

State, Silk and Ethnicity of the Suai in Pueai Mai Village, Sisaket Province¹

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to investigate the ethnicity of the Suai in a multi-ethnic village in Thailand's lower northeast region in the context of state development at the local level. The findings in the article were partially drawn from qualitative research conducted in Pueai Mai village, Phromsawat sub-district, Phayu district, Sisaket province, of which semi-structured interviews including participant and non-participant observations were the main data collection methods. According to the research, community economy and tourism development projects by the Thai state have played a vital role in creating the "Suai-ness" discourse, which revolves around hand-woven, ebony-dyed brocade silk-locally called "*pha kep*" — of the Suai. Through the support of local government organizations, Pueai Mai villagers established a sewing group whose members have produced *pha kep* in the form of both textiles and local-style shirts. Through the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) campaign initiated by the Thai government, *pha kep* has been promoted on many occasions until it has become the staple product of Sisaket. While the Thai state exercises its power at the local level by constructing fixed Suai identity solely linked to *pha kep*, the Suai themselves have seized this opportunity to redefine their ethnic identity through a sewing group network as well as through the Indigenous Knowledge Learning Center Project at the local secondary school.

Keywords: *pha kep*, Suai, ethnicity, identity, silk

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อนำเสนอการธำรงชาติพันธุ์ของชาวส่วยในบริบทพหุสังคมอีสานใต้ท่ามกลางการพัฒนาของรัฐไทยในระดับท้องถิ่น ข้อค้นพบที่ปรากฏในบทความได้มาจากการทำวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพที่บ้านเปือยใหม่ ตำบลพรหมสวัสดิ์ อำเภอยะโฮรี จังหวัดศรีสะเกษ โดยใช้การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างและการสังเกตแบบมีส่วนร่วมและไม่มีส่วนร่วมเป็นวิธีการหลักในการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูล ผลการศึกษาพบว่า กระแสการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจชุมชนและการท่องเที่ยวของรัฐได้นำไปสู่การก่อตัวของวาทกรรม “ความเป็นส่วย” ผ่านผ้าไหมทอมือที่เรียกว่า “ผ้าเก็บ” นโยบายของรัฐในระดับท้องถิ่นได้ส่งเสริมอาชีพให้ชาวบ้านรวมกลุ่มทอผ้าและตัดเย็บเสื้อผ้าเป็นเสื้อผ้าเก็บเย็บมือย้อมมะเกลือ จนกลายเป็นสินค้าหนึ่งตำบลหนึ่งผลิตภัณฑ์ที่สำคัญของจังหวัดศรีสะเกษ ในขณะที่รัฐสร้างอัตลักษณ์แซ่แข็งครอบชาวส่วยโดยเชื่อมโยงเข้ากับอาชีพทอผ้าและตัดเย็บผ้าเก็บ ชาวส่วยได้ฉกฉวยช่องทางนี้ในการประกอบสร้างความหมายของผ้าเก็บเสียใหม่ในปฏิบัติการของเครือข่ายกลุ่มทอผ้าและโครงการแหล่งเรียนรู้ภูมิปัญญาท้องถิ่นในโรงเรียนมัธยมศึกษาประจำท้องถิ่น

คำสำคัญ: ผ้าเก็บ ชาวส่วย การธำรงชาติพันธุ์ อัตลักษณ์ ผ้าไหม

Introduction

It is evident that Thailand's development policy has placed importance on poverty alleviation as well as self-sufficiency of the people with the hope of maintaining sustainability for the country's economy, politics, society, culture and environment. This is particularly true in terms of the economy, and consequently, a policy involving indigenous knowledge and intellectual property was created and applied in order to maximize commercial benefits. For this reason, the national production strategy has switched from the emphasis on large-scale industrial production to the promotion of local products at the community, provincial and regional levels (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013). The change in this development policy not only allows for the development trend widely accepted across the country, but also fosters the well-being of Thai citizens in all regions.

