

Cultural Identities in Multicultural Ethnic Societies in the Chiang Rai Special Border Economic Zone

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Abstract

This research aimed to study backgrounds and cultures of 10 ethnic groups living in Mae Sai District who are currently stakeholders in the Chiang Rai Special Border Economic Zone (CSBEZ), and to investigate their cultural identities and assimilation abilities under the multicultural ethnic societies openness policies of CSBEZ. The research tools consisted of participatory and non-participatory observation, focus group discussions, and interviews. The key informants were representatives of the 10 ethnic groups including elected and nonelected leaders, totally 19 persons for in-depth interview, and representatives of government and nongovernment agencies who were associated with these 10 ethnic groups, totally 22 persons for the focus group discussion.

Findings revealed that most of the ethnic groups originated in China and Myanmar except for the Tai Yuan group who were indigenous people living in Northern Thailand. Culturally, all ethnic groups have their own spoken language while some have their own written languages such as Tai Yai and Tai Lue. Importantly, all the ethnic groups have their own food culture and costumes both for daily life and for particular ritual ceremonies. However, there are less traditional houses of all groups due to dispersion of modernization from globalization and disrupted technology. The same as traditional epistemological perceptions for health care which are less preference than modern medical procedures. Most of them believe in Buddhism, while some have changed to Christianity. In terms of cultural tolerance, most of them received help from other ethnic group who previously lived in the communities. They show no noticeable religious discrimination and the atmosphere of tolerance for different cultures. This has resulted in harmony, cultural preservation, mutual respect, and good assimilation among the multicultural identity societies of the CSBEZ.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Ethnic Society, Multicultural Society, Chiang Rai Special Border Economic Zone (CSBEZ)

Introduction

Culture is a pattern of human life as well as a determinant of behavior or human conduct. Also, it is an output from human action in each society according to situations, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Different lifestyles bring different cultures to each society. The culture in each society has its own characteristics and identities that are different from other societies. They are the symbols of each ethnic group that outsiders can recognize including languages, costumes, and traditions (Satsanguan, 2000, pp. 42-43; Amornlertvit, 2000, pp. 66; & Athicomnanta, 2000, pp. 6)

Valipodom (1999, pp. 11-12) said that people with different ethnic backgrounds are socialized by initiating economic co-operation, which is an important foundation for social and cultural cohesion. Finally, assimilation between ethnicities who live together for a long time can result better assimilation. It appeared in different cities where so many people were together, so it was an era of ethnic dynamics that influenced the government and religious rights (Qadeer, 2014). When ethnic groups live according to their way of live, their cultural patterns are revealed in their particular identities. Every ethnic group defines their own ethnic identities according to their particular history and their epistemological thinking. Therefore, ethnicity is not a prefabricated thing fixed with a single brand. This deliberate choice to identify oneself with a particular group gives them maximum benefits (Santasombat, 2001, pp. 122-124).

Santasombat (2008, pp. 124) mentioned that people in their society and the outsiders assist in building social processes that help to determine their particular identity. When it was crystallized, specific characteristic might still exist, flow or transform on the basis of social relationships occurring with other people and different contexts.

Identity is a characteristic associated with one's biological self. The culture plays an important role in enlightening one's personality through beliefs, values, and worldviews at both the individual and group levels. Therefore, the term of true identity consists of the image of oneself, which is derived from social interaction and is understood both at our own level and in a related way to other persons in the society throughout the lives (Padungchevit, 2008, pp. 3-4). Other people could perceive or learn the meaning of uniqueness through the identity that its pattern of symbolic culture was holistic (Victor, 2013).

Mae Sai District, Chiang Rai Province is a cross-border town on the trade and war road from Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Keng Tung in Myanmar, and Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in China. When uncertain situation occurred in the other towns such as revolution, wars, and disasters; some groups of people who were living in the upper latitudes decided to migrate to Mae Sai District. Therefore, Mae Sai has become multiethnic society and a market of goods from South Asia, China, Myanmar, and Thailand. Most important, Mae Sai is going to be a part of the Special Border Economic Zone (SBEZ). This present study emphasized the cultural identities in multicultural ethnic societies in

the SBEZ, Mae Sai District, Chiang Rai Province in order to collect data including backgrounds, settlement patterns, and abilities to adapt and assimilate into new societies. Under multicultural ethnic societies, it is important for ethnic groups to keep their cultural identities before social and cultural influences change their traditional identities. Beneficiaries of the study would be the Ministry of Culture, government organizations as well as public and private sectors that work on ethnic issues. Results would also raise awareness and promote cultural identities which would lead to values preservation.

