when I visited their houses, those which were not homestays and were not even in the tourist villages, they were also clean. However, within the tourist market, the word “cleanliness” has had to be modified, strategized and then promoted. Some foreign tourists, when they talked to me, wondered about the fact that litter is dropped everywhere in Vietnam, but not at the tourist villages. Nevertheless, as I observed, to attract the tourists, homestay type “b” houses are cleaner and brighter than the type “a” houses and other households; the first floor is swept and they clean the toilets and bathrooms every day – the same as in modern hotels. Those in the homestays have to sweep the floor, clean the toilet, bathroom, and wash the basin outside the bathroom every day. The bed sheet provided to the tourists is white, which is the symbol of cleanliness. After the tourists move out, homestay type “b” washes



bed sheets every time, but not the pillow covers and blankets which are not white but are of mixed color. However, cleanliness is not just a part of the competition between the homestays, but also between the two tourist villages (Bản Lác and Bản Pom Coọng). At the center of Bản Lác, the main tourist village, where most of homestays type “a” are located, husbandry is prohibited for the reason of tourists’ hygiene; whereas the villagers of Bản Lác alleged that Bản Pom Coọng is un-hygienic place and not a good homestay village.

The market discourse of “cleanliness” is practiced very well in these tourist villages not only because it is compatible with White Tai’s habit of cleanliness but it also allows them to negotiate with authenticity as well as constructing their modern identity. White Tai usually take a bath on a daily basis. The hosts perceive the foreign (and domestic) tourists who do not bath as dirty (not good). Moreover, that person will be often gossiped by them. For example, every motion of a French tourist who has no bath for 3 days is ridiculed by the homestay host. When the tourist is looking for something he dropped on the ground, the host ridicules him in White Tai, “*mong hăn máng...lung ói...nàm bào ạp*”, meaning “looking for what...uncle...(who) do not have a bath?”. When he asks the host some questions in English via me, I translate and she answers him in White Tai with a gossip at the end of her answer (that he does not have a shower, and is very dirty). The same perception applies to the Kinh who do not take bath regularly. Moreover Kinh usually drop litters on the floor; such an action is widely perceived among the villagers as uncivilized ethnic groups. Therefore, when they are talking about Kinh tourist behavior they usually say in White Tai (mixed with Vietnamese) “*keo bản bản*” (Kinh is very dirty).

The White Tai also like to compare the level of cleanliness between themselves and other ethnic groups (even though they accept that Western societies are cleaner than their community). Cleanliness, in their view, is associated with “developed” people. It can be said that the White Tai have succeeded in manufacturing a new identity as developed people and a discourse of cleanliness. Their ethnic identity in terms of cleanliness (as a new representation) is publicised in the Vietnamese articles written on many tourist websites and in newspapers. In 2009, while I was staying in Hanoi, a Kinh tour guide told my Vietnamese host “*Nhà của người Thái rất sạch*” – meaning that White Tai houses are very clean. My Vietnamese

host was surprised, and replied “*thé a?*”, or “really?” The tour guide insisted it was true and gave her details as to how the White Tai are cleaner than the Kinh in this regard. So, apart from being involved in selling hospitality, cleanliness is another factor in the politics of ethnicity for the White Tai when negotiating their identity as a counter discourse to the “civilized Kinh”. In other words, the White Tai negotiate as authentic their identity in the contemporary world through hybrid forms of hospitality, which also form an integral part of their everyday life.

In summary, the White Tai hospitality in the tourist market is the mixture of ethnic images, modern modifications, and idea of tranquility rather than limit to the fixed essentialistic ethnic representation because the villagers do not considered it only as commodity but also as their negotiating identity especially in the host-guest relationships. Engaging with the tourist market space, they strategically utilized essentialistic culture and reinvented tradition as well as reproduced their habitus in order to be adaptable to their contemporary lifestyle. In this sense, they try to position themselves beyond the national boundary, both as a part of global modernity and their ethnoscape. Hybridizing hospitality is, however, carried out in the tourist space mainly in a form of negotiating authenticity. Most tourists tend to see as authentic only the fixed ethnic images or such dichotomies as traditionalism and modernism. But the White Tai hosts mostly provide the tourists with ambiguity in their newly invented culture which mostly blurred the boundary between such dichotomies.

Through hybridization and blurring all kinds of boundary, the White Tai villagers try to reconstruct their identity free from such domination of the fixed representation and engage, instead, in negotiating authenticity, particularly seen in their practices of hospitality which they can manage to have some control. This is why hospitality is varied according to different types of host-guest relationships. Hospitality can be more like commodity or “thing” in a commercially oriented relationship as in most type “a” homestay but more intimate relationship in type “b” homestay. It is clear that White Tai villagers concern less with the idea of “objective authenticity” as seen through their hybridizing hospitality in various ways without clear-cut the boundaries between essentialistic ethnic images, the modern facilities/ideas, and intimate relations. To them authentic hospitality cannot simply be consumed in terms of essentialism but require some experiences of their everyday

living and relationship which are hybrid and changing. However, such hybridized hospitality is appreciated as authentic by many tourists who are not trapped in a superficial tourist gaze. This is another reason why some White Tai villagers do not care much about the information and images published in the book other people wrote about them.

### 5.3 Decommodifying Hospitality and Redefining Host-Guest Relationships

Normally the dominant tourist market tends to commodify the “authentic” representation of White Tai hospitality and consume it simply as “thing”. However, Dunn has argued that the consumers can also have their own subjectivity that allow them to see the value of commodity as detached from things (Dunn 2008: 84). Especially, in the context of host-guest relations, the tourists who engage in some kinds of exchange with the hosts can construct and/or redefine the meaning of their relationships. Before a discussion on this transformation of “normal host-tourist relation” to “new redefined relation” could be carried out, we need to look at the hosts’ perception of tourists/guests first.

