

Ethnic Relations of Residents in Vietnam - Laos Border Areas

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Abstract: *Ethnic relations have been a long-standing topic which gather quite a number of researches providing both direct or indirect reference in certain research contexts. Formed throughout the historical process of Vietnam, ethnic relations in the Vietnam - Laos border areas have manifested in many aspects of history, ethnic origin, marriage, economic, cultural and social relations. The study of ethnic relations in border and transboundary areas has practical significance in providing the Party and the State with a more in-depth and comprehensive view of the issue, contributing to appropriate policies that better conform to the new context in a bid to achieve socio-economic development goals, national stability and security.*

Keywords: Ethnic Groups, Ethnic Relations, Border Areas, Ethnic Relations across Borders

1. Introduction

In the process of rapid economic, cultural and social integration, the study of ethnic relations is increasingly important, especially ethnic relations in the border areas, which gives us a deeper understanding and a more objective view of this issue. The Vietnam - Laos border areas stretches across many provinces, with many different ethnic groups on both sides of the border. In the field trips from 2015-2019, we focused on the Thai and other ethnic groups in districts such as Quan Son, Muong Lat, Quan Hoa... in Thanh Hoa province and Con Cuong district, Que Phong district, Ky Son district... in Nghe An

province, for the following reasons: Firstly, these are districts with a large number of Thai people currently residing. Secondly, those districts locate in the Vietnam - Laos border areas, which is targeted by the research. Thirdly, in these districts, the Thai plays an important role in the historical and social relationship with other communities, especially the relationship with the Thai community in Laos.

This article is an important component of the field research conducted over the years, referring to ethnic relations in the western border areas of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An. Apart from the Thai, this area is also the home of some other ethnic groups such

as Kinh, Hmong, Kho Mu and Muong people. In the process of gathering, the ethnic groups in this region have had reciprocal relationships to some extents and created quite dramatic cultural impacts and influences. Therefore, during the comparative study between the Thai and the Tay Dang people in Laos, we expanded the scope to the intersection between Thai culture and Vietnamese-Muong culture as this has always been a problem within this historical process. Moreover, Vietnamese and Muong people always play a crucial role and greatly influence the economic, cultural and social development of ethnic groups residing in the Thanh - Nghe region. Besides, ethnic relations in border areas, cross-border ethnic relations and roles of rituals and folk beliefs in ensuring national security and security are also crucial topics of our special interest. Thereby clearly identifying the key role of ethnic groups along the Vietnamese - Laos border in the sustainable development of the traditional friendship between the two countries as well as the two local people.

2. Regarding the origin relations of Thai people in the Vietnam - Laos border areas

Based on published documents, the ancient ancestors of Thai groups in Laos and Thai people in Vietnam, including Thai people in Thanh Hoa - Nghe An, originated from the southwestern region, the Yunnan Province in China. From the eighth century onwards, the Thais from the Yunnan region (China) continuously moved to the South. In those migrations, there was a branch going to the Northwestern region of Vietnam, with a branch invading Laos, which had previously belonged to the ancient Mon - Khmer kingdoms. Regarding the time

of heavenly migration, the documents are recorded in the annals of Laos as well as two epic volumes (*Quam tổ mường* and *Tay pú xác*) of Northwestern Thai people in Vietnam mentioning the character Khun Lo - the eldest son of the general Khun Bu Lom/ Khun Bo Rom - during the movement in the eighth century to the South, when invading Laos had defeated the resistance of the Kha at Pak U (in the Nam U River emptied into the Mekong River) led by Khun Can Hang, then occupied the village Swa (village Soa or Sao Va) of the Kho-mu people and changed their name to Xieng Dong - Xieng Thoong, later renamed Luong Pha Bang (the village is protected by rocky mountains) (Vi Van An, 2012: 31-32).

