

A critical review of the literature on the Lo Lo ethnic group in Vietnam¹

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Abstract: *To date, scholarly research on the Lo Lo ethnic group (known as Lô Lô in Vietnamese) in Vietnam, particularly those residing in Cao Bang province, remains relatively limited. Despite their small population - fewer than 10,000 people - they are recognized as a minority group that has received notable attention from the State. Furthermore, their culture has been profoundly influenced by cultural exchanges and integration with the Kinh people, especially within the context of recent development of community-based tourism in the region. This article provides a comprehensive review of the literature on the Lo Lo people and their community-based tourism activities in Cao Bang province.*

Keywords: Community-based Tourism, Culture Resources, Culture, The Lo Lo People, Cao Bang Province, Vietnam

1. Introduction

The Lo Lo people, who speak Tibeto-Burman languages, are divided into two subgroups: The Lo Lo Den and the Lo Lo Hoa. Currently, the Lo Lo Hoa subgroup consists of approximately 400 people, residing primarily in Ha Giang province. The Lo Lo Den subgroup, with a population of over 4,000 people, mainly inhabits Bao Lac and Bao Lam districts (Cao Bang province), while a smaller number of

them reside in Dong Van and Meo Vac districts (Ha Giang province) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2020). To date, scholarly studies on the Lo Lo people in Vietnam have been limited, with even fewer focusing on Lo Lo subgroup residing in Cao Bang province. This ethnic group has a small population of fewer than 10,000 people. Furthermore, the culture of the Lo Lo people *has been profoundly influenced by cultural exchanges and integration with the Kinh people*, especially since the recognition of the Non nuoc Cao Bang geopark as a UNESCO Global Geopark in 2018, which has prompted the initial development of community-based tourism (CBT) services in the community.

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However, tourism activities in this region remain in its early stages, unorganized, and have yet to provide stable livelihoods for the local population. In this context, the preservation and promotion of the traditional cultural values of the Lo Lo people is a matter of urgency, particularly when linked with the development of community-based tourism in the region. Such an approach would enable the local population to improve both their material and spiritual well-being through their distinct cultural identity and values.

2. Foreign studies on the Lo Lo people in Vietnam

The Lo Lo people in Vietnam have attracted attention of various foreign scholars, especially during the colonial period. Although the number of studies on this ethnic group remains limited, there have been valuable works providing crucial documentation on the group's languages and cultural practices.

Regarding the Lo Lo's languages, "Étude sur les langues parlées par les populations de la haute rivière claire" (A study on languages of populations in the upper Chay river) by A. Bonifacy (1905) is a notable work. In this study, the author provides detailed descriptions and classifications that help distinguish languages spoken by different ethnic groups in this area. Furthermore, Bonifacy underscores the critical role of women in preserving their traditional costumes; the floral motifs on the clothing serve as key markers distinguishing them from other ethnic groups residing in the same region. In addition, he provides observations on physical characteristics as a supplementary means of differentiating these groups. Although the section focused on the Lo Lo

is relatively brief, it contributes valuable insights into this community.

Two further studies - "Notions de grammaire Lo Lo" (Records on grammar of the Lo Lo people's languages) and "Notes sur les dialectes Lo-Lo" (Remarks on the Lo Lo people's dialects) by the French scholar M. Alered Lietard (1909) were published in the *BEFEO*. They both primarily focus on the group's language, with the emphasis on analyzing its fundamental characteristics and usage. However, unlike many ethnographic works by French scholars on ethnic minorities in Vietnam, these studies do not include detailed descriptions of the Lo Lo people's cultural and material life.

In general, foreign scholarly studies on the Lo Lo in Vietnam have been largely by French researchers from the early 20th century, with a primary focus on linguistic characteristics of this ethnic group. However, there is relatively little description of their cultural traits and social organization, and other aspects.

Concerning historical perspectives, significant studies include those by Chinese scholars on Di (Yi) people, an ethnic group comprising several subgroups, including the Lo Lo. In examining the history and culture of the Di people in Vietnam, Liu Xin (2011) notes that after migrating to Vietnam, the Di people were identified by various names, such as Lo Lo and Phu La. Based on related data, the author conducted a preliminary investigation into the demographic distribution, migration history, and cultural traits of the Lo Lo in Vietnam, aiming to provide references for studies on the group's distribution beyond China. Similarly, Pu Zhongliang (2003) compiled "An overview of the Di

people in Vietnam: History and culture” to supplement the academic resources to researchers focused on the Di people.

