

DUAL ETHNIC IDENTITY OF THE KOHO IN LAM DONG PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

In the ethnographic discipline in Vietnam, the perspective that views cultural characteristics as having an ethnic identity defining quality is apparently a popular view. In the ethnographic discipline in Vietnam, the perspective that views cultural characteristics as having an ethnic identity defining quality is apparently a popular view. Over time, under particular circumstances, a number of members in an ethnic community may adopt an ethnic label imposed upon them by outsiders. And it is from this social phenomenon that an ethnic community can develop a second identity in addition to their local ethnic identity. The State, through ethnographers, is often an agent that initiates this second nationally used identity for local people, and the mass media, school textbooks, as well as tourist companies play a very important role in disseminating this second ethnic identity. We believe that the Chil in Lam Dong Province are a case in point.

Keywords: the Koho, ethnic identity, ethnic boundary, social constructivist; essentialist.

The multi-dimensional nature of ethnic identity and ethnic identification

To start with, we would like to recite a number of anecdotes related to ethnic identities among the Koho and ethnic identification work in Vietnam.

A government official of the Chil group in Da Sar Commune, Lac Duong District, Lam Dong Province told us that when he once was in Ho Chi Minh City, he was asked about his ethnic affiliation and he said he was of the Chil group. The listener

had never heard of any group called Chil and did not know where this group was living. He then said he was of the Koho ethnic group¹ and the person to whom he was talking nodded in understanding.

When asking a number of Chil families in Hamlet 1, Da Don Commune, Lam Ha District, Lam Dong Province on their ethnicity, we raised the question: Is it possible to say that the Chil belong to the Koho ethnic group? A woman replied: If our Chil group is labeled as Koho, we

¹ In the 1979 official list of ethnic groups in Vietnam, the Chil are classified as a local group of the inclusive rubric Koho (which includes the Koho, Lach, Chil, Nop and other smaller groups). In this paper, the term "Koho" is used for this inclusive ethnic category, and also refers to the Koho ethnic group per se.

as adults will know that it is not right, but then our children will no longer know our group is Chil, not Koho, when they grow up.

At a Lach family in Lac Duong Town, Lam Dong Province, we asked a girl in her 20s, "Do the Lach belong to the Koho ethnic group?", she replied, "Yes". Later that day, we asked the girl's father the same question, and he said, "No". We then said, "Your daughter told us that the Lach belonged to the Koho ethnic group". On hearing this, the father said, "She said so because she did not know".

In Lac Duong District, Lam Dong Province, we asked a Chil young man who had received his tertiary education at a college of culture studies at Thu Duc District, Ho Chi Minh City, whether the Chil were of the Koho ethnic group and he said, "Yes". When asking the same question to a group of Chil young men at Dar Sar Commune, Lac Duong District, Lam Dong Province, which is considered as a commune in remote areas, we received a negative answer, in which they strongly asserted that it was not correct to call the Chil "Koho".

At a meeting with Lam Dong Province officials on the ethnic re-identification of the Chil group, an ethnic Chil official said that his group was a separate ethnic group with their own identity. He continued, however, that he as a government official would consent to the government policy of putting his Chil group into the Koho ethnic group.

At a conference on the ethnic affiliation of the Nguon in Quang Binh Province, an ethnic Nguon researcher, who had strongly argued for the re-classification of the Nguon as a separate ethnic group and not as a subgroup of the Viet majority as they are classified at present, stated that the Nguon themselves in many ways are an ethnic group per se, but he would conform

to the officially accepted viewpoint and would suggest putting the Nguon in to the Chut ethnic group (i.e., a minority group in Vietnam).

In a fieldwork trip to the Chil and the Koho areas in Lam Dong Province, a colleague of ours made a list of the main cultural traits of these two groups and then did a calculation of the percentages of similarities and differences in their culture. He then argued in a formal meeting for re-identification of the Chil that the Chil and the Koho share over 70 per cent of the major cultural similarities and hence they should continue to stay in the same ethnic group as they do at present according to the 1979 official ethnic classification list for Vietnam.

At a village in D'ran Town, Don Duong District, Lam Dong Province, in a conversation with us as ethnographic researchers from a central research institute, a Chil elderly man told us that his Chil group was part of the Koho ethnic group. But later, after enthusiastically telling us about how his Chil group's cultural practices are different from those of the Koho, he said the Chil are not ethnically the Koho due to these differences. As we reminded him of his earlier comment on the Chil's ethnic affiliation at the beginning of our conversation, and while he was still thinking of an answer, his daughter sitting next to him said to us that her father used to work for the Commune Fatherland Front and often said so in reference to their own ethnic affiliation.

