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CURRENT CULTURAL LIFESTYLE OF THE HMONG PEOPLE IN THE BORDER AREA OF CAO BANG PROVINCE, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The culture of ethnic minorities in general and the Hmong people in particular are an essential part of Vietnam's advanced culture, rich in ethnic characteristics. In the current process of international integration, the exchange and adaptation of cultural values from the outside world are both an objective necessity and a challenge. This process provides opportunities while, at the same time, posing challenges for preserving and promoting traditional cultural values. Additionally, the Hmong culture is also influenced by religious beliefs, specifically Protestantism, which accentuates cultural transformation. This has an impact on the stability and development of the cultural and social aspects, as well as the local and national security. Therefore, this article focuses on analyzing the current cultural lifestyle of the Hmong people in the border region of Cao Bang province. It aims to identify the issues that arise and propose solutions to preserve and promote the cultural values of this ethnic group under the influence of Protestantism. Simultaneously, it seeks to limit the emergence of negative factors contributing to the sustainable development of the border region of Cao Bang province.

KEYWORDS:

Current status, culture, Hmong people, border, Cao Bang province.



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1. Introduction

Culture of ethnic groups is an essential component of the multicultural national culture. Culture is both a common and a unique, distinctive feature of each ethnic group, each region. Simultaneously, culture is both sustainable and subject to continuous change. The culture of Vietnam's ethnic minorities in general, and the culture of the Hmong people in particular, follows these general developmental principles. In practice, cultural phenomena rarely emerge, develop, and change independently; they are often interconnected, forming a cultural complex. In our country, the intermingling of ethnic groups has led to the blending of cultures, making the culture of various ethnic groups richer and more diverse.

During the process of integration and development, one of the most fundamental and prominent challenges is how to preserve and promote the traditional cultural values of ethnic groups in a world full of complex changes. It's crucial to actively integrate without losing one's identity and modernize without sacrificing the unique cultural values of these ethnic groups. Therefore, researching the current status of the cultural life of ethnic groups is not only a matter of recognizing the importance of cultural heritage but also an urgent requirement of the national unity strategy in the period of industrialization, modernization, and integration in our country today. Cao Bang is a region with distinct political and cultural characteristics among the northern mountainous provinces, and it's also home to various ethnic groups, including the Hmong people living in remote, highland, and border areas with a rich cultural life. Additionally, the Hmong people in Cao Bang have been significantly influenced by Protestantism, resulting in significant changes in their traditional culture. This has had an impact on the stability and development of our country's cultural and social aspects, as well as national security and defense. Therefore, with the desire to contribute to a better understanding of the Hmong ethnic culture transformed by Protestantism, this article focuses on analyzing the current cultural life of the Hmong people today. The aim is to identify the issues at hand and suggest solutions for preserving and promoting the positive values of the Hmong culture in the current context, where *"culture becomes the spiritual foundation of society, both a goal and a driving force for the development of the economy and society."*

Article Structure: Following the introduction, the article will present the theoretical basis, including research methods, interdisciplinary approaches, and a focus on the cultural subject. This will help outline the research methods used and serve as the foundation for the content of the article. Next, the article will present the results regarding the current cultural lifestyle of the Hmong people, categorized into smaller segments to analyze material culture, social culture, spiritual culture, and a discussion section consisting of recommendations and solutions. Finally, the article will provide a conclusion and a list of references.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Approach of the Article

Firstly, the approach of interdisciplinary research: The research topic is the current cultural lifestyle of the Hmong people in the border area of Cao Bang province. Therefore, the approach of Ethnology/Anthropology is combined with other related scientific fields such as Cultural Studies, Sociology, Geography, etc., in this study to provide a comprehensive and multidimensional view of issues related to the topic.

Secondly, the approach from the perspective of cultural subjects and development: This research is approached from the viewpoint of cultural subjects, which are the people living in the research area. They have a profound understanding of their cultural practices and are directly affected

by cultural changes. The study assesses changes in their way of life, cultural traditions, and how they adapt to and interact with material, social, or spiritual cultural factors.

Thirdly, the approach based on the theory of cultural interaction: The theory of cultural interaction is rooted in the idea of cultural exchange and adaptation introduced by French ethnologists and Western anthropologists in the late 19th century, notably represented by Redfield (1934) and Broom (1954). This theory describes the direct and long-term contact between two different cultures. The result of this contact is the change or transformation of certain cultural elements of one or both cultures. Cultural interaction involves various processes, including diffusion, adaptive coping, social and cultural reorganization, and contact and interpretation of culture. The stronger assimilation of one group in contact with a weaker group leads to cultural hybridization. Throughout this process, there is a significant degree of cultural autonomy to preserve traditional cultural values. Cultural interaction is related to the interaction between two or more distinct groups, and this interaction affects cultural transformation.

2.2. Research Methods and Techniques Used in the Article

- *Literature Review:* Collecting and analyzing previous research works, reports, and relevant documents to understand the history and culture of the Hmong people, as well as the changes and external influences.

- *Ethnographic Fieldwork:*

+ *Direct Observation:* It involves going to the field, observing daily life, festivals, and cultural practices of the Hmong people, and recording information firsthand.