With respect to tangible culture, Zhang Yaojun (2020) pays particular attention to the distinctive features of the Lo Lo people’s clothing in Vietnam and believes that the Lo Lo people in Vietnam share similarities with the Di people in China and are considered a subgroup of the Di ethnic group. Throughout their historical development, the Lo Lo have successfully preserved their unique cultural traditions, particularly those related to their clothing. Based on field surveys in the settlements of the Lo Lo people in Vietnam’s northern mountainous regions and the examination of their costume collection at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Zhang Yaojun employs a comparative material analysis to classify and summarize key characteristics of the Lo Lo people’s attire in terms of shapes, decorative techniques, patterns, and colors. Furthermore, he provides detailed explanations of the symbolic meanings, social significance, and cultural implications embedded in their clothing. Drawing on research hypotheses, he explores the cross-border cultural development between the Di and Lo Lo communities in China and Vietnam, which reveals that Lo Lo clothing is intricately crafted, characterized by a wide range of forms and decorations, vivid colors, and distinctive motifs. It shows both artistic similarities and distinct differences in the ethnic groups’ costumes across the two nations. The current clothing of the Lo Lo people in Vietnam vividly reflects their historical and social imprints, offering valuable insights for studies on traditional culture, customs, history, and religious

beliefs among cross-border ethnic groups in China and Vietnam.

In terms of intangible culture, a notable article “The return of the Soul - A field report on the Lo Lo people’s perception of the soul and sacrificial rituals in Vietnam” by Cai Hua (2009) indicates that the Lo Lo people believe that the soul is present everywhere and, after death, returns to the ancestral home. The Lo Lo people worship tree deities, household gods, and ancestral spirits. They use horns, bamboo staffs, and eggs to communicate with deities; incense, clothing, and fabric balls to summon souls; chickens, pigs, and cattle as offerings to the spirits; and melodies of bronze drums to escort the souls. They also rely on spiritual guides to lead the souls of the deceased back to their ancestral origins. In the examination of the Lo Lo’s beliefs regarding the soul and their sacrificial rituals, Cai Hua concludes that they have a profound understanding of the soul, the natural world, and the existential phenomena of life. On one hand, this reflects the Lo Lo’s worldview; on the other hand, it highlights their indomitable spirit and optimistic outlook in exploring life and the world.

Studies conducted by Su Yi and Mao Shendao (2023) explore bronze drums and the worldview of the Di people in China and the Lo Lo people in Vietnam. The extensive multi-site fieldwork examines bronze drums within interregional cultural contexts to uncover musical traditions, investigates conceptions of sound, and analyzes the cosmological expressions embedded in the sound of bronze drums across these two ethnic communities. Accordingly, bronze drums serve as sacred objects used by ethnic minorities in southern China and across

Southeast Asia in ritual worship. Today, they are preserved in museums and found among local communities as ancient cultural relics that embody historical memories of a once flourishing regional civilization. However, the transmission and performance of bronze drum melodies can only be reconstructed through elderly members' recollections and imagination, or archaeological research. As a result, bronze drums that have been passed down in folk communities and continued to be used in ritual practices have become increasingly valuable musical instruments. Among the Rioru people of Di ethnic group in Malipo county, Yunnan province, China, and among the Lo Lo villages in Dong Van district, Ha Giang province, as well as Bao Lam and Bao Lac districts in Cao Bang province, Vietnam, bronze drums persist as both essential ritual objects and musical instruments in everyday cultural life. Unlike bronze drums kept in museums, those found in local communities remain an integral part of daily life, serving as "living fossils" for the study of bronze drum music.

Thus, foreign scholars studying the Lo Lo people in Vietnam have concentrated on specific areas of interest, notably language, material culture (particularly clothing) and, to some extent, spiritual life (as explored through studies on bronze drums). Although these works by foreign scholars cover only a limited number of aspects, they offer significant documentary value. Nevertheless, certain dimensions of the Lo Lo's cultural landscape and their cultural values have yet to be fully explored. This underscores the necessity for further in-depth studies of the Lo Lo people in Vietnam.

3. Domestic studies on the Lo Lo people in Vietnam

Although scholars have shown some interest in various aspects of the Lo Lo people, the number of dedicated studies remains limited, with most publications appearing in academic journals. In addition, there are also a few books exclusively devoted to the Lo Lo people or just a chapter section of broader works on multiple ethnic groups.

