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# Clothing of the Thai Women in Vietnam : The Similarities and Differences

Dr. Vi Van An<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

## 1. BACKGROUND

Clothing and jewels are considered as components of material culture. They not only show ways of life, mental processes, habits, aesthetic senses of the certain ethnic group but their cultural characteristics. As mentioned among the whole materials of clothing, the women ones seem to have been maintained better than those of men.

In Vietnam, the Thai ethnic group ranges the third position in number of population (after the Kinh and the Tay). They live rangely from to Northwest area to Hoa Binh province and the West of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces.

Now far, the clothing of the Thai women in Vietnam seems to be described base on only those of the Thai people in the Northwestern of Vietnam; that belong to the Thai women in Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An has not been much concentrated by the scientists.

In addition to that, up to now, there are not many studies and articles mentioned about clothing in general and those of the Thai women in Vietnam. Particularly, the studies that concentrated on comparing the clothing of the Thai women in different areas, sub-groups are still missing.

In fact, as shown in the map of Vietnam, the Thai people do not only live concentrically in the North West of Vietnam but also in Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces. In the Northwest area, the Thai should be divided into two sub-groups named Black Thai (*Tay Dam*) and White Thai (*Tay Khao / Tay Don*) through in the Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces, there are many local groups with different names.

In comparison with the Thai people living in the North West of Vietnam and other sub-groups of the Thai in Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An, the differences are shown in both social signs and materially cultural characteristics. It is known that the similarities of the ethnical group are

existing in hand with certain differences between sub-groups and/or local ones of the Thai people, especially in material culture, that includes women clothing.

With the manners mentioned in the background, our article concentrates on distinguishing some similarities and differences of the Thai women clothing in different areas, local groups. We believe that, in hand with other important characteristics, the clothing of the Thai women is one of the cultural symbols of the ethnic group.

Nowadays, at the Vietnam National Ethnology Museum, presentations of the Thai people mostly come from the Thai in the Northwest area, characteristics of the Thai in different areas, especially in women clothing, have not been shown absolutely. We hope to bring you more information so that you would have more profound knowledge of the Thai women clothing in Vietnam through the article.

## 2. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES OF THE CLOTHING OF THE THAI WOMEN IN VIETNAM

### 2.1 *Similarities*

One of the basic characteristics of the Thai people is similarity of psychological identity that is shown in both material and spiritual culture. In other words, similarities of the Thai women clothing is considered as the comparable presentation of psychological identity in material culture.

It is certain to say that the *first performance* of the similarities in clothing of the Thai women in Vietnam is that they always wear skirts (*xỉn*), belts (*xai hợt*, *xai ẻng*), short blouses (*xửa cỏm*) and turbans (*khăn hua*). These are components of traditional clothing of the Thai women that live form Northwest area to Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa provinces and the Western of Nghe An.

In hand with the traditional clothing, the Thai women in Vietnam have customs of wearing *jewelry* (necklace, bracelet, ear rings...) as well as chewing betel and blackening the teeth.

As the clothing of the Thai women is considered, the great characteristics is their habit and custom of wearing skirt as well as the maintaining this custom up to now. Though the components creating the clothing of the Thai women are existing in those belonging to other minority ethnic groups in Vietnam, special characteristics and beauty of clothing of the Thai women are easy to recognize.

Traditional skirts of the Thai women in Vietnam are close. They are created from cotton cloth that was dyed indigo; gliding headlong or putting from legs is suitable. The Thai women have a habit to wear skirts clinging to their body.

In short, to comment on clothing of the Thai women, the first mention must be related to their custom and habit of wearing skirt. We also see that in a folk song about growing silkworm and weaving that says: “*As long as you are Thai women, you must know how to grow silkworms, weave and wear skirts*”. We do not know if the song is a tie of habit and traditional custom or not, nevertheless, wearing skirts seems to have been and will be the feeling of pride of the Thai women, because it is their own cultural beauty.

In hand with skirts, traditional blouses of the Thai women is a short and black one (*xửa côm*) that clings to their body, with round neck, narrow sleeve, and a line of buttons in front that are shaped as butterflies or balm crickets and made of silver or aluminum. At some place, these buttons is ring and made of bronze that called “*néek*”.

*The second performance* of similarities in clothing of the Thai women is materials that used to create that.

Though the Thai people do not know exactly time that their ancestors started planting cotton and weaving, it seems to be the oldest familiar and the most popular handicraft work in their society. Up to now, cotton is the only one material for Thai women clothing. In short, if we can say that flax and linen are ethnical characteristics out of the weaving work of the Hmong in Vietnam, the second say must be cotton and cotton yard are ethnical characteristics out of the weaving work of the Thai people. Besides cotton yard, silk is popular material of weaving in Thai area but it is often used as embroidered thread.

