

# SOME EVIDENCES RELATED TO RIVER CULTURE IN THE LIFE OF DAO PEOPLE IN VIETNAM

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*Dao people in Vietnam mostly reside in the highlands of Cao Bang, Bac Kan, Thai Nguyen, Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, Yen Bai, Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Son La, Dien Bien, Quang Ninh, Hoa Binh... Only after the 1990s, a part of the Dao people migrated to the South, residing in the provinces of the Central Highlands and the Southeast have the conditions to cultivate in the highlands, with relatively flat terrain. However, there are many traces showing that the culture of many Dao groups is related to the river culture. In the scope of this article, the author gives some evidence related to river culture in the spiritual life of the Dao people in Vietnam. This is the result of fieldwork, research, collection and collation of sources for about 15 years. This is also the first publication of the evidence related to river culture in the life of the Dao people in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** Dao people; River culture; Water wave pattern, beeswax pattern; Ethnic origin and history.

## 1. Introduction

Culture is a concept that has a very broad connotation, people approach this concept depending on personality and perception that have many different understandings. Culture is considered as a concept related to all areas of human material and spiritual life.

In the scope of this article, river culture can be understood as an implication of culture, the product of mankind, created and developed in the reciprocal relationship between human and society. But that very culture is involved in creating people, maintaining stability and social order. This culture is also passed from generation to generation through socialization; recreated and evolved in the course of human social actions and interactions. The process of migration, residence and living of the Dao people has formed in this ethnic community a unique cultural aspect of the river. Traces of that river cultural life have been discovered and decoded through the process of ethnic studies of scholars, contributing to unraveling more about migrant life and rich cultural heritage of the Dao people. The article briefly presents research results on historical origins and traces related to river culture in the spiritual life of the Dao people in Vietnam.

## 2. Research overview

Up to now, there have been many researches on Dao people in Vietnam, especially studies on ethnic culture and residence history. Some typical works can be named such as “The Dao people in Vietnam” (Social Sciences Publishing House, 1971) by authors Be Viet Dang, Nguyen Khac Tung, Nong Trung, Nguyen Dang Tien; “Traditional culture of

the Dao people in Ha Giang” edited by Pham Quang Hoan and Hung Dinh Quy; or “Taoist painting of the Dao people in Vietnam” by Phan Ngoc Khue...

In studies on the Dao people, most experts have raised doubts about the Dao people once residing and being the owner of a certain swamp, river, before moving to settle in the high mountain areas like today. However, there has been no in-depth research to solve this doubt. Currently, this issue is discussed by the author of the article in the book “The initiation rite of Vietnamese Dao people” (Nang, 2019) with a very small amount of time. In which, the author has yet to systemize and connect the set of signs – symbols and compare it with many different Dao groups on a large scale.

In fact, research on the history of ethnic group residential area has important implications. It becomes even more important when the people have passed thousands of years of history, and the original documents on ethnic origins and history are almost no longer exist or have insufficient evidence. However, this is an advantage of symbol interpretation in ethnic research.

## 3. Research methods

Three important methods which are used simultaneously in the research are field method, method of comparison, factual argument and symbol interpretation. In which, throughout is the view of interpreting symbolic - semiotics based on the most detailed and universal ethnic culture.

## 4. Research results

### 4.1. Historical origin

Up to now, the issue of the historical origin

of the Dao people has not really been agreed by experts, especially Chinese scholars. This has many subjective and objective reasons. However, in the Dao's worship texts almost all mention San Miao, with the head being Chi You. Han legends say that in the ancient evening, there emerged three tribes: Shen Nong, Huangdi and Chi You. Conflict between the tribes gradually arose, and the struggles between Huangdi and Yandi caused "the kingdom of San Miao to perish".

Without discussing the war and the demise of San Miao, here, in terms of the name of the ancient term, Shen Nong was originally for Baiyue, while Chi You represented San Miao. So the name Huangdi from the history of tribal formation must have had something quite forced, because "Huangdi" (Emperor) is the basic concept that appeared from the Qin dynasty, when Qin Shi Huang ascended the throne.

