

TRANSFORMATION IN FAMILY, LINEAGE AND VILLAGE RELATIONSHIPS OF THE HMONG PEOPLE AFTER FOLLOWING PROTESTANTISM IN THE NORTHWEST VIETNAM

TRANSFORMACIÓN EN LAS RELACIONES FAMILIARES, LINAJE Y ALDEA DEL PUEBLO HMONG DESPUÉS DEL PROTESTANTISMO EN EL NOROESTE DE VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Protestantism spread and developed in the Hmong community in Northwestern Vietnam has changed many aspects in the socio-cultural life of the Protestant Hmong in particular and some other ethnic minorities in the Northwest in general. Along with the rapid development of Protestantism in the Northwest, a Protestant Hmong community with a culture and lifestyle that is different from the rest of the Hmong community has been formed. Under the influence of Protestantism, family, lineage and village relationships of this Protestant Hmong community have been gradually changed in many aspects as well. This transformation has had a positive impact on the lives of the Hmong people but also poses many challenges for preserving the cultural identity of the Hmong ethnic in Northwestern Vietnam today.

Keywords: Transformation; family; lineage; village relationships; the Hmong people; Northwestern Vietnam.

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RESUMEN

El protestantismo se extendió y se desarrolló en la comunidad Hmong en el noroeste de Vietnam ha cambiado muchos aspectos en la vida sociocultural de los protestantes Hmong en particular y algunas otras minorías étnicas en el noroeste en general. Junto con el rápido desarrollo del protestantismo en el noroeste, se ha formado una comunidad protestante Hmong con una cultura y un estilo de vida diferentes al resto de la comunidad hmong. Bajo la influencia del protestantismo, las relaciones familiares, de linaje y de aldea de esta comunidad protestante Hmong también han cambiado gradualmente en muchos aspectos. Esta transformación ha tenido un impacto positivo en la vida del pueblo hmong, pero también plantea muchos desafíos para preservar la identidad cultural de la etnia Hmong en el noroeste de Vietnam en la actualidad.

Palabras clave: Transformación; familia; linaje; relaciones de la aldea; pueblo Hmong; Noroeste de Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Protestantism has thrived in the mountainous regions in general and Northwestern Vietnam in particular. According to the statistics of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs as of March 2015, the number of Protestant minorities in the Northwestern mountainous region is 115,822 people (with 26,502 people in Lao Cai province, 1,139 people Yen Bai province, 53,017 people in Dien Bien province, 22,436 people in Lai Chau province, 12,728 people Son La province) and the number of Protestants in this area continues to grow. (Nguyen, 2017, p.100) In Dien Bien province, as of July 2016, out of 9,940 households, there were 58,041 Protestants in 404 villages and hamlets. In Protestantism, there have 343 groups belonging to 11 factions operating in Dien Bien province, of which 50 Protestant groups have been issued with their certificates by the local government to register for the religious activities in groups. In Lao Cai province, as of September 2016, the province has 5,073 households with 27,955 Protestants. Up to now, 152 Protestant groups have been granted their certificates to be permitted to register for the religious activities in groups. (Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, 2017, p 45-48) The rapid development of Protestantism in the Northwest region has had a significant impact on many aspects of the socio-cultural

life of the Hmong ethnic in the area, leading to the disturbance and transformation in the culture of life organization and family, lineage and village relationships of the Hmong people. This transformation has had a positive impact on the lives of the Hmong people but also poses many challenges for preserving the cultural identity of the Hmong ethnic in Northwestern Vietnam.

Protestantism has been present in Vietnam since the late nineteenth century and up to now, there have been many research papers on Protestantism in general and Protestantism in Northwest Vietnam in particular. Researching on the Hmong culture and the cultural transformation of the Hmong Protestant in Northwest Vietnam, the researchers all affirm that the traditional cultural values of the Hmong people, the transformation or change of traditional beliefs in the cultural life of the Hmong people stems from the internal and are under the influence of Protestantism. Author Nguyen Khac Duc, in his book Protestantism of the Hmong and Dao ethnic groups in the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam, pointed out the cause of the development and the influence of Protestantism in the lives of the people here and pointed out the characteristics and movement trends of Protestantism in the northern mountainous regions of Vietnam. Author Nguyen Van Minh and Ho Ly Giang, in their article Some practical issues about Protestantism among ethnic