+ *In-depth Interview:* The plan is to conduct 50 in-depth interviews with representatives from various groups within the community, including the elderly, youth, women, men, local officials, and children. Particularly, 10 primary target groups will be selected, each consisting of 5 individuals, to ensure diversity and representation.

+ *Group Discussions:* There will be five group discussion sessions, each involving 8-10 participants, including both men and women from different age groups and economic backgrounds. The goal is to encourage community members to share their perspectives and experiences regarding current culture and the changes that have occurred.

- *Interview Questionnaire Design:* To design the interview questionnaire for the research on the 'Current Cultural Lifestyle of the Hmong People in the Border Area of Cao Bang Province,' we have identified several important factors to ensure that it efficiently and effectively collects the necessary information. Below is a description of the method for designing the interview questionnaire: The interview questionnaire will be meticulously designed to ensure it accurately and comprehensively reflects various aspects of the cultural lifestyle of the Hmong people in the border area of Cao Bang province. This design method will include the following steps.

+ *Defining Research Objectives:* Identifying specific objectives that we aim to achieve through the interviews, such as gaining an understanding of traditional customs, cultural realities, and the perspectives of the Hmong people.

+ *Defining the Research Subject:* Identifying the subjects we will interview, including (women, respected individuals, youth, and the elderly). This ensures diversity and richness in the collected information.

+ **Creating a List of Questions**": Constructing a list of specific and structured questions, ensuring that they are directly related to various cultural aspects. The questions should be developed to ensure the reflection and authenticity of the information.

+ **Using Supporting Materials**: Utilizing images, maps, charts, or other supporting materials to help the interviewees better understand issues related to the cultural lifestyle of the Hmong people.

+ **Assessment and Adjustment**": After completing the interview questionnaire, conducting a content check to ensure accuracy and completeness. Subsequently, adjusting the questionnaire based on feedback and assessment.

+ **Conducting Interviews**: Finally, the interview questionnaire will be used to conduct interviews with the research subjects following the planned research method. By adhering to the above steps and careful planning, we will have a high-quality interview questionnaire to collect essential information for the research topic.

- *Expert Method*: Contact and interview at least 5 experts in the fields of Ethnology, Cultural Studies, and Sociology to obtain opinions, assessments, and evaluations from a professional perspective.

- *Analysis, Comparison, and Synthesis of Materials Method*: Use statistical and data analysis software such as SPSS to analyze the collected data, emphasizing the detection of trends, causes, and effects of cultural changes.

Among these research methods, ethnographic fieldwork is a significant research method in the fields of Ethnology and Anthropology. Its notable features include:

Real-life Experience: Researchers directly live and participate in the daily life of a specific group of people or community to gain in-depth understanding of their culture, lifestyle, and beliefs.

Two-way Observation: Not limited to observation, researchers actively participate in the activities and rituals of the community, providing a more comprehensive perspective.

Living Data: Data collected through ethnographic fieldwork is often "living" data, meaning it is gathered directly from real-life situations, without the mediation or influence of third parties.

Combination of Data Collection Methods: Ethnographic fieldwork often combines multiple data collection methods, including interviews, observations, note-taking, and even audio or video recording.

Emphasis on Local Perspectives: This method focuses on understanding culture and life from the viewpoint of local people, rather than imposing an external perspective.

In-depth Analysis: Data collected through ethnographic fieldwork is typically analyzed in-depth, combining theory and reality to provide new and profound insights into culture. The results will be presented specifically in the subsequent article.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Overview of the Research Area

Cao Bang is a mountainous border province located in the northeastern part of Vietnam. It shares its northern and northeastern borders with the Guangxi Autonomous Region of China. To the west and southwest, it is adjacent to Ha Giang and Tuyen Quang provinces, while to the south, it borders Bac Kan and Lang Son provinces. The province covers a natural area of 6,724.72 square kilometers and has a long border of 333.125 kilometers with 634 border markers (469 main markers and 165 subsidiary markers). This border often follows natural boundaries such as rivers, streams, and mountain ridges. The residents on both sides of the border have had long-standing relationships. Cao Bang has two international border gates, namely Ta Lung and Tra Linh, as well as two main (bilateral) border gates, Soc Giang and Ly Van, along with numerous minor border gates and local markets. These border crossings facilitate cultural and economic exchanges between the people living along the border, including the Hmong community. Cao Bang is known for its rich cultural diversity, with various ethnic groups residing in the province, including the Tay, Nung, Hmong, Dao, Kinh, San Chay, Lo Lo, and Hoa. Among the province's population of 530,341 people, ethnic minorities make up a significant portion, totaling 503,167 individuals (as of 2021).

Ha Quang District, located in the northern part of Cao Bang province, covers a natural area of 810.96 square kilometers, with 74.871 kilometers of border roads running through its eight bordering communes. The district's population in 2019 was 59,467 people per square kilometer. Ha Quang is home to five different ethnic groups, including the Tay, Nung, Mong, Dao, and Kinh. This district also includes a Hmong population, with 4,734 individuals (as of 2021). The district has a national border gate, Soc Giang, which serves as a significant point for trade, interaction, and travel between the local population and neighboring China. Lung Nam is a border commune within Ha Quang District, with an area of 47.43 square kilometers and a border extending over 9.08 kilometers, adjacent to China. The commune consists of 12 hamlets with 627 households and a population of 2,848 people. Of these households, 238 are considered poor, accounting for 37.96%, and 180 are near-poor, accounting for 28.71%. The residents of Lung Nam are primarily from the Nung and Hmong ethnic groups, living together in this remote, mountainous area.

