

“Nong” of Southern China: Linguistic, Historical and Cultural Context

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Abstract

Nong people are a branch of Zhuang nationality, settling in Yunnan and Guangxi of Southern China. Like Vietnam’s Nùng, they live in border areas. The autonyms and exonyms referring to them show that there are various branches of Nong around these areas. This paper presents the linguistic classification of Nong/Nung language first. Then, some historical evidences and anthropological perspectives, gathered from surveys and documents about Nong ethnic groups in Southern China, are additionally proposed. According to some phonological criteria, Proto-Tai linguistic classification grouped Nung/Nong as a subgroup of Central Tai. There are arguments amongst scholars whether some Nong dialects in Southern China can be also identified as a subgroup of Northern Tai dialects or not. According to the historical records and ethnohistory, a rebel leader of Nong in 11th century named Nong Zhigao became interesting information for further researches. Nowadays, even though Nong people are culturally influenced by Han Chinese, they still maintain their ancestral culture and tradition.

Keywords: Nong/Nung, Zhuang, ethnicity, Tai linguistic classification, ethnohistory

Introduction

Zhuang nationality is China’s biggest ethnic minority, having a population of more than 17 million. More than 80% of them or around 15 million settled thickly in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. Apart from Guangxi, around one million of Zhuang people are in Yunnan province. More than 80% of the Zhuang in Yunnan live in Wenshan Zhuang and Miao autonomous prefecture. For the remainder, there are 90,000 Zhuangs in Lianshan Zhuang and Yao autonomous county of Guangdong province and 30,000 in Congjiang county of Guizhou province (see Wang and Johnson, 2008: 2-8). According to Chinese-Zhuang scholars, the traditional culture of Zhuang people had been preserved and maintained in Wenshan prefecture of Yunnan, located along the Yunnan-Guangxi border. In this paper, the data conducted in this area is presented and discussed.

The ethnonym term ‘Zhuang’ or *Chuang* in Wade-Giles system, as far back as possible in Chinese historical records. The name Zhuang first appears in the Song dynasty (960-1279). But this word had not been used in a consistent way for those people in Guangxi and eastern Yunnan who are currently recognized as a part of Zhuang ethnic group until the early 20th century and ethnographic surveys of the 1950s. In the period of pre-revolutionary, the Han Chinese people simply called the population in that area as “*Turen*” or “*Tulao*,” which can be loosely interpreted as indigenous people. While some Zhuang groups used the word *pou* (person) as their initial names. This contemporary nationality came into being in 1953 when the Chinese Communist Party created under *minzu shibie* project (ethnic classification project) and assigned this name to a group of linguistically homogenous peoples scattered in South China.¹ Zhuang were the original inhabitants of Guangxi and Yunnan before they were collectively identified as a Zhuang nationality in 1953 and subsequently given Guangxi as their own autonomous region in 1958. At present, there are various branches of Zhuang, including Nong, Pu Xiong, Bu Yai, Pu Ha and Bu Dai. They are

¹ Thus, more than four hundred groups identified on the basis of local distinctions were recategorized into fifty-six *minzu*. See this arguments in Charles F. Keyes, “President Address: “The Peoples of Asia”- Science and Politics in the Classification of Ethnic Groups in Thailand, China, and Vietnam.” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, 4 (November), 2002, pp. 1163-1203.

believed as descendents of the people in Sino–Vietnamese borderlands. Moreover, they live in border areas, the same as Vietnam’s Nùng, Giay and Tay nationalities.² The largest Zhuang branch in Yunnan is known as “Nong” or “Pu Nong,” while the term “Nung” (Nùng) is known amongst Vietnamese scholars as one ethnic minority, according to the ethnological Vietnamese classification (*dân tộc*) in the 1970s.

The study on Nong or Nung³ ethnic group has played an important part for studies of Tai language family and culture. In linguistics, the classification of Nong language is still under arguments. Besides, Nong communities have possessed ethno-historical evidence related to Chinese historical records since 11th century. The rise of the Nong clan showed the statement from the Song history get along with Wei, Huang and Zhou clans which were constantly contending and pillaging each other. The culture and tradition of the minorities or ethnic communities in China are rapidly disappearing. However, the Nong people in Yunnan are able to maintain their own traditional culture.

