

20 YEARS OF THAI STUDIES IN VIETNAM

VƯƠNG TOÀN^(*)

Thai Studies Vietnam official came into being by late 1980s of the 20th Century as a Programme for the organisation of researches focusing on 6 basic clusters regarding ethnic minorities belonging to Tay – Thai languages family, Thai-kadai in Vietnam.

The paper written by Associate Prof. PhD. Vương Toàn, Vice Dean of Thai Studies Vietnam Programme offers an overview on the coming and scientific process (research, training and exchange activities, scientific works being published and under way) under the Thai Studies Programme over the past 20 years.

Social Sciences Information Review, hereby, has the honour to introduce the paper.

1. Thai studies conducted not only in Vietnam

Thai, Tay and Nung ethnic minorities (formerly known as Tho – now this name refers to an ethnic minority belonging to Viet – Muong), have gained due attention from researchers. However, most of the studies are separate or combined as in the case of Tay – Nung due to the close link of these two minorities. Until late 1980s of the 20th Century, studies on ethnic minorities belonging to language family of Tay – Thai, Tai-Kadai have become a scientific subject in Vietnam and has been called the name *Thai studies*.

Meanwhile, previous years, researchers have formed Thai organisation, not only in countries whose minorities to this

language family such as Thailand, China, India, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, Germany, Australia, the U.S, the Netherlands, South Korea, Great Britain, Japan and France....

Being studied not separately due to the need of having academic exchange, 10 International Conferences on the Thai Studies were held every 3 years. Specifically: The first Conference was in New Delhi, India (15-27/2/1981); the Second in Bangkok, Thailand (22-24/8/1984), the Third in Canberra, Australia (3-6/7/1987), the Fourth in K'un - ming, China (11-13/5/1990), the Fifth in London, England (5-10/7/1993),

^(*)Ass. Prof. Dr. Institute of Social Sciences Information.

the Sixth in Chiang Mai, Thailand (14-17/10/1996), the Seventh in Amsterdam, Holand (4-8/7/1999), the Eighth in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand (9-12/1/2002), the Ninth in Northern Illinois University, U.S. (3-6/4/2005) and the Tenth in Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand (9-11/1/2008). Some Vietnamese researchers were invited to join the Conferences and presented their reports.

Thai Studies were also referred to in several international scientific activities. For instance, the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences – IUAES has a sub-committee for Tai-Kadai's Inheritance and Development of Non-Physical Culture. The 16th Congress IUAES will be organised from 27-31/7/2009 in Kunming (Yunnan), China.

In the *Opening Address* of the first Workshop on Thai Studies Vietnam (TSV) (1991), former President of National University, Prof. Dr. Nguyễn An held the opinion that International Thai Studies is mainly the humanity science focusing on historical, linguistic, cultural, socio-economic issues and the social development of relations among communities of Thai language family living in different countries in Southeast Asia (1, p.15)

In Vietnam, Thai Studies Vietnam Programme was established under the Decision by President of Hanoi National University on 7/9/1989 and was hosted in *Vietnam Centre for Research and Cooperation*, and is determined as a long-term scientific programme of the Centre. Coming from the *Vietnam*

Centre for Research Coordination, The Vietnam Centre for Research and Cooperation has developed into the *Vietnam Centre for Research and Cultural Exchange* (1995-2004), and since 2004 it has become *The Institute of Vietnam Studies and Development Science*, Hanoi National University, with the orientation of inter-discipline studies connecting Regional Studies and Development Science.

The TSV has the task to carry out synthetic studies (mainly focusing on society and humanity sciences and ecological environment) on ethnic minorities belonging to Tay-Thai language family in Vietnam.

With a population of around 4 million people, which accounts for more than 5% of the country's population, the Tay-Thai group mainly live in Northeastern, Northwestern and Western areas in the provinces of Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An. They are 8 ethnic minorities of which the most populated group is Tay, Thai and Nung, then comes San Chay, Giay, Lao, Lu and Bo Y.

