

DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF**NGUYEN THI HUONG. *Livelihoods of the Chil people in the Lang Biang biosphere Reserve, Lam Dong province: Traditions and Transformations***

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Lam Vien highlands (or Lang Biang), part of the Bidoup Nui Ba National Park in Lam Dong province, is the long-established habitat of the Chil people. Throughout their history of survival, resistance, and adaptation to natural conditions, the Chil people have created their own culture and a distinct ethnic identity, part of which are their livelihood activities. Due to their adoption of shifting cultivation, the Chil's livelihood is still highly dependent on the forests. However, as Vietnam entered the Doi Moi period, the Chil people have gradually adapted their livelihoods to the changing environment. It is crucial to study and understand the transformation of their livelihood and their adaptation strategies in order to manage, protect, and utilize natural resources more effectively, particularly when Lang Biang has become the world biosphere reserve.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters: Chapter 1- Literature overview, theoretical framework, and area of research. Chapter 2- Traditional livelihoods of the Chil. Chapter 3- Livelihoods of the Chil in modern day. Chapter 4- Transformation trends and development of livelihood strategies of the Chil. Some highlights of the research are presented below.

Before 1986, the Chil's livelihood was totally dependent on nature with a closed, self-sufficient economy. Their main livelihood activities were shifting cultivation

and exploiting natural forest resources based on their ethnic knowledge and experience in order to adapt to natural conditions and ecological environment of their living habitat. Their production tools were basic, their cultivation methods were simple, and their irrigation system was reliant on nature. Husbandry and crafts were supporting economic activities. Bartering was not common, and only took place once in a while between the Chil and other sedentary ethnic groups. Though relying on forest resources, the Chil's livelihood during this time was quite sustainable and harmonious with nature, due to low population, rich forest resources, and moderate climate. Research results of the dissertation show that traditionally the Chil had an adaptive lifestyle that was closely connected to the natural environment. They also tried to conquer and exploit nature in their own ways.

From 1986 up to modern day, due to internal and external factors (such as land laws, government's investment projects, development of the market economy, population increase pressures, cultural exchange and acculturation among ethnic groups, transformations in the culture – nature – society spheres, etc), the Chil's livelihood activities have undergone many changes. They moved from shifting cultivation to sedentary cultivation, with the main crop switching from maize to coffee. Agricultural production also transitioned from self-sufficiency to commodity production. Technology knowledge and access changed from exchanges within the community to observation of new arrivals' practices, or from courses and field visits conducted by the local agriculture officers.

Using ethnography field observation, deep interviews, group discussions and surveys in three communes located in the core, the buffer, and the transition zones of Lang Biang Biosphere Reserve area, the dissertation studies activities related to the Chil's livelihoods in the past and present, the transformations that took place, the Chil's degree of adaptation to new changes in the natural environment and government policies towards them. In addition, the dissertation provided a complete and systematic analysis on the factors that transformed the Chil's livelihood activities, including

Land policies which created land shortages and scarcity, making it difficult for the Chil to carry out agriculture activities. Because the government had nationalized land, the Chil was no longer able to cultivate freely and had to work on allocated lands. Because of technological and financial constraints, it was difficult for them to repurpose the land, in turn lowering productivity. Furthermore, sedentary cultivation and fixed production on allocated land had fundamentally altered the Chil's ethnic customs, rituals and beliefs.

Migration (free or organized by the government) also generated tensions in the sustainable development process of Lang Biang Biosphere Reserve. Excessive migration had destroyed the ecology and culture of the Chil and other ethnic groups in the area. Furthermore, the lack of understanding on sedentary ethnic groups' land use strategies and seizure of their land were the main reasons leading to land conflicts between ethnic minorities and free migrants.

The market economy activated dynamic trading activities, allowing the Chil and other sedentary ethnic groups to exchange goods more easily. On the other hand, social

integration took place too sudden while the Chil had not been able to prepare sufficient knowledge on social integration. This led to a clash in knowledge and awareness between the Chil and the outside world. The young Chil generation in particular had become more Vietnamese, but the old generation however had not been able to integrate because of limited education, making it hard for them to access new technologies and new social transformations.

The dissertation sheds light on the sweeping economic - cultural - and social transformations that are taking place within the Chil community. It also shows challenges in sustainable development of the Chil in the Lang Biang Biosphere Reserve area. These challenges include the tension between economic development and preservation of ethnic culture, religion, and customs. The key to resolving this issue lies in understanding livelihood strategies. Today, there has been positive progress on improving livelihoods for the Chil with several viable solutions. However, in order to expand to environment protection and natural diversity preservation for the area, this dissertation maintains that there should be more effective solutions such as: improving community livelihoods, protecting natural resources and biological diversity. For these solutions to be impactful, there needs to be unanimity in implementation from the Central government to local level, as well as mindset changes among communities of the Lang Biang Biosphere Reserve area, especially the Chil community.

The thesis was successfully defended at the Thesis Examination Council of the Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in 2022.

*Introduction by
T.A.*