With regard to multifaceted studies, in 1960, Lam Tam published an article titled, "A brief introduction to the Lo Lo ethnic group in Dong Van district, Ha Giang province", which provides an overview of appellations and several socio-cultural characteristics of the Lo Lo people therein. In the volume *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam (Northern provinces)*, published by the Institute of Ethnology in 1978, the Lo Lo are featured in a brief ethnography. As with many other ethnic groups, the information presented in the book has served as a foundational reference for readers seeking to understand minority groups in Vietnam's northern mountainous areas. Nguyen Van Huy (1988) offers a detailed description of the *traditional culture of the ethnic minorities in the Ha Nhi - Lo Lo group*, including an examination of Lo Lo people's kinship systems and family and clan relations. Despite not a dedicated monograph on the Lo Lo people, the book provides valuable insights into their traditional culture and social life.

The first relatively comprehensive monograph on the Lo Lo people was co-edited by Khong Dien and Tran Binh (2007). The book addresses a wide range of aspects, including the natural environment, historical origins, population size,

demographic distribution, economic life, social organization, material culture, and spiritual culture of Lo Lo people. Until the early 20th century, the livelihoods of the Lo Lo in Ha Giang and Cao Bang provinces largely reflected characteristics of a closed, self-sufficient economy, marked by considerable hardship. As a result, the Lo Lo communities have long faced enduring disadvantages due to limited investment in essential services such as healthcare, education, and vocational training. Despite these challenges, the Lo Lo remain one of the few ethnic groups to have retained a considerable portion of their traditional culture, ranging from settlement patterns, housing, and clothing to farming tools, ritual practices, belief systems, and folk art. To date, there has been almost no in-depth studies dedicated to the ethnic group's livelihoods. One of the earliest studies on their economy focused primarily on the cultivation of non-rice crops (*trồng ruộng màu*) and rock-soil pocket farming (*thổ canh hốc đá: A method involving the use of soil-filled rock holes to grow non-rice crops*) among the Lo Lo in Ha Giang province, particularly emphasizing their experiential knowledge, farming techniques, and land use. Despite significant socio-economic transformations, the livelihoods of the Lo Lo remain largely self-sufficient. Issues concerning traditional farming practices, crop varieties, and indigenous production knowledge, and the Lo Lo's economic activities have been typically addressed only in general publications that cover a broad range of topics (Nguyen Anh Ngoc, 1975; Khong Dien & Tran Binh, 2007; Mai Văn Tung, 2012).

In terms of tangible culture, several articles published in academic and ethnocultural

journals have provided detailed discussions on the Lo Lo's housing and house-building customs, covering aspects such as structural design, living spaces, and associated customs and beliefs. Today, the Lo Lo people live in both stilt houses and ground-level dwellings, with the latter becoming increasingly prevalent and exhibiting greater structural diversity. The construction techniques have reached a level of sophistication comparable to that of the Viet people (Kinh people) in terms of roof trusses and assembly, while still maintaining distinct local characteristics. Studies have also identified several factors driving changes in Lo Lo housing in recent years, including rapid environmental shifts and cultural exchanges with neighboring ethnic groups in the region (Nguyen Văn Can, 2006; Ly Hanh Son, 2006).

In a study on the Lo Lo's traditional costumes, Ly Hanh Son (2006) notes that, the Lo Lo, grounded in a self-sufficient economy, have made distinctive attire that reflects not only their refined craftsmanship but also a strong sense of ethnic identity. Despite its unique features in design, tailoring techniques, colors, and decorative motifs, the Lo Lo's traditional clothing has undergone transformations under the pressures of the market economy and the current trend of integration. Le Anh Duc, who has spent years studying the Lo Lo Hoa's traditional attire, argues that decorative details on women's skirts are key markers distinguishing the Lo Lo Hoa from the Lo Lo Den. He further highlights that it is possible to identify whether a Lo Lo Hoa woman's traditional outfit was made by the wearer herself or gifted by her husband's family simply by observing decorative motifs on the sleeves or the apron. Based on

these findings, the author emphasizes the importance of preserving and promoting the cultural value embedded in the Lo Lo Hoa's traditional costumes not only to safeguard their heritage but also to reflect and understand the community's social characteristics, worldview, folk beliefs, aesthetic sensibilities, and ethnic identity. Furthermore, such efforts may contribute to income generation by fostering tourism development (Le Anh Duc, 2019).

