

Viet Kieu: Identity and adaptation processes of living
in the North east of Thailand

เหวียต เกี้ยว: อัตลักษณ์และกระบวนการปรับตัวในการดำเนินชีวิตในภาคอีสาน

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Abstract

This research was aimed to study the history and background of Viet Kieu people in the north east of Thailand, current conditions and problems with the way of life in Viet Kieu communities and study the identity and adaptation processes of Viet Kieu people in Isan. Data were collected by survey, observation, interview and focus group discussion. According to the results, Vietnamese immigrants who have been living in the northeast of Thailand for more than 100 years are called Viet Kieu. They dressed like the Chinese, spoke Vietnamese and believed in Buddhism, Christianity, spirits and supernatural phenomena. The conditions of life of Viet Kieu in the northeast of Thailand have changed due to economic and technological developments. Modern Viet Kieu could speak Thai-Isan, Central-Thai, Vietnamese and other languages. They dressed modernly in daily-life and dressed in Vietnamese national dress for special ceremonies or events. The beliefs and religion of Viet Kieu have changed over time. The modern Viet Kieu in the northeast of Thailand have changed their way of life in order to survive in different social cultures and traditions of the Thai-Isan region and to improve their quality of life and social status.

Keywords: Adaptation, culture, society, traditions, Viet Kieu

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีความมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาประวัติ และความเป็นมาของชาวเหวียด เกี่ยว ที่อาศัยอยู่ในภาคอีสาน สภาพปัจจุบันและปัญหาในการดำเนินชีวิตของชาวเหวียด เกี่ยว ในภาคอีสาน และศึกษาอัตลักษณ์และกระบวนการปรับตัวในการดำเนินชีวิตของชาวเหวียด เกี่ยว ในภาคอีสาน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลคือแบบสำรวจ แบบสังเกต แบบสัมภาษณ์ และแบบสนทนากลุ่ม ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ชาวเหวียดนามที่อาศัยอยู่ในภาคอีสานส่วนหนึ่งเป็นคนชาวเหวียด เกี่ยว ที่อพยพมานานกว่า 100 ปี นับถือศาสนาพุทธเป็นส่วนใหญ่ และบางกลุ่มนับถือศาสนาคริสต์ เชื่อในเรื่องผี วิญญาณ สิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์เหนือธรรมชาติ การแต่งกายคล้ายกับคนจีน ปัญหาที่พบคือวัฒนธรรมเริ่มสูญหายไปไม่มีผู้สืบทอด มีการจัดประเพณีเฉพาะกลุ่มของตนเอง สังคมและวัฒนธรรมเปลี่ยนไปทำให้รับประเพณีของชาติอื่นเข้ามาผสมกับประเพณีดั้งเดิม อัตลักษณ์และกระบวนการปรับตัวในการดำเนินชีวิตของชาวเหวียด เกี่ยว ในภาคอีสาน พบว่า ชาวเหวียด เกี่ยว ในภาคอีสานมีการปรับตัวในลักษณะของการตั้งถิ่นฐานบ้านเรือน ภาษา การแต่งกาย อาหาร ศาสนา ความเชื่อ ประเพณีและพิธีกรรม เพื่อการดำเนินชีวิตอยู่ในสังคมได้อย่างปกติสุข

คำสำคัญ : การปรับปรน, วัฒนธรรม, สังคม, ธรรมเนียม, เหวียด เกี่ยว

Introduction

The main types of Vietnamese immigrant in Thailand can be divided into two categories : political and religious refugees and prisoners of war. According to the historical evidence from during the reign of King Narai the Great, the Vietnamese settled in the Krungsri Ayutthaya region. The people in this so-called Kochinchina camp came from Annum, Tangkia and Kochinchina (Chanthawimol, 1998). During the reign of King Rama the 4th (1851-1868), 5,000 Vietnamese immigrated to Thailand as religious refugees. The immigrants traveled across

the sea from the south of Vietnam to Cambodia and the east of Thailand. Others traveled across the Chaopraya River to Bangkok, Autthaya and Nakhon Sawan. More immigrants traveled from Thanh Hua, Nghe An and Ha Tinh, cities in the north of Vietnam, through Laos and along the Mekong River to the north east of Thailand and lived on the banks of the Mekong River.

