

Sani Yi Female Embroidery Traders' Economic Participation

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With growing social change, an increasing number of Sani Yi females in Shilin, Yunnan Province, China, are presently entering the market to participate in economic activities, especially embroidery trade. Sani Yi female embroidery traders' emergence, different types of traders, and their trading patterns will be analyzed in this paper. Moreover, this paper attempts to explore the ways in which Sani Yi female embroidery traders strategically apply their social capital to pursue better economic life. It also tries to examine how Sani Yi female embroidery traders' economic participation brings changes in their lives and in their relations with males.

Keywords: Sani Yi Female Embroidery Traders, Economic Participation, Social Capital, Strategies, Gender Relations

INTRODUCTION

Various scholars have written about women who participate in economic activities in different contexts. Some scholars examined the purpose of women's workforce engagement. For example, Seligmann (2001) claims that women become willing to participate in economic activities for survival of their households and their children. Moreover, Lessinger's (2001) work is on Chennai market women's economic participation in south India. In her work, she proposes the idea of "sacrificial motherhood" referring to women who will do anything to preserve their children and to keep their households intact. She illustrates the importance of female petty traders' work for maintaining their family well-being, and thus their works being viewed as an extension of mothering.

Some scholars discussed women's strategies for better economic life. Like Chang's (2014) work is on Yunnanese women traders' economic participation in the border area. She examined Yunnanese women traders' long-distance trade experiences and their business strategies. Moreover, as Aranya (2008) has discussed in her work, the *Tai* petty traders use various strategies to gain better economic life at the Shan State and China border.

In addition, some scholars also explored that women's economic participation entails changes in women's roles and their relations with males. Wu's (2001) examines the *Nuosu* women's economic roles during the social change contexts in China. She claimed that *Nuosu* women played a variety of roles in the traditional agricultural economy in the history. Along with social change, they had the opportunity to make their own careers and look for independent life by selling household goods in the market. This helped bringing changes in *Nuosu* women's lives. Moreover, Krongthong Sudprasert's (2008) focuses on the *Hmong* women hemp traders who live in a village in Payao Province, Thailand, connect to Laos for hemp trading and sell it at Warorot Market in Chiang Mai. Her research shows that *Hmong* women hemp

traders, under the social change, have become adapted to the market. As a result, restricted by the patriarchal ideology, despite *Hmong* women hemp traders still do not have absolute power to manage the income and to make decisions in the household, their increasing various forms of capital give them a little power to negotiate with their husbands.

Therefore, in this paper, I would like to explore *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders' economic participation. More specifically, this paper attempts to examine how do *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders strategically apply different dimensions of social capital to gain better economic life, and it also tries to discuss how their economic participation brings changes in their lives and in their relations with males.

METHODS AND SOURCES OF DATA

The field work of this study was conducted in Shilin *Yi* Autonomous County, located in the mid-east area of Yunnan Province, southwest part of China. This study is based on data collection during 2017-18. The process of data collection of this research used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative household survey provided rich information on the basic life situation of *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders, such as land ownership, income and expenditure, etc. Household survey involved 30 *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders and their husbands. Each informant was chosen on the basis of diverse requirements, such as socio-economic background, educational background, age, marriage situation. This was done in order to choose a diverse and complex research sample. In addition, this research was followed by personal narrative and participant observation in order to examine changes in each woman's life through her own interpretations and perspectives. The informants' diverse narrations not only illustrate *Sani Yi* females' life experiences, but also provide insights into their personal life aspects.

***SANI YI* FEMALE EMBROIDERY TRADERS EMERGE UNDER THE DYNAMIC ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES**

This section demonstrates under what circumstances the *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders have emerged in; how so many *Sani Yi* females have been able to seize new economic opportunities; and how they have changed their livelihood strategies from agricultural production to embroidery trade as a result of conducive economic environment during the past four decades. There are two main issues worth of being discussed. Firstly, limited land resources are one of main reasons that force *Sani Yi* people enter in the non-agricultural work sphere. Secondly, ethnic tourism and the commoditization of *Sani Yi* culture provide new economic opportunities to *Sani Yi* females for participating in economic activities.

Limited Land Resources

In the early 1980s, China developed a family-farming system, formally called the "household responsibility system". This system introduced dividing up collective land and contracting plots to individual households (Bossen, 2002). Benefited from this system, *Sani Yi* gained freedom over the crops they would plant, and their living standard was consequently improved. However, there emerged three different types of land possession-based problems. This forced more and more *Sani Yi* people to enter in the non-agricultural work space in order to look for new occupations.

First of all, during the past four decades, the increase in the number of households has resulted in decreasing the cultivated land holding size of each family. Some *Sani Yi* families not having enough cultivated lands, especially the young generation, have to look for other jobs in order to earn income in new occupations.

Secondly, some *Sani Yi* families have lost their cultivated lands to serve the recent land reform policy, especially who live nearby the urban area. They had to sell their lands to local government to support tourism projects and economic development.

