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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HMONG PROTESTANT COMMUNITY IN SUỐI VILLAGE OF VIETNAM'S NORTHERN HIGHLANDS

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On February 5, 2023, Suối village in Lai Châu, a northern border village of Vietnam, has been recognized as the most attractive community-based tourism area in ASEAN. Indeed, this village is situated amidst majestic natural scenery, inhabited by friendly, open-hearted Hmong people adhering to the Christian faith, who are adept at communication. Few are aware that the present-day beauty and vitality of Suối village have been revitalized from a community nearly depleted by long isolation, economic deprivation, and opium addiction. Studies explaining the changes among the newly-formed Protestant Hmong communities in northern highlands of Vietnam tend to emphasize the roles of Protestantism in the improvement of their living conditions. Our research, based on field data analysis spanning from 2018 to 2023 and through the lens of religious and developmental theories, underscores that the development of the Hmong Protestants in Suối village represent a successful combination of two main factors recognized as religion and state.

Keywords: Hmong Protestants; Northern highlands; Protestantism; Suối village; Vietnam

Introduction

On a summer day in 2023, we arrived at Suối, a village with the entire Hmong, in Lai Châu province of the northern mountainous region of Vietnam. It is situated at an elevation of 1500 meters above sea level, approximately 450 km away from Hanoi. The village has just been selected as a winner of ASEAN Community Tourism Awards in 2022 at the International Tourism Fair in Yogyakarta (Indonesia). Before this milestone, it was recognized by the People's Committee of Lai Châu as a community-based tourism village. Suối rests on the slope of a high mountain range, with interconnected wooden houses accessed through a network of winding narrow roads. Interspersed among the residential

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areas are small tropical forests, terraced rice fields, and beautiful gardens of orchards. Behind the village lie tall mountain ranges and waterfalls, while in front stretches a long valley, gazing towards the border with China, a mere 10 kilometers away. Various epithets have been employed to praise its beauty, one of which is “paradise in a sea of clouds”. In Suối village, the population remains exclusively Hmong to this day. As of 2023, 106 Hmong households adhere to Protestantism, representing around 71,6 % of the village’s total population [Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Sin Suối Hồ 2023]. While sipping coffee at a homestay following the community tourism model, we were intrigued by the Southern accent of the young proprietor. He recounted:

I’m from Saigon (Hồ Chí Minh city). My presence here was serendipitous. At the end of 2019, I came here alone for tourism. The initial impression was the breathtaking scenery. Stranded due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I stayed here longer than expected and thus gained a deeper understanding of the Hmong people and Protestantism here. They are truly hospitable, polite, and unassuming. I then fell in love with a Hmong girl in the village, proposed, and we got married. Our wedding even made headlines in the media and virtual social networks. Now, we have a lovely child. I have chosen to stay here permanently, engaging in community tourism with her.

Much like him, we outsiders from Hanoi are easily captivated by the abundant natural beauty and raw charm of Suối village upon the first encounter.

However, few witnessed Suối village before the 2000s when it was almost isolated from the world. Its inhabitants lived on the fringe of civilization, plagued by poverty, illiteracy and opium addiction for many years. Today, both roads leading to the village are adorned with local orchids, offering a year-round fresh, cool climate, picturesque natural landscapes, terraced rice fields, magnificent waterfalls, and the distinctive culture of the Hmong, attracting numerous domestic and international tourists. The economic livelihood of households has significantly improved. The number of well-constructed wooden houses, adorned with beautiful gate decorations, has been steadily increasing. At the village entrance stands the Church, where every weekend sees congregants dressed in traditional Hmong attire, holding Bibles upon their hands, singing hymns praising God.

Historically, the Hmong in Vietnam originate from South-West China. Some migrated to the northern highlands of Vietnam over 300 years ago. In these highlands, their traditional livelihood model revolves around shifting cultivation (swidden agriculture), migration, cattle farming, and self-sufficiency [Culas and Michaud 1997; Michaud 2020, 85; Vương Xuân Tình 2019, 70–72]. In Vietnam, the Hmong once cultivated opium as the crop which brought them regular cash income. When the government implemented its resettlement program for ethnic minorities starting from 1968, they were mobilized to settle in areas difficult for agriculture due to steep and rocky terrain, combined with water scarcity. During Vietnam’s difficult period from 1975 to 1986, inadequate infrastructure and the lack of transportation means limited the Hmong’s opportunities for interaction and exchange with the outside world. Residing in remote highland areas with challenging terrain and harsh weather conditions, deforestation, coupled with poverty and lagging development, alongside opium-related issues, have long been the external perceptions of the Hmong here [see: Ngô 2016, 6, 31]. This situation changed dramatically with the reception of Tin Lành (Protestantism) starting around the year 1987. When the faith spread among ethnic minority communities residing in the northern border region of Vietnam, it was quite successful among the Hmong, including those living in Suối village. The village is a typical case where religious faith, as one of the most important factors, has contributed to changing the fate of a community [see: Rumsby 2023, 71–78].

