Chapter Six

GENDER ROLES AND GENDER RELATIONS

The gender roles and gender relations in Tai village society have been dominated by norms and values as well as religious beliefs and an ideology of power that clearly define the status and duties of a man and a woman in the capacity of a child, husband and wife. Social norms reflect ideals or expectations, but in real life the relationship between man and woman, husband and wife, may be more complicated than idealistic models, as there can be haggles and conflicts, and they may change according to economic turns, cultural adaptation and individual adjustment. In this chapter, we will examine the gender roles and gender relations in Tai village society and special emphasis will be placed on the contrast between the ideals and the changes taking place in the daily life of a Tai farming community.

Gender Roles in Tai Culture

In the Tai cosmology, a man stands on a higher stage of existence than a woman.¹ Being nearer to perfection, he enjoys a higher status of merit than a woman or, to put it plainly, the Tai believe that a man is more blessed than a woman. This notion is influenced by Buddhist religious teachings which allows only men the right to be ordained a monk, together with the viewpoint that a man is more gifted, both physically and spiritually, than a woman. Only men can reach

¹ Milne (1910:31).
Nirvana or become a Buddha. Nevertheless, a woman’s role within the family and community is accepted to be no less important than that of a man. A daughter is cherished and regarded as a source of delight and happiness to her parents no less than a son. The social roles of women have been prescribed by tradition to shoulder the responsibilities of cooking food and child-rearing. Consequently, a woman’s duties are heavier than those of a man, since she works in the field as much as a man and still has to perform household chores, look after the children and also take care of the trading side. So a woman is busy with work for almost the entire day. The pictures of a woman toiling on the farm land, carrying vegetables home to boil pig-feed, loading farm produce on the farm utility van to sell at Muang Khon market, spoon-feeding her children or busy doing kitchen work are sights that one will come upon any day on walking through a Tai village. It is rarely that we see a group of women sitting around or spending leisure time chatting in convivial groups like their male counterparts. Even at functions arranged for marriages, funerals or poi festivals which should be a time to relax, women are still the ones to do the heavy work of cooking food and preparing for the social gatherings.

Figure 6.1 Tai women at the open market in Muang Khon

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Even though a woman works more heavily than a man, and has to bear greater responsibilities than a man, Tai social values dictate that it is the man who is head of a household and enjoys a higher social status. A Tai woman will be taught and trained from childhood to be respectful and obedient to her father and, after leaving the household following marriage, to also be respectful and obedient to her husband. Tradition requires that a woman displays respectful manners towards a man.³ A daughter or wife may not eat before the father; normally, household members, both male and female, will eat together but on occasions where guests are present, the women—especially the daughters—have to be in attendance and prepare the food trays for the father and guests and thereafter to withdraw and eat separately.⁴ A woman should not interrupt men in a conversation circle since it is considered bad manners.

Established norms requiring that a woman should be responsible for housework, rearing children and also the main labour in the ricefields, may have evolved from ancient traditions that a boy needed to spend the greater part of his time studying in temples whilst a girl did not have much opportunity for book learning but had instead to stay at home and help her mother do the housework. Thus the Tai male received better education, and was able to read and write whilst a woman did not have the same opportunity for studies and education. For this reason, the Tai in olden days held the view that women were less knowledgeable and should be the ones that had to listen to men, since men had studied the scriptures and were therefore more intelligent.

As a Tai male had to spend a great proportion of time studying for ordination, in travelling to different places for trading, being conscripted by the chaopha for warfare or for labour, the Tai male had rather less time to stay at home than the womenfolk. Thus a woman was the main source of labour for the household as well as for production on the farms, in stock raising and looking after domestic affairs. Being the main labour force has given women considerable bargaining power in the family as can be seen from the Tai woman's freedom in choosing a life partner. A Tai woman is able to save and accumulate money that she has earned by her own efforts, such as weaving and basket work.⁵