Geographically, the Northeast region, generally known as Isan, is divided into two parts-the Sakhon Nakhon basin and the Khorat basin. The former covers the upper area while the latter-nourished by the Mun and Chi rivers-covers the lower. The two parts, particularly the Khorat basin, have historical and archaeological significance. The unique ways of life found in the Khorat basin is a mixture of Dvaravati, Khmer and Lao cultures (Vallibhotama, 2011: 45). The area that is present-day Sisaket province is located in the Khorat basin. The information published by the province points out that Sisaket has been inhabited by diverse groups of people as in the provincial slogan, “*luang pho to khu ban, thinthan prasat khom, khao hom krathiam di, mi suan somdet, khet dong lamduan, lak luan watthanatham, lert lam samakkh*” (the Great Buddha image; the land of ancient Khmer stone temples; good rice, onions and garlic are cultivated; the Princess Mother Park; the land of the White Cheesewood [tree]; diverse cultures, love and unity among the people) (Sisaket Provincial Office, 2014). Sisaket is known for its indigenous people who are broadly classified into four ethnic groups-namely, the Suai, the Khmer, the Lao, and the Yoe (Sisaket Provincial Office, 2014).

Despite the ethnic diversity in the province, local government organizations in Sisaket tend to promote the maintenance of indigenous knowledge of the Suai, the most prominent ethnic group, who have been recognized as the predecessors of the people in Sisaket. Interestingly, the provincial development strategy emphasizes the promotion of religion, arts and culture, customs, traditions, including local wisdom, most of which have resulted in the promotion of native textiles to be developed as community and local products widely known as One Tambon One Product (OTOP). The OTOP project officially started in 2004 during the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, who adopted this idea to encourage villages across the country to create unique merchandise on the basis of community indigenous knowledge as well as resources or raw materials available in their area with the hope of stimulating the national economy, and ultimately increasing the people’s income. As a consequence, OTOP promotion activities were organized

nationwide. In Sisaket, a number of activities took place. Examples include Two Countries OTOP Activity-Thailand-Cambodia Relationship Promotion, Selected OTOP Products Fair, and Dok Lamduan Ban Festival - The Continuance of Four Ethnic Groups' Traditions. These activities were designed to demonstrate and sell OTOP merchandise, mainly textile products (Sisaket Provincial Administrative Organization, 2013). The emphasis on Suai textiles by local government organizations has transformed the original hand-woven, ebony-dyed brocade silk or *pha kep*, as it is called by the Suai, into the "Textile of Sisaket Province," which nowadays comes in varying colors, and not just black. Amidst these changes, however, some villages in the province still carry on the traditional method of weaving (Sisaket Community Development Office, 2011).

Pueai Mai, a village in Phromsawat subdistrict, Phayu district, is known for its silk. According to the Phayu Community Development Office, a number of weaving groups are found in the district, including one in Peuai Mai. The official name of the group is "Klum Maeban Kaset Ban Pueai Mai," which literally means Pueai Mai Farming Housewives Group. The village's main products include ebony-dyed brocade silk and hand-sewn, ebony-dyed brocade silk shirts. The silk fabric from Peuai Mai is original and unique. It is different from those produced by other weaving groups in nearby villages such as the "*khit*" or patterned silk of Nong Hang, the hand-woven cotton of Nong Thapthai, and the hand-woven silk of Krasaeng.

The state promotion of hand-woven silk production at the local level has changed the meaning of a staple cultural material of the Suai from hand-sewn, ebony-dyed brocade silk shirts that local people of Suai background wear in everyday life to a high-quality OTOP product of Sisaket province. It means that the fundamental symbol of the Suai people has been manipulated and brought to the market system by the state. This transformation reflects the power-embedded relationships between provincial governmental organizations and the Suai, whose identity has been frozen and imprinted through the state-promoted silk products. In other words, the state attempts to define the ebony-dyed

brocade silk shirts or locally known as *suea pha kep* as the key symbol of the Suai in Pueai Mai and the Suai as a whole in Sisaket. The Suai residents, on the subordinate side of this power relationship, have to employ different ways to construct a space to proclaim what it means to be “Suai.” This article, therefore, deals with the meanings of *khwam pen Suai* or “Suai-ness,” defined first by the state and later by the Suai themselves. The identity created by the Suai was made through the use of state discourse of “Suai-ness” in contestation as well as in negotiation for the existence of the group against the backdrop of state development at the local level.