This article aims to describe and analyse the development of the Hmong Protestants in Suối village to contribute to understanding their nature as a new ethnic-religious community emerging in Vietnam over the past 30 years. However, we aim to demonstrate that

religion, here represented by Protestantism, is not the sole factor contributing to this success. The article is structured by providing an overview of the context of Suối village before and during the *Đổi mới* (Renovation) period, followed by an analysis of the development process of the Hmong Protestants living in this village. Through the lens of religious and developmental theories, we focus on analysing the roles of two main involved factors, including Protestantism and the state. We utilise data gathered through participant observation during field trips from 2018 to 2023. In-depth interviews and conversations were conducted with village leaders, the pastor of the Suối village Church, the Hmong Protestants and some people who involved in community tourism here. For research ethics reasons, we use a pseudonym for the village. All participants in the interviews willingly agreed to share information about themselves. While no one requested anonymity, we choose to use pseudonyms.

Scholarly Explanations of the Role of Protestantism in Ethnic Development

Since the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, amidst globalization and under pressure from powerful entities such as the state and the market, as well as from other ethnic minorities in the Southeast Asian region, segments of the Hmong have abandoned their traditional folk religion and ethnicity to embrace world religions. Especially as international evangelical Christian denominations (Protestantism) intensified their missionary efforts targeting ethnic minorities, preaching about the transformative power of God, promoting ethical living, and promising prosperity to those who believe in Him, surprisingly attracted many new believers. Missionary activities during this period have yielded unexpectedly successful results. Some studies have analysed the nature of this phenomenon, revealing that conversion is not simply a spontaneous movement, but behind it lie deeper causes related to politics, economics, society, culture, and religion [Tapp 1989; Salemink 2009; Ngô 2016; Hoang 2017; Bourdeaux 2019; Rumsby 2023]. Precisely, according to Nicholas Tapp, the medical and educational benefits were the “by-product” of the minorities’ conversion to the faith. He also indicates that “material and economic factors” have influenced significantly on the minority ethnic groups’ willingness to convert to Protestantism [Tapp 1989, 70–79].

The conversion of the Hmong specifically, and ethnic minorities in general, to Protestantism in certain areas of Asia including Vietnam, is explained as an attraction to both material and spiritual benefits [Tapp 1989, 71–72]; a rational response to enter into new relationships due to the strong economic and social changes and the loss of old structures [Zehner 1996, 306]; transcending difficulties and striving to adopt Western-style modernity [van der Veer 1996, 1–21]; adopting new religious identity and resisting the state and dominant culture [Saleminck 2009, 53]; seeking alternative paths to escape marginalization and reach to the new landscape of modernity [Ngô 2016, 9–10]; embracing alternative pathways to progress and modernity [Rumsby 2023, 166]. These explanations largely focus on issues directly related to the political, cultural, and religious responses of the Hmong in a context of intense change driven by state, market, modernization, and globalization pressures.

Research has also shown that economic development is one of the prominent impacts of Protestantism. From a classical economic theory perspective dating back to Max Weber, the ethical dimension of Protestantism was seen as a factor driving economic success in a capitalist manner. Some contemporary studies reaffirm the validity of this theory to some extent, although the manifestations are different from what was observed in Europe in the past. Large-scale data analysis by Fitzgerald (2015) showed that religion can boost GDP by increasing faith in a specific society. Bryan, Karlan, and Choi found a positive correlation between increased religious fervour and increased household income for a group of Filipino Christian believers over six months [Bryan, Choi, Karlan 2018]. Recent

calculations by Brian Grim (2021) have shown that religion, in general, significantly contributes to the GDP of the United States. Yet, the economic impact in non-Western societies is a topic less addressed, perhaps partly due to the diversity of Protestantism and the lack of locally grounded or comparative studies in Southeast Asia [Bourdeaux 2019, 83].

In Southeast Asia, the missionary works of Protestantism is motivated by aiding believers in overcoming poverty, and fostering development, thus emphasizing messages of prosperity [Tapp 1989, 70; Bourdeaux 2019, 87]. Following the Renovation period, Protestantism began to penetrate the northern mountainous regions of Vietnam around 1987 and attracted predominantly the Hmong [Nguyễn Văn Thắng 2009]. Due to missionary efforts by churches within and outside the country, there has been a wave of Hmong converting to Protestantism. Before 1986, in the northern mountainous regions, there was only one Christian association of the Red Dao people in Bắc Sơn district, Lạng Sơn province. Since 1987, there has been a segment of Hmong converting to Protestantism under the name Vàng Chử [Vương Duy Quang 2003; Nguyễn Văn Thắng 2009]. By 2019, the number of Hmong Protestants had increased to 270,000 people [Nguyễn Phú Lợi 2022, 234] out of a total Hmong population of 1,393,547, accounting for nearly 20 % [Vietnam General Statistics Office 2020, 43].