⁴ Milne (1910:117).
Nowadays, as schools have replaced the temples in terms of providing education, boys and girls have to learn on rather the same footing, so there is now no disparity between young Tai men and women in their ability to read and write. This is despite the fact that women still shoulder heavy work as before by having to accept the responsibilities of house-keeping, raising children, farm work, not to mention running the business side and controlling home expenses as well. The role that women perform in trading the family products in the Muang Khon market has rewarded them with a higher social standing. Experience gained as vendors in the market has turned Tai housewives into experts in bargaining prices with merchants, so they are usually assigned the task of negotiating prices of products with the Han traders who come to buy wheat, melons and other agricultural products in the village. After negotiations on prices between the merchant and the housewife are concluded, she will tell the buyer to formally settle the deal once again with her husband. The present-day Tai woman’s important roles in production, control, marketing and managing the household economy have resulted in raising her social standing to a higher level than before. The women of Lak Chang now unequivocally agree that men and women stand more and more on equal terms. Tai women enjoy a higher standing compared to their Han sisters who, on marriage, also take up their husbands’ family name, but their roles in production and their bargaining power on the social scale are less than those of Tai women. Furthermore, the endogamous marriage rule which encourages marriages between young people in the same village has enabled the woman to continue holding on to social ties with her family of orientation. A woman is not abandoned to fare for herself, but she has allies and a family group always ready to offer her continuous assistance, the more so when she leaves the family to live independently with her husband and children, when the influence of her mother-in-law begins to decline. In such circumstances, a woman who is a wife is able to expand her role in matters of production, trading and supervision over the family’s economic affairs with greater convenience.

The significance of endogamous marriage, the blessing and approval of the village elders which are required if the couple demand the right to a share of farmland later on, as well as the benefits of holding marriage ceremonies and having grand parties—all these factors have helped to enhance the role and standing of women.

6 A number of husbands interviewed agreed that their wives are shrewd businesswomen, highly skilled in bargaining for a better price for farm produce.
In a marriage, the groom has to pay bridewealth to the woman’s family, must be responsible for expenses in arranging a party, has to be the side that goes to beg the woman to marry him. The bride’s family is also in a position to demand a higher bridewealth for their daughter. The parents of the woman usually hold back a portion of the bridewealth for their daughter, to be presented at the ceremony of giving a name to the first grandchild.

The Tai village society has no tradition of discrimination against women, such as the old Chinese custom of binding the feet of young girls, of covering the face or other prohibitions that restrict the freedom or hinder women from seeking success in life. At present a Tai woman is likely to have an equal opportunity to any man if she wants to continue her education in high school or institutes of higher learning in Muang Khon or Kunming. A sizeable number of Tai women are now beginning to enter new professions, as teachers, nurses, doctors or government officials. Freedom in choosing careers is much greater than in the past.

However, the concept, with its roots embedded in religious beliefs, that man is the master, has not entirely disappeared but still exercises its influence on the way of thinking of both men and women and still plays an important part in determining the gender roles and gender relationships in the Tai village community.

The Concept of Male Supremacy

Although Tai women presently have a more complicated role and higher social standing than before and despite the remarkable extent of sexual equality in Tai society—remarkable not only by contrast with the status of women in Asia, but also with significant segments of the contemporary West—it is nevertheless a basic premise of Tai culture that men are naturally and inherently superior to women. Even though the concept of male supremacy is present in various cultures throughout the world, such as in China,7 India,8 Middle East9 or Thai10 cultures and cannot be considered as a new phenomenon in any way, the reasons given to explain male supremacy still vary from culture to culture.

7 Hsu (1963).
8 Kapadia (1966).
9 Patai (1971).
In Daikong, the primary reason offered to explain male supremacy concerns merit and the law of karma. The Tai believe that men possess a certain innate essence which invests its possessor with superior moral, intellectual and spiritual qualities to women. The Tai cite the superiority of the male, not for reasons of bodily strength or physical stamina or ability in doing work, but for superiority of intellect and of the spirit.

Hence, however proficient a female may be in matters of production, trading, profit-sharing, education or management of a household economy, she will always have a lower potential than a male on the spiritual side. She is more distant from heaven or Nirvana than the male.

