

CULTURAL REGION OF NORTHWEST VIETNAM AND ACCULTURATION

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Northwest Vietnam is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural region and a typical historic-ethnological region. The local inhabitants speak languages belonging to different language families; they have uneven socio-economic development levels and diversified life and cultural characteristics. As they have co-existed for a long time and shared a common fate and history, the ethnic groups in Northwest Vietnam have had cultural contacts, exchanges and interfaces since early times.

The Northwest region comprises Lai Chau, Son La, Hoa Binh provinces and the hilly areas of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces. There are two mountain ranges- Hoang Lien Son, Song Ma-which are among the highest ones in Vietnam, and two well-known rivers-Da and Ma. The region comprises fertile valleys: Muong Thanh (in Dien Bien Phu district, Lai Chau province), Muong Lo (Van Chan district, Yen Bai province), while it has sheltered many ethnic groups whose origins are most complex, it has for many centuries been deeply influenced by the culture of the Thai ethnic group.

1.1. The Thai culture has a dominating influence in the Northwest region. According to many researchers on culture, anthropology, history and linguistics, the Thai culture is an important factor which contributed to the formation of Vietnam's ancient culture from the beginning of its history. While having a long history, until the XXth century, Thai cultural values have remained within the framework of a "ban muong culture" (village culture) with valley paddy culture as its basis. Thai traditional agriculture is a harmonious combination of wet paddy cultivation, slope cultivation methods and the exploitation of natural resources, and the emergence of sedentary villages (ban muong) characterized by self-sufficiency. Having lived for a long time in a natural environment with tropical rain forest, a dense network of rivers and

brooks, high mountains and thick forests, a humid tropical climate with abundant sunshine and rain, the Thai ethnic group has adapted itself harmoniously to these natural conditions. That is indeed the environment which gave rise to Thai cultural values, to a valley culture deeply characterized by an agricultural civilization.

1.2. Using sticky rice as staple food has become a tradition in economic activities and the food habits of the Thai ethnic group. Glutinous rice as a main staple has been maintained by the Thai ethnic group until the 1950s of this century and rice is still important thereafter. Of course, the Thai living in Vietnam is not the only group preferring sticky rice. Almost all ethnic groups belonging to the Thai language family in Southeast Asia, and typically those living in Laos and Thailand, consume sticky rice as the staple food. In his book "The paddy path", Dr Watabe Tadaio, a Japanese agronomist, also regarded the habitat of the Thai-Tay ethnic groups in Vietnam as part of the glutinous rice area of Southeast Asia. Indeed, his book gave a picture of glutinous paddy growing areas which comprise a part of Thailand, the whole of Laos, the mountainous areas of the Northern part of Central Vietnam, the North-Western part and a part of the North-Eastern part of Vietnam, a part of Kuang His and Yunan provinces of China, a part of the Shan state of Myanmar, the eastern part of Assam state of India and referred to them as "Glutinous paddy growing region".

Which prerequisites led a part of the Southeast Asian population to take the glutinous rice as their first choice, instead of the ordinary rice? Many scientists suppose glutinous rice was associated for a long period with communities engaged in gathering, collecting and hunting during the pre-agriculture period. During that period, these human groups took tubers as their staple food, and it was the fragrance and taste of tubers which caused them to have a predilection for glutinous paddy as and when they started

domesticating paddy. It was also associated with the use of glutinous rice the habit of eating steamed food and glutinous rice cakes, and cooking rice in fragrant bamboo tubes. The Thai habit of eating glutinous rice is also related to the custom of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic group to hold ceremonies in honor of the ancestors involving offerings made of glutinous rice. This shows that the ancestors of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic group ate glutinous rice as a staple food.

1.3. The stilt house is a cultural symbol that is associated with a geographic region and specific ethnic groups. In Vietnam, the house on piles is an outstanding cultural pattern and living style in the North-Eastern and North-Western region, Truong Son Mountain Range and the Central Highland and is mainly associated with ethnical minorities.

Among the Thai, the house on piles of Black Thai is different from that of the white Thai. The house of Black Thai has an oval roof, with the roof and the wing forming a continuous whole and thus conveying the image of a boat turned upside down. The house of White Thai comprises 4 roofs, 2 main ones and 2 subsidiary ones.

But the houses of both Black and White Thai share the following common features:

- The front is arranged along the length of a valley
- The house is located near water sources, fields and forests.