Similar is the case of Wendy (a pseudonym) who lives in the X village, 2 kilometers far from the Forest Stone Scenic Spot. Around 10 years ago, in order to expand the tourist areas based on the scenic

spot, the villagers, who lived nearby the scenic spot area, had to sell their cultivated lands to the local government. Wendy told me:

“As compensation, we could get 10,000 yuan per year in the previous years. But those years, we could only get 2,000 yuan per year. Once we lost our lands, we could not earn income from agricultural outputs any longer. How could we survive if we relied solely on the compensation fee? All of family members have to look for other jobs outside the village in order to make a living” (Wendy, pers. comm. August 2017).

Like Wendy’s family, numerous households who lived nearby the scenic spot area had to sell their lands to the government. In spite of fact that the local government provided opportunities for those people to work at the scenic spot, the limited job opportunities were not enough be offered to everyone. For other people, they experience different constraints in looking for job opportunities.

Thirdly, for some *Sani Yi* families, the agricultural production does not provide enough income over the whole year. Based on the special rocky and sandy soil characteristics and climate conditions in Shilin, the cultivated lands are very suitable for tobacco planting. With the external political change and the improvement of technology and planting skills have caused tobacco output highly developed. As tobacco planting areas extended, tobacco became the primary pillar industry in Shilin County. It also has brought greater economic profits to local people (Ang & Liu et al, 2006).

By 1980s, the Shilin Tobacco Company started to make contract with local people. The company provides technology and planting skills as well as fertilizers for local people. The company is also responsible for collecting flue-cured tobacco from local people each year. However, since some cultivated lands are rugged and rocky, tobacco company only makes contracts with the households whose lands are flat and free of stones. So, the *Sani Yi* families without contracts can only plant some cash crops with low prices, and thus their agricultural productions do not provide enough income over the whole year. These families’ annual income from the farm work could only support their agricultural consumption. In this sense, young generation usually choose to leave their farm work for their parents or rent out their lands to their relatives or friends, and they look for jobs outside the village.

Given these circumstances, *Sani Yi* people in the either case would be forced to enter the non-agricultural work space. Meanwhile, *Sani Yi* males and females experience different restraints and constraints in finding jobs. Because of their limited education background and skills, they can only find few of the available jobs. Occupations open to males include working at construction sites or automobile service factories, driving in transport system or express delivery industry and working as security guard. However, fewer occupational opportunities are open to females, as illegal tour guides working in the scenic spot, waitresses in restaurants or hotels, embroiderers serving in the business of clothes and textile garments.

The Commoditization of *Sani Yi* Culture and Ethnic Tourism Development

In addition to availability of limited land resources, another factor is promotion of ethnic tourism development by the state in Shilin, which influence the local people to enter in the non-agricultural work sphere.

The commoditization of *Sani Yi* culture emerged under the two main conditions: the revival of local marketing system and the ethnic tourism development. As the collective system was being dismantled, the rural marketing system started reviving in the late 1970s. The rural marketing system has not only provided a way of self-employment and earning income for rural people engaged in different economic activities, but it also provides possibilities for households to establish and run their own enterprises and hire labor privately (Judd, 1994). Meanwhile, the household responsibility system freed up much surplus labor in the countryside, the government accommodated this pressure by easing the mobility restrictions of residences and by allowing them to set up small-scale enterprises (Diamond, 1975). Despite rural residents were still barred from re-establishing permanent urban residence in the cities, the government allowed them to set up shop in villages or in smaller towns.

As a consequence, nearly one hundred million adults abandoned their cultivated land and took up other work in the villages and townships throughout China in the mid-1980s (Summerfield, 1994). Over time, townships grew rapidly and became significant economic and social elements in the Chinese polity. Whole markets opened up and created new large demands for consumer goods. Given these circumstances, rural enterprises sprang up like “bamboo shoots after a spring rain (*yuhou chunsun*)” in China during the period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, throughout the decade, and rural enterprises became the major sources of rural prosperity (Wong, 1988; Lieberthal, 1995).

As elsewhere, the rural marketing system was being revived gradually in the early 1980s in Shilin. Local people were able to purchase commodities in local markets. This continued expanding till the present time. On the one hand, with the revival of rural markets, local people’s living standards and the extent of convenience were improved rapidly. On the other hand, the market has become one of the few places to provide opportunities for *Sani Yi* females to participate in economic activities. For example, it is worth noticing that the “Ethnic Embroidery Handicrafts Factory of Shilin *Yi* Autonomous County”, one of famous rural enterprises, was established by 1984 (Bi & Wang & Li et al, 1996). Beginning with this first embroidery handicrafts factory, the embroidery trading spread quickly among *Sani Yi* females in Shilin.

Meanwhile, the ethnic tourism development also enhanced and expanded the commoditization of *Sani Yi* culture. Some scholars argue that ethnic tourism development is promoted by the state for economic reasons, which, in a certain sense causes people to reevaluate their culture and re-conceptualize their ethnic identity (Linnekin, 1997; MacCannell, 1984; Picard, 1990). This argument offers us a way to understand the relationship between state-promoted ethnic tourism and the commoditization of culture. In China, the state plays an absolutely arbitrary role in defining ethnic tourism through its regulation of tourism investment, consumption and production (Swain, 1990).

