



Research Article

Sani Embroidery Traders' Gendered Cultural Capital and Symbolic Power

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Abstract

Drawing on *Sani* embroidery traders' life experiences collected through in-depth fieldwork in Shilin, Yunnan Province, China, I found that inspired by the new economic opportunity of neoliberalism and cultural commoditization, an increasing number of *Sani* females are presently participating in embroidery trade in order to reach their goals and pursue better lives. This paper contends that Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is limited in that he did not take gender into account, and rarely considered women as capital-accumulating subjects. In investigating the *Sani* female embroidery traders' trading practices, this paper argued that *Sani* embroidery traders are not only able to actively acquire and improve their gendered cultural capital but also able to convert it into symbolic capital to defend their legitimate position in the household and in society. This is further represented by the word "*lacao*", which refers to an ideal woman, emphasizing her economic contributions to the family, hard-working virtue, and ability to take care of her household.

Keywords: *Sani* embroidery traders, Gendered cultural capital, Symbolic power, *Lacao*, Gender relations

Introduction

The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, claims that "all action is interested" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 178). He borrows the term of "capital" from Marxism and extends the logic of economic calculation to all practices oriented towards the maximization of profit. In Bourdieu's work, he views all forms of capital as power, whether they be material, cultural, social, or symbolic. In everyday practices, individuals or groups draw upon a variety of resources, not only economic, but also cultural, social and symbolic, to maintain and enhance their social positions in the social world. Bourdieu conceptualizes these resources as capital when they function as a social

relation of power, that is, when they become objects of struggle as valued resources (Swartz, 1997, 2013).

In his article "The Forms of Capital", Bourdieu (1986) claims that cultural capital itself exists in three different forms. First is the embodied form, which refers to the disposition that develops very early childhood and is internalized in the mind and body through socialization. This includes knowledge, skills, tastes, preferences, and more. Second is the objectified form, which refers to the cultural goods and objects, such as books, instruments, art, etc. Third is the institutionalized form, which refers to the educational credential system, or otherwise referred to as educational qualifications. As Swartz

(1997) has demonstrated, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital covers a wide variety of resources. In Bourdieu's view, cultural capital plays an extremely important role in the reproduction of class-based positions and power relations, and it also impacts the reproduction of inequalities (Bourdieu et al., 1984; Bourdieu, 2001).

Bourdieu's contribution to the sociological study of power relations is lie in his idea that all of forms of capital are interrelated and interchangeable, they can convert into one another in certain circumstances. Yet the conversion is not equally possible in all directions and may vary from situation to situation. In Bourdieu's analysis, he emphasizes that economic capital is the root of all of the other forms of capital, and that economic capital, generally, appears to convert more easily into social capital and cultural capital than vice versa. Meanwhile, social capital and cultural capital are more closely related to each other than to economic capital. Indeed, although Bourdieu suggests that economic capital plays a primary role in social distinction, his work provides the possibility that agents who lack economic capital might seek different strategies to accumulate, invest, and exchange alternative types of capital, using these alternative forms of capital to reach their goals instead. Bourdieu also contends that symbolic capital, like other forms of capital, can be accumulated, or used to legitimize certain power relations. Normally, individuals or groups can convert their economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital into symbolic capital to define and defend a legitimate position (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu's theory of capital conversion is useful for analyzing social class distinctions and the power relations between competing individuals or groups within a field. Yet, this paper will debate the limitations of Bourdieu's analysis of capital. Firstly, he did not mention the role of gender in his articulation of capital, especially focuses on cultural capital. Secondly, he rarely considered women as subjects with capital-accumulation strategies of their own.

This paper will integrate gender into Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and apply the concept of "gendered cultural capital", and it attempts to examine how do *Sani* females accumulate gendered cultural capital and convert it into symbolic power.

Objectives

1. To study the impact of neoliberalization and cultural commoditization on *Sani* embroidery traders' lives.
2. To study how embroidery practices and trading practices as forms of gendered cultural capital are used by *Sani* embroidery traders to accumulate various forms of capital and convert them into symbolic power to negotiate gender relations.

