

Vietnam's Thai Studies Program - A Road of 30 Years: Research Achievements, Topics, and Orientations

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Abstract: *Thai Studies, namely the Vietnam's Thai Ethnic Group Studies Program, is one of the research fields associated with the establishment and development of Vietnamese Studies in Vietnam. Over 30 years since its establishment in 1989, the program has achieved remarkable accomplishments. The article includes a systematical review of 10 main research topics conducted under the program and propositions of research possibilities in an attempt to contribute to the development of the Vietnamese Studies in the coming future.*

Keywords: Thai Studies, Vietnamese Studies, Research Achievements, Research Orientation

1. Birth and research subject of Vietnam's Thai Studies Program

Tai/Thai Studies has attracted early attention from researchers not only in the countries where ethnic groups of this linguistic family are residing but also in other countries, such as the UK, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, America, Japan, and France. Apart from independent researches, 13 International Conferences on Thai Studies (ICTS) have been organized in seven countries, namely India, Thailand, Australia, China, the UK, the Netherlands, and the US.

Thai Studies has also been mentioned in some other international scientific activities. For instance, the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological

Sciences established a subcommittee on Tai-Kadai's Inheritance and Development of Non-Physical Culture. The Union organized its 16th Congress in July 2009 in Kunming, Yunnan, China. There exists *TAI CULTURE*, an international publication on researches on culture and history of different ethnic groups in this linguistic family living in different regions: Viet Nam, Laos, Myanmar, Assam (India), Thailand, Cambodia, and China. The publication is mainly in English, with some exceptional articles in French and German (<http://www.seacom.de/taicul/tc.html>). A special volume of the publication, Volume 17 (2004): *Tai people in Vietnam*, was published.

International Thai Studies is a subject of humanities that mainly focuses on

historical, linguistic, cultural and socio-economic issues, social development, and relationships among Thai-language communities concentrating in some Southeast Asian countries.

In Vietnam, some ethnic minorities like Thai, Tay¹, Nung have been studied quite early, mainly as independent groups or sometimes coupled with other ones (Tay-Nung for instance, following the policy on creating a Latin-based alphabet for these two groups). First scholars who paid attention to this issue are Nguyen Van Huyen, followed by La Van Lo, Ha Van Thur, Dang Nghiem Van, To Ngoc Thanh, and others.

However, not until the late 1980s, Thai Studies was officially researched systematically, following the advent of the Vietnam's Thai Studies Program (VNTS), established under a 7 September 1989 decision of the Hanoi University's Rector. This was a *long-term* program, administered by the Cooperation Center for Vietnamese Studies (present-day the Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Sciences under the Hanoi National University).

At its birth (1989), VNTS Program aimed at conducting general researches - mainly focusing on social sciences and humanities and ecological conditions as well - ethnic subgroups in the *Tay-Thai* linguistic group in Vietnam with a population of about 4 million people, accounting for over 5% of Vietnam's population, mainly residing in the Northwest, Northeast and the western

part of the provinces Thanh Hoa and Nghe An. There are eight ethnic subgroups, in which the largest are Tay, Thai, and Nung, followed by Giay, Lao, Lu, Bo Y, and San Chay (alias Cao Lan).

VNTS focuses on studying ethnic subgroups of the Thai language group living in Vietnam, which was formerly called the Tay-Thai group of the Thai-Kadai language family, in terms of ethnology, history, language, culture, or in other words, in social sciences, humanities and ecological conditions².

At the 6th Conference (2012), the Program considered that Thai Studies also covered researches relating to the Thai-Kadai language family. It meant that the Program would pay attention to four other ethnic groups of the Kadai language family: La Chi, La Ha, Co Lao, and Pu Peo in Vietnam.

2. Achievements of the Program in the past 30 years (1989-2019)

Over the past years, the VNTS Program has conducted successful researches (through gathering scientists and collectors from different regions) on many fundamental issues of the Thai-Kadai language ethnic groups and organized eight national-level scientific conferences. The first three conferences were held in Hanoi (in 1991, 1998, and 2002). The last five events, from the 4th to the 8th, were organized in provinces, namely Cao Bang (2006), Dien Bien (2009), Thanh Hoa (2012), Lai Chau (2015) and Nghe An (2017). It is noteworthy that, apart from in-depth researches, there were a number of informative and objective

¹ Formerly, the group was called Tho. However, in 1974, the term "Tho" became the official ethnonym of another ethnic group in the Viet-Muong group, consisting subgroups of Tay Poong, Dan Lai, Ly Ha, Keo, Mon, Cuoi, and Ho.