The belief in male spiritual supremacy is not confined only to men. On the contrary, this belief and way of thinking is held strongly by women as well. Sharing the belief in male spiritual supremacy, women recite the following conventional prayer:

Before attaining Nirvana, I pray that I may be reborn as a male in the future existence. And I wish to be freed from this state of a woman, and when in future existences I pass through abodes of men and spirits, I wish to be born a man endowed with virtue, understanding and faith.¹¹

When one is in the company of a female group in Lak Chang and asks the housewives and maidens what they would like to become in the next life, almost every one, particularly those who are already married, gives the same answer that they want to be born as a man and, if possible, as a man of affluence. The women of Lak Chang not only desire to be born as a man because of spiritual superiority, but because they see that a male enjoys a happier life than a female, shoulders less of a work burden than a female and has more time to himself in seeking personal enjoyment. On the other hand, the life of a female has to meet greater hardship and heavier responsibilities, has to face worrisome physical problems from monthly periods, pregnancy, the thrones of childbirth, has to be a slave of her children and husband until old age. A woman’s life has only suffering that comes from her physical nature added with work duties that are heavier than those of a man; so to be born a female is not so delightful and, if one could choose, Tai women would speak unanimously that they would prefer to be born a man.

The belief in male supremacy is also apparent in the shape of various symbols in Tai culture, such as the peacock which has beautiful feathers and the long drum which men beat at various traditional events. The male sex symbols have been used as ethnic symbols. Male superiority is also shown in other tangible forms, for instance the seating of a male or the father at a dinner table; the father’s chair will be towards the north, which is the direction pointing towards Mount Meru which is auspicious. The belief in the spiritual superiority of men is symbolically projected onto inanimate objects. Thus, the northern side of the house is the noble side, and it is the side on which the men sit. The southern side is the ignoble side, it is the side on which the women sit.

Even though male superiority is presented as being derived from the real inner force that is greater than that of the female, the nucleus of the superior male human being has been fostered and developed to higher potential by completion of studies for ordination into priesthood, which only males are allowed. The male’s innate superiority enables him to become a monk, which in turn increases his already pronounced superiority over the female. In Tai religious rituals, elders and male groups will sit near the monks and Buddhist statues in the temple whilst females are seated hindmost. After the feast of the monks has ended, males will then eat first while females will eat afterwards.

Male superiority is also manifest in other social activities, for instance in marriages. In former days a man might have several wives, or should the wife pass away and the husband want to marry again, he was free to arrange marriage ceremonies and parties every time he desired; but a widow who wished to marry again was not entitled to demand any bridewealth or to arrange any marriage ceremony.

A female enjoys a lower social status than a male and in actual fact a female on her own has no status in society. She enjoys social status only by being a daughter or wife of a man. Hence a female’s social status is near that of a child; in other words, no status, no prestige, no social recognition.

Male chauvinism reflects the roots of basic ways of thinking from ancient times which sees the male as having greater sanctity than the female. Consequently a wife must look up to and respect her husband next to other sacred entities such as the Lord Buddha, the holy precepts, monks, elders and parents. Sanctity unites the male with the Buddhist religion and priests whilst the female is the surrogate at medium sessions or spirit propitiating rites, and this is one of the other
important reasons that the Tai male uses to explain why virtually all the mediums in practically every Tai farm village are females.

Females are also looked upon as the unclean sex and the source of ecological disasters. Menstruation of the female is an unclean thing and may cause cabalistic inscriptions, various enchanted articles or auspicious states of things to lose their original powers. For this reason, the Tai have a taboo against a man touching a woman during her menstrual period or having sex with a woman undergoing medical treatment or arranging *poī* festivals at that time in the belief that it will cause ecological problems and will not be auspicious.

Nowadays such taboos are beginning to be discarded and the concept of male supremacy is being undermined by women’s increasing roles and bargaining powers including changes in various aspects of cultural tradition. Yet the beliefs and many taboos concerning sexual contacts and pollution of the female body still remain and may be proof of the existence of a certain uneasiness as well as perturbations that males entertain against females—the fear of being overwhelmed by the wife.

