

AN OVERVIEW OF HISTORY, CULTURE AND SOCIETY OF HMONG PEOPLE IN THANH HOA

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Abstract: *Hmong people belong to the Hmong - Yao language branch, the South Asian language family, is one of the ethnic minority groups which has a large number of population among ethnic groups in Vietnam. Hmong people have the slow migration and settlement process compared to other ethnic groups in our country. They are located mainly in some highland provinces: Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Cao Bang, Lang Son, Lao Cai, Son La, etc. and in the western mountainous region of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces. Hmong people in Thanh Hoa reside mainly in three districts: Muong Lat, Quan Son and Quan Hoa. Most of them come from other places in the northern mountainous areas, migrating through two direct ways. Essentially, Hmong people in Thanh Hoa have a high sense of ethnicity and also maintain many traditional cultural features which contribute to enlivening the colorful picture of ethnic culture of Xu Thanh.*

Keywords: *Hmong people, Thanh Hoa, history, culture and society.*

1. Introduction

Among the ethnic minority community of Vietnam, the Hmong people belong to the Hmong - Yao language branch, of the South Asian language family; is one of the largest ethnic minority groups in our country (recently Hmong population around 1,068,189) [2].

The name Hmong has a long historic origin. The name HMong following the Chinese-Vietnamese pronunciation is Miao (Miêu). According to some researchers, this name is used to call the people who early knew the cultivation of rice in area of Banh Loi and Dong Dinh lakes, which has now become an official name. The majority of Hmong people in our country call themselves as *Mống* (Hmoob), other Hmong groups call themselves as *Ná Miảo*. *Mống* is also the name of Hmong people in Laos, Thailand and in some parts of China. The name-*Mống* means the name of ethnic communities as well as the name of Family. Based on a number of ethnographic characteristics, it is possible to divide Hmong people into some groups: Hmong Trang (Mongz Dou), Hmong Hoa (Mongz Lenhs), Hmong Xanh (Mongz Dua), Hmong Den (Mongz Duz).

Hmong people are considered as the descendants of one of the ancient indigenous inhabitants living in south China. From southwest China, Hmong people migrated to Vietnam in different times. The reasons of the migration is the desire to escape the oppression of feudal landlords, the hope to escape the slaughter after the protests and having a better place to live. The

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first migrations of the Hmong people began over 300 years ago to the border areas of Ha Giang and Tuyen Quang province. Then, the migration flow lasted until the day China was completely liberated in 1950, in which there were two large migrations about 200 years and 100 years ago. Most of our Hmong people still remember that they came from Quy Chau to Vietnam [5].

Currently, Hmong people in Vietnam live mainly in some provinces such as Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Cao Bang, Lang Son, Lao Cai, Son La ... and the western mountainous regions of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces.

The habitat areas of Hmong people are often on the mountainside with an average altitude from 800m to 1500-1700m, rugged terrain, cliffs erect on the valleys of abyss areas. At an altitude of 800m - 1700m, the climate lies in the sub-tropical climate, the annual average temperature is from 15- 20 celsius. Annual rainfall is in the range of 2000mm- 3000mm, however, in some places where are sheltered from the wind, rainfall is only about 700mm. Characteristics of rainfall where Hmong people live in are a rainy season and a dry season. In the dry season, monthly rainfall is only tens of millimeters or less. Sometimes it does not rain, so this area often lacks of water. With the diligence and creativeness, Hmong people have turned many highlands of northern Vietnam into their beloved homeland. For Hmong people in Sa Pa - Lao Cai, they possess an extremely rich and diverse terraced field system. This is a wonderful and unique creative work which is very valuable - as the unique cultural heritage, preserved through many generations of Hmong people. Terraced fields are a treasure of indigenous knowledge of ethnic groups that need to be preserved and promoted. It can be seen that the imprint of the Hmong people associated with the life of settlement and sustainable development for many generations in this important frontier. In order to affirm the land of Lao Cai or Ha Giang are their beloved second hometown. Hmong people often say:

The fish live in the water (Cá ở dưới nước)

The birds fly in the sky (Chim bay ở trên trời)

We live in the highland (Chúng ta sống ở vùng cao)

And the birds have their nests (Và con chim có tổ)

Hmong people ourselves also have the root (Người Mông ta cũng có quê)

Our root is in Mong Vac (Quê ta là Mông Vac) [5]

People in Dong Van plateau also believe that on the top of Mong Vac mountain, there is a God's well and there is a couple of birds specialized in picking up leaves to make water in God's well clean. People want to drink the water from the well to get away from sickness and when they die, they will be returned to their ancestors. Therefore, in the past, many old people wished to visit Mong Vac, "where the fatherland was held" and "to drink miraculous water from the well". Besides the superstitious factor, these things have a certain meaning to the formation of the love of the homeland and also arising the patriotism of Vietnam of the Hmong people. That patriotism is increasingly strengthened in the process of standing side by side with ethnic people fighting to protect our country and build a new life.

2. History and ethnic process of Hmong people in Thanh Hoa

About the origin of Hmong people in Thanh Hoa, in a research towards Thanh Hoa province (Le Province de Thanh Hoa) written by H. Le Breton (1918) describes that some people met a number of Hmong people and Yao people in mountainous area of Thanh Hoa.

Those were the new residents from China traveling to Indochina most recently around the middle of the last century (19th century), apparently after the Chinese slaughter (under the Qing Dynasty) at that time in Guizhou region. Also, according to H. Le Breton, Hmong people are very good at tilling a field (on the mountain slopes). Only when cultivation land can no longer be cultivated, the whole tribe will move to a new forest corner in Thanh Hoa province ; they usually gathered near Muong Lat area, in Luc Canh and Huu Thuy cantons of Quan Hoa mountain district [1].

According to the documentary named Thanh Hoa by Charles Robequain (1929), it says that Hmong people *live behind* to the Yao people (means that Hmong people live in higher areas than Yao people do) on the mountain of Phu Nghi range (in the writer's opinion Phu Nghi is now called Pu Nhi). This mountain block is at the border between Houaphanh province (Laos) and Thanh Hoa province (Vietnam), between the Ma river and Luong river, with the average high range about 1,200m. Inside Indochina, it is rarely to see the Hmong people live below the 800m altitude, they usually live on the mountain slopes with the high range between 800m and 1000m. In other words, they "jumped" from one mountain to the others despite of the administrative boundaries.

Also according to the survey study of Ch. Robequain (1929), the first Hmong people entered Muong Lat around 1900 - 1905. They live separately on high and steep slopes, because they claim that they cannot be in a hot and toxic valley, in the land of leeches and buffaloes, the dead must be buried under water, and the opium poppy cannot grow well. Hmong people have an idiom : 'the fish live in the water, the birds fly in the sky, Hmong people live in the mountain'. And also according to Ch. Robequain, he says that Hmong people do not want to admit that all the valleys have the owners (Thai and Muong people), therefore they cannot be there [3].

According to the Hmong people in Pu Nhi, Muong Lat district narrated, their ancestors migrated from Huoaphan (Laos) to Muong Lat (Thanh Hoa) about 150 years ago (6-7 generations). However, other legends tell that the Hmong people in Muong Lat and in Son La are brothers. Due to the poor circumstances, they were separated. The older brother went to Son La to bring his father's sword; and the younger brother took a cap to Laos, then he stayed at Muong Lat [1].

Thus, although it is only a legend about the family, it provides us with information that the nearest ancestors of the Hmong people in Pu Nhi (Muong Lat) came from Laos. However, it does not exclude the possibility that their previous ancestors were one of the groups who had been to the northern mountains, following the ways from China to Ha Giang or Lao Cai, and then moved everywhere and some of them went to the mountainous area in Thanh Hoa [6].