Methodology

The field work of this study was conducted in Shilin Yi Autonomous County, Yunnan Province, China. This study is based on data collection during 2017-2018. The methods of data collection for this research were primarily qualitative. Data collection began with a preliminary survey, followed by in-depth interviews and participant observation. Thirty *Sani* embroidery traders were selected and completed the preliminary survey, which provided rich information on their basic life situation. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 interviewees. These interviews provided a way to understand *Sani* embroidery traders' diverse and complex life experiences. Men were interviewed as well, in order to obtain richer information regarding gender relations. Meanwhile, participant observation was conducted in different spatial practices, such as the interactions between men and women in the household, the women's network, the market, and the agricultural fields.

The *Sani* Yi of Shilin

The Yi are one of the fifty-six recognized ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China and are a Tibeto-Burman-speaking people. During the *minzu shibie* (the classification

of national minorities) of the 1950s, many small ethnic groups with similarities are combined into one ethnic group for classification according to the ethnic classification principle, and thus many different groups of people were classified as the Yi, *Sani* is one of them. In spite of *Sani* and other subgroups of the Yi are diverse both culturally and linguistically, they are all related to each other historically (Harrell, 2001).

The *Sani* Yi people mainly live in Shilin Yi Autonomous County¹ (24° 30' to 25° 03' N. and 103° 10' to 103° 41' degrees E.), which is normally called as Shilin County for short, has an area of 1,725 square kilometers and is located in the mid-east region of Yunnan Province. It is 89 kilometers away from the capital city of Kunming and became part of the Kunming municipality in 1983. Shilin Yi Autonomous County can be divided into two main areas, urban (Shilin city) and rural (villages). Shilin city (in the west part of the county) is located near the Stone Forest Scenic Spot, only nine kilometers away. The city is surrounded by eight townships.

Shilin County is famous for its rugged, karst (limestone) mountain landscape. This special rocky and sandy soil characteristics and the subtropical plateau monsoon climate conditions make the land very suitable for tobacco planting, which has become the primary industry of Shilin until today. Traditionally, the second most important source of income for *Sani* people was animal husbandry. This included pigs, as well as goats, cattle, and buffaloes. Yet with the improvement of

agricultural technology, people do not need to use cattle to plough their cultivated lands, and thus, the function of cattle in agricultural work has become obsolete. Moreover, most *Sani* people rebuilt their houses after saving up enough money, and in order to maintain clean and comfortable living conditions, they no longer raise livestock in their houses. After economic reform began in the early 1980s, the Chinese state promoted ethnic tourism and Shilin has become a very famous tourist destination for both domestic and international tourists. Over time, the tourist industry has become the third most important source of income in Shilin.

In *Sani* society, men were believed to be superior to women, which is reflected in different aspects such as marriage patterns, the head of the household, land ownership, and land inheritance. Women typically move into their husbands' house and join their husbands' residence after marriage, as part of the patrilineal household tradition. Men are the legitimate heirs of their father's patrimony, including land, houses, livestock, money, and other assets. In contrast, women do not normally have a legitimate claim to their father's property. *Sani* men's superior status, in addition, reinforced and formalized by the external policy of the household registration system (*hukou system*)². Along with *Sani* men officially became the head of the household, their position typically confirms the authority and power of the family, which has resulted in unchecked decision-making power and household management, and significantly weakened the authority of women in both the household and society.

¹ According to the "Autonomy Law", which was adopted by the central government and formally expanded throughout China, the ethnic minority groups in the autonomous regions were allowed to adopt their own policies and to determine their own education system, which meant that they were given the right to essentially govern themselves according to their own situation and needs. The state gives special assistance to ethnic autonomous regions in order to support their economic and cultural development.

² The household registration system (*hukou system*) is a system officially identifies a person as a permanent resident of an area and includes some necessary information such as name, date of birth, parents, marriage, spouse. It is issued per family and includes the information of all members in the family.

While *Sani* men are expected to be leaders and should be responsible for supporting the entire family, *Sani* women, on the contrary, are expected to be followers and stay at home since they are considered to be less educated and less capable. In daily practice, women have to complete endless domestic work. It includes but is not limited to: child rearing, taking care of the husband and parents-in-law, preparing meals, cleaning the house, doing laundry, amongst many other tasks. From time to time, women also contributed to the family income by working on the farm with men, raising livestock, embroidering and making clothes. Yet, the women's work normally appears as an elective choice and their work is often invisible and seen as unworthy.