In real life, the Tai male takes it most seriously if teased by friends that he is afraid of his wife or is a henpecked husband. Every Tai man believes that the woman who is his wife will try by every and all means to have power over him and will try to control his life. Women control men by the use of endearments, seductions and sex including the use of love potions and magical incantations. The fear of coming under the control of women has made almost every Tai man have uneasy and contradictory feelings about women. Tai men view women as the gender that attracts, arouses emotions and feelings or, in plain words, they see women as a sex object that they should seek and keep. Conversely Tai men are afraid of women, afraid of being dominated and subjugated. Paradoxically, men see themselves by nature as superior to women, but they open the way for women to share equally or to even have greater roles than men as regards production and trading. Men have to depend upon their wives for cooking food, looking after the house and raising children, and women are the ones that have real power in the family.

Viewed this way, the concept of male superiority may be a self-preservation mechanism created to protect the male from fear of the female, from fear of being suppressed and fear of challenges from the female. The concept of male superiority has helped the male to be dependent on the female although in actuality it is the female that has power to make decisions and who controls the male.
Gender Roles and Social Expectations

Male supremacy in the religious sphere seems to reflect the belief that the male is a sacred being relative to the female. And since men are superior to women, it is therefore proper, according to Tai cultural norms, that the husband should have greater power than the wife. Traditional cultural norms demand that the husband should be older than the wife for the simple reason that, according to Tai custom, a person who is younger must show respect to an older person. Husbands, therefore, should be of greater age because it is to the husband that the wife must show respect in his capacity as the wife’s provider and protector. Similarly, the wife must honour and obey the husband, administer to his comforts and strictly obey the husband’s orders, to be faithful to the husband and ensure that he is “living well”.

In Tai marriage ceremonies, when the groom goes to receive the bride back home and pay respects to the village elder, the latter will give a lesson on “the duties” and responsibilities of husband and wife towards each other as follows: The duties of the man or husband are (1) to be the provider of the family, (2) to be diligent, to have endurance, to be willing to face hard work, (3) to conduct life smoothly, not to become addicted to excessive drinking and gambling habits, and (4) to treat his wife with love and compassion, refrain from beatings or the use of force or threats. On the other hand the duties of a good woman or wife are: (1) to be a good housewife, look after the home, cook food, look after the children, care for the comforts of her husband, (2) to be diligent in work, not be lazy, to stay at home and not roam about the village unnecessarily, (3) to take wise care of the family money and be frugal, and (4) to be faithful to her husband, not be arrogant or show interest in other men but only in her husband.

The social expectations regarding the ideal roles of husband and wife are values which the majority of villagers, particularly those already married with a family, agree to be suitable. Should one examine these social expectations, it would be obvious that most of the attributes of the ideal wife reflect the ideology of male supremacy. It should be noticed that the issue of fidelity of the married couple

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12 Data on gender roles and social expectations are derived from interviews with 24 married villagers. Twelve men and twelve women were asked to describe the qualities which constitute a good husband and a good wife and to specify their duties to each other. Most men and women gave almost identical responses to these questions.
touches upon the role of the wife only whilst, for the husband, social expectations do not stress fidelity to the wife at all. The reason for this disparity may be because the Tai believe that men by nature do not know how to master their feelings in sexual matters. Interest in women is part of a male’s inborn trait; deviations, extra conjugal pursuits whenever the opportunity offers are part of manliness and normal things. Infidelity of a husband outside the village is neither unexpected nor threatening to the wife, whereas any sexual misconduct on the wife’s part is not only a serious moral breach, but is highly threatening to her husband. Therefore a good wife should not roam about the village unnecessarily, particularly at night time because, in so doing, she would be the target of malicious gossip, leading to quarrels with her husband because the wife did not make use of her time in looking after the house, in cooking and taking full care of her husband’s comforts.

Aside from the issue of fidelity, the other good qualities of the husband and wife are of similar attributes, whether they refer to diligence or enduring hard work. Both husband and wife are expected to be diligent in earning a living, know how to save money and not be extravagant in spending. The wife especially is expected to manage the family income and expenditure competently.