An outstanding feature of the Thai house, and typically that of Black Thai, is the presence of 2 “Khau Cut” affixed at two points where gables adjoin on both sides of the roof. Each “Khau Cut” consists usually of 2 wooden or bamboo sticks disposed in the form of a letter X. Elaborate “Khau Cut” are carved, or have the form of a pair of buffalo or goat horns or a lotus flower. In essence, the “Khau Cut” is, more or less connected with the worship of buffaloes which play a very important role in the lives of the Thai living in a valley and mountain environment.

1.4. Among the physical expressions of culture, clothes and costumes are indeed most

characteristic. What is noteworthy is that while Westernization has exerted a most vigorous impact on the ethnic minorities in Vietnam, the latter still consciously treasure their traditional clothes.

With respect to traditional clothes, women's clothes, as is the case with many ethnic groups, are most representative. From a certain perspective, one can say that women have an important role in the preservation of the cultural identity of the community thanks to their clothes. Thai women's clothes vary considerably from one area to another. As far as Thai women (Black Thai and White Thai) in the Northwest are concerned, the short shirt with a row of silver buttons is regarded as the “soul” of their costume. The Black Thai women used to wear the “Khan Pieu” shawl, decorated with a big amount of typical images. But things are different with Thai women in Hoa Binh province whose clothes are similar to those of Muong women, with images mainly sewn in the rims of their skirts. The clothes of Thai women in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces represent a mixture of Thai, Muong and Lao patterns with the skirt constituting the “soul” of their clothes something quite different from Thai women in the Northwest. The skirt is decorated with images, with gay-colored images in the rims. The provincial origin of each Thai group in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces is reflected in the pattern of their clothes, with the skirt adorned with different images being the main component.

All the above-mentioned cultural values of the Thai exerted a direct impact on the neighboring ethnic groups, and most deeply on ethnic groups of the Mon-Khmer language family that will be dealt within the next section. The Thai language, a special cultural value, has become a tool, something like a lingua franca, used by many ethnic groups in the Northwest in their mutual relations for many centuries. Other spiritual and moral values of the Thai ethnic groups have become symbolic for this region.

2.1. Many ethnic groups-including the Yao and H'mong-have lived for a long time with the Thai in the Northwest region. But it is the ethnic groups of the Mon-Khmer language group which through contact and interface were the main

recipients of the influence of the Thai culture. These ethnic groups living in the Northwest comprise:

- The Kho Mu, numbering about 40,000 persons, live in Lai Chau, Son La, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An provinces, with greatest density in Son La and Nghe An.

- The Xinh Mun, numbering about 11,000 persons, are concentrated in Lai Chau and Son La provinces.

- The Khang, numbering about 4,000 persons, live in Lai Chau and Son La provinces.

- The Mang, numbering over 2,000 persons, live in Lai Chau province.

Of these, the Xinh Mun, the Khang and the Mang are the earliest inhabitants in the Northwest with the longest residential periods. Because of their small number and their relatively lower level of socio-economic development, most of the ethnic groups of the Mon-Khmer language family have been strongly influenced by the Thai language and culture.

2.2. An obvious evidence of the deep influence of the Thai language on the languages of the above-mentioned ethnic groups can be seen in the latter's basic vocabulary. In general, the basic vocabulary is the long-standing and long lasting component in any language. If such a basic vocabulary is lost or replaced by the basic vocabulary from another language that would a substantial indicate on of the loss of the language. Indeed, such a loss in language has taken place in the course of contacts, relations and exchanges with the Thai. For example: In counting, the Kho Mu still retains number 1 and 2, but for the remaining numbers they use the Thai language. This is also the case with the Khang. The Xinh Mun still retain the first 4 numbers (1,2,3,4) but for the remaining numbers they use both Xinh Mun and Thai terms (2,3).

Some segments of the Khang ethnic group in Thuan Chau district (Son La province), and particularly the Khang in Chieng Muon (also in Thuan Chau district) have forgotten their mother tongue and have switched to the Thai language. In Yen Chau district (Son La province), children and young people no longer speak and understand their mother tongue, and are now

speaking Thai, while the Xinh Mun people in Mai Son district (Son La province) have switched to the Thai language. The same happens to the Kho Mu and La Ha in some areas.