Prof. Dr. Cầm Cường, the first Director of TSV programme, used to stress that studies on these ethnic minorities in Vietnam need the International Thai Studies Faculty, simultaneously results from studies of TSV could be remarkable contributions to International Thai Studies Faculty because of its diversity (1, pp. 22-23).

Ass. Prof. Dr. Hoàng Lương, now working as Director of the TSV, believes that: 'Thai studies is a big subject including several scientific contents with practical usage not only to

Vietnam, but also of great importance to the world. For long, Thai studies has become an object of research of many countries in the world and has gone international (1, pg. 36).

2. 20 years of Thai Studies Vietnam Programme

a. In community of ethnic minorities in Vietnam, the history and culture of each minority has *diverse, distinct and unique* features that need to be studied and recognized so as to make good contributions to the culture and history imbued with national identities of Vietnam, characterised by the unity in diversity which looks like a flower garden with various scents.

It is easily to be mistaken between the name of a minority and the name of a minority group classified by language family to which the research circle often refers. In order to avoid such a mistake, Prof. Phan Huy Lê used to point out that TSV is defined as a study on minorities belonging to the Thai language group in Vietnam, which is formerly known as Tay-Thai group, Tai-Kadai, on such areas as ethnology, history, linguistics, culture and generally speaking on society and humanity sciences, environment and ecology. (3, p. 21). However, in reality, the two ways of usage can be seen due to habit or for the sake of emphasis.

Regarding the history of this discipline, researcher Cẩm Trọng, former Director of TSV, had a very reasonable remark that not until 9/1989 as TSV came into being, were basic scientific issues studied.

To be correct, it should be said the other way round, thanks to research works on Tay-Thai minorities in Vietnam, TSV has basis for existence and development (2, pg.10). Those who made the first merits or contributions must be listed: Nguyễn Văn Huyền, Lê Văn Lô, Hà Văn Thur on Tay – Nung, and Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, Tô Ngọc Thanh on Thai minority.

b. Reviewing 20 years of TSV operation, first thing to be mentioned is the coordination and mobilisation of potential TSV researchers from all regions, especially researchers from localities concerned. So far, TSV has held 5 conferences, workshops at national level. Reports were selected and listed in Summary (see 1-5)

The first three conferences were held in Hanoi, not in fixed schedule, but depending on researchers, particularly the financial difficulties for printing out materials and organisation of workshop.

The first workshop was held on 25-26/11/1991 with 34 reports from 30 researchers, mainly focusing on cultural aspects, historical origin, linguistics and documents, culture and arts, customs, socio-economic and other sciences related to Thai studies.

Along with the themes of culture and history, there were Conference, the Second (24/6/1998) and the Third (26/4/2002). There were 58 reports from 62 researchers sent to the Second Conference. Besides 5 reports on general issues, scientific reports dealt with linguistics, documents and folklore literature of Thai, Tay and Nung minorities. What's worth noticing most in this Conference was that the TSV

programme has come out with 6 basic contents for study: Linguistics and documents; History; Ethnology; Literature and Arts; Architecture and Medicine; The relation between TSV and International Thai Studies.

The Third Conference received 117 reports from 115 researchers. As selected for printing in a book, besides 2 reports with synthetic contents and introduction, reports were classified into 5 categories: I. History and society; II. Culture and cultural exchange; III. Customs and religious beliefs; IV. Literature and Arts; V. Linguistics and documents; With the participation of more than 200 people, the Third Conference was resounding. However, the content, though diverse, not focused enough, therefore TSV determines the themes for each conference. Moreover, to give more priorities to local researchers for easier participation, the common decision taken that received positive response was that priorities should be given to localities that host the next conference. As proposed by locality and as researchers' wish, the Fourth Conference was held in Cao Bang 29/6-1/7/2006 (4, pg. 12), the origin of Vietnam Revolution, where President Hồ Chí Minh opened the history of Vietnam. The main theme of the Conference was: *Contributions of Tay-Thai minorities in the historical process of Vietnam*. There were 64 reports from 51 researchers sent to the Conference, dealing with specific contributions by these minorities with important historical milestones, they were: nation making period, Chinese invasion (179 BC to 939), feudal and

independent period, (9th and 10th Centuries), French invasion (1858-1945), French resistance war and American war (1946-1954).