Civilizations of the tribes during formation are often associated with rivers. The Baiyue civilization associated with the Yangtze river (Chang Jiang) is acknowledged by many scholars. As for the Chi You civilization and the San Miao state, recently, when studying the cultural "fossils" in the Dao people life, it was known that some Dao groups used sesame seeds, millet... as a magic charm, mystical power-tools during the ceremony. For example, at some important rituals in the ceremony, the priest will sprinkle a few sesame seeds into the bowl of water to cast "magic", to increase the strength... Dao Tien group of priests, when performing important parts, especially when worshipping mythical ancestor Panhu, always wears a long dress, then wraps his back with a long belt, with tassels attached at the ends like a figure of cotton jars. That proves, in the past, millet – barley was an important food in life.

Researching on the Yellow River, many scholars around the world have also admitted: The Yellow River is the birthplace of dry agriculture, "barley culture". These logic lead us to envision the original site of the San Miao ethnic group with the leadership of Chi You is closely related to this place. This helps to confirm, two imprints forming an important early civilization: Baiyue's wet rice culture associated with the Yangtze life; San Miao's dry agricultural culture of millet – barley are associated with the Yellow River. This is even more plausible when most studies admit: the beginning of Han culture was nomadic culture.

Along with the south advancement of the Han, conflicts caused Chi You and San Miao to weaken, perish, and disperse. This is the first reason that caused the separation of ethnic groups to take place, from there, forming the Mong/Mieu and Dao. Regarding the formation of the Dao ethnic group, up to now, almost all Dao groups have used the legend of the Dragon-Dog Ban Ho. However, there are several points to note: First, the legend of Panhu

is a legend formed late, when there was a king-pantheon relationship. The proof of that is that the king rewarded the Dragon-Dog Ban Ho, married the princess and granted the writing board to the Coi Ke mountains to live and settle. Secondly, the legend also said that, in order to kill King Cao, Dragon-Dog Ban Ho had to swim for 7 days and 7 nights to where King Cao resided to bite King Cao's neck and bring it to King Binh. The legend, even if it can be created later, covered in the shadow of the court in the form of blessings to people with meritorious services, still unintentionally reveals one thing: the talented swimming talent of Panhu - the leader of the Dao people. That gives the researcher the right to relate to the interpretation related to river culture in the life of the Dao people in Vietnam.

#### 4.2. *Water wave pattern and beeswax dot art on canvas by Dao Tien woman*

In the initiation rite, when worshipping the ancestor Panhu, the priest must wear a dress. According to the Dao Tien, since Panhu used to be the king-in-law, he had to bring his wife's surname. Therefore, when worshipping, the priest had to take a gown on. It is worth mentioning, on the body of this dress there is a water wave pattern and a millet cluster pattern. This may be a residual manifestation of the matriarchy (even in marriage, the role of the uncle is also very important) and is also a sign of the Dao people life attached to the river.

The costumes of Dao Tien women and the way to create patterns on the Dao costumes have been described by Qufei Zhou in the Song dynasty: "The Di people used beeswax to create shapes. The way to do is to melt beeswax poured into the existing molds, with very beautiful colors on the clothes". After 1,000 years, currently in Vietnam only Dao Tien group retains the art of dot pattern with beeswax on canvas. Hence, in terms of evidence, it should obviously be considered a "fossil" of culture. Through translated documents of Trieu Huu Ly, among the 12 groups of Dao migrated, the group of Tieu Ban who arrived in Vietnam at the earliest, the Dao Quan Chet group later admitted it... Survey the pattern system of all Dao group in Vietnam shows that only Dao Tien women's skirts are printed with water waves, which helps to think that the Dao's residence area in some period was closely linked to the river profession.

#### 4.3. *Worshipping practices are related to river culture*

For the group of Dao Quan Chet, Dao Nga Hoang... during Qingming Festival, a must-have item in the offerings to ancestors is shrimp and fish, as much as possible. Explaining this, some priests said that because in the past, there were many people who died prematurely and died when there was no place to leave their bodies, so they had to offer many shrimps and fish, as many

heads as possible, to distribute to the ancestors. However, from the researcher's point of view, it is a explanation somewhat dictated by feeling.