Objectives of the Research

The research aimed to gather background data about the culture of ethnic groups in Chiang Rai Special Border Economic Zone (CSBEZ), Mae Sai District, Chiang Rai Province to determine cultural assimilation under the multicultural ethnic society frameworks, and to explore the existence of cultural identity under the multicultural ethnic societies according to current trends.

Research Methodology

The research participants composed of two groups: 1) representatives from each of the ten ethnic groups living in ten villages in the CSBEZ, Mae Sai District, Chiang Rai Province including two local administrative organizations: three sub-district municipalities, and three sub-district administrative organizations, totally 19 persons; and 2) representatives of the sub-district municipalities, sub-district administrative, public sectors, and private sectors in Mae Sai District, totally 22 persons.

The research instruments for data collection consisted of participatory and non-participatory observation forms concerning behaviors, and cultural activities in each ethnic group; question guideline for informal interviews and in-depth interviews on context and situation, culture, multicultural societies, existence, and adjustment; and open ended questions for a group discussion to explore and recheck information of cultures, multicultural society, and opportunities to support activities of the 10 ethnic groups.

The construction and efficiency of research instruments were firstly creating research instruments based on literature reviews, concepts, theories, and facts about cultural identities and multicultural adaptability in ethnic societies according to the research framework, and using the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) for checking appropriateness by three experts in the fields of ethnic studies, cultures, multicultural societies, and social science.

Data collection: in the initial stage, it was reviewing the secondary sources of ten ethnic groups for not only obtaining data based on the research objectives, but completing, validating, and triangulating the research data by various instruments. Next, observing with participation and non-participation for ten ethnic communities in order to explore community conditions, culture and traditions, and eating meals. Also, researchers made an appointment with the communities before

visiting. In addition, performing formal and informal interviews for in-depth data collection from both formal and informal leaders, representatives of elders, representatives of each ethnic groups, and cultural stakeholders in various aspects for cultural information included background, settlement, and cultural identities of each ethnic group. Organizing the focus group discussions with the representatives of agencies and organizations which worked closely with the ethnic groups in order to collect information on cultural identities and assimilation adaptabilities. Finally, researchers summed up with the participants for examining the data accuracy, and providing additional suggestions for the completeness.

There are three steps for data analysis included data classification, content analysis, and information recheck. After collecting data from observation, interview, and group discussion, then categorizing data into themes according their backgrounds and the cultural specifics of each ethnic group, their ability to assimilate under the multicultural ethnic society framework of the Special Border Economic Zone (SBEZ), Mae Sai District. Researchers transcribed and analyzed data by adhering content analysis to fulfill the objectives and to answer the research questions. For information recheck, researchers triangulated data to check validity and accuracy. Both researchers and participants also did criticize and reflections on that data and provided suggestions for its clarity and completeness before reporting for the research results.

Results

1. Background and culture of ethnic groups in the Chiang Rai Special Border Economic Zone.

The findings revealed that among the ten ethnic groups, seven of them originated in China and migrated to Thailand. These groups included Dai Lue, Dai Ya, Dara-ang, Lua, Akha, Lahu and Chinese Yunnan. In terms of Tai Yai and Tai Kun, they originated in Myanmar, and the Tai Yuan previously occupied the Northern region of Thailand during the establishment of the Lanna Kingdom and before. Nine ethnic groups migrated to Mae Sai because of revolution, internal conflict, and needs for better lives. See table 1.

Table 1 Presenting Places of Origin, Reasons of Migration, and Places of Living

Ethnic Groups	Places of Origin	Reasons of Migration	Places of Living
1. Tai Yai	Keng Tung, Taunggyi, Hseni, and Hsipaw in Myanmar	Internal conflict in Myanmar, and economic depression	Ban Pha Taek, Moo 10, Wiang Phang Kham
2. Tai Kun	Keng Tung, Myanmar	Poor living condition, and internal conflict in Myanmar	Ban Pha Taek, Moo 10 Wiang Phang Kham
3. Dai Lue	Xishuangbanna, China	Revolution in China	Ban Pa Yang Chum, Moo 6, Mae Sai

