

# Transnational Ethnic Relationship with Development in Vietnam

Vuong Xuan Tinh \*

**Abstract:** With a multi-ethnic country, transnational ethnic relations (TER) play a very important role affecting the development of that country. For example, the uncertainty related to TER of some countries in the Balkans, Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia is currently one of the causes of ethnic conflicts and ethnic conflicts with state. TER is determined to be the relationship of a minority ethnic group with its counter minorities in other countries. In a narrow sense, it could be ethnic relations across borders (ERAB), or the relations with counterpart neighboring ethnic minorities. This relationship has taken place for a long time and it has been increasing in the context of globalization. The paper analyzes theoretical and practical issues of transnational ethnic relationship with the development in Vietnam in the context of a changing global politics.

**Key words:** Transnational ethnic relationship, ethnic relationship across border, migration, ethnic minority.

## 1. Review on transnational ethnic relations in Vietnam

Thanks to the effects of factors such as history, international relations, globalization and regionalization, the Đổi mới (Renovation) process in Vietnam and TER have been growing, especially after 1975. That relationship is expressed in various fields with Kinh (the majority Vietnamese ethnic people) and many ethnic minorities. The relationship not only relates TER with 3 neighboring countries of Vietnam (China, Laos and Cambodia) but also with many other countries such as South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia, Russia, Germany, France, Canada, USA, etc. In this context, the development and management of TER is the concern of many countries. To develop and manage relationships effectively, it should have the appropriate policy system built on the basis of delicate scientific studies.

It is estimated that there are over 40 ethnic minority peoples including Kinh people in Vietnam today having TER, mostly in Vietnam - China border with 26 peoples (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2012: 30-32). However, the level of TER is different because of historical conditions, ethnic development characteristics and international context. In this paper, we only focus on TER of ethnic minorities, namely some peoples of Tày - Thái and Tạng - Miên (Tày, Nùng, Giáy, Hà Nhì, Lô Lô) in the Vietnam - China border area, peoples having TER that foreign scholars are interested such as H'mông, Thái, Hoa, Chăm, Khmer and ethnic groups following Protestant Đê ga in the Central Highland such as Êđê, Gia rai, M'ông (Taylor, 2008: 18-23).

The article focuses on researching those

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(\*) Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., Institute of Anthropology.

peoples because they are considered typical in Vietnam's TER today. With the peoples of the Tày - Thái and Tạng - Miến, they all have intra/inter relationship with other ethnic minorities living in the autonomous region in China, such as the Tày, Nùng in Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng provinces (Vietnam) with Zhuang people in Guangxi (China); Hà Nhì, Lô Lô in Lào Cai, Lai Châu and Điện Biên provinces (Vietnam) with Hani, Di peoples in Yunnan (China). In addition to intra and external ethnic relationship with their counterparts in Laos (H'mông), Campuchia (Khmer, Champa), China (Han), those peoples also have intra-relations in Asia, Europe and North America countries, especially those relating to refugees after Indochina war (1975) and Northern border conflict (1979). For example, there are around 40,000 Champa people in Malaysia, many of them are descendants of migrated Champa people after 1975 (Phú Văn Hãn, 2009). TER of these peoples is expressed primarily through the economic, social, cultural and religious aspects.

### ***1.1. Economic relations***

Economic relations of Vietnam minorities with other neighboring minorities (mainly in China, Laos and Cambodia) usually consist of unofficial trade, production, employment and resources exploitation, therefore it is difficult to control. On trade, the prevailing situation in the Vietnam - China border area is that Vietnamese ethnic farmers could only sell agricultural and forestry products to traders across the border and suffer trade deficit with China. In the rest two border regions, Vietnam people sell less but buy more goods from Cambodia and Laos/Thailand. In many

border areas, there have formed cross-border ethnic minorities business, such as Tày, Nùng in Lạng Sơn, Hà Nhì and Giáy in Lào Cai, H'mông in Nghệ An, Khmer and Champa in An Giang mainly at small scale (Vương Xuân Tinh, 2010: 82-96; Phạm Thu Hà, 2012). Notably, the ethnic Chinese, H'mông and Champa already have transnational trade relations with their counterparts in many countries. Some H'mông people in Kỳ Sơn district, Nghệ An province travel into Laos regions and the North of Thailand to trade cattle, they also trade traditional costume with the H'mông in America. Champa Muslims in the Southwest region trade electronics and some other goods in Cambodia, Laos and Malaysia (Vương Xuân Tinh, 2012: 104-105).

