

## Some Dao Hợ ethnic group's wedding customs in Sơn Hà commune, Bảo Thắng District, Lào Cai Province

**Chu Quang Cường<sup>(\*)</sup>**

**Abstract:** *Based on the author's empirical research results and secondary data, the paper presents some features of the wedding customs of the Dao in general and the customs of the Dao Hợ in Sơn Hà commune, Bảo Thắng district, Lào Cai province in particular. It clearly shows that the distinctive traditional culture of Dao ethnic group in Vietnam has still been maintained until today.*

**Key words:** Culture, Customs, Ethnic minorities, Dao Hợ, Lào Cai

Sơn Hà is a lowland commune located along Red River in Bảo Thắng district (Lào Cai province). Until 2014, the total natural land area of the commune is 2,102 hectares with the population of 1,377 households and 5,212 people. Of which, the Dao (mostly Dao Hợ) has 588 people, the rest are Kinh, Tày, Nùng, Hoa, Mường, Thái, Giáy... The commune has 13 villages, of which 3 villages belong to the difficult area (area 3); in terms of production, agriculture and forestry accounts for

30% of the economic structure, husbandry 30.53%, handicrafts and services 39.47%.

According to many Dao Hợ people in Sơn Hà, due to their nomadic practices in the past as well as their habit of gathering near water bodies, Dao Hợ villages, similar to their neighbouring group Tày, have been formed for a long time. This is the place where Dao Hợ families live and form different households, which is characterized by their blood relationships, relatives in one clan or by marriage. Therefore, households in each Dao Hợ village

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<sup>(\*)</sup> Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.

establish close relationships and support each other whenever the others have important events. In addition, the research results also show that Dao Hợ villages in Sơn Hà are a cultural space carrying the identity of communities.

Through a lot of research documents, it can be seen that in the development history of the Dao in general and the Dao Hợ in Sơn Hà in particular, traditional belief is one of the factors which creates the solidarity of the community and helps the Dao be aware of themselves. In their religious practices, ancestor worshipping plays an important role, reflecting the connectivity of different generations and how the Dao Hợ always keep in their mind their origin. Thus, so far, the Dao Hợ in Sơn Hà has still maintained lots of their traditional culture features expressed in their funeral rites, maturity ritual, home building..., especially wedding customs.

### **1. Some features of the Dao's wedding**

Wedding is the proceedings in which the family and clan members carry out rituals for the son or daughter to get married when they are old enough. Some published documents by authors like Bế Viết Đăng et al. (1971), Phạm Quang Hoan and Hùng Đình Quý (co-editors) (1999), Trần Hữu Sơn (editor)

(2001, Lý Hành Sơn (2003)... showed that, in the past, a majority of males and females in Dao group, including Dao Hợ, got married at an early age. The child marriage was relatively common. Nowadays, according to the Vietnamese Marriage and Family Law, only females over 18 and males over 20 are allowed to get married. Therefore, early marriage of the Dao as well as that of some other ethnic minorities in Vietnam has decreased significantly.

Surveys in many localities where the Dao live in Lào Cai, including Dao Hợ in Sơn Hà commune, show that Dao ethnic males and females often meet each other at fairs, during their farming jobs, in festivals... When they have feelings for each other, they will tell their parents. Only when their parents agree, they will develop their relationships. In case that their parents disagree, they will only be friends. According to the Dao's customs, parents have the right to refuse, even force the couple to follow their choices. Some studies on the Dao have also confirmed this practice. Particularly, in the past, marriage of the Dao in general and the Dao Hợ in particular was arranged by parents. i.e. the fact that a girl must marry the young man (that) her parents have selected for her is prevalent. Children have to take it passively and sometimes are forced to

do so. Therefore, many spouses know their partners' appearance for the first time at their wedding. Some elderlies of the Dao Hợ in Sơn Hà said that because of not knowing and loving each other before their marriage, they were still like strangers for a while after their wedding.

