



Female weavers group of Ban Tai: The Process of Empowering a Community Using Ethnic Wisdom

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Abstract

This study focuses on the process of empowering the Ban Tai silk-weaving community, using local wisdom of the Teen Chok (hem borders) silk weaving technique. The silk weaving at Ban Tai is operated exclusively by village women who live in the Khu-Bua sub-district of Muang district, Ratchaburi province, Thailand. They inherited the ethnic know-how of Teen Chok silk weaving from the Thai Yuan through their ancestors who migrated from Chiang Saen. This know-how enables them to negotiate with the public and private sectors regarding their own activities and operations. The weaving also provides a supplementary source of income for low-income families, thus improving their quality of life. The group has utilized many strategic operating plans such as setting up Teen Chok silk contests and having ancient Teen Chok silk exhibitions. Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhon was invited to attend the exhibition. Her Royal Highness's attendance and support helped to reinforce the importance of Teen Chok silk weaving among the villagers. Owing to a marketing potential, a knowledge exchange with other provinces, and their ability to integrate cultural capital, this group has become a strong, widely-accepted, and powerful force in society.

Key Words: Teen Chok silk weaving; ethnic wisdom; empowering community; Ban Tai community; Chiang Saen Thai Yuan; female silk weaver



Introduction

Nowadays, the acceptance of women's rights has increased, and women have been empowered with a self-perception of value. Academicians in the Feminism movement play an important role in adjusting the paradigm and perspective regarding the rights and humanity of women. They provoke the issues by criticizing the social structure that takes advantage of women. Several methodologies are used, including: the discourse, the deconstruction, and synthesis to acceptance; the opening of more spheres to women in the sense that women have a social sphere; more opportunities of higher education; and work outside of the home. Economic needs of the family might have precipitated this change. However, the household responsibilities still belong to women. Therefore, women retain their roles inside the household, as well as taking on new roles on the outside.

Although village women have long worked alongside men in the fields of business, agriculture, and even heavy manual labor, history has shown the role of women to be limited to work mostly in the house, such as preparing the food, household work, embroidery, and weaving. All of these activities were perceived as not creating an income. As a result, women had lower income and wages than men, which in turn gave them a lower social status. This lower social status, therefore, slashed their value in society and further disadvantaged them socially and academically (The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security 2004: 33).

Currently, the Thai government not only places importance on women's capacity but also uses that potential to help develop Thailand. In fact, the Thai government has implemented a long term women development plan since 1982. This plan, originally set for a timeframe of 20 years, was not only created to bring about a major change in women's status in Thai society, but was also created to help Thailand progress to a level of western modernity. For the women, this plan has been a success: women now have more economical roles, greater decision making powers, and



responsibility in allocating resources both in the home and in the labor market. More importantly, women have come to exercise their talents and wisdom both individually and in groups. Finally, Thai women have learned to leverage their skills for household production into a profit-making advantage (Amara Suntornthada and Sirinan Kittisuksathit 2004: 8). This long term plan is a breakpoint from past traditions, enabling women to become stronger and better accepted in the outside society.

One such female profit-making group is the female silk weaving group at Ban Tai, Khu Bua sub-district, Muang district, Ratchaburi, Thailand. The women of this community are of Thai Yuan heritage, who have immigrated from Chiang Saen, northern Thailand. They brought wisdom, knowledge and ability, which all serve as the cultural capital. This capital was used to give Chok silk weaving an identity that is easily distinguished from other sources such as Nakhonratchasima, Chiang Mai, Sukhothai, and Kampaengpetch. Unique features include the weaving techniques, patterns and the silk thickness. This group is additionally unique in that they do not wait for government assistance. Instead, the group members empower each other in various ways: passing on their ethnic wisdom from ancestors to presently 50 females; sharing the learning processes in the realm of production; teaching problem solving techniques; and initiating activities that increase their quality of life. What's more, this group is self-equipped with marketing knowledge, thus increasing their negotiating power in the economic and social sectors, and thereby strengthening their community power and improving the level of acceptance of women among men in their society.

Therefore, this research aims to study the process in which Ban Tai female silk weaving group empowers itself by integrating the Thai Yuan ethnic weaving wisdom to the learning and problem-solving process. The integration also leads to community empowerment.

Research Methodology

Based on a qualitative research method, in-depth interviews were conducted with 40 key informants of the Ban Tai female silk weaving group consisting of female group leaders, female group members, seniors, community members, and concerned government agencies. The research employed several theoretical concepts: defining the cultural capital used to participate in market economics; viewing a community as an entrepreneurial entity; recognizing the formation of community networks; and identifying self-reliance as a guideline to study the production process. The production process fosters self reliance by consuming their own products to reduce family expenses. The process does not aim to gain the highest profit by taking advantage of consumers.