Viet Kieu refers to Vietnamese living outside of their country. The Viet Kieu immigrants in the northeast of Thailand adapted to harmonize with the Isan culture. Although many moved back to their homeland, they took back the Isan culture and traditions, for example Thai dress, food, Thai dance and Thai language (Sriphana, 2005). The lifestyle of the Viet Kieu in the northeast of Thailand has changed due to the changing economy and society (Atthanak, 2000). The new generation of Viet Kieu has grown up as Thai youngsters. They use Thai language and live their lives as Thai people. In 1992, after the announcement of recognized citizenship of Viet Kieu people in Thailand, the Viet Kieu community became a real part of the modern Thai era. Nevertheless, research has shown that most Viet Kieu “express a desire to travel back to reaffirm their ethnic links, as soon as they have the opportunity to do so.” (Nguyen and King, 1998). “It has become a fashion to criticize the study of culture and identity as rigid entities, while the increasing stress on subjectivity and agency has made identity seem ever more evolving and changing.” (Chan, 2005). Yet, given the need for the Viet Kieu to relocate and adapt to a new way of life, the researchers were interested in examining the current identity and adaptation process that they have undertaken in order to assimilate into modern Thai society. This investigation thus aims to

study the identity and cultural adaptation of Viet Kieu communities in the northeastern provinces of Isan.

Research methodology

This is a cultural qualitative research. Data were collected between July 2010 and December 2014 by documentary research, field study, observation, interview and focus group discussion. The researcher chose the research location with a purposive sampling technique with 5 criteria as follows:

1. The sample community should be home to Vietnamese immigrants.
2. The sample community should be in a municipality and there should be a high density population
3. The sample community should be conservative.
4. There should be interest and support for social and cultural activities in the sample community.
5. The sample community should be unique.

The sample areas were Viet Kieu communities in Mueang District, Udon Thani Province, Muang District, Nong Khai Province, Mueang District, Sakhon Nakorn Province and Mueang District, Nakorn Phanom Province. The sample population included 100 individuals, including 20 key informants, 60 casual informants and 20 general informants. The research tools were basic survey, interviews, observation and focus group discussions. Data were validated by triangulation and analyzed by descriptive analysis.

Results

History and background of Viet Kieu immigration and colonization in northeast Thailand

According to document research, the Vietnamese first immigrated to Thailand during the reign of King Taksin Maharaj (1770) due to the rebellion to overthrow the Nguyen brothers. In 1785, Aong Aeangchoon, a Vietnamese lord, immigrated to Thailand for political asylum (Chaichana, 1964). King Taksin Maharaj allowed the Vietnamese to settle in his kingdom.

During the reign of King Rama the IV (1851-1868) the Vietnamese immigrated to Thailand seeking political asylum. That was the first time that the Thai government paid attention to immigrants by providing them with habitation along the Maekong River in Nakhon Phanom and Sakhon Nakorn. During the reign of King Rama the 6th (1820 AD), the French occupied Vietnam as a colony and caused famine and starvation. The Vietnamese immigrated to Laos and the north-east of Thailand in Ubon Rathchathani, Nakorn Phanom, Sakon Nakorn, Udon Thani, Nong Khai and Sakhon Nakorn. The Vietnamese immigration continued until the early years of World War II (Champeesri, 1976).

Viet Kieu have lived for more than 100 years in Thailand. Most of them are Buddhist and some are Christian. The Viet Kieu adapted themselves to the Thai culture and society. The Viet Kieu in Isan or the north east of Thailand can be divided into two groups, old Viet Kieu (those living in Thailand since before World War II and young Viet Kieu (who immigrated to Thailand during World War II and could not migrate back to their country because of the Vietnam War).

