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The Present Status of Using Written Hmong Language in the Hmong Community in the Northwest Region of Vietnam - Case Study in Son La and Lai Châu Provinces

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Abstract

Writing system is an important part of a certain language. When a language has its own writing system and is widely used, it is apparent that the language will have a strong position and vitality. Hmong language is a mother tongue of Hmong people, an ethnic minority that are now residing in many parts all over the world and mainly in the northwest region (Tây Bắc) of Vietnam. Unlike many other languages which have only one writing system, Hmong has many different scripts that are being used at a time. Therefore, understanding how Hmong people use their written language is an intriguing topic to help demystify their language usage and furthermore, understand their spiritual life. From our practical fieldwork, in this paper we focus on the discussion of the current status of using written Hmong in its community in the northwest region of Vietnam.

Keywords: Hmong Writing System, Hmong People, Language Usage, Hmong Script, Northwest Vietnam

1. Introduction

In 1961, according to the Decree 206/CP of the Ministry of Education and Training (Decree 206, 1961), Vietnamese Government officially conceded the use Hmong language system. This event marked a milestone for Hmong ethnic people in having their official language. This Hmong script was developed and compiled by authors Van Chinh Nguyen and Thanh Phan based on the Latin alphabet characters via recording voice and taking phonetics from the people of Flower Hmong (named because of their bright, colorful embroidery costumes including Hmong Lènh, Hmong Si) in Sapa region (Lào Cai province) as standard. In addition, they also supplemented some phonemes of other Hmong groups in other localities. After more than a half of century, until now, apart from the Hmong writing system compiled by the two authors mentioned above, in the life of Hmong people in Vietnam, there has also appeared another type of Hmong script which is originated from the outside of Vietnam known as different names: Laotian Hmong, American Hmong, Regional Hmong, International Hmong, etc. Therefore, one should keep in mind this highly diverse picture of Hmong written languages in northwestern Vietnam in relation with Hmong speaking language. In order to evaluate the status of Hmong written usage in this

region, we have carried a case study by surveying 220 Hmong people in Tà Xùa village in Sơn La province and Sin Suối Hồ village in Lai Châu province. Our result discussed in this paper aims at contributing more realistic views on the status of using Hmong written in Hmong ethnic community in northwest region (Tây Bắc) of Vietnam.

2. Content

2.1 Overview of survey region

Tây Bắc is an important geopolitical region of Vietnam. This is not only a large area with 102,000 km², but also multifarious in ethnicity with 30 ethnic groups living altogether since a very long time (Tran, 2016). Until now, the government has given special attention to Tây Bắc region. In particular, the outstanding goals are to maintain national security, develop a sustainable socioeconomy associated with improving people's education, preserving and promoting cultural values of their community.

Tây Bắc now includes four provinces including Hòa Bình, Sơn La, Điện Biên, Lai Châu in which Hmong people inhabit throughout the whole area. Although Sơn La and Lai Châu are in the same region, but Hmong people in these two provinces have some distinctive cultural and linguistic characteristics that can be typically representative for the northwest and northeast parts of Vietnam. This is the main reason for our study to be carried out in these two locations. In each province, we selected thoroughly a specific surveying area for our study based on their most prominent properties in which Tà Xùa village of Sơn La province and Sin Suối Hồ village of Lai Châu province were selected.



Figure 1: Sin Suối Hồ village 2020 (Source: NK Nguyen).

Tà Xùa is a central village of the same name Tà Xùa commune in Bắc Yên district, Sơn La province which can be considered as the most important part and a core area of Hmong people in Bắc Yên. Here, all inhabitants of Tà Xùa village and five other highland communes of Bắc Yên are native Hmong people. Today, Tà Xùa has totally

111 families with 650 people. Most of Hmong people living here are Black Hmong (Hmong Đuz). The economic activities of Hmong people are quite diverse. Besides the traditional agriculture activities such as growing rice, maize and raising livestock such as cow, buffalo and goat, they also grow green tea, hawthorn and take part in some touristic activities. Since a long time, Tà Xùa has created its own famous green tea trademarks like Tà Xùa or Thiên Đường Mây of Tà Xùa (which means “Paradise of Cloud”). Every year, Tà Xùa welcomes about 10,000 tourists. In addition, other business activities in Tà Xùa is also becoming very uproariously.