Transnational production relations of ethnic minorities in Vietnam are mainly in agriculture. At the Northern border region, there has appeared co-production: some ethnic households as H'mông, Tày, Nùng, etc. receive their counterparts' invest to plant trees (rubber, banana, sugarcane, pineapple). Some H'mông households in border areas of Nghệ An, Bru, Vân Kiều in Quảng Trị, the Khmer in An Giang and Kiên Giang provinces also lease their expatriates' land for cultivation.

Outsourcing are prevalent activities of ethnic minorities near the border region, especially in Vietnam - China one. Tày, Nùng, H'mông in Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng; Hà Nhì, Lô Lô peoples in Lào Cai and Hà Giang provinces have entered deep inland China to work for their own or other ethnic minorities, in agriculture fields such as planting, growing and exploiting sugarcane, bananas, pineapple etc. or exploring rice

fields (Vương Xuân Tình, 2010: 97-100; Bùi Xuân Đỉnh and Nguyễn Ngọc Thanh (Co-author), 2014: 85-92). Research by Lý Hành Sơn shows that there were nearly 6,000 people went to China to work.

According to the report of An Giang province, it had 265 cases of illegal migration to work abroad in 2013. People often do sales job, carrying cargo across borders legally and illegally in all three border areas, especially in Vietnam-China and Vietnam - Cambodia borders. Some ethnic minorities even exploit natural resources across borders. H'mông, Khơ-mú peoples go to Laos to exploit forest products in areas where their minorities reside. Similarly, Khmer and Champa enter Cambodia to do fishing in fields and rivers (Phạm Thu Hà, 2012; Vương Xuân Tình, 2012: 104-105).

As for the Chinese minority, transnational economic relations with their counterparts developed than the rest. This is a traditional Chinese feature (Châu Thị Hải, 2006: 180-322). The network of Chinese minority in Vietnam is just one part of their ethnicity in mainland China, Taiwan and the world, especially in the Western countries due to the migration after the refugees' incident in 1978 and the border war in 1979. Therefore, the Chinese ethnic minority in some localities, especially in Hồ Chí Minh City has many links with overseas minority to co-develop trade and business. As reported by the Ethnic Department of Hồ Chí Minh City, there are now plenty of Chinese businesses in this city having business relationship with foreign countries or territories outside Vietnam, mainly with China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong such

as Biti's, Tân Cường Thành, Thái Tuấn, Kinh Đô, etc. Private company Biti's has branches in 40 countries worldwide. Notably, based on relationships with Chinese and other ethnic minorities in Vietnam, there are now quite a large number of Chinese people (both Han Chinese and ethnic minorities) illegally working at professions such as medicine, aquaculture, services in Vietnam which makes it very difficult to control (Nguyen Van Chinh, 2013).

### ***1.2. Social organization***

Social organization of the transnational ethnic minorities in Vietnam is most evident in family relationships, marriage, immigration and criminal activities. Regarding family relationships, most ethnic people groups in the border region have relation to their brothers on the other side of the border. Some groups like the H'mông, Khmer, Chăm, Hoa, Gia-rai, Ê-đê ethnic minorities also have family ties in the United States and many European countries because of the given historical context. Family relationships diversification is represented such as visiting relatives (mainly unofficial), caring or giving gifts, building places for worshipping. Due to development of transport and communications today, that relationship has been strongly promoted. TER in Vietnam - Cambodia and Vietnam - Laos Highlands border area is mainly to visit relatives. With the Chinese community in Hồ Chí Minh City, the association operation is strong and attracting even expatriates' participation.

Transnational marriage of the ethnic minorities has also been growing. In the Vietnam - China border areas, there are mixed ethnic marriage across boundaries with mainly one direction that Vietnamese

women marry Chinese men while two way marriages happen more common in Vietnam - Laos and Vietnam - Cambodia border areas. However, most married couples do not register, they only celebrate in their ethnic or local wedding tradition (Vương Xuân Tình, 2010: 45-60; 2012: 54 -75; Lý Hành Sơn, 2011: 64). In the Central Highlands, there have been more and more ethnic women from Ê-đê, Gia-rai communities get married with expatriates in America. With Chinese Hải Ninh people, 60% of women married to Taiwanese men. Along with other factors, transnational marriages increases internal ethnic relations and affect the national identity awareness (Nguyễn Văn Thắng, 2010).