A number of works by domestic researchers, explaining the phenomenon of rapid development among ethnic minorities since the Renovation period, have highlighted the ways in which this faith has supported these groups in improving their living conditions. The presence of Protestantism is assessed to have had notable impacts on lives of the Hmong in both the material and spiritual aspects. Protestantism found its way into ethnic minority areas at the right time during the Vietnam's Renovation and world integration period. A portion of the Hmong has undergone profound changes in their perception, seeking means and strategies to improve their social status. Protestantism has proven useful for communities in changing their mindset and adopting lifestyles more compatible with the market economy [Nguyễn Khắc Đức 2015; Vũ Thị Thu Hà 2018, 107]. On one hand, by following Protestantism, believers receive some forms of support from pastors or congregations who can mobilize resources domestically and internationally. On the other hand, more importantly, adhering to the Bible and following God's teachings enables them to abandon supposedly outdated customs and practices that are often costly and wasteful, such as spirit worship for healing, prolonged mourning ceremonies, discarding habits of waste and laziness [Nguyễn Khắc Đức 2015; Nguyễn Quang Hưng 2015, 27–28; Lê Đình Lợi 2019; Hoàng Hữu Bình 2020, 158] as well as finding strength through health care, education, and connecting with Protestants from different ethnicities living in other countries. Protestants in Vietnam are described as becoming industrious, setting clear goals for increasing income, saving expenses, learning economic activities, increasing social capital [Hoàng Văn Chung and Trần Thị Phương Anh 2018, 67–68; Trần Thị Phương Anh 2020]. Therefore, the change includes both mindset and economic activities. Conversion, thus, reflects rational thinking, sensible choices among the few options available to believers for better economic performance [Trần Thị Phương Anh 2016].

As we can see, at least two factors have been identified by international and domestic researchers which play important roles in the development process of minor ethnic communities following Protestantism, including religion (missionaries, pastors) and local people (the converts who have strong motivation of change). However, the analysis and evaluation of the roles and contributions of these factors to development by researchers have certain limitations. Most of the aforementioned studies either overly emphasize the role of Protestantism as the major factor driving significant transformation and progress, or suggest that the proactive seeking, experimentation, and determination of the local people are decisive. Meanwhile, the role of the state contributing to the development of Protestant communities has not been fully and objectively assessed. We will demonstrate that this factor also plays a notable role in the coming session.

From Being at Risk of Withering away...

Since the late 19th century, opium cultivation for commercial purposes was prevalent among the Hmong in Vietnam [Michaud 2020, 75]. This lasted until 2000s. However, its aftermath resulted in widespread addiction among the cultivators. Most addicts did not want to work and all what they cared was satisfaction from taking opium through days and nights. When the government banned opium cultivation in 1993, along with the prohibition of deforestation for cultivation, the Hmong's economic livelihoods faced further challenges. Statistics indicated that the highland areas where ethnic minorities traditionally cultivated opium had the highest poverty rates compared to other regions nationwide [People's Police 2005]. It can be said that both opium cultivation and its eradication negatively impacted major aspects of the Hmong's lives in the northern mountainous region, including those living in Suối village.

Until late 1980s, the lives of the people in Suối village in terms of economy, culture, education, and healthcare were extremely difficult. Firstly, material and economic deprivation was caused by harsh natural conditions as well as the lack of infrastructure for trading with other regions. The traditional self-sufficient economic method based on cultivation of rice and corn, and animal husbandry only produced a very limited amount of food, not enough for the whole year, while there were hardly any other options for generating income. Villagers recalled with us that in the past, they only had two seasons in a year, namely a season of plenty and a season of scarcity. The former was short, while the latter was often very long.

In terms of culture and lifestyle, the lives of the Hmong in the village were constrained by their own traditional customs, which they referred to as "cái lý" or reasoning [see: Nguyễn Văn Thắng 2009]. Previously, the Hmong here practiced ancestral and polytheistic worship traditions, believing that these forces influenced every aspect of their lives. When someone died, there were mourning ceremonies at home that lasted up to seven days, causing heavy pollution to the living environment as the dead body decayed. Additionally, there were many rituals performed throughout the year, requiring significant expenditures.

When facing health issues, they often turn to shamans first, believing that illness was caused by evil spirits or ancestral punishment, rather than seeking medical treatment at hospitals and using Western medicine. This led to a situation where many people become physically weakened, and even died prematurely due to lack of timely care and treatment. Furthermore, the Hmong traditionally had a practice of having many children and marrying before reaching adulthood. Parents, as being busy working, did not have enough time to take care of every child.

Regarding education, the Hmong in Suối village were mostly illiterate before 1987. They recalled that at that time, no one in the village could read and write. Only a few adults could speak broken Vietnamese as the official language. Children either did not go to school or, if they did, dropped out early. Illiteracy and difficulty in communicating with the majority Kinh people posed a significant barrier to integration with the lowland areas and development in all aspects.