minorities in the Northwest today, introduced the status of Protestantism in the Northwest. The authors have pointed out the causes and influences of the development of Protestantism in the field of economic development and the influence on the socio-cultural life in the Northwest. (Nguyen, 2011) Author Nguyen Van Thang, in his book, Keep the “old logic” or follow the “new logic”, the nature of different reactions of the Hmong in Vietnam to the influence of Protestantism, mentioned traditional beliefs of the Hmong people, the role of traditional beliefs in Hmong society and culture; the change process of the Protestant Hmong and the positive and negative effects of changes after following Protestantism on culture, economy - society, security and defense in border areas. The author also pointed out the reason and nature of the change from the traditional beliefs to Protestantism of the Hmong people. (Nguyen, 2009) In the book named The Hmong spiritual culture in Vietnam - traditional and modern, the author Vuong Duy Quang indicated the reason and nature of the fact that a part of the Hmong people follows Protestantism and its impacts on the community, culture and society of the Hmong people. In particular, the author pointed out the changes in the spiritual culture of the Hmong people in the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam. The author said: “In the past or present, the religious conversion of the Hmong people showed that they have been undergoing the most drastic changes in their culture and religion. The action of accepting Christ of the Hmong people during the past century has shown that part of this community wants to change its life, feel freedom through true conversion, etc. Injury in the community relationship between people with conversion and people without conversion is inevitable because both sides consider their faith to be legitimate.” (Vuong, 2005, p.269) Author Thao Xuan Sung, in the book The Hmong in Son La in handling current problems of beliefs and religions, mentioned the reason, the process of infiltration and development of Protestantism into the lives of the Hmong people in this locality. Since then, the author raises some solutions and directions to solve the problem of the beliefs and

religions of the Hmong people in this locality. (Thao, 2010) In the article named Transformation of the Hmong beliefs - reality and concerns, author Kieu Trung Son pointed out the reason and change of traditional beliefs of the Hmong people. The author has analyzed the backward traditional belief factors of the Hmong people and gave suggestions to change some backward factors of the Hmong beliefs. According to the author, not only conversion can make a change, but even in the thought, within the ethnic group, there have also been cultural adaptations. (Kieu, 2013)

The development of Protestantism and the transformation of religions and beliefs of a part of ethnic minorities have changed many socio-cultural factors of believers in particular and ethnic minorities in Northwest Vietnam in general. The existence and development of Protestantism in the Northwest have caused a great change in the lives of all ethnic minorities here, especially the culture and lifestyle shown in the family, lineage and village relationships. This article uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative research to evaluate the transformation in family, lineage and village relationships after joining Protestantism in Northwest Vietnam today.

RESEARCH RESULTS

An overview of traditional social and family relationships of the Hmong people

One of the characteristics and also a good cultural feature of ethnic minority communities in Vietnam is the close link between family members (wife - husband, sibling - sibling), lineages and village communities, which contribute to strengthening the cohesion in the social structure, tightening ethnic relationships, directing members to exchange, share joys and sorrows, help each other develop in terms of economy. The position and role of the man, the husband, the brother, the lineage head, the village elder, the village chief in the traditional ethnic

minority community also creating respect and order in families, lineages, village communities has contributed to building the foundation for community cohesion from bloodline to society, which is the source of community strength of ethnic groups. Prestigious people in a community are not only in charge of uniting people of the same bloodline, but also in charge of social management, protection, and transmission of ethnic fine customs and traditions.

The Hmong people follow a patriarchal social system with the basic social structure of family, lineage and village. Usually, each family has two or three generations living together, some families have three or four generations with many couples living under the same roof. In the traditional conception of the Hmong, the man's role is always highly valued. Men are active in marriage and choosing partners, while women are passive. The Hmong patriarchal society highly respects the rights of the man in the family, then the interests of the lineage and then the rights of the woman. In a traditional Hmong family, the husband and son are the ones who decide all the important affairs, the role of the wife, the woman is very weak, their position is not valued and they often have a sense of resignation. Before getting married, a Hmong woman, no matter how much love she receives, is still less valuable than a man. When getting married, accepting the ceremony of "entering the door" to become the ghost of the husband's family, the woman must completely obey her husband's family, not arbitrarily leave her husband's house for any reason. The customary laws of the Hmong specify very strict rules for women. It can be said that, compared to men, Hmong women are people of low status, they do not have the right to decide on family affairs as well as participate in social and community affairs. However, the loyal relationship between husband and wife is a value upheld in the Hmong tradition. Besides, the relationship among siblings is also an appreciated relationship in the Hmong community. According to the traditional conception of the Hmong people, siblings in the same family and lineage must obey a certain

hierarchy and order, they must love and protect each other.