In the context of this research, our focus is on Lung Nam commune. This commune is one of the border areas that has maintained strong cross-border relationships for generations. The distinct cultural characteristics of the Hmong people are deeply rooted in this area, with a rich history of cultural connections. The Hmong people mainly reside in high mountainous regions with complex terrain and harsh climate conditions. Their isolated living conditions have allowed them to preserve their unique culture and ethnic identity over time.

3.2. Overview of the Hmong ethnic group

The Hmong people are one of the 53 ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, belonging to the Hmong-Dao language group. According to the 2019 Population and Housing Census, the Hmong population ranks 8th among the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, with 1,393,547 people. This ethnic community primarily resides in the northern mountainous regions of Vietnam, particularly in provinces such as Ha Giang, Lai Chau, Dien Bien, Lao Cai, Son La, Yen Bai, Cao Bang, Bac Kan, Tuyen Quang, spread across highland areas with elevations ranging from 800 to 1,700 meters.

In Cao Bang province alone, there are 61,759 Hmong people, constituting 11.65% of the total provincial population, and they are divided into three subgroups: Mong Hoa (Mong Lèn), Mong Đen (Mong Đu), and Mong Trắng (Mong Đâu). Cross-border ethnic and kinship relationships between Vietnam and China, including the Hmong people, have been maintained and developed. These

relationships are expressed through friendships, shared economic activities, common beliefs and religions, not only within the same ethnic group but also across different ethnicities on both sides of the border, both directly and indirectly. Since the early 1990s, as relations between Vietnam and China normalized, border areas have undergone significant changes in the lives of the border population, opening up new livelihood opportunities and cultural exchanges. However, in recent years, especially under the influence of border closures by the Chinese government due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been noticeable impacts on the lives of the people living on both sides of the border, including the Hmong people in Cao Bang province.

The Hmong people in Cao Bang have cultural, historical, and ethnic distribution characteristics that create ethnic relationships and kinship connections along the borderlines. Especially, they share common roots, language, customs, and traditions, and are mainly distributed in the geographical area that spans Cao Bang (Vietnam) and Guangxi (China). Therefore, in addition to their domestic ethnic relationships, the Hmong people in this region also have cross-border ethnic relationships originating from family ties, kinship, and further developing into lineage relationships, marriages, and various cultural and economic exchanges. Historically, people from various ethnic groups, including the Hmong, living on both sides of the Vietnam-China border in Cao Bang, especially in border villages and hamlets, have had long-standing ethnic and kinship relationships. These relationships include fostering brotherhood (*lão tông*), marriage, and other customs. As a result, during traditional ethnic holidays, New Year celebrations, the seventh lunar month festival, death anniversaries, and wedding ceremonies, people from both sides of the border often visit each other to exchange greetings and celebrate. After the Doi Moi (Renovation) period, the Hmong people in Cao Bang began to embrace Protestantism, and this strong influence of Protestantism led to significant changes in their traditional culture.

3.3. Current Cultural and Material Lifestyle of the Hmong People

3.3.1. The Status of Material Cultural Life

* Culinary Culture

Culinary culture is not just about satisfying hunger; it comes with an entire cultural background for the Hmong people. It encompasses their interaction with nature, their social behavior, and community cohesion. Typical Hmong dishes include "thắng cố" and "tiết canh," with special emphasis on "tiết canh gà" (chicken blood pudding). Hmong people often enjoy homemade corn wine. In the study area, the daily diet of Hmong families doesn't vary significantly in terms of ingredients and food preparation methods. However, a distinct feature of Hmong Protestant families is that they begin their meals with prayers, offering praise to God and expressing gratitude for the meal. Unlike traditional Hmong meals, those following Protestantism generally avoid alcohol consumption during meals, even on festive occasions. If alcohol is consumed, it is usually reserved for guests who do not follow Protestantism, while the Hmong maintain their traditional cultural practices. The practice of refraining from eating dog meat and tiết canh is well-followed by Hmong Protestants in the research area.

*Attire Culture:

There has been a transformation in Hmong attire, primarily due to the influence of the Kinh people when the Hmong migrated to the mountainous regions. However, among Hmong Protestants, there is a sense of pride and a commitment to preserving their traditional clothing. They often choose traditional clothing when participating in religious ceremonies and special events.

**Housing:*

For Hmong Protestants, there are instances where they have combined elements of modern housing with their traditional practices. This might involve the use of cement bricks and tiled roofs. The general layout of the houses for Hmong Protestants still follows the traditional model, with the primary difference being the absence of an ancestral altar in the central room. Building sturdy homes with modern materials is more common among Hmong Protestants compared to those who adhere to traditional cultural practices. They prefer a fusion of traditional Hmong architecture and Kinh-style construction. In terms of overall cleanliness, the homes of Hmong Protestants are well-maintained in the study area.