Nong/Nung Language in Linguistic Classification

The linguists accept that there seem to be a quite large number of linguistic studies of Kra–Dai speaking family, formerly known as Tai-Kadai, in the region by well-known Tai –Kadai comparative linguists, such as Li Fang-Kuei, William J. Gedney, Andre G. Haudricourt and Soren Egerod. However, considering the vast areas where the Kra-Dai speakers live, it seems the studies have not covered even half of them.⁴

The Zhuang nationality in China was categorized in the group

² Wang Mingfu and Eric C. Johnson, *Zhuang Cultural and Linguistic Heritage* (Yunnan: The Nationalities Publishing House of Yunnan, 2008), p. 10; He Zhengting, *Yunnan Zhuang Nationality* (Yunnan: The Ethnic Publishing House, 1998); There is agreement that Zhuang in the North are Nùng. Cited in Doan Thien Thuat, *Tay- Nùng language in the North Vietnam* (Tokyo: Institute for The Study of Language and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1996), p. 3.

³ This article uses the terms “Nong” and “Nung”(Nùng) to describe the ethnic groups in Chinese and in Vietnam respectively. However, these terms are not related with the current political affiliation. Autonyms in IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) are noang⁴⁴ and nuŋ.

⁴ Pranee Kullavanijaya and Theraphan L-Thongkum, “Linguistic criteria for determining Tai ethnic groups: case studies on Central and Southwestern Tais.” *Paper presented at International conference on Tai Studies organized by the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University* (Bangkok, July 29-31, 1998); Pittayawat Pittayaporn, *The Phonology of Proto-Tai* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, Faculty of the Graduate School, 2009)

of Tai-speaking people, due to the linguistic relation. Li (1960; 1977)’s reconstruction proposed three primary branches of Tai which were Northern, Central and Southwestern Tai, based on the historical phonology and lexical features.⁵ The languages and dialects spoken by the Zhuang in Yunnan were classified as a part of the Tai (Zhuang-Dai) branch in Tai-Kadai or Kra-Dai language family.

According to Li’s classification, the Nong language was classified as a part of the Central branch, including Tay, Nùng, and Giay languages of Northern Vietnam. In addition, the Central Tai Zhuang languages have aspirated consonants which cannot be found in the Northern Tai dialect at present. These Central Tai languages are known as “Southern Zhuang.”

On the other hand, linguists found that the Zhuang languages spoken in some counties in Wenshan, Yunnan as well as several counties in western Guangxi are classified in the Northern Tai group. These languages, together with a number of other languages spoken by Zhuang in Guangxi and Bouyi in Guizhou provinces, are classified as “Northern Zhuang.”

Compared with Northern Zhuang (Northern Tai) languages, Southern Zhuang (Central Tai) languages were more similar to Southwestern Tai languages, such as Thai, Dai and Lao in Southwestern Tai branch.⁶

Pittayaporn (2009) recently presented a new reconstruction of Proto –Tai phonology. His dissertation discussed and proposed the data based on a variety of Nong/Nung dialects in Guangxi, Yunnan and Vietnam. It noted that the Central Tai group had no any genetic status in this sub-grouping schema. According to Li’s classification, Central Tai could be basically divided into four sub-groups. He supported Strecker’s view (1985) that the phonological innovations shared by Central Tai dialects and used by Li as sub-grouping criteria were, in fact, recent areal innovations.

⁵ Alternative views (Chamberlain 1975; Ferlus 1990; Gedney 1989; Haudricourt 1956; Strecker 1985) hold that Central Tai and Southwestern Tai form one primary branch which is a sister to Northern Tai. Note that Haudricourt (1956) further notes the existence of some understudied dialects that are intermediate between his two primary branches. See this discussion in Pittayaporn, *ibid*, p. 738.

⁶ Note that Southern Zhuang and Northern Zhuang languages are classified to 6 and 10 subgroups respectively. See details of each subgroup in M. Paul Lewis, editor *Ethnologue: Language of the World* (16th edition), (Dallas, Texas: SIL International, 2009), [Online: http://www.ethnologue.org/show_family.asp?subid=841-16].