Results and Discussions

Background of Ban Tai Villagers

The results of the interviews and discussions with Ban Tai villagers indicated that Thai Yuan people at Ban Tai community migrated from Chiang Sean or Yonok Nakorn in the reign of King Rama I. King Rama I gathered troops to attack Chiang Sean city in 1804 (Nithi Eawsriwong 1996: 185-186). The troops chased down the Burmese and herded the Thai Yuan to Bangkok and migrated to various provinces such as Sukhothai, Tak, Kanchanaburi, Sarabuti, and Nakornratchasima. The Thai Yuan who migrated to Ratchaburi province settled down in Ban Rai Nathee on the riverside of Mae Klong river which is about 2 kilometers east from present Ratchaburi city. As the families grew, relatives spread to settle down in the nearby provinces of Nakhon Pathom and Kanchanaburi, as well as the area of Ban Tai, Khu Bua sub-district, Muang district, Ratchaburi of today.



Ethnic Wisdom of Teen Chok silk weaving of the Thai Yuan Community

The Thai Yuan have passed on the unique identity and exquisite beauty of Teen Chok silk weaving for generations. Teen Chok silk is weaved with techniques that bring more patterns. One distinctive technique involves using thread made by hedgehog hair. Wood or a finger is used to lift the main threads and insert the special thread, thus creating patterns in some spots with various colors. In the past, every Ban Tai family had a loom for weaving silk. But nowadays, people neither admire Teen Chok silk sarong, nor do they weave the Teen Chok silk with the inherited methods and tested techniques from the ancestors. They view Teen Chok as old fashioned and they tend to dress according to the modern trends, wearing skirts and jeans. This trend resulted in a decrease in silk weaving.

Luckily, in the year 1986, Udom Somporn, a Thai crafts teacher who has the ability to weave the Teen Chok silk, recreated Teen Chok silk weaving in the village in order to preserve the Thai wisdom of the Thai Yuan ancestors. Through his efforts, the Wat Kae Sai School Alumni Foundation committee was appointed and maintains relationships between the village and corresponding government agencies.

The Teen Chok silk recreational activities began by organizing a Miss Teen Chok Silk pageant, encouraging the villagers to dress their children in the ancient Teen Chok silk. When the audience realized the beauty and delicacy of the silk, the villagers saw the importance of the Teen Chok that had previously been overlooked. At the same time, the ancient Teen Chok silk contest and the silk exhibition were held. The committee invited Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhon to visit the exhibition. Her Royal Highness has supported the Teen Chok silk weaving. It makes the villagers understand the importance of the Teen Chok weaving. After that, the group established the weaving school to the groups of housewives, young people, students and



the general public to have the opportunity to learn. Moreover, the group, with cooperation from the Department of Vocational Education in the Ministry of Education, has established weaving courses through the academic institutions of Polytechnic College and Ratchaburi Technical College, since 1993 and 1995 respectively.

Furthermore, the group promotes its wares through public announcements and commercials over the television and radio, enabling the general public to know more about the ancient tradition of Khu Bua Teen Chok silk. In fact, the group has established three craft centers in Khu Bua sub-district: Don Rae sub-district, Muang district, and Jom Bung sub-district. These centers serve several functions: as a warehouse for the villager's wares, as a marketplace for those wares, as an order center for customers, and as a training place for Teen Chok silk weaving. More importantly, beyond promoting the knowledge of the silk, these public broadcasts and centers help the group find markets for product distribution; otherwise, without this range of distribution, the Teen Chok silk inheritance could very well be lost forever, along with the villagers' potential for self-reliance.

To teach the weaving, the group invites the wise elders of the village to share their pattern weaving knowledge. In the first phase, the group coordinates with the government agencies, such as the Department of Labor, the Office of Non-formal Education, and the Polytechnic College, in order to gain the financial support for hiring these Teen Chok weaving teachers. The teachers' knowledge, technique, and the village heritage are then passed on to the children in hopes that they in turn will pass it on to their children and subsequent generations, thereby reviving a once almost lost tradition and way of life.

To help advance the Teen Chok silk weaving project, government agencies such as Kae Sai School, have opened the Teen Chok Silk Inheritance Center in order to collect the ancient Teen Chok silk and to teach the Teen Chok silk weaving to young



people and the general public. At the same time, Wat Khu Bua community school has opened the Teen Chok silk weaving course for grade 5 and 6 students, to the delight of the students who all want to learn how to do the Teen Chok silk weaving.

Background and Operation of the Female Weaver Group of Ban Tai

The female weaver group of Ban Tai was established in 1981, led by Aram Piboontaew, the female leader in the village. She gathered the housewives interested in the Teen Chok silk weaving and found support from the public and private sectors.