Transnational migration of ethnic minorities is mainly to seek seasonal jobs in agriculture. The general trend is that Vietnamese ethnic minorities migrate to neighboring countries to seek employment other than vice versa. In Vietnam - China and Vietnam - Cambodia borders, seasonal migration can take place in a few months or weeks. At a crowded communal Tày, Nùng peoples in Lạng Sơn province, thousands of people go to Guangxi to seek jobs annually. In a commune of Lào Cai province, around 80% of Giáy households do sales, porters in Hekou (Yunnan) (Bùi Xuân Đỉnh and Nguyễn Ngọc Thanh, 2014: 82-83). With the Cham Muslims in the South West, many people migrate to Malaysia to seek employment. The two governments' control of this trend is still limited revealed through many illegal immigration cases (without official documents or excess of permitted time). In addition to seasonal employment, there is also free migration that people move to settle elsewhere across the border. This two direction types of

migration are common among H'mông in Vietnam - Laos border which invoke guerrillas and the so-called "the Kingdom of H'mông" to undermine the two countries (Vương Xuân Tình, 2012: 119-122).

Ethnic minorities' transnational crime activities are often drug trafficking, human trafficking, weapons trafficking, theft of assets and guerrilla. The major drug trafficking is in the Vietnam - Laos border area, especially in Cầu Treo (Hà Tĩnh), Nậm Cắn (Nghệ An), Tây Trang (Điện Biên), its typical transnational ethnic relationships mainly involved with the Thái and H'mông peoples.

In Vietnam - China border, Tày, Nùng, H'mông and Dao peoples often involved in drug trafficking and human trafficking. In this highland, there is collaboration with their accomplice across borders to kidnap women and children to China. Theft across border happens with the participation of ethnic minorities in all three borders. Banditry activities primarily related to the H'mông in Vietnam - Laos border, in the forms of looting, rebel, provides financing for guerillas, training and coaching banditry in Laos, even in Myanmar (Vương Xuân Tình, 2012: 118-125).

### ***1.3. Cultural relations***

Transnational relation culture of ethnic minorities in Vietnam is expressed through the dimensions of language, customs and information - communication. Sharing the same language with expatriate minorities, Vietnam ethnic minorities can communicate with their counterpart minorities in other countries. In some Western countries, although minorities such as the H'mông, Khmer, Chăm, Ê-đê, Gia-rai peoples have to learn the language of the target country,

they still spread their ethnic language through family or community educational system they create. Ethnic groups in the border region are likely to use bilingual or multilingual, so they can communicate with their counterparts and other minorities across boundaries. Many ethnic Hà Nhì, Phù Lá, Lô Lô, H'mông, Dao people in the Northern border can speak 2-3 languages of the region; in addition, they also speak Mandarin - southern language of Chinese (Chu Thái Sơn, 1987: 285-298).

The majority of H'mông people in Vietnam - Laos border can speak Thái - the common language of Laos. Champa people in the Southwest border region could use Khmer language – the common language of Cambodia. However, Vietnamese language has not developed in this region as expected. Many ethnic minorities people aged over 40, especially women could hardly use Vietnamese, thus their chance of receiving national culture is limited (Vương Xuân Tình, 2012: 84-97).

Relationship of the transnational ethnic customs is expressed specifically through costumes, festivals, beliefs and folk literature. The H'mông, Hà Nhì, Lô Lô, Dao peoples in the Northern border region like their Chinese minority counterparts' costume for its beauty and affordability. Women costume of the White H'mông in Nghệ An is produced by the combination with their expatriate minority H'mông in the US: they make the pattern while their American expatriates deal with fabrics and tailoring. Festival Đờng Đờng, Bắc Ngà in Lạng Sơn some time attracts tens of thousands of people (mostly Zhuang) from Guangxi - China to attend.

In the traditional New Year of the Khmer in the South West, tens of thousands of people cross the border to visit relatives and attend festivals. Religious activities along the border areas, especially in Vietnam - China and Vietnam - Laos regions still occur. Many shamans of Tày, Nùng, H'mông, Dao, Khơ-mú often serve worshipping rites, especially treatment for expatriate minorities across borders. In folk cultural activities, Hà Nhì people in Lào Cai, Khmer in An Giang are affected by their expatriate minorities across borders (Nguyễn Văn Toàn, 2012; Vương Xuân Tình, 2012: 54 -75).