Due to the stereotypical gendered division of labor, *Sani* men are expected to be active participants in economic undertakings, and thus many seek work in the city. This forces a separation of women from their husbands, meaning that they must take on the household responsibilities alone while their husbands work outside the home. However, the increased pressure of family financial demands has forced more and more *Sani* women to engage in wage labor. As *Sani* women face different job constraints and limitations on their mobility, the neoliberal market is one of the few places where they can earn an income. As a result of social change, specifically the development of ethnic tourism and the emergence of the cultural commodities market, the number of women participating in the public sphere has greatly increased, especially in terms of economic activities such as selling embroidered goods.

The effect of market liberalization on women's lives has been documented in many studies. Overall, the evidence has shown that market liberalization negatively impacts women, particularly in terms of the deterioration of women's working conditions and the doubling of their work burden after they are forced to participate in economic activities (Elson, 1992; Haddad et al., 1995). As

such, female labor is exploited both as wage labor in the sphere of production and by men (usually their male counterparts) as unpaid labor by the gendered division of labor within the household. In response, this research explores how embroidery trade creates employment for *Sani* females and how their status has changed after gaining an independent source of income.

Market Liberalization, *Sani* Embroidery Trade, and Traders

During the collectivization period, no private property or market transactions were allowed. After the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee held in 1978, China reconnected with the world economic system and moved towards neoliberalization in the early 1980s. The revival of rural market system provided new economic opportunities for rural people engaged in different activities to become self-employed and earn an income. Meanwhile, as ethnic tourism was promoted by the Chinese state in an effort to increase local economic development and foreign investment, Shilin became a very famous tourist destination and opened up to the outside world. The primary attractiveness of Shilin as a tourist destination lies in its unique limestone landscape, though the intriguing *Sani* culture cannot be ignored as a secondary factor, which mainly refers to the diverse *Sani* embroidered goods in this paper.

Sani embroidered goods, especially *Sani* embroidered bags, became well-known tourism souvenir items, the embroidery trade spread quickly amongst *Sani* females. The market liberalization and cultural commoditization provide an alternative economic development choice for *Sani* females, their reasoning is that the embroidery trade participation is the best way for them to circumvent their constraints, in terms of limited land resources and limitations in finding jobs. This study has found that there are two models of *Sani* embroidery traders: (1) the embroidery traders who buy various embroidered products from embroidery producers and

sell them in the market; (2) the embroidery traders who produce the embroidered products themselves and sell their own products in the market. This paper only analyzes the second model of *Sani* female embroidery traders and does not include the first model of embroidery traders.

Sani female embroidery traders can be divided into two main types based on the length of traders' trading time and their mobility: the permanent embroidery traders and temporary embroidery traders (Guo, 2019). The permanent embroidery traders are full-time traders and maintain a stable trading life, they usually rent or own a fixed location for selling their products. The temporary embroidery traders normally set up small stalls and sell their products in mobile markets, this group of traders usually lacks financial resources and does not have a fixed selling location in the market. Temporary traders typically have to spend more time and effort on agricultural work, and thus they only occasionally go to sell their products in mobile markets. Their income is, therefore, typically much less than that of permanent embroidery traders. Interestingly, the permanent embroidery traders and temporary embroidery traders are closely interconnected. Exploring these categorizations of traders, it was revealed that almost every permanent trader started out as a temporary trader, which demonstrating that the transformation from temporary to permanent is possible. The possibility of transitioning from temporary trade to permanent trade is determined primarily by their accumulation of different forms of capital, in terms of cultural, social, and economic capital.