Mac Duong (1964) indicates that Miao people (*người Mèo*) living in mountainous area of Thanh- Nghe mainly resided in Muong Xen district (Nghe An) and in Quan Hoa district (Thanh Hoa). They were from Upper Laos and northwest Vietnam and migrated to these mentioned province about 200 years ago [4]. From these materials, it can be said that Hmong people in Thanh Hoa migrated directly from Laos and before from northwest Vietnam.

Consequently, Hmong people (including Yao people and Kho-mu people) entered Thanh Hoa when Thai people have already resided in low valleys that are suitable for cultivation of wet rice. To avoid to be tenants or serfs of other ethnic groups, Hmong people

settled in higher mountainside. Each village has about 15 - 20 rooftops and the village is far away from the other as a space of a mountain, therefore travelling is extremely difficult.

In terms of population, in the first decades of the 20th century, the documentary related to ethnic minorities in the mountainous areas of Thanh Hoa were almost absent especially related to Hmong people. According to the earliest record of French people about this territory of H. Le Breton or Ch. Robequain also did not mention this issue either. As H. Le Breton (1918) explains that because of shifting cultivation, the Hmong people usually residing on the peaks of the mountain, hence, it is very difficult to know exactly the number of their population [1]. However, from the 1990s onwards, the Hmong migrated freely to the western region of Thanh Hoa with the large number of people made the local population increased dramatically. If before the year 1990, only 3,638 Mong people lived in the mountainous area of Thanh Hoa, 10 years later (in 1999), the number of Hmong people was up to 13,325 people [7], an increase of approximately 10,000 people, mainly from the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam.

Currently, the Hmong people in Thanh Hoa reside mainly in two communes, Pu Nhi and Quang Chieu, Muong Lat district, but the majority are in Pu Nhi commune, basically Hmong Trang people (Mongz Dou). This is the first place that Hmong people set their foot on the land (the writer called these people are the old Hmong people). According to statistic, until 31.07.2007, there were 14,755 Hmong people in Muong Lat (accounting for 89.05% of Mong people population in Thanh Hoa). In addition, Hmong people also settle in Quan Son districts (915 people, accounting for 6.20%) and Quan Hoa district (700 people, accounting for 4.75%). In recent years, it can be seen that the picture of distribution of Hmong ethnic group in Thanh Hoa is very dynamic with a high population growth rate. According to Vietnamese Census in 1960, Hmong community in Thanh Hoa was 1,235 people; in 1979 there were 2,606 people; the period from 1960 to 1979 increased by 1,371 people; by 1989 there were 3,638 people; by 1999, the Hmong population in Thanh Hoa had a sudden increase by 13,325 people, the period 1989 - 1999 increased by 9,687 people, 10 times higher compared to the previous period. From 1999 to 2009 Hmong population increased by 1,097 people.

Table 1. *Hmong population in Thanh Hoa*

No.	District	Number of people
1	Muong Lat	12.789
2	Quan Hoa	708
3	Quan Son	925
Total		14.422

Source: Departments of Ethnicity, Thanh Hoa province (Statistics in 2009)

Currently, Hmong people in Thanh Hoa reside in 46 villages, including 9 communes of three border highland districts including: Muong Lat (41 villages, 5 communes), Quan Son (3 villages, 2 communes) and Quan Hoa (2 villages, 2 communes, in Buoc Hien village in Trung Thanh commune only 2 households). Muong Lat district has 3 communes in which Hmong people make up over 70% of the population (Phu Nhi commune has 13/14 villages with 807 households, 4,674 people; Trung Ly commune has 12/16 villages with 521 households, 521

households, Muong Ly commune has 11/14 villages with 464 households, 3,062 people, and Tam Chung, Quang Chieu (Muong Lat) communes; Na Mong, Son Thuy (Quan Son); Phu Son and Trung Thanh (Quan Hoa) are 2 villages where Hmong people live alternately with other ethnic groups [6].

