

## CHAPTER VI

### POWER RELATIONS, MOBILITY AND NEGOTIATIONS IN NORTHWESTERN LAOS

#### 6.1 Introduction

As a result of the experiences gained through the opening of the border and the development of a market economy and globalization, people who live in the study area have had to adapt their societies and communities in order to cope with a changing world. In this chapter, I will elaborate upon how they have adapted to survive in this market-oriented economy and transnational world, and in addition, will touch upon the power relations that have developed within their societies and communities as a result of cross-border ethnic relations.

In the first section, I will focus on the inequalities and power relations that exist within the watermelon business, while in the second, I will explain what non-agricultural practices people carry out for their survival - as a means of diversifying their negotiations within the current market, focusing on the Chinese in Lao society, the movement of the Ho ethnic group, prostitution and, in the third section elaborates the learning of languages in China and Laos.

#### 6.2 Power Relations and Chinese Influence

With regard to the ethnic relations found within the watermelon business, those which I mentioned in Chapter IV, inequality exists among the ethnic groups, plus power relations are present in the relationship between the employers and employees; however, within the watermelon business in Muang Sing, a particular relationship exists.

In terms of power relations within the Chinese trader group, the Han as investors clearly have power over all aspects, while the Chinese Lue act as translators and helpers, and a Chinese Lue technician is also hired (by the investors). As a background to this, although there is an historical ethnic issue in that the Han are felt to be superior to the Chinese Lue in China, the Chinese Lue do not actually have the ability or network present to operate the watermelon business by themselves.

In addition, ethnic inequalities occur on occasion during the buying and selling of watermelons. As most of the traders from China are Han, they tend to force a reduction in the price charged by the Chinese Lue farmers and local farmers. During my interviews, some local farmers said that:

*“When negotiating the watermelon price, some Chinese traders try hard to get a major price cut, but not all of the Chinese traders.”*

(Based on a personal interview: April 2009)

The Akha work as laborers and are also landowners within the watermelon business, though, except for the Chinese Lue, the other ethnic groups do not borrow land from the Akha, they only hire the Akha in order to help with the harvest or plant watermelons. During my research period, although some Chinese Lue farmers and investors planted watermelons with the local Lue, there were no Chinese Lue farmers or investors planting watermelons with the Akha. For the Chinese, Han and Chinese Lue, the Akha represent merely a labor force, and this demonstrates the Akha's particular position in the watermelon business. The Chinese investors told me that they do not care about the ethnicity of the co-planter, they only look at the land; however, one local person told me that if he plants watermelons, he chooses the Lue not the Akha as co-planters.

The status of the Lue in Muang Sing has always been high. In the pre-colonial days, ethnic-relations were constructed through trade, and various ethnic groups participated in this trade regime on equal terms. However, in Muang Sing over time

there has existed ethnic, social stratification. The Tai Lue consider that they are top of the ethnic stratification, due to their historical background (see Chapter I), as the former ruler of Muang Sing was a Tai Lue who escaped from Myanmar, and the Tai Lue have dominated the lowland areas for many years. As a result, they regard themselves as a kind of “special” and important ethnic group, when compared to the other ethnic groups at least. Even now, the Tai Lue dominates the lowlands and are at the top of the ethnic class stratification.

The status of the Akha meanwhile, has changed. Locals regard the Akha as being inferior to other ethnic groups in Muang Sing, thinking them to be dirty and uneducated. Some people; however, insist that the Akha are rich because they have an abundance of land for planting rice and rubber, and because they sometimes lease this land to other ethnic groups who live in the lowlands, along the main road. In addition, the organic vegetables and fruit that the Akha plant are very popular at the market, and although some hold politically-incorrect views of the Akha in terms of their ethnicity, their products are highly valued. People’s views of the Akha in Muang Sing are therefore polarized.



**Figure 6.1: An Akha Woman Selling Organic Vegetables in the Market**

There are two groups of Chinese in Muang Sing; the Chinese residents who moved to Muang Sing to open businesses and the seasonal Chinese visitors such as the vegetable or fruit traders. I mentioned before that power relations exist among the Chinese seasonal laborers and between the Han and Chinese Lue, though there is a tendency for there to be few power relations among the Chinese residents (mainly Han and a few Chinese Lue), because they run different and individual business and have different forms of mobility. Although there are no power relations among the Chinese residents in Muang Sing, they and the Ho from Phongsali have clearly developed power relations in terms of their relationship as employers and employees in restaurants and guest houses.