Before establishing the group, the Ban Tai villagers were mostly farmers and did not have any other jobs. Some housewives went outside to do the weaving using the loom in Ratchaburi. Later the factory used machines for weaving, resulting in the villagers having no part time job to increase their income. As the responsibility to raise the family fell onto the husbands, Aram Piboontaew and other villagers gathered to meet the village headman. They discussed a solution for the career problem of the Ban Tai people. They brainstormed and established the Ban Tai weaver group. The Ban Tai villagers were supported with 10 looms from the Khu Bua Sub-district Administrative Office and they borrowed the money from the members of parliament in the area to buy the thread for weaving. Now the debt is paid off.

The female weaver group of Ban Tai uses the Petch-Thongkam multi-purpose hall, which is the central hall of the village. It also a place for business operation, allowing the housewives to do the weaving and open the Teen Chok silk weaving course to the women who are interested but do not know how to weave. They had also been provided some financial support from the Non-Formal Educational Office with the concept that team work is the tool for negotiation, for power building, or for requesting aid from the government or from private organizations. Eventually this all brings strength to the female group and to the Ban Tai community.



The president of the female weaver group is elected. However, the current president has been in the position for a total of 6 years as she is well accepted for many talents: the ability to weave the Teen Chok silk, logistic coordination, management, marketing, and listening to the group's opinions.

The group has sold shares since June 2004 for 100 baht per share. Almost all families in Ban Tai are the members of the group and receive an annual dividend.

The government agencies and the Khu Bua sub-district Administrative office help publicize the products of the Female Weaver Group of Ban Tai, and there is a large volume of orders. Customers come to see the weaving. But as the area is not close to the main road, traveling is not convenient.

During the first phase, the Ban Tai villagers come to do the weaving at the operations center. Since the housewives still have to take care of the children, the elderly, and the household work, so they often do production work at home, but still participate in the group meetings and visitor welcomings.

When the budget is allocated to the group, the president will call for a meeting to clarify the details. When there is an order for woven silk, the president will assign work - explaining the order and product details in terms of the pattern and color. If it is an urgent order, the order is assigned to the fastest weavers. The group members are able to weave every pattern of the Teen Chok silk.

Teen Chok Silk Weaving, the Thai Yuan ethnic wisdom of the Ban Tai Women

According to the teaching "Any woman who can weave the Teen Chok silk is qualified to be a lady and is suitable to get married and have a family", Ban Tai Thai Yuan people have traditionally taught the Teen Chok silk weaving methods in order to make the apparel and equipment for family members and to offer to the monks. In other words, the weaving was done for personal use and not for commerce.



This attitude changed after the country development policy according to the first Social and Economic Development Plan (1958 – 1962). Focus shifted onto economic development and the stimulation of consumerism. Ban Tai villagers' lives changed according to the commercial economic way. Previously, they used to weave the silk for making apparel such as sarong, loincloth, bags, and satchels. Later, they happened to see these things as outdated and turned toward more modern fashions, leading to a decline in silk weaving. When the group gathered and revived the wisdom of Teen Chok silk, the villagers became interested in making an income from Teen Chok silk weaving. Therefore, the production is done mostly for commerce, but is reliant on the ancestor's wisdom. This combination resulted in the Ban Tai women's having the power to change their status. Ban Tai men are also interested and learn how to weave. Weaving can be done at home, which brings the additional benefit that workers do not have traveling expenses.

The tools and materials for weaving consist of: threads, silk thread, a hand loom, heddle, thread roll, reed, a hoop, a cloth roll, and a stretcher.

The Teen Chok Silk can be used in various ways. One prominent application is found in the edging of a sarong. Other popular uses include loincloths, handkerchiefs, and the head cover for persons about to be ordained as Buddhist monks. All of these items require good eyesight to produce, because the patterns are quite complex and the items are quite small. Nowadays, the elderly usually do not weave because their poor eyesight leads to many errors in the final product.

The price of the Teen Chok Silk depends on the pattern and the difficulty in weaving. Wholesale prices of regular plain cloth are 80 baht per meter - small pattern cloth is 400 baht per piece, and a pearl pattern is typically 600 baht. Currently, there is a mutual agreement in setting the price with other Teen Chok Silk weaving groups in order to create a mutual price standard.



The uniqueness of the Khu Bua cloth is due to its pattern and color. The ancient Khu Bua cloth consists of 3 colors which are green, black and red considered as the distinctive identity that differentiate it from other Teen Chok Silk. The Ban Tai silk is weaved by hand loom making the cloth firm when comparing with the silk from Don Rae, which is a nearby sub-district that is weaved by stretcher loom. The Ban Tai silk is more beautiful and firmer compared to silk from other areas, because the Thai Yuan in Ratchaburi pull the threads one by one in order to create the pattern. Other silk producers tend to lift the cloth rather than pull the threads one by one. As a result, the Ban Tai silk is more detailed, firm and popular, prompting customers to refer to this distinctive character.