The Lo Lo people's intangible culture, particularly folklore, folk songs, and traditional dances has attracted the greatest scholarly attention. The Lo Lo Den's folk songs and music are especially diverse, including antiphonal singing between men and women, festive songs performed during Tet and other ceremonies, birthday celebrations, housewarming occasions, market gatherings, weddings, funerals, and, most notably, rituals held to pray for good harvests and rain (Lo Giang Pao, 2004). Their folk dances are particularly remarkable, often performed during festivals, New Year celebrations, and traditional ceremonies, such as soul-calling and prayer-for-longevity rituals, as well as farewell dances for the deceased (Nguyen Van Can, 2007; Trinh Minh Ngoc, 2009).

In the Lo Lo people's culture, bronze drums are regarded as sacred objects that serve as a bridge between humans and deities. Therefore, their sound is only heard during especially significant occasions in the community, such as funerals, rituals honoring the Earth Deity, Heaven-and-Earth worship ceremonies, and other communal cultural rites. As a result, bronze drums are meticulously safeguarded by the clan leader. Whenever the drum is to be used, incense must be offered to request ancestral permission before taking it down.

The Lo Lo people possess as many as thirty-six distinct rhythmic patterns for bronze drums. In the ritual dedicated to Heaven, *mồ đánh* (sky drum) is used; *po đánh* (frog drum) is employed in ceremonies honoring the Earth Deity; and *múi đánh* and *thắng đánh* are used in funerary rites. During funeral rituals, the sound of bronze drums accompanies the spirit of the deceased on their journey to reunite with the ancestors, serving as a sacred bridge between the realms of the living and the dead. In other rituals, the drumbeat continues to be an indispensable element of traditional folk dances (Lo Giang Pao, 1996; Hong Kieu, 2009; Nguyen Thi Hao, 2010). Today, many cultural features are undergoing transformation due to interactions and acculturation with the Kinh, other neighboring majority ethnic groups, as well as with co-ethnic and cross-border communities (Tran Thi Mai Lan & Doan Viet, 2019).

Ethnic relations among the Lo Lo people are examined by Pham Dang Hien (2010) through empirical research conducted in their communities in Ha Giang and Cao Bang provinces. Le Minh Anh and Le Thi Mui (2023) critically analyze characteristics of ethnic relations prior to 2000 and new expressions under the market economy. The study emphasizes that families, clans, and villages are the foundational social institutions that structure the Lo Lo's internal ethnic networks. With the development of the market economy along the Vietnam-China border, the Lo Lo's ethnic interactions have increasingly extended to other ethnic groups as well as individuals from different social and occupational backgrounds, particularly with the Kinh from the lowlands, the Chinese and Hmong across the border.

4. Studies on the Lo Lo people in Cao Bang province

An early scholarly study on the Lo Lo people is by Hoang Hoa Toan (1975), whose article, “Lo Lo people in Bao Lac district, Cao Bang province”, discusses various aspects of their economic, social, and cultural life.

The spiritual lives of the Lo Lo Hoa people in Meo Vac district (Ha Giang province) and the Lo Lo Den people in Bao Lac district (Cao Bang province), noted for their cultural richness and distinctiveness, have been systematically documented and analyzed across various elements, including sacred seasonal rites, belief systems, agricultural rituals, ancestor worship, folk performances, and traditional games. Regional integration, the diffusion of market-based economic relations, and the influence of globalization have posed significant challenges to the Lo Lo community. In response, the preservation and promotion of ethnic cultural values have emerged as urgent concerns in the Vietnam-China borderlands (Pham Dang Hien & Nguyen Van Minh, 2008). Furthermore, life cycle rituals have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Fieldwork findings consistently reveal that distinctive customs and ceremonies marking major life events, such as marriage, birth, and death among the Lo Lo people in Cao Bang province, vividly embody the community’s collective consciousness and ethnic identity. Various aspects of their marriage are explored, including conceptions, norms, forms of marriage, associated customs and rituals, cultural elements, and recent transformations. Notably, comparisons have highlighted both similarities and differences in marriage practices between

the Lo Lo people in Bao Lac district and those in Ha Giang province (Dang Thi Hoa, 2006; Mong Thi Xoan, 2017).

5. Studies on the promotion of cultural resources in community-based tourism development

Given its diverse resources, Vietnam has significant potential to develop community-based tourism (CBT). Several community-based tourism models emerged relatively early, notably in Lac village (Mai Chau district, Hoa Binh province) and Sa Pa town (Lao Cai province). Thus, the cultural diversity of ethnic minority groups plays a crucial role in attracting both domestic and international tourists. Promoting community-based tourism not only supports the commercialization of local cultural products but also facilitates the dissemination of local cultural values across broader networks. This, in turn, provides ethnic minority communities with additional resources and incentives to sustain, preserve, and practice their cultural traditions, objectives that are fully consistent with the policies of the Communist Party and the State of Vietnam (Nguyen Cong Thao, 2022).