The Ho are Yunnanese Muslims, and according to Joachim Schliesinger (2003), the ancestors of the Ho were ethnic Uzbeks from Central Asia who fought as mercenaries in Kublai Khan's army when he conquered Yunnan and Myanmar. After the successful invasion, many Muslim Uzbeks were ordered to settle in Yunnan to help with the pacification process there, and so the Uzbeks assimilated into the local culture, and adopted Chinese manners and dress as well as the Yunnanese language through intermarriage over many centuries. The time when most Yunnanese Muslims fled south into Southeast Asia was between 1855 and 1873, due to the devastation of large areas of Yunnan. Another major migration into Southeast Asia from Yunnan, one which included the Ho, occurred after the communists took over China in 1949. At that time, some units of the Nationalist Koumingtang army (KMT) plus some civilian refugees, including Yunnanese Chinese and Han - those who had lived for generations in Yunnan, fled over the border into the Shan and Wa territories of Myanmar, while other KMT units moved into Phongsali Province in northern Laos. Now, the Ho who settled in Phongsali are descendents of several of the KMT units from that time. There are two kinds of Ho in Laos: the Lao Ho who were born and grew up in Laos and the Chinese Ho who moved from China. The Ho in Muang Sing are mostly the former, and all the Ho who work in Muang Sing are of the younger generation. They can speak both Chinese and Lao fluently; however, it is said they mainly speak Chinese during their everyday lives as using Chinese is seen as better than Lao - also their identity tends to lean towards being Chinese. As a result, the

Chinese residents prefer to hire the Ho. The Ho also understand their value within Chinese society; therefore they have moved to Muang Sing, where there are many Chinese businesses, from Phongsali - where there are no jobs.

### 6.3 Rural Migrants from China and other Provinces

#### Chinese in Lao Society

As mentioned above, more than 1,000 Chinese live in Muang Sing, including the long- and short-term residents. Most of the Chinese only develop close relationships with other Chinese, though interaction with local people is unavoidable. They tend to be quite careful when developing relationships with local people and this behavior is used by the Chinese as a means of negotiation and survival in Lao society. These tactics are employed with different types of people, such as neighbors, the police, immigration officers and business partners; even strangers who live in Muang Sing.

One day I came across one situation which outlines the efforts used by the Chinese to assimilate into Lao society. My Chinese trader group had an accident with some local people who were riding a motorcycle on the main road in Muang Sing. When one of the Chinese traders reversed his car, he crashed into a motorcycle which two young local people were riding whilst carrying a TV, which was broken when it fell to the ground. The back light of the Chinese traders' car was also cracked. Many onlookers surrounded the crash scene and started to give their opinion, as the following exchange shows:

*Local people: "You must pay to have the TV fixed - it is really broken."*

*Chen Tai Lian: "It was not our fault. In China, we would not need to pay anything for a small accident like this."*

*Local people: "You reversed suddenly; therefore, we crashed. You should pay."*

*Lin Zhi Yong: "This TV is still available; our car was also damaged; therefore we don't need to pay each other."*

*Local people: "No no, you broke our TV."*

*Lin: "How much do you want?"*

*Local people: "I don't know...."*

*Chen: (talking to Lin) "Don't pay!! If we pay some money to the Lao, they will want more. We shouldn't pay anything - it's not our duty."*

*Lin: "But this is Laos, not China. We should pay, if only a little."*

As a result of this negotiation, the Chinese paid 50,000 kip to the Lao men, and although the local people threatened to call the police, the problem was resolved through the paying of money to the locals. From their conversation, it can be seen that the Chinese wished to avoid trouble with the Lao locals. This is not only reveals their consciousness of being in Laos not China - where their argument, rights and common sense would prevail, but also their adaptation to and negotiation with Lao state power. One Chinese woman, who has lived in Muang Sing for seventeen years, outlined the difficulties faced by the Chinese:

*"I moved to Laos from Yunnan with my husband. We lived in Lunag Namtha first, and moved to Muang Sing in 1995. We didn't have a high level of education or knowledge; therefore, it was hard to live in China. In Laos, my husband worked as a construction worker at first, and we opened this clothes shop in January 2009, plus started operating a 300 mu rubber plantation. We have two children; my son is fourteen years old and my daughter is nine. They study at the local school with Lao students. My daughter speaks Lao very well - more than Chinese. I like Laos and the Lao people; they help each other all the time. However, I am worried about our life in Laos. Despite the large number of Chinese residents, we don't have any Chinese organizations in Muang Sing. When the Chinese have accidents with the locals, the judgment of the Lao police is not equal - we just pay money every time, we can do nothing but pay the money. If something happens, the Chinese don't know how to resolve problems with the Lao and are afraid they will exact revenge."*

(Based on a personal interview: November 2009)

The Chinese traders mainly focus on their relationship with the police and immigration officers; they attend the wedding parties of policemen from China, and sometimes they drink beer or Chinese whisky with the immigration officers – when they obviously treat them. It is not only the Chinese traders who do this but also the Chinese in general who have lived in Muang Sing for a long period. If they meet immigration officers or policemen in the pub, they will surely buy them a drink. The Chinese recognize that such behavior and tactics are necessary if they wish to live and work in Laos peacefully.

### **The Ho - Moving for a Better Life**

In Muang Sing, the Ho work at Chinese restaurants, guest houses and Chinese motorcycle shops, and they are friendlier with the Chinese than most of the local people, in fact, their identity tends toward being Chinese - they think of themselves as Chinese. They have also good reasons for moving to Muang Sing:

*“Although Chinese people open businesses in Phongsali, it is very difficult to find a job there; therefore, we moved to Muang Sing. Here there are more jobs than in Phongsali and it is easy to get a job, because there are so many Chinese and Chinese shops here.”*

(Based on a personal interview: February 2010)

The Ho work at a wide range of Chinese shops as translators and employees, and their presence is very important for the Chinese who cannot speak Lao or Lue. Moving to Muang Sing, working in Chinese shops and developing a good relationship with the Chinese are the ways in which they have adapted in order to gain economic opportunities.

### **A Chinese Owner and Girls in Pubs and Karaoke Bars**

The influx of Chinese people into Muang Sing to buy and plant watermelons has influenced not only the local farmers but also the non-agricultural dwellers. In this section, I will focus on those who work in prostitution, as although there was only one

night club in Muang Sing (with five or six women) in the early 2000s (Lyttleton et al. 2004), there are now five pubs in Muang Sing. Based on the work of Lyttleton et al. (2004), commercial sex services in Muang Sing are concentrated in the towns, in particular along route 17B, and even now, almost all the pubs are situated along this road and 17A, though others are located near the bus station.

Every one of these establishments is engaged in prostitution, and one local pub owner told me about the Chinese influence:

*“There are ten girls in my pub now, but the turnover of girls is very high. Most of them come from Udomxai and Luang Prabang, they are not local residents from Muang Sing. They range from eighteen years old to twenty five and are of Kham or Lao Tum ethnicity. They like the Chinese, Korean and Japanese men, but not western guys. Lao men also come here only to drink; they don’t buy girls because they don’t have the money. The Chinese are the most popular among the girls because they are very generous and drink a lot. The prostitution fee is 200 RMB to 300 RMB per girl, and girls must give 30,000 kip of this to the bar owner. The time when the girls earn the most income is during the watermelon harvesting season.”*

(Based on a personal interview: November 2009)

Actually, every bar is filled with Chinese traders during the watermelon harvesting season; they order women and drink, chat and dance together in the bar. Some Chinese traders have their favorite Lao women at the pubs; they go to the pub where their favorite women work almost every night after dinner. Some of the women regard their Chinese trader clients as steady boyfriends.

