

Identities of Phuan Language and Hom Culture of Thung Hong Village, Phrae Province

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Abstract

This article aims to present the relationship between Thung Hong (Thai-Puan) language and Hom culture maintenance of Thung Hong village, regarded as the Thai-Phuan community of Phrae province. Language is one of the most significant markers of ethnic identification and it plays a crucial role not only in the external perception of an ethnic group by outsiders but also in the self-identification of an ethnic group. It symbolizes identities and it is used to signal identities by those who speak them. Northern Thai dialects and cultures are important since they are the sources of knowledge, culture, traditions, and local wisdom. More details of Hom culture and are presented in the introduction and passages below to show how Thung Hong (Thai-Phuan) language is related and linked in harmony with it.

Keywords: Phuan Language; Hom Culture; Thung Hong village; Culture Maintenance

Introduction

Every culture has its own unique patterns of behavior. These patterns of behavior have been applied to determine an individual's social role and the social role of others in order to understand and formulate self-concept. An individual's sense of identity

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consists of their view of themselves in comparison with others and the opinion they believe other people may have about them. The sense of identity enables an individual to categorize oneself into a group, to experience belonging to a group and, to identify oneself with members of the group.

Phuan language, Moh Hom indigo dye clothes, and the lifestyle of Thung Hong villagers are all rooted in Hom culture. This culture also originates from the unique traditions of Thung Hong village, unique cultures, and the local clothes of the Phuan people. According to the historical documents, “Tang Hong” is the former name of Tung Hong village. Tang means anvil and Hong is a Puan word meaning a place that is hollowed out, similar to a well-used anvil. The name comes from the fact that in the past Phuan people living in Tung Hong village were mostly blacksmiths who used their anvils in their daily life.

Thung Hong’s villagers have been producers of Moh Hom clothing, which is one of the identities of Phrae province. The word “Moh Hom” is a combination of the words “Moh” and “Hom”. These traditional clothes are regarded as the Thai version of blue jeans and denim since the distinctive deep blue color of the dye comes from indigo plants. The process of producing Moh Hom apparel is a specialty of the Phuan people, whose ancestors came from the Phuan kingdom in Laos. In addition, Phuan women were renowned for their expertise in the various stages involved in making garments including spinning, weaving, dyeing, and embroidery.

Moh Hom production process is the participatory economic self-reliance system of Thung Hong village since it relies on the participation of the members, consisting of Hom farmers and Hom manufacturers. Therefore, it reflects Phrae culture, tradition, and wisdom, considered “Hom culture”.

The Relationship between the Language and Culture

An understanding of the relationship between language and culture is important for both language learners and users since it reflects human beliefs, realities, and actions within a social community. Salzman (2001) claimed that comprehension of the surrounding culture is key to learning a language since it is related to all features of human life in society.

Language and culture have a complex, homologous relationship. Language is complexly intertwined with culture (they have evolved together, influencing one another in the process, ultimately shaping what it means to be human). According to Azizakhon (2022), culture, then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other. Guessabi (2013) pointed out that the totality of the messages we exchange with one another while speaking a given language constitutes a speech community, that is, the whole society understood from the point of view of speaking. He further explains that all children learn their language from their societies, and during the process of learning a language also learn their culture and develop their cognitive abilities.

Silverstein (2022) proposed that the communicative force of culture works not only in representing aspects of reality but also in connecting one context with another. That is, communication is not only the use of symbols that “stand for” beliefs, feelings, identities, or events, it is also a way of bringing beliefs, feelings, and identities into the present context. Language and culture are homologous mental realities. Cultural products are representations and interpretations of the world that must be communicated in order to be lived. Therefore, to speak is to assume a culture, and to know a culture is like knowing a language.

According to Ken Hale (2013), when a language loses, a piece of culture is also lost. It is because culture has a strong influence on the language. This idea is also supported by Salzmann (2018) who claimed that language is a key to the cultural past of a society and it is also a guide to social reality. Therefore, an appreciation for the relationship between language and culture can help to illuminate the diversity of views held toward the use of language.

It can be concluded that culture and language share human beliefs, realities, and actions within a social community. As a result, there is a relationship between culture and language.

Local Language maintenance

The term “language maintenance” is closely intertwined with the term “language shift” in the field of language contact research. The latter refers to the change of ethnic language use by migrants due to the influence of the mainstream language while the term “language maintenance” means the use of ethnic language in some or all aspects of life in the host society in spite of the influence of mainstream language (Hill, 1998). There are many factors relating to local language maintenance.

The first is the role of the family at home since the family has close control of the children in terms of communication and transmission of the community language. According to Clyne (2013), language is not going to survive another generation unless it is transmitted in the home, or within the family. Besides, the family environment is a motivating factor in the promotion of successful intergenerational maintenance of the community language.