Female Weaver Group of Ban Tai Network

The group network is considered to be the network that creates social relationships on every level: individual-to-individual, individual-to-group and group-to-group.

The female weaver group of Ban Tai originated from a group that continuously works together. The group gains support for group activities from both private and public sectors, according to the government development course that concentrates on strengthening communities that have the potential to be independent.

The relationship of the weaver group and the customers is good because the customers believe in the weaver's skills. Referrals are common. Therefore, there are orders for personal use and commerce, continuously strengthening the network between individuals and the group.

In addition to the government-supported group-to-group network, the female weaver group of Ban Tai independently coordinates with other weaver groups in other sub-districts such as Wat Na Nong weaver group, Don Rae sub-district, Wat Rang Bua weaver group, Jom Bung sub-district and Wat Khu Bua weaver group, and Khu Bua sub-district. The cooperation between these



groups achieves the following goals: setting prices, borrowing silk samples for exhibitions and road shows, exchanging distributor information, and organizing information exchanges with other groups. The Teen Chok silk weaving experience has been exchanged with other weaving groups from places such as Utaithani and Nakornratchasima.

The Self Dependence of the Female Weaver Group of Ban Tai

In the past, Ban Tai villagers mainly did farming because the topography was suitable. Some villagers were freelancers collecting local vegetables to sell, such as morning glory, water clover, and pang vegetable. The primary household income was the responsibility of the husbands. The traditional life of the Ban Tai villager was rather difficult, as the income did not cover expenses. After establishing the female weaver group in 1999, the villagers became more interested in weaving after working in the weaving factory in Ratchaburi. Those women learned how to weave the Teen Chok silk, creating a good income for the family. Families turned to the Teen Chok silk weaving as their primary source of income. Some families have many looms.

Most work comes from a regular shop order, comes from a regular customer order, or is performed in anticipation of sales at an exhibition. The income from weaving enables the Ban Tai women to rely on themselves without having to depend on their husbands' income. This gives them more social negotiating power in many decisions, including household finances and children's education. Moreover, the weaving is done at home and in the community creating the good relationship among the community members.

The monthly income from weaving is more than 7000 baht. Some husbands have quit their old job to learn the Teen Chok silk weaving. This brings the families closer together, having better lives, savings, and money for investment.



The existence of the female weaver group of Ban Tai resulted from the confluence of several forces: the participation of the villagers; the vision of group leaders; love; unity; the desire to help each other; the love of Teen Chok silk weaving; and the desire to inherit the Thai Yuan ancestors' art and wisdom.

Conclusion

This study details the growth of one female group that employed the concept of cooperating in order to gain power within society. By employing their cultural capital to support an operation, the group gained strength and self reliance. Teen Chok silk weaving is this cultural capital – it is their own original wisdom inherited from their ancestors. The Thai Yuan have pride in their roots and ethnicity. They used this pride, along with economic necessity, to maintain and revive the Thai Yuan culture. Females were elevated to self reliance after years of doing household work and relying on the husband's income. Today there are a number of groups that benefit from Teen Chok silk: the merchandisers; the distributors; new communities that seek to replicate the success of the Ban Thai; the government agencies; and the Thai Yuan children. One can see that the value of the ancestor's wisdom was created by the integration of the economic, social and cultural capital of the community. The value can be measured in the following ways:

1. An acceptance of a woman's role in household economic development: Traditionally, a woman's sphere was restricted to the house - lacking any opportunities to access power and fame. The building of the community enterprise brought jobs and good income for the families, bringing economic stability and security. It led to household self reliance. Women do not need to rely on the men's income as in the past, and women now have the household decision making power. Women also have power outside the household. They are often trainers and members of the management committee.



2. The social networks between the Teen Chok silk weaving group, both inside and outside of the community: These networks lead to experience exchange, pricing agreements, and the development of relationships with traders and customers.

3. Community enterprise management: The systematic thinking and the management style learned by the Ban Tai women is exemplified by the “4 star One Tambon One Product” (OTOP). The female weaver group of Ban Tai brainstormed ideas, and applied management skills to select the outstanding product for sale, bringing pride to the community and the surrounding locality.

4. Gender equality: The role and status of the female weaver group of Ban Tai is strong and well accepted with equality not different from men. The female group has the courage to show their potential. This is displayed by their willingness to take on leadership roles, their courage to give an opinion, and their ability to propose long term plans to the group. This equality will likely grow beyond Ban Tai community.

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