In contrast, the Chinese men have a different view to that of the locals. In October 2009, a new Chinese-owned pub was opened in Muang Sing, and now this is the only Chinese-owned pub left. Actually, this pub is operated by four owners: two Chinese and two Ho who come from Phongsali in northern Laos. The Chinese owners

capitalized all their funds to open the pub, while the Ho owners manage it. The Ho owners plays Thai-style music, Chinese music, Lao music and Western dance music, and they also run a prostitution business, for which the customers have to pay 200 to 300 RMB per girl, from which the girls pay the owners 70,000 to 80,000 kip per person. It is little bit more expensive here than in the other pubs, because they have two luxurious karaoke rooms and serve Chinese beer. The watermelon traders prefer to sing Chinese songs in these rooms. Zheng Xi Xin, one Chinese owner, told me about the difficulties faced when running a bar in Muang Sing:

*“I came from Hunan province. My first trip to Muang Sing was in May 2009, after my Chinese friend invited me. My Chinese friend and the Ho owners have been friends for two years. Before I came here, I worked at an electronics factory in Shenzhen. Life in China is better than it is in Laos, and I was surprised that Laos is so poor – more than I expected. I will not make enough money in Laos, so in the future I have a plan to transfer our business to the locals; it will be better. The number of Chinese coming to Muang Sing will increase in the near future, but I want to go back to China at the end of this year.”*

(Based on a personal interview: November 2009)

In summary, the Chinese influx into Muang Sing from across the border has increased the demand for prostitution, and women have migrated to Muang Sing from other provinces to work at the Chinese pubs or restaurants.



**Figure 6.2: Lao Government Poster Promoting Condom Use in a Chinese Restaurant. It Reads:**

**‘Chinese Guys, Lao Girls, Please Be Careful!  
HIV and Other Sexual Transmitted Diseases  
Common Health Issue and Socio-Economic Problem  
Between Laos and Chinese People at the Border’**

#### 6.4 Knowledge, Language and Practices

Speaking a range of languages is a very important skill for survival in China and Laos nowadays. Some of the Han study Tai Lue or Lao in order to do business in Laos, like the Chinese watermelon trader Lin Zhi Yong from my trader group. He has mastered Tai Lue; therefore, has become a middleman. One Chinese man who opened the motorcycle repair shop has also studied Tai Lue; Zhang Mu Rong (twenty years old) came from Sichuan Province six years ago with his family. In China, he studied motorcycle mechanics, but his parents came to Muang Sing to plant rubber trees, because it is very hard to make a living in China due to the population size and density. Soon after that, he and his older sister came to Muang Sing also and now his parents run a Chinese restaurant on the main road. He studied Tai Lue by himself after he came to Muang Sing and he is now fluent in the language. He also has many local friends and everyone knows him in town. His parent’s restaurant is alive with local customers, and he runs, not only the motorcycle repair shop in Muang Sing, but also a tractor sales outlet in Vientiane. He also helps find land and shops for the Chinese newcomers. His life in Laos has clearly become more prosperous than the other

Chinese residents, those not familiar with the Lao and Tai Lue languages. In Jing Hong, I met one Chinese woman who is studying Lao (Li Yu Lian - 40 years old) and she told me that the number of Chinese people studying Lao is gradually increasing in China, especially in Sipsong Panna.

*“All of them aim to open businesses in Laos, even me - I want to start a watermelon business in Laos because of the fertile land, cheap labor and cheap land fees. I plan to plant watermelons at the border between Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. The watermelon business is very famous among the Chinese people who live in Sipsong Panna.”*

(Based on a personal interview: May 2009)

Recently, the Chinese have started to recognize the importance of learning the Lao language, and at the same time, learning the Chinese language is becoming more popular among the Laotians, especially for residents of the northern and north-western provinces. At the Xishuang Ban Na Vocational Technical Institute in Jing Hong, there are 80 Lao students studying Chinese (2009), most of whom come from Udomxai and Bokeo, but with others from Vientiane, Xaiyaburi and Luang Namtha. Most are men who have graduated from junior-high and high school; those who have graduated from university are few in number. According to a first year Lao student of this school I spoke to, there were only 45 students in the first year during 2005 – the year that the Lao government opened the school to Laotians. All the students have to pay a tuition fee of 5,200 RBM per year, plus an accommodation/living allowance of 1,000 RBM.