In general, the White Tai called their guests “*khách hươn*” (meaning the guest of the home or *khách nhà* in Vietnamese). But in their daily experience of tourist market, the villagers divide the guests superficially into two types: *khách du lịch* in Vietnamese (paying guest or tourist) and *khách thân tình* in Vietnamese (nonpaying guest). It is important to keep in mind that, the term *khách* (guest) can be used to differentiate various types of guests or visitors. However, they will not be considered all “*khách hươn*” as *khách thân tình* or close guest, i.e. non-paying guests in the social sense, as opposed to paying guests or “customers”. In most cases, these *khách thân tình* are people from the same ethnic group, i.e. any Tai (or in most of the remaining cases, a Hmông trader whom the villagers know well, or otherwise in several cases they are from other ethnic groups such as Mường or Lao, coming from villages in other parts of Vietnam or even other countries such as Thailand or Laos for whatever reason but not as tourists. Meanwhile, Vietnamese tourists are considered by the hosts only as simply *khách* or *khách ma inn* (*ma inn* means visit) or only as *khách du lịch* or *khách vãng lai* (or visitor in Vietnamese) which is a term expressing the

normal feelings towards a visitor. Foreign backpackers, in turn, are called by the more derogatory term *tây ba lô* (*tây* means Westerner; *ba lô* means backpacker). In contrast, the foreign tourists who are brought in by tourist agencies are perceived as high-class visitors and known by the term *khách tây*. In the villages, it is possible to hear stories about locals being cheated by *tây ba lô* which seem to demonstrate the untrustworthy character of such visitors (Achariya 2011: 35).

We may, then, ask what is the difference between a “guest” and a “visitor”? A guest relationship is understood to be a long-term connection, based on a close or kin relationship, even if the connection is for commercial business. Besides this, in host-guest relationships, the two parties treat one another on an equal basis. The host-visitor relationship, on the other hand, is just a temporary interaction and their business relationship is asymmetrical in a sense that participants are expected to take advantage of each other. For that reason, not all visitors are treated as guests; they will not be perceived as one if they do not share a meal with the host, especially the *khách tây* (Achariya 2011: 35). A White Tai, who is an associate professor, explained to me that, though they perceive those who eat together with the host as close guests and treat them like relatives. In the case of type “a” homestay, all tourists are only treated as visitors since the service is not much different from that of a hotel. The host does not communicate directly with tourists. The tour guide usually acts as an intermediary, quite in the same manner as the front desk clerk of a hotel would do. The type “a” homestay hosts try to be an “able entrepreneur” rather than “moral entrepreneur”.

According to the White Tai, “hospitality” is considered a space for expressing feeling, showing regards and being joyfully with the guests and not for sale. As such “hospitality” can be translated into White Tai as “*hắc peng khách ma hươn*”, meaning “love the arriving guest”. Accordingly, this White Tai practice is reflected in their habitus as a way to decommodify hospitality. Also as stated, habitually the hosts positioned themselves in inferior position in honor of the guest. In general the hosts do not have the sense of controlling guests or for that matter also tourists. They do not ask the tourists to deposit ID card or passport even though as a rule the district authority allows and advises them to do so. For example, according to field observation, one day the policeman came to my homestay for his random check of tourists’ passports that the hosts are supposed to keep. My host did not strictly follow



the regulations. But she responded to the policeman that her guests had just arrived and they were having meal. This is a trick that she plays on him because White Tai people should serve the guest food and drink and let them take a nap before asking for passport or requesting anything else, according to White Tai's culture of hospitality. As a result, the policeman had nothing to say

In addition, many tourists also recognized the decommodifying practices in the White Tai hospitality in all type of homestays, as they pointed out that White Tai hosts are gentle and modest when dealing with tourists; unlike other ethnic tourist place where ethnic people pressure or try hard to convince the tourists to buy their souvenir or get service by following around the tourists in the tracking route for hours. They do not put effort in convincing visitors to have a meal at their homestay. They do not force them to buy souvenir goods, or demand that they buy liquor from the homestay. They also do not force them to hire their motorbike taxi service or trekking tour guides. The food they serve to the guest are better than what the host family eat, although they cook good food for the guests, sometimes they do not keep any food for themselves.

The White Tai hosts usually do not put strict control on the tourist because, for the homestay type "a" they regard the tour guide to deal with the tourists. They do not deal with the tourists directly. They also have to follow the business regulation they have contract with the tour agencies. But, in fact the homestay type "b" which most of the time accept the independent tourists bind the guests in a "soft way" by expressing sentiment/affection to the guests as mentioned in section 5.2 (However it does not mean that the homestay type "a" do not bind the tourists. They bind the tourists in business contract instead of intimacy). This is the way of applying strategic intimacy of homestay type "b". Moreover, they give free pots of hot tea (gift) to their visitors; something which always costs a price in Vietnamese society.

For the foreign tourists I have interviewed, they think that Mai Châu, compared to other ethnic/cultural tourist attractions such as Sa Pa and Hội An, is more authentic. To them, what is authentic is opposite to being business. If the tourist places are too much defined by "business transactions" instead of intimacy, they are not authentic. This means that the tourists feel that their interactions with villagers are purely based on business transactions. Both domestic and foreign tourists alike



appreciate Mai Châu, not because of its colorful ethnicity, but because of the habits of local people. Many tourists told me that White Tai do not force them to buy goods and services. They are friendly and kind. Those tourist views point out clearly that they tend to decommodify hospitality as seen in the White Tai culture of hospitality which they regard as more authentic.

Additionally, making guests and visitors feel at home is considered as an important strategy in sustaining their homestay business, especially for the homestay type “b”. White Tai hosts will do anything for visitors to make them feel comfortable at their place. This is why homestay owners would ask their guests if they want to enjoy a cultural show at their home. Those who do not know how to entertain visitors and guests will gradually lose customers. The Kinh who rented White Tai houses to do homestay business (by themselves) failed in businesses since what they offer was not an “authenticity”, run-by-heart White Tai hospitality (as elaborated in chapter 2 and 3). In other words, they failed because they did not have “strategic intimacy”. Or, they do not “decommodify” hospitality.