² Introduction, *Culture and History of Ethnic Groups in the Thai Linguistic Family in Vietnam*, Summary Record of the 3rd Thai Studies Conference, p. 21.

essays provided by authors who are local residents. They provided an abundance of documents, enabling readers to easily identify historical dimensions and cultural identities of ethnic groups in this language family in Vietnam. Reports submitted to the conferences were selected and printed in eight summary records, with 566 articles and 5,290 pages in total.

Especially in 2016, the Northwest Program carried out the State-level project “A research to put forth measures for the Thai ethnic group to bring into play their role in the Northwest’s sustainable development” (Assoc. Prof. and Ph.D Pham Van Loi as the lead researcher). The project attracted the participation of many members and collaborators from the VNTS Program. The summary record of the 8th National Conference of Thai Studies was also one of the scientific outputs of the project. Research results were assessed and approved by a board of review in 2018. Some major results were sent /handed over to the National Assembly’s Ethnic Council, the Communist Party of Vietnam’s Central Mass Mobilization Committee, the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs and the provincial People’s Committees of Yen Bai, Lai Chau, Dien Bien, Son La, Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa, and Nghe An - the provinces where Thai people reside in large numbers.

It is noticeable that in 2016, a group of authors introduced *Dictionary of Culture of Thai, Tay, and Nung* (Hanoi National University Publishing House, 507 pages). The 270 A4-page book *Folklore of Nung and Tay Ethnic Groups - Traditional Concepts* was granted with a consolation prize of the Vietnam Folklore Award in 2012.

Most recently, the book *Vietnam’s Thai Studies: A 30-year Path, 1989-2019* was published, summing up the Program’s research activities for 30 years while introducing some articles on ethnicity issues (historical origin, economy, society, and culture) of the Tay-Thai group and the Thai-Kadai family in general.

There exists a large army of VNTS researchers who are present in almost most of the regions where ethnic groups of this language family are dwelling. Many scholars among those come from ethnic groups of the Tay-Thai family, having a rich and profound knowledge of their groups.

3. Ten topics already studied and research orientations for Thai Studies in Vietnam

VNTS researches over the past 30 years were printed in eight summary records (VNTS Program, 1992, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, and 2017), focusing on ten following topics. On this foundation, we suggest some orientations for researches to be conducted in the time to come, with a hope that VNTS would merge into the common trend of Vietnamese Studies in the future.

3.1. Ethnological process and the country’s foundation and development

Some researchers have mentioned issues relating to the ethnological history, emphasizing the contributions of different ethnic groups into the country’s development. Many essays took into account the ethnological process, especially that of the ancient Tay-Thai people and the distribution of ethnic groups. Some articles focused on family annals, clans, and historical figures (Hoang Van Thu, Chu Van Thinh), helping to clarify contributions of the Thai-Kadai community in Vietnam.

The upcoming researches on ethnological history can be based on data from folk literature, especially the works in ancient written languages of Thai, Nom Tay, Nom Nung, to answer many questions raised by researchers: Why did the Tay-Thai people in Vietnam have no bronze drums¹? Why no written work in the Nom script of the Tay and Nung has been found recording stories of Nong/Nung.

In general, it is necessary to further clarify the role and position of the Thai-Kadai community among ethnic groups residing in Vietnam as well as in the world's Thai-Kadai community, both in history and at present. At the same time, solutions must be proposed for preserving and bringing into play those historical values in the context of industrialization, modernization, and international integration.

3.2. *Traditional economics*

Many Thai Studies researches have focused on traditional economic characteristics. There are also some in-depth studies on livelihood, attaching special importance to traditional agriculture, especially farming; surveying traditional crafts, or introducing some handicraft villages (brocade weaving, ceramics, forging) with specialized tools and means.

Some researchers have pointed out that many traditional crafts should be promoted for the sake of economic development and people's better living standard. Apart from the policy on shifting from milpa cultivation to forestation, traditional methods of

cultivation (companion planting, crop rotation, and intensive farming) are still exploited in people's livelihood.

In the time to come, researches should continue to elucidate issues arisen in people's sustainable economic development. For example, to develop community tourism, it is necessary to pay attention to both economic interests and cultural preservation.