After the economic reform started in the early 1980s, ethnic tourism was promoted by the Chinese state for local economic development and foreign currency (Swain, 1990). Ethnic autonomous policy has centralized ethnic minority groups living in specific autonomous areas and has guaranteed ethnic minority groups’ specific legal rights. Most of the ethnic minority groups live in regions with abundant natural resources, and they hold the greatest geographical and cultural diversity. It has resulted in increasingly attracting both international and domestic tourists through unique landscape and exotic culture. Jameson (1979) and Greenwood (1977) argue that a landscape transformed into an object and appropriated for tourists’ gaze may be described as transforming the culture to a marketable item, which is commoditized when customs become attractive for the tourists. In this sense, ethnic culture and ethnicity have been objectified and commoditized in the economic context while transforming them into products that can be sold and bought in the markets.

With the promotion of ethnic tourism by the government, Shilin has become a very famous tourist destination opened to the outside world attracting both domestic and international tourists. *Sani Yi* people have been coping with tourism since the early 1980s, and around 500,000 tourists visited every year in Shilin during 1990s (Swain, 1989, 1990). The primary attractiveness of Shilin destination lies in the specific limestone landscape, however, the unique *Sani Yi* culture cannot be ignored as the second source of attraction. Influenced both by the market revival and the ethnic tourism development, *Sani Yi* culture, in terms of diverse embroidered products, transformed into commodities is available for people to purchase. One of the famous *Sani Yi* embroidery handicrafts markets in Shilin was next to the Stone Forest Scenic Spot (Bi & Wang & Li et al, 1996).

The commoditization of *Sani Yi* culture has also been reported in an article that *Sani Yi* females have themselves learnt certain foreign languages, like simple English, French, and Japanese in order to communicate with foreign customers (Smith, 1989). During that time, a great part of the tourism revenue was generated by handicraft marketing of the *Sani Yi* embroidered souvenir items (Swain, 1989). According to the report on tourism ranks from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ (1989), *Sani Yi* embroidered products along with jade and porcelain as typical souvenirs of China.

Therefore, the emergence of cultural commoditization provided new economic opportunities for *Sani Yi* females to enter in the market to sell their embroidered products. *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders have emerged under the dynamic economic opportunities. To understand the *Sani Yi* female embroidery

traders and their social practice, the different types of *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders and the trading system will be further examined in the next section.

CLASSIFYING *SANI YI* FEMALE EMBROIDERY TRADERS AND TRADING SYSTEMS

Inspired by the new economic opportunities, some of *Sani Yi* females have become market traders selling certain commodities, especially embroidered products. According to the trading time and space, the present *Sani Yi* embroidery traders can be classified into two main types: permanent embroidery traders and temporary embroidery traders. The *Sani Yi* permanent embroidery traders are those who rent commercial buildings in the market or manage their own stores at home; this group of traders usually have stable trading life. The *Sani Yi* temporary embroidery traders are those who have small budgets and no fixed selling locations in the mall; this group of traders normally set up temporary booths in the street during the market days or involve in certain other similar activities.

The first type of *Sani Yi* traders are permanent full-time traders. This type of embroidery traders can be classified into two subgroups according to their trading places: the market traders and the home-based traders. The market traders usually rent stores in the central market—*Shuanglong* Mall in Shilin. I have observed that there are approximately 63 shops selling various manufactured goods in the mall. Almost half (around 29 shops) of the total are *Sani Yi* clothing stores run by *Sani Yi* traders. They are selling different products, such as *Sani Yi* dresses, *Sani Yi* bags, *Sani Yi* hats (*baotou*), baby carriers, ethnic-style fashion clothing, and ethnic souvenirs. Their customers are mainly local people (both *Sani Yi* and non-*Sani Yi* people) and tourists. The rest (around 34 shops) are selling other commodities, such as food, fashion clothing, beddings, and daily groceries. They are mainly rented by *Han* Chinese merchants. This study focuses on and analyzes only *Sani Yi* clothing traders, not including other types of traders. In addition, the home-based traders normally sell products at their own home as they do not own or rent any commercial buildings. Most of their customers include their relatives, friends and neighbors. The full-time embroidery traders normally bring a substantial amount of income to support their families. According to them, their embroidery trade gains were the main income source for their household finance, which was three to four times higher than what they could earn from farming work.

The second type includes the temporary *Sani Yi* traders who normally circulate on the market days or in the temporary markets during different activities. They set up their small size booths in the street during the market days. There are four main township-level markets in Shilin: the Banqiao Town market on Friday; the Guishan Town market on Sunday; the Beidacun Town market on Saturday; and the County market on Wednesday and Saturday. Some *Sani Yi* females sell their embroidered products including embroidered pieces, bags, and ornaments. The rest of the products are consumer goods, such as casual clothing, hardware, fertilizers, pesticides, cosmetics, food, and so on. Besides, large numbers of local people participate in special events happening in villages, such as wrestling and bull fighting competitions, and the temporary traders usually set up their booths in order to earn money from the participants and the visitors. This study investigates only embroidery traders and does not include other traders. Such embroidery traders have to spend more time and effort on farm work, and they only go to sell their products on the market days. The temporary embroidery traders' trading income normally is much less than that of the permanent embroidery traders.