In the period after 1987, another issue emerged that severely affected the health of people in the village. Suối was once one of the main areas for opium cultivation and use in Lai Châu province. At that time, many families in the village had members addicted to opium. Many men and even women did not work but spent their days indulging in opium smoke. The consequence was that children did not go to school, the elderly people were not taken care of, and women suffered from hard labor and gender inequality. Vang, a prominent figure in the village and also the village chief, reminisced,

At that time, there were many problems in the community, typically opium addiction, alcoholism, tobacco addiction, etc. Teenagers and youth were addicted to opium, both men and women. Therefore, all the people in community were very poor, lacking food all year

round. People only ate wild yams, forest yams, wild vegetables, and whatever they could find in the forest. Due to this lack of food, diseases spread. People died every week. Some days, even one to two people died. It was very common.

Could the Hmong in Suối village escape poverty? Where would they start? No one knew the clear answer. It seemed that difficulties persisted through generations, compounded by declining labor productivity and deaths from opium addiction that had thwarted any ideas and determination for change.

Overall, during the 1980s–1990s, the people in Suối village were in very difficult economic conditions and this was accompanied by cultural decline, slow educational development, and health deprivation. Until one day in 1988, they first heard on the radio broadcasted in Hmong language about a new spirit, described as a powerful Savior, who could bring a total change to life.

...to Revival and Development

The Savior they heard about through the FEBC (Far East Broadcasting Company) radio station from Manila, Philippines, is called “Vàng Chứ” in Hmong language. Initially, after listening to the radio, some villagers started to believe in this Savior but they wanted to learn more. However, there happened conflicts between a part of believers with some local government officials in regard to the view on the validity of the newly-imported-through-air religion. Believers contended that following “Vàng Chứ” would certainly lead them to a better life. Meanwhile, some local officials insisted that this religion was against traditional norms and values, at the same time caused social disorder, thus they even attempted to arrest and force believers to abandon their belief. This resulted in reactions from the believers, some fled into the forest and continue ritual practice. Others crossed the border with China to learn more about the nature of this religion.

These individuals later returned to Hanoi. Initially, they went to some Catholic churches, but after a period of activity, they realized the difference between what they heard on the radio and the reality there. Eventually, they turned to the Vietnam Evangelical Church (North) in Hanoi and found out that their faith was actually Tin Lành (Protestantism), and “Vàng Chứ” was the way the Hmong pronounced “God” in the Bible. The government no longer prohibited their faith, therefore misunderstandings and conflicts between the local government and the Hmong followers gradually dissolved. Since following Protestantism, they have learned more and systematized their knowledge about God, the Bible, as well as strategies to build the community Church in Suối village and organize regular services. From just a few believers in the beginning, nearly the whole village had then converted to Protestantism.

The Bible contains many teachings about ethics and lifestyle, about the harm of laziness, dependence, and bad habits. Thus, becoming a Protestant can also be seen as adoption of a new kind of morality [see: Ngô 2016, 160]. With the belief that they would be guided by God, they began the process of rebuilding their community by first overcoming addiction. After successfully rehabilitation, they together cleaned up and renovated the village, restructured internal relationships, explored, learned, and experimented with new livelihood models to escape poverty. The faith had actually created a new moral motivation for them as building a new life. They wanted to show that they deserved God as making good things happen on earth.

The economic life of the Hmong people following Protestantism here progressed ever since. From escaping hunger and poverty, to a large part of the population having enough food and clothing, and a small portion becoming wealthy. No longer being dependent on traditional production methods only, they have found new, relatively stable, and high-income sources from orchid cultivation, cardamom cultivation, and community tourism serving domestic and international tourists. Currently, the village has about 111 hectares of cardamom cultivation and nearly 30 hectares of orchid and high-yield hybrid fruit trees

such as apples, plums, and peaches. Just considering income from cardamom cultivation, one Hmong Protestant in the village said his family cultivated seven hectares of cardamom, harvested more than 2 tons per year on average, and earned about 150–200 million VND (around 8,000 USD). This is a relatively good income compared to Hmong families living in other villages. Growing orchids also brings significant income to the people here. Due to the advantages of altitude and weather, orchids here are very beautiful and can be sold at high prices. There have been times when this plant helped them escape poverty and invest in new livelihoods. The village chief Vang told us his family once sold a pot of 50 orchid stems for 10 million VND (around 450 USD). At the peak of the market, the income of a family growing orchids reached about 400 million VND (around 16,000 USD) a year. The orchid bloom in 2017 brought in revenue of two billion VND (around 85,000 USD) for households in the village. Meanwhile, for comparative purpose, a survey with the Hmong in 2018–2019 showed that their average income was only 18 million VND (around 730 USD) a year per household [Hoàng Hữu Bình 2020, 72].