Transnational information, communication and media are vibrant in the border region. In many border areas, ethnic minority can listen to radio or watch television broadcast by neighboring countries in mandarin or ethnic languages. In three borders, Vietnam - Cambodia border is affected most by communication from neighboring stations. The majority Khmer people here enjoy watching neighboring TV programs and pay no attention to domestic broadcast that led the government ban people using parabolic antennas (Trần Hồng Hạnh, 2012). Some H'mông language radio programs (Manila Radio), Laotian, Khmer (Free Asia Radio) from other countries sharing no border with Vietnam also have effects on Vietnam's ethnic minorities.

Meanwhile, many areas in Vietnamese - China and Vietnam - Laos borders cannot get access to national and ethnic minority television programs because of complex terrain. In many border regions of Vietnam, ethnic minorities mainly use the cultural products of China, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, America, Malaysia, etc. such as music

recordings, films while Vietnamese cultural products is very limited (Trần Hồng Hạnh, 2012; Vương Xuân Tình, 2012: 76-86).

#### **1.4. Religious relations**

Transnational religion relations of ethnic minorities mention in this report is limited to the major religions, namely Buddhism, Islam, Brahmans, Protestant and Catholic. Among transnational ethnic religious relationships, Khmer, Chăm, H'mông, Ê-đê, Gia-rai, M'ông and Ba-na ethnic minorities receive much attention.

In several dimensions of TER, Khmer people in Southern regions enjoy Buddhism practice with their twin minority in Cambodia. Buddhism in the two countries has an important role in their lives. Khmer people in Vietnam usually join religious activities across the border (building and repairing pagoda, worshipping rites, festivals). Some people even learn Khmer language (words) and practice Buddhism in Khmer pagodas in Cambodia. In An Giang province, most of the pagodas have relations with foreign personnel or organizations to receive financial supporting for their activities (Vương Xuân Tình, 2012: 68-73).

Cham people mainly follow two main religions, Brahmans and Islam. The most powerful transnational Muslim Champa religion group lives mainly in the Southern region. They have relation with their fellow believers in Malaysia, Indonesia, even in some Middle East countries. Pilgrimage to Mecca (Saudi Arabia) is the dream of many people, and each year dozens of people complete their commission mainly by self-funding. Specifically, 20 people in Châu Phong commune, Tân Châu town, An Giang province went on a pilgrimage to

Mecca in 2013. Even some Khmer people from the poor villages of An Phú district, An Giang province managed to do this. Religions create strong links between believers in the society, not only in rituals but also in other fields. Many Champa Muslim communities in the Southern region have received funding from overseas believers to build churches, studying or assistance. Champa fishing community on the Mekong River enjoys nomadic life in Cambodia, but they still have close ties with fellow believers in church rituals and receiving charity (Vương Xuân Tình, 2012: 68-73).

The H'mông, Ê đê, Gia rai, M'ông and Ba na peoples used to follow Christian in the French colonial period, however in the past decade the number of Protestants increased rapidly led to transnational religious relation developed. Through open and secret missionary, especially in the border regions of Vietnam - China and Vietnam - Laos, they receive religious literature and foreign finance support (Lý Hành Sơn, 2008: 128-138; Vương Xuân Tình, 2012: 121-122). The development of Protestantism has created larger religious ethnic communities, involving many different ethnic minorities share the same religion thereby incorporating nationalist sentiment and religion to become a high organizational community and impact.

## **2. The cause and the impact of transnational ethnic relations**

### **2.1. The cause of transnational ethnic relations**

TER has developed thanks to the following main reasons:

*2.1.1. History.* These ethnic groups have lived long in the culture - history region.

Later, the formation of modern nations defining border among ethnic groups but it cannot separate their existing relations.

*2.1.2. Migration.* The exodus search to find new residence due to the war or epidemics, disasters, famines... has constantly happened in the minority regardless national borders. After settling in the new place, those people still keep ties with the old country.

*2.1.3. The need for socio-economic development.* Every individual, family or community has his own need of socio-economic and cultural development. To meet the demand, they are willing to cross border legally and illegally.

*2.1.4. National policy.* Each country has its own economic policy, aims at protecting society national security in general, border security in particular, strengthens its national interests and enhances their influence. Vietnam innovation policy is closely related to this issue. Besides, several countries especially China and the US also have many policies, particularly the policy of "soft borders" to promote their influence with other countries, including Vietnam.