From those short accounts, we would like to make the following remarks:

1. There is always an imbalance of power between the classifiers or those who make an identification of others and those who are classified. In the ethnic identification work, the power is weighted in favor of the

- ethnographer who is granted the task of classification.
2. There may be a difference among people of different generations in the same ethnic community in their views of their own ethnicity.
 3. For people of the same generation in an ethnic community, there may be a difference among those who live in different geographical locations and are exposed to different social interactions.
 4. In Vietnam, and probably in many other countries, ethnic groupings according to State official lists are not entirely identical with the actual ethnic affiliations in local contexts.
 5. Ethnic identification work, which is often considered in Vietnam's official ethnographic discourse as a highly scientific task, is possibly affected to a significant extent by the factors that go beyond the boundaries of the ethnographic discipline.
 6. In the ethnographic discipline in Vietnam, the perspective that views cultural characteristics as having an ethnic identity defining quality is apparently a popular view. In the West, many anthropologists would not agree. Thomas H. Eriksen (2001), for instance, wrote, "One can have deep ethnic differences without correspondingly important cultural differences...; and one can have cultural variation without ethnic boundaries ...". He asserted, "During the past thirty year ..., hardly a single serious contribution to the field has failed to point out that there is no one-to-one relationship between culture and ethnicity ...; that cultural differences cut across ethnic boundaries, and that ethnic identity is based on *socially sanctioned notions* of cultural differences, not 'real ones'" (italics in original).
 7. Over time, under particular circumstances, a number of members in an ethnic community may adopt an ethnic label imposed upon them by outsiders. And it is from this social phenomenon that an ethnic community can develop a second identity in addition to their local ethnic identity. The State, through ethnographers, is often an agent that initiates this second nationally used identity for local people, and the mass media, school textbooks, as well as tourist companies play a very important role in disseminating this second ethnic identity. We believe that the Chil in Lam Dong Province are a case in point.
 8. Dual ethnic identity has been discussed in anthropological literature. Stevan Harrell writes that the Yi in China as an inclusive ethnonym are comprised of many ethnic groups. But after a long time that this ethnic name had been used, the locals with their own separate ethnic identities also identified themselves as Yi when they were asked about their ethnic affiliation. (1990: 522). He indicates how China's peripheral peoples have reacted to the new ethnic identities brought to them through the government's development programs. Their reactions include, among other things, "partial participation" and "simple adoption of the state-imposed *minzu* identities" (1995, cited in Nguyen Van Thang 2007: 174). Nguyen Van Thang observes that ethnic minorities may participate in the State development programs in order to improve their socioeconomic status, and this may involve adopting

multiple ethnic identities to be used in different social contexts (2007: 176). The Hmông in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, in the process of their conforming to Thai society in order to improve their economic status through the benefits of government development projects, “have become bicultural and present either of their two identities [i.e., Hmông or Thai] in different contexts” (*op. cit.*: 175).

9. The multidimensional and situational nature of ethnicity mentioned above seriously challenges the essentialist perspective in ethnic studies (a perspective that is not difficult to find in mainstream ethnographic discourse in Vietnam). The main reason is that essentialism in ethnic studies tends to freeze a phenomenon that is dynamic and ever-flowing in real life. The essentialist perspective in ethnic studies also tends to limit and reduce identity-forming factors to the stable in-group cultural qualities while ethnicity itself is generally relational and often subject to particular contexts of social relations. Essentialism in ethnic studies is also criticized for tending to view differences between social groups, including ethnic communities, as originating from group internal characteristics, thus neglecting the implications of inter-group interactions, and for tending to overemphasize the homogenous character of a group and thus missing the ever-present in-group variations. Thomas H. Eriksen remarks, “... for many anthropologists, essentialism ... appear as dated as pre-Darwinian biology” (2001). We would argue that those ethnographers who took on the State’s assignment to classify ethnic minorities using a list of cultural similarities and differences as a

classifying tool and neglecting the actual process of social interactions in particular localities ran the risk of following in the footsteps of those who take an essentialist point of view in ethnic studies.