Since 2006, TSV programme has been held every 3 years and given priorities to localities whose collection and studies are remarkable. Accordingly, Fifth Thai Studies Conference with the theme: Geographical names and historical – cultural issues of Tay – Thai minorities group in Vietnam was organised on the 20th Anniversary of TSV and 55th Anniversary of Điện Biên Phủ Victory on 24-25/5/2009 in the City of Điện Biên Phủ – being not only famous for heroic victories of the 20th Century, but also in depth of history and culture – Mường Thanh – Điện Biên Phủ is considered the original place for Thai minority. (5, pg.8). There were 50 reports sent to the Conference, writers are researchers from institutes, central universities in Hanoi, Huế, Thái Nguyên and other experts not only in Điện Biên, but in provinces as well such as: Sơn La, Cao Bằng, Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Hòa Bình. In this Conference, theoretical issues and approach to geographical names of Tay-Thai had been of particular concern to participants.

There are several explanations to the origin of places. For instance, one writer believed that in Thai language, Theng in Mường Theng (now known as Mường Thanh) does not refer to sun because Thai people believe that when they die, they must go through Mường Lộ (Nghĩa Lộ). Other writer questioned if Na Sầm (in Lạng Sơn) used to be Na Chằm (meaning rice field – equivalent to a

series of places in this region beginning with Na) and was written on the map and documents by the French as Na Cham, later on 'ch' was changed into 's'. In general, it is not a good idea to jump to conclusion in case the information is processed in different ways.

Noticeable is that, besides in-depth studies, there were several information-intensive reports made by local researchers. Therefore, the varied materials helped readers recognise historical aspects and features building national identities of Tay-Thai minorities in Vietnam.

The sixth Conference is expected to open in Thanh Hóa or Sơn La in 2012. Three themes for discussion are: 1) Literature and arts (including folklore literature and written documents); 2) Family annals of minorities; 3) native knowledge and how this knowledge is brought to a new life.

c. After 10 years of operation, several valuable works majoring in *achievements, methodology and prospects* concerning studies of Tay – Nung and Thai in Vietnam as well as *Thai Studies training in the University of Social Science and Humanity* (Hanoi National University) were completed in 2002. The common results have shown that though Thai studies did not actually become a discipline over the half century, the University has trained some graduates, post graduates to do research on these minorities (from 1970 to 2002, the History Faculty alone had 104 Thesis of different kinds).

Not only working on national languages, TSV also worked on graduate and post graduate training related to these

minorities. Trainees include both domestic and foreign researchers.

Thesis discussed such issues as: language and script, cuisine, costume, house, marriage, family, funeral, folklore beliefs, decoration arts, folklore songs, economic activities, production materials. Most of the thesis focused on populated minorities such as Thai, Tay and Nung.

The traditional script of minorities that lures attention includes Tay Chinese, especially Thai language with 8 different types of characters. After taking into consideration the different opinions of local authorities and intellectuals, ancient Thai language experts and people from 7 provinces: Hòa Bình, Sơn La, Lai Châu (then including Điện Biên), Lào Cai, Yên Bái, Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An, the agreed trend is to take the advanced Thai language of the Northwestern area to do transcription of each local and this alphabet is considered the *Common Thai Language*. This move had been announced in the Third TSV Conference (2002). To make it easier for printing, the making of Thai language for computers has attracted lots of attention from information experts (3, pg.809, 827)