Notably, thanks to the funds from new sources of income, many households have invested in new livelihoods that yield higher incomes without the toil of labor and long waits for harvests as before. Currently, while orchid cultivation is decreasing in yield due to pests and climate change, community-based tourism in the village is flourishing. Alongside establishing homestays that emphasize the traditional Hmong cultural identity, efforts have been made to expand tourism-related activities such as opening restaurants, guiding mountain treks, renting out vehicles, selling traditional brocade, souvenirs, etc. Suối village is gaining recognition among adventurous travelers as it is located near the starting point for trekking to the summit of Bạch Mộc Lương Tử, the third-highest peak in Vietnam. Mr. Vang mentioned that during the 30th of April – 1st of May holiday in 2023, accommodation in the village was fully booked, with many homestays reserved months in advance. According to Lai Châu province's statistics, Suối village attracts over 30,000 tourists annually, including visitors from more than 15 countries worldwide [Tâm Anh-Lekima Hung 2024].

To attract tourists, Suối village has implemented the traditional market model of the Hmong. Previously, there was no market in the village, and people were not engaged in trading. Nowadays, the market is where locals engage in commerce, selling traditional Hmong and local products (brocade, food, agricultural tools, etc.) Additionally, the village has established different spaces to showcase the traditional production processes of local products, and a simple stage has been built in the village center for performances of distinctive Hmong cultural acts. Since 2018, with the idea of promoting community-based tourism, the village has organized the Hmong New Year event, which lasts for one day. In 2018, this event attracted about 15,000 people from various localities, generating over 100 million VND (around 4,000 USD) for the village's collective income. Nowadays, this event has become a regular occurrence, taking place annually.

As households have improved their income, they allocate funds for upgrading and beautifying their living spaces, improving healthcare, and investing more for the education of future generations. To enhance living conditions, they also purchase vehicles such as motorcycles, cars, household electronics, etc. Equally important, they begin to reassess the values of their inherited cultural heritage from previous generations and take steps to preserve and promote their values. Through innovative thinking and actions, they interact more effectively with the government, finding ways to utilize existing state support such as borrowing money at low-interest rates, participating in training programs to enhance economic capacity and healthcare, enriching gender equality awareness, and building social order and security. With the improved quality of life, the marginalization and negative perceptions of Suối village have gradually changed. Protestantism is recognized as one of the main factors which have assisted the community to overcome hardships and awaken their resilience to collectively build a new life.

Protestantism as a Driving Factor for Change

In the development process of Suối village, Protestantism plays an important role. The Hmong converts here placed their trust in the transformative power of God. They believed that with God's instructions, they could change their fate. Besides, the practice of ethical principles in the Bible enabled them to lead a healthier way of life. Further, Protestantism helped to establish a community with a shared-faith, with determination to change, and the motivation and inspiration to overcome difficulties and the constraints of old customs.

The Suối village Protestant Church got the permission to register its activities with the local authorities in 2012. This legalized its existence. A church was then built up by the villagers, located by the main entrance to the village. There, the Hmong Protestants worship God, listen to Bible teachings, host visits from domestic and international Protestant groups, share information about state policies, available development assistance, as well as effective economic models from other communities. It is also where the Hmong people discuss and plan strategies for renewal and development. Based on the Bible foundation and what they have learned through expanding interactions with the broader society, the village residents have begun implementing a five-stage development roadmap, including addiction rehabilitation and altered previous unhealthy lifestyle, mindset change, construction and renovation of internal infrastructure, training human resources for community tourism, and creating new products and building a brand. In these stages, biblical principles and ethical criteria are highly emphasized and strictly adhered to.

In the first stage, they started rehabilitation by separating themselves from the opium environment. They elected to reside in the forest, at a considerable distance from their home village, until the process of detoxification was fully completed. By 2005, there were no more addicts in the village. This did not mean an end to poverty, but the success of rehabilitation instilled confidence in their subsequent plans. In the following stage, they began promoting mindset changes through self-education. Pastor Hang shared with us: "From 2005 to 2010, we used repentance methods as stated in the Bible to change our mindset. We then opened courses on Protestant theology. We taught our brothers and sisters 15 subjects specializing in the life of the Savior, and then in leadership, Christian family, ethics, life skills, etc. From 2005 to 2010, over 100 people completed the program". These courses not only helped people understand the Bible more deeply but also created consistency in perception, along with faith, determination, and moral motivation to build a new life.