For this study the researcher chose Viet Kieu communities in Udon Thani, Nong Khai, Sakhon Nakorn and Nakorn Phanom. Their traditional living conditions are detailed in the following table.

Table 1. Viet Kieu communities in the northeastern provinces of Isan

Identity		Details
Houses	Udon Thani Province	Usually build bamboo sheds or cabins and roofs from Lalang leaf. Bathrooms were built outside the house. Viet Kieu build ancestral shrines in the middle of the house.
	Nong Khai Province	Usually build brick houses
	Sakhon Nakorn Province	Usually build bamboo sheds or cabins, plastered walls with plaster and roofs with Lalang leaf. Bathrooms and kitchens were built outside the house.
	Nakhon Phanom Province	Single storey house, roof with roofing tiles.
Languages	Udon Thani Province	Vietnamese
	Nong Khai Province	
	Sakhon Nakorn Province	
	Nakhon Phanom Province	Vietnamese, Thai
Clothes	Udon Thani Province	The Vietnamese dress like the Chinese in daily life and “Ao Yai” dress in ceremonies.
	Nong Khai Province	
	Sakhon Nakorn Province	
	Nakhon Phanom Province	
Cuisine	Udon Thani Province	Viet Kieu people did not like spicy food and cooked with vegetables, beans, pork and chicken.
	Nong Khai Province	
	Sakhon Nakorn Province	Due to famine and starvation Viet Kieu in Sakhon Nakorn eat dog meat (Phillips, 2009)
	Nakhon Phanom Province	They often plant vegetables and raise pigs and chickens at home for food. In Nakhon Phanom they do not eat sticky rice.

Religion	Udon Thani Province	Buddhism, Christianity
	Nong Khai Province	
	Sakhon Nakorn Province	
	Nakhon Phanom Province	
Belief	Udon Thani Province	The Viet Kieu believe in the supernatural. They believe in amulets to bring luck and protect against evil. In addition, they also believe in the medium of Len Do.
	Nong Khai Province	
	Sakhon Nakorn Province	
	Nakhon Phanom Province	
Traditions and rituals	Udon Thani Province	Vietnamese new year, Kongtek ceremony, funeral
	Nong Khai Province	
	Sakhon Nakorn Province	Wedding ceremony, funeral
	Nakhon Phanom Province	

There are a number of areas of lifestyle in which the Viet Kieu communities in the provinces of Northeastern Isan share similarities. Most notably, the language, dress and religion are the same in each of the four provinces (with the exception of Thai spoken by the Viet Kieu of Nakhon Phanom Province. Other than these categories, there are similarities in two or three provinces for the remainder of the categories, most commonly Udon Thani and Nong Khai Province, largely due to their proximity. Present situation and problems in living of Viet kieu in the northeast of Thailand

The researcher compiled data about the present situation and problems in the lifestyles of Viet Kieu people in Isan. The results are presented in the following tables.

Table 2. Viet Kieu communities in Mueang District, Udon Thani Province

Identity	Present situation	Problems
Houses	Commercial buildings and modern homes	Traditional houses are less popular
Languages	Vietnamese, Thai, Thai-Isan, Chinese. Modern Viet Kieu do not speak Vietnamese	Modern Viet Kieu cannot speak Vietnamese
Clothes	Modern clothes and "Ao Yai" dress in ceremonies.	Traditional clothes are less popular. Modern Viet Kieu dress internationally, both in daily life and on special occasions.