3.3.2. The current situation of socio-cultural life

** The traditional relationships of the Hmong people*

The traditional factors that constitute the strength of the Hmong people are primarily their ethnic consciousness, partly reflected in the traditional social structure with the interconnections of typical relationships such as family relationships, lineage relationships, and community relationships, with the distinct feature of family relationships dominated by the authority factor. The lineage is the foundation of traditional Hmong society, both in the past and the present. The relationships between lineages form a sense of community solidarity among the Hmong people. As such, the community relationships expressed through local or inter-regional Hmong organizations serve as a binding factor for their ethnic consciousness. This has created the strength of the community, allowing the Hmong people to survive and develop to this day, while preserving their unique cultural identity.

Family relationships, including those between spouses, siblings, and parents and children, create a strong bond, contributing to the establishment of a foundation for community cohesion, starting from blood ties to lineage relationships. It can be said that in the social structure of the Hmong people, which includes families, lineages, and village communities, families represent the core unit along with lineage organizations that play a role in strengthening the social structure of the Hmong people in a specific residential area. These organizations also have an outward focus, expanding interactions with members from different regions. Lineages act as connecting threads that go beyond the local context to strengthen relationships within the same ethnic group, contributing to the preservation of their cultural identity. It is the behaviors within the family, lineage, and village community of the Hmong people, linked to rituals, customs, and traditions, that have created a distinctive cultural feature of the Hmong people in Vietnam, particularly in Cao Bang province.

** Family relationships of the Hmong people*

The relationship between a husband and a wife is established on the basis of marriage, where a man and a woman commit to living together, sharing responsibilities and obligations towards each other and their children. A comparison of Hmong marriages according to the Lutheran faith in the research point out some fundamental differences and transformations

- In the first case, both the young man and the young woman are devout Protestants. To progress towards marriage, the young couple has engaged in a courtship, expressing mutual affection. According to Protestantism, when two individuals wish to marry, they must come together willingly, without any coercion. Based on this voluntary spirit, both parties share responsibility for their actions. This clearly demonstrates equality in marriage and the husband-wife relationship, where women have an active role in determining their fate.

Moreover, before entering married life, the young couple is taught and guided by the Bible. They must make a promise before God to love, bond, work, produce, and raise children together. In the marital relationship, the Bible emphasizes that the husband should be an ideal leader, loving, and faithful. The wife has the duty to reciprocate that love. The Protestant concept of marriage is one man, one woman, indissoluble. This is similar to the traditional Hmong culture, where they desire harmonious family life for the young couple. The difference lies in one side having the blessing of God and living according to biblical teachings, while the other side has the endorsement of ancestors and lineage. The traditional Hmong culture and Protestant culture each have their distinct ceremonies and create noticeable differences, particularly in wedding ceremonies. Another positive aspect of Protestantism in Hmong marital relationships is the requirement for newlyweds to have legal recognition, meaning they must register their marriage. This is an advantage of Protestantism because it consistently places demands on its followers to live in compliance with the law. This also serves to ensure the legal rights of Hmong women in cases of marital issues and asserts the position of Hmong women in society.

- In the second case, either the wife or the husband follows Protestantism. In this situation, the behavior within the marital relationship can differ significantly, leading to major conflicts, particularly regarding status. To move towards democracy and equality, Protestantism has established guidelines for marital relationships that reduce the traditional authority of the husband in the family (which contradicts the traditional Hmong culture). These guidelines include not using physical or verbal abuse towards the spouse, avoiding alcohol and tobacco, and emphasizing the importance of working diligently. These rules bring many benefits to Hmong women, relieving them of outdated and oppressive customs. By following Protestantism, Hmong women gain confidence in the struggle for gender equality and resistance against the constraints of conservative, patriarchal norms. However, if only one member of the family follows Protestantism and the other does not, it can lead to conflicts and disagreements in the marital relationship. In reality, the Protestant Hmong marital relationship, on one hand, brings positive changes in gender equality, promoting love, respect, and economic improvement through mutual cooperation. This contributes to social stability. On the other hand, having one spouse as a Protestant and the other not can lead to certain conflicts.

Family relationships among the Hmong people have undergone significant changes over time, with many of the strict rules and taboos gradually being eliminated. In the past, it was a tradition that daughters-in-law could not sit at the same table with their fathers-in-law, especially when there were guests. However, with the adoption of Protestantism, daughters-in-law can now sit and eat at the same table with their fathers-in-law and guests. While certain traditional hierarchies within the family are still maintained, equality among family members is increasingly emphasized and the imposition of strict rules is diminishing, particularly within Hmong families who follow Protestantism. Hmong Protestants are known for their independence, education, and the belief that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, as taught in the Bible. However, even in Hmong families following traditional beliefs, there have been changes in family dynamics due to the impact of societal development. The most notable changes include a reduction in rigid prohibitions and an improvement in family relationships. Sustainability within the family is continually emphasized. Families that follow Protestantism have contributed to making family relationships more modern and refined. Within these families, family members are treated as equals, individual freedoms are respected, and the self-determination of each person is valued. It's important to note the role of a third party in these relationships: God. In addition to family members' responsibilities and respect for hierarchical relationships, they also allocate a portion of their emotions and actions to God, with God overseeing and guiding their behavior. In cases where some family members follow Protestantism and others do not, conflicts and differences in

beliefs and practices can arise. Typically, this occurs when the second generation, the sons and daughters-in-law, embrace Protestantism, while the first generation, the parents, do not follow the faith. This situation can lead to family discord and disagreements, encompassing various aspects such as business decisions, treatment of daughters-in-law, and the execution of rituals related to life cycles. However, such cases are not very common, as households where one spouse follows the faith while the other does not often tend to separate.