According to social expectation, the husband is the family breadwinner whilst the wife is the good housewife. Food is an important symbol of Tai society that binds the husband, wife and family members together. Food and feasts are important components of poi festivals, marriage ceremonies, funerals and ceremonies of almost all kinds in Tai society. In married life, the husband is the one who “obtains food” for the family while the wife is the one who “prepares” the food. A good husband has to find food to feed the family and a good wife has to prepare food for her husband to have a full stomach at every meal. Food is the symbol of exchange of benefits and mutual amelioration. Therefore, in the event of a heated and vehement quarrel, the wife may stop cooking food for her husband or refuse to eat together with her husband as a protest or to express dissatisfaction, which is the only form of protest that the wife is able to make to the husband.

A model wife must not only cook and see to the comforts of her husband but must also honour and display respectful obedience to her husband. When in the midst of friends, relatives or strangers, the wife has to especially be in attendance and at the service of her husband, but not join in the conversation if not invited.
and she should not express opinions on any subject unless the husband first asks her to do so. That a child shows respect to an elder and the wife shows respect to her husband are considered as norms of social order in Tai society.

Even though, in the formal setting, the wife is the one that honours the husband, most Tai women are well aware of their powers and influence within the households. A Tai female, according to the view of one elder in Lak Chang, “puts her words and decisions in the mouth of the husband, lets him be the one that declares her decisions”.

For this reason, we have to differentiate clearly between formal dominance and actual dominance in the husband and wife relationship. In Tai village society, the formal relationship between husband and wife exhibits all the patterns of deference and respect required by the cultural norms of male supremacy. The male may receive the place of honour as the head of the family—the formal decision-maker on family matters—but more often than not we find that the real power and leadership are in the hands of the wife. From studies of husband and wife relationships in Lak Chang, we discover rather clearly that the wife has a higher role and influence than the husband in nearly every household. It is the woman who is the real leader of the family. On asking for the opinion of some 20 couples as to who is the real leader of the household, every couple unanimously agreed that the husband is the family leader. But on questioning other households as to who they think is the family head, the answers we received from over 80 per cent of couples turned out to be that the wife was the real family leader. It can be seen that when we asked the husband and wife to consider their status role in their household, the husband and wife answered the question based on cultural norms and social expectations—saying that the husband is the household leader—but when we asked other families to consider the role and standing, the opinion we received reflects the true social relationship. On top of that, when we asked the opinion of some four or five elders in Lak Chang during a conversation at a poi festival, the elders gave a jocular reply that the majority of Tai males, including the elders of Lak Chang, are all under the supervision and care of their wives.

Dominance between husband and wife in a household is an ambiguity, easily leading to misunderstanding. We tend to use the word dominance in the sense of control or one party having to accept the authority of the other party. However, the state of leading or having power in a household can mean the ability to steer
the mind, influencing or coaxing the other party by various means into accepting one’s ideas. In the family context, dominance by the husband or the wife usually means the ability to control, persuade or coax the other party into complying with his or her wishes. In real life, the power of the wife may not be formally evident since the husband receives the honour and respect in the presence of friends or guests. The male has his own seat and is the one to dine before his wife, is seated near the monk in the temple, for instance, but the power of the wife is clearly evident in the choice of crops to be planted in the following year, in fixing and bargaining the price of produce, in managing the income and expenditure of the household, which are of greater importance than official leadership status. Moreover, the area that shows clearly and tangibly the power of the wife in the household is her role as manager of the household economy. Household expenses are under the control of the wife and even the head of the family must ask for money from his wife to spend on personal business. For these reasons, we can say that the issue of dominance in the husband and wife relationship is rather ambiguous. In terms of cultural norms, the Tai male holds a higher position than his wife: he is the household chief, receives honour and respectful obedience from his wife; the husband walks in front whilst the wife follows; the wife is the first to rise and the last to sleep; the male speaks at village meetings whilst the wife may sit quietly listening or stay at home and not join the meeting. At the same time, if we were to look at performances within the family context, we would instead find that the wife takes the leading role in agricultural production and management of the household. The Tai people accept that the female has greater responsibility and authority in making decisions regarding household affairs than the male and, normally, household affairs also include production management, trading and control over the entire income and expenditure of the household. To that extent, the wife is dominant in the family. For the Tai male of Lak Chang, power and dominance within the household are of little significance because they pertain to worldly matters only, while in the things that really count—that is, in spiritual matters—it is the husband who is dominant. The Tai female also agrees that her authority in the household and in managing production just “add responsibilities” and put a burden on her
shoulders. Even though wives have higher roles and bargaining powers as well as social standing than before, the women view their extra responsibilities as extra drudgery and sufferings. For these reasons, a Tai female would still like to be born again as a man because she sees that a male does not have to shoulder such great responsibilities.