Figure 2: Touristic high spot Tà Xùa Paradise of Cloud 2020 (Source: NK Nguyen).

Table 1: Demographic statistics data 2019 in Tà Xùa village (Son La province)

Total	Gender		Religion	Profession			
	Male	Female		Farmer	Merchants	Public servants	Student
651 (100%)	338 (51,92%)	313 (48,07%)	0 (0,0%)	542 (83,25%)	23 (3,53%)	9 (1,38%)	77 (11,8%)

Sin Suối Hồ is also a central village of Sin Suối Hồ commune, Phong Thổ district, Lai Châu province. The only feature that makes this village distinctive from Tà Xùa is that 85% of Hmong inhabitants in Sin Suối Hồ are Protestants. Nowadays, in this village live 130 families with 674 Hmong inhabitants, in which most of them are Flower Hmong (Hmong Lệnh, Hmong Si). In the past 10 years, economy of Sin Suối Hồ has seen a remarkable change, Hmong people in which their lives mainly depend on growing rice, maize and livestock, is now shifting gradually to new economic activities such as touristic business based on the form of Homestay for tourists and growing Orchid plant (known as a high income activity in Vietnam). Yearly, Sin Suối Hồ attracts thousands of domestic and international visitors.

Table 2: Demographic statistics data 2019 in Sin Suối Hồ village (Lai Châu province)

Total	Gender		Religion	Professions			
	Male	Female		Farmer	Merchant	Public servants	Students
674 (100%)	342 (50,74%)	332 (48,26%)	539 (79,97%)	545 (80,86%)	37 (5,48%)	11 (1,63%)	81 (12,01%)

We chose these two locations for studying the status of using Hmong written language of Hmong people with following reasons. First reason is that Hmong people of these two villages (Tà Xùa and Sin Suối Hồ) are all native Hmong that belong to Flower Hmong (Hmong Lênh, Hmong Si) and Black Hmong (Hmong Đuz). The second reason is that the two villages are also very active in touristic activities, this means that the local people here communicate very frequently with people from other ethnic groups and other locations including foreigners. In the third reason, both Tà Xùa and Sin Suối Hồ locate in the central part of their two communes. For the fourth reason of this survey is that the two villages have a distinctive features in term of the religion of their inhabitants. Most of Hmong people in Sin Suối Hồ are Protestants while in a contrast, in Tà Xùa, all inhabitants are non-religious. Those typical features are the main reasons for us to choose these two villages to investigate because they possess many similarities as well as dissimilarities.



Figure 3: Hmong ladies with traditional costumes in a dance performance for tourism activities in Sin Suối Hồ village 2020 (Source: NK Nguyen).

2.2 Overview about Hmong writing systems

Hmong ethnic people have a long history and they reside in many different regions in the world (Nguyen, 2017). Hmong language is now the native language of about 10 million people inhabiting in different countries. Despite a long history of existence, many researchers in the world and in Vietnam have agreed that *ancient Hmong language has no writing system* (Ly, 2009) although in Hmong mythology, it was told from generation to generation that their ancient language has a script, but unfortunately the script was “*eaten by a cow*” Nowadays, in the Hmong’s belief, particularly during their important events such as wedding feast, funeral, New Year holiday or naming ceremony for newborn baby *etc.* Hmong people usually use a white paper carved with many little holes that create special patterns. They believe that those patterns are the special codes of Hmong script that have been passed on from their ancestors. Then this devoted wish of having a writing system for Hmong people has now come true. To date, Hmong is one of the very few languages which has different writing systems at a time.

In China, in 1904, missionary Samuel Pollard, as first set his foot in Yunnan China had compiled a Hmong script which was then called the Hmong Pollard. Hmong people in Yunnan afterward learned and knew this kind of script, they wrote Christian Bible and Hymn in Hmong Pollard. From 1949 to 1954, Chinese Government released three sets of Hmong scripts which were developed based on Latin alphabet system in three regions, namely Guizhou Hmong, Hunan Hmong and Yunnan Hmong. These three writing systems are different in number of consonants, vowels and tones. Nowadays, in these areas, Hmong people are still using these scripts for writing.