The Acquisition of Embroidery and Trading Skills for Better Economic Opportunities

In the past, during their early childhood, *Sani* girls, following their mothers' example, have to learn how to embroider, weave, and make clothes for home use. Once they had their own family, they were traditionally

responsible for preparing clothes for their husbands and children, not only for daily wear, but also for special occasions. The skills of embroidery, which is inherited from their mothers and same sex peers through hereditary transmission, are gradually transformed into *Sani* women's daily practices. Although almost every *Sani* woman's embroidery skills are obtained through domestic transmission, the skills differ amongst *Sani* females. These differences come from the amount of time, energy, and effort that each individual spends on the process of developing their skills, which results in the variance between different individuals' possession of cultural capital.

As a result of social changes, many *Sani* embroidery traders are now willing to acquire more cultural capital in order to meet market demands and expand their trade. The acquisition of fundamental embroidery skills has paved the way for *Sani* female embroidery traders to improve their skills in various ways. Some traders learned other ethnic embroidery skills by participating in some cross-culture embroidery skills exchange programs. Or, some traders who acquired advanced professional clothes-making skills (sewing, tailoring, designing) by attending formal technical institutions.

Traditionally, *Sani* embroidery traders made clothes simply for use at home. Now, however, the phenomena have changed in response to their acquisition of new forms of gendered cultural capital, which is obtained and transferred through interactions with other ethnic groups, as well as tourists, and in response to the demand of customers, both local *Sani* customers and non-*Sani* customers, who prefer a variety of commodities. As a result, the new forms of cultural capital that *Sani* female embroidery traders acquire facilitate multicultural learning and connect with the young generations' fashion taste. These *Sani* female embroidery traders hope to obtain new skills, not only to fulfill the demands of customers, but also to seize more economic

opportunities. In other words, the process of learning new skills, or the process of obtaining gendered cultural capital, is necessary for *Sani* female embroidery traders to expand their trade and sustain their business.

Among both permanent and temporary embroidery traders, some of them have experienced long-distance embroidery trade previously for various reasons: lack of financial resources to rent a fixed store; lack of social networks; lack of a loyal customer base; and geographic disadvantage in accessing local markets. For those traders, most of them have been to Beijing and Shanghai. On the one hand, they declared that they indeed earned a respectable income while they were selling their embroidered goods during the long-distance embroidery trade, because those cities have relatively high population density, and their various types of polychromatic *Sani* embroidery goods gained much popularity among local residences. But on the other hand, they complained that they experienced really harsh time, which not only because of their hardworking lifestyles that they had to work hard enough to earn more money, but also because of their tough living conditions that they had to save any penny as much as they can.

It is interesting to see that those traders are brave enough to undertake long-distance trade, and also worth noticing that they are clever to apply various strategies in order to maintain their business in other strange cities, such as partnering with relatives or friends in order to help each other; finding safe and cheap places to stay; setting up their stalls in crowded places; wearing their bright-colored *Sani* dress to attract people's attention; learning how to assign value to their products and negotiate the price with customers; learning some simple English to communicate with foreign customers.

Nowadays, as a result of highly developed information technology and social media, it is also possible to see many *Sani* female embroidery traders applying new techniques in their trade to obtain more economic opportunities and gain better profits. For instance, social media, like WeChat³, has become a platform for advertisements. At the very beginning, people normally utilized WeChat to connect with their friends, send messages to each other, share life stories and emotional feelings. Gradually, some traders even started to advertise their products through it. They are able to post their products' pictures on it and sell products to their online friends directly. Additionally, some traders have also learned how to use e-commerce platforms, like *Taobao*⁴, to sell their products through online shopping website. Those traders usually create an attractive webpage, post and update pictures of their products frequently, communicate with customers online, and deliver their products to customers who they have never meet in different cities. Based on various cases, this study has found that these new online trading skills have provided more opportunities for *Sani* embroidery traders to obtain a wider range of resources and expand their businesses. In practice, however, these new skills are more widely possessed and easily applied by the younger generations than the elder generations, as the younger generations are more adept at learning and accepting new things.

Gender and Cultural Capital

1. Limitations on Bourdieu's Analysis of Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's concept of capital is useful for analyzing social class distinctions and the power relations between competing individuals or groups within a field. Yet, Bourdieu's analysis is limited in that he did not mention gender in his articulation of capital. Gender does not

³ WeChat (*weixin*) is a multifunctional application developed by Tencent and was first released in 2011.