The collective work *Reviewing Thai Studies Vietnam Programme (1989-2003)* has confirmed that *The Study and Completion of Thai script* was a basic research led by Prof. Dr. Đoàn Thiện Thuật with great distinction on 26/3/2002, Hanoi National University. TSV has compiled Thai textbooks and carried out pilot training in some places as Mai Châu (Hòa Bình), Nghĩa Lộ (Yên

Bai). Prof. Phan Huy Lê remarked that this Common Thai Script would be a means to bring policies, guidelines of the Party and the State into ethnic life, improving knowledge, preserving and developing language and culture of Thai minority, a part of Vietnam culture (3, p.24). However, recently, the Preservation Network of Native Knowledge of Thai Minority in Vietnam (established under the sponsorship of the Centre for Sustainable Development of Mountainous Areas) proposed to take the ancient Thai language in Northwestern as a common Thai language, called as *Thai Language Vietnam*, simultaneously all ancient Thai scripts of localities are preserved and used in each local.

TSV has compiled Thai, Nung textbooks (besides Mong language) for first-year students majoring in *Language and Culture of Ethnic Minorities*, Linguistics Faculty, University of Social Sciences and Humanity (Hanoi National University).

Particularly, since 2004, the writer group of Cẩm Trọng, Nguyễn Văn Hòa, Hoàng Văn Ma and Vương Toàn have proposed and compiled the Dictionary of Thai, Tay & Nung community culture with a selection of 600 entries under the leadership of Ass. Prof. Dr. Nguyễn Thị Việt Thanh, Vice Director of the Institute of Vietnam Studies and Development Sciences.

Drawing experience from the building of *Table of Words* and the first draft of 29 entries in 2004 (printed in 38 A4-sized page), in 2005 the writer group had conducted to compile *A Draft of 430*

Entries (452 A4-sized pages) in the scope of 'cultural space', specifically concepts related to geography and person names.

In 2006, the group finished compiling 142 concepts (156 A4-sized pages) which is known as *the most common* that we can see as far as *spiritual culture* of the ethnic minorities mentioned above is concerned. Specifically, they are concepts of ancestors, the earth and heaven, gods and evils.

In 2007-2008, the group finished compiling 168 entries (120 A4-sized pages) regarding material culture including food and drink, clothes, shelter and travel.

In 2008-2009, the group has compiled entries concerning spiritual culture including festival activities and traditional arts and culture life.

It is estimated that after final editing, this *Dictionary* will reach the readers on the occasion of the Sixth Thai Studies Vietnam Conference.

3. Conclusion

Besides overwhelming response from a great number of researchers and supports from domestic organisations over the past 20 years, TSV programme has also gained supports and attention from international individuals and organisations ranging from research materials exchange to facilitating the participation in international workshop related to Thai studies issues. Therefore, Board of Directors and some members had opportunities to exchange scientific and transfer knowledge of TSV with international colleagues.

As a supervisor of TSV, Director of the Institute of Vietnam Studies and Development Science, Prof. Dr. Nguyễn Quang Ngọc has clearly pointed out that TSV is Vietnam studies on a socio-cultural space and Tay-Thai environment using inter-discipline research methods, combining ethnology with related subjects such as history, sociology, linguistics, folklore culture, geography and environment etc., in order to get an overview knowledge of ethnic minorities belonging to Tay-Thai language family. Research results will make contributions to the preservation and development of traditional culture heritage serving as a basis for reaching solutions to regional development, enhancing national solidarity and successfully implementing guidelines and policies concerning ethnic minorities of the State and the Party, especially in the global integration context.

Then, he remarked: 'On the basis of achievements gained by a generation of Thai studies experts over the past tens of years together with strong development trend of inter-discipline oriented TSV, in the context of globalisation and open-door, integration of the country, we are fully capable of reaching an advanced TSV being equal with major Thai studies in the region and the world as well (6).

As a juvenile body and with an increasing number of young researchers, TSV will surely gain achievements expected by many.

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