In the story of the Tay Deng people in Hua Phan (Laos), the migration of the Ngo Pa, the Phu Duoi, who considered to be the oldest resident generation of the Phu Thay people in Hua Phan, is the run-away from the Long Nhim (Khon Men), came from Thanh Hoa, Nghe An (Vietnam). Besides, people also talk about the existence of the second generation residents in Hua Phan province in the thirteenth century - XIV century, that is, 10 large families emigrated from Muong Ca Da and Pha Khang (Thanh Hoa, Nghe An). Afterwards, the sporadic migration of the Phanha Xi Ho, Phanha Khen Lang and Xieng Kho Lai families..., all from Thanh Hoa and Nghe An, upstreamed to the Ma and Non Non river to reside in Vieng Xay districts, Sam To - which belongs to Hua Phan province today. From the years 1940 - 1954, due to many reasons, the sporadic movements of Thai groups in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces continued, especially the large-scale migrations of Tay Dam, Tay Khao, Tay Deng, Tay Moi from

Son La, Lai Chau, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An to Laos (Vi Van An, 2012: 32).

R. Robert, a French official, during his time in Thanh Hoa, paid attention to and recorded many valuable documents on the lives of the Tay Dang people in the governing area. He stated that the Tay Dang people in Lang Chanh (Thanh Hoa) have a close relative to the Tay people in the provinces of Son La, Hoa Binh and Hua Phan. In Nghe An, they were known as Man Thanh and they called themselves Tay Nhai... They also populated in the Muong Xoi and Xieng Kho areas and had strong positions in Sam To in Hua Phan Province, Laos (Robert, 1941).

The Tay Deng people in Laos explained the reason why they were called Tay Deng was because of their origin in Muong Deng (Lang Chanh, Thanh Hoa, Vietnam). Apart from the name Tay Deng, they also had another, called Tay Nhai. Nhai/pai means moving, as they were simply residents living dependently, not village leaders. Thus, they often moved continuously. Much later, they settled down together and became a village. Thus, the explanation of this name is also similar to that of the Tay Thanh/Tay Deng people in Nghe An and Thanh Hoa, Vietnam (Vietnam Institute of Studies and Development Science, 2012: 33). The Tay Deng people in Laos are well aware that they were a separate Tay branch instead of the others residing in Hua Phan province. They also remembered clearly that their ancestors in Muong Khoong and Muong Cada, especially Muong Deng in Thanh Hoa province or Muong Mun and Muong Ha in Hoa Binh province (Vietnam), had migrated to Laos (Dao Van Tien, 1998: 354). Regarding the above point, Kham Pheng Thip Muntaly

also said that the Phu Thay people in Hua Phan province (Laos) migrated mainly and directly from Northwestern Vietnam and the Western Thanh Hoa province through many times. The largest was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Specifically, the Phu Thay people residing along the Nam Ma River (Ma River) around the town of Xam Nua (Sam Nua), Hua Muong district, Nam Non area said that, 8-9 generations ago, the Thai Den people from Muong Muoi (Thuan Chau - Son La) had already come to Et village and Xon village. Another part in Xam village, Pua village, Kho sub-village and Xon village remembered that their ancestors had been running away from the enemy from Cada village (in Quan Hoa District, Thanh Hoa nowadays). Tay Deng (Tay Deng) in Hua Muong district (Hua Phan, Laos) said that some of them had moved from Cada village (Thanh Hoa, Vietnam) to Xieng Men (Tuong Duong, Nghe An) before living in O village, Hua Muong district (Hua Phan, Laos); others in Sop Hao in Xieng Kho district (Hua Phan, Laos) originated from Khoong village (Ba Thuoc - Thanh Hoa), Cada village (Quan Hoa - Thanh Hoa) and Mun village (Mai Chau - Hoa Binh - Vietnam) (Kham Pheng Thip Muntaly, 2006: 28).

Except for Tay Deng group who are currently residing in Hua Phan province, groups called as Tay Men, Tay Moi in some districts in Xieng Khoang, Kham Muon and BuliKhamxay provinces in Laos are originally from Xieng Men village in Tuong Duong and other Thai villages in Quy Chau, Nghe An provinces. A study comparing the language and intonation of the Tay Men and Tay Moi in

Laos with that of Thai people in Nghe An, J.R. Chamberlain has concluded: The Tay Men's speaking language is the original dialect of the Thai people currently residing in localities of Roads 48 and 7 in Nghe An Province (Vi Van An, 2012: 33).