In Laos, throughout 40 years from the 50s to 90s of the twentieth century, four Hmong writing systems were established. Specifically, the Hmong Txwj Zeb script was created in 1950, Hmong *Latin* script (1953), Hmong *Song Lu* (1959), Hmong *Tsuj Yig* (1997). Among these scripts, the Latin Hmong script to which the Hmong people often called as the International Hmong (the English name for this Hmong script is Romanized Popular Alphabet–RPA or Hmong RPA) is the most influential. Today, Hmong people in Laos, Thailand, US, Australia, Canada... have agreed to use the International Hmong writing system as standard syllable for transliteration (Nguyen, 2016). The International Hmong script is recorded based on the White Hmong (Hmong Đơ) dialects. As a consequence, they have used this Hmong script to create many cultural and media publications.

In United States in 1990 and in Thailand in 1991, there appeared *the Hmong pictograms as the patterns decorated on their costumes*. However, this pictogram–based script had no strong vitality and popularity in Hmong community.

In 1917 in Vietnam, priest Father M. Savina had compiled a Hmong phonetic script in populating the Protestantism in the Hmong living areas. Unfortunately, this script have been no longer used as there is almost none of Hmong person in Vietnam knows how to use this script. In 1961, the Government of Vietnam approved the Mèo (Miao) script–another so-called name of Hmong written language in Vietnam (Decree 206, 1961). Two authors, Van Chinh Nguyen and Thanh Phan had compiled this Hmong script based on the Latin characters, taking the Flower Hmong dialect (Hmong Lênh, Hmong Si) of Sa Pa (Lào Cai province) as standard. This Hmong script has been used for teaching in many Hmong living regions in Vietnam until now and was usually called as Vietnamese Hmong.

2.3 Results and Discussions

2.3.1 The literacy status of Hmong people in the surveying areas

The result in the Table 3 shows that if considering in term of quantity, the number of literate Hmong people (ability to read and to write with Hmong script) is quite high. In Tà Xùa, the percentage of literate Hmong people is 60,90 %, while in Sin Suối Hồ, this rate is even higher which is up to 92,72%. In term of the age, most of Hmong people that are able to use Hmong script are under 60; there is obviously no difference in term of gender between the number of men and women that know Hmong script. In terms of occupation variables, Hmong students have the highest literacy rate, then followed by public servants and finally those who are merchants and farmers. However,

if considering the literacy rate in term of religion, there is a very clear difference among people which are in different religions. Hmong people who are Protestants in Sin Suối Hồ have much higher literacy rate compared to non-religious Hmong in Tà Xùa. Table 6 shows that number of Hmong people who are illiterate in Hmong writing in Tà Xùa is 39,10%, while that number in Sin Suối Hồ is 7,28% and all of them are over the age of 60. It is worth noticing that despite many Hmong people do not know Hmong writing, but they are very fluent in oral communication in Hmong language. Many of those are shamans and priest in Hmong community. This means that they teach Hmong language to their descendants via oral communication.

Table 3: Study result on the number of literate Hmong people

Village	Number of people	Ratio (%)	Know Hmong script		Do not know Hmong script	
			Number of people	Percentage (%)	Number of people	Percentage (%)
Tà Xùa	110	100				
Sin Suối Hồ	110	100	102	92,72	8	7,28