Furthermore, distribution of Central Tai dialects amongst the four primary branches of Tai, according to Li's hypothesis, in fact, encompasses the full genetic diversity of Tai languages.⁷

The latest data collected by Pittayaporn (2009) showed a wide diversity of the Nong dialects in southern China and northern Vietnam. According to Gedney's investigation on the Zhuang dialects, five of each six Zhuang people were Nong.⁸ Gedney (1989) noted that it was much more difficult to find a boundary between the Central and Southwestern groups. However, it seems to be somewhere around the middle of Sino-Vietnamese border. This area was a periphery area of Central and Northern Tai branches where should be investigated further⁹.

Available data on the Tai dialects of this area is limited, but seemed to indicate no clear boundary, but rather a gradual transition like the transitional place of Tai speaking groups. For this reasons, it would seem more likely that was a two-way branching, into a Northern and Southern branch¹⁰.

Gedney assumed that there were various sub-groups of Tai language which had not been well known. For example, "Tou" sometimes was called "Tai." This is why he hypothesized that more and enough data would help to find that the relation between the Central and the Southwestern groups gradually changed. If so, the trace of change in the relation between the Northern and the Central groups would be seen as well. Gedney proposed that Tai language should be classified into two groups, consisting of the group of the Central and the Southwestern branches and the group of Northern branches.

⁷ Pittayaporn, *ibid*, pp. 302-303.

⁸ *Interview*, 23rd June 2006.

⁹ William J. Gedney, *Selected papers on comparative Tai studies*. Edited by J. Robert Bickner, Thomas John Hudak, John Hartmann, and Patcharin Peyasantiwong (Michigan papers on South and Southeast Asia center for south and Southeast Asian studies, the University of Michigan, Number 29) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), pp. 33-39.

¹⁰ Thomas John Hudak, "Introduction" in *William J. Gedney's Central Tai Dialects: Glosseries, Texts and Transitions*, edited by Thomas John Hudak, (Michigan: Central for South and Southeast Asian Studies, The University of Michigan, 1995), pp. xiv-xv.

Many years later, Gedney’s intensive work (1964-1969) on Central Tai Dialects in northern Vietnam contains three chapters. One of them is about the dialect of western Nung. Various data of Nung-speaking people in Muong Khuong, Lao Kay, Vietnam was presented. This group of people was hypothesized as western Nung, because they called themselves and their language as Nung. Moreover, the word Nung was used for most of their surnames. They lived far westward from the main settlement of Nung in Vietnam’s most northeast. Tingsabhad’s 1976 work on Nung’s sound system and vocabulary was conducted by surveying the informants in Lao Cai, Vietnam with a set of around 100 words. The survey showed that the informants’ sound system was similar to Gedney’s later work.¹¹ The latest fieldwork data was collected by Eric Johnson, a sociolinguistics researcher and coordinator of SIL International, East Asia Group, who has been working on development of language amongst the Zhuang people in Wenshan prefecture in order to preserve the language and the culture amidst China’s social and economic development. Johnson’s the comparison of tonal systems of the three Central Tai language of Wenshan revealed that Dai Zhuang is significantly different phonologically from both Nong and Min Zhuang and is indeed a distinct language, not just a different dialect, and that Dai Zhuang speakers will not be able to benefit from Nong based language development work. His comparison of consonant and vowel systems of Nong and min Zhuang revealed several different phonological developments, including phonemic mergers and splits not shared by both languages.¹²

From my latest fieldwork data (in 2011) in Wenshan and some area in Guangxi based on the linguistic criterion provided by Fang Kuei Li, the dialects spoken by the Nong of Wenshan, Yunnan belong to the Central Tai branch of Tai linguistic family while those spoken by the Nong of Shanglin and Dahua Counties, Guangxi belong to the Northern branch of the same linguistic family.¹³

¹¹ Cited in Thomas John Hudak, *ibid*, pp. 401-403.

¹² See the details in Eric Johnson, *A Sociolinguistic Introduction to the Central Taic Languages of Wenshan Prefecture, China*. (SIL Electronic Survey Reports, 2010).