** The Clan Relationships of Hmong people*

The relationships among members of Hmong clans with shared blood ties have undergone noticeable changes. The position and role of the clan, especially that of the clan leader, have significantly diminished. The influence and authority of the clan leader have faded, no longer dominating the community life of the clan. The role of the clan leader has been replaced by God and the pastor or group leader. Those who follow the faith within the clan no longer heed the guidance and requirements of the clan leader in organizing traditional rituals. Furthermore, the division between those who follow Protestantism and those who do not within the same clan is quite substantial. While members within the clan have tight bonds and established rules of conduct among themselves, following Protestantism can disrupt these established norms and lead to conflicts with other members of the clan. Those who follow Protestantism may be separated from the clan because they no longer adhere to the ethical standards and conduct of the clan, gradually losing their sense of heritage, ancestry, clan history, and traditional religious customs. Ultimately, they find themselves outside the cultural and religious activities of the clan.

** The social relationships of the Hmong people*

Following Protestantism also helps create strong bonds and mutual support, both in material and spiritual terms, within the community, and more broadly within the clan. This has given rise to a new community, the Hmong Protestant community. This community extends beyond clan and village boundaries, gradually forming a new communal unity whose strength in solidarity is no less than the traditional clan unity of the Hmong people. Particularly, for Hmong individuals who migrated freely, Protestantism serves as a means to reconnect with each other and provide mutual assistance, when the support from those of the same clan or lineage cannot be effectively realized. They help each other in production, share difficulties, provide encouragement, and offer both material and spiritual support. In traditional clan relationships, only those of the same clan and lineage can fully assist each other and host one another in their homes. However, according to the "faith," all Hmong people, regardless of their clans, are considered brothers and sisters, sharing the responsibility of caring for and assisting each other and opening their homes to each other. Those who follow the faith in the villages have a responsibility to help each other, especially on special occasions such as building new houses, weddings, and funerals. Additionally, in cases of emergencies such as house fires or accidents, Hmong Protestants who suffer misfortune receive help from fellow believers in neighboring villages. In fact, at its core, the influence of Protestantism has led to a division of the Hmong people within the same clan, lineage, and sub-clan into two distinct groups: those who follow Protestantism and those who adhere to traditional beliefs. Hmong Protestants often have limited interaction with those who follow traditional beliefs. They are less likely to participate in traditional rituals and ceremonies, especially those associated with traditional beliefs. The level of care and mutual support, both in material and spiritual aspects, among Hmong Protestants and non-Protestants within the same clan, especially during special occasions like births and weddings, has decreased in comparison to those who share the same religious beliefs. Moreover, there are cases where family relationships between

Hmong Protestants and non-Protestants have become more distant, as Hmong Protestants tend to recognize their kinship with others solely through their family names.

** The Role of Hmong Women*

The adoption of Protestantism also brings about changes in gender relations. Specifically, when following Protestantism, men are required to abstain from alcohol and tobacco, refrain from verbally abusing their wives and children, and ensure that their wives and children have time to rest and pray on Sundays. In Hmong families that follow Protestantism, the status of women is elevated and placed on equal footing with men. Women are not burdened with excessive labor without enjoyment, they are not responsible for managing all household matters, especially not the financial burdens associated with large expenses in traditional rituals or funeral ceremonies. In Protestantism, Hmong women are affirmed in their societal roles and are encouraged to participate in decision-making within the community, a privilege they were often excluded from in the past (Trần Thị Hồng Yến, 2016). Hmong women have the opportunity to communicate, express themselves within the community, which allows them to showcase their beauty and charm. They also become more diligent and skillful in their feminine roles. Nevertheless, Hmong women continue to display modesty and respect towards men and other family members, as this remains an integral part of their cultural identity.

** The Role of Respected Figures*

In Hmong society, there are individuals who hold significant roles within the community, such as clan leaders, spiritual leaders, shamans, community elders, and soothsayers. The introduction of Protestantism has given rise to conflicts between different generations, particularly between the younger and older generations. These conflicts are manifested through the traditional ceremonies of the Hmong people. With the introduction of Protestantism, the roles of village elders and clan leaders have diminished, or in some cases, vanished altogether, making way for a "new generation" of leaders who head Protestant congregations at the village level, such as pastors or evangelists. These active evangelists are predominantly young or middle-aged individuals, and the younger generation is particularly influenced by Protestantism. These individuals tend to overlook the importance of preserving traditional customs and values, which their ancestors wanted to pass down. The older generation, village elders, and clan leaders are unable to protect and pass on the cultural heritage to the next generation as they once did.