Regarding community-based tourism associated with the promotion of cultural heritage values, Nguyen Kim Le (2012) identifies various forms of tangible and intangible culture in connection with tourism activities, as well as the impacts of tourism on the Thai people’s cultural values. Vu Van Cuong (2014) in a study overviews community-based tourism in the Pu Luong Nature Reserve, focusing particularly on enhancing the effectiveness of tourism activities. He highlights the potential of community-based tourism to become a key economic sector for local communities, contributing to

poverty reduction and hunger alleviation through the rational exploitation of natural resources, while simultaneously preserving traditional cultural values. The publication *Managing growth and sustainable tourism governance in Asia and the Pacific* is a valuable reference by the UNWTO for research on community-based tourism. The report provides an in-depth analysis of 15 sustainable community tourism projects in Vietnam, with particular attention given to the CBT model led by Duong Minh Binh in Mai Hich remote village in Mai Chau district, Hoa Binh province, where is home to White Thai ethnic minority group and renowned for its picturesque landscapes and distinctive indigenous culture (as cited in Tran Thi Thuy, 2020).

Cao Bang province offers favorable conditions for tourism development, particularly community-based tourism. A survey of 250 people from six community-based tourism villages in the province identifies key barriers to local participation in this sector, including inadequate state policies, limited household resources, insufficient support from businesses and NGOs, and poor organization of tourism services. Addressing these barriers is essential to promoting community-based tourism in the region (Tran Chi Thien & Le Ngoc Nuong, 2021). Therefore, to achieve sustainable development, proposed solutions should focus on establishing linkages among tourism destinations, enhancing the promotion and outreach of homestay tourism products through seminars, exhibitions, and product showcases. Other key strategies include fostering partnerships with businesses engaged in homestay tourism and

coordinating the development of cultural tours and tourism routes centered on the Lo Lo ethnic group (Tran Chi Thien & Le Ngoc Nuong, 2021; Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy, 2020).

Given the circumstances, the role of local communities in developing and operating tourism systems is of great importance. They serve as stakeholders of tourism resources, co-management partners with the state, providers of tourism services, creators of cultural tourism products, promoters of local tourism, and protectors of both natural and cultural assets (Nguyen Thi Phuong, 2016).

Certain types of tourism, such as ecotourism and sustainable tourism, require active participation of local communities to be effectively established and developed. These models are often implemented in regions rich in untouched natural resources and wilderness. While such areas tend to attract a large number of visitors, poor transportation infrastructure poses significant challenges for tour operators in delivering services effectively. Consequently, both tourists and tourism enterprises frequently rely on local residents in villages and hamlets to support tourism activities. Moreover, local communities in these areas possess valuable cultural assets, such as customs, festivals, lifestyles, and vernacular architecture that are regarded as important tourism resources, meeting visitors' growing demand for cultural exploration and appreciation. At the same time, these communities face numerous socio-economic difficulties, including limited employment, low income, and lower educational attainment compared to other regions (Vo Que, 2006). Evidently, tourism

development can generate employment opportunities for people in communities directly and indirectly involved in tourism-related activities. It also contributes to marked improvements in both technical and social infrastructure, such as transportation networks, clean water supply, electricity and telecommunications, and postal services. As visitor numbers increase, so do employment prospects and income levels. Some communities have even managed to overcome geographical isolation by leveraging their available resources, such as landscapes, water, forests, and biodiversity that were previously overlooked but hold great potential for development.

6. Conclusion

It is evident that scholarly studies on the Lo Lo people in Vietnam remain limited, with even fewer focusing on the Lo Lo community in Cao Bang province compared to those in Ha Giang province. While general studies on the Lo Lo people may include those in Cao Bang province, such references are typically brief and superficial. Notably, there has been almost no research on the issues that have arisen in recent years. In this context, conducting a comprehensive study of the Lo Lo people's culture, aimed at identifying distinctive cultural elements for preservation and promoting sustainable community-based tourism, is both necessary and especially meaningful, given the increasing risk of cultural erosion and transformation. Developing community-based tourism grounded in cultural resources, driven by community participation, and focused on generating value for local communities represents a research direction that deserves greater attention □

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