⁴ *Taobao* is a famous online shopping website in China and owned by Alibaba.

appear in Bourdieu's fundamental structuring principle of the social space, and he treats gender as "secondary" (Bourdieu et al., 1984; Swartz, 1997; Laberge, 1995).

McCall (1992) interprets that gender was treated as a "secondary" principle of the social world because it is hidden behind—it appears to be "universal" and "natural". In fact, the volume and structure of the initial capital that an individual possesses is determined by social group distinction. The distinction here not only refers to Bourdieu's primary attention to social class, but also refers to gender distinction. This study, then, follows McCall's idea and argues that gender cuts across all forms of capital, which have gendered meanings because they are assigned by gendered disposition in the field, in other words, the possession and inheritance of capital are determined by gender distinctions. Here, this paper only focuses on gendered cultural capital.

In the context of this research, *Sani* females are socialized to accept the responsibilities of embroidery and clothes-making, which are considered as females' roles according to traditional cultural norms and social expectations. In this sense, embroidery skills and clothes-making skills are viewed as feminine skills that are inherited and possessed only by *Sani* females. Additionally, as seen in many other studies, females are more adapted to the market than males (Alexander, 1987; Kusakabe, 2001; Wu, 2001; Lessinger, 2001). Throughout my fieldwork, some *Sani* female embroidery traders, especially the permanent embroidery traders, reported that their male counterparts today even take on some of the responsibilities of their business when they need some help, but they explained that males are more suited to doing outside work as they can use physical strength, such as moving heavy products, loading and delivering supplies, and they would typically not ask their husbands to look after their shops or sell their products. Females think that they have more patience to communicate with customers and bargain with them,

and thus they are better suited to trade; in contrast, males think that they will lose their face because they are ashamed of price negotiations with customers.

Given these circumstances, this paper illustrates that embroidery skills, clothes-making skills, as well as trading skills are gendered cultural capital, because they are considered as feminine disposition and are expected to be held by females through socialization according to the cultural norms. Therefore, the engagement between Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and the feminist perspective of an integration of gender into cultural capital offers a proper way to apply the term gendered cultural capital in this study and argue that the accumulation of cultural capital is determined by gender distinctions.

2. *Sani* Female Embroidery Traders as Capital-Accumulating Subjects

In Bourdieu's discussion of male domination, he has claimed, in the least differentiated societies, women were normally treated as means of exchange enabling men to accumulate social capital and symbolic capital through marriage, which functioned as investments leading to the creation of more or less extensive and prestigious alliances, and thus women make a decisive contribution to the production and reproduction of the capital of the family. For instance, women not only play the lead role in converting economic capital into symbolic capital for their families through the display of cultural tastes, but also play a key role in manifesting the symbolic capital of the domestic group through the presentation of their appearance. Meanwhile, in many societies, a large part of the domestic work falls to women, they aim to conserving the solidarity and integration of the family by maintaining all the social capital and prestige of the family through the organization of a series of social activities, such as prepare meals which bring together the whole family on special occasions, exchange gifts, etc. (Bourdieu et al., 1984; Bourdieu, 2001). In this sense, Bourdieu

principally understood women as objects in social space, which circulate between men and serve specific functions in the capital accumulation strategies of families and kinship.

Bourdieu, indeed, makes an important point when he draws attention to the fact that the maintenance of class and other social boundaries through the accumulation of capital is gendered, and that women play an important role in this process. However, Bourdieu rarely considers women as subjects with capital accumulation strategies of their own. Feminist scholars criticize Bourdieu that he recognizes women as “repositories of capitals which are appropriated and deployed by men as assets in their jostlings for position with one another” (Lovell, 2000, p. 38). Toril Moi, then, gives a good example of the ways in which women as subjects to accumulate capital by analyzing Simone de Beauvoir. She recognizes Bourdieu’s idea and demonstrates that the value of women in France during that time, indeed, as repositories of social capital and symbolic capital in the marriage strategies of their families, which restricted women’s own individual quests for the accumulation of legitimate capital, yet through the case of Beauvoir, Moi ensures that there are possibilities and opportunities for women to complete their own intellectual goals, and women have rights to be intellectuals and to be taken seriously (Moi, 1994).