In fact, with the "codes" above, it can be understood that rivers are a period of residence of the Dao. There, items such as shrimp, fish... become the main food to feed people. In this case, the acts are similar to sticky rice offerings in many other ethnic groups: the proof of hand-eating period, with sticky rice as the main food. When the sea receded, the rice in the water field was formed, the sticky rice became a more precious item, so the ethnic groups gave it to worship the gods after leaving the custom of hand-eating and using chopsticks instead, with plain rice as the main food. That is, shrimp and fish here are also considered as a "fossil" culture. But the blurry memory makes the Dao people who are practicing this work no longer recognize it, similar to many other ethnic groups today using sticky rice products to worship without understanding the original origin of it is when the sea has not yet receded, while the cultivation is still on the hills and high mountains.

In addition to worshipping on the occasion of the Qingming Festival, there is also the duty of the fish in bringing the soul of the deceased back to their ancestors. Surveying the funeral ceremony of the Dao Thanh Y people, the author Diep Dinh Hoa said: "On the coffin of the Dao Thanh Y, there is a wooden fish. There is always a stream in front of the caves for the graves of the Dao Thanh Y. The soul of the dead will merge with that wooden fish, swim along the stream, to the east, to integrate into the original land where the ancestors lived in the past" (Hoa, 2002, p.281).

During the initiation rite, the cards are also cut in the picture of a fish, the steps on the steps to the altar are also stuck with rupas with fish-shaped figures. The fish is responsible for bringing the soul of the disciple to sublimation to cross the worldly realm, to the temporary realm (fake death) for the purpose of rebirth for the disciple during the ceremony. Particularly for this issue, almost all Dao groups in Vietnam admit it. Even in the 12-light ceremony of the Dao Tien family, the bird symbol appeared only once, when it was necessary to bring the scallops to the upper kingdom for Jade Emperor. The tasks of bringing souls beyond the realm of the world, bringing the souls of disciples to the underworld to grant soldiers and shrines... are all done by fish. Even when all the priests prepare for the seal ceremony during the 12-light ceremony, they will have to turn around the house and put a mat on their head to go to the altar. The mat in the symbolic nature of the Dao Tien is a boat. The priests to run to the temple are actually riding a boat, crossing the sea to their ancestors, the shrine on the underworld to use their horses and supreme powers to prepare

for a special ceremony. The important distinction in the ceremony to grant the 12 lights to the disciple: granting the seal.

Also in the 12-light ceremony of the Dao Tien group with a white long skirt, there is a custom of fortune telling, finding and redeeming the souls of the premature, sudden death, death without recognition... to reunite with their ancestors. At this ceremony, the Pat chuoi priest had to lie down and fake his death, so that Tau priest sent him (the second priest) to place two water jars on his chest. At this time, the two water jars represent two boats. The Pat chuoi priest's soul will merge into these two "boats" to fortune-tell, find and ransom the soul that wanders somewhere to reunite with his ancestors. That is, the image of the boat, the fish... is a symbol closely associated with the spiritual world of the Dao: the boat, the fish are symbols of the host in the journey of searching, bringing the soul to transcendence in order to converge with the world of the Dao people in the underworld.

#### ***4.4. Expression of river culture on the house.***

Traditional houses of the Vietnamese Dao people today have 3 types: Stilt houses, half-stilt houses and ground houses. Except for the temporary houses, which are made in the form of columns, there are also spacious houses, at the tip of the trusses in the eaves area are often engraved with gourd patterns and fish shapes. If you put in an independent perspective on the architecture and the art of home decoration, it will be difficult to find a plausible reason why despite living in the high mountains, the Dao people often decorate the fish at the tip of the trusses.

Connecting together with the above-mentioned sets of symbols related to river culture, however, will make it clear that such decorative creations have a special past. That is, this is also considered a symbol, a unique cultural code of the Dao people in Vietnam: in the past, they were residents and had a fairly long period of development in wetlands and rivers.

### **5. Discussion**

The research results will contribute to deciphering the mystery of the historical origin of the Dao people that many scholars have long debated or refused to admit to the early creative achievements of a dry agricultural civilization (barley) in the Yellow River basin, whose owner is first San Miao of Chi You, and then the contribution of the Han people in the process of descending to the delta and annexing Central Plain.