¹³ Damrongphon Inchan, “Nung” of Southern China: their historical , linguistic and cultural back-

Nong Zhigao: From a Ethno-Historical Hero to a Local Deity

The Chinese-Nong and Zhuang scholars believe that, in the past, Nong was a great and powerful Tai speaking group, having their own kingdom. In addition, the Chinese historical records contain many stories of Nong.¹⁴

According to Chinese records during 8th-10th centuries, Nong was one of ancient Liao tribes, and was a part of Yue, living in the south around Yuan River. The river flowing from Southeastern Yunnan to Guangxi caused several fertile lands. As a result, farms in these areas could be harvested more than once per year. When the Northern Song dynasty had power in northern China, it seized Liao areas from Nong.

Because of the politics, the people were governed by Feudal System. The governors had the right to allocate farms according to number of members of each family. In the late of 8th century, the most powerful Nong leader could possess Southeastern Yunnan, Western Guangxi and some parts of Northern Vietnam. After that, he pledged allegiance to Kingdom of Great Succession (*Da Li Guo*, 大历国) which then became Nanzhao Kingdom. Therefore, Dali King appointed the head of Nong as his nobleman. Both Chinese and Vietnamese court historians use the terms *Nong Zhigao*, (農智高/农智高) in Chinese or Nùng Trí Cao in Vietnamese (ca.1025-1055) as their official names. The leader of the Tai-speaking rebel founded an independent kingdom at the border between China's Song Empire (968-1279) and Vietnam's recently-established Đại Co Viet (Great Viet) kingdom (968-1054). The historic example of Nong Zhigao is very attractive for modern-day indigenous inhabitants.

In the middle of 11th century, Nong Zhigao rebelled against Song Dynasty by gathering Nong's previous land and forming the State of South Heaven (*Nan Tian Guo*, 南天国) in 1049. He created himself as Huangdi

grounds. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Thammasat University, College of Interdisciplinary Studies, 2013).

¹⁴ Fan Honggui, "Tong gen sheng de min zu- Zhuang Tai ge zu yuan yuan yu wen hua" [The national of the same origin: origin of Zhuang and Tai nationality and culture] *Quangning Daily Press*, 2000, p. 157); He Zhengting, *From Nung Zhigao's leading his Army to Live in Yuan River to Study Zhuang and Dai's Relationship* (Unpublished, 2003); Wang Mingfu, *Na Wenhua Tanyuan* [Tracing "Na Culture" to its Source] (Yunnan: Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Minority Affairs Commission's Bureau of Ancient Document, 2008) (All Chinese).

(Emperor), and then paid tribute to the Chinese court. However, Chinese court refused and sent an army to suppress Nan Tian Guo. Nong Zhigao and his people fled to Northeastern Yunnan, especially around Guangnan, Jinping, Yuanjiang, Honghe and Luchuan Counties and Northern Vietnam.¹⁵ They had influenced over there for a period of time.

In addition, there were several tales amongst the local people, such as a legend about a battlefield and military ways near Guangnan County and a legend about their ancestor as Nong Zhigao’s soldiers.

According to a legend of Zhetu villagers in Guangnan, Nong Zhigao’s mother “*A-Nong*” was a brave and wise lady. Nong people raised her as a heroin called “*Yah Woeng*.” (*Woeng* mother; *Woeng* means a powerful person). Legend had it that one day she was accidentally pregnant. She didn’t know who her husband was because he always visited her at nights. Therefore, according to her father’s recommendation, she tied a silk thread to his leg one night. In the next morning, she found that her husband was one of her family’s dogs. Before the dog fled, escaping from her father’s anger, it told the woman that she should give birth when she met a deer. However, she gave birth to an infant when met a buffalo. Nong Zhigao, the baby, became a powerful child. He could ride a horse when he was three days old, and shot a bow when he was five days old. However, at last, he was defeated a Chinese Emperor. A legend gave a reason that he didn’t have enough power to fight with the Emperor because of his premature birth.¹⁶

According to Vietnamese history, Hoang Luoang (1998) said that *Nùng Trí Cao* was Tay or Tay Tho. His hometown was Ban Ngan, Tuong Can Commune, Thach An District in Quang Nguyen Province¹⁷ - currently is Vin Quang Commune, Hoa An District, Cao Bang Province.¹⁸ He was

¹⁵ He Zheng-ting, “On The National War Led by Nung Zhi-Gao.” in *Legends about Thao Houng Thao Cheuang: Historical and Cultural Dimension* (Narisa Dejsupha, Editor) (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University in coordination with the Office of the National Cultural Committee, Ministry of Education, 1998), pp. 83-97.