It can be argued that “intimate relationship” bind the host-guest together. Unwittingly or not, run-by-heart White Tai hospitality is surely beneficial for the host in terms of reciprocity. For example, the host have a merit to ask for some help from their guests, just like they ask tour guides (non-payment guest) to translate Vietnamese message to English, to teach and correct their English, or the guests are embarrassed if they do not buy the host’s souvenir goods. This means that they are in a reciprocal relationship which the guest feel like they hold a social obligation towards the hosts. Additionally, the inferior position of the host will turn into a superior position once they are asked for help from their guests. Thus the superior and inferior relationships of the hosts and the guests are constantly reversed. For this reason, hospitality cannot be perceived in a linear commodity transaction in the market, or the “balanced reciprocity” (paying back measured in terms of equitable quantity) in the sense of Sahlins (Narotzky 1997). Rather the business transaction leads to social intergration and obligation – the “generalized reciprocity” (belated paying back with (un)equitable quantity) (Narotzky 1997, Graeber 2001). Taken an argument of Bloch’s (1989) conception of the linkage between short term cycle and long term one, the host-guest short term relation can be sustained in the long term.

On the matter of price of negotiation, as pointed out by my Vietnamese teacher, in Vietnamese society the buyer needs to show more power than the seller. For example, the buyer may pretend that s/he will not buy unless a discount is given or pretend to walk out and then the seller will be inclined to offer a discount. However, for White Tai, negotiation is related to reciprocity. They would think instead how they can keep the relationship with their customers (Vietnamese or the foreigner living in Vietnam) for a long term. Sometimes, they have to pay money back or give a discount perceived as a gift when the customers do not bargain. It again proves that they bind the customers by the way they express their sentiment to the customers. Gift and commodity get along, to make relationship between seller-buyer more intimate. It is not just a transient transaction as I have discussed in chapter 2. To White Tai, as Bloch (1989) argues, the long term cycle is obtained by short term transactions. However, the money relation depends on with whom they are dealing. In relation to Vietnamese tourists and the foreign tourists living in Vietnam, or even dependent foreign tourists (coming with tour agencies), the hosts do not take all at a single moment. If they are backpackers coming to Vietnam just for vacation or they appear too stingy (trying to get much by paying less), in some cases they will be taken advantage of by the hosts. The short term cycle is at the end in itself so that there is no morality of exchange attached (Bloch 1989).

Hospitality, at first glance, is presented as a commodity functions within the dimension of gift (social obligation/integration) as evident in Mauss's notion but the White Tai hosts tend to decommodify and offer, instead "subjective experience" for the guest. This is not only because the White Tai hosts believe in making merit (*hết phước*) but they also would like to make good impression with the White Tai image – to gain more respect rather than only economic benefit in a short term. In the complex relationship based on reciprocity, the White Tai hosts are able to turn around the power of tourist gaze<sup>2</sup> (Urry (2004(1990))) and are free from the market domination by redefining and creating a space for equal relationships through sharing experience of living in the contemporary White Tai world. This kind of engagement transform the transient transaction into some kind of "authentic relation" because the tourists can experience such relationship directly in the White Tai life itself bypassing the

<sup>2</sup> Which in a very rudimentary sense means ethnicity is constructed as objects of the tourist gaze.

consumption of cultural commodity invented just for tourists. Through this authentic relation, an “intimate relationship” of host and guest can be developed in a dialogic process that allows the hosts to become part of modernity and global connectivity apart from purely commercial tourist exchanges. This kind of relationship is different from the experience of authenticity which is mediated only through things, as some scholars pointed out (Fee 1996, Adams 1997, 1998, Tucker 2003, Cold 2007). Such authentic relationships can be developed in all types of homestay but is varied according to different categories of tourists.

As discussed above, Vietnamese adults in general do not respect their White Tai hosts and are very noisy; however, the White Tai hosts tend to endure this kind of behavior, tend to be patient towards their guests or sometimes just stay away from them. Through their interactions with the Kinh, the hosts consider themselves to be quieter, gentler and cleaner; in short, more civilized than the Kinh. This helps them to counter the representation of the White Tai as uncivilized, as represented by the Vietnamese state, in their own minds. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the moral disciplines of the White Tai are based on sins and merits and the morality of money - these are the cultural boundaries of the White Tai. First, they like to show their identity as being polite, especially in relation to the Kinh tourists. About this politeness, a driver I spoke to said that Mai Châu is better than any other cultural tourist location because there are no beggars and vendors following tourists around trying to convince or pressure them into buying. The image of beggars and vendors is that they are something rough and troubled, so the White Tai villagers are gentle by not forcing the tourists to buy or pay for a service. In addition, the White Tai hosts show respect to the tourists; they do not tease and flirt with them (except in a few rare cases when they are drunk). As a result, most tourists perceive this place as being quite, peaceful and tranquil, although there are many noises emanating from the cultural show, the parties, camp fires, amplifiers and electricity generators.

Furthermore, the hosts expect the Vietnamese tourists to stay for only a few days, though they still use them as a way to expand their own networks; for example, villagers may pretend to admire the tourists in the hope of attracting other wealthy customers. In any case, and without doubt, those visitors holding negative stereotypes about the White Tai will hardly be able to break free from the traditional discourses

and representations of otherness often used. At the same time, they are regularly and unwittingly utilized by the villagers, who give them their business cards and present the tourists with small souvenirs - asking them to bring other tourists to their homestay in the future, with the hope of expanding their networks (Achariya 2009: 7).

And yet, those Vietnamese tourists who eventually see the villages and their inhabitants as civilized and modern (as previously stated in Chapter 3) tend to react in two ways. First, they react negatively, complaining that the White Tai are becoming like the Kinh, which means they are becoming “modern”. Some of the tourists I interviewed reasoned this way: all roads in the village are made of concrete, the villagers use modern electronic appliances and satellite dishes, and they do not wear White Tai traditional costume during their everyday activities. Instead of becoming modern, for them White Tai culture must remain rooted in the traditional and primitive. I should take this opportunity to elaborate upon the image of the “modern” White Tai. As discussed above, we should accept the fact that they now live in the contemporary world and have to deal with the global tourist market; not live in a primitive world. As an elder once told me in the White Tai language, “*Ho hao mo măt sa ma noi*”, which means “let us open our face to new things”.