Since the French colonialists invaded Vietnam, to avoid the persecution by the enemy, many Thai people from the border areas had fled to Laos. Their main residential place is Sam Nua. From here, they dispersed to many other places such as Phong Sa Ly, Udom Xay, Luong Nam Tha. In Xieng Khoang, the Thai group now resides in Khang Khay, Phon Xa Van as having been evacuated with Deo Van Long by the French colonialists after the failure at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The Thai group who now lives in Kham Cot, Kham Muon; Tay Deng group in Sam To district, Vieng Xay and Sop Bau in Hua Phan province mainly came from Moc Chau (Son La), the western part of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An (Vi Van An, 2012: 33).

It can be said that the Thai people in general and the local groups of Tay Dam, Tay Khao and Tay Deng currently residing in Laos in particular certainly have a historical relationship with the Thai people in Vietnam, especially with Thai people in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An. The Thai groups in Laos had been migrating within different periods. The first migratory wave of Thai groups from Vietnam to Laos took place around the 11th - 12th centuries onwards; the characteristic of this group was to follow the Thai Chiefs to expand their area, sometimes for other reasons; the entire were those who migrated to Laos in later times, even though they had only arrived in Laos in the last few decades.

It can be said that, with the proximity of residence and historical origin as mentioned above, the Thai group's culture in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces will certainly share some similarities with the Tay Deng people in Hua Phan province, Laos.

3. Ethnic relations of Thai people in the Vietnam - Laos border areas

In the Vietnam - Laos border areas, ethnic relations take place mainly among the Thai, the Muong, the Hmong and the Kho-mu. They are ethnic groups with many ethnic communities living across the border. Therefore, apart from economic relations, exchanging marriages, visiting relatives on holidays..., they also have historical relations, blood relatives and neighbours.

About religion and belief

In the context of present exchanges and integration, ethnic relations have strengthened the understanding and cooperation between ethnic or racial communities. These are the most positive and fundamental impacts of ethnic relations to accelerate the process of cooperation between ethnic minorities with each other and with neighbouring Kinh (Vietnamese) ethnic groups - the majority of ethnic groups play the leading role in the national system. Excluding several cases due to the influence of external factors such as small parts of Hmong ethnic groups with Protestantism, for example, the process of cooperation has been naturally occurring for the ethnic groups in the territory of Vietnam in Tay Thanh - Nghe. As mentioned, the current national cooperation takes place quite extensively in the fields of material life, spiritual entertainment, the form of conducting some rituals... On that basis, it affects the awareness of self-improvement of

people's intellectual standards and cultural life in each ethnic minority community, gradually eliminating unsuitable customs and practices such as curing by superstitious procedures, abstinence when worshipping, and inferiority complex.

The current ethnic relations in the Tay Thanh - Nghe area also rise the need to integrate among the majority ethnic groups in the neighbouring areas and also, to absorb new popular things to improve the organizational form of some family and community ceremonies, which later reduce the interdependence among members of the ethnic community. Currently, Thai people often have neighbourly relations with all ethnic minorities as well as the majority throughout Tay Thanh - Nghe, even across the Vietnam - Laos border. This shows that, along with the Kinh (Vietnamese), the ethnic relations of the Thai people in this area also play a decisive role in strengthening the great unity of ethnic groups, contributing to the main stability in social security in the region.

About socio-economic aspect

The expansion of ethnic relations in modern-day at Tay Thanh - Nghe area positively impacts the demand for improving social life in every family and every ethnic community. First of all, it boosts the needs for transportation, communication, etc. to support the strengthening of ethnic relations, regardless of race or ethnicity. Secondly, family and community members always pay their attentions to mass media such as newspapers, radio, TV news, etc. to discuss issues related to economy, health, environmental sanitation, poverty reduction, etc.