3.3.3. The Current State of Cultural and Spiritual Life

** Hmong Spiritual Culture and Religion*

Due to the historical, cultural, and ethnic characteristics, the Hmong people living in the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam, including Cao Bang, have a rich spiritual life with various forms of worship related to animistic beliefs, which have been deeply ingrained for a long time. The traditional spiritual and religious beliefs of the Hmong people encompass their beliefs about the universe, ideas about the soul, conceptions of different spirits, various forms of worship, and agricultural rituals. The act of ancestor worship, from a cultural and moral perspective, still holds significance in preserving and nurturing the distinct cultural heritage of the Hmong people and reinforcing their community consciousness. However, in traditional Hmong rituals, one can observe numerous elaborate and often costly customs and ceremonies, with some rituals being cumbersome and difficult, and others carrying a strong sense of superstition that no longer aligns with the modern way of life. Notably, the intricacy and resource-intensiveness of these rituals, in terms of effort, time,

and money, stand out. Under the influence of various factors, both internal elements such as the psychological mindset of the Hmong people and the gradual erosion of the credibility of traditional beliefs, as well as external factors including globalization, the advancement of science, and exposure to new ideologies, such as Protestantism (specifically, the Hmong's adoption of Protestantism), have brought about certain transformations and changes in the traditional religious beliefs of the Hmong. These changes are particularly evident in the religious practices related to wedding ceremonies, funerals, housewarming events, and more. Concerning the traditional social structures of the Hmong people, there have been gradual changes due to the growing influence of Protestantism and the subsequent adoption of religious laws. Traditional Hmong society has had specific, strict conventions and customary practices, which are binding and mandatory for all members of the community, contributing to the establishment of a sustainable structure that fosters community cohesion. Nonetheless, under the current developments and modernization in society, the increased openness to the outside world, scientific progress, and especially the emergence of Protestant faith, many Hmong individuals have adhered to and voluntarily followed the religious laws in place of the traditional customs and conventions. Each religious denomination has established a comprehensive religious system with precise regulations governing the behaviors and conduct of its believers, who are adherents of Protestantism. The strict adherence to these religious laws arises from the faith of the followers. Hmong Protestants believe that by emulating the example of God, loving God, doing good deeds, and refraining from evil actions, they will receive God's grace and, upon death, ascend to Heaven with God. This religious faith has adjusted the behavior of the believers and guided them to adhere to the stipulations of the faith more conscientiously. Traditional life cycle ceremonies, such as births, weddings, funerals, and house construction, which had unique characteristics in each Hmong clan and region, have been replaced with uniform religious rituals due to the influence of Protestantism. For example:

The Hmong people have transitioned from worshipping multiple deities to monotheistic worship. This shift marks the first noticeable change in their beliefs and religious practices, as they've moved from believing in and worshipping various spirits to solely believing in and worshipping God, particularly Jesus Christ. The Hmong's cultural adaptation to Protestantism presents a stark contrast with their traditional Hmong culture, where they held beliefs in both God and spirits. This transformation in belief systems has influenced different approaches to religious rituals and behaviors. In Protestantism, the Hmong's perception of the soul has evolved. They now believe that when a person passes away, their soul goes to be with God, under His protection. This shift in belief has led to the abandonment of ancestor worship practices, which were replaced by prayer rituals in line with Protestant customs. Furthermore, the belief in various spirits and ancestral worship, which was once prevalent among the Hmong people, is no longer practiced by those following Hmong Protestantism. This transition signifies a change from polytheistic and animistic beliefs to monotheistic religious worship, resulting in a transformation from infrequent and irregular religious practices to more structured, regular rituals with specific guidelines. The transition is also reflected in the alteration of spiritual activities from the Hmong tradition to Protestant ceremonies.

Presently, traditional festivals and celebrations have been replaced by collective prayer sessions held at specific locations, such as the house of a religious leader, a prayer house, or a community member's house. The significant religious holidays and activities have taken precedence. While traditional festivals still preserve the cultural values of families, clans, and communities, they require significant financial investment. Many individuals reluctantly participate in these events, often resorting to borrowing money to cover the expenses, as these traditional ceremonies adhere to elaborate customs. In contrast, the Hmong people who follow Protestantism typically abstain from

participating in traditional ceremonies and cultural practices of their families, clans, and communities. Following Protestantism, they focus on their faith in God, rejecting belief in spirits, which has resulted in minimal or non-participation in traditional festivals (Tran Thi Mai Lan, 2014). This has created a gap between those who follow Protestantism and those who do not, affecting their relationships.

Moreover, the customary rules of clans and villages have been replaced by religious laws. Traditional Hmong society had well-defined, strict conventions and customs that were both explicit and binding, ensuring that all individuals adhered to these customs, thereby contributing to a sustainable framework that promoted community cohesion. However, under the influence of modern society, increased exposure to the external world, developments in science and technology, and especially through the adoption of Protestantism, many Hmong people have voluntarily followed religious laws instead of traditional conventions and customs. Each religious denomination has established a comprehensive system of religious laws with precise regulations governing the actions and behaviors of its adherents. Those who follow a religious faith adhere to these laws willingly. The strict compliance with religious laws stems from the faith of the followers, with Hmong Protestants believing that by following the example of God, loving God, performing good deeds, and refraining from evil, they will receive God's grace. When they pass away, they expect to ascend to Heaven with God. This religious faith regulates the behavior of the faithful and encourages them to adhere to the religious stipulations diligently.

