

The Dynamics and Adaptation of Hand-Woven Mud Mee Silk Businesses in the Thai Puan Community, Lopburi Province, Central Part of Thailand

¹Pranorm Kiantong, ²Watee Kongbuntad and ³Worapol Aengwanich

¹Maharakham University, Kantharawichai District, Maha Sarakham 44150, Thailand

²Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Sciences, Maharakham University, Mueang District, Maha Sarakham 44000, Thailand

Abstract: This research identifies the dynamics and adaptability of the hand-woven Mud Mee silk business in Thailand. Specifically, the research explores the Mud Mee silk business as operated by the Thai Puan, a Thai-Lao ethnic group that descended from the Puan people. The Thai Puan live in Lopburi province in the central part of Thailand where the research, using qualitative research methods, was conducted from January to July 2007. The first Thai Puan settlers originally came from Puan City in the sub-district of Xieng Khouang in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and migrated to Thailand more than two hundred years ago. Since then, they have evolved with contemporary Thai society and have developed their own identity, traditions and culture. Their distinctive hand-woven Mud Mee silk is a symbol that represents their unique identity and traditional production skills. These skills were handed down through generations and produced a livelihood for their communities long before the introduction of modern capitalism. Today, their production techniques have advanced. They use their knowledge of traditional weaving techniques to be more flexible allowing them to adapt their weaving style to accommodate contemporary society's demands. The process has been one of continuous learning and adapting. It is also a process that enhances their product and improves trade, which helps subsidize the community's livelihood. Over the years, as trade among communities increased, a sub-district-level business system emerged along with women weavers' guilds. There were also alterations made for surviving capitalism. Weaving networks for both production and marketing were established. Moreover, there was an adaptation to mainstream development both in recognition agreement and in selecting new products for appropriate integration into society. Importantly, the community's continual learning process makes growing career and business opportunities possible. Finally, this study shows that these factors create the potential for a stronger community economy by introducing cooperation between members of groups that have been formed to decrease the risks of market price and market problems. The study also demonstrates the importance of having a leader who is empowered and devoted and members who are willing to work together for the benefit of the group and community.

Key words: Dynamics, adaptation, network, business, hand-woven mud mee, Thai Puan

INTRODUCTION

Thai society, regardless of ethnic group, has long emphasized the importance of village community, kinship, beneficence, generosity, love and friendship. This way of life has been nurtured by villagers and has become a strong pillar of the community. The trademarks of Thai society are: environmentally-friendly production methods which enhance self-reliance, magnificent unique local cultures subtly filled with local wisdom, beliefs filled with tricks encouraging mutual love among people and respect for nature are what is called community culture. It is a

culture that originated with local people's wholehearted cooperation and has assured the people's well being for generations. However, Thailand's community culture has been undermined by capitalism, where economic growth is the dominate concern. It was adopted 40 years ago by the Thai government as a major country development policy (Nathsupha, 2005). The policy stated that in order to achieve sustainable and well-balanced development, higher priority must be put on the overlapping and mutual reinforcement of the country's existing capital including social and economic capital and natural and environmental capital. Reinforcement of social capital is

the solid foundation. It begins with human development in order that the people are equipped with knowledge and morality, public consciousness and awareness of change. This then drives the country to develop as a strong community with both intra-and inter-community beneficence (The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2006).

Problems in economic and social development in Thailand have been evident since the first National Economic and Social Development Plan. In 1997 an economic crisis in the country prompted the government to launch a development program named the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) development project. It was designed to add product value to community products and encourage each community to develop local business ownership (Dangdokmai, 1999). The program considered it a must that the local business owner's products be representative of the local community's traditions and skill sets, which combined local wisdom with universality.

The program has encountered various problems: business management, marketing, product quality, raw materials, product processing development, product design development, research, product development, as well as technology transfer are but a few. Community cooperation is needed in order to solve these problems and generate quality products to compete in the market. Local academics must get involved and work with the community, as well as build cooperative networks with other communities to exchange knowledge and experiences. The existing knowledge can then be used for the complete adaptation of the plan as it develops into the mechanism of community business development (Jommuang and Wasusopapol, 2003). Businesses employing local wisdom or local identity to generate income for the community are indispensable to the existence of the community and the quality of life of its people. These local businesses can startup with a small investment. Also, independent business administrations can produce income for the community. People in the community can supplement their main income with side jobs in agriculture and according to the community business network which provides inter-community encouragement and sustenance, they can support products from other communities. They can gain market power by establishing an occupational guild (Wiwonwan, 2002).