The dual ethnic identity of the Koho in Lam Dong Province

The process in which the Chil have come and lived near the other local groups of the Koho and other ethnic groups in different districts and towns in Lam Dong Province has been speeding up in more than the last thirty years. Since 1979, the Chil have been subsumed under the Koho ethnic group by the central government and provincial offices of statistics. Since then, many researchers and people outside of the Koho group have called the Chil *Koho Chil* – a subgroup or local group of the Koho. Over time, in different contexts of social relations with the outsiders, Chil or Koho individuals living in geographical proximity to each other have shown similar cultural behaviors. The reason why this has happened is that the Chil and the Koho have undergone a long process of social interactions for the last several decades. But when the interactions happen to an even greater extent and the two groups display more similar socio-cultural similarities, given the two groups have their own local ethnic identities, we see that many of these similarities are brought about by the impact of the economic, political, and social factors from outside their own communities. There are cases in which the overt cultural characteristics of one local group in the officially recognized Koho ethnic group are taken to characterize the other local groups of the same ethnic group.

The Chil and Koho communities at present have and present multiple identities, and their specific presentation depends on particular circumstances. However, their local ethnic identity, which is the identity that they present in social

interactions at the *community level*, has still dominated their ethnic identity at the national level – i.e., the identity formulated and put in common use in 1979. To prove this point, we are now going to present some of our fieldwork data collected in Lam Dong Province.

We argue that the dual identity of the Koho (the Chil subgroup included) will be recognized through the characteristics of their settlement or living space and histories. Settlement or living space is not only a concept for demarcating an ethnic group's geographic boundary, but also an important cultural concept for expressing the existence of the social relationships that the group has established. The living space exists not separately from, but in association with the relationships established by particular ethnic groups, through their historical linkages. The cultural meaning of living space is even more accentuated when the individuals use their space for their identity representation. In their histories of settlement, the living space among the Koho and the Chil is an important indicator of their identity, especially when they talk about it as their own lived experiences.



Pham Thanh Thoi and the Chil

in Lac Duong, Lam Dong, 2006

In the inclusive category of Koho ethnic group, the Chil have a clear distinction in their minds of their own living space against that of the Lach and the Koho Srê. The Chil living in Duc

Trong, Lam Ha, Don Duong Districts, Ta Nung Commune (Da Lat City) and in Da Knang Commune (Dam Rông District) say that their present settlement areas were the territories of the Koho Srê before 1960. The Chil in Lat Commune (Lac Duong District) note that the area where they are living at present used to be the Lach's land. The reason for this change in their settlement areas is due to the Ngo Dinh Diem Regime's policy of resettlement for the establishment of strategic hamlets, which was going on intensively at the end of the 1950s. The change in the Chil's settlement areas is also due to the impacts of the Government's Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization Program intended for social and economic development of the regions with difficulties since 1981.

The relocation of their settlement areas to their present villages has objective historical reasons which go beyond their subjective intentions. But in the process of resettlement to their new areas, the Chil also experienced a number of intentional situations. For instance, after moving in to set up their new villages in many districts and towns, the Chil communities conducted friendship-forming ceremonies (*nghi le ket nghia*) with the Koho Srê or the Lach in their area. These ceremonies took place more than 30 years ago, but they are still remembered well among the groups involved. The preparations for these ceremonies in such villages as Ta Nung or Da Knang Communes were taken care of by the village elders of the two villages and the Chil newcomers were in charge of the expenses.

For more than the last thirty years, the Chil have lived in proximity to the Koho in Duc Trong, Lam Ha, and Don Duong Districts, to the Lach in Lac Duong District and Da Lat City (Ta Nung Commune), to the Mnông and the Ma in Dam Rong District. Nevertheless,

their psychological association with their former settlement space is still strong and remembered with deep emotions. The elderly people at Da Long and Da Mrông Communes (Dam Rong District) can easily recite the names of their old villages (*bon* in the Koho language) where the Chil used to live around the tall mountains of more than 2,000m in height like Yang Ksung, Yang Duh, Yang Yu Ponang, Yang JuJih, etc. The *bon* is closely associated with the history of each Chil community, such as Bon Ma, Kiêu Dih, Kiêu Tô, Mãng Pier, Ciêng Kao, K'Tung, K'Long, K'Rjam, Trang Yu, Dạ Chair, Kon K'lang, Tría Yang Kring, Ryol Hã, Yong Kla, Sơ Dut Sar, Bon Dong, Sơ Nut Slang, Corong, Bon Ja Dih, Bon Ja Trang, Bon Ja K'Na, Cơ Liêng, Chiên Wur, Chiên Romum, Jolu, Bon N'ien, Ntol; Cilmup, Liêng

Trang, Bon Tron, Đa Rhô, Kơ Dôh, Đa Mrông, Dong Jri, R'liêng, R'Yông Dong, Ryông Yu, etc.