In this article, the phenomenon studied is conceptualized through a constructivist approach to ethnicity in explaining how meanings of an ethnic group have been created in the middle of power relations between the Suai and the local-level Thai state. This approach basically emphasizes the historical context and the process of meaning construction, and it challenges the notion that ethnicity can be primordially and essentially formulated on the basis of existing cultural aspects of a particular ethnic group. By contrast, the constructivist approach views ethnicity as consciousness, awareness or organizational form constructed in a constant manner to classify people as well as to assert and maintain group identities through certain sociocultural aspects, which change according to historical contexts. For this reason, the constructivist perspective in ethnicity is inclined to view ethnic consciousness as a process of constructing meaning (Ganjanapan, 1996). Ethnicity in this approach is examined as a phenomenon that changes from time to time against construction of group meanings in particular contexts and conditions.

Donsom (2008) uses the constructivist approach to explain how Thai people of Vietnamese background in Na Jok village of Nakhon Phanom province construct their identities on a historical and cultural basis. Among the constructed identities are the Dai Vuong shrine, village songs, respect for Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese course instruction, and the Vietnamese female national costume. These identities have been formed through relations between the Thai state and Thai people of

Vietnamese origin, and through interactions between the latter and members of other ethnic groups in the area. The important condition that allows for the construction of identities is Thai state policy, which has transformed Na Jok into a village of shared ethnic consciousness and ideology among the Vietnamese-Thai people. This work reflects interactions between the Thai state and an ethnic group, which is the main issue that I have brought in examining identities of the Suai in Pueai Mai.

Another interesting work is the master's thesis of Cadchumsang (2000) entitled, "A Muslim Community in a Market Town at the Thai-Burma Border: The interrelationship between Plural Society, Economic Life and Ethnicity." The thesis presents the existence of a Muslim community close to the Thailand-Myanmar boundary. Muslims in this area prefer to be small-business owners, a way of life that goes well with Islamic teachings. Muslims in this border town exist on two levels of interaction, namely, the Muslim community and the border market town. This context has resulted in Muslim identities, which have been formed in the midst of interplays among Muslims from various origins, and between Muslims and local people from other ethnic groups. The thesis focuses on the essential conditions for coexistence in a pluralistic border society that encompasses economic interdependency, social interactions and shared sociocultural values. The field site in terms of ethnicity and culture is like the context of Pueai Mai. Multi-ethno-culturalism, thus, is considered as a key condition that allows for the construction of Suai identity.

The findings in this article are based on qualitative research conducted from March 2013 to December 2014. The two main data-collection techniques were key informant semi-structured interviews and participant observations to gather data regarding community historical development, economic activities, socio-political and cultural dimensions of the village, and ethnic consciousness, including the assertion of Suai identities.

Pueai Mai as the research site

Pueai Mai is a village situated in Phromsawat subdistrict, Phayu district, Sisaket province. The distance from the village to the city of Sisaket is approximately forty kilometers. The village, formerly called “Pueai,” emerged around three hundred years ago. The Suai are widely recognized as the first group of settlers in this village, later followed by Lao and Khmer groups. Nowadays, most residents of the village grow rice and hire themselves out as laborers for their main sources of income. Some families have supplemental incomes from silk weaving. Despite the coexistence of residents from Suai, Lao and Khmer groups, local people use Suai and Lao as the main spoken languages in everyday life. In this multi-ethnic context, social interactions have been made through kinship, intermarriage, participation in social activities, social organizations and political involvement. Regarding the involvement in politics at the local level, the Suai take part in political affairs more actively than do village members of the other two ethnic groups because they form the majority of the village population. As the largest group of the village, they have a stable platform to access resources as well as economic and political powers, all of which eventually allow them to hold village crucial positions ranging from *phuyai ban* (village headman) to *kamnan* (subdistrict headman), municipality council member and vice-president of subdistrict administrative organization. Interestingly, these state representatives in local organizations have Suai origin. The vital roles of the Suai in local politics, as a result, are responsible for the supremacy of Suai identity over that of the other two ethnic groups, and for the establishment of close relationships between the Suai and the Thai state at the local level.