Cuisine	Vietnamese, Thai, Thai-Isan, Chinese and western cuisine	Cuisine and eating style has changed according to era and cultural transmission
Religion	Buddhism, Christianity	Christians and Buddhists are explicitly separated
Belief	Believe in the supernatural	Supernatural things are unacceptable in the modern Viet Kieu era
The traditions and rituals	Vietnamese new year, Kongtek ceremony, funeral	Ceremonies held only by a small group of people. Traditional festivals are less popular due to western and Thai cultural transmissions

Table 3. Viet Kieu communities in Mueang District, Nong Khai Province.

Identities	Present situation	Problems
Houses	Commercial buildings and modern homes	Traditional houses are less popular.
Languages	Vietnamese, Thai, Thai-Isan, Chinese. Modern Viet Kieu do not speak Vietnamese	Modern Viet Kieu cannot speak Vietnamese
Clothes	Modern clothes and “Ao Yai” dress in ceremonies.	“Ao Yai” is used not only in rites but other traditional festival. Moreover, the modern “Ao Yai” is adapted to be more fashionable.
Cuisine	Vietnamese, Thai, Thai-Isan, Chinese and western cuisine	Changed according to era and cultural transmission
Religion	Buddhism, Christianity	Christians and Buddhists are explicitly separated according to the different beliefs and attitudes
Belief	Believe in the supernatural	Supernatural things are unacceptable in the modern Viet Kieu era
The traditions and rituals	Wedding ceremony, funeral held as western ceremonies	Ceremonies held only by a small group of people. Traditional festivals are less popular due to western and Thai cultural transmissions

Table 4. Viet Kieu communities in Mueang District, Sakhon Nakorn Province

Identity	Present situation	Problems
Houses	Commercial buildings and modern western homes	Traditional houses are less popular.
Languages	Vietnamese, Thai, Thai-Isan, Chinese. Modern Viet Kieu do not speak Vietnamese	Modern Viet Kieu cannot speak Vietnamese
Clothes	Modern clothes	Traditional clothes are less popular, "Ao Yai" is used only for rites
Cuisine	Vietnamese, Thai, Thai-Isan, Chinese and western cuisine	Changed according to era and cultural transmission
Religion	Buddhism, Christianity	Christians and Buddhists are explicitly separated according to the different beliefs and attitudes
Belief	Believe in the supernatural	Supernatural things are unacceptable in the modern Viet Kieu era
The traditions and rituals	Wedding ceremony, funeral held as western ceremonies	Ceremonies held only by a small group of people. Traditional festivals are less popular due to western and Thai cultural transmissions

Table 5. Viet Kieu communities in Mueang District, Nanorn Phanom Province

Identity	Present situation	Problems
Houses	Commercial buildings and modern western homes	The house area is limited as the houses have been converted into restaurants
Languages	Vietnamese, Thai, Thai-Isan, Chinese. Modern Viet Kieu do not speak Vietnamese	Modern Viet Kieu cannot speak Vietnamese
Clothes	Modern clothes and "Ao Yai" dress is adapted and redesign to be more fashionable.	Traditional national costume was modified to be more fashionable, leading to a lack of identity.

Cuisine	Vietnamese, Thai, Thai-Isan, Chinese and western cuisine	Changed according to era and cultural transmission
Religion	Buddhism, Christianity	Christians and Buddhists are explicitly separated according to the different beliefs and attitudes
Belief	Believe in the supernatural	Supernatural things are unacceptable in the modern Viet Kieu era
The traditions and rituals	Wedding ceremony, funeral held as western ceremonies	Ceremonies held only by a small group of people. Traditional festivals are less popular due to western and Thai cultural transmissions

Table 6. The identity and cultural adaptation of Viet Kieu communities in the northeast of Thailand