¹⁶ Sumitr Pitiphat and Samerchai Poolsuwan, “*Tai*” and “*Zhuang*” in *Yunnan, China: The analysis from fieldwork* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 2000), pp. 39-40. (Thai)

¹⁷ Ban Ngan, Tuong Can Commune, Thach An, Quang Nguyen Province, Vietnam.

¹⁸ Ban Ngan Vinh Quang Commune, Hoa An District, Cao Bang Province, Vietnam.

the second son from three children of *Nùng Ton Phuc* and *A-Nùng*. His ancestors were previous tribe leaders of Quang Nguyen. Its centre was in Thanh Na Lu- now is in the west of Cao Bang district. He had four wives, including one Tai and three Vietnamese.¹⁹

Several years after his death, King Ly Tai Tong gave him the title of “*Khau Sam Dai Vuong*”- a great king of Khua Sam, had a temple set up in his memory at his village. Since 1993, the temple of Nùng Trí Cao has been being praised as one of important Vietnamese historical sites. A pile of people visit the place for worship on every the ninth of January.²⁰

James Anderson (2007) published his book titled “The rebel den of Nùng Trí Cao: loyalty and identity along with Sino-Vietnamese frontier,” examining several accounts sources on Nong Zhigao’s history and presenting his approaches in term of political and military power, cultural and ritualistic power and local hegemony.

Anderson noted that the current sources might be found in the tales of Nong Zhigao’s ambitious attempts to establish a border kingdom. In 1042, at the age of 17, he established his first kingdom under the name of Kingdom of Da Li. He was captured by Vietnamese troops and detained in Thang Long for several years. After his release in 1048, Nong Zhigao announced the foundation of the State of South Heaven (*Nan Tian Guo*). Following the announcement, the Đai Co Viet court launched an attack on Nong Zhigao’s stronghold. The rebel’s leader and his followers fled farther north to Song territory. During his third attempt to gain the regional recognition in 1052, Nong Zhigao not only proclaimed the establishment of the Kingdom of the Great South (*Da Nan Guo*, 天南国), but also praised himself as a benevolent and kind emperor (Renhui Huangdi). Finally, in 1052, Nong Zhigao ordered to burn the villages under his control and led five thousand of his citizens to revolt that soon gained momentum-like force and swept across the South China coast to the city of Guangzhou. Within the year, Song imperial troops suppressed the rebel. Nong Zhigao

¹⁹ Hoang Luoang, “*Nùng Trí Cao in the History of Vietnam*” in Narisa Dejsupha, Editor, *ibid*, pp. 98-100.

²⁰ Hoang Luoang, *ibid*, pp. 100. And a tag recorded in Vietnamese at Nung Tri Cao Shrine, Ban Ngan, Ving Quang Commune, Hoa An District, Cao Bang Province, Vietnam (2006).

decided to flee to Dali kingdom (937-1253). The official Chinese records stated that the wary Dali ruler executed Nong Zhigao, and sent his head to China. However, according to the popular accounts, Nong Zhigao’s soldier and subordinates fled to northern Thailand where their descendants have been thriving until today.²¹ Jeffrey Barlow (2001) argued that Han’s penetration into the southern frontier after the decline of the Tang dynasty was one of the primary reasons that the local ethnic groups became independent or teamed with the other neighbouring kingdoms.²²

He (2003) proposed that, after the failure of rebellion, Nong Zhigao led his army back to the south of Yunnan, and finally lived along Yuan river (*Yuanjiang*, 元江). His descendents were renamed from Nong to Na while his army and people were also renamed as Dai (Daizhong) from Zhuang (Nong and Sha). Many of them traveled south to Southeast Asia, and then became an important part of Lao, Shan and Dai. He (2003) claimed that Yuan river was a transitional place where Zhuang and Dai blended or a pivot where the history of Zhuang, Dai, Lao and Shan linked up. All has a close relationship with Nong Zhigao and his army.²³