2.3.2 Current status of using Regional Hmong and Vietnamese Hmong

The survey result shown in the Table 4 reveals that total number of people who know Hmong written language, the proportion of Hmong people who know each type of Hmong scripts has a large difference. For example, the number of literate Hmong people in Tà Xùa and Sin Suối Hồ who know “Regional Hmong” script takes a large percentage of 89,55% và 98,03%, respectively. In a contrary, the number of Hmong that know “Vietnamese Hmong” script is very low of 8,19 % và 2,73 %, respectively. It is worth mentioning that the Vietnamese Hmong script created in 1961 that was originally compiled based on phonetics of Flower Hmong (Hmong Lênh, Hmong Si), these Hmong people are also now living in Sin Suối Hồ. Thus, if assuming that the Vietnamese Hmong script are not popular in the Hmong ethnic community because of the phonetic difference between different Hmong groups is absolutely unconvincing in our opinion. Because today, Hmong people inhabiting in Sin Suối Hồ are Flower Hmong (Hmong Lênh, Hmong Si). Considering at certain aspect, one might probably think that they should have felt familiar with Vietnamese Hmong script which was originally based on their phonetics. However, the fact that they feel “alienated” with this Hmong script is so unexpected. Meanwhile, the Regional Hmong script (International Hmong) which was compiled based on the phonetics of White Hmong (Hmong Đơ), a different Hmong group, those are not inhabitants of these two regions indeed has been widely used here. Then the question is “why is there such a high number of the Hmong people that know and use that Regional Hmong script?” To answer this question, we need a further investigation. Is it because of a fact that Regional Hmong has many published journals and books, then many Hmong people can use it? From our fieldwork in the location, we realized that most of Hmong people know Regional Hmong script (International Hmong) by *self-learning* and *self-researching*. In this scenario, they will learn the language by methods in which a person with better Hmong written knowledge will teach those who knows little. And in turn, the person that knows very little Hmong script will teach those who do not know any Hmong word. In fact all of them have never participated in any official language class. By self-learning, Hmong people in Tà Xùa village where is not influenced from Protestant religion still has a rate of literacy up to 60,9%. In Sin Suối Hồ, a religious region where most of Hmong are Protestants to which learning Regional Hmong is a mandatory (to read and understand Protestant Bible), the rate of literacy in Regional Hmong occupies 92,72% which is of course understandable. The above analysis from our data has shown different aspects of the whole picture in using different Hmong writing systems in Hmong ethnic community in the northwest region of Vietnam.

Table 4: Study result of Hmong who know all type of Hmong characters

Village	Total number knowing Hmong	Ratio (%)	Regional Hmong		Vietnamese Hmong	
			Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
Tà Xùa	67	100	60	89,55	7	10,45
Sin Suối Hồ	102	100	100	98,03	2	1,97

2.3.3 The purpose of learning Hmong script

The study result shown in the Table 5 on the purpose of using Hmong script reveals that all Hmong people in Tà Xùa and Sin Suối Hồ use Hmong script for communicating purposes (for sending message) and entertainment (for watching movies and films) with 100% of people in both locations. On the other hands, they use the Hmong script for reading and writing books with lowest rate of 10% and 1% in Tà Xùa and Sin Suối Hồ, respectively. Particularly in Sin Suối Hồ, because of the need in reading and understanding the Protestant Bible, it is a compulsory requirement for the believers to learn Hmong script. For this purpose, all people here want to learn Hmong written language. From this aspect, one can see that Hmong writing system together with its speaking language are very important tools to connect the individuals inside the Hmong community, especially in term of their religion, which help them protect, preserve and pass on their cultural and spiritual values as well as connect individuals in a community.

Table 5: Study on the purpose of Hmong people in learning Hmong script

Purpose of using Hmong script			To write a letter	To send message	Watch TV and video	To sing <i>karaoke</i>	To read books and magazines	To write papers	To read Protestant Bible
Tà Xùa	Number of people	67	5	67	67	38	6	0	0
	Ratio (%)	100	7,46	100	100	56,71	8,95	0,00	0,00
Sin Suối Hồ	Number of people	102	8	102	102	89	15	2	102
	Ratio (%)	100	7,84	100	100	87,25	14,70	1,96	100

2.3.4 The attitudes of Hmong people in leaning Hmong script

Now let take a look at the data shown in the Table 6 which reveals that the number of Hmong people that like learning Hmong script occupies a high rate of 91,81% in Tà Xùa and 97,27% in Sin Suối Hồ. On the other hand, those people who dislike learning Hmong script are almost elderly. They said that they are quite old to learn how to write and to read Hmong script, thus they are not interested in learning. Otherwise, all the people who were questioned said that they want to learn Hmong and *quốc ngữ* script (official language of Vietnamese). To this desire, in our opinion, this is very legitimate and practical. The Hmong script in any type is an effective tool for the Hmong people to preserve their culture while “*quốc ngữ*” script is an important tool to help the Hmong integrate with the general development of the country and in addition with *Kinh* society (main ethnic group in Vietnam) in the main land. Our practical fieldwork study shows that Hmong people do not have stigmatized attitudes towards the different types of Hmong script. They believe that with any Hmong writing type, it only needs to be simple to learn, to remember and to use; it can be used to exchange information, their feelings and their love in the community. If one written language meets those requirements, then it can be considered as useful and valuable (the opinion of Ms. Thi My Giang, 28 years old in Sin Suối Hồ village). Actually, we believe such opinion on leaning Hmong script in Tà Xùa and Sin Suối Hồ comes from their love to their language. To some extent, such opinions may become suggestion in planning of the language policy and the cultural management for the Hmong people in Vietnam to find solutions that are suitable and effective in teaching and disseminating the Hmong script in the Tây Bắc, Vietnam.