Research has shown that the geographical concentration of community languages in a particular area is one of the factors which helps to maintain the local language. Fishman (2001) argued that community languages were better well-maintained by minority groups who were more concentrated within certain geographical areas than those that were more dispersed. Fishman (2001) pointed out that, “the smaller the size of a community, the stronger the threat of language shift and death”. Lee (2004) noted that the geographical concentration of the community in one area allows for the increase of daily interaction and use of the community language outside of the private domain, unlike the dispersed community where the community language was associated with the home domain only. In addition, Holmes (2013) found that Chinese, who were living in Chinatowns in the US, were more likely to maintain the Chinese language than those who had left the Chinatown areas.

The maintenance and retention of one’s identity play an important role in the maintenance of the local language. As pointed out by Fishman (1989), the minority language is an important tool for expressing cultural heritage and ethnic identity. Similarly, Cavallaro (2005) noted that language is the key factor representing ethnic identity in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Therefore, it seems that there is a strong connection between language and identity. The destruction of a language is the destruction of a rooted identity (Fishman,1989).

In addition, speakers' positive attitude towards community languages is regarded as a factor that can help to maintain the local language. The study by Al-Nahar (2009) investigated language maintenance among the Armenians of Jordan. The results indicated that the Armenians had positive attitudes towards the Armenian language since it was regarded as the most beautiful and useful language and it reflected Armenian identity. Similarly, Dweik et al. (2014) found that the Arabic-speaking community of Vancouver had positive attitudes towards learning and speaking the Arabic language. They believed that their language was the most prestigious language since it is the language of the holy Qur'an.

The use of a community language in education is a significant factor in local language maintenance since it contributes to the development and maintenance of a language. Rouchdy (2013) conducted the study of the Arabic language among Arab Americans. The results revealed the importance of teaching Arabic as a foreign language in some public schools as well as the increase in enrolments in Arabic classes at universities. The third factor was supported by the study of Gomaa (2011) on the maintenance and transmission of Egyptian Arabic. It was found that a higher educational level of the participants was among the essential factors for maintaining the Arabic language. He also pointed out that well-educated parents were more likely to be aware of the importance of Arabic for Egyptian and Islamic identity. Besides, well-educated parents had a positive attitude towards the maintenance of their community language.

To sum up, all the language maintenance factors mentioned in this section are seen to be essential for the retention and transmission of the local language when it is in constant contact with the majority language. The availability of some of these factors has a great impact on the intergenerational transmission of local languages. These factors seem to work better and are in favor of language maintenance when they are combined with each other. For instance, the role of the family at home is crucial for the maintenance of the community language but needs to be supported by other factors such as the role of the community.

Identity of Hom Culture

Hom culture is based on history, Phuan language, beliefs and festivals, Moh Hom indigo dye clothes, and the lifestyle of Thung Hong villagers which will be following described.

The history of Tung Hong village

Phuan community of Phrae province has unique settlement stories. The original inhabitants of Tung Hong village migrated from the city of Puan in Xieng Khoung province, in present-day Lao PDR, during the reign of King Taksin. Seventeen Phuan families were granted permission by the city governor to settle outside the city walls near the main horse gate. Later on, the Siamese army also captured Phuan people and moved them to the North of Phrae in the neighborhood of Wat Sawankhaniwet temple. As the area was not suitable for farming, they constructed their main temple further north. A second religious structure was subsequently created when the people found better land for constructing residential homes on the site now known as Thung Hong Village. The original name of the village is “Tang Hong”. Tang means anvil and Hong is a Tai Puan word meaning a place that is hollowed out, similar to a well-used anvil. The name refers to the fact that in the past the people here were mostly blacksmiths who used their anvils in their daily life. Later the name of the village was changed to Thung Hong. Phuan people living in Tung Hong village speak a dialect and hold a big festival called “Kam Fah” annually. Their traditional skills in Moh Hom garment production have brought revenues and fame to Phrae province.

Phuan Language of Tung Hong Village

Although both Lanna and Thai are used to communicate in daily life, people in Thung Hong village speak Phuan language, which is a member of the Tai language family. Phuan language used in daily communication is called “Pa Phuan” or “Vao Phuan”. Tung Hong villagers still maintain the identity of Phuan language in spite of being influenced by the central Thai language and Northern Thai language. It is because Phuan language represents the identity of Hom culture. The spoken language is used by most families in the community and it is especially popular among adults and the elderly.

For example, they use the word “Kaleu” which means “where” in English instead of “Tee Nai” (central Thai language) or “Tee Dai” (Northern Thai language). They use the word “Hong” which means the basin in English instead of using “Aang” (central Thai language). In addition, “Pai Ker” which means “Where are you going?” and “Ed Hung” which means “What are you doing?” are still used among Tung Hong villagers.

There is also a relationship between Phuan language and the processes of producing Moh Hom clothes of Tung Hong village. The word used for the first process is “Eed Fai”, which refers to harvesting cotton fruit. The cotton fruit is sundried in this process and its seeds are taken out. “Aloon” is a word for calling an instrument used for fluffing cotton. The cotton is fluffed until it resembled candy floss. After that, people use a tool called “La” to roll the fluffed cotton into long round sticks and twisted it to create yarn. The yarns would be used for weaving on the loom.