However, ethnic relations in the new setting also give rise to many negative impacts

on social life among the ethnic groups in Tay Thanh - Nghe area. One of them is the wealth gap between households, between localities and ethnic communities, which is a quite urgent issue. Take Kho-mu ethnic group as an example. During the pre-harvest season, they are very poor and in hunger, and most of them have to work as hired labourers for neighbouring ethnic groups to earn a living or wait for rice relief from the State. While there are ethnic communities here and there, even neighbours with the Kho-mu people have a wealthier economic life. Not only that, under the influence of ethnic relations, the trade of drugs across Vietnam - Laos border is not only increasing but also more sophisticated. There are numerous cases of residents crossing the border to Laos territory to rent land to grow opium, especially in Hua Phan province - the border with Thanh Hoa and Son La provinces of Vietnam. That is not to mention the situation of children dropping out of school at all levels, from junior high school upwards. Especially, there are more and more social evils such as drug addiction, gambling, theft, prostitution, etc. The reason is attributed to the current ethnic relations, which cause ethnic traditions related to education, the role and prestige of the elderly as well as several customs that punish crimes, illicit sexual relations, etc. to fade and lost by time.

About culture, marriage and lineages

According to the results of field researches, Thai ethnic relations in the border area of Nghe An province are common in only a few places in Ky Son and Tuong Duong districts, particularly in the two communes of Keng Du and Nam An in Ky Son,

especially for the Thai group claiming to be Tay Khang and the Thai section in Keng Du commune. The reason is that the recent generations of Tay Khang group have migrated from Laos to some parts of Ky Son and Tuong Duong districts; and Thai people on both sides of the border of Keng Du commune have been separated into different ethnic communities of Vietnam and Laos since 1977, following the Treaty of National Border Planning between the two countries. However, these relationships are mainly related to blood relatives, marriage and mutual assistance during Tet and family rituals. Meanwhile, the current cross-border marriage relationship of Thai people in this area is not as common as it used to be. For example, in the Nong De village of the Tay Khang people in Nam Can commune (Ky Son district), there are up to 8 cross-border couples in a total of over 80 households, but most of these people are over 50 years old¹; while in Na Loi commune (Ky Son district), there have been only four cases of cross-border marriage so far in Thai Na Loi village, and only one case in Na Khuong village. However, it is worth noting that, in the current setting, the cases of Thai cross-border marriages have increased mutual visits, even facilitating Thai communities on the two sides of the border. The relationship is more coherent in many aspects, especially relatives and marriage alliance.

Particularly in the western region of Thanh Hoa, research data in Ten Tan

Commune, Muong Lat revealed that until now, Thai communities on both sides of Vietnam - Laos border are still very close, because they have just been separated into citizens of the two nations since the boundary delimitation in 1977, under the Treaty of National Border Planning between Vietnam and Laos. Not only do they have a regular kinship, but they are also increasingly expanding cross-border marriage. Specifically, up to now, in Ten Tan village, Ten Tan commune, within 160 households with about 700 people, there are already 18 couples who have married across the border, not to mention some cases of Thai people in Laos who have just come to live in law, without marrying yet. In another village of Ten Tan commune, the newly established Phieng Mon village in 2006, 7 cases of marriage with Thai or Laos people across the border have been reported, in a total of about 60 households. (quoted by Institute of Ethnology, 2012: 123)² ...

The relationships related to cultural activities and the celebration of ceremonies in this area are also increasing. For instance, until 2015, Thai people in Laos still celebrated Chinese New Year like in Vietnam, therefore they always had the opportunity to cross the border to celebrate with each other; and when the New Year Water Festival in Laos happens, Thai people in Vietnam also celebrate the festival with Thai people from the other side of the border. Besides, daily

¹ Fieldwork data collected from Luong Pho Bon, Head of Nong De village, Nam Can commune, Ky Son district, Nghe An province.