2.3. In agriculture, the ethnic groups of the Mon Khmer language family are typically engaged in sloping cultivation, whereas the Thai are cultivating wet paddy fields. This was reflected in a Thai saying:

“The Xa ‘earn’ their living thanks to fire”

“The Thai ‘earn’ their living thanks to water”

Yet, with the passage of time, many Xa inhabitants (also belonging to the Mon-Khmer language family) have switched to wet paddy cultivation, by learning from the Thai and using the latter's agricultural techniques. Among other things, this new pattern of cultivation has caused them to give up slash and burn agriculture and adopt sedentary farming and a sedentary life.

Thai houses on piles and clothes have become the common property of these ethnic groups. Many houses of these ethnic groups follow the Thai traditional style with the oval roof and a balustrade on the front part or the house. As their weaving trade is less developed or has been eroded, they have bought-either with money or through barter-Thai, Lao clothes, as also Thai blanket and mattresses.

In social relations including marriage and family life, one could see clearly Thai influence in the organization of family clans by the above ethnic groups. Nowadays, the Khang, the Kho Mu, the La Ha, the Mang bear Thai family names, a process that has been further accelerated by intermarriages between the Thai and members of these groups. Thai marriage customs have been adapted to very great extents by many segments of these ethnic groups. For example, Khang and Laha women, after getting married, set about arranging their hair in upright buns like women of the Thai ethnic group.

These ethnic groups also adopt Thai folklore, legends, mythological tales, religious ceremonies, and games and regard them as their own cultural assets.

Of course, the Thai have also benefited in terms of cultural values from these contacts. For example, the Thai have obviously acquired a taste and liking for the bamboo and rattan interlacing articles of these groups whose skills in this trade are recognized by all neighboring ethnic groups.

3.1. As a result of the socio-economic development process and increased cultural exchanges, the influence of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic group on the Northwest region has increased substantially. The number of inhabitants of Kinh origin in this region started to increase from the Dien Bien Phu victory in 1954 with the establishment of state farms comprising a big number of demobilized army men, workers and officials of Kinh ethnic origin. In the 1960s, in accordance with the government policy, a group of inhabitants, mainly from the delta, was moved to the Northwest for the purpose of socio-economic development of the highlands. At present, inhabitants of Kinh origin are the second biggest group in the region, next to the Thai. They mainly live in urban areas, along the highways and roads, which are convenient to business and trading activities. This population movement has brought about fundamental changes in this region.

3.2. In the past, the Thai language was the main tool for communications. At present, the Vietnamese language is used alongside the Thai language and has been acquiring an ever more important role. It is being used in various offices as a common language, a state language. The school network, which came into being in 1945 and was further developed from 1954 with a presence in most villages, also uses the Vietnamese language as a media of education at all levels. The mass media-press, radio, television-also mainly uses the Vietnamese language. It is the sole language in trading activities; transactions because most people engaged in business and trade both in government organizations and the private sector are of Kinh origin.

3.3. The increased influx of people of Kinh origin are also associated with the introduction of elements of the market economy into the

Northwest region. While the initial impact is still quite weak, the market economy will usher in an important shift. The region's agricultural economy, strongly marked by autarky, may move very slowly, but it will inevitably move toward commodity production. This process is further supported by a process of urbanization, which started with the emergence of a number of urban settlements with a group of inhabitants whose way of life is substantially different from the one of exclusive agricultural communities. The market economy has exerted a strong impact on the division of labor and exchanges. But the reverse of the coin is has also given rise to such negative phenomena as robbery, gambling, prostitution and crimes, which were completely alien to the local population but are now threatening their ethic, customs and, in particular, the young generation.

3.4. Through the channel of inhabitants of Kinh (Viet) origin and other channels, a number of exogenous cultural elements, both positive and negative, have flowed into the Thai, Hmong, Yao, and Khomu... villages in the Northwest region. That is also a result of globalization. It is assumed that this influx will increase along with the industrialization and modernization of the country. Thus, the traditional cultural values of the ethnic groups are facing major challenge in the context of Vietnam's integration into the world community.

All the issues mentioned above raise the question: whether the traditional cultural values of the ethnic groups in the Northwest region? Would the Northwest cultural region remain in the future? Only the future can give an accurate answer. It is, however, our hope and trust that the local inhabitants will make an appropriate choice as they face the changes in the socio-economic situation, in the natural and cultural environments, which affect all ethnic groups, no matter whether they are Thai, Hmong, Khang or Kinh... Thus, the Northwest cultural region could remain and acquire added dynamism so long as contacts interface and development activities would retain the traditional values as the basis and absorb modern values that the local communities find acceptable.