According to many elderlies of the Dao Hợ and Dao Áo Dài in Sơn Hà and some communes in Bảo Thắng district, so far Dao parents are still very serious about their children's marriage. Boys and girls at the age of 13 or 14 are allowed to get married but commonly, when the boy turns 16, the parents will start to look for him a wife. If a girl near by is selected, the boy's family will ask a neighbour next to the girl's house to visit and investigate whether the girl has someone to marry, then introduce their son to the girl. Previously, the wedding customs of the Dao groups are quite complicated, because each Dao group has different rituals.

For the Dao Áo Dài, they take green and red threads to bind two coins together and ask somebody to take them to the girl's house to send the girl's family a word. If the girl's family takes two coins, the boy's family will carry out espousal rituals. Accordingly, the boy's family brings a bottle of wine, a kilogram of pork (if

available) or a chicken, a bag of salt, two betel nuts to the girl's house. After listening the boy's family's, if the girl's family agrees, they will give the boy's family their daughter's "lộc mệnh" (a red piece of paper or cloth with birth date and name of the girl) to compare their age. Representatives of the boy's family take the girl's "lộc mệnh" home. On the way, if they do not have bad omens such as: hearing muntjacs' crying, meeting bamboo rats, pangolins, spiders' dropping on the way, snakes crawling across the road, stone rolling, people carrying shovels, seeing funerals..., they will carry out the ceremony to compare age (*nai meng*). In case those bad omens occur, the girl is considered not being appropriate to the boy's fate; thus, the boy family will look for another girl. If the girl's and the boy's age are compatible, they will kill a chicken and invite a diviner to interpret their future in a ritual by using chicken legs. If "everything is good" according to the interpretation of chicken legs, the groom's family will take a chicken or some pork to the bride's family to conduct "*báo mệnh*" ritual, i.e. informing the bride's family the result of age comparison and chicken leg future interpretation. At the same time, the groom's family

will officially ask the bride's family for a wedding ceremony" (Trần Hữu Sơn, editor, 2001, pp.57-60).

In some other Dao groups, if the age of the couple is compatible, the groom's family will take a chicken and gifts to the bride's to carry out the chicken leg future interpretation ritual, combining with "báo mệnh" ritual. At some places, in the "báo mệnh" ritual, they have the groom to present at the bride's family..." (Bế Viết Đăng et al., 1971, p.229).

The following is the official engagement ceremony. With this ritual, in Dao Đỏ group, the groom's family only takes two alive capons, ten bottles of wine, ten kilograms of rice to the bride's; in Dao Tiền group, the groom's family takes a slaughtered pig of about 20-30 kilograms, ten litres of wine, ten kilograms of rice and some betel nuts and areca; in other Dao groups, there are similar betrothal gifts. In the engagement ceremony, the bride's extended family and *representatives* of the groom write a marriage letter, which details: the agreement of the bride's family on the marriage, offerings which the groom's family has to give the bride's (silver, meat, wine, rice, jewelries for the bride...), number of people who send the bride to the groom's house and number of people who come to the bride's house and bring her to the

groom's house. They fold the marriage letter written in a red rice paper sheet diagonally, halves it so that the bride and the groom keep each half. In some Dao groups, the wedding day is set in the engagement termed "*ghĩa tịnh*" in Dao Đỏ language and they list the wedding presents in the marriage letter. However, in Dao Đỏ group and Dao Tiền group, they do not set the wedding day in the engagement. Only when the groom's family fully prepares for the wedding day, they choose a "good day" and the groom's family has to inform the bride's family in person (Bế Viết Đăng et al., 1971, pp.229-230).

About the wedding, there are differences among Dao groups. Each group has its own features reflecting the cultural diversity of the Dao in Vietnam. As for Dao Hộ group in Sơn Hà, participatory research and interviews show that so far, the proceedings of a normal wedding are divided into 3 main stages, including: rituals before the wedding, during wedding and after the wedding, which are then divided into steps and contain many customs for each stage.