Identity	Details	Adaptation
Houses	Usually build bamboo sheds or cabins and roofs from Lalang leaf. Bathrooms were built outside the house. Viet Kieu build ancestral shrines in the middle of the house.	Commercial buildings and modern home
Languages	Vietnamese	Vietnamese, Thai, Thai-Isan, Chinese, English and French
Clothes	The Vietnamese dress like the Chinese in daily life and wear “Ao Yai” in ceremonies.	Modern “Ao Yai” is adapted to be more modern and fashionable.
Cuisine	Viet Kieu people do not like spicy food and cook with vegetables, beans, pork and chicken.	The modern Viet Kieu turn their knowledge in cuisine into careers
Religion	Buddhism, Christianity	
Belief	The Viet Kieu believe in the supernatural. They believe in amulets to bring luck and protect against evil. In addition, they also believe in the medium of Len Do.	Obey traditional Thai beliefs in Buddhism and Karma
The traditions and rituals	Vietnamese new year, Kongtek ceremony, funeral	The Viet Kieu hold grand celebrations on their important days and let other people join their festivals

Discussion

The Viet Kieu in the north east of Thailand can be divided into two groups, old Viet Kieu and those who immigrated during World War II. The old Viet Kieu lived in bamboo cabins or commercial buildings and dress like the Chinese. They can use both Vietnamese and Thai as their national languages. The Viet Kieu cuisine is mostly made from vegetables. The Viet Kieu believe in the supernatural. They believe in amulets that bring luck and protect against evil. In addition, they also believe in the medium of Len Do. This is related to the research of Atthanak (2000), which concerned Thai-Vietnamese life in Mukdahan Province. Atthanak found that the Vietnamese in Mukdahan could be divided into two groups: Vietnamese with Thai nationality and those who immigrated to Thailand during World War II. It is also related to the work of Phoungpak (1989), which showed that Thailand nationality law grants citizenship to children of Vietnamese immigrants who were born in the country. Some Vietnamese got certificates of alien registration without going through the process of government monitoring by breaching the law. Moreover, the Vietnamese used this breach of the law to facilitate their careers and businesses.

The results show that the modern Vietnamese communities face a loss of culture and traditions due to the lack of pride in their nationality. Vietnamese traditional cuisine, clothes, religion and faith has been changed and adapted to be more modern. This corresponds to the findings of Wansiri (1997). The Vietnamese in Thailand have adapted to Thai culture for example by building Thai-style houses, eating Thai cuisine and speaking the Thai language. Moreover they interweave their cultural and traditional ceremonies with Thai culture.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the investigation, the identity and cultural adaptation of Viet Kieu communities in the northeast of Thailand can be categorized in seven groups:

1) Houses - cabins have been adapted into modern buildings for both living and business

2) Languages - The old Viet Kieu speak only Vietnamese but these days modern Viet Kieu can use Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese and other languages.

3) Clothes - "Ao Yai" or national Vietnamese dress was used in traditional important rites or festivals in the past but nowadays the national clothes have been adapted and decorated in order to be used on more occasions.

4) Cuisine - The Viet Kieu do not like spicy food, so most of their national food is made from vegetables but after years of cultural transmission they have developed the variety of their national food to be more popular.

5) Religion - Viet Kieu in Thailand are both Buddhists and Christians.

6) Beliefs - The old Viet Kieu believe in the supernatural. They believe in amulets that bring luck and protect against evil. Nevertheless, the faith in supernatural things is unacceptable for modern Viet Kieu, since they believe in Karma and Buddhism.

7) Traditions and rituals - Viet Kieu have their own traditional celebrations that have been inherited over time but, due to cultural transmission, the ceremonies are usually held according to Thai traditions.

Suggestions

Thai people living abroad can use these

results as information on where and how to preserve traditional Thai culture. Local cultural centres should be set up to both document and preserve the rich history of the Viet Kieu presence in Thai communities. These centres could also act as physical reminders of traditional heritage and prevent the total assimilation of the rich Viet Kieu culture. Government departments can also use this study to support and solve immigration problems. Further research should study the conservation and inheritance of culture and traditions in other immigrant communities, study the effect of immigration on the local economies and culture of Thai communities, study the support of human rights for the immigrants and study the improvement of tourism support in immigrant communities.

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