Ethnic Groups	Places of Origin	Reasons of Migration	Places of Living
4. Dai Ya	Yunnan, China	Need of peacefully living, and freedom for believing in Christianity	Ban Nam Boe Khaw, Moo 6 and 10, Huay Khrai
5. Dara-ang	Xishuangbanna, China	Internal conflict in China	Ban Phrachao Thanchai, Moo 8, Pong Ngam
6. Lua	Xishuangbanna, China	Internal conflict in China, and need of peacefully living	Ban Huai Nam Rin, Moo 2, Wiang Phang Kham
7. Akha	Tibet, China	Need of land for good cultivation	Ban San Pa Sak, Moo 7, Pong Pha
8. Lahu	Tibet, China	Internal conflict in China	Ban Pha Hee, Moo 11, Pong Ngam
9. Chinese Yunnan	Yunnan, China	Revolution in China	Ban Pa Yang Chum, Moo 6, Mae Sai
10. Tai Yuan	Primitive of Lanna Kingdom including Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Nan, and Phrae in Thailand		Ban Muang Dang, Moo 8, Chang

Source: Summarized and synthesized by the researchers

Findings showed that those ten ethnic groups have their own spoken languages and seven groups have their written languages except Dai Ya, Dara-ang, and Lua. Also, each of those ethnic groups have their own food culture which is still practicing in their villages. They also have their own costumes, therapeutics, traditions, and music. In contrast, their housing structures styles and traditional medicine practices were hardly seen or else disappeared from their original architectural types. Since they had shifted from their tradition styles to modern styles. Concerning religious believes, the Akha and Lahu are changing from animism to Christianity. See table 2.

Table 2 Presenting Culture of the 10 Ethnic Groups

Ethnic Groups	Language		Food	Dress	House	Therapeutics	Religion	Tradition	Music
	Speak	Write							
1. Tai Yai	√	√	√	√	×	Herbs	Buddhist	√	Violine
2. Tai Kun	√	√	√	√	×	Herbs	Buddhist	√	Carabash oboe
3. Dai Lue	√	√	√	√	×	Herbs	Buddhist	√	Zheng dance
4. Dai Ya	√	×	√	√	×	Guza	Christian	√	Ting Tong
5. Dara-ang	√	×	√	√	×	Herbs	Buddhist	√	Phin, 3 metal strings

Ethnic Groups	Language		Food	Dress	House	Therapeutics	Religion	Tradition	Music
	Speak	Write							
6. Lua	√	×	√	√	×	Guza	Buddhist	√	Phin
7. Akha	√	√	√	√	√	Guza	Christian	√	Leaf
8. Lahu	√	√	√	√	√	Herbs	Christian	√	Drum hitting
9. Chinese Yunnan	√	√	√	√	×	Guza	Believe in gods	√	Lio dance
10. Tai Yuan	√	√	√	√	√	Herbs	Buddhist	√	Salo Seo Sung

Source: Summarized and synthesized by the researchers

2. Cultural assimilation under the multicultural ethnic societies according to current trends in the Chiang Rai Special Border Economic Zone.

The findings revealed that there were some ethnic groups such as Dai Ya and Yunnan Chinese migrated to Thailand with the help of other ethnic groups. For examples, Dai Ya migrated to Mae Sai with American Missionaries, and Yunnan Chinese moved here with Lua. Most of them got help from previous migrants who came here first for transportation and resettlement. There were more rounds of migration in each ethnic group. Majority of ethnic groups lived on the land occupied by a previous ethnic group as workers in the garden, then became part of that community as mentioned in Table 1, and lately became the land owners such as Tai Yai, Tai Kun, Dai Lue, Dara-ang, Lua, Akha, and Lahu. Others were able to find their own land which was not under the restrictions of the governments and built a temporary house with the bamboo before starting to be an employee in order to earn money for living and building a concrete house such as Dai Ya and Yunnan Chinese.

They served their communities as labours in farms, stores, and construction which met the needs of communities, so they benefited to local economics. Hence, those ethnic groups were able to adapt effectively to Thai values and religions. They were also tolerant to learn Thai for their careers, friendly, humble and respect others. These characteristics enable them to adjust well and accept among their communities and Thai people.

Finding showed that those ethnic groups shared similar cultural backgrounds and value systems such as life styles and religious beliefs. These make them live humorously and peacefully in the community. Also, they were willing to participate and cooperate with social activities for better understanding between the different culture and values. For example, they practice religious ceremonies, career learning, having inter-ethnic marriages, accepting other different languages, and learning the Thai language as a pathway for Thai citizenship. From visiting 10 ethnic groups, they showed some

similarity in foods, farm and fishery equipment, herbs, and Guza. These are the cultural assimilation and integration of cultural differences among people from different cultural background for harmony and happiness within the community.

3. Existence of cultural identities under the multicultural ethnic societies according to current trends in the Chiang Rai Special Border Economic Zone.