Significantly, the permanent embroidery traders and temporary embroidery traders are closely interconnected. In some cases, the permanent traders usually provide products to temporary traders who trade on the market days. Or, in some cases, the temporary traders sell their products to permanent traders as well. Among these two types of embroidery traders, almost every permanent trader was initially a temporary trader. All of them have set up booths in the street, and some even have experienced long-distance embroidery trade. Movement from the temporary traders to permanent traders is possible, which is not only determined by their economic capital, but it also depends on their social capital (social networks).

APPLYING DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AS STRATEGIES FOR BETTER ECONOMIC LIFE

The term of “social capital” is one of various important forms of capital in Bourdieu’s theory. It refers to the actual or potential social resources which are linked to possession of durable social networks among individuals. In other words, to score membership in a group (Bourdieu, 1986). In this section, I will explore *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders’ social capital, which refers to the relationship structures that is individuals’ connection with their families and communities.

Sani Yi female embroidery traders, both the permanent traders and temporary traders, have applied social capital as their strategies to gain better economic life in various ways. Their social networks are able to help them get more information, better selling location, better rental, cheaper supplies, schedule of activities of interest, access to bank credit, access to more customers and worthy reputation. *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders’ social networks can be classified into two main dimensions: kinship-based networks and non-kin resources. Moreover, non-kin resources can be divided into two types: friends, and social connection with Chinese authority systems.

Kinship-based Networks

From the historical time, *Sani Yi* society is kin based, with rotating community leadership, multi-community clan affiliations, and cross-cousin marriages (Swain, 2001). The kinship-based networks can be divided into two subtypes: nuclear family and relatives. The nuclear family includes husband and wife relationship, parents and children, and also including daughters-in-law or sons-in-law who come from other villages. Meanwhile, for daughter-in-law and son-in-law, even they joined in their partners’ residence, they still keep in touch with their family and relatives on both sides.

In *Sani Yi* society, the kinship can become a primary economic resource for *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders. Some of the kinship members may possess financial resources for direct economic investment, or some can act as cheap and hardworking as well as trustworthy labor sources to accumulate economic capital. For some *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders, especially the permanent traders who scaled up their business, often recruit workforce from their kinship members. The most important reason for including their kinship members in their own business is that kinship members are seen as more loyal, reliable, hardworking, and cheap. Since in some difficult times, kin would work hard without payment.

As a case from Helen (a pseudonym), when she alone was unable to produce enough products to meet the market demands, then she recruited her niece and nephew to work with her. Her nephew knows the place where they can get good quality supplies with cheaper prices, and he is responsible for buying supplies. Her niece usually helps her to embroider and sew different products. Meanwhile, Helen’s niece and nephew’s friends have also become a part of their customers.

Learning from Helen’s case, network relationships between Helen and her relatives are based on cooperation (mutual benefits) and loyalty (mutual trust). Benefited from the kinship relations, Helen was able to accumulate more and more customers and gain more profits. Each of Helen’s relative is a member of multiple networks, which means there are multiple hidden social resources behind each relative, and thus they function as a bridge between Helen and the market.

Helen and her kinship members’ relations provided us a reciprocal example. However, not every *Sani Yi* female embroidery trader would like to recruit her kinship members, some of them prefer to hire non-kin employees.

Zora (a pseudonym) is a successful entrepreneur who owns a *Sani Yi* ethnic garment factory. She used to run a small scaled store to sell ethnic clothing in the mall. After she saved enough budget, Zora scaled up her business and operated a garment factory. She recruited around thirty embroiderers, not only *Sani Yi* people, but also *Han* Chinese who had embroidery skills. Most of her employees are non-kin, but a few of the employees are Zora’s kinship members. At the beginning, Zora wanted to offer them job opportunities because it was hard for them to find jobs outside due to their limited educational background. Yet, soon after, Zora realized that her relatives were problematic. Some of them came late for work frequently, or some were lazy and inefficient, or some were unwilling to improve their skills. Being Zora’s relatives,

their behavior was less easily controlled, and she felt not easy to blame them. This caused inevitable conflicts. Zora once told me:

“I have set up some rules. My employees, both kin and non-kin, have to be self-disciplined, hardworking, and humble. They have to work on time, respect each other, and have passion to learn from each other. I hope that every employee can enjoy harmonious working environment. Non-kin employees are more easily guided. They follow the rules and obey what I have said. If they did something wrong, I would criticize them directly. But kin employees are less easily controllable and manageable. We are relatives, some are older than me. If they made some mistake, or had some irrational behaviors, it was difficult to criticize or punish them. Once I tolerated their unsatisfactory works or inappropriate behavior patterns, they would cause bad influence on other employees, then I would not have authority to manage my employees.

Last year, I dismissed one kin employee. She went to the bar every night, and then came late for work every morning. She normally was very sluggish during the work time. She could not concentrate on her work, and thus her work was inefficient. Considering the kinship relation between us, I tolerated her behavior for few months at the beginning. Then I talked to her and explained our factory’s rules, but she did not change her behavior, and even some other employees were badly influenced by her irrational behaviors. Just like Chinese old saying goes, ‘A speck of mouse dung will spoil a whole pot of porridge (*yike laoshushi huaile yiguo Zhou*)’. I dismissed her eventually” (Zora, pers. comm. November 2017).