The idea of a “comfortable homestay” represents a hybrid between traditional living and modern facilities, as they have a toilet, bathroom, motorbike and TV. However, these modern facilities and ideas are not only meant for the tourists’ but also their own day-to-day living. For example, the hosts are now unable to use the traditional toilet and bathroom or eat dirty food, use dirty dishes, wear dirty clothes and live in a polluted environment. I saw my host’s mother going to the village nearby, and feeling very uncomfortable about using the traditional toilet there, to the point that she would normally wait to go back home and use the modern toilet there. Some villagers even do not eat so much food at wedding parties or funerals in nearby villages because the dishes are not clean enough. Of course, the White Tai are habitually clean, but maybe not as clean as the standard cleanliness adopted in the modern world, that which they are now in contact with. In some senses, we can say that their quality of life has been very much influenced by the global tourist market. According to Lim and Gee (2008), what is perceived as authentic among ethnic people/cultures tends to focus on how they live their life in the contemporary world.



Some Vietnamese tourists also agree that authentic White Tai life exists in their contemporary world, as they face up to the fact that the White Tai care very much about cleanliness.

Vietnamese tourists tend to react positively when they recognize the fact that the image put around of the White Tai as being backward and primitive is false. They are surprised by the fact that the White Tai villagers can cook delicious food, weave beautiful textiles; are educated and clean and have nice personalities. Some tourists even ask their hosts which schools they went to, when they are studying how to cook, only to learn that the hosts are generally self-educated. As a result of this, some tourists tell each other to stop looking down on the villagers. Since White Tai businesses tend to operate very efficiently, some of the Vietnamese tourists come to suspect that the locals must have received subsidies from the government or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to help them establish their businesses – as happens at many other tourist sites. Once these suspicions are proved wrong, the tourists tend to respect the White Tai even more. To the Vietnamese tourists, White Tai authenticity goes beyond the simple meanings of cultural items or commodities, but is more about their contemporary way of life, which can also be experienced in the context of the host-guest relationship.

Through their interactions, the hosts and guests not only become business partners, but also come to respect each other, and as a result, the guests are more willing to learn about White Tai culture. For instance, there are articles on many tourist websites admiring the White Tai villagers for their friendly and hospitable nature or their skill at constructing and managing a community-based tourist market. Besides, even though some of those articles still represent the White Tai as “primitive”, they at least reflect the White Tai’s ability to manage both traditional and modern values. Some Vietnamese tourists are surprised by the business abilities of the White Tai villagers, though from the point of view of the White Tai, their new relationships have been redefined in a contemporary/modern world in which they are as smart as the Kinh. Such a reaction in turn brings a feeling of ethnic dignity to the villagers; on one hand it makes the White Tai villagers proud, and on the other the view of the White Tai as backward and uneducated, and other stereotypes constructed

by outsiders, are shaken off. This new relationship helps “redefine” the dominated ethnic relations, turning them into more intimate ones.

For some Vietnamese adults, the White Tai have either lost their authenticity or are smart people in the contemporary world; whereas for Vietnamese students, the White Tai are a kind of unintelligent group of people in relation to them. Because they travel on a tight budget, some Vietnamese students try to save money by bringing their own dried food to eat at the homestays, and/or call for cheap meals like boiled rice or noodles at the homestays. Since they are young, they eat a lot; much more than they can pay for. For example, some students arrived at to my host’s kitchen (while the host’s family and I were having dinner) and demanded more food. My hosts are very kind, so gave them a few more earthen jars of rice plus some fried pork – free of charge. When doing business, normally a seller has to charge for more goods bought. While I was there they asked again, but there was no more food left, so the mother and sister-in-law of the host family offered them the food they were eating. I felt that this was not fair, so asked them to stop doing this, as we were eating the food. Eventually; however, after we had finished eating, the family took the remaining food to the Vietnamese students. This phenomenon can be interpreted in this way; even though in this case the hosts were not happy dealing with the Vietnamese students because of their bad behavior, due to the White Tai’s tradition of hospitality, guests have to be respected. Moreover based on the *bun* and on humanity, my host had to show sympathy to the students who were still hungry, though they would not pay money or show respect.

Given the attitudes of the students and the local people’s opinion of them, sometimes the relationship between the students and the souvenir shop owners can become hostile, even to the point of the shop owners accusing the students of stealing souvenirs. One souvenir shop owner told me that there have been many cases of students stealing, and that one time a bracelet was stolen and that her husband had to arrest the thief. At weekends, when many Vietnamese students take a vacation in Mai châu, she does not dare to leave her shop as she sometimes does during week days. She also told me that one time some students did not pay a villager for 40 noodle dishes they had eaten at a homestay, due to a misunderstanding between the hosts and a villager (the cook), who both failed to check the bill. It was only after the tourists

had left that they realized the mistake had been made and called the students on their mobiles. However, there was no response so the cook lost around VND 700,000, or 35 US Dollars.

Outside the homestays, there are other spaces in which students shop and stroll around, and at in these spaces they can express themselves without any formal, structural constraints. For example, some Vietnamese students like to wear ethnic dress when they shop and stroll around the villages, but the dress they wear is not only White Tai but also Black Tai and Hmông, which the souvenir shops hire-out. The students like to pose for photos while wearing the ethnic clothes. Some of the boys even wear skirts and pretend to be girls for the photos. These actions are not well accepted in real life, because Vietnam society does not accept a third sex. While watching the cultural shows, many students shoot videos. They enjoy watching the shows and like to take part also; for example the dancers often invite the audience to dance with them, and they do not hesitate to do so. Sometimes they even go to dance without having been invited. After enjoying the cultural show, they normally go to the playground to enjoy sitting around a campfire and dancing to music played through an amplifier. When they dance, they tend to dance in a crazy way, like they are being released from their routine life tensions. Anyway, while Vietnamese students feel liberated from their routined life and Vietnamese social structure, the villagers feel annoyed by them. For them coming to Mai Châu is for recreation than interaction with the villagers. So, authentic hospitality to them is just consuming the White Tai “service”, being served by the hosts. Apart from hospitality, for them authenticity depends on “things”. That is why, according to my interviews, almost of Vietnamese students said that White Tai lost their authenticity.