At this point, even though the clear conclusion on He’s proposal has not been made yet, some scholars agreed that Nong Zhigao might be the same person of Thao Houng or Cheuang Han, a Great hero in an epic poem of Southeast Asia. Chamberlain (1998) hypothesized that histories of South China and Vietnam were in line with epics of ethnic groups in the region, such as Nong Zhigao’s rebellion.²⁴ China’s resistance in the east and Đai Co Viet’s pressure in the southeast might stimulate Tai people to migrate western. Then, Tais might fight with Kadais and Austroasiatic people living in the west. However, he didn’t describe whether Nong Zhigao’s rebellion was the origin of the Thao Houng or Cheuang’s epic poem. Noted that there were Tai people in Yunnan before Nong Zhigao’s

²¹ James Anderson, *The rebel den of Nùng Trí Cao: loyalty and identity along the Sino-Vietnamese frontier* (Seattle and Singapore: University of Washington Press, 2007), p. 117.

²² Jeffrey Barlow, 2001, *cited in Anderson, ibid*, pp. 117.

²³ He Zhengting (2003), *ibid*.

²⁴ James Chamberlain (1998) “A Critical Framework for the Study of Thao Houng or Cheuang” , in Narisa Dejsupha (Editor), *ibid*, pp. 1-11.

arrival, and Thao Cheuang didn't relate to Nong Zhigao anymore.²⁵

However, Chamberlain quoted Barlow's work (1987) that Nùng Cheuang or Nùng Chuòng, the family lineage of Nùng in Western Lao Cai (Vietnam) and Yunnan (China), named themselves as Nong Zhigao's offspring.²⁶

Nowadays, the tales of Nong Zhigao/Nùng Trí Cao's rebellion are both parts of local folklores amongst Nong and Zhuang along the Sino-Vietnamese border in Yunnan and Guangxi. From Pitiphat and Poolsuwan (2000), James Anderson (2007), Wang and Johnson (2008) to my anthropological fieldwork in Wenshan in 2013 found that many families with the Nong surname still reside in Yunnan, Guangxi and Northern Vietnam and most consider themselves to be direct descendants of Nong Zhigao, his father Nong Ton Phuc, and his mother A-Nong. There are temples and local monuments in Guangxi, Yunnan and Northern Vietnam, displaying the deeds and accomplishments of Nong Zhigao. For example, the majority of Nong communities in China do not have a Nong Zhigao temple, but his descendants in Ayong village in Guangnan County, Wenshan Prefecture of Yunnan has built one. During the sixth or seventh lunar months of each year, Ayong villagers, including Nong and other Zhuang families, make sacrifices to Nong Zhigao to recall that the place was once camped by his troops.

Nong's ethnicity and ethnic identity in the plural society

According to the local scholars, autonyms and exonyms of Nong were, in fact, speakers of the same language. For example, Zhuang people in Wenshan Prefecture call themselves as follow: Pu Nong (Bu Nong) or Pu Xiong (Pu Xiong). For the exonyms, Nongzu, Nongyi, Longjiang, Tianbao, Jiangzhou, Donglan, Long'an, Aoren, Lizu and Heiyi are used. However, there are several different groups of Nong, named

²⁵ Thongthaem Najchumnong, "Zhuang in China and Haw's hand." *Art and Culture* (6th April, 1989), pp. 133. (Thai)

²⁶ Jeffrey G. Barlow, "The Zhuang minority peoples of the southern Sino-Vietnamese frontier in the Song period." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* XVIII, 2, 1987, pp. 250-269, cited in Chamberlain, 1998, in Narisa Dejsupha (Editor), *ibid*, pp. 10.

from the areas where they live: Nong Dau (in Guangnan County), Nong Yang (in Xichou and Malipo Counties), Nong Du (in Maguan County) and Nong Dai (in Guangnan County’s Zhetu District). Mostly, Nong Zhuang in Wenshan, Yunnan refer to themselves as “Pu (Phu) Nong.”²⁷ This point is also consistent to my anthropological fieldwork data in 2011 showed that the Nong subgroups in Wenshan are identified based on geography, costume and culture.²⁸

According to the discussion with the local scholars, it was common to distinguish types of Nong people, based on the design of the women’s traditional costumes. Some ethnic names simply reflect the geographic origins of the various Nong communities. According to their linguistic research, there was no any significant difference in the languages. Besides, their dialects are fairly similar, causing no troubles in communication. The Nong people have widely spread over the area, and have a variety of dialects and traditional costumes. Meanwhile, the Dai Zhuang (Tu) has no a direct relation about costumes. That is why the names of Nong sub-groups and the dialects of Nong are used for consideration.