Construction and renovation of internal infrastructure was a more difficult stage, requiring the participation and contribution of all the villagers. They started by mobilizing resources to build a good concrete road from the village to the commune center – where the main road leads to other areas. This was essential for connecting the residents in Suối village with the outside world and keeping up with social development. The focus of ideas, inspiration, and determination for the village's renovation and development was Pastor Hang – also the Church leader and a respected figure in the village. He recounted: "At that time, paths inside our village filled with thick mud mixed by dirt and shit of buffaloes and pigs. Mosquitoes and flies swarmed in flocks. When one just breathed a little louder, he or she would inhale those flies into the throat. No one came here all year round. I couldn't do any buying or selling. So, the first step was to build a concrete road". However, by 2010, the state budget was limited, and the people were too impoverished thus constructing a road from the village to the center of the commune was extremely challenging. To fulfill this determination, the villagers appealed to the authorities for cement, while they themselves sought ways to acquire the remaining essential materials (sand, stones) and contributed their labor. Pastor Hang rallied households to support by selling valuable assets to raise funds for materials. Those without money went to work to contribute. Fortunately, at that time, the government had a policy to grant each household a good amount of money for helping with preservation of national forest. Instead of spending

such money for family needs, villagers contributed all the sum for building the road. As a result, in less than a year, the villagers completed over 4 km of concrete road from the village to the commune center. Subsequently, they continued to improve the secondary roads within the village leading to each household, constructing rugged roads leading to the base of the waterfalls behind the village. Alongside road construction, they created areas for convenient sightseeing, planted flowers, cleaned up the village, moved livestock to the outskirts, and built a market, all with the aspiration to transform their living environment into a paradise as depicted in the Bible.

Concerning stage of human resource development, they recognized that for community tourism to be effective, they needed trained, professional personnel on-site. The Church dispatched individuals for training and workshops at state centers in fields such as driving, cooking, beverage mixing, restaurant management, homestay hosting, tour guiding, and performing arts. At the same time, the Church sent some youths to cities to learn English and arranged weekly English classes for children back in the village. They sought to increase the number of villagers who could talk directly to foreign tourists in an international language such as English.

At the fifth stage, the entire village is focusing its resources on product creation and brand building. Noteworthy in the tourism business system aimed at attracting and serving tourists are the characteristic Hmong cultural homestays and the impressive living spaces here, such as beehive-shaped houses, bird's nest houses, and houses amidst fields, along with cafes with beautiful views. According to the outlined plan, from 2020 to 2025, the villagers will produce high-quality products that meet state standards, establishing their own brand. All tourism products of the village must meet cleanliness standards, ensure environmental hygiene, preserve ecological landscapes, and natural spaces of the village. Each family, each tourism site, must consciously classify waste for appropriate environmental disposal.

Notably, although the transformation and development process are based on the Bible and the modern Evangelical prosperity philosophy, the Hmong in Suối village have not forsaken their traditional culture but seek to harmonize old and new elements. On one hand, they endeavor to restore and promote traditional Hmong cultural practices. On the other hand, they unanimously agree not to sell land to outsiders to maintain the ethnic cultural identity. This also limits external investors who are solely interested in personal gain. The village strives to ensure that profits are evenly distributed among households. In many other highland communities such as those in Sapa district of Lào Cai province, ethnic minority groups, driven by short-term interests, have sold land to outsiders, giving them the opportunity to settle and do business. The consequence of this is the gradual fading and distortion of the traditional cultural identity of the local community. According to pastor Hang, what made Suối village different to those villages was the adoption of the Christian faith. The pastor explained that: "If brothers and sisters don't have a specific faith, then they will live by their own desires, their own profits. It's only a matter of time before they compete against one another. Unhealthy competition can never be avoided then". Evidences from doing fieldworks show that the religious factor has provided the motivation and purpose for change and development in Suối village, while not necessarily replacing the traditional cultural identity of the Hmong with Western culture. When community interests are prioritized in this way, it contributes to inclusive and therefore sustainable growth.

Along with changes in the religious belief and practices, the power from a shared-faith community also contributed to the welfare of the Hmong in Suối village. The Hmong Protestants became the active agents in seeking solutions, seizing opportunities, and taking decisive actions to escape poverty, backwardness, and isolation, thus enabling them to rise. Upon perception of Protestantism, they realized that this religion could answer key questions that had previously eluded them. Accordingly, they utilized the religious faith to form a shared vision of the future, a common motivation for unity, and a collective

effort to build community strength. Influenced by the spirit of Protestantism, some villagers had become inspirators who led the community on its development path. These leaders represent the community's understanding of challenges and opportunities that need to be seized. They symbolize the efforts of all the villagers in equipping themselves with the most basic and necessary skills to adapt and integrate into the market economy. Individuals like Vang and Hang are not only spiritual leaders but also guides in action for the community. Through extensive interaction and engagement with the Kinh people and other nearby ethnic groups, they have acquired valuable lessons and experiences in organizing community life and fostering socio-economic progress. The aforementioned religious elements have proven to be an essential resource, contributing significantly to the prosperity of the Hmong in Suối village.