By following feminists’ idea, this article has found that *Sani* female embroidery traders, also, are “capital-accumulating subjects” in social space. Specifically, *Sani* women, as cultural producers, have not only been able to create and define their dynamic culture, but have also enhanced their identity through the inheritance of cultural knowledge and cultural skills. In practice, *Sani* women have been played an important role in the preservation of *Sani* cultural identity. The strong and lasting ties between mother and daughter have enabled the mother to instill not only women’s roles into the

daughter but also a sense of identity. In addition, the various knowledge and beliefs that are embedded in *Sani* embroidery and the social meanings symbolized by *Sani* clothes are actively maintained and reproduced from generation to generation. In spite of *Sani* women are at the core of these main cultural processes, their cultural skills and abilities as well as capital acquisition were misrecognized as “natural” through socialization, and also because of this capital accumulation of cultural knowledge did not manifest economic value in the past, thus their capital accumulation strategies were less visible and easily overlooked.

In response to recent social changes, including the market liberalization and the cultural commoditization, *Sani* females’ fundamental cultural skills paved the way for some of them to choose a new career path and earn an income. Many cases provided evidence that *Sani* female embroidery traders are willing to actively improve their gendered cultural capital, including embroidery skills, clothes-making skills, and trading skills, in order to serve the diverse preferences of their customers and to meet the market demands in an effort to maximize their economic profits. Meanwhile, *Sani* female embroidery traders also strategically accumulated and utilized their multilayered social capital in order to further enhance their business. Therefore, this article argues that *Sani* female embroidery traders not “repositories of capital” possessed by men, but instead, are subjects with capital accumulation strategies of their own. They are able to claim their rights and create more opportunities to accumulate different forms of capital for their own benefits, and to use various strategies to convert capital into one another in order to reach their goals in pursuit of a better life.

3. The Detraditionalization of Gender: Gendered Cultural Capital Used by Men

Along with social change, an increasing number of *Sani* females are motivated by the new economic opportunities and have stepped into the neoliberal market, which provides a new way for them to earn an income for the family by applying their gendered cultural capital and become subjects with capital accumulation strategies of their own. In this sense, social change is linked to a reworking of gender, which leads to the disruption of traditional rules, norms and expectations. It is called an ongoing detraditionalization of gender (Adkins, 2005). This is seen in the ways in which women, in terms of *Sani* female embroidery traders, are detached from traditional family roles through economic participation, and thus, their economic power provides them with negotiations in marriage and in the gendered division of labor.

Meanwhile, social change has resulted in feminine skills are increasingly in demand. Some cases demonstrate that nowadays more and more men are willing to obtain gendered cultural capital in order to increase their mobility in the labor market. In practice, some *Sani* males would choose to leave their farm work with their parents because their agricultural productions could not provide enough income over the whole year; and when they confront different job limitations in the labor market, they are willing to learn sewing and tailoring skills in order to run a small family business with their wife. Therefore, gendered cultural capital, in terms of embroidering, sewing, weaving, were once viewed as 'negative' feminine skills that limits women's action and women's space in the past. However, nowadays, these feminine skills as a form of cultural capital is beginning to have broad currency, more and more men are able to gain economic profits by using these feminine skills.

Sani Female Embroidery Traders' Symbolic Power and Changes in Gender Relations

In the past, since the traditional cultural norms and social values asserted *Sani* males as superior to females, relevant social expectations placed the man or the husband as the "backbone of family" (*jiating de dingliangzhu*). The husband is normally expected to be the head of the household and make right decisions in order to guide the family, and he should be capable of serving as his family's economic provider and protector to bring a brighter future for the family. In this sense, the *Sani* male would enjoy a higher status and greater power than the female in both family and society. On the contrary, the woman or the wife is expected to be good and devoted (*xianneizhu*). The wife is usually confined to family life and taking responsibility for domestic chores, and she should respect and obey her husband's decisions, understand and appreciate the husband's contribution and support him. In this sense, even the wife has little informal power to make some decisions within the household, she is viewed as the powerless one and stands in the subordinate position.