3.3. *Society and environment*

Ethnic groups' traditional society is closely organized, especially in the community of Thai and to some extent, in the Tay as mentioned in numerous studies. This requires each and every member of the group to voluntarily obey the community's long-standing customs and habits, as seen in behaviors, conventions on marriage and family, taboos on childbirth, raising a baby or funeral.

Sociologically, there is a series of articles on the community's role in the government and political system; the role of villages/hamlets in conserving and bringing into play cultural values in the context of international integration, even at school. Nature, identities, and adaptability in sustainable social development are emphasized, particularly in interrelations with other co-habiting ethnic groups.

Regarding human behavior with the natural environment and the ability to adapt to development, some authors have written about the actualities and issues arising in ethnic groups' use and protection of natural resources (water, forests, land), including the construction of nature-cultural museums, or the exploitation and protection of sacred forests.

The orientation for the forthcoming research is to place importance on issues of

¹ The bronze drum displayed in the Dien Bien Museum is confirmed not to be made by the Thai. In the past, many rich families in Quan Son, Thanh Hoa, purchased and possessed bronze drums rather than producing the item by themselves.

sustainable economic and environmental development and to survey issues posed changes in livelihood and habitat.

3.4. Indigenous knowledge

Researches show that people's knowledge in folk medicine is quite abundant, with several traditional herbs and remedies. From using naturally-grown medical plants, people nowadays can breed and grow these plants as a valuable source of natural medicines.

In calculating time, the Thai people invented their own calendar for production and seasons.

In production and daily life, people knew how to protect their ecosystem, land, forests, and water. A large part of their knowledge now remains very relevant and needs to be preserved and exploited to soundly manage land resources and forests while developing handicraft villages and new countryside.

The upcoming researches should further make full use of all values of the community knowledge that can contribute to socio-economic and cultural development, national solidarity, and border security.

3.5. Traditional culture

Material culture: The cuisine in each region has its own distinctions. Many values of people's culinary culture have been studied and exploited to serve tourism development. Through researches, it is possible to conclude that traditional costumes of ethnic groups have been still treasured in modern life and frequently worn in festivals, rituals, funerals, and wedding ceremonies, not just on stage.

Immaterial culture: Not only describing annual festivals, such as Lunar New Year, Qingming (tomb-sweeping day), calling

for buffalo's spirit, and new harvest celebration, several studies have also focused on festivals like the festival to start a new crop, the praying-for-rain festival, the Hoa Ban (*Bauhinia variegata*) Flower festival, together with some folk games (pushing canes, unicorn dance, swinging, walking on stilts). Researches show that many festivals and ceremonies have been maintained quite well.

The future researches should go into depth, pointing out real characteristics that are ethnic groups' identities, proposing solutions to conserve and promote good cultural values in the process of building the new countryside, to make contributions to the construction of a progressive Vietnamese culture imbued with national identities in the era of international and regional integration.

3.6. Spiritual life

Not only surveying the spiritual life with worshipping rituals and ancestral-cult/good-luck prayers used by people, many authors, to further clarify people's spiritual life, have tried to thoroughly research ethnological psychology: from spiritual practices reflecting Buddhist cultural imprints to the mixture of folk beliefs. For instance, *Then* singing (a practice of belief transformed into an activity of performing art) is an expression of the "human spirit" of Tay, Nung, and Thai groups. *Then* singing was recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage and as the representative intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO in December 2019.

The orientation for the forthcoming studies is to find out why religions (typically Buddhism) leave faint imprints in these ethnic subgroups' spiritual life in Vietnam,

quite different from other subgroups of the same language family living in neighboring countries (Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar).

3.7. Folklore

Works of folklore have been collected, introduced, and analyzed, including legends, fold tales, myths, epics, or folk songs/poetry of all kinds. The custom of singing Van Hoan (by the Thai people in Muong Moc) or *Cỏ lau* (by the Nung) is gradually buried in oblivion and needs to be researched for preservation. Traditional performing arts, closely associated with community activities, such puppetry as, *da hai*, or *han khuong*, need to be surveyed, conserved, and developed for festivals. Folk dances, especially *xoe*, are honored and practiced in efforts of preserving national arts. Some authors have researched decorative art, architecture, fine arts (with folk creativeness), and some traditional musical instruments.

Regarding the orientations for upcoming researches, it is necessary to continue collecting and enriching the treasure of folklore, doing analyses and comparisons to identify common and specific values that can be promoted in modern life.

3.8. Language

Spoken and written languages of ethnic groups have attracted a large number of scholars who tried to describe dialects, make vocabularies, and compile bilingual dictionaries.