Today, the Chil no longer live in their old settlement space associated with their traditional *bon* in the high mountains at the upper reaches of the Krông Nô (or Da Kroong) River. They now live in six districts/towns of Lam Dong Province. Around the year 1960, the Chil group started to scatter to many areas where they still retained the smaller groupings with their own local names. Such smaller groupings are: Chil Bon Ja, Chil Kon Klang, Chil Kon Doh, Chil Tiah Soh, Chil Bon Ma, Chil Bon Yong, Chil Bon Rum, Chil Bon Duh, Chil Narhoa, etc. Their present settlement areas are shown in the following table.

The Chil's various smaller groupings in Lam Dong Province and their present settlement areas

Group name	Settlement areas at present
	In 6 districts/towns of Lam Dong Province
- Bon Ja	<i>Dung Kno Commune, Lat Commune</i> (Lac Duong); <i>Đam Pao</i> (Đa Đon Commune, Lam Ha District); <i>Liêng Srôn</i> Commune (Đam Rong District)
- Kon Klang	<i>Phu Hoi, Ta Nang Communes</i> (Đúc Trong); <i>Đa Đon</i> (Lam Ha); <i>Đa Sar, Đa Chais, Đa Nhim Communes</i> (Lac Duong); <i>Tu Tra Commune, D'ran Town</i> (Đon Duong)
- Bon Duh	<i>Ntôl Ha, Phu Hoi Communes</i> (Đúc Trong); <i>Đa Long Commune</i> (Đam Rong); <i>Tu Tra Commune</i> (Đon Duong);
- Bon Ma	<i>Đa Đon Commune</i> (Lam Ha); <i>Đa Tong</i> (Đam Rong)
- Kon Doh	<i>Ta Nung Commune</i> (Da Lat City), <i>Đinh Van Town</i> (Lam Ha); <i>Đa Mrong Commune</i> (Đam Rong); <i>Đa Sar, Dung Kno, Đa Chais Communes</i> (Lac Duong); <i>Ntol Ha Commune</i> (Đúc Trong)
- Narhoa	<i>Phu Hoi, Ntôl Ha, Lien Hiep Communes</i> (Đúc Trong); <i>Tu Tra Commune, D'ran Town</i> (Đon Duong); <i>Đa Long Commune</i> (Đam Rong)
- Tiah Soh	<i>Me Linh Commune</i> (Lam Ha); <i>Lat Commune</i> (Lac Duong); <i>Đa Long Commune</i> (Đam Rong)
- Bon Nôm	<i>Dung Kno, Đa Chais Communes</i> (Lac Duong); <i>Phu Hoi, Ntôl Ha Communes</i> (Đúc Trong); <i>Tu Tra Communes, D'ran Town</i> (Đon Duong)
- Bon Yong	<i>Dung Kno Commune</i> (Lac Duong); <i>Me Linh Commune</i> (Lam Ha); <i>Phu Hoi Commune</i> (Đúc Trong)

Source: Fieldwork data collected in Koho and Chil communities in different districts/towns of Lam Dong Province by Honda Mamoru (Toyo University, Japan) and Pham Thanh Thoi from September 2004 to December 2006.

The above list is not comprehensive because in constructing it we relied on what Chil people recounted and the people in the areas we visited were different in their memories of their old settlement space. However, the deep emotions and fond memories of the lived experiences that many Chil people had when recounting their lives in their older *bon* still linger on in their minds and hearts, and these feelings and memories, among others, also serve as a line of demarcation between their own local ethnic identity and that of the other groups to whom they are now living in proximity. In the case of the Chil people, as “newcomers” in their own thinking, their territoriality or emotional attachment to their former living space, in the context of the present social cohabitation with other ethnic groups, can be looked at as a primordial feeling that makes them aware of their own identity in *local* social interactions. *We believe that many mainstream ethnographers in Vietnam missed this important marker in the Chil’s ethnic identity when they tried to subsume the Chil under the rubric Koho. This ethnic marker is probably not to be found in overt cultural traits like clothes, housing styles, or whatever in a people’s tangible culture, but should be explored and discovered through observing, communicating with, and listening to the people involved.*