An occupational guild established by the Thai Puan Hand-woven Mud Mee Woman Weavers in the Ban Mee district of Lopburi province in the central part of Thailand has practiced the culture of Mud Mee weaving over many years and inherited the wisdom and community culture unique to the Thai Puan. The guild runs its business

activities adhering to the precepts of local wisdom and community culture. The local wisdom and community culture are composed of the knowledge and experiences derived from a thinking system, beliefs, values, or ideology that comprise the identity of the community over a long period of time. This has successfully generated income for the guild's members and the community up until the present. Unfortunately, accurate economic data that pertain to the dynamics and adaptation concept of the Thai Puan community is nearly non-existent. Nonetheless, the absence of information does not discourage them from creating projects that will enhance their livelihoods. These projects include raising public awareness of their products, cultural conservation programs and their ability to adapt their products to a contemporary audience are methods that will continue to improve their local economies. The objective of this study then was to identify the dynamics and the adaptability of a particular hand-woven Mud Mee silk business in the Thai Puan community of Lopburi province in the central part of Thailand. The results of the study could be seen as a valuable foundation for other communities in Thailand that are striving to modernize.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area: Purposive sampling was done in the community of the Thai Puan ethnic group including the sub-districts of Mee village, Kluay village, Sai village, Hin Pak village and Bang Ka Pee village in Ban Mee district, Lopburi Province, central part of Thailand. In each of the sub-districts, the residents weave Thai Puan local fabric and they are members of the Thai Puan weaver's guilds.

Methods of study: Information source and research methods were divided into two categories:

Documentary research: The author explored primary and secondary sources, especially related research, in order to study ideas and analyze results derived from the research on the topics: background, the current situation, the characteristics of dynamics and the adaptation of the establishment of the hand-woven Mud Mee silk business network in the Thai Puan community of Lopburi province. The documentary research contributed to the development of new ideas and alternatives for community development.

Qualitative research: This was done using various methods including observation, interview, focus group discussions among experts, among stakeholders and among the general public. The snowball technique was

used in order to study the current situation, dynamics and the adaptation of the establishment of hand-woven Mud Mee silk business network. This then led to the analysis of different issues to reach the empirical facts regarding the research objectives.

Data analysis: The data analysis was carried out in accordance with the determined research objectives using analytic induction based on Chanthavanich (Chanthavanich, 2005). There were 5 steps in the analytic induction process) Theory utilization and conceptual framework formulation for analytical thinking,) Data analysis,) Notetaking and indexing,) Memoing and data reduction and) Drawing and verifying conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The background of Thai Puan community: Thai Puan is an ethnic group that settled in many different provinces in Thailand. The word “Puan” is used to identify the group and in their own language they refer to themselves as “Puan” or “Tai Puan.” The Thai Puan migrated from Puan City on the left bank of the Khong River in the Xieng Khouang Sub-district of Xieng Khouang City, which was once an important city of the Puan Empire in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. More than two hundred years ago, they migrated into Thailand several times: in the late reign of King Thonburi, in the reign of King Buddha Yodfa Chulalok the Great (Rama I), in the reign of King Nangklao (Rama III) and in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) during the campaign against Chinese Haw (Jumthong, 2003). The migrants settled in different regions: The Central region (in the provinces of Suphanburi, Singhaburi, Saraburi, Uthaitani, Kanchanaburi and Lopburi), Northern region (in the provinces of Phrae, Phitsanulok, Uttaradit, Phichit, Sukothai and Nakhonsawan), Eastern region (in the provinces of Nakhonnayok, Prajeenburi and Chachoengsao) and Northeastern region (in the provinces of Udonthani and Nongbualampoo). The Thai Puan named their villages in Thailand after original Lao names. Interestingly, Thai Puan have for decades established relationship networks called Thai Puan Society in Bangkok and 19 other provinces. This highlights the effort of the Thai Puan ethnic groups in Thailand to stay together, which can reflect the relationship networks resulting from various factors, for example, the collective awareness of ethnic identity, building the nation-state, the trend towards the promotion of culture, especially Thai Puan’s long-inherited local wisdom in weaving and the promotion of ecotourism (Sombat, 2005).

Initially, an assumption, coupled with the study of historical evidence, archaeological sites and permanent structures, as well as verbal accounts, led to the conclusion that the Thai Puan had reasons for settling in Lopburi Province. The 4 reasons are as follow: Normal migrants, war captives, refugees and migrants following their kin. The migrants can be categorized into 3 main groups.

The first group migrated into Thailand around B.E.2321 during the reign of King Thonburi, the second migrated in B.E.2371 in the reign of King Nangklao, when there was the rebellion of Prince Anuwong of Vientiane and the third migrated after B.E.2436 in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. The third group is the ancestor of the Thai Puan descendants in Lopburi Province and has their own unique culture, tradition and beliefs. They had the opportunity to directly inherit their ancestors’ local wisdom, experiences and ways of life. The Thai Puan in Lopburi province live in Muang, Khoksamrong and Ban Mee districts, which is the home to most Lao Puan in Thailand.