Zora’s behavior in terms of providing job opportunities to her kinship members was called as “moral obligation” by Heberer (2007), while Scott (1976) calls it as “the moral economy of the peasants”. However, this “moral obligation” has resulted in a dilemma which can be seen reflected in Zora’s narration. On the one hand, she wants to fulfill her social obligations by providing jobs to her kinship members, on the other hand, she aims at searching for maximum economic profits by hiring most able and competent non-kin employees instead of those who are lazy, incompetent, and noncontributing kinship members.

Learning from previous cases, whether the relationship with kinship members or with non-kin people, to a certain extent, it will be lasted and maintained only on the basis of mutual trust and economic advantages in the long term. Indeed, kinship-based social networks play a crucial role in *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders’ trading lives as they have prioritized access to kinship resources. But, for some traders, those who do not have enough kinship connections, non-kin resources can be their main social capital. Different types of non-kin social resources will be explained in more details in the following section.

Non-Kin Resources

As I observed during my fieldwork, *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders also build many different sets of relationships with non-kin resources which can be divided into two types: friends, and networks with local officials.

Nowadays, many *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders argue that friends or non-kinship relations’ role has increased, and it can be especially seen reflected in business cooperation, access to credit, and borrowing money from each other. *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders often develop friendships with people who joined same activities in the past (*jiuxiangshi*), or who shared similar experiences (*tongleiren*). More specifically, their friends usually come from two realms: from same village and from embroidery trading.

In the village, women are usually divided into many groups according to their age, and those who are of the same age or same generation more easily build friendships. Within one group, some of the group

members share kinship relations as well, but some are newcomers. For example, some are moved in from other villages and joined their husbands' residence because of marriage. The same group of women usually have close relationship, which depends on deep respect and trust. They exchange labor on the farm, embroider together, share resources, borrow money from each other, and help each other when group members confront difficulties.

Meanwhile, some *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders maintain relationships with people they know from past activities, in terms of embroidery trading. These women normally share marketing information and sell products together.

Some *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders do not only own kinship-based social network and friends, but also have particular social connection with Chinese authority systems. In recent years, a series of policies were carried out by the central government in order to promote economic and social development of ethnic minorities in ethnic minority regions throughout China. By following the state policies, Shilin government set up some projects to support the development of *Sani Yi* people and to promote the *Sani Yi* women entrepreneurs. Various organizations, such as the Women's Federation, the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection and Inheritance Center, and the Shilin Tourist Administration, are all led by the Party and government. They got some budgets from the local government and set up some programs in order to encourage local ethnic people doing business.

Sani Yi female embroidery traders themselves or their kinship members who enjoy good relations with government officials more easily get access to information about new policies, programs, and financial opportunities. Meanwhile, they also are more likely to acquire government financial supports. There are two different cases presented here to examine the relationship between traders and officials, and to illustrate various strategies in which *Sani Yi* female traders interact with officials.

Zora (a pseudonym) is a Party member. Her cultural capital possession has paved a career path for her. Zora's professional embroidery skills were acknowledged by officials of the Women's Federation, and thus she got multiple chances to participate in various activities held by the WF. Since then, the relationship between Zora and WF officials has been built up. Zora used some strategies to maintain and manage their connections, like sewing clothing for them, selling them commodities with cheaper prices, and so on. Benefited from this special relationship, Zora could get more useful information about where the local government will launch new activities, when the government will have new projects, and how to apply for financial supports from the government. Zora got hundred thousand yuan from the Women's Federation and expanded her business. She established an ethnic clothes and textile garment factory two years ago. As shown by this case, it was the close relationship between Zora and the WF officials which made it possible to get information easily and get approval for financial support quickly.

Anna's (a pseudonym) case provides us another example. Anna joined her husband's residence and moved to her husband's village after they were married. Anna once was a full-time housewife, and then she started to work in the village. She has been working for two decades in the village and she had an experience of working at various positions, such as a cashier, a secretary, the head of village, and now as the director of three villages committee. As a village leader, Anna has to cater for villagers' needs and negotiate with local government officials. In order to benefit from various projects of the local government and get officials' approval and support, she knew that providing dinner, drink, and different gifts was necessary. Within two decades, Anna got financial supports from officials and made some achievements, such as building a *daikechu* (a public place for villagers to receive guests and to hold different activities, such as wedding, funeral, the celebration for baby's first month birthday, etc.), repairing the road in the village, building new automatic electric tobacco curing houses, and so on.

With the continuous process of negotiation with the government officials, Anna also managed private social connection with officials. She sometimes invited them for dinner privately, karaoke, or gave them some gifts. The informal communications and interactions between Anna and officials enhanced their social relations. By 2015, Anna got financial support of one hundred and fifty thousand yuan from the government and applied loans from the bank to build an ethnic cultural studio. Meanwhile, it also provided many new economic opportunities for her, such as embroidery study workshop, ethnic cultural

exchange program, and so on. It can be learnt from Anna's case that social relationship not only won her the required financial support, but also provided her with wider social resources in the future.