In 1962, the local administrative political reform made Pueai Mai into a village in a new subdistrict called Phromsawat. At this time, local governmental organizations invested heavily in infrastructure of villages in the province. The development in the local area brought about a concrete road that connects Pueai Mai to nearby villages, a telephone network and a developed transportation system. Besides that, there was

a hydrant water system, which, in the eyes of villagers, could solve drought problems. As Daosuk [Pseudonym] (2013), a community leader said, “In the past we had a pond and a stream as main sources of water. We didn’t have tap water. In the dry season we had a hard life. Villagers had to fetch water at the pond. During rice transplanting time, there was no water in the rice fields, so we didn’t grow rice that year. I can’t remember exactly when this happened because it was a long time ago.” Because of the water issue, most people in Pueai Mai had no choice but to grow rice as a crucial way of life. “This village had only rice cultivation. We couldn’t grow other crops because it’s extremely dry here. We didn’t have enough water, even water in a stream,” said another key informant (Soemsi[Pseudonym], 2014). At some point in time, agricultural products did not meet the requirements of villagers, and so they had to struggle to survive, as Sodamuk [Pseudonym] (2013) put it, “I was born in 1964. We didn’t have a concrete road at that time. Although we had a pond that was full of water in the rainy season, there was not enough water in the dry season. I remember that there were droughts seven years in a row. Villagers had a hard time. We even dug up yams to eat.”

The construction of infrastructure in the village mentioned earlier, however, has generated wellbeing to a certain degree in the whole community. In this regard, I have noticed that the establishment of the silk weaving group initiated and supported by local governmental organizations is an alternative way of adaptation for the Suai people in this area who need supplemental income owing to insufficient income from rice cultivation. They had no reason to refuse the weaving group project offered to help them by the Thai state.

In 1994, upon the enactment of the Subdistrict Council and Subdistrict Administrative Organization Act, Phromsawat subdistrict was upgraded to Phromsawat Subdistrict Administrative Organization (PSAO). At present, 20 villages are being administered under the PSAO authority. Among the 20 villages, Pueai Mai is the largest in terms of population, and the Suai form the ethnic majority of the area (Phromsawat Subdistrict Administrative Organization, 2014).

Like other villages, Pueai Mai has been supported constantly by local government organizations through the development of different projects. Examples include concrete road construction, village road repair, electricity expansion, and small and micro community enterprise-career groups-OTOP group promotion. In the midst of this development, nevertheless, the meaning of “Suai-ness” in Pueai Mai has been constructed in the form of hand-woven, ebony-dyed brocade silk shirts produced by the Pueai Mai Farming Housewives Group. This signature merchandise is best-known as Sisaket’s staple product. It is noteworthy to mention that at an early stage this unique product was promoted by local governmental organizations as an “original” and “authentic” one that the Suai people have used in daily life and in their ceremonies.

“Suai-ness” in the meanings constructed by the Pueai Mai Farming Housewives Group

The Pueai Mai Farming Housewives Group (PMFHG henceforth) was officially established on April 10, 2001. In the beginning, the group was called the “Female Weaving Group,” whose main objective was to maintain indigenous knowledge of the Suai ancestors. The group was financially supported by the PSAO. At a later time, the Sisaket Skill Development Center organized a silk-weaving training course to strengthen the skills of the Female Weaving Group’s members, and the PSAO allocated more funds to the group. In 2007, the group was renamed the PMFHG. What makes the group famous in the province of Sisaket and beyond are ebony-dyed brocade silk fabrics and hand-sewn shirts. It has been acknowledged that all stages in the production process are done by hand.

Formerly, most members of the PMFHG were the Suai people. This was because a PMFHG president, as a representative of local governmental organization and a Suai resident of Pueai Mai, persuaded her relatives to join the group. However, relationships between Suai and Lao people through marriage across the groups have allowed Lao

villagers to learn how to weave silk in the Suai style; and they became members of the group once they had more weaving skills. Interestingly, according to some key informants, none of group members have a Khmer background. Therefore, it is safe to say that knowledge and skills in silk weaving have been transmitted from Suai predecessors to most, if not all, PMFHG members. Kinship-based relationships among group members from different ethnic backgrounds play a vital role in strengthening and unifying the group. As told by Duangnet [Pseudonym] (2013), one of the members, “I’m a relative of the group president. Our members are relatives. The president asked them to join the group. I saw how my mother did silk weaving when I was a kid. When I grew up I started to help her, and I’ve been in this work since then.” Apart from the kinship connections, weaving skills of group members have been passed on from their own family members.