The bloodline relationship is also a relationship attached with great importance in the Hmong community. To a narrow extent, the Hmong lineage may include descendants in 3 to 5 generations in the family cohered by the bloodline of the father. To a large extent, the Hmong lineage may include many families residing in different areas, despite being far apart but sharing the same religious symbols, or "the same ghost". Each Hmong lineage has its own self-governing organization, which includes members such as:

Lineage head - the head of the lineage who is appointed by the lineage, knowledgeable about life, has bravery, has solid arguments and lives uprightly. The lineage head is the person who has the right to deal with the affairs of the lineage, acts on behalf of the lineage to perform the domestic and foreign affairs after unanimous discussion of the whole lineage.

The person "in charge of ghosts", is the one in charge of affairs related to the religious rituals of the lineage. These are people who are knowledgeable about the rituals, how to organize funerals of the lineage. This member is not chosen by election but based on inheritance.

Aunts are the sisters of the father and uncle generation in the lineage. The representative for the aunts will be the person responsible for supervising the activities of the person in charge of religious rituals and all members of the lineage in the implementation of regulations and laws of the community. This is also a person who has a decisive voice in affairs related to the marriage of family members.

In addition to the three main members mentioned above, the Hmong lineage also has Saman fathers. Saman fathers are responsible for helping the lineages to detect those who do not seriously comply or violate customary laws and regulations, and Saman fathers also have the role

of helping the wrongdoers redeem their ancestors through rituals of worship.

The lineage organization handles the affairs of the lineage based on customary laws and regulations set by the lineage. All members accept and voluntarily implement. It can be said that in the traditional society of the Hmong, the lineage organization is a self-governing apparatus, operating very effectively as well as the glue between the members in the community.

The lineage of the Hmong is a strictly self-governing and organized social unit with customary laws that clearly define the responsibilities and rights of each member. The Hmong customary law has very clear and strict regulations on relationships within the lineages. Specifically, it is forbidden to get married in the lineage, including others with different ghosts but with the same lineage, not to allow people with different lineage to die or give birth in the house. Live as a member of the lineage, then die as a ghost of the lineage. Relatives in the same lineage must support, protect, help each other pay off debts, collect debts, help each other revenge, etc. The Hmong believe that the brothers in the lineage must help and share with each other not only because of the brotherhood but also for the honor of the lineage. The Hmong customary law also stipulates wherever the lineages reside, the customary law has the value to governing there. With the provisions of customary law, the link between people of the same ghost in the Hmong community transcends administrative and territorial boundaries.

The lineages of the Hmong co-reside in villages. Each village has from one to three lineages with several dozen families. The Hmong village community relationships are relationships among members of the same lineage and among different lineages. The village has common conventions built on the customary laws of the lineages. Due to the co-residence and long-standing relationship, the sense of neighboring and ethnic community in this ethnic group has a very close connection.

Whenever the village community faces threats from outside, the lineages will join together to create a common strength to protect the village, protect the ethnic community.

The Hmong village organization is built on the basis of representatives of the lineages. The village has common conventions built on the customary laws of the lineages. The village self-governing system operates on the basis of the lineage organization. Community closeness and cohesion are some of the basic residential characteristics of the Hmong. The main relationships in the village are relationships between lineages and neighbors.

In a traditional society, village chiefs are elected by villagers so they are highly respected. The village chief can be the head of a large lineage, who is good at communication, knowledgeable about customs and practices. The village chief plays an important role, is the one who maintains the customs and practices, is the spokesperson, the judge, the mediator within the community. People, when they face an important affair, often seek the opinion of the village elders.

Thus, it can be seen that the lineage is the most important factor that makes up the village and society of the Hmong. The Hmong villages are operated in an orderly manner because it is based on the customary law of the lineages. The traditional behavioral culture of the Hmong is also mainly based on the customs and practices of the lineages. When Protestantism took its root in the Hmong community, the family, community and village relationships of the Protestant Hmong changed greatly.