The State's Role in Development of Ethnic-Religious Communities

Studies conducted by international researchers on Protestant conversion and the development process of ethnic minorities in Vietnam often portray the state as more of a hindrance than a help. Oscar Salemink argued that in many instances, conversion "can be interpreted as a form of protest against the state and its dominant culture" [Salemink 2009, 53]. In her research on the Hmong community embracing Protestantism, Tâm Ngô has highlighted numerous challenges faced by Hmong Protestants due to the state's policies, laws, and the management of Protestant activities by local officials [Ngô 2016, 127–131, 168–169]. Seb Rumsby, in his book on religious transformation in the highlands of Vietnam, questions whether Hmong Christianization should be seen as resistance against the state [Rumsby 2023, 162]. A recurrent theme in these arguments is that the state has not provided adequate and effective support to the ethnic minorities in the Northern highlands, including the Hmong. In some instances, state actions have even compounded the challenges faced by these communities in their efforts to evolve. However, our investigation on the development of the Hmong Protestants as an ethnic-religious community in Suối village demonstrates that the state is an indispensable factor in this process. Here we present two key arguments: first, the state's legalization of Protestant activities in ethnic minority areas, recognizing them as a potential resource for local community development; and second, the implementation of policies specifically aimed at their economic, cultural, and social progress.

Following Renovation, the state has renovated its policy and laws on religion which results in a more objective consideration of the role and contribution of religion to nation-building [Taylor 2007, 15; Bourdeaux and Willaime 2010; Bouquet 2010, 95; Hoàng Văn Chung and Đỗ Quang Hưng 2023, 319–320]. The state also timely improves local authorities' implementation of religious policies and management of religious activities to better guarantee religious freedom. Particularly, the Directive No. 01/CT/2005-TTg dated 4th February 2005 on some tasks on Protestantism has created favorable conditions for the development of this religion, notably in the areas of ethnic minorities. In the case of Suối village, the early authorization of Protestant activities by the local authorities in accordance with the aforementioned legal regulations and the establishment of the community Church have made this religion a significant resource in the development process of the Hmong community. Besides, the local authorities demonstrated support for the Protestant community through timely approval of its proposals for improvements.

Second, in conjunction with policies that leverage religious resources for building community, the state has also implemented a variety of policies and programs aimed at providing comprehensive support for the development of ethnic minority communities since Renovation. According to a report by World Bank, ethnic minorities in Vietnam are benefited from many policies and programs by the government and its partners' developmental projects [World Bank Group 2019, 18]. Precisely, since the Reform Era, Vietnam has implemented numerous programs and projects related to poverty reduction, such as the National target program for poverty reduction in the periods 1998–2000, 2001–2005;

the Sustainable poverty reduction national target program for the period 2016–2020; Program 135 for socio-economic development in extremely difficult communes of ethnic minority areas; Program 30A (rapid and sustainable poverty reduction support for 61 poor districts); Credit programs for ethnic minorities (very low interest rates from 0 % to 1.2 % per year), etc. These programs focus mainly on key areas such as production development, improving living standards; infrastructure development; development of essential local public services such as electricity, schools, health stations, clean water; cultural life improvement; training and capacity building; housing support, etc. As a result, millions of ethnic minority people across the country have benefited in various ways. For example, from 2005 to 2012, about nearly 10 million poor households were granted loans. Consequently, about 2.4 million households have escaped poverty [recited from: Nguyễn Đình Tuấn 2021, 148–149]. The average income per capita in ethnic minority groups increased from 592,503 VND (around 24 USD) in 2008 to 1,884,756 VND (around 73 USD) in 2018. In the Middle Central and Northern mountainous regions alone, the poverty rate decreased from 64 % to 13.8 % during the period 1998–2016; the enrollment rate and on-time enrollment rate during the period 2009–2019 increased from 88.1 % to 93.5 % for lower secondary education and from 57.3 % to 68.4 % for upper secondary education; the average life expectancy increased by 0.16 years per year (of which, the Hmong increased their average life expectancy by 4.5 times); the average household income increased at an average economic growth rate of 8.4 % per year [recited from: Nguyễn Đình Tuấn 2021, 214–220]. These positive changes have happened when the ethnic minorities are better enabled to participate in labour market, enjoy infrastructural and economical connection, and gain access into public services (education, health care, housing and other facilities such as electricity, clean water, etc.) [World Bank Group 2019, 18]. In practice, these aforementioned programs and projects do not create immediate changes but it often takes time until effectiveness is shown and recognized. Further, some programs were failed due to inappropriate approaches, and received no support from the locals.