Onomatology is a field receiving special attention, with articles surveying personal names/authors who are members of ethnic groups, place names relating to villages/hamlets, and explaining ethnonyms.

The teaching of ethnic languages in many regions has recently been conducted in

accordance with general guidelines and policies. Some languages have been taught not only in schools but also in special classes for civil servants and members of armed forces. For example, the Thai language is taught in the provinces of Dien Bien, Hoa Binh, Lai Chau, Son La, Yen Bai, Thanh Hoa, and Nghe An; the Tay language in the provinces of Cao Bang, Bac Kan, Lang Son, and Thai Nguyen; the Lao language in Son La and Thanh Hoa; the Nung in Lang Son. It is reported that the Committee for Ethnic Affairs in Lao Cai Province suggested the opening of Giay language classes.

Ancient written languages of ethnic groups (ancient Thai, Nom Tay, Nom Nung) have also attracted researchers' attention in various aspects, especially in collecting, conserving and bringing into play values of many ancient texts.

In the coming time, the research orientation is to pay respect to the tendency of returning to traditional writing systems, as seen in the Thai community. For ethnic groups having several scripts, it is necessary to make clear whether ancient Thai writing systems being used in some area continue to be taught - for example, Nghe An Province has been teaching all three scripts: Lai Tay, Lai Pao, and Tay Thanh, or developing a single unified writing system. At the same time, values of the Latin-based scripts approved in 1961 need to be reviewed.

3.9. Changes in integration and development

Mentioning the new life, with changes in the process of integration and development, some researches have shown that not only people's communication and behavior skills but also customs, practices, and

cultural distinctions (in terms of housing, cuisine, music) are gradually changing. Recently, for instance, the eating habits have considerably changed, as reflected in the frame of meals. Regarding costumes, changes are seen in materials, methods of weaving and tailoring, styles, especially those for daily use and men. There are also changes in house building and decorating techniques.

In modern times, characteristics of a wet-rice culture are still seen in daily life but with a miscellany; meanwhile, such factors like ethnicity, language, and religions are also renewed and diversified.

The orientation for the upcoming researches: Based on actualities, it is necessary to study and point out gains/losses (for example the development of community tourism in support of policymaking; set up models of preserving and exploiting cultural values which make up national identities.

3.10. *Connection of Vietnam's Thai Studies and the world's*

Over the past time, there have been articles reporting researches on international Thai Studies and Vietnamese researchers' contributions to Thai Studies abroad. Some measures are also suggested for enhancing the role of ethnic groups who are residing along the borderlines for the sustainable development of traditional friendship between the countries (Vietnam, Laos, China). Many essays were submitted to international conferences.

The research orientation in the future is to expand the scope of comparative research, not only focusing on ethnic groups living in Vietnam but also those in other countries. It is important to pay attention to similarities and differences in terms of classifying

ethnic groups and identifying ethnonyms in other countries.

After 30 years of operation, though not yet forming the subject of Thai Studies, some institutions have trained several bachelors, masters, and doctors who implement researches on ethnic groups in this language family¹. These trainees are not only Vietnamese but also some foreigners. Their dissertations, theses, and projects have mentioned various issues, from spoken and written languages to other aspects of life, such as cuisine, costume, housing, marriage, family, funeral, folk beliefs, decorative art, folk singing tunes, economic activities, production and tools. Not only taking into account the ethnic groups with large populations like Thai, Tay, and Nung, some in-depth researches has surveyed smaller groups, for example PhD theses on languages of the La Ha and the Cao Lan (one of two subgroups of the San Chay ethnic group). Studies on some subgroups like Ngan, Nung Ven, and Tay (Tho) Da Bac are receiving attention because there are different interpretations.

4. Conclusion

Vietnam's Thai Studies over the past 30 years has clarified many issues relating to ethnic groups in the Thai-Kadai language family in Vietnam, with contributions made by a large number of researchers and the assistance of many organizations at home and abroad. With a growing and rejuvenating team of researchers, in the coming time,

¹ For statistics, see Vuong Toan (2016), Directory of successfully-defended doctoral theses, masters theses, and graduation projects on the ethnic groups of Tay, Thai, and Nung (incomplete statistics until 20th November 2015), in *Dictionary of Cultures of Thai, Tay and Nung Ethnic Groups*, pp. 500-595.

VNTS is expected to achieve greater gains that meet the society's requirements □

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