Changes in family, lineage and village relationships of the Hmong after following Protestantism

Changes in the position and role of men and women in the family

In recent decades, due to the impact of many factors, including religious factors, marriage and family of the Hmong have also changed

significantly. The gap and difference in the position and role of men and women in the family have been somewhat narrowed. In a Hmong family that follows traditional beliefs, men have a decisive voice in all affairs and women are dependents, having little voice in the family. Due to the impact of Protestant morality, the gap and difference in the status of men and women in the family have been somewhat narrowed. In the Protestant Hmong community, the woman somewhat affirms her position in the family and society, she is involved in deciding the affairs of the family and the community and co-admitted by the family and community. The marriage and marital relationship of the Protestant Hmong have undergone certain changes compared to the traditional Hmong marriage and marital relationship. The relationship between husband and wife still retains the core value of faithful love, but at the same time attaches great importance to gender equality and the woman's position and role in the family. Survey results on changes in family relationships among Protestant ethnic minorities showed that 59.3% of respondents said that there is a change and 34.1% of respondents said that their ethnic minorities' family relationships after becoming religious get better. (Le, 2017).

Change in the role of the head of the family in performing religious rituals

According to the tradition of the Hmong community, the head of the family (man) plays a very important role, which is being the head and managing all activities of a family from economic aspects to religious rituals. However, since Protestantism entered the Hmong community, this role has changed quite dramatically. According to survey data conducted by Vu Van Hau in 2015 in the northern mountainous provinces, it shows that for Hmong families who are not religious, when the family has funerals, the proportion of the head of the family (man) becoming the owner of the funeral is 76.8% and the proportion of the head of the lineage becoming the owner of the funeral is 22.5%. For Hmong religious families, when there is a funeral, the proportion of the owner of the

funeral being the leader of the religious group is 94.6%. (Le, 2017) This shows a clear difference in the role of the family head of the traditional Hmong people and Hmong Protestants.

Changes in the role of the lineage head, village chief, and village elder

The role of the lineages significantly decreased, especially the role of the lineage head. The influence and power of the head of the lineage added away, no longer dominate the community life of the lineage, instead, it was the position of the Lord, the priest, the group leader. Followers in a lineage do not appreciate the role of the lineage and do not follow the lineage head's instructions in performing traditional religious rituals. Along with the decline in the role of the lineage head, the cohesion among the lineages of the Hmong has also changed dramatically, with differentiation between Protestants and non-Protestants. Traditionally, members of the same lineage have a close cohesion, a code of conduct recognized by the lineage and each member of the lineage has to do it voluntarily. In the Protestant Hmong groups, the lineage's code of conduct has been broken, causing conflicts with other non-religious members of the lineage. Protestants will be separated from their lineages because they no longer follow the lineage's ethical standards and codes of conduct. They gradually lose their sense of family origin, ancestry, history, customs and beliefs. Because of standing outside the traditional cultural and religious activities of the lineages, Protestants gradually form separate communities, cohesed together by religious beliefs, gradually forming religious communities - groups.

The conception of the Protestant Hmong community in the Northwest about the role of the most important person in the village has also changed dramatically. In traditional society, apart from the lineage heads, village chiefs and village elders are also influential people and play a very important role in Hmong villages and hamlets. However, currently, this concept

has also changed significantly. According to our survey results, with the question “*Who is the most important person in the village?*” for 2296 Protestants, the results were as follows: 1859 people said that it was the priest/ group leader/ point leader, accounting for 81%; 221 people said that it was the village elder, accounting for 9.6% and 216 people said that it was a village chief, accounting for 9.4%. (Le, 2017) This shows that, in the Protestant Hmong communities, the role of village elders and village chiefs has seriously declined.

Due to the historical characteristics, residence characteristics, ethnic cultural characteristics, the Hmong have close family, lineage and community village relationships, governed by customary laws and conventions of lineages, villages. The cohesion and attachment of the Hmong community are clearly shown in the lifestyle of solidarity and understanding, attachment, sharing, and helping each other in daily life; expressed in customs and practices; in religious activities and community festivals, etc. When Protestantism developed into the Hmong community, a community of the Protestant Hmong was formed and a community of the Hmong still followed traditional beliefs. There are 62.7% of the Protestant Hmong who is surveyed said that the lineage relationship has changed after a part of the Hmong became religious; 7.1% of them said that it did not change and 30.2% of them had no idea. (Le, 2017).