Resulting from plenty of visits to Dao Hộ villages in Sơn Hà and other communes in Bảo Thắng district, we have had chances to listen to wedding stories from elderlies, especially

witnessing and participating some Dao Hò people's wedding. Based on the investigation of ways and procedures of rituals in a wedding, especially the wedding of the Dao Hò in some villages in Sơn Hà, it can be seen that, apart from common wedding characteristics of the Dao, Dao Hò's wedding ceremony has specific features, reflecting their daily life, worldview and spiritual life.

In the Dao's wedding in general, Dao Hò in Sơn Hà in particular, many practices are kept until today, specifically: custom of confining souls of the bride, groom and other members of procession of the groom's family, custom of stretching a string in front of the bride's house gate, or the custom in which the bride's family carries a stick and chase the procession of the groom's family, opening the road... These customs show a "lovely" culture identity of the Dao Hò. The following is some practices in wedding of the Dao Hò we have witnessed expecting that it can contribute to the resources on the wedding customs of Dao group in Vietnam.

## **2. Confining souls (hon)**

Before going to the bride's house to bring her home, the groom's family invites a sorcerer to their home to inform

their ancestors and pray the ancestors to protect the bride, the groom and the procession on the way back from the bride's house as well as when they are at the bride's house from bad lucks and evil spirits. When the sorcerer finishes the worshipping ritual, the main matchmaker (*ma cha ta* in Dao Hò language) takes some rice representing souls of the bride and groom to put into a piece of red paper prepared by the family. After that, the matchmaker uses magic to confine the souls (*hon*) of the bride and groom in that paper, then ties the paper with the rice on the tip of an umbrella and always keeps the umbrella with him until the end of the ritual of receiving the bride at her home, bringing her to the groom's house and addressing the bride and groom to the groom's ancestors. In the morning when the wedding finishes at the groom's house, before other people and the matchmaker go home, the bride and groom have to stand in front of the door so that the matchmaker can practice some rituals. Then, the matchmaker carries the umbrella confining souls to the door, raises the umbrella, opens it to let the paper and the rice fall on the bride and groom's heads, which implies to return them their souls. After opening the umbrella, the matchmaker continues to pray the

groom's ancestors to protect the bride and groom's souls...

Noticeably, at the same time when the matchmaker ties to confine the souls of the bride and groom in the umbrella, a helping matchmaker (often called hereditary mandarin "*lại cong*") also takes a piece of red paper, puts rice into it, then ties to the tip of a small stick with the implication of confining the members of the procession of the groom's family who go to get the bride. When "confining" the souls of the procession, the helping matchmaker also uses magic to keep the souls and always keep them with him along with the wooden stick until the procession gets to the bride's home, finishes all the rituals to bring the bride to the groom's house and returns to the groom's house. In the morning when the wedding finishes at the groom's house, after the ancestor worshipping rituals, the helping matchmaker goes to the corner of the garden and tears the red paper to let the rice fall with the implication of giving back the members of the procession their souls.

According to Bàn Văn Sang, 65 years old, a Dao Hợ in Khe Mụ village, Sơn Hà commune "*On the way to the bride's house, and at the bride's house, if we don't confine the souls of the bride, the groom and the members of the procession, evil spirits can see their souls, tease them and ask them to*

*wander, so they will be prone to be ill. When arriving home, if we don't let the souls free, the people whose souls are confined cannot do anything but always are half-witted.*" It can be said that it is one of interesting practices that are maintained in the Dao Hợ's wedding.

### **3. Stretching a string in front of the bride's house gate**

According to previous practices, the Dao Hợ in Sơn Hà as well as in other areas in Bảo Thắng district, the procedure of going to the bride's home to get her, completing all rituals at the bride's house, and coming back should take them 2 days regardless of the distance. Bàn Văn Trấn, 55 years old, a Dao Hợ in Khe Mụ village, Sơn Hà commune, said: "*During the wedding ceremony in the bride's house, there are many rituals. For each ritual, lots of songs must be sung. The matchmaker, the hereditary mandarin, and the gift protectors from the groom's procession have to exchange songs with representatives from the bride's family*". After taking rest and having meal at a neighbour's house near the bride's home, when the time comes, the main matchmaker, the gift protector "*loong to*" and the procession will be welcome by one person who carries an oil lamp and taken to the bride's home. Then, in front of the bride's house gate, two women who

can sing stand at the two sides of the gate. Each takes one end of a string (*ý lan máu zan lù*) made by two pieces of red and green cloth (*lu pì meng*) in the way that they sag down to form a hammock shape. Behind the bride's house gate, they prepare a tray (*tật á*) with a mug of wine, two cups, a plate of meat, and a pair of chopsticks for the procession when they pass the gate.