The next category of tourists I would like to discuss is the independent foreign tourists, who have minimal interactions with the homestay hosts because of the language barrier, plus because they have tour guides to take care of them. As such, they do not need much face to face interaction with the hosts. Their space for active interaction is not at the homestay, but rather while trekking, when they get closer to the White Tai guide who can speak English and French, and who likes to learn from the tourists, though they mostly speak to each other about economic matters. During the treks, they usually stop at the tour guide’s house and have tea, though through

their close interactions they come to understand and respect White Tai hospitality. For example, there were a lot of messages written in the visitors' books at the local guide's house giving the foreign tourists' impressions of the hospitality shown, for example:

“Thank you so much for your hospitality. It was lovely to bike round the countryside. We loved it very much. You have a very beautiful home and you are so friendly” (A Canadian couple, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011).

“Xuân, thank you so much for your “amazing” hospitality – it has been a long time since I ate so much good food. You are such an open & generous person – staying with you has been a pleasure, and if I come back to Mai Châu, I will certainly come and find you again” (A New Zealand man, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011).

“Thank you very much for inviting us to drink tea around your warm campfire on this very cold day. Your village is warm and friendly very interesting too. My family has enjoyed your hospitality” (An Australian family, November 11<sup>st</sup> 2011).

Once they have returned to their home countries, some of them send postcards and photos taken at the homestay; some even send gifts such as trousers, bags and scarfs. So, during their interactions, the tourists' sentiments consist of much more than just consuming - through gazing, and maintaining the (mis-)representations presented.

The interaction between the hosts and the foreign tourists living in Vietnam is different from that between the hosts and the dependent tourists. The hosts prefer the foreign tourists, for although they may come alone or in a group, the hosts are glad to accept them (though due to the variable costs, they do not make much profit from only one or two tourists) - they are pleased to pick them up from the bus terminal for free. However, the hosts do not treat the Vietnamese independent tourists in this fashion, mainly because it is meaningless to offer additional hospitality to those who look down on them as unintelligent, who do not even admire what they do for them. When they act like this for a foreign tourist, on the other hand, their image is enhanced (as being kind and generous) when compared to the Vietnamese, so the White Tai “do not care about those who do not respect us”. Thus, the hosts act in subtle ways in order to counter the power relations of ethnicity. If guests visit the villages alone or as a couple, rather than in a big group, the hosts like to sit down and



talk with them, because they can speak some Vietnamese and know how to get close to the hosts by greeting them. Sometimes, for instance on a special day like national day, they share meals or drink beers with the tourists; furthermore, the hosts often talk to these guests, take special care of them, lend them their bicycles and show other signs of hospitality. Sometimes, the hosts take care of them very well; for example, when their guests are hungry and call for food after meal times, the hosts may go to the market, buy food and cook it for them, in spite of the fact that the host family normally does not normally cook when cooking time is over, because they do not store ingredients in the fridge - they have no ingredients and are tired after washing the dishes and cleaning. These actions are not solely based on pity, but on the hosts wanting to show the guests that the White Tai are very kind.

As consequence of this behavior, long-term relationships often emerge. Some tourists are known for returning to the villages every year; for example, an American family, a Spanish man and a Thai couple I met return to the village every four or five years. Previously, the Thai couple gave their host a silver bracelet. One German man, who is married to a Vietnamese woman and is the owner of an alcohol export company, stayed one month in the village in order to learn how to produce local liquor. In another case, three American tourists and a group of western students joined the villagers in cultivating rice. These kinds of guest are very familiar with many of the households in the villages; for instance, an American tourist I met could identify the names of many of the villagers, having conversed with the host about their health and livelihood situations. In fact, this guest is friendly to everyone in the villages; smiling, greeting and even teasing others who only know him as a tourist. Another German man keeps in regular touch with his former host, so that when that host went to Hanoi, where the German man has a house, the host was able to stay at his accommodation, free of charge. A Spanish man I met had returned to the village to say goodbye to his old host, prior to returning home.

Another Spanish guest, the director of an under-construction Mường ethnic tourist village in Hòa Bình Province, used to visit the White Tai villages, and having learned about the management capabilities of the White Tai hosts, brought a group of 30 Mường ethnic people with him to be trained in catering services. He still keeps in touch with the villagers and returns regularly to the same homestay with his family.

While sightseeing, one villager who does not run a homestay, spotted this man and his family. Even though they had never spoken to each other before, the villager recognised him and invited his whole family to his house, served them tea and talked. All members of the household joined in to welcome the guests. This incident made a big impression on the Spanish man's wife. The interactions between hosts and guests are to a great extent determined by the level of generosity shown, whether or not there is an expectation of material return. In one incident I came across, it was the host who was impressed - Grandfather Nhám, the pioneer of the homestay business in the villages. A group of twenty American war veterans stayed overnight at his homestay, and one of them told him he regretted having dropped bombs over Vietnam during the war, and showed his surprise at the fact that no villager seemed to hold any hostile feelings towards them. "Now you come here for vacation, there is no reason to hit you; but if you hit Vietnam again, I would fight you again", replied Grandfather Nhám. The American man then apologized to him. Some French tourists also said sorry to him for the same reason.