Case of student A (26 years old)

*“I came from Xaiyaburi three years ago. My parents live in Xaiyaburi and they run a grocery shop there. I decided myself to come and study Chinese as the Chinese language is becoming very important, next to English, and if I can speak Chinese fluently, I will get a good job easily.”*

(Based on a personal interview: May 2009)

Case of student B (19 years old)

*“I come from Udomxai and before, my older brother studied here and I wanted to study Chinese. I have not thought about my future yet; I don’t know what I will do.”*

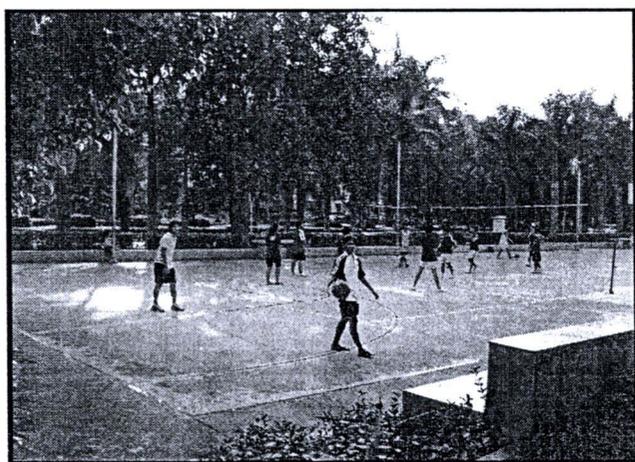
(Based on a personal interview: May 2009)

Case of student C (26 years old)

*“I come from Vientiane and have studied here for two and-a-half years now. There are so many Chinese people in Laos; therefore, I thought that I should study Chinese. If I can speak Chinese, I will have many job opportunities.”*

(Based on a personal interview: May 2009)

As seen above, the importance of being able to speak Chinese is being increasingly understood among the Lao younger generation. Most of the students who come to study Chinese in Jing Hong decide to study Chinese due to the high demand for the language in Laos. Some students are recommended by their parents - who understand the need for it. All the students believe that if they can speak Chinese fluently, they will find a good job more easily.



**Figure 6.3: Lao Students at Xishuang Ban Na Vocational Technical Institute in Jing Hong**

I visited one private school in Luang Namtha city, a school which opened in October 2009. This school offers pre-school (three years), elementary school (six years) and junior high school (only one year) levels and all the students are Laotian. The school was built by one Ho man from Phongsali Province in northern Laos. Four Chinese teachers teach Chinese in this school, and the students receive Chinese classes from pre-school onwards: one hour per day for pre-school students and two hours per day for elementary school students. They start their English language education at the third-grade level, and this shows that to learn Chinese is more important than English. School tuition fees are almost the same as at the public schools, but public schools do not have a Chinese language program. The tuition fee at the elementary school is 450,000 kip per term, while for junior high school it is 500,000 kip.

Lin Feng (22 years old) is a Chinese teacher from Sichuan Province. After graduating from high school, he moved to Sipsong Panna to study gardening. During his studies, he met some Lao friends so became interested in the Thai or Lao languages, and he started to study Lao at the Xishuang Ban Na Vocational Technical Institute. When he started, there were many students studying Thai so he chose to study Lao instead. When I spoke to him he was planning to move to Vientiane to study Lao at the National University of Laos. He told me his future plans:

*“I want to be a translator between Chinese and Laos. In this school I earn 1,200 RMB per month; whereas a translator can make 3,000 RMB per month.”*

(Based on a personal interview: November 2009)

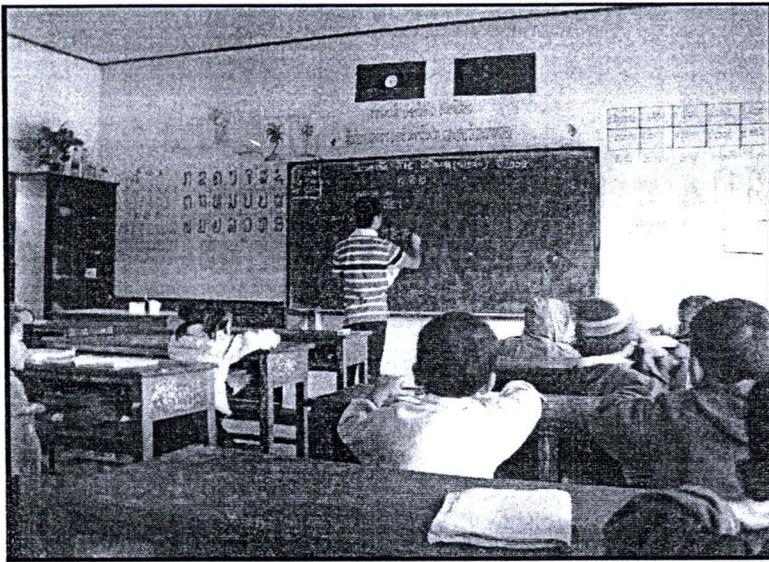
Chen Qian Zhi (36 years old), is a Chinese teacher from Kunming. He used to be a math teacher at a high school, and told me:

*“In the high school, I took charge of the third year class. At that time, it was really stressful for me during the college entrance*

*exams, so I decided to change my life. That is the reason why I came to Laos. Life in Laos is very stress-free and peaceful; I like it."*

(Based on a personal interview: November 2009)

The above people teach Chinese to the locals in Luang Namtha at this school during the day then at night they teach adults - after they have finished work. More than 120 students attend the night-time classes.



**Figure 6.4: A Chinese Teacher Teaching Chinese at the Elementary School in Luang Namtha**

Due to the simplified nature of crossing the border and the Chinese influx into Muang Sing, the livelihoods of the locals have been changed drastically, an increasing number of Chinese in the town studying Lao or Tai Lue, plus an increasing number of Lao studying Chinese. This emphasizes the increasing importance of studying Chinese, which is increasing year on year in Lao society. Knowledge of the Chinese language is now essential for many Laotians in northeastern Laos if they wish to improve their lives. The purpose of the above activities carried out by the Chinese and local people is to attain greater economic opportunities, either by working at a Chinese company or being a translator for the Chinese.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined the inequalities, power relations and adaptations taking place among the Chinese, Chinese Lue and locals with regard to the watermelon business and Lao society. In the first section, I described the inequalities and power relations that exist within the watermelon business, with power relations existing between the Han, Chinese Lue, Akha and other ethnic groups, the form of which is decided by the employment relationships between these players and their ethnicity. Among the ethnic groups in the area, the Akha still face forms of discrimination, though their position in Lao society has changed through the agricultural products they produce, the property they own and the presence of wealthier Akha who have benefited from cash crop production such as planting rubber and sugarcane for sale in China. Now, the difference in terms of ethnic hierarchy between the Akha and other the ethnic groups is becoming smaller, at least for some of the Akha.

This chapter also focused on the diverse adaptations used in order to exploit economic opportunities in Muang Sing. Although the Chinese, especially the Han, have power within the watermelon business, they are powerless in Lao society as a whole; they have not created any Chinese associations and are careful to avoid trouble and problems with the locals, for getting into trouble in Lao society means that they might miss-out on economic opportunities. This applies not only to the Chinese engaged in the watermelon business, but also those who have opened businesses in the town. The Chinese position in Lao society is quite vulnerable; when they are in Laos they try to comply with Lao society using their common sense. In addition, the resolution of the car accident through the paying of money, avoiding complaining to the police and the development of a close relationship with the police and immigration officers - those who work within the agencies of state power, all these behaviors reflect the Chinese traders' negotiations with Lao state power, and such behavior shows that they are conscious of the fact that Laos is different from China, that the border is a space where state power is clearly shown, and that, for them, it is a space for negotiation, not only with economic gain, but for state power.

Although nobody mentions it outright, the locals have a poor opinion of the Chinese. Because the Chinese sometimes break the peace in the area; for example, by smoking at guest houses, leaving their rooms messy, breaking the curfew at guest houses, touching Lao ladies' bodies and driving at high speed around town, the Chinese are regarded as "dirty" and "terrible" people among the locals, at least among those who are not familiar with them. The expansion of Chinese capital and the spread of Chinese people into Laos across the border is not only seen as a threat, but also as a golden economic opportunity for those locals who cannot maintain a self-sufficiency lifestyle due to the introduction of the market economy, and as a result, it is very difficult to consider their lives as separate from the cross-border practices taking place with China. The way the local people gain cash income by producing cash crops for the Chinese market and by working with Chinese capital, is evidence of this. Many of the locals who have enough money study Chinese in China or Laos, and apply for jobs at Chinese companies. The situation with Chinese people and goods crossing the border has also led to economic opportunities in Laos, but also the idea that the Chinese economy is superior to that in Laos, and these views have spread from the border area and created an economic negotiating space. In such conditions, the Chinese and locals therefore negotiate within a society and world in which they live and work among power relations, those formed by the current situation in both their countries.