When the procession arrives at the bride's house gate, the two women stretching the string sing to ask the procession: who they are, where they are from, why they come here. At this point, the two matchmakers have to sing: we are ... sent here by Mr./Mrs... in ...and ask for permission to get into the house to present in front of the family's ancestors and let the procession... with the groom named... bring the bride named... home to be Mr./Mrs. ...'s daughter in law; thus we look forward to letting get inside. After finishing singing, the main matchmaker puts in the sagged cloth 10 to 20 thousand dongs. The two women stretching the string sing again in order to tease and prevent the procession from getting into the house. At this moment, the matchmaker has to sing cleverly so that the two women pave the way for the procession to present to the bride's ancestors in time... The process of exchanging songs goes on, the representatives of the two families

have to sing a lot of times. After each time, the groom's procession finishes singing, the matchmaker drops into the string from 10 to 20 thousand dongs. They exchange songs about 5 times, then the two women take back the string and let the procession get in and present to the sorcerer who waits at the bride's house to go through other rituals.

#### **4. Bride's family's carrying sticks to block the groom's procession**

After finishing all rituals at the bride's home, the procession and the bride go to the door and are ready to come to the groom's house. Then, the bride's family sends a strong young man carrying a stick in his hand; he shouts, threatens and blocks the way of the groom's procession. This young man loudly asks for the name of the representative of the procession and the names of each member, where they are from and does not let them out. If they want to go home, each member of the procession has to drink a cup of wine and bows down under the stick to pass...

To respond to the threatening words by the young man representing the bride's family, one of the two matchmakers will represent the procession to sing a song to clarify that: the procession has done all the procedures in front of the bride's ancestors and parents, it is the

appropriate time to leave, so let them go back. After that, each member of the procession has to tell their name and where they are from, then drink a cup of wine, and bow to pass under the stick the young man raises.

It can be said that till now, the Dao Hò in Sơn Hà as well as in other communes in Bảo Thắng district, Lào Cai province, still maintain interesting customs in their wedding which have not been mentioned in any document. Of which, the custom that the representative of the bride's family carries a stick and prevents the groom, the bride and the procession from going back the groom's family could be a remnant of wife robbing ritual in the Dao Hò's marriage in the past.

Moreover, in the wedding of the Dao Hò, there are some rituals such as: the sorcerer uses magic to three puppets so that the bride, the groom, and their children will not be haunted; after the bride gets out of the gate of her house, she must not turn her head back on the way to the groom's house; from the wedding day to the day when the newly-weds first visit the bride's family, the bride has to wear the same wedding dress which can only be taken off after that first visit...

One of important people who connects the bride's and the groom's family is

the matchmaker. The matchmaker is responsible for the whole wedding procedure and is the one who maintains the cozy and friendly atmosphere between the two families. Therefore, after the wedding, the new weds consider the matchmaker as their godfather. They have to pay him a visit on different occasions and wear mourning for him when he passes away...

### **Some comments**

Hitherto, the wedding ceremony of the Dao Hò in Sơn Hà and some neighbouring communes in Bảo Thắng district (Lào Cai province) still carries the typical traditional culture features of the Dao in general and the Dao Hò in particular. Although currently their lifestyle has changed in a modern way, complying with Vietnam Marriage and Family Law, practicing marital monogamy..., the Dao Hò's wedding still maintains traditional principles, rituals and practices.

Generally speaking, the Dao Hò's wedding reflects their cultural identity and is characterized by humanity. However, the procedure of the wedding ceremony consists of many different rituals and gifts and requires the participation of a large number of people. There are still some practices which are not suitable for the new lifestyle and should be left out □



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