Hmong people at the frontiers in Muong Lat include 2 communes of Pu Nhi and Nhi Son. In Pu Nhi commune, Hmong people concentrated in the villages of Pu Ngua, Hua Pu, Ban Com, Ca Noi, Ca Tau, Pha Den, Na Tao, Pu Tong and Loc Ha; in Nhi Son commune includes the villages: Cat, Pa Hoc, Chim, Keo Hu, Keo Te. Additionally, in Quan Son district, Hmong people live in the border communes of Son Thuy and Na Meo. In Son Thuy commune, Hmong people live in Xia Noi and Spring villages; in Na Meo commune, they reside in Ché Lau village.

Particularly, Hmong people in Quan Son district originated directly from Pu Nhi commune, the old Quan Hoa district. Recently, it is called Pu Nhi commune belonging to Muong Lat district. They moved to Quan Son in late 1989 (when Quan Hoa district was not separated into 3 districts: Quan Hoa, Quan Son and Muong Lat), at that time, they had only 34 households, with nearly 600 people, lived in 3 villages chosen by themselves is Xia Noi, Mua Xuan and Che Lau of Son Thuy commune, each village had more than 10 households [3]. In 1999, to implement the Decree 65 of the Government, Son Thuy commune was split into two communes: Son Thuy and Na Meo. Cho Lau village belongs to Na Meo commune.

In general, Hmong people in Thanh Hoa mostly migrated from other places in the northern mountainous region through 2 direct and indirect roads. Hmong people in Thanh Hoa have three branches: Hmong Trang (Mongz Dou), Hmong Hoa (Mongz Lenhs), Hmong Den (Mongz Duz). In which, Hmong Trang people (Mongz Dou) have the largest population and the Hmong Den (Mongz Duz) people have the smallest population. The Hmong people in Thanh Hoa have many families such as Ho, Thao, Lau, Va, Cha, Ly, Vu, Vang, and Dang. The most populous families are Lau, Ho and Thao. Due to living in high mountainous areas, their livelihood mainly is on shifting cultivation activities combined with raising, gardening and forest exploitation. Basically, Hmong ethnic community in Thanh Hoa preserve many traditional cultures, contributing to enriching the diversity of the multi-colour cultural picture of Xu Thanh ethnic communities.

3. Cultural and social characteristics of Hmong in Thanh Hoa

Like the Hmong people living in our northwest region, the resident unit of the Hmong people in Thanh Hoa likes the village of Kinh and Thai people. Hmong Trang people (Mongz Dou) call their village as *lú ro* and Hmong Den (Mongz Duz) people called it as *lu rò*. However, because of living alongside with Thai people for a long time, Hmong people often call their resident units as same as Thai people do, namely Ché Lau, Xia Non, Mua Xuan, Pu Ngua, and Lo Ha villages...

Each village of the Hmong usually has more than 10 rooftops in one place or in many places. The characteristic of the Hmong's village is that they have their own territory and business areas; the residents of a village consist of many family names and there is one more crowded family than others; each village has a common Earth Gods (head of the territory) and common conventions related to agricultural production, animal husbandry, forest protection and mutual help.

Each village of Hmong people is seen as a cultural community. Hmong people have belief in worshipping the Earth Gods, the Earth Gods may be general Gods, and sometimes be the men who exploit this land, protect and build a village or the leaders who have the duty to protect the Hmong ethnicity. In the spiritual life, early spring festivals are the chances for the whole community, especially young men and women, singing and playing, organizing folk games such as swinging, Ferris wheel, wrestling and throwing ball. In addition, there are traditional Tet ceremonies, such as Sao Nong ceremony which is held annually in January to worship in the Earth Gods (*Thổ ti, Thổ địa*).