² Data provided by Vi Văn Mien, Head of Ten Tan village and Vi Thanh Toan, Cell Secretary of Phieng Mon village, Ten Tan commune, Muong Lat district, Thanh Hoa province.

visits happen regularly in time of family or community rituals. Notably, most of the Thai people in Laos are influenced by Buddhism, while in Vietnam, they only worship ancestors. This makes the difference in religious activities, especially when performing funeral rites.

It can be concluded that the Vietnam - Laos cross-border relationship of the Thai community in Tay Thanh - Nghe area happens usually and is increasingly expanding with kinship relations. These relationships, whether ethnic or racial, retain traditional friendship and solidarity, with virtually no relation to drug trafficking, free migration and illegal evangelization. However, according to the report of the local authorities and border guards in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces, only in the border areas of Vietnam, the number of Thai people who are addicted to drugs is more than other ethnic groups. This is a pressing issue associated with the ethnic relations among ethnic groups, not only within the border areas of Vietnam but also related to the cross-border relations between Vietnam and Laos.

One of the most important factors that support the strengthening of cross-border ethnic relations is the regular briefings between the local authorities, the security forces, and the Vietnamese and Laos border guards. The regular briefings occur at least twice a year, one takes place in Laos, possibly on the occasion of the New Year Water Festival, and the next one is conducted in Vietnam. If any other briefings happen, the times of these briefings are decided by each locality and each level of government on both sides of the border, including communes and districts. During the

briefings, local authorities, security forces as well as border guard representatives of the two countries discuss the problems associated to cross-border ethnic relations, devise solutions for the pressing issues in the communities to ensure the solidarity and friendship in the ethnic relations between the ethnic groups on the two sides of the border. This proves that the authorities, security forces and border guards in the localities of Vietnam and Laos always facilitate favourable conditions to expand ethnic relations across the border, and at the same time strengthen the management of those relations to maintain the friendly solidarity, guarantee the political stability and national defence in the border areas between the two countries.

About ethnic relations trends

Through approach with ethnic minority communities in the western border areas of Thanh Hoa - Nghe An, we realize that the trend of cohesion among ethnic groups in the current setting is mainly from the sense of ethnic self-discipline, combined with cultural and psychological characteristics. Such cohesion is most evident in situations when a conflict of interest between one ethnic group and the other over arable land arises, or when the ethnic policies of the Party and the State are not suitably implemented. Sometimes, the difference in cultural and psychological characteristics is the reason for the collision between two ethnic groups. Meanwhile, in other fields such as economic activities, social organizations, etc., the harmony is still sustained, and the interdependent relationships for development are increasing. Particularly, the Kinh (Viet) community in the neighbourhood, especially

the Kinh traders, always play a leading role in linking ethnic groups in these fields, mostly with economic activities followed by the market mechanism. Besides the impact of the policies of the State, it is the Kinh who have been generating dynamism in the economic activities of the ethnic groups in this area. They are both the factor that stimulates the ethnic groups to produce more goods and merchandise, as well as the consumers of these items. Consequently, the ethnic minorities here have gradually changed the mindset of traditional economic activities and have focused more on developing other economic activities to create various income sources, such as planting fuel or industrial crops, weaving brocade products, raising cattle for sale, working as hired labour, opening other services, extending trade and exchange, etc. This trend is a relatively quick transition for ethnic relations in production activities and material life (Institute of Ethnology, 2012: 132).

4. Ethnic relations across borders

With Thai people, the cross-border ethnic relations in the western region of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces have already existed for a long time, but not as clearly as in the Hmong people group. This is since the number of Thai people across the border is scant, since their origins are mainly Thai groups from Vietnam that migrated to Laos in different historical periods. The ethnic relations of Thai people in Thanh - Nghe region and Thai people of Tay Deng group in Laos are mainly kin. However, in the current context and the time of economic integration, the cross-border ethnic relations of these ethnic groups are expanding, generally with economic relations.