In 1998, two linguists Pranee Kullavanijaya and Theraphan L-Thongkum conducted a fieldwork with 52 Tai-speaking groups in southern China, Laos and Vietnam. They proposed that many different Tai ethnic groups were misplaced under Dai and Zhuang nationalities. Some groups, such as Tay La, Tay Lo and Tay Nam, were also classified as Dai even though their languages and costumes of their women were in Zhuang style.²⁹ This point shows that the classification of Tai-speaking groups has not been known to many people, and might be investigated into several aspects.

Zhuang nationality can speak Chinese fluently, but they have their own languages and writing system for long time ago. Nowadays, the languages of many ethnic groups consist of Chinese loanwords or

²⁷ Wang and Johnson, *ibid*, pp. 14, 19.

²⁸ See the details in Inchan, *ibid*, pp. 120-124.

²⁹ Kullavanijaya and L-Thongkum, *ibid*.

some Zhuang dialects in Guangxi, even different in percentage of usage, showing heavy influences from Chinese. Meanwhile, Zhuang in Yunnan preserve a larger percentage of the words descending from Proto-Tai language. The Chinese loanwords about daily life are being used more than the loanwords about politics and economy (both Standard Mandarin and the local dialect).³⁰ For example, Nong don't have their own alphabets, but they have the ancient scriptures written with a combination of Chinese and ancient Zhuang characters. *Mo Hog Tay*³¹ is a 36-verse scripture descended for generations. There are more than 13,000 words. 'Mo' priests use it for funeral ceremony. Mo Hog Tay means scripture used for sending spirits. Its word-by-word translation is about sending spirit of the dead to the heaven, just like transplanting a sprout in a new place. The scripture describes many creation mythologies, stories of their ethnic origin and historical development. For instance, in the beginning period, the world consisted of gloomy mist. The sky and the earth were connected. Tigers and humans were friends. Scaly ant eaters' tails headed downward. Monkeys couldn't raise their heads. Until, a goddess used her scales for dividing sky from earth. After that, she separated beings into two sexes- male and female. In addition, rituals, legends, regulations and other things involving with death were contained in the book.

Besides, Nong's identity includes all parts of the fascinating culture which the ancestors created and handed down to today's Nong people. Even if the valuable culture is rapidly disappear, due to the combination with the modernity, Nong people still maintain to perform the traditional festivals and ceremonial rituals related to natural environment and Mo religion in their daily life.³²

Although Chinese ethnic classification categorized Nong as one of Zhuang and Vietnamese, including Nùng and Tay, the ethnohistory and

³⁰ More details in Wang and Johnson, *ibid*, pp.142-147.

³¹ He Zhengting, "Briefly introduced about Mo Hog Tay Scripture of Pu Nong." Presented paper for international conference *Before Civilized Tais*, held by Thai Khadi Research Institute at Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organization), 1999 (Thai). The story of Mo Hog Tay should be studied further.

³² See the details in Wang and Johnson, *ibid*, pp. 29-128.

ethnography on Nong people clearly showed Nong’s ethnicity and ethnic identity. Nong could be divided into various sub-groups. These sub-groups have their own languages and cultures. Each Nong ethnic sub-group was named by their costumes, original hometowns or geographical locations. Many Nong communities could identify differences of each group’s dialect, and could know their mutual social relationship. Therefore, Nong’s ethnicity could show some aspects of language, ethnohistory and culture. The term Nong was what linked each sub-group together, showing the same ethnic group which might have the same origin of the extremely variable linguistic categories encompassing widely differing populations.