Due to the difference in faith and the practice of religious and belief rituals, Protestants gradually separate themselves from the traditional community, forming new communities cohesed by the faith in God. If the most important sign for members of the traditional Hmong lineage to recognize each other as the same lineage (in a broad sense) is the “same ghost” factor, which is also the most important factor creating the cohesion between the members of the lineage, for the Protestants, faith in God is also the most important factor helping them to connect

with each other, creating the cohesion of the community. People who believe in God are linked together, creating a cohesive relationship in a large community beyond the lineage or village. They always help and share with each other both physically and mentally. If the Hmong following traditional beliefs believe that only relatives in the lineage can love each other fully and can die in each other’s house, the Hmong Protestants believe that all Hmong regardless of lineage are relatives, they must both help each other and die in each other’s house. According to the survey results, 76.3% of the Hmong Protestants agree that all believers regardless of lineages are relatives, have the responsibility to care and help each other and can die in each other’s house.

Currently, in the Northwestern provinces, although Protestants have formed their own religious community - group, to a certain extent, they still maintain a relationship with the traditional Hmong communities. system. When a part of the Hmong people abandoned traditional beliefs to follow Protestantism, conflicts in the villages and lineages occurred very harshly. But over time, especially when Protestantism is recognized by the State and facilitated to operate in accordance with provisions of the law, the inconsistency also diminishes. Previously, in a lineage, believers and non-believers almost broke up with each other, didn’t greet and didn’t visit when the others were sick, etc. even in some localities, conflicts occurred between relatives in a lineage, they fought with each other because of the difference in faith. However, at present, the conflict between believers and non-believers still exists but it’s not as severe as before. Relatives, friends and neighbors, despite their different faiths, have become more harmonious, they can visit and help each other with big affairs and illnesses.

However, field surveys also show that the relationship between Protestants and non-Protestants is no longer coherent. Although there is a certain degree of harmony between

the believers and non-believers, the level of communication and intimacy between the two communities mentioned above is still very limited. The reason for this is the differences in lifestyle and behavior between 2 community groups that are governed by the difference of faiths, beliefs and religions. The Hmong Protestants often had little contact with the Hmong people of traditional beliefs. They also rarely attend events, works of the community of traditional beliefs, in particular, they rarely attend parties and traditional religious rituals of the lineage and community. The level of care, support and mutual help both in material and spirit between the Protestants and non-Protestants in the same lineage and village, especially on holidays, Tet, weddings, funerals also became less common compared to people of the same belief. There are 67.7% of the Hmong Protestants surveyed said that the relationship in the village has changed after a part of the Hmong people becomes Protestant; 2.1% of them said that it did not change and 30.2% of them had no idea. (Le, 2017)

Currently, some localities still have silent contradictions in the lineages and communities when there is a great difference in the number of believers and non-believers in the lineages, villages and. In a lineage, village or village that has a much smaller number of Hmong Protestants than non-believers, they are often isolated and discriminated against by members of the lineage or the village. This is also one of the basic reasons why many Hmong families are forced to leave their homeland to migrate to places where there are many Protestants to live, and even in the period 1986-2000, they massively migrated to the Central Highlands provinces. On the contrary, when the number of Hmong Protestant in one lineage or village is the majority, the Hmong people still holding traditional beliefs becomes the ones who are boycotted and isolated. Although the conflicts

between these two communities are no longer as severe as when Protestantism was first introduced, the aforementioned conflicts still occur silently in many Hmong lineages, villages in the Northwest region. Our survey results show that up to 72.0% of Protestants believe that there is a distinction between believers and non-believers in the lineage; 28% said there was no discrimination. (Le, 2017) The survey data analyzed above show that traditional relationships in the Hmong ethnic community are under a great impact when the Protestant is introduced. The influence of the Protestantism has changed the traditional relationships of the Hmong in both positive and negative directions.

CONCLUSION

Over 30 years of development, Protestantism has affirmed its place in the socio-cultural life of the Hmong ethnic community and became an undeniable social entity in the Northwest. In the process of existence and development, Protestantism has established its cultural value system in the spiritual life of the Hmong. The impact of Protestantism contributes to the elimination of many outdated and backward customs that have persisted in the cultural life of the Hmong, but on the other hand, it also poses challenges for preserving the cultural identity of the Hmong. It requires Protestant organizations to actively integrate more with the traditional culture to have a harmonious development, positively contribute to the socio-economic development of the Northwest. For those in charge of management, along with preserving and promoting the traditional cultural identity of the Hmong ethnic, it is necessary to promote the good culture and lifestyle of Protestantism; encourage and promote the positive exchange relationship between the traditional culture of the Hmong with Protestant culture and lifestyle, contributing to the sustainable development of Northwest Vietnam.

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