The close interaction between the hosts and the tourists leads the hosts linking themselves with the world beyond their nation-state boundary. That is to say, in their everyday lives, the hosts see news from the TV, the internet and talk with the tourists. The hosts like to ask the tourists about the political events/phenomena in their home countries; for example, many villagers asked me whether or not I was a red or yellow shirt (the symbol of a political ideology in Thailand), or asked about the underlying reasons for the bombs in Bangkok - even asking me about the reasons why the poor people in Thailand love former Thai Prime Minister, Taksin Sinaawatra and where he lives. I sometimes spoke about President Obama with the US tourists, and the hosts asked the tourists about their countries' economies, culture, climate, livestock, paddy fields and women, and the way they greet people or what they call one another in order to show their family status (like sister, brother and aunt etc.), in order to make a comparison between Mai Châu/Vietnamese culture and society and elsewhere. Sometimes, the hosts did not understand so asked me why the term the Westerners' were using referred to others as "you" or only used a "name", unlike in their culture, for they refer to others in line with their position, such as *Ay Lam* (sister Lâm), *ẻ pa Yên* (aunt Yên).

My next point relates to whether or not interactions between the hosts and the tourists are hostile, cold or warm, depending on the behavior and habits shown by both sides. Sometimes relations are cold, because some backpackers like to keep their distance from the hosts by taking a rest, reading or playing their guitars during their time at the homestays, and as a result hardly talk to the hosts. This may be due to cultural and language barriers. During my second time in the villages, a man from Singapore arrived with a backpack and a pamphlet teaching Vietnamese - it was his first visit. The purpose of his visit was to relax, having been working for two months as a hotel manager in Sa Pa, a well known tourist town in northern Vietnam, before returning back home. The man dressed a little like a hippie, and on his second day, while lying on a chair in front of the homestay, sang Western songs very loudly, which was strange to both the villagers and to me. The villagers thought he was a bit mad and kept their distance from him; however, having to maintain polite interactions with whoever stays in their homestay, showed him hospitality. He was satisfied with the way the hosts catered to him (though to the host's he was not actually a guest); however, at the end, due to his short stay and his oddness (in the hosts' eyes), the hosts wanted to overcharge him, eventually charging him twice the normal amount.

Despite this example, some friendly relationships also develop - it depends on how positive the backpackers are in dealing with their hosts. Many backpackers like to see what economic and social activities the hosts have to offer. One French couple I met enjoyed playing music with their hosts, and the hosts took care of them very well. After lunch the host made a bed for them to take a nap - really showing they cared for them. In another case, my host took a French couple to the bus station to go to Điện Biên Phủ. However, due to the Vietnamese new year, most of the buses were full, so he spent over an hour wait with them for the bus, to make sure they could board and negotiating a fair price for them. However, eventually, after waiting over an hour, he had to return before the couple could board, even though the couple felt embarrassed and had asked him to stay. However, he told me he had had many things to do. Whatever the result in this case, this example shows the host's compassion towards the visitors, although they were with him only for a short time. For him it does not matter, because what he did represented *bun*, and, as mentioned before, will help him to negotiate the power relations of ethnicity with the Kinh.

Generally the White Tai hosts are gentle (even in the homestays which cheat tourists) and try to be compatible with their visitors, even though they feel reluctant to do so. For example, some villagers do not really like to be the object of a tourist's photo. I spoke to one old lady whom tourists took a photo of because she was wearing a traditional dress and has black teeth. She told me that when they take a photo they take her *phí khuôn* (spirit) away, and according to the White Tai, if your spirits are not with you, you will be sick and may even die. Anyway, she said the reason why she let the tourists photograph her was because she felt proud to be seen as an attractive White Tai woman by the tourists. My host also does not like to be the object of photographs, but he said that he has to go along with it because it takes only a moment; there is nothing to lose and it leaves a positive image of the White Tai tourist village, which will then be expressed on the international stage. Moreover, he said that in this case he was able to establish a friendship with the tourists and that "everything is very easy if we are friends". Once when I walked away from a backpacker trying to photograph me cleaning my teeth, my host scolded me, saying "do not do like this; let him take your picture, it is just a short moment; you may get from him more than you think".

This place is also a haven for backpackers who love to go trekking. One popular trek is to walk around the White Tai tourist villages. This trek takes about a half-day, and cover seven to eight kilometers with a local guide. Another trek goes from a White Tai village to a Hmông village called Xái Linh, which covers about 18 kilometers of strenuous walking and is a whole day trek with a local guide, with the tourists staying overnight in Xái Linh village. However, without actively interacting with the local tour guide, these treks are just a way to gaze at the local people through the fixed meanings/representations constructed by outsiders. For example, one Dutch woman I met had viewed villagers' livelihoods as she trekked to other villages, but looked puzzled, as she had seen many women in the paddy fields. Usually, the women in Europe take care of the domestic chores while the men work in the fields (in terms of agriculture). She perceived the situation in Vietnam as representing gender inequality, because physically men are stronger and more suited to work in the field, much more so than women. She therefore wondered why White Tai culture accepts this violent gender structure, for she saw women working in the fields and jumped to



a conclusion about White Tai society. She did not know at this point that both men and women input an equal amount of labor into agricultural activities.

The last category of tourists includes the tour guides and drivers. It is only at the White Tai villages in Mai Châu where tour guides and drivers are offered free accommodation and meals (plus beers). Some of the homestay owners told me that none of the guides or drivers appreciates what they get for free from their White Tai hosts, saying that the guides think the White Tai provide them with free accommodation and meals because of the benefits they receive from them in terms of bringing tourists to the villages. A Vietnamese friend of mine had this to say about the attitude of tour guides and drivers: “they think that they can exploit our backward culture, in other words, they think it is not wise to give things free of charge” (Vietnamese scholar, personal communication, March 2010). Sometimes, my host said, a tour guide or driver would take a beer from the fridge without permission. These gifts (food, drink and accommodation), in a “regular” relationship like this, in the tour guides’ and drivers’ minds is utilitarian - these gifts are part of a relationship that entails a transaction of utility (Carrier 1990: 29). These gifts do not express the hosts’ sentiment, as they do not deserve appreciation.