Moreover, according to the history about Nong Zhigao, it was hypothesized that his army consisted of several ethnic groups just like a political group, led by the Nong family. This was because it was hard to fight with the Song dynasty court by only one ethnic group. These ethnic groups were separated after Nong Zhigao had been defeated in the war. Therefore, each sub-group still used the name of their previous leaders as a part of their names. It was assumed that, in the beginning period, Nong was the name of a “political unit” that was an important history of China and Vietnam. Later, Nong became ethnic groups that had their own languages and cultures different from the others.³³

Both China and Vietnam were a plural society. Therefore, they tried to definite, identify and classify the ethnic groups. They also tried to organize all of the ethnic groups to be under the same nation’s rule. Keyes (2002) noted that such ideology could be said linking with politics. Charles F. Keyes presented that Chinese and Vietnamese officials began the projects for classifying various ethnic groups in each country. The countries had been zealously studied on ethnology since 1950s. They tried to categorize the ethnic groups and to find their identities in order to develop their quality of life, making them proud of their unity. However, it seems to be confused and obscure on the identities of

³³ According to Fredrik Barth an important Norwegian anthropologist, ethnic identities could sustain by preservation. Ethnic Boundaries was not only cultural differences, but also social behavior that related to public acceptance and could separate groups and a part of cultural repertoire. In addition, he emphasized on social organization. For details, Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston, Massachusetts: Little Brown, 1969).

ethnologists and local people. Furthermore, Zhuang's long-time history was ignored in China. China paid attention on its largest population of all ethnic groups instead. This term had influence over other scholars, especially Thai ones. Although China's ethnic classification was not the same as Vietnam's, both of them were the same in using the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist approach. The significant feature of the Nationalities Institute is to study the minorities living in China on the theoretic basis. In contrast to the pre-modern distinction between the civilized Han and the barbarians or the Qing and early Republican recognition of the five major "races" of China, the *minzu shibie* (民族识别) project equated all minority peoples by designating all of them as *minzu*. Later (1962), all *minzu* were considered to be integral components of the nation of China (Zhongguo, 中国). The classification could hugely reduce diversity in the country, because many groups were combined into one.³⁴ The *minzu shibie* project, as Nicholas Tapp concluded, "looks in retrospect like one of the great colonizing missions of the twentieth century, a huge internal 'self-Orientalizing' mission designed to homogenize and reify internal cultural differences in the service of a particular kind of ... cultural nationalism."³⁵

In Vietnam, the classification could not cause the final result about Vietnamese beings. Keyes concluded his article that the academic scholars of these countries facing with cultural diversity of people in the countries. Moreover, they did some mistakes on the method that showed an old partiality on status. Because of these issues, some people might not be the citizens of the countries they were living. In addition, political adaptation related to human diversity. The context of modernization, a phenomenon along the Sino-Vietnamese border region is an outstanding example recently. Christopher Hutton's research on the Nung - Ngai of Quang Ninh province in northeastern Vietnam's is represented the

³⁴ The historical meaning of *min* is simply "people as a whole," or "civilian" while *zu* "indicated a small group of people within a locality or a larger organization, and over time acquired the sense of kinship"; "race"; "a class or group of things with common features." The Chinese term *minzu* acquired new meanings when it began, probably from the 1920s on, to be understood with reference to Soviet theories of nationality (Crossley 1990, 20 cited in Keyes, *ibid*, p. 1183).

³⁵ Tapp, 2002, cited in Keyes, *ibid*, p. 1184.

complexity of ethnolinguistic categorization involving.³⁶ Keyes questioned whether projects on the identity classification of people in Asia should be continued.³⁷ The ethnic classification project of the nation state based on the linguistics criteria is questioned.

In conclusion, some Nong languages and cultures are influenced by surrounding communication and cultures, such as weddings, trading, and customs. Therefore, there are some mutual, unique cultures between the ethnic groups. At the same time, the Nong try to maintain some of their ethnic identities, such as language used in family, traditional rituals and ceremony. Therefore, Nong ethnicity has a great influence over ethnic identity.

³⁶ See the details in Christopher Hutton, “Ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese Border at Mong Cai”. In Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton and Khun Eng Kuah (editors), *When China Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Changes in Border Regions* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000, pp.254-276).

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 1194.

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