In the specific development story of the Hmong in Suối village, the local government's role in facilitating development can be observed in several key aspects, including investment in infrastructure (providing electricity, roads, schools, and stations), construction of new rural areas, protection of forests and the environment, and the issuance of resolutions to promote the traditional cultural identity of ethnic groups in conjunction with tourism development. This included organizing training courses on tourism, recognizing and investing in Suối village to become a provincial-level tourist destination, and providing preferential interest loans for community tourism to local residents. The local population has positively acknowledged the role of the state in supporting community tourism. The local state was the primary factor in awakening the tourism potential in this area. In 2015, the People's Committee of Lai Châu province granted Suối the certificate of community tourism village, creating favorable conditions for the Hmong to start community tourism professionally. Pastor Hang shared, "Before 2015, we still didn't know what community tourism was". But then, the village has achieved many prestigious national and international awards. For example, in 2019, Suối village was awarded the title of "Prominent village for community-based tourism" by the Vietnam Tourism Association. In 2023, the village received the 3rd ASEAN Community-Based Tourism Award. Along with providing potential directions for community tourism, the state offered training programs for ethnic minorities on cooking, serving in restaurants, opening and running homestays, driving cars, and performing ethnic traditional arts. Additionally, a portion of the local state budget was allocated to improve the main road connecting the province's center to the local commune.

Besides, the People's Committee of Lai Châu issued two specific resolutions to boost provincial tourism. These included Resolution No. 04 dated February 17, 2021, on the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural identities in conjunction with the

development of tourism among ethnic minorities during 2021–2025 and towards 2030, and Resolution No. 59 dated December 10, 2021, on regulations for the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural identities in conjunction with the development of tourism during 2021–2025. In these resolutions, the ethnic minorities were regarded as important agents in the promotion of community tourism in Lai Châu province. For households in Suối village, the province reserved a grant scheme to directly facilitate their participation in community tourism. A homestay owner told us, “Back in 2015 the [local] government would grant each household in Suối village with 160 million VND (around 6,200 USD) if they run a homestay. My family also received one of these grants”.

Conclusion

In his investigation into the identity and economy of the Hmong in Vietnam, Michaud argues that the society of the Hmong is under pressure from rapid integration with the national framework and participation in the market. They have adjusted their means of resistance and adapted to economic and cultural changes brought about by external forces by using their own tools to preserve their identities and secure their existence [Michaud 2020, 105]. This observation is relevant to the case of the Hmong in Suối village if one sees their decision to follow Protestantism as a way to survive and thrive in the new social context.

The development of the Hmong here should be best understood as a result of successful combination of two prominent factors at the same time, including Protestantism and the state. Protestantism has served as a catalyst for change, instilling motivation and aspirations within the community, while also introducing a novel moral framework conducive to the demands of a market economy. The Hmong Protestants, under leadership of their pastor and village figures, have successfully taken advantage of all available resources and opportunities into growth. The state, in turn, has played a crucial role by furnishing the requisite support and resources essential for facilitating the integration of ethnic minorities into the evolving socio-economic landscape. The state’s renewal of policies regarding the perception of religion as a resource has also promoted new mechanisms that enable religion to actively participate in development. Our research is, however, on an ideal model of collaboration between religion and the state. Elsewhere in Vietnam, there are still misunderstandings and conflicts between these two factors. This explains the fact that there are limitations of progress faced by similar ethnic-religious communities.

The current appearance of Suối village is the result of over 30 years of development. By now, the success story of the Hmong Protestants here has been widely and regularly broadcasted on the networks of national communication. Yet this success does not imply that all Hmong families in the village are enjoying comfortable lives. They still face numerous challenges in their efforts to stabilize and increase their income. Only families that are more adept at adapting to the market economy and optimizing available support have better living standards. It should be noted that there are families in the village that do not follow Protestantism, and their standard of living is lower compared to families of the converts. The question arises as to why this small group of families chooses to maintain their spiritual traditions instead of converting to Protestantism, despite witnessing the inherent benefits of conversion. This indicates the need for further comparative studies to provide more clarity in the future.

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Розвиток хмонгської протестантської громади у селищі Суой Північного нагір'я В'єтнаму

5 лютого 2023 року селище Суой в провінції Лайтяу, на північному кордоні В'єтнаму, було визнане найпривабливішим регіоном для туризму, що розвивається місцевими громадами, у країнах-членах Асоціації держав Південно-Східної Азії (ASEAN). Дійсно, це місто розташоване серед величної природи й населене дружніми, відкритими представниками етносу *хмонг*, які сповідують християнство й вміють спілкуватися. Мало хто знає, що теперішні краса й життєздатність селища Суой були відроджені після занепаду, спричиненого тривалою ізоляцією, економічними негараздами й залежністю від опіуму. Дослідження, що пояснюють зміни серед новостворених протестантських громад *хмонг* на Північному нагір'ї В'єтнаму, зазвичай наголошують на ролі протестантизму в покращенні умов їхнього життя. Наша розвідка, базована на аналізі розглянутих кризь призму теорії розвитку й релігії польових даних, що охоплюють період із 2018 по 2023 рік, підкреслює, що розвиток протестантів етносу *хмонг* у селищі Суой є успішним поєднанням таких двох головних чинників, як релігія і державність.

Ключові слова: В'єтнам; Північне нагір'я; протестанти *хмонг*; протестантизм; селище Суой

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