Anyhow, even though the Tai, both male and female alike, look at the authority of the female as being unimportant, the female as controller of the money purse is the deciding factor in having control over the husband and his dependence on her. In accepting the duties of supervising the household money, the wife is able to have control over the husband within her household.

Within the family, the wife controls her husband. Outside the family, in the domain of symbolic power such as religious affairs and local politics, the husband controls his wife. The husband is the one who manipulates the religious symbols, supervises merit-making rituals and controls the tokens of power. However, within the perimeter of household and economic activities, the male is the one who is managed and controlled by the female from the day he is born to the day he dies. From infancy to youth, the Tai male is under his mother’s control and when he marries and has a family of his own, he is under his wife’s control.

The obverse of the wife’s control of the husband is the husband’s dependence on the wife. Of the villagers of Lak Chang whom we interviewed, almost all of them explained that the wife is the one who controls the household’s finance because the husband wants her to perform this duty. The male wants to have a wife who is able to supervise and take responsibility for the household’s finances capably. In taking over these tasks, the wife is well aware of her authority within the household and the dependence of the husband on her. Some Tai women denied that taking over the supervision and management of the family purse was the decisive factor for control of the husband but explained that they found it necessary to look after the household’s finance because the male is irresponsible and if the husband was allowed to manage, he might squander all the household’s money on gambling, loafing and various frivolities. For these reasons, it was necessary for the female to take charge of the household’s finance. Some Tai women explained the reason for them accepting responsibility for the household’s money from a different angle. They explained that they accepted responsibility
for taking care of the household’s finance because of the love they have for their husband. “If we allow our husband to spend money freely and extravagantly, he would have to work too hard.” These are the two types of explanations that we heard most often when we questioned Tai housewives on the reason why women take over control of household finances.

The contradictions and inconsistencies between the cultural and structural dimension of the relationship between the sexes in Daikong are not uncommon when compared with a great number of peasant societies. Spiro\(^{13}\) describes the wife’s role in Burmese peasant society as the one that controls and makes decisions regarding almost all economic activities of the household whilst the man has formal authority outside the household boundary. In the same way, Hildred Geertz\(^{14}\) has noted the gender roles of the Javanese peasant society thus:

> The wife makes most of the decisions; she controls all the family finances, and although she gives her husband formal deference and consults with him on major matters, it is usually she who is dominant. Strong-willed men may have a relationship of equal partnership with their wives, but families actually dominated by the man are exceedingly rare.

Similar forms of gender relationship are also reported in research on family life of Northern Thai peasants by Sulamith Potter.\(^{15}\)

In Tai peasant society, the contrast between social ideals and reality regarding male and female roles is absorbed in the love and intimate ties that the husband and wife share between one another. Marriage built on love, mutual attraction and free will, as well as the fact that husband and wife work together in almost every aspect, has made the couple quite close to each other with occasions to chat and consult one another tending to create lasting mutual understanding.