Therefore, we can assess that, in social practices, the three dimensions of social networks (kinship-based network, friends, and social connection with Chinese authority systems) have played an essential role in *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders' trading lives. Their social connections help them to get more information in order to obtain more economic opportunities and develop business, such as better selling location, better rental, cheaper supplies, schedule of the important activities; to accumulate more customers and reputation in order to build sustainable business life; to get financial support and gain wider social resources for expand their business. Significantly, various cases illustrate that different dimensions of social networks are overlapping and changeable. The extension of these social relations depends on how well they know each other, how deeply they can trust and respect each other. By applying strong social networks as their strategies, *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders are able to gain better economic life in various ways. The following section will further discuss how economic participation, in terms of embroidery trade, entails changes in *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders' lives.

SANI YI FEMALE EMBROIDERY TRADERS' LIFE CHANGES AND GENDER RELATIONS

Gender division of labor exists in many societies. For *Sani Yi* society, gender roles and gender relations have undergone changes throughout time. For having a historical view, Paul Vial (2003) has documented in his work, *Sani Yi* males were responsible for heavy farm work, on the contrary, females were responsible for relatively slight agricultural tasks and multifarious domestic chores as well as child rearing. He also mentioned that males' authority was respected in the family, but the household administration authority belonged to females, especially the mother, every family member had to obey her (Vial, 2003).

However, gender roles and gender relations in *Sani Yi* society have been changed along with the external political environmental changes. During the past seven decades, male supremacy in *Sani Yi* society was even officially enhanced by the external policy, in terms of household registration system (*hukou system*). Influenced by this policy, the male has officially and naturally become the head of household. The name of household leader typically confirms the authority and power in the family, which has resulted in unbalanced power for decision-making and household management. In this sense, formally, the *Sani Yi* male enjoys higher status and has greater power than the female in the family and society. Even the *Sani Yi* society has no tradition of discrimination against women like the old *Han* Chinese custom of binding women's feet, some social constraints and limitations on women were increased.

Moreover, according to social expectations and cultural norms in *Sani Yi* society, males are expected to be the active participants in economic undertaking and the family management enjoying the higher social status both in the household and in the community. On the contrary, females are expected to be good housewives who confine in family life, and they are responsible for domestic chores and child rearing as well as the farm work. In spite of *Sani Yi* females always contributing to the family by being responsible for domestic works and being main labor in the field work as well as making economic contribution to the family income in daily practice, their works and their stories were less visible and easily overlooked. Therefore, through discussing a few cases, this section attempts to examine *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders' economic participation entailing changes in their lives and in their relations with males.

Case # 1. Bella

Bella (a pseudonym) was born in 1965, and she was only graduated from junior high school. Her husband, seven years older than her, had been a wrestling coach who taught at Kunming Physical Science College; he is now retired. Bella stayed in the village for a few years after they were married while her husband lived in Kunming. By 1998, Bella moved to Kunming in order to send her elder son to elementary school and take care of her husband.

Bella was once a full-time housewife without any income. She was extremely timid because she had to ask for money from her husband every month for family's daily expense. Even Bella did not have any free time for herself, she spent all of her time to take on endless domestic works and take care of family members, Bella's husband did not appreciate her efforts. More ironically, Bella was violently abused by her husband occasionally.

Bella's husband was getting 7,000-8,000 yuan monthly salary at that time, but, he only gave Bella 400 yuan for the family expenses. He used to invite his friends to play mahjong almost every night at home. Sometimes, Bella's husband lost quite a lot and violently abused Bella in order to let off steam. Or sometimes Bella was violently abused after her husband got drunk. Bella tolerated domestic violence for six years without reporting to anyone since she lacked any social network in Kunming. Meanwhile, she was too scared and felt too ashamed to share her abusive episodes with others.

By 2004, Bella used her younger son's preschool education and agricultural work as excuses, and she moved back to the village. Since Bella lived separately from her husband, she felt more freedom to decide what she wanted to do. Bella cooperated with her close friends living in the same village to design and embroider *Sani Yi* clothing and sell them in the market. Only in few years, Bella saved a lot of money from her trade. Nowadays, Bella not only sell embroidered products, but, she has also built an ecological chicken farm to do broiler chicken raising (*roujiyangzhi*).

Being curious about Bella's motivation of economic participation and identity transformation from a timid housewife to an active entrepreneur, we may ask: what are the cognitive changes underlying Bella's life experiences? How does she interpret these changes? To what extent does Bella's economic participation help her to break through the conventional restrictions and gender hierarchies that are imposed upon her? Then Bella told me:

"My husband only wants me to be a housewife and obey him for my whole life. But I wanted to earn more money in order to offer a better life to my children. After I moved back to the village, my husband could not intervene in my life decisions while we were living separately. Luckily, I could start my embroidery trade with my friends. Once I earned some money, I did not need to ask for even one penny from my husband.

When I was a full-time housewife, I had to rely on my husband for almost everything. I had to fully obey him, even sometimes he resorted to violence, but I could not do anything. I always cried by myself and tolerated every single harmful thing that he had done to me. But since I do not need to rely on his money to live anymore, I dare to speak up if there are any thoughts on my mind. I am able to make decision by myself without negotiating with him.

I normally do not tell him what I am doing. If I faced some problems, or if I needed to borrow money, I would ask my friends' help. I would never tell my husband about my decisions and problems, otherwise there would be an inevitable war between us. At times, when he would beat me, I would fight back. Although I could not defeat him because he was a wrestling coach, I am still able to fight back. Later on, he did not resort to violence against me anymore. I think that it is because of my nerve and my strength" (Bella, pers. comm. May 2018).