The results of the study also contribute to further affirm that the legend of the Dao Dragon-Dog Ban Ho is definitely a product created later, covered with the shadow of the ruling court in the cultural style of "grace" for people with meritorious services. Because as some scholars have commented on the

upheaval and warfare of the Man Di in the Zhou dynasty: “It is said that Man Di was prosperous, because he dared to oppose the Huaxia” (Du, 2018, p.206). That is, with the bond from the Man Di (Dao) beliefs with the ancestor of Panhu, they had more strength to resist and fight with ethnic groups stronger than them. That is the reason that a certain intelligent authority will have to find ways to blur the leader character in order to reduce trust and the connecting bonds. And that will be the reason for the Dragon-Dog Ban Ho to be born. This is different from many prayers of the Dao people, which often refer to two characters as “Holy god Panhu, holy saint Pangu”. That is, Pangu, who was the creator of heaven and earth, was only revered by the Dao people as saint. And the higher order is holy god, they still respectfully respect their own ancestors.

### 6. Conclusion

With the set of symbols related to river culture surveyed above, it is clear that the Dao people in Vietnam now have a long history of development in wetlands and rivers. There is a civilization attached to the river to create their own cultural values. That explains why, in the seventeenth century, when the Dao group in Phu Tho came to Vietnam, there were also Qua Hai Do (map to cross the sea), there were

many songs related to the sea such as Phieu du qua hai, Story of Dang Hanh and Ban Dai Ho...

Along with the above interpretation, it is possible to temporarily comment on the historical origin of the Dao people as follows: The period of the San Miao state of Chi You, not separated into the Mong and Dao ethnic groups - they resided in the Hoang Ha river basin and had dry agriculture, before shifted to wet rice culture. Next, the process of annexing San Miao led to the formation of the Mong and Dao ethnic groups. Here, plus the existing wet rice achievements, the Dao people gradually retreated to the Yangtze river basin and resided in the Dongting Lake area (bordering the two provinces of present-day Hunan and Hubei). When the war broke out, because of his merit to King Binh, the king granted him the Coi Ke mountains to live. That is, from this point on, the Dao people have to officially reside in the mountain. This also means that, the legend of the Dragon-Dog Ban Ho certainly had its transformation and re-creation through the will and thinking of the ruler and head of state at that time. And so, the combination of symbols related to the river culture of the Dao people in Vietnam are very important codes, marking a period of development of Dao culture in the past.

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## MỘT SỐ CHỨNG TÍCH LIÊN QUAN ĐẾN VĂN HÓA SÔNG NƯỚC TRONG ĐỜI SỐNG CỦA NGƯỜI DAO Ở VIỆT NAM

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**Tóm tắt:** Người Dao ở Việt Nam hầu hết cư trú tại vùng núi cao thuộc các tỉnh Cao Bằng, Bắc Kạn, Thái Nguyên, Hà Giang, Tuyên Quang, Yên Bái, Lào Cai, Lai Châu, Sơn La, Điện Biên, Quảng Ninh, Hòa Bình... Chỉ từ khoảng sau những năm 1990, một bộ phận người Dao di cư vào phía Nam, cư trú tại các tỉnh thuộc khu vực Tây Nguyên và Đông Nam Bộ mới có điều kiện canh tác tại khu vực cao nguyên, địa hình tương đối bằng phẳng. Tuy nhiên, có khá nhiều dấu tích cho thấy văn hóa của nhiều nhóm Dao có liên quan đến văn hóa sông nước. Trong phạm vi bài viết này, xin đưa ra một số chứng tích liên quan đến văn hóa sông nước trong đời sống tâm linh của người Dao ở Việt Nam. Đây là kết quả của quá trình điền dã, nghiên cứu, sưu tầm, tổng hợp nguồn tư liệu đối chiếu trong khoảng 15 năm. Đây cũng là công bố đầu tiên về những chứng tích liên quan đến văn hóa sông nước trong đời sống của người Dao ở Việt Nam.

**Từ khóa:** Người Dao; Văn hóa sông nước; Hoa văn sông nước, hoa văn sáp ong; Nguồn gốc và lịch sử tộc người.