The word Mee is a Thai Puan word meaning Mee tying. Silk yarn is tied into many sections with various colours and then *Pum* cloth or *Yok Dork* cloth called *Sin Mee* (Mee sarong) is woven. Because the villagers are extraordinarily skillful Sin Mee weavers, their village is named “Ban Mee” which symbolizes the Thai Puan’s Mud Mee weaving profession (Meesatdharma, 1983). Their main source of income is rice farming, both non-glutinous and glutinous rice, which is for domestic consumption. They transplant rice in the lowland and sow rice in the highland. Rice farming has been related to Thai Puan’s way of life for generations. The hands-on practice leads to the experience, skill and intellect of the farmers. With beliefs and faith, they boost the morale of both their fellows and themselves, which has become their own culture. This knowledge has undergone the process of selection and adaptation until it has become the skill and mastery that can be eternally used to solve problems and improve the quality of life (Romrattanaphan, 2005).

Regardless of geographical changes, the Thai Puan still maintain their cultural identity which is outstandingly unique when compared with the culture of other groups. If people from each district in Lop Buri participate in an activity in the same area, it is easy to immediately detect the Thai Puan from Ban Mee district from their spoken language, dressing, manners and good heart, all of which have been inherited from their Thai Puan ancestors. The transfer of Thai Puan’s local wisdom is thus a very important socialization mechanism since it reveals the community’s idea of life-long learning that covers every aspect of their way of life from birth until death.

The current situation of hand-woven Mud Mee cloth in Thai Puan community:

The Thai Puan's wisdom or culture can be considered as knowledge and experience that have been inherited over a lifetime of change. Similarly, Thai Puan Mud Mee weaving is a cultural reproduction that embraces change to continue to exist. Weaving is not only an activity that generates income for the villagers; weaving is also intertwined with their moral system and religious ethics. Three examples would be their generosity, their use of Mud Mee in religious ceremonies and its use as an offering in various Thai Puan rites. Moreover, Mud Mee weaving, a deeply rooted wisdom, is considered to be the Thai Puan's spirit that reveals the community's identity and society. It is a cultural activity which reflects the traditional skills that has also been part of the production system that existed in the community long before the influence of external capitalism. Their new production process, with the adaptation of the combined knowledge in Mud Mee weaving and the continuous learning and adaptation process can develop their heretofore domestic activity of weaving into a trading business, which helps the villagers to subsidize their livelihood. This so called domestic business can be linked to sub-district-level community business in accordance with the trade's size and level.

Dynamics and the adaptation of the hand-woven Mud Mee silk business in the Thai Puan community:

The Thai Puan's response to rapid external change has been to use their original knowledge in Mud Mee weaving to produce products and then modify them to be acceptable to capitalistic requirements. Development and selective adoption has become the community's business system. This system may not be defined as a successful system, as in other types of business, in terms of profit, business growth and technology-aided production. Rather, it depends on collective wisdom and involvement to determine the kinds of products, prospective customers and marketing. The community cannot exist on the hand-woven Mud Mee weaving business alone. The study reveals that variety is one way toward achieving self-sufficiency. As such, the self-supporting Mud Mee weaving business must be conducted simultaneously with other pursuits, for example agriculturalists, carpenters, concrete workers and wage earners. These businesses can improve the Thai Puan's livelihood and quality of life. Employment and higher earnings can decrease social problems and positively affect Thailand's overall economic conditions. The Thai Puan's development foundation consists of wisdom and community culture. This then is their wisdom network.

The wisdom network gives them the confidence to adapt to external changes. Their ability to adapt to

changes, such as changes in capitalist mainstream development, has become one method of creating suitable conditions for a self-supporting community with a well-balanced existence. Their adaptability can also be seen in their production, marketing, recognition agreement and ability to select new things to benefit the community. This continuous learning process enables the development of the weaving profession into a reliable business.