The hand-woven silk made by group members reveals insights into relationships between silk and Suai ways of life in Pueai Mai. As member Butnamrak [Pseudonym] (2013) states, “In the old days female villagers in all families wove fabric for their personal use. They didn’t make silk for sale like we do nowadays. They tended to weave fabric to use in the household, and to give some to their daughters to use when they get married. My mother said nobody weaves for sale because it’s very difficult, and it takes a long time to weave a piece of silk.” Upon the emergence of the village weaving group, this prominent practice of Suai local wisdom which had been passed down from generation to generation has been employed in the context of tourism and commerce. Onsi [Pseudonym] (2013), a group member explains, “My mother asked me to try to weave. That’s how I learned to weave. My mother said I’ll never be able to weave if I don’t try to do it. She also said when I know how to weave, I can make silk for my own daughters and sons to use in their wedding ceremonies. Well, at present we only weave for sale or made to order.” Savai [Pseudonym] (2013), another member provides similar information but with more details, “In former days, villagers in each house wove silk for personal use. They just made it to use for themselves and to give to their daughters, who would use it in their

wedding ceremony as a gift for respected senior relatives. They had to have this kind of silk.”

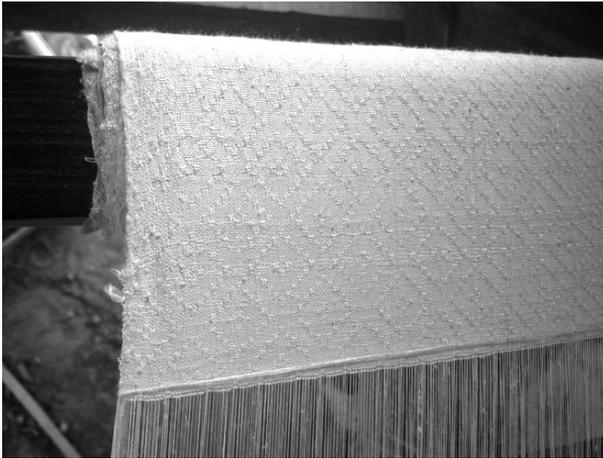


Figure 1 Undyed hand-woven brocade silk.

Once the group became well established and was widely recognized, their products were promoted in public more often, particularly in governmental spaces. Among others is Sisaket Rajabhat University, which actively promotes Suai-ness on several occasions. As Prathum[Pseudonym] (2013), an elderly member of the group, says, “Scholars from Sisaket Rajabhat University come to our village to take photos of our brocade silk. Silk shirts made in this village have a unique style. Their seams are stitched in a crisscross pattern with colorful threads. Although non-Suai villagers can weave brocade silk like we do, they really cannot make shirts in the Suai style.”

The construction of Suai identity in a local education space

The previous section discussed the connections between brocade silk and the Suai people, and the establishment of the village weaving group that has led to the construction of Suai identity. It also explained how the interplays between the Suai residents of Pueai Mai and local-level

governmental organizations—through the promotion of hand-woven brocade silk products—have caused active participation in the weaving group on one hand, and have generated a frozen identity of the Suai on the other.

This part of the article will concentrate on another practice that the Suai use in their identity assertion. This practice is the establishment of a brocade silk weaving network and of a local wisdom learning center, the latter of which is the result of a 2001 Ministry of Education policy on curriculum administrative regulations and academic affairs for basic education. According to this policy, schools under the Office of the Basic Education Commission are required to determine contents and provide activities on the basis of local socio-economic factors, arts and culture, including indigenous knowledge, as part of student development. As Thongkoed [Pseudonym] (2014), a male teacher responsible for the Local Wisdom Learning Project of a local secondary school, explains,

When all the schools were required to have the Local Wisdom Learning Project, as a teacher of social studies and religion, I was assigned to do research on what local knowledge students should learn and where they should learn it. I was born and raised in the village, and my parents are of Suai origin. I have seen brocade silk woven by elderly people since I was young. Until now, there has been a weaving group here, and our brocade silk has been promoted as provincial OTOP product. To me, silk weaving is Suai local wisdom. That's why I chose the weaving group as a learning center for my school. I proposed my idea to the school director. He supports my project because he is also a Suai resident in this village. He said that we have local scholars who are knowledgeable enough to teach our students. Once my project was approved, I took about twenty students to study with the weaving group. Most students have Suai and Lao backgrounds. There are also a small number of students of Khmer origin. They will be taught every step in the process of brocade silk production.