Arriving in Lam Dong Province, if you use the name of a Chil *bon* to ask about what ethnic community lives there, no matter who you ask, whether the person you are asking belongs to the Chil, Lach, or Koho Srê group, you will receive the same answer that the ethnic community living in that *bon* is Chil. In Lam Dong Province, people from the Koho, Srê, Chil, or Lat groups can always identify in what geographical locations people of their own group live. The older people can give details of the time when a community

arrived at that place and how their customs and lifestyles differed from those of the neighboring communities.

Generally speaking, each individual in the (larger) Koho minority group finds it very easy to tell tourists about where the Chil, the Srê, or the Lach live. The clear distinction of each community’s living space and settlement history among local minority people probably makes anyone visiting a community, though not for doing ethnographic research or with the purpose of ethnic identification, become able to perceive the identity of each local group. If all the groups in the inclusive category Koho are believed to have one common identity, then this belief may have a weak foundation. In reality, whether people from different groups live as next-door neighbors to each other or in nearby separate villages, the boundaries of living space in the minds of people from each local group in the (larger) Koho group do not become dim, but are very clear instead. The living space demarcation of this sort is clearly systematic and detailed, and hence indicates an identity of their own, which exists together with a shared ethnic identity created by the wider society outside their local setting.

In everyday life, when tourists ask ethnic minority people how to tell the difference between the Koho, the Chil and the Lach, the answers greatly vary. The common answers are: The languages spoken by the Chil and the Koho differ in a number of vocabulary items and pronunciations. In terms of religious beliefs, the Chil are Protestant, and the Koho are Catholic. The Chil have specific names for their lineages, while the Koho do not. The Chil lead a nomadic life and practice slash-and-burn agriculture, while the Koho have a sedentary lifestyle and practice wet rice cultivation. For men among the Chil, “Ha” is put in front of their given name, while among the Koho, “K” is put before a man’s given name. In

marriage life, cross-cousin marriages are more common among the Chil than among the Koho. And one can hear many other answers about the difference between the groups. Some local minority people just say that there is no need to rely on anything else for recognizing ethnic difference, because “the Koho Srê are Koho Srê, the Chil are Chil, the Lach are Lach, and this cannot be mistaken”. At the same time, one may hear, for example, some people from the Koho Srê saying that it will be fine if the Government or people from the outside society coming here call all of them Koho, whether they are originally Koho or Chil or Lach, because “Koho is the term used to refer to all of these people who belong to the same ethnicity!”.

It is commonly known that the Chil no longer lead a “nomadic” lifestyle. They as well as the other groups of the Koho now cultivate wet rice and coffee, among other crops, on fixed farming lands. Many Chil families are also Catholic like many Koho families. Cross-cousin marriages still exist but have become rare even among the Chil where this is a preferential marriage form. The Koho in several areas in Lam Dong Province also have specific names for their lineages (*mbol*), like Pang Tiêng, Đạ Chắt, Dong Gur, Kon so, Kơ Să, KraJăn (among the Koho Srê at Preteng Hamlet, Phu Son

Commune, Lam Ha District). Or, at wedding ceremonies today, there is hardly any basic difference between the Koho and the Chil or the Chil and the Lach, given the fact that they are Christian and their wedding ceremonies are conducted in churches. And most of their wedding receptions, for which they hire local catering firms, are increasingly like an ethnic Vietnamese wedding reception in the area. It can be logically argued, then, that ethnic identity cannot be found through a cultural trait or traits that can be tangibly seen by an observer or ethnographer. As Keyes put it when referring to the “primordial” quality in ethnicity under Geertz’s view, “Ethnicity ... entails an assumption that there is something essential or given in the distinctions between peoples. But one has to *look beyond some sets of cultural traits* to find this primordial basis for ethnicity (1997: 153; italics added). We would also argue that if an ethnic marker is an indicator of an ethnic identity, then in the case of the Chil in Lam Dong Province, their attitude and feelings towards their former settlement or living space in the present context of ethnic cohabitation in many districts and towns in Lam Dong Province can be interpreted as one of the markers of the Chil ethnic identity.

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