Sometimes, family members are reluctant to accept small numbers of tourists, tour guides and drivers, as giving free meals and accommodation to the tour guides and drivers who bring only two visitors is not economically viable. When I asked them about their losses in these situations, one 67-year-old woman, the mother of a host (of a type “b” homestay), justified this behavior, saying “Don’t think about the loss, we are always hospitable to anyone visiting our place”. Therefore, those tour guides with negative views cannot be said to act as cultural brokers (also, they do not really know the history and culture of the villages they visit, especially the intangible culture of Mai Châu) in a relationship that moves beyond market rationality. I can confirm this from my personal experience. I saw my host take care of one driver very well, even though he was just an independent taxi driver not working for a tourist company, meaning he had no link to a business network. Thus, what the White Tai host was doing here was not for business growth over the long run, but represented the habitus of the white Tai.

Therefore, in general the behaviors of the tour guides and drivers do not please

the hosts; they gossip about them for not being polite and drinking a lot of free beer. As I witnessed one time, when the host has two groups of tour guides and drivers, the larger groups do not want to eat together with the smaller group, and this increases the work burden for the host. Sometimes, the drivers gamble at the homestays and the hosts are afraid of being arrested by the police. The hosts told me that they do not like talk to the drivers. Moreover, my host suspected that her big mosquito net had been stolen by a driver, but to maintain a good relationship, she did not dare ask him about it. I saw that if the the tour guides and drivers are rough towards the hosts, they will not prepare a good bed for them. For the female tour guides, who are more polite than the males, my host said she is happy to take care of their arrangements.

It is not only in the interactions that power relations are displayed; even the conversations that take place between the hosts and the tour guides and drivers are often about “ethnic power relations”. Once my Vietnamese friend, who was accompanying me to Mai Châu, had a meal with my host, a tour guide and a driver. He observed their conversation and told me it had been full of ethnic issues. The tour guide and driver looked down on the Hmông as they attempted to compare them with the White Tai, because to them they were the same; both minority peoples. My host’s son (at 23 years of age) reacted negatively (frankly) to what they had said and they got angry with him, but he pretended to be drunk. However, their subsequent conversations stayed on this issue and generated more arguments. Observing the event, my Vietnamese friend wondered why the host’s son was bold enough to be frank about his opinions, for in their culture, the Kinh keep silent when they are resented. My explanation was that it was because there was no structural domination for the man pretending to be drunk, and that he was not afraid of hampering any business connections. Also, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the hosts wish to safeguard the tourists’ interests, and the poor behavior of the tour guides indicate that they do not like each other.

The ethnic conflicts that arise between the villagers and tour guides become visible and serious when the tour guides refuse to support the villagers’ businesses – refusing to introduce tourists to the souvenir shops or discouraging them from buying from a particular shop. As visitors, they are served for free by the hosts, but as tour guides they are treated as hostile people. The villagers told me that they will introduce

tourists to souvenir shops only when they receive money from the sellers. Generally, the souvenir shop owners dislike this behavior and refuse to give them a share. In addition, some tour guides prohibit the villagers, especially children, from seeing the cultural shows they hire for their guests; they order the hosts to close the doors during the performances. This behavior is deemed unacceptable by the villagers, and they consider some of the tour guides to be very mean.

In summary, what I have gleaned about the relationships that have developed is, first, that relations between the hosts and the tourists may or may not be transformed from “normal host–tourist relations” into “new redefined relations”. According to Erb (2004), the tourist encounter may be a space for redefining and shaping such interpersonal relations. These relations are also clear-cut, from the fixed representation of essentialistic ethnicity considered as a thing. Whether the relations can be redefined or not depends on being able to decommodify the hospitality provided. As shown in the cases above, the White Tai practices, in some relationships, are reflected in their habitus, as a way to decommodify their hospitality. Of course, decommodification is also influenced by the types of host-tourist relations that develop, as discussed above. So any relationship based on the decommodification of hospitality is considered by the hosts and the guests as an “authentic relation”, authentic because they share an experience and live through the “relationship”, not only share the meaning of “things” or “representations”. In “authentic relations” based on a long term relationship, the hosts (through the guests) develop more intimate relations. Intimate relations help develop world connectivity for the hosts. As shown, the hosts link themselves as “being in the world” by going along with what is happening in the world, beyond the nation state boundary. This reveals the ways in which the hosts construct their new identity as people who exist in the contemporary world. Such intimate relations can help the local people transcend the hierarchical relations of minority politics, as well as the power of ethnic and market discourses, to become “somebody” in Vietnam. In addition, this helps the tourists transcend the notion of consuming White Tai ethnicity as a thing to experience, so that it becomes a new thing in a new relationship.

Within host-tourist relations there are “some” kinds of relationship that are being transformed, so that although habitually the White Tai tend to decommodify

hospitality and generate long term relationships, there are some conditions and factors which mean that some host-tourist relations are not transformed from temporary relationships into long-term ones. Those relationships that can be transformed include those between the hosts and the Vietnamese tourists who respond to the White Tai's contemporary lifestyles positively, and also the foreign tourists staying in Vietnam. These relationships are formed over long term transactions, since the hosts demand a long term cycle. For the hosts, the long term cycle of "partnerships" helps to expand their market networks; furthermore, these tourists are not influenced by the discourses of otherness, ethnic stereotypes and bias, or any fixed representations and hierarchical relations considered as the relations of domination, since they experience something new in relation to the hosts and so are liberated in their perspectives of the world.

However, this relationship will not be transformed if the tourists, such as the Vietnamese students and many Vietnamese, foreign tourists, backpackers, tour guide and drivers react negatively. Except in certain situations with the foreign dependent tourists and backpackers, relationships are not possible in terms of developing intimate relations and the sharing of new experiences, because these tourists are trapped in the discourse of otherness and in the consumption of fixed representations; they are not open enough to see the meaning of any new relations that could develop.