About historical origins

The ethnic relations across the Vietnam - Laos border of the Thai people in the West Thanh - Nghe region is stronger than the relations of those in many other localities in the provinces of Dien Bien and Son La. In terms of cause, on the one hand, Thai communities in Hua Phan and Xieng Khoang provinces (Laos), which borders the West Thanh - Nghe region, have originated from Vietnam, and until now they still have close relations with the Thai people in Vietnam. For example, the communities of Thay Deng (Tay Deng) and Thay Dam in Muong Kham, Muong Pôn districts, which belong to Xieng Khoang province (Laos), or the Phu Thay and Thay Deng communities in Xieng Kho, Vieng Xay, Sop Hao, Sam To districts of Hua Phan Province (Laos), all claim to originate from Muong Deng (Lang Chanh, Thanh Hoa), Muong Muoi (Thuan Chau, Son La) and Muong Thanh (Dien Bien district, Dien Bien province) of Vietnam (Vi Van An, 2004: 58-59)... On the other hand, thanks to the convenience and modern of current means of transport and communication, the connection and travel of people from both sides of the border are becoming easier. Nevertheless, in this border region, the support from relatives and people in the same ethnic group, as well as the number of cross-border marriages of Thai people only happen commonly in some areas in the western region of Thanh Hoa province, especially in Quan Son and Muong Lat districts. In the border areas of Nghe An province, there are few Thai ethnic relations on either side of the border, because the Thai people here are sparsely populated, and they are living far in Laos inland.

About economic, cultural and social aspect

The relations between the Thai (Vietnam) and the Kho-mu, Hmong (Laos) ethnic groups still occur regularly through multiple activities, such as trading, grazing cattle across borders, exploiting natural resources like collecting forest product or timber for house construction, etc. The reason for this practice is that the Thai people have certain advantages and impacts on these ethnic groups in terms of language and culture. In other words, the language and culture of Thai and Lao people are considerably similar to each other. Other relationships such as marriage, visiting, inviting others to attend rituals, etc. still take place among Thai families here, including fraternal communities, but these relationships are not as close as the ethnic relations among Thai ethnic communities on either side of the border in western areas of Thanh Hoa province.

In fact, according to the sharing of the elderly who have made cross-border marriages since the time of the anti-French and anti-American resistance war, in some today lineages, people still maintain the marriage alliance relationship and tend to strengthen this relation. From this foundation, they continue to act as a bridge and facilitate their relatives and friends to proceed to the next marriages. Therefore, the reciprocal relationship from marriage is both the basis and the driving force for trading and cultural exchanges in the new setting.

Conclusion

The study of Thai people in two villages of Ten Tan and Phieng Mon in Ten Tan commune, Muong Lat district (Thanh

Ho) proves that Thai people here tend to get closer relations with the Thai people across the border. This is driven not only by the ethnic factors (exchanging marriages, relatives, etc.), but also due to the economic activities (exchanging plant varieties and domestic animals, consuming commodity, supporting production capital, working as hired labours, etc.), and the cultural exchanges (participating in the celebration of the New Year of both Vietnam and Laos). In Nghe An, similarly, the results of the research in Nong De village, Nam Can commune and in Na Khuong village, Na Loi commune in Ky Son district also show that the trend of Thai people is becoming more and more closely related to the same ethnic group on the other side of the border. However, the cohesion of the cross-border ethnic relations among Thai people is mainly related to economic activities, based on the relationships of relatives and marriage alliance. It can be said that, in the current setting, it is difficult to manage the cross-border ethnic relations, because of the increasing number of passersby, which mainly takes place in the minor roads. Moreover, the consolidation of the Thai ethnic group here does not occur tightly in different ecological regions of Vietnam, such as the Thai in Son La province with the Thai in Nghe An province, or the Thai in Muong Lat district, Thanh Hoa province with Thai people in Ky Son district, Nghe An province, even between Thai people in Muong Lat district and Thai people in Thuong Xuan district, both in Thanh Hoa province, also have a little relationship; while the ethnic relations across Vietnam - Laos border is often strengthened □

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