With materials of cotton and silk yard, in order to have final products of cloth, then skirts, blouses, turbans, blankets and other cloth goods will be made, there are many procedures such as: separating cotton seed (*it*), carding cotton (*công*), rolling cotton curl (*lọ*), pulling thread (*păn*), spinning (*pia*), reeling (*công quạng*), twisting (*phiến*), weaving (*tấm*), etc. For cotton yard, in order to use for skirts, before weaving it will be dyed in one of the two methods following: dyeing in rice slop or indigo. For silk, before weaving or using as embroidered thread, it should be dyed with natural materials such as: *phang*, *xét*, *chặng* (light brown) and other leaves in the forests.

*The third similar characteristic* is that there are three traditional methods for weaving that are normally weave (*xan*), knit and pin (*khuýt*) and i cát (*cát mí*).

Normally weaving is the easiest method. That is described as knitting cotton yard simple-intermodly. This method is used to weave white coarse cloth, striped or square fabric.

The second method is more complicated due to its purpose to create designs. It is operated with many manual actions that directly pin color reels on different stages of fibres depending to some formulas to

create designs. Then, the reels will be put out whenever it will be woven. The most popular designs are broken lines, lozenges, triangles and their versions base on formulas of geometric pattern. However, this method can help women create various and plentiful cloths. Each pattern should have been performed with one or more colors. Around main pattern, many sub-details are added. Thus, during the process of weaving, many shuttles with different color of fibre are used.

In summary, with this method of weaving, various patterns should be created with different geometric formulas or realistic views as they were done on blankets, curtains, lower hem of skirts but the most common is to be on blankets.

It is noted that besides the method to weave designs directly on the cloths, embroidering is applied to make better the shortcomings of the weaving.

In comparison with the two mentioned above methods, *cát mí* is much complicated. This method requires experience, skill and patience of the weavers. Firstly, a square frame is in need. Second, fibre is arranged and made a tight knots base on some formulas with a thread that come from a tree called *bơ chọng pa*. Then, clew of fibre is opened and dyed. Part of fibre that is tied closely will not be dyed. After that, fibre will be washed, dried and rounded into small rolls. The last procedure is weaving. Designs will be created naturally during the work by the weavers.

*The fourth performance* is color that used in the clothing of the Thai women. We can see that except the White Thai (*Tay Khao*) women who have worn the white blouses, others from Northwest Area to Hoa Binh and western of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces all use the most popular color: black. According to the Thai belief, white is sign of bad things or dead. Thus, in typical days, the Thai abstain from wearing white clothes,

wearing white hat or using white mosquito net, etc. White clothes, skirts... are only used in mourning.

*The fifth performance of similarity* is the poor decorated designs on the clothing. In some ethnic groups belonging to Seno-Tibet to or Hmong-Yao language groups, clothing of the women always is made with showy design types. But these designs never have been seen in the traditional clothing of the Thai women. However, from old time up to now, Thai women in Mai Chau, Hoa Binh province and some districts in the mountainous area of Thanh Hoa have been weaving skirts and that have embroidered designs in rim; and women in Nghe An province and districts at borderline between Thanh Hoa and Nghe An have got used to wear the skirts with designs on lower hem. According to some researchers, the actually that the Thai women in the two provinces have used design-embroidered skirts could be originated from the cultural exchanging and receiving with the Muong and some sub-groups of Phu Thay in Laos, but not traditionally cultural characteristics of the Thai people only. For the area where is considered as center of the Thai people of the Northwest area including Son La, Lai Chau, Yen Bai provinces, there is no design in the clothing of the women. It is said that even the turban called *piêu* that is well known of the Black Thai (*Tay Dam*) in the North West might be initiated with culture of Mon-Khomer ethnic groups; it might be developed and created by the Thai people and then became their cultural characteristics of clothing.

## 2.2 Differences

As mentioned in our background, there are not only similarities but also differences in the clothing of the Thai women that distinguish them from different areas, sub-groups or locals. From year to year, with cultural effects and interrelations with other ethnic groups, the differences themselves seem to become special cultural characteristics what



are considered as figures to class the Thai people into various sub-groups or branches. The differences are shown in the following aspects:

*First*, the clearest difference is the color of blouses that is white for White Thai (*Tay Khao*) women and black for Black Thai (*Tay Dam*). The distinction of the color of the blouses is criterion to identify two branches: Black and White. However, this distinction was seen clearly in Northwest area only a long before. Nowadays, even Black Thai women, particularly young people, are shifting to wear white blouses commonly. Thus, the distinction between the two branches of Black Thai and White Thai based on color of blouses is not very clear. As consequence, criterion that based on the color of blouses should not be considered as the most important to identify Black and White Thai because it is not clear and convivial. However, the differences between the two branches that are shown in custom and habit to wear black or white blouses in the Northwest area are realistic. It is interesting that you would take a trip from Phuong Tho, Muong Lay district to Dien Bien, Lai Chau province to Son La province to see that the White Thai women are day by day shifting to wear blouses like that of the Viet people, meanwhile most of Black Thai women are wearing their traditional blouses.