The Thai Paun have evolved into contemporary Thai people with their own identity, tradition and cultures. Hand-woven Mud Mee in particular represents the Thai Puan's long inherited identity. This corresponds to the Structural-functional Theory that emphasizes the existence or the stability of a social system including function performing and constant stability suitable to an uncomplicated society. In the present, Mud Mee weaving is a cultural activity. It reflects the symbol which, in accordance with symbolic interactionism, states that a person learns from the social interaction he has with others. This interaction is one of the original production skills that existed long before the community fell under the influence of external capitalism. The current production process is a new process that uses a Mud Mee weaving style that corresponds to new situations. The process continues with trade which generates income to subsidize the villagers' livelihood, creates employment and runs activities that promote earnings by improving the community's management capability. The mutually interdependent nature of the business discourages the villagers' emigration (Walaisatian *et al.*, 2006). In accordance with the study of Jommuang and Wasusophaphol (2003) trading leads to the establishment of women's weavers guilds and the emergence of the sub-district-level business according to the size and level of trading. As rapid change occurred, the communities in the past integrated original knowledge and then reproduced product. Additional alterations were made allowing for capitalism. Then the weaving networks, both production and marketing, were established. Moreover, there was an adaptation in accordance with the mainstream development both in recognition agreement and in selecting new products for appropriate integration concerning community benefit. One important point is the community's all-time or continuous learning. This is in accordance with the study of Phongsaphich (Phongsaphich, 2004) which states that human beings must live together in a group, that the sociocultural adaptation is in group-level rather than individual level and that cultural inheritance must be transferred from one generation to the next. Consequently, the cultural adaptation is the adaptation of the group which resulted in the guild's establishment thereby developing the weaving profession into a business.

However, the successful establishment of a hand-woven Mud Mee business network in the Thai Puan community, which is one alternative towards creating the condition of a self-supporting community with a well-balanced existence, depends upon the development foundation of the Thai Puan's wisdom and their community culture. Moreover, there must be the adaptation, both in recognition agreement and in selecting new products for appropriate integration concerning community benefit, to address changes arising from the development of capitalism. Importantly, the community's continual learning and improvement makes success possible.

CONCLUSION

Thai Puan are an ethnic group descending from Puan ancestors who originally lived in Puan City in the Xieng Khouang Sub-district in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and migrated into Thailand more than two hundred years ago. They have become contemporary Thai people with their own identity, tradition and cultures. Hand-woven Mud Mee silk especially represents Thai Puan. It is currently the sociocultural activity reflecting the symbol which indicates the traditional production skills having existed in the community long before the influence of capitalism. Their current production techniques are new processes that include adaptations of the community's collective weaving knowledge. The new processes allow Mud Mee weavers to respond to new contemporary situations. This fosters the process of continuous learning and adaptation. The new process engenders trade, which generates income to subsidize the villagers' livelihood. The new process has led to the establishment of women's weaver's guilds and the emergence of the sub-district-level business according to the size and level of trading. A business network has been extended to the other communities and along with this are the transfer of weaving knowledge and wider marketing. There is adaptation in selecting new products for appropriate integration concerning community benefit. Importantly, the community's continuous learning enables the development of the weaving profession into a business.

REFERENCES

- Chantavanich, S., 2005. *Qualitative Research Methodology*. 3rd Edn. Chulalongorn University Book Center, Bangkok.
- Dangdokmai, M., 1999. *Ancient Patterned Woven Fabric, Uthaithani's Local Wisdom*. Sang Panya Lert, Bangkok.
- Jommuang, L. and S. Wasusophaphol, 2003. *Tai Lue Woven Fabric: Community Economy for Self-Sustenance*. Sangsan Press, Bangkok.
- Jumthong, S., 2003. *Thai Puan Culture*, Ban Sai Sub-district. Lopburi: Sub-District. Administration Organization, Lopburi.
- Meesatdharma, S., 1983. *Thai Puan Ban Mee Lopburi*: Ban Mee District Education Office, Lopburi.
- Nathsupha, C., 2005. *The Ideology of Community Economy: Theoretical Proposal in Different Social Contexts*. 2nd Edn. Chulalongkorn University Book Center, Bangkok.
- Phongsaphich, A., 1998. *Cultural Religion and Ethnic Thai-social Analyze On Anthropology*. 5th Edn. Chulalongkorn University Book Center, Bangkok.
- Romrattanaaphan, W., 2005. *Social Capital*. Bangkok. Duan Tula Printing House, Bangkok.
- Sombat, J., 2005. *Puan's Identity in Contemporary Thai Phenomenon*. Graduate thesis, Master of Sociology and Anthropology (Anthropology), Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University, Bangkok.
- The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2006. *The 10th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2006-2010)*, The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, Bangkok.
- Walaisatian, P., J. Mongkolchaiarunya and K. Phuang-ngam, 2006. *Policy and Strategic in Eco-Social and Environmental Development, Money Saving Group for Next Step to Production of E-San region in Social-Experience Developing*, Plan Printing Co. Ltd., Bangkok.
- Wiwonwan, W., 2002. *Ban Noennamyen Weaving and Paknampho Products from Local Wisdom*. 2d Edn. Thai Wattana Panich, Bangkok.