Traditional life-cycle ceremonies, including birth, marriage, funeral, and house construction rituals, which previously had distinct features based on clan and regional customs, have been replaced with uniform religious rituals due to the influence of Protestantism.

** Changes in Wedding Customs*

Hmong people have embraced modern concepts of marriage influenced by the Hmong Protestant faith, resulting in simpler and less costly wedding ceremonies. Notably, Hmong Protestants have abandoned polygamous marriages and now strictly adhere to monogamy. Wedding ceremonies include both civil registration, recognized by the authorities, and religious rituals. Religious ceremonies are conducted in a church or, if not available, at a prayer house or another family's home where the congregation gathers. This religious ceremony is believed to receive God's approval.

The traditional Hmong and Hmong Protestant wedding customs have fundamental differences, one being elaborate and costly, while the other is simple and economical. The crucial distinction lies in the realm of beliefs and religion. However, both sides emphasize the importance of building a happy and sustainable family with adequate living conditions and raising children to adulthood.

** Changes in Funeral Rituals*

When a Hmong family experiences a death, they notify the group leader and inform the community, who then form committees, such as the funeral committee, food committee, and secretariat, to coordinate the funeral proceedings. The funeral committee typically consists of a pastor or group leader and a choir responsible for singing hymns, aiding the grieving family, and conducting prayer ceremonies. Protestant funeral ceremonies are typically completed within two days, unless relatives from afar are en route to attend the funeral. In the case of Protestant burials, there is no requirement to select specific dates and times; the primary concern is ensuring cleanliness. There is no need to conduct traditional customs, such as guiding the deceased or warding off spirits.

Consequently, the practice of moving the deceased's coffin from inside the house to an open area has been eliminated, as well as other rituals related to three days of worship, offerings to spirits, and more. Hmong Protestants strictly adhere to the Bible's guidelines.

** Hmong Way of Life and Culture*

Hmong people who follow Protestantism have incorporated values such as charity, compassion, integrity, and righteousness into their way of life, influenced by their religious beliefs. These values are part of the religious teachings that guide how individuals should eat, behave, and interact with others. The impact of Protestantism on Hmong culture is evident through the cultivation of virtues and the elimination of outdated customs and superstitions. The adoption of Protestant doctrines has transformed the lives of its followers, meeting their spiritual needs and offering the prospect of a better life. Protestant commandments have been applied to improve individual morality and help the Hmong people reduce the burden of obsolete customs in organizing funerals, weddings, and healing practices. Religious community activities have attracted a wide audience, particularly the youth and women. Families that follow Protestantism ensure their children receive an education. Young people have refrained from cultivating and using opium, and substance abuse has significantly diminished. Additionally, youth and young men have ceased to engage in alcohol abuse and have embraced a more loving and respectful approach towards their wives, unlike the past. All these positive changes have led to the attraction of a portion of the Hmong population to Protestantism and have enabled Protestantism to coexist among the Hmong people.

3.4. Discussion

3.4.1. Some issues raised

First, urban planning and new construction in residential areas have changed and disrupted traditional spaces, altering and breaking the cultural community spaces of the ethnic group with a long history of formation and development. These changes have disrupted village and community relationships, social cohesion, and family lines, leading to the disappearance or distortion of customs and traditions of the Hmong people. Traditional cultural values have thus been gradually fading away.

Second, in the context of international integration and rapid development in all areas, the cultural life of ethnic minority and mountainous regions has shown brilliance by transcending regional boundaries to open up to integration. This creates opportunities for ethnic minorities to spread their valuable cultural values beyond national borders, contributing to asserting the vitality, identity, and cultural values of the ethnic culture. However, under the influence of modern socio-economic life, cultural intrusion, and changes in religious beliefs have become increasingly strong, putting the cultural identity of the Hmong and many other ethnic groups at risk (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2014).

Third, despite the changes and cultural transformations, the Hmong people, in general, have preserved their cultural identity in their daily lives. Folk stories, folk songs, and folk dances still exist in the consciousness of the people, and many customs and traditions are still maintained. The cultural and spiritual life, as well as the access to information for the people, have improved. Cultural activities have expanded towards integration. However, young people often admire cultural values from outside their community and show indifference to the traditional cultural values of their own ethnicity. Some community cultural values, such as folk songs, folk dances, and various musical instruments, are now being presented in new spaces, blending with the cultural values of other ethnic groups, resulting in changes in rhythm and ethos. The strong influence of modern life is eroding some of the cultural heritage of the Hmong people. Some customs and traditions with the long-standing

beauty of the community are being distorted and no longer in line with the traditional cultural identity, such as the customs of "capturing wives" and "eloping" among the Hmong people. Some traditional festivals and beautiful customs sometimes only exist in the memories of a few artisans, village elders, and community leaders.