*2.1.5. Globalization.* Globalization is a large circulation of the world today, attracts most of the countries and communities integrate into the flow, thereby breaking many barriers related to the administrative border.

*2.1.6. The hostile forces at home and abroad.* To sabotage Vietnam through ethnic and religion issues, these forces use all plots, actions to lure, incite, support finance and organize sabotage in various fields from politic, economic to the social, cultural and ethnic minority aspects of Vietnam.

## **2.2. The positive and negative impacts of TER**

### *2.2.1. Positive impacts*

Regarding economic sectors, firstly TER has a certain impact in poverty reduction. Thanks to expanding employment in trade, business, employment, resource extraction with their counterparts across borders, people have more chances to increase income. Business activities also promote many ethnic minorities having heavy subsistence economic model to integrate with the market. Transnational economic relations also lead to change households and communities' economic structure in some localities in the direction of increasing trade and service proportion. Socially, TER have extended family relationships, friends, ethnic minorities and religion, it solves both emotional needs and repercussion economic sectors. Thereby, this relationship contributes to improve the capacity of individuals and communities, promote the integration of minorities into society development.

### *2.2.2. Negative impacts*

TER also cause negative impacts as follows:  
a. Many poor households depend on the economic activity of neighbor countries. Their income is primarily from working across borders. That condition forces many farmer families in the Northern and Southwestern borders abandon their fields to work for instant money, making it difficult to escape the poverty trap.

b. TER create social unrest in some border areas. Smuggling, drug trafficking, human trafficking, weapons trafficking, theft, and guerrillas have caused social unrest in many ethnic minority communities. At times in a community of H'mông people in Kỳ Sơn district, Nghệ An province, several dozen people were arrested for those

crimes. TER also caused divisions within ethnic groups, especially under the impact of religion differences.

c. People focus too much on sentiment toward cultural roots across the border of some residents. This is more evident in the Khmer minorities in the Southwest and ethnic minorities belong to Tibet language group in the Northwest through the influence of the ethnic minorities' culture across the border (costumes, documents art, and folk beliefs).

d. It contributes to blur national consciousness in some ethnic residents. This effect occurs when ethnic relations increase, especially with clan having larger habitat across borders, while Vietnam national culture does not attract enough.

e. It creates bad impacts on Vietnam political stability in ethnic minority areas

The riots of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and the South West, the situation of self-proclaiming king, guerrillas in the H'mông communities in Northwest and West of Thanh - Nghệ are inextricably linked with TER and affect grassroots politics, ideology and attitudes of the people towards the Party and State. Overall, some ethnic groups in Vietnam, especially the typical TER minorities do not have advantages in relation to their counterparts in other countries. The root cause of this situation is that Vietnam ethnic peoples have a smaller size of population, the real and potential power of Vietnam is not sufficient enough; Vietnam do not have a clear strategy for developing and managing TER while it is also affected from ethnic policy and development policy of other countries, the hostile forces have been taking advantage of ethnic issues to sabotage.

Meanwhile, the impact of globalization, Vietnam TER will be growing and ethnic minorities will participate more and more deeply into global economic, social, cultural and politic life.

### **3. Conclusion and recommendations**

On the basis of the historical distribution of ethnic groups, under the impact of political, socio-economic and globalized conditions, Vietnam TER has been going strong. This relationship not only occurs within or with other ethnic minorities along the border, but also with many countries in other continents. It has increasingly gained profound influence on the Vietnam minority life, especially with ethnic groups in border areas. To develop and manage TER in Vietnam better, the author proposes some recommendations as follows:

First, we must improve and develop strategies to build a solid border region. In addition to the economic and defense base, we should pay special attention to social and cultural issues.

Second, we have to develop a plan to respond to the strategy of China, the US and other countries regarding "soft border" through pushing deep economic impact, social and cultural hinterland into Vietnam, including the impact on the transnational minority.

Third, we ought to formulate development policies to influence the peoples have strong TER such as H'mông, Hoa, Chăm, Khmer, Gia-rai, Ê-đê, Tày, Nùng, Giáy, Hà Nhì and Lô Lô.

Fourth, we need to strengthen national cultural elements in the border area, especially in terms of ordinary language and national consciousness, nationalism. Fifth, we should

perform the tasks mentioned above, the immediate need is to build research programs TER at state level to develop a theoretical basis, practical summaries, recommendations, solution to the current situation and trends of TER in Vietnam.

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