Table 6: Study on the attitude of Hmong people with Hmong language

Villages	Number of people	Ratio (%)	Like learning		Do not like learning	
			Number of people	Ratio (%)	Number of people	Ratio (%)
Tà Xùa	110	100	101	91,81	9	8,19
Sin Suối Hồ	110	100	107	97,27	3	2,73

3. Conclusions

In summary, in the daily life of Hmong community in the northwestern region (Tây Bắc), Vietnam, they use two sets of Hmong scripts namely Vietnamese Hmong (released in 1961) and the Regional Hmong (imported from other Hmong communities outside of Vietnam). The similarity of these Hmong writing systems is that they use *Latin* characters to record the Hmong voices by different techniques. Nowadays both types of Hmong script are still being used in different regions at different levels depending closely on many factors such as religion, frequency of contacting with other individuals from other lands or with published Hmong written books and magazines or by *self-learning* method among Hmong individuals in each community. In addition, Hmong people also contact quite often with the Vietnamese Hmong script via the programs broadcasted from governmental and local television channels. The contingent of public servants who are Hmong and other ethnic personnel are making great efforts in studying Hmong script in order to obtain *Hmong language certificate* (Decree of Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2006) which is important so that it can be used to propagate and educate Hmong people with the governmental policies and documentary. On the other hands, these staffs can transfer new technology and engineered achievement through documents in Hmong language. However, Hmong people living in the Tây Bắc region, more specifically, those living in our survey area are standing on the brink of being illiteracy in Vietnamese Hmong, in a contrary they understand better and use more frequently the Regional Hmong. This paradox, according to our opinion, one should continue to study in order to find out a suitable solution for the problems in learning written Hmong.

Table 7: Questioning table used to interview

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you (Sir/Madame/Mister/Miss) understand any type of Hmong script? 2. Could you please read the following Hmong script? 3. What kind of Hmong script do you know? (The Vietnamese Hmong or the Regional Hmong (the International Hmong)? 4. For what purpose are you using Hmong script? 5. Do you have books or newspapers written by Hmong in your family? 6. Do you like learning Hmong script? 7. Why do you like learning Hmong script? 8. By which methods have you learned the Hmong script?

Table 8. The paragraph written in Vietnamese Hmong script used for the survey

<p>Cur tsêr nhaoz ntourv ntangr trôngz saz. Tsêr khoangz thaov haz lăngx nzas. Tsêr tuôr cxangx. Kraor yongz zênhv thaz kraor trôngx zaos muôz ntông uô. Tsêr vur vuôl, ndêx tsêr zaos têx tul ntông lux thaz khênhx, yangr puôv đrangr phaos thaz hur si. Cur tsêr hax muôx iz luz rour đêx cxiv thur chiz. Đêx tâu chu lour tul char đêx pêv kraor đêx lul. Cur luz tsêr tuz uô nêr lul lak, tangz tsênhv chuô yaz cha. Ndis lênhl tao vangx, tao tsêr muôx ntâu zangv ntông naox txir (Nguyen, 1996). (Lao Cai College of Education, Tài liệu học tiếng Mông, p.52)</p>

Table 9. Paragraph written in Regional Hmong (International Hmong) used to survey

Kuv lub tsev
Kuv lub tsev nyob puag saum toj roob siab. Kuv lub tsev dav thiab nyob laj cua heev, lub tsev yog tsev puab av, qhov rooj tsev yog muab ntoo ua. Saum qaum tsev vov vuas. Sab nraum tsev yog ib lub tiaj huv si thiab

muaj ib lub pas dej siv gach nkaig ua. Dej ntws raws lub raj puas pem hauv dej los. Kuv lub tsev twb ua tau ntev heev lawm tiam sis ntshia tseem zoo thiab tsiab heev. Nyob ib ncig kuv vaj tse yog txiv xyoob txiv ntoo.
(this paragraph was written by Thi My Giang, preschool teachers, Sin Suối Hồ village)

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