For these untransformed relationships, authenticity tends to be based on "essentialistic ethnicity" and "things", rather than "relations", which is why, once these tourists see something "modern" in the village, they think the White Tai have lost their authenticity. However, the White Tai do not care much about the fixed representations constructed by the outsiders (as discussed in the previous section, the way the hosts negotiate authenticity is about blurring the boundaries between things and relationships, and between essentialistic ethnicity and modern facilities/ideas). In this way, the hosts are free from the relations of domination constructed by various discourses and hierarchical relationships.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

The commodification of hospitality in Mai Châu, in the context of meeting consumers' various demands in the global market, in post-socialist Vietnam and in the



ethnic hierarchical relations that exist there, leads the hosts to play a crucial role in the process of hybridizing hospitality. From the notion of the mainstream market, it can be said that White Tai utilize their ethnicity to develop market strategies. As a result, “ethnicity” can be considered as a value added product of hospitality, one that makes it “authentic” - called “strategic ethnicity”.

However, apart from developing a market strategy, the production process of hospitality is not just a way to counter ethnic representations under the notion of post-modernism, in which authenticity is based on the meanings of commodity (even though it is negotiable). In fact, hybridizing hospitality leads to a blurred boundary between “things” and “relations”, and between “essentialistic ethnicity” and “modern facilities/ideas”. The White Tai hosts mostly provide the tourists with ambiguity in their newly invented culture, mostly blurring the boundary between such dichotomies. Hybridizing hospitality is the way in which the White Tai hosts negotiate their authenticity, meaning that the real White Tai is real White Tai life in the contemporary world. So, those tourists who see as authentic only as a fixed ethnic image or in relation to such dichotomies as traditionalism and modernism, will be disappointed by the relatively ambiguous authentic White Tai. But those tourists who accept the contemporary White Tai lifestyle will develop a level of acceptance, leading to the experience of new things in a space of negotiated authenticity.

Negotiating authenticity by blurring the boundaries and making White Tai authenticity ambiguous has led the White Tai hosts to free themselves from the control imposed by relations of domination, based on various discourses and relations with things, as well as ethnic hierarchical relationships. In practice, the more authenticity is blurred, the less able it is to be dominated by outsiders. In terms of constructing identity, I would say that, in the process of hybridizing their hospitality, the hosts have negotiated their ethnic identity in order to position themselves in the world beyond the nation state boundary, both as a part of global modernity and their own ethnoscape. In addition, the White Tai’s everyday lives are affected by the modern idea of quality of life. As stated above, they like to use modern (cleaner) toilets and bathrooms, eat clean food – with a good (modern) taste, dress in a modern style, send their children to university and consume other aspects of modernity, such as travelling to the beach and Ocean Park in Hanoi, and in this sense, they are trying

to position themselves beyond the nation state boundary, both as a part of global modernity and their own ethnoscape.

Secondly, it is “only” in the close/intimate relationships that have developed that I would argue the hybridity of hospitality has led to the experience of “authentic relations” in the consumption process. Only some normal host-tourist relations (the first visit is a transient business transaction) are able to bring about intimate relationships later on. That is to say, normal host-tourist relations can be transformed into “authentic relations” and then linked to “intimate relations” based on a long term cycle. This transformation is carried out through the process of the decommodification of hospitality, which the White Tai improvise during this process. So, hospitality in this sense is not a cultural commodity but the “relations” instead. For this reason, negotiating authenticity is not done through “objects” or “commodities”, but rather through relationships that go beyond commercial exchange. Thus, the boundary between things and relations during the process of decommodification is mostly clear-cut. Importantly, because the authenticity is based on relationships, no one can dominate the relations or control the meanings. Hence, within the decommodification process, the tourists and the hosts are free from control by the various ethnic and market discourses, as well as by the relations of domination. In addition, the ethnic hierarchical gap is narrower or even erased. Through these authentic relations, an “intimate relationship” allows the hosts to become part of modernity and global connectivity, apart from purely commercial tourist exchanges. Also, through this process, the White Tai have been able to construct their identity as ethnic people who are not dominated, but are instead self-determining people; “somebody” in Vietnam and the world.

Analytically, constructing intimate relationships is based on: (i) different situations, (ii) the categories of tourist-host relations, and (iii) how long the transactions are conceived by the actors. In addition, the transformed relationship at the study site reveals the moral embeddedness of the economic transactions taking place (Polanyi 1957, Sayer 2004). According to Bloch (1989), such a relationship is based on a long-term cycle, whereby the short term transaction is supportive of the long term cycle, to which a morality of exchange is always attached. However, market relations (host-tourist/tour guide relations) in Mai Châu assert that the market is the

site of moral conflicts between actors committed to different values, as well as the locus of political struggles between various interests (Fourcade and Healy 2007).

Another point I would argue is that the ethnicity engaged in the process of negotiating authenticity is undeniably seen as a double process of production and consumption, which constructs meanings of ambiguous hospitality (“blurred boundaries” between things and relations, and modern and essentialistic ethnicity), and of the “authentic relations” through both approaches – negotiating authentic representation based on commercial exchange, and negotiating authentic relations apart from that exchange. These processes are located as new relations redefined, where production is absorbed into consumption by the experience of new consumption (Achariya 2011: 48).

Finally the processes of the commodification (and decommodification) of culture seem to be “contradictory” in the context of a globalizing market. On one hand, globalization is considered as a threat to local culture, resources, and livelihoods, whilst on the other it urges a reconstruction of local identity – as being a part of the world (Friedman 1990) and a part of the tourist map in Vietnam. With hybridizing hospitality, globalization and localization are not contradictory modes of identity, since the White Tai’s identity and authenticity can be considered to exist within the contemporary world. This chapter will close then with some words uttered by my White Tai teacher, who said, mixing White Tai with Vietnamese: “*bào mi Mai Châu, bào mi Thái Trắng ở Hoà Bình*” – meaning “no Mai Châu (tourist place), no White Tai in Hòa Bình (province)”.