Hmong people have a number of family names, each family name has many descents and each descent has different lines. Specially, the cohesion of family names of Hmong people is solid expressed through the authority of the Head of families, who can decide the settlement of his villages as Hmong's idiom often says that: *He holds his hand, his villagers stay; He opens his hand, his villagers leave*. People who have the same family names like Lau, Thao, Ho consider each other as brothers despite they have common old ancestor. The families in the same line do not need to reside near each other. Although they live far away, everytime they meet, they are considered as family members. Therefore, it is possible to explain why Hmong people often migrate in the lineages, even by the village [8]. This indicates the durable characteristics of Hmong's culture.

Hmong family is a patriarchal family, highly appreciating ancestral origin. As a result, family and descent relationship of the Hmong people are connected and strong, as well as they are responsible for protecting each other. That is why in married life, despite of the distance between ten generations, a man and a woman are not able to marry because of the same ancestor and blood relatives. Due to the nature of the nuclear patriarchal family (a couple and their children living together), when their son get married, he tends to live separately. That trend is expressed in the proverb of the Hmong people: "Big trees split many branches, crowd people split into small group" (*Cây to cây chia nhánh; người đông người chia nhỏ*).

Although in traditional society, Hmong's men are valued in the family, the role of women is very important and just behind the head of the family. Particularly, when the house owner decides some important issues, he discusses only with his wife and when only his wife agrees, everything go smoothly. In addition, the family is seen as a social unit, the division of labor among family members of Hmong people is also strict according to gender and age. The men often take on the heavy work such as: plowing, harrowing, cutting trees, hoeing, planting. Otherwise, the women take part in farming, doing embroidery at home, doing housework, weaving and knitting.

In Hmong's society, people always show their high respect to the elderly. Therefore, the authority and responsibility of the village patriarch is vital. If there is any conflicts in the family and village, the village patriarch is responsible for reconciliation, punishment, and being an advisor to deal with the big issues of the community like a marriage, funerals, etc.

In the ways of behavior, the Hmong in Thanh Hoa believe that when visitors come, the owners must greet the guests first, this shows the humility and respect for the guests. In communicating with the outside world, Hmong people also know how to use Thai language - like 'popular language' in mountainous areas in the west of Thanh Hoa. Currently, Hmong's young generation can speak 3 languages: mother tongue (Hmong language), Thai language and

national language (Vietnamese- Kinh). Therefore, Hmong people are able to communicate with people living in Laos' border area, because most of them are mostly Thai and Hmong people. Hence, for a long time, the Hmong and Thai people in the border areas of Vietnam and Laos have a mutual understanding in exchange goods and culture. These exchanges create a strong relation between two countries day by day.

Furthermore, Hmong people have a typical physical cultural life, creating their own values, expressing ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness. It is tradition of living in house builded on the ground, stalling, covering around the house with wooden planks or bamboo wattle, and the palm-leaf roofs or embankments, or wood called *sa mu*.

Regarding to traditional clothes, Hmong's men wear loose-fitting trousers, drawstring belts. Their's clothes are usually black with some patterns, but loose-fitting trousers have no pattern at all. Additionally, Hmong women wear skirts and patterned shirts. The skirt has two types, a layer and multi-layer skirts. Hmong women's costumes in Thanh Hoa have three different designs, showing the suitability for physique, psychology and three years of age: unmarried girls, middle-aged women, and elderly women. Furthermore, women wear a turban on their head, and the men often wear soft hats or not.

In term of cuisine, Hmong people eat mainly rice, sticky rice is only available during festivals. Previously, due to the difficult conditions, Hmong people often use water instead of soup to eat with rice, or boiled vegetables eat with fish sauce or salt, boiled vegetable water is used to eat with rice. The dish of pork impregnated with salt hung in the kitchen corner for a year is also a unique dish of the Hmong people. Black meat chicken is also a special food of the Hmong people, often cooked to treat precious guests, this type of chicken is also used to make medicine for the good health.