Married life in Tai peasant society is usually peaceful. Divorces appear to be few and far between. In Lak Chang village, there has not been a divorce for over 20 years which, however, does not mean that there are no quarrels between husbands and wives. Quarrels and arguments between married couples occasionally occur in Tai peasant society as elsewhere. Arguments may sometimes

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14 Geertz (1961:46).
15 Potter (1976).
reach vehement stages so that a couple will refuse to speak to each other for days, or stop eating together, or the wife may cease preparing dishes for her husband as a sign of protest. Anyhow, quarrels between married couples seldom appear to become so violent as to resort to attacking one another. Tai villagers consider wife-beating as the way of vile people, despicable behaviour that is strongly condemned by the community.

Squabbles between husband and wife therefore are usually of a temporary nature and invariably end in reconciliation. The reasons for the rarity of divorces in the village can be attributed to several factors. The first one is that marriages between husband and wife arise from love; the young people choose their own life partners, so the union is based on love and mutual understanding from the start. Secondly, violent quarrels are not tolerated by the Tai community. When conflicts arise between individuals or groups, whether these are disagreements between husband and wife, between relatives or friends or between neighbours, the elders of the kin group act as mediators to quell the dispute before hostilities grow out of proportion and become irreparable. Thirdly, Tai people place special significance on image and prestige. Divorce brings shame and dishonour to the family name, so it is a thing to be avoided at all cost. Tai society does not accept a person that has divorced his or her spouse. Some elders say that both the men and women who have divorced usually have to live alone for the rest of their lives because nobody would want to marry such a person. Lastly, it is the family, not the individual, that is the unit of land holding. A divorce results in the family’s extinction, creating a problem in the structure of land distribution followed by many other problematic situations. For the various reasons stated above, marriages and conjugal relationships between men and women in Tai peasant community tend to be of a lasting nature or, at least, there does not exist a case of divorce in Lak Chang for us to discern the reasons or to conclude otherwise.

**Gender Roles in Changing Times**

During the past four decades, Tai village society in Daikong has undergone changes in many aspects. The increase in the number of households has resulted in the land holding of each family decreasing in size. Population and birth control policies which have been strictly enforced have caused the family labour force to
shrink whilst the demand for agricultural production has steadily increased, forcing the Tai peasants to work more heavily throughout the year to enable production to keep pace with market demand and to obtain cash income to meet rising costs of consumption of goods from outside. After four centuries of Chinese domination, the Tai people have come to accept many cultural characteristics of the Han as their own. Presently, the Tai favour building houses out of brick with tile roofing similar to the Chinese architecture. Tai males have begun to dress in the popular style of the Chinese, use clan names in the Chinese way and eat meals with chopsticks as the Chinese do.

Nowadays women play greater roles in production and trade, resulting in their enjoyment of higher standing and bargaining power in village society. Changes in women’s roles have also caused gender relations in Tai society to follow suit. Tai females have begun to exercise the pivotal role in the family and the stabilising force of the community.

Anyone who has travelled to Muang Khon or other towns in Daikong may have noticed that it is difficult to tell the difference between present-day Tai villages and other Chinese villages in Yunnan province. Tai houses show almost no dissimilarity in appearance to houses of the Chinese. The body build, facial features and attire of the Tai are almost indistinguishable from the common Chinese. The outstanding feature or characteristic of the Tai at the present time is the dress of the Tai women. From childhood to youth, the style of dressing of the Tai maiden would not evidently be different from that of the Chinese. Teenage Tai girls favour T-shirts, jeans and high heels in the Chinese fashion. However, after marriage and having a home, every young Tai female turns to wearing black skirts, open front blouses, hair knotted in a bun with a bright coloured turban as the symbol of a married woman. Up to this day, Tai women still preserve this traditional style of dress which firmly distinguishes the Tai ethnic identity.

Tai women also play an important role in the preservation of Tai cultural identity. Strong and lasting ties between mother and daughter have enabled the mother to instil the sense of identity and motherhood into the daughter who has become the representative of the mother; the daughter becomes the mother’s successor—the daughter is socialised to accept responsibilities for the back-breaking chores of the agricultural economy, child-rearing and household supervision. The reproduction of mothering in Tai society has become a unifying force that
provides continuity and stability to the family and the community. Tai women continue to play a leading role in terms of production and reproduction of the sense of ethnic identity, which is the subject that will be described in detail in the next chapter.