There is another difference between the two branches of Black and White Thai that the Black women wear a kind of turban called *piêu* but the White ones wear only black turbans. The other is somewhere the women get used to wear leggings somewhere not.

It is the same for the Thai women in Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces. The women belonging to Tay Do sub-group mainly wear white blouses, black skirts while others of Tay Nhai sub-group are maintaining to wear their traditional black and short blouses with black skirts.

*The second dissimilarity* in clothing of different Thai branches or sub-groups is shown in the model. We find easy to see that: in Son La, Lai Chau, Yen Bai provinces, the traditional blouses of the Thai women are maintaining its conventional type and model as short, round neck (Black Thai) or heart-like neck (White Thai), with the buttons made of silver or aluminum that are shaped in butterflies or balm-cricket; while in Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces, since cultural exchange and relation between different ethnic groups in the area, traditional blouses of the Thai women are getting clearly different. In fact, clothing of the Thai in Hoa Binh province and in some districts of Thanh Hoa seems to be affected by that of the Muong women. This exchange and development are: upper hem of the skirt is embroidered, the shoulder is split, and turban is white. Otherwise, the clothing of the Thai women in Nghe An are affected by and received the details both of that belonging to the Viet and the Laos. Evidence for this is: the blouses are jacket-like, lower hem is embroidered that are not seen in the skirts of the Thai women in the North West of Vietnam.

*The third performance* is difference in materials to create clothes among different areas of the Thai. It is known that before 1954, clothing of the Thai women in the North West area and Hoa Binh province were mostly made by indigo-dyed cotton and silk fibres. But since 1954, particularly in recent years, though traditional method as well as styles of design has been maintained, clothes of the Thai women in these areas seems to be made by the only one kind of cloth called commerce-cloth. In fact, what we can observe is that the indigo dyed cotton has been used less and less to create blouses or skirts. Meanwhile, industrial cloths that could be bought in the market have been used more and more. Cotton cloth that made by the local people seems to use only for blankets, bags, turban, etc. that supply their typical living and some exchange. Thus, it is

not surprised to realize the less development of cotton planting among the Thai people in North West of Vietnam, though their economical system is still seriously self-supporting. However, as their awareness is considered, this change is appropriate to objective rules; in one hand, traditional characteristics are maintained; in other hand, there are acquirement and co-ordination with modern characteristics. Thus, the traditional beauty and characteristics of the Thai women clothing are preserved.

Clothes of the Thai women in the two provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An are made by two different materials: the blouses that made by commerce-cloth are tailored (or bought), skirts are still woven with indigo cotton or silk fibres. It is remarked that change of materials to create women clothing from traditional ones to new industrial products is not absolutely; it is stopped at combining old elements with modern ones that were chosen and accepted by the Thai women. Therefore, in comparison with that in the North West area, work to plant cotton and raise silkworms of the Thai people in mountainous areas in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces is better preserved and developed. As consequence, methods of weaving, embroidering as well as decorated designs are richer. This is the reason that non-governmental organizations such as Kraft-Link or SIDCE now are concentrating on helping Thai people in Nghe An in order to recuperate and develop traditional weaving and embroidering of the Thai, step by step make their products become commercial goods.

Differences in clothing of the Thai women are shown not only among different areas but also among each local group in one area. To compare Tay Do group and Tay Nhai group in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces, the differences are: Thai people belong to Tay Nhai group trend to create designs on skirts by directly embroidering or use *cát mí* method. Their most popular skirt is called *múc* (with white stripes). It has two parts:

upper hem and body of the skirt. Since upper hem of their skirt always dyed in red and belt is clew of fibres, they are also called as *Tày xỉn múc* (the Thai with white stripe skirts) or *Tày xỉn hua đeng* (the Thai with red hem skirts). Lower hem of their skirts is often embroidered with geometric designs or symbolizing or stylizing pictures (leaf of areca nut, coconut, chin of chicken...). These designs move vertically with colorful: white-red-green-yellow...

While, the people belonging to Tay Do group have a custom to wear a skirt called *xỉn đán*, with belt made from color silk cloth. Their skirts have three parts: upper hem, body and lower hem in which, lower hem is the first part to weave and embroider, then, body and upper hem is connected. Designs in lower hem move horizontally with realistically pictures such as dragons, elephants, birds, butterflies, trees, etc. and the color are white-yellow-green