Fourth, the process of applying scientific and technological achievements in ethnic minority and mountainous regions has significantly impacted the awareness of the Hmong people, changing their habits and attitudes in daily life. This is a positive change for the production culture of ethnic minorities. They have developed effective methods for agriculture, including farming, orchards, industrial crops, and fruit trees. As a result, their quality of life has improved, and their livelihoods are more secure. However, this transformation has also made some Hmong people more dependent and passive. They wait for government support for production and buy ready-made clothing instead of traditional attire. They are becoming accustomed to the lifestyle of the lowlands and are undervaluing their indigenous knowledge. In particular, the Hmong language and script, which are among the symbolic elements of their cultural heritage, are gradually disappearing.

The current situation shows that cultural policies in ethnic minority areas in general and among the Hmong people in the border province of Cao Bang, in particular, have not met the demands and requirements. In the implementation of these policies, certain areas of activity have not been specifically defined and remain heavy on principles. For example, policies regarding cultural and information officers in particularly difficult regions, policies for preserving and promoting the language and script of ethnic minorities in cultural and information activities, and policies for artisans who make significant contributions to the preservation and promotion of ethnic culture. Cultural policies in ethnic minority areas, in general, lack a systematic approach, some are not feasible, or they are only implemented in specific locations for a limited time, resulting in limited effectiveness. Investment activities, the level of investment, and investment mechanisms for the culture of ethnic minorities tend to be crisis-oriented or experimental, which limits their widespread impact and sustainability. The investment ratio for the preservation of the culture of ethnic minorities is still modest.

3.4.2. Recommended Solutions

Firstly, raising the awareness of the party committees, authorities at all levels, political and social organizations to consider the preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage of the Hmong people, and ethnic cultures in general, as the responsibility of the entire society. Strengthening propaganda and education to enhance the awareness of the Hmong people, making them proud and connected to their heritage, actively and consciously engaging in the conservation and promotion of their ethnic cultural heritage.

Secondly, continue to supplement and amend policies for socio-economic development linked with the construction of the cultural life of ethnic minority communities, including the Hmong people. At the same time, there is a need to intensify the implementation of principles, policies, regimes, programs, projects for the efficient utilization of funding and investment in preserving, inheriting, and promoting the cultural heritage. This is not only about preserving valuable cultural assets but also a national security task in the face of the increasing influence of foreign religions and other intentions in border areas and among ethnic minority communities. Enhance the quality of the 'Whole People Unite to Build a Cultural Life' movement. Continue to invest in building cultural facilities at the grassroots level, connected with local historical and cultural relics. Increase the organization of cultural reading activities for the Hmong people, such as encouraging the establishment of private

libraries, community libraries, village bookshelves, and focusing on publications in the Hmong language. Create conditions for people to participate and play a leading role in building a new cultural life, contributing to improving the cultural enjoyment of the Hmong people.

Thirdly, enhance the organization of cultural and artistic activities serving ethnic minority communities, including the Hmong people, in remote and difficult areas, prioritizing border areas and particularly challenging regions. Recognize and support artisans and individuals with influence in the community who participate as pioneers in cultural and artistic clubs or create new cultural and artistic values to serve ethnic minority communities. The goal is to 'create a comprehensive cultural environment in families, schools, communities, party organizations, state institutions, social organizations, and businesses so that culture is truly a driving force and a breakthrough in economic, social development, and international integration.'

Fourthly, effectively carry out planning, training, development, and utilization of ethnic minority personnel, including the Hmong people. Special attention should be given to the cultural workforce. Grassroots officials, civil servants, and ethnic minority individuals play a vital role in the political system and are exemplary representatives in promoting the unity of Vietnam's ethnic communities. They directly contribute to implementing the Party's policies, the State's laws, and bringing them into the lives of various ethnic groups. Among these, preserving and promoting the traditional cultural values of ethnic minorities in general, and the Hmong culture in particular, is a practical and sustainable solution for harmonious economic and social development, enhancing the quality of people's lives.

4. Conclusion

The process of integration and globalization has affected all economic, social, and cultural aspects of various ethnic groups, including the Hmong people. Additionally, the culture of the Hmong people has been influenced by Protestantism, particularly the Protestant religion. Under the dual influence of these factors, the traditional culture of the Hmong people has undergone changes, and in some cases, fundamental transformations. This is evident in various aspects such as the traditional social structure involving family, lineage, and community; folk customs throughout the human life cycle; changes in religious beliefs, and customary practices. Notably, the aspects related to spiritual and religious beliefs have changed most rapidly, creating fundamental differences compared to the traditional practices. While some of these cultural changes have had positive outcomes, such as eliminating certain inappropriate customs and reducing social problems, these cultural transformations also come with specific limitations. They have eroded certain cultural features of the Hmong people, causing a loss of unity within families, lineages, and village communities. Therefore, the issues arising from the cultural transformation of the Hmong people due to the influence of Protestantism in the border region of Cao Bang province and across the country as a whole need to be objectively and carefully evaluated by relevant authorities. These issues require the appropriate handling by government authorities. This involves preserving and promoting the traditional cultural identity of the Hmong people while accepting and promoting the Protestant way of life, fostering harmonious relationships and fruitful interactions between the traditional Hmong culture and the Protestant way of life. This approach aims to not only preserve, build upon, and promote the valuable aspects of Hmong culture but also to ensure sustainable national development in this new era.

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