Tung Hong Village Beliefs and Festival

The most important Phuan tradition is the Kham Fa festival, a merit-making custom inherited from Xieng Khoung to worship the sky god Phaya Tan. This festival is organized annually and has been inherited from generation to generation. It also directly relates to villagers’ beliefs. They always pray for rainfall, the smooth passage of the seasons, and safety in their everyday lives.

According to Thung Hong history, Chao Chomphu (or King Chomphu), the ancestor of Phuan community, was one of the clever rulers who could solve emerging problems with brave and carefulness. He cultivated hardworking, patient, and harmonious people, including the right livelihood during his reign. In terms of religion, he built Buddhist temples, supported monks to further Dharma study, and set out Heet-Klong (a custom guideline for ruling the city or conventional practice in the community) as a practical model for people. Once, the King of Siam gave a royal command for Chao Chomphu and Phra Chao Vientiane (or King Vientiane) to raise an army to attack Luang Phrabang kingdom. Finally, they could defeat it successfully. As Chao Chomphu announced the independence of Phuan kingdom, Chao Non (or King Non) of Vientiane kingdom raised an army to attack Phuan city and successfully captured Chao Chomphu. During the ritual killing, the lightning

hit the killing spear used to kill Chao Chomphu. Suddenly, Vientiane soldiers were frightened and ran away. When Chao Non knew about the amazing incident, he thought that Chao Chomphu was a person with power of merit, so he allowed Chao Chomphu to rule Phuan kingdom.

According to this incident, Phuan people have given importance and respect to the sky. Therefore, Kham Fah festival, which means holding the sky, is organized and has been inherited from generation to generation. During Kham Fah festival, the villagers of Tung Hong village stop working to make merits and have fun together. It is believed that if anyone is not obedient and goes out to work, that person may be hit by lightning. Besides, during Kham Fah festival, the eldest member of each family also makes an announcement to the working animals and pets to encourage them to keep working hard and to reassure them that they will be cared for. Currently, people who live in nearby villages and individuals who believe in this tradition will also join the festival every year.

Moh Hom Indigo Dye Clothes

Moh Hom is a Lanna word (northern Thai). “Moh” means pot; “Hom” is the name of plant from which indigo is extracted. The plant’s scientific name is *Baphicananthus Cusia*. The art of Moh Hom garments production has been passed on in Phrae province since more than one hundred years ago. It is believed that Moh Hom came with the Phuan people who were forced to migrate to Phrae as prisoners of war and became labor slaves during the time referred to as “putting vegetables into the basket, putting slaves into town”, though some migrated voluntarily. In ancient times, Moh Hom cloths were used as wraps for traditional herbal compresses. Phuan people wore Moh Hom clothes as working clothes since they were dark colored. Men wore short-sleeved collarless Moh Hom shirts with buttons or strings, which was similar to a kind of Chinese shirts, together with long trousers and Pha Khao Ma (long multi-purposed cloth) tied to their waists. Women wore long-sleeved collarless buttoned-up blouse and tube skirt known as “Sin Lae” which had some red stripes at the foot of the black skirt.

Nowadays, Moh Hom clothes are an expression of the Phrae identity. The quality of the Moh Hom products from Tung Hong village is well accepted since they are usually

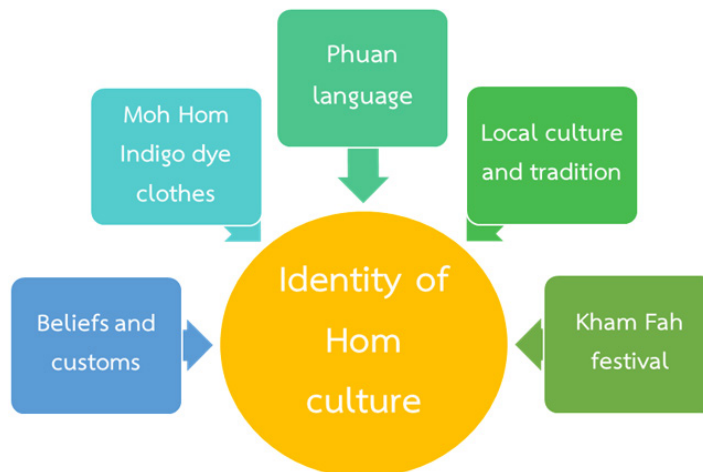
of good quality, durable in terms of fabric and dye, and easy to wear on different occasions.

Conclusion

Language and culture developed together and influenced each other as they evolved. When people interact with another language, it means that they are interacting with the culture that speaks the language. Phuan language, regarded as an asset of Phrae province's cultural identities, is a very unique dialect language spoken within Thung Hong village of Phrae province. It represents social values, perceptions, and identities of Hom culture. The relationship between Hom culture and Phuan language is the way Thung Hong villagers share human values, realities, and behaviors of Phuan social group. Therefore, they feel proud to celebrate their linguistic and cultural solidarity as language establishes the system of representation and transmission of cultures over the generations.

New Body of Knowledge

The following graph illustrates the elements of Hom culture's identity which facilitate Thung Hong villagers' common understandings, traditions, and values, all central to the identification of plans of action to improve well-being.



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