However, gender relations in contemporary *Sani* society are changing with the shifting social context. Today, as *Sani* women's public participation and engagement in economic activities have been increased, their economic power and expanded roles have resulted in their enjoyment of greater authority in the household and higher social positions than before. It is worth noting that *Sani* female embroidery traders' participation in the embroidery trade has increased their accumulation of different forms of capital (cultural, social, and economic), granting them greater responsibility and decision-making authority in the household than their male counterparts. The household affairs that are controlled by females include, but are not limited to, the crops to be planted the following year, the selling price for livestock, the reconstruction of the house, the management of the family income, and the household expenditures.

As the wife is the family manager and controls the household income, as well as makes decisions about family issues, she not only has greater responsibility to maintain familial stability, but also has control over the husband, making her husband dependent on her. When I asked some traders why they took responsibility for the household's finances, they had varying explanations: men are not like women, they do not know how to save money; men would spend all they have on drinks if they had money; men would be really tired if we asked them to manage the family income. Regardless of their explanations, the fact that the husband allows the wife to supervise the family's finances means that he recognizes and acknowledges the wife's capabilities. In the same way, the fact that the wife takes over the household duties shows that the wife is aware of her own authority within the household.

Meanwhile, it should also be noted that for most *Sani* female embroidery traders, they are trapped in the conventional ideologies of motherhood and wifeness, they still believe that it is their task to look after the house and the children. They have to fulfill their household responsibilities while they are taking care of their trading business and making financial contributions to their family's income. Their success is contingent upon their ability to multitask and to maintain balance between home and work. In practice, though, they are able to use various strategies to negotiate the existing gender relations, particularly use the factor of familial stability for negotiation with their husbands. For *Sani* female embroidery traders, their increasing economic ability and irreplaceable position are the fundamental condition to maximize their own power and their opportunities to pursue a better future within a particular set of constraints.

Moreover, throughout this research, the word "*lacao*" was used frequently by *Sani* women. "*Lacao*" is a native word used to describe the image of an ideal *Sani* women.

The definition of "*lacao*" differs between generations. In traditional *Sani* society, *Sani* women were referred to as "*lacao*" if they possess exquisite embroidery skills and make beautiful clothes for their family members, further demonstrating that others recognize and acknowledge the level of their skills. Along with various social changes, nowadays, the meaning of the word "*lacao*" has changed as well. It not only describes woman's exquisite embroidery and clothes-making skills, as well as the ability to take care of the household, but also refers to the increasingly positive perception of a woman's economic contributions to her family. In this sense, the *Sani* women who are referred to as *lacao* today are appreciated and recognized by both family and society. Consequently, *Sani* female embroidery traders cite endurance, continuous learning, hard work, economic capacity as their key characteristics, which are also the main reasons they are able to maintain their positions. It is for these reasons that *Sani* female embroidery traders now have more power than the husband in their households. Even though the husband maintains the place of respect as the head of the household and receives honor in society as required by the cultural norms of male supremacy, in practice, *Sani* female embroidery traders hold the real power and are the real heads of the household since they play irreplaceable roles in family management, agricultural production, and in the embroidery trading business.

Therefore, this article argues that although *Sani* females were considered to be powerless figures in the subordinate position of gender relations based on the traditional cultural norms, nowadays, their social position has been improved and enhanced. They are active agents who use different strategies to turn their disadvantages into advantages and to transform their powerless positions into ones with power. In other words, *Sani* female embroidery traders are able to convert their cultural, social, and economic capital into symbolic capital to defend their legitimate positions in the household and in society.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that embroidery practices and trading practices as forms of gendered cultural capital since they are considered as feminine dispositions and are expected to be accumulated by *Sani* females according to cultural norms. After China reconnected with the world economic system and moved towards neoliberalization in the early 1980s, many *Sani* females have seized the new economic opportunity to participate in embroidery trade, they maintained and expanded their business by improving and applying their gendered cultural capital. *Sani* females were considered to be powerless figures in the subordinate position of gender relations traditionally, yet this article has argued that *Sani* females are subjects with capital accumulation strategies of their own, they are not only able to accumulate different forms of capital to pursue a better life but also able to convert their gendered cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital into symbolic power to defend their legitimate positions in the household and in society.

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