The most prominent ethnicity features of each ethnic group included the costumes, the languages, different types of food, and religious beliefs. Findings demonstrated that the ethnic cultures wanted to preserve and sustain their spoken and written languages, traditional housing, social rules, traditional folk crafts, and performing arts and dances. Findings also pointed out that governments play critical roles for cultural preservations of those ethnic groups in both policies and actions especially Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, and District Cultural Council should provide platform to present the ethnic culture to the public on important occasions including encourage the ethnic groups to dress their clothes to celebrate their traditions or at the temples, and widely. These will develop a sustainable restoration of ethnic culture and help to keep their culture a life.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research findings revealed that culture of ten ethnic groups in Mae Sai District, Chiang Rai Province are still in existence including languages, foods, dressing, housing, therapeutics, dominance in the group, belief and religion, customs, music, dance and singing and recreations; although, some aspects of cultures underwent few or much changes. For example: Gingara dance, in the past only showed in the famous traditions such as Poi Sang Long, but at present, it shows in any opening ceremony. Moreover, all ethnic groups continued to practice and revive their almost cultures through instructions. These cultures could bring them into a social space and live in the society with their own identity and increase acceptance. These findings were in lines with Santasombat (2001, pp. 122-124) who mentioned that when an ethnic group wanted to assimilate to a modern culture, they would use some characteristics of their cultures and traditions as weapons to fight or protect their benefits as in the case of Tai Ahom people who tried to revive their Tai ethnic identities in order to separate themselves from other ethnic groups.

In terms of cultural adaptation among the ten ethnic groups, the findings revealed that the key issues helping in adaptation are adjustment, religion, acceptance of new culture, work, Thai language learning, occupations, and friendship between each group. Also, interaction would be the way of gaining respectful personality, honoring others, and accepting differences. These findings were also associated with Adsakul (1999) who noted that Mon ethnicity in Ban Muang properly assimilated into Thai society because Mon and Thai people had positive relationships and accepted each other

without prejudices since in the past until the present. Similarly, Sripamorn (2005) mentioned that the factors affecting cultural assimilation of Chinese people and Northern Thai people in Chiang Mai were social and culture, economic, politics, and administration. Moreover, the study of Treeaekanukul and Wannasiri (2009) has shown that the cultural assimilation of Dai Ya who migrated to live in Thailand could rapidly assimilate with the cultures of Tai Yong dialect, Tai Lue dialect, and Northern Thai people because of analogues of language family and accents. This makes them understand each other well although there are some different words.

Another finding showed that dresses, languages, foods and customs associated with religion were the most prominent feature for ethnicities. These identities represented the image of each ethnic group, their personalities, and distinguished identities for people to recognize. This finding was in accordance with Padungchevit (2008, pp. 3-4) as stated that cultural identity was a characteristic associated with a concrescence. The culture played an important role in enlightening one's personality with cultural influences, beliefs, values, and worldviews at both the individual and group levels. Also, Santasombat (2008, pp. 124) noted that people in the society and the outsiders built social processes that created or endorsed the identity. The specific characteristic might still exist, flow or transform on the basis of social relationships occurring with other people and different contexts when it was crystallized. Last but not least, the inherited ethnic identities would be their social capital in balancing power within the economic zone and beyond.

Suggestions

1. Academic suggestions

1.1 The documentation about the history and culture of the ten ethnic groups should be considered for dissemination to local people systematically in order to have greater assess and to improve their better understanding of the ten ethnic groups in the CSBEZ.

1.2 Members of each ethnic group should realize and understand that cultural assimilation in the multicultural ethnic society context is vital for harmonization and peaceful adaptation in the CSBEZ.

1.3 The restoration of cultural identities campaign should be supported under the collaboration of the ten ethnic groups continuously and sustainably for cultural preservation and social capital inheritance.

2. Suggestions for implementation in the organizations

2.1 Ethnic organizations such as clubs, associations, or independent organizations should be organized with social and cultural activities in order to promote their cultures, values, and identities consciously and continuously.

2.2 Local Administrative Organization should supervise, plan, and allocate budgets to raise the standard of ethnic groups' living, income and organized cultural activities for cultural integration and dissemination of ethnic cultures to the other local and remote areas in order to promote better understand among the different cultures.

2.3 Public and private organizations working on ethnic groups issues should cooperate to restore cultural identities through tripartite participation in order to ensure continuity and co-operation in all aspects.

3. Suggestion for further work

3.1 Further research projects should be conducted on the patterns of cultural identity restoration of different ethnic groups which could be helpful in regenerating their identities.

3.2 Comparative social and cultural activities should be studied in order to promote cultural identity of different ethnic groups in areas with a multicultural society.

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