In a paper tackling the issue of women's experience of violence, Gupta and Yesudian (2006) argue that it closely relates to their spousal age and educational differentials. They claim that women who are married to men much older than themselves or whose husbands are much more educated than themselves are likely to have experienced violence or live with the threat of violence than those women who are closer in age and have similar education background with their husbands. Since a large age and education gap can put women at a relatively disadvantage position in the marriage. As such, in Bella's case, she and her husband have relatively large age and education gap indeed.

Nevertheless, the primary reason of Bella's experience of violence stems from her lack of self-reliance both materially and mentally should be highly regarded. Moreover, Bella's shameful feelings from the constraints of cultural norms have resulted in her tolerant attitude towards domestic violence. In this sense, economic self-reliance plays a key role in achieving the goal of ending domestic violence and taking control of one's life. In other words, as women's economic self-reliance and spatial movement autonomy increase, they will less tolerate domestic violence, and they get more courage to challenge gender discrimination and implement structural changes.

Case # 2. Lina

Lina (a pseudonym) was born in 1968. She left her natal family and joined his husband's residence after they were married in 1991. Lina's husband used to be a fertilizers manager, and they had their daughter in the second year. Lina's husband normally worked at the company in the county on weekdays, on the contrary, Lina usually stayed at home in the village. Lina was the main labor source work on the farm, and she had to take care of parents-in-law and children, and also to take on domestic chores. Despite Lina's husband had regular salary every month, he did not send any penny back for them since all of his salary was used for his food and drink.

Partly inspired by the new economic opportunities, and partly pressured by her family's financial demands, Lina has participated in the long-distance embroidered products trade after her daughter was two years old. Lina and her friends went to Beijing multiple times. They usually stayed over there for six or eight months per year, and they came back home during the winter time. Lina and her friends only rented one room and shared beds; seven yuan per night for each person. Lina and her friends cooked by themselves every day instead of eating in the restaurant in order to save money.

Lina took the long-distance embroidered products trade for five years, and she was satisfied that she saved a sum of money for her daughter. However, soon after Lina's return, she found out that her husband had a mistress when she was trading outside. Lina's husband stole a sum of money from his company in order to feed his mistress (*yangqingren*). When the company planned to sue her husband, Lina, being softhearted, helped her husband to repay 87,000 yuan back to his company in 1998. Lina used up all the money that she earned from her embroidered products trade to help her husband. Lina tolerated her husband's irresponsible behavior for the sake of children. She was afraid that it would have bad impacts on her daughter if they had a divorce. But a few months later, Lina's husband eloped with his mistress. Lina was put in an extremely cruel situation by her husband.

As her daughter was growing up, Lina was much concerned about her daughter's education and family daily expenditure. She was unable to take long-distance trade any longer because she had to take care of her daughter. Lina wanted to run a store, but she did not have enough budget to do so. She also tried to find other jobs, but her education background was a problem that she could not find any well-paid and stable job. Meanwhile, working outside was unrealistic for her since she had to accompany her daughter at home most of the time. Luckily, Lina met a woman embroiderer (*xiunv*) who ran an embroidery store, and thus she could do what she was good at and also able to take care of her daughter.

Lina worked for her boss around six years. After she saved enough money, she opened a *Sani Yi* hats (*baotou*) store in the market eventually. Lina's store is a 17m² room located at the central mall in the county. Lina has been running her store for nine years by now, and she is quite successful. Once she told me:

"I have been through many hard times. I once felt hopeless. Divorce had destroyed my passion and confidence. Sometimes when I saw my ex-husband's colleagues while I was walking on the street, I normally lowered my head and passed them quickly. I felt extremely ashamed and worried that how they would judge me. I was afraid of talking to them, it seemed like I had done something wrong. But gratefully, my friends and my relatives were being very supportive, and even some relatives from my ex-husband's side still are the most stable customers to support my business nowadays.

After I saved enough money to run my own store, my life began improving. I had experiences for trading from my long-distance trade, and luckily, my embroidery skills were acknowledged by many people. If I work hard, I am able to earn eighty thousand to hundred thousand per year. I could earn my own living; I supported my daughter's education; I also bought a new apartment last year. I feel satisfied about my life now. I do not feel ashamed of failure of my marriage anymore" (Lina, pers. comm. April 2018).

Learning from this case, Lina, like other *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders, participated in embroidery trade, especially long-distance trade, on the one hand, is pressurized by the family demands and initiated by their primary concern for their family members' well-being. On the other hand, Lina's economic participation has resulted in the overturning and destabilizing of traditional expectations on women's roles and conventional constraints on women's spatial movement.

Meanwhile, there are two main positive changes that cannot be ignored in Lina's life. Firstly, Lina does not feel ashamed about divorce, instead, she fully accepted her identity as being a divorced-single mother, and her satisfaction for being the sole economic supporter of her family and her daughter's education. This illustrates that Lina not only gained economic power from her economic engagement, but also gained self-awareness and self-confidence. Secondly, Lina obtained ability and capacity to make a meaningful life choice by herself, and she was able to turn disadvantages into advantages to pursue better life through hard-working and her courage.