The local wisdom learning project could be considered as the embedding of ethnic awareness in young generations in Pueai Mai and nearby villages. The reproduction of Suai history regarding brocade silk in the context of education and tourism could bring about collective memories of culture among the Suai from different generations. Consequently, stories and meanings of brocade silk continue to be reproduced at different times and at varying spaces, whereas Suai identity could be altered by political and socio-economic dynamism. As Nakham [Pseudonym] (2013), a student who joined the project explains, “My parents are Suai. I’d seen brocade silk weaving all my life, but I didn’t try to weave because it’s hard work. Only elderly female villagers make silk. My mother said that it takes a long time to finish a piece of silk. She never forced me to weave. Although I don’t know how to weave, I always wear silk made by my mother and grandmother to perform traditional dances at school.” Similarly, Sodamuk [Pseudonym] (2014), another student, said, “I’m the granddaughter of the PSAO vice-president, who is the president of the weaving group. My mother is a member of the group. I’ve seen my mother’s weaving since I was very young. I used to help my mother to draw the silk. Nowadays I seldom help her because I have to go to school and I have a lot of schoolwork.” She recalls, “I’ve seen my mother, my grandmother and senior female villagers wearing brocade silk since I was a little girl. When I grow up I want to wear it too, but I don’t have any of my own. Whenever we have events at school, I always wear my mother’s silk.” The above data match a story I heard from Manichot [Pseudonym] (2014), “When I was a little girl, I sat on a loom with my grandmother, and I observed the way she would draw the silk. I enjoyed picking mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms. We use silk from silkworms to weave brocade silk, which would be used as material for making shirts. People always wear brocade shirts when they make merit at temples or when they attend wedding ceremonies.”



Figure 2 Hand-sewn, ebony-dyed brocade silk shirt.

Such stories told by Suai female students in Pueai Mai reflect ethnic consciousness, which has been embedded in the daily life of the Suai people since the old days. However, a story by a Suai girl from a nearby village has a different perspective. “I’m from another village. I came here for my education. People in my village only weave cotton. We don’t make silk like the people here do. I never knew about the Suai brocade silk until I joined the Local Wisdom Learning Project at school!” (Saengphakdi[Pseudonym], 2014).

According to data provided by the school director, in addition to having the Local Wisdom Learning Project, the school also has a plan to invite members of the weaving group to be special teachers in brocade silk weaving. In my opinion, the weaving group and the participation of group members have played a major part in creating and maintaining Suai identity in connection with a network of governmental organizations and other weaving groups outside the village. This connection has given rise to various forms of activities, such as a micro-enterprise training process, an excursion to see the community economy in another village, the organization of a weaving group network, and an organizational career group workshop. These activities are crucial parts

in the construction of Suai identity through constructing social spaces and a network, which have been employed in negotiation with other ethnic groups and with the Thai state. Therefore, it is essential for the weaving group to build connections with other weaving groups outside Pueai Mai. This issue was raised by Duangnet[Pseudonym] (2013), a member of the group, “That [other] village has OTOP merchandise, but their products have been categorized as a three-star level. The population of that village are Lao, who make cotton fabric for sale. When we [both Lao and Suai] attended a weaving training session, a district chief officer said that neither Lao nor Suai should forget their own culture.” This statement confirms the opinion of Khamsi [Pseudonym] (2013), another member, who said, “Some years ago a community development chief officer took other members and me to visit a leaning center in the village of the Phu Thai. Phu Thai women knot their hair and wear black clothes. They weave black fabric to make shirts and a unique silk called *phrae wa*. It’s good to learn that they still carry on their material culture.”