Hmong people celebrate the Tet's holiday following the New Year calendar, at the end of the year, in December. The time of spring celebrations usually takes three to five days, but sometimes lasts up to half of month depending on economic conditions of each village, each year. In a few days off, Hmong people prepare meals and often invite people in the same family names come to join with them for fun and joy. In those days, the households often slaughter pigs, they have the pork dishes with enough intestine of pigs, with a bottle of wine, the sticky rice, then they set on the ancestor altar (*đá xử ca*) to invite the ancestors to come back home and join the Tet's holiday with them. On the holidays and New Year, people wish each other beautiful words, hope that everyone will be healthy, have many descendants and hope for productive crops. The visitors come to Hmong village on this occasion will be warmly treated by their compatriots, which is the hospitable tradition of the Hmong people.

Like Hmong people in the northern mountainous region of our country, the Hmong people in Thanh Hoa have a rich cultural and spiritual life. First of all, the treasure of folk arts and literature include stories, folk songs, proverbs which reflects the creative ability of the masses and their awareness of nature, society, culture and national history [8].

Many folk tales reflect the unpleasant side of society: the suffering of the orphans, the grim treatment of sister-in-law with the bride, the evil step-mothers, the cruel mandarins; otherwise dignifying talented people from the residents, beautiful love stories, victors who against cruel men. The explanations about the phenomena of the physical and spiritual life of Hmong people are various (making ghosts, worshiping the women (*cúng mụ*), women are not

allowed to go upstairs, worship the columns of house, panpine dance (*múa Khèn*)...that is all remembered by family members as family activities in the normal life.

In the folk literature of Hmong people, folk songs occupy a significant position. Many folk songs have good ideological content, subtle and discreet expressions, are reminded by images closed to daily life. The common feature of folk songs is that it not only sings with lyrics but also sing with other instruments like wit pan- pine (*khèn*), Jew's harp (*đàn môi*), and leaf horns (*kèn lá*). These instruments are closely associated with folk songs of the Hmong. When people listen to pan- pine, Jew's harp and leaf horns, they deeply understand the content that the performer expresses. In folk songs, there are not only short stories but also some famous long episodes such as *Tiếng hát làm dâu* (the voice of bride), which is known by other ethnic groups. Mostly, Hmong people knows more or less the folk songs as well as the way of using their traditional instruments.

Hmong's folk music is lyrical and plentiful which reflects the natural beauty of the highlands, the bright beauty of Hmong's spirits, therefore many researchers are interested in studying Hmong's music.

Hmong's musical instruments are very unique. Panpine is used in funerals and some family rituals. At the time when the men go for walk or relax under the moon at night after a long hardworking day, they tend to blow panpines. Also, Jew's harp and leaf horns are the means of exchanging the hearts of young men and women in the late night. Especially, the meaning behinds the word of the song they play with those instruments is more powerful than the word itself [5]. Moreover, for Hmong people in Thanh Hoa in general, flute is also a close and popular instrument in their spiritual life. This is also an instrument that is easy to express heart, especially the feelings of boys and girls in love.

In some areas of Thanh Hoa province, the panpine dances of Hmong people are also popular with Kinh, Muong, and Thai people. They use panpine dances in parties, events, public holidays, public celebrations, house celebrations, New Year celebrations. In some special event like the music events to welcome the Congress, welcome the honour guests, Hmong's panpipe dances is performed by Hmong people or by other ethnic groups.

However, cultural and spiritual values including the treasure of folklore, music of Hmong people has been eroded. It does only exist in the older generations, for the younger generation, few of them is interested in and has little understanding about it.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, Hmong people in Vietnam ingeneral and in Thanh Hoa in particular have the late migration and settlement processes compared to other ethnic groups in our country. So far, there has been a little change in Hmong communities in term of population. In the past and until now, Hmong people mainly take up shifting cultivation and animal husbandry as their main economic activities; other economic activities are only complementary. Additionally, Hmong people have a high sense of community, spirit of mutual support to help each other when the village have to deal with great work. They also have a sense of material contribution to spiritual and cultural activities for community events Therefore, the values of the history, culture and society cultural are the solid base for Hmong people to survive and develop sustainably in their own homeland.

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