Case # 3. Wendy

Wendy (a pseudonym) was born in 1969. As the local markets have been revived gradually and both domestic and international tourists increased in Shilin in the early 1980s, Wendy and her mother, like other *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders, have participated in embroidery trade ever since.

Despite the transportation service was underdeveloped during the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Wendy had a geographical advantage because she lived in the village only 2 kilometers far from the embroidery handicraft market, and thus it only took around 10 minutes each time for her to walk from her village to the market. Wendy and her mother usually set up their booth in the market every day. Wendy was mainly selling *Sani Yi* embroidered bags. She normally charged around 15-25 yuan per bag, and thus she could earn three thousand yuan within one year. Wendy's small-scale business flourished, and her economic gain from embroidered products trade played an essential part of her household economy at that time.

By 1999, in order to protect and develop a favorable tourist environment, the Shilin Tourist Administration started to manage the scenic spot, any sorts of commercialized activities were forbidden. Wendy and other *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders were unable to sell embroidered products in the handicraft market any longer. Fortunately, Wendy's embroidery skills were acknowledged by her relatives, friends, and neighbors through these years, so that she has accumulated customer sources. Instead of searching for another available place or renting a store in the market to continue her trade, Wendy chose to sell embroidered products at her home.

The income that Wendy earned from embroidery trade constitutes a large proportion of her family finance, especially after they sold their cultivated land to the government in order to support tourist areas' development around 10 years ago. Once Wendy's family lost their lands, they could not earn income from agricultural outputs anymore. Each family member had to look for other jobs outside the village. Wendy and her husband worked as gardener in the scenic spot. Even they could earn around seventeen thousand yuan from their work per year, their salary could not support their family expenditure. In this sense, Wendy's embroidery gains were three times higher than what they could earn from farm work and non-farm work.

Accordingly, as Wendy's orders for embroidered goods increased progressively, which required her to spend more and more time and effort on embroidered products. In order to support Wendy's trade, her husband took on all of responsibilities for domestic chores (cleaning the house, doing the laundry,

preparing for the meals, washing dishes, etc.) willingly, which previously were Wendy's responsibility. As Wendy once said to me:

"Honestly, people at my age are pretty relaxed, but I, on the contrary, am occupied every day. Sometimes I feel fatigued as the process of creation and production is difficult. I cannot sleep well when I am thinking of new patterns, and doing embroidery really hurts my eyes. But I cannot give up. My customers trust my skills. They said that no matter how long it takes—a few months, or even a year—they still wanted me to embroider for them. I am so glad that my customers acknowledge my skills and appreciate my works. Since I have to spend more and more time to make embroidered products, I even do not have enough time to do laundry. My husband is being supportive, and he takes on all of domestic works.

I learnt embroidery during my childhood, because every *Sani Yi* female had to learn it in my generation, but I have never thought that one day my living would totally depend on it. If I had not learnt embroidery skills, I could not able to earn much money after we lost lands. I saved a sum of money from embroidery trade for years, and I spent most of them to rebuild my husband's family house and my family's house in my natal village few years ago. I am happy about my achievements" (Wendy, pers. comm. August 2017).

In Wendy's case, she is not the sole economic supporter of the family, but her economic undertaking made a huge contribution to her familial stability and improved her family living conditions. Most importantly, Wendy's economic participation brings a significant change in her life and in the relations with her husband, in terms of transformed gender division of labor. While I was trying to analyze gender division of labor in Wendy's family, like Hutheesing (1990) suggests, we have to dismantle the stereotypical ideas about gender roles as fixed and immutable. In a certain extent, the changes in gender roles in Wendy's family provides an extremely important example to argue that is possibly a new configuration of gender relations.

After learning from the previous cases, it is not hard to notice that *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders' economic participation is not only driven by the external politico-economic structure, but it is also initiated by their primary concerns for their families' well-being. Nowadays, *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders enjoy greater responsibility and authority in making decisions and family management because of their irreplaceable roles and increasing forms of capital.

Significantly, *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders' economic participation entails changes in their lives and in their relations with males. Indeed, as was indicated in case studies, life changes not only reflected in economic self-reliance, but also can be seen reflected in various aspects, such as improved women's sense of self-awareness, acquired decision-making power and authority, changed women's attitude towards domestic violence, obtained capacity to make strategic and meaningful life choices, transformed the household gender division of labor, broke the existed limitations on women's spatial movement and power possession, and gained social status.

CONCLUSION

This paper has mainly discussed *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders' economic participation. With growing social change in terms of the re-appearing markets and cultural commoditization as well as tourism development have created many new economic opportunities for *Sani Yi* females. Not only inspired by the external environment, but also pressurized by family demands, an increasing number of *Sani Yi* females are presently entering the market to participate in embroidery trade. According to the trading time and space, the *Sani Yi* female embroidery traders can be classified as permanent and temporary embroidery traders. Both permanent and temporary embroidery traders are able to strategically apply their multilayered social capital to gain better economic status and livelihood. Meanwhile, *Sani Yi*

female embroidery traders' economic participation also brings various changes in their lives and in their relations with males.

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