This data suggests that the Local Wisdom Learning Project is responsible for ethnic consciousness training among younger Suai generations, who define the brocade silk as a familiar object used in everyday life. The Thai state at the local level, however, has a different meaning for the brocade silk. That is to say, the silk is a kind of fabric used as costume. It represents localism, which has arisen in the midst of the expansion of tourism. The state promotion of hand-woven brocade silk production has allowed for the presentation of Suai identity in public spaces—particularly the local secondary school, where the unique culture of the Suai can be learned by people from all ethnic origins. The Suai, thus, have taken this opportunity to negotiate with the Thai state at the local level, and to redefine “Suai-ness” at the same time. Therefore, ethnic identity is fluid in nature. It has changed from time to time and from place to place. More importantly, ethnic identity is a tool used by the Suai in contestation and negotiation with both local Thai state organizations and other ethnic groups.

Conclusion and discussion

The assertion of Suai identity is the result of the state's promotion of hand-woven, ebony-dyed brocade silk as a provincial staple, which led to the establishment of the weaving group in Pueai Mai. Both conditions act as platforms for the Suai people in this village to construct their identity through their participation in the weaving group, the creation of a weaving group network, and the initiation of the Local Wisdom Learning Project at the secondary school. It could be said that state power can promote or destroy local culture. In the case of Pueai Mai, the findings suggest that local governmental organizations have played a crucial role in promoting local culture and wisdom in response to Thai government policies concerning economic and tourism developments.

If we examine other examples of reconstructed identity, Jatuworapruk (2000) shows how the migration of Lisu to the city of Chiang Mai and their becoming a marginalized people in the new context have allowed for cultural adaptation and contestation through the reconstruction of locality and identities of ethnic group. The reconstructed ethnic identities include symbolic response, proclamation of group existence and ethnic merchandise production. The Lisu employ selected past experiences or events, which have been linked to present and future, in the construction of meaning in a new living space. Having been exposed to capitalist-oriented life in the city of Chiang Mai, the Lisu produce ethnic commodities and modify the meaning of their merchandise in order to add more value that represents their authentic identity. The case of Chiang Mai Lisu is in line with a study by Srila (2007), which proposes that in the context of ethnic diversity and interactions with members of other ethnic groups, the Kha-Bru have employed certain aspects of culture as a mechanism to reconstruct their group identity. In so doing, the Kha-Bru connect their Khmer roots to local historical evidence and reconstruct the meaning of the group as that of a powerful people. With the state development mechanism as well as the establishment of an ethnic group network, the Kha-Bru have more power in politics and economy in the area than they did before.

Therefore, important conditions that allow for the construction and modification of Kha-Bru identity are social interactions with other groups on the basis of historical consciousness and group existence in a new political organization, that is, Thailand.

Santasombat (2000) explains the continuance and modification of ethnic identity of the Tai in a village called Lak Chang, in Yunnan province, southern China, which has been under Chinese power for over 400 years. Nevertheless, the Tai still maintain and reconstruct their ethnic identity through the modification and redefinition of key cultural symbols in order for them to adjust relationships with other ethnic groups. Interestingly, the Tai employ “rice” as a tool to respond and contest Chinese domination. The Tai also have a Buddhist ceremony as a space to proclaim what it means to be Tai.

Works by Santasombat (2000), Jatuworapruk (2000) and Srila (2007) share the same point. Their research reflects power relations between a state and an ethnic group and the construction and maintenance of ethnic identity in the context of diversity and development. Like these studies, this article deals with the construction of the ethnic identity of the Suai in Pueai Mai. To create and assert “Suai-ness,” the Suai make use of a study program in local wisdom and culture to reconstruct their identity. In addition, they have transformed a conventional group identity into a new identity which focuses more on economic opportunity. The support of the weaving group by local governmental organizations has allowed the Suai to carry on the local wisdom of brocade silk production and formulate collective memories within the group. These practices could be considered as the maintenance of Suai cultural space in an economic space provided by the state. At the same time, the Suai have expanded their social space to the local secondary school. Although the Suai have tried to deconstruct the fixed identity given to them by local governmental organizations and reconstruct a new identity of their ethnic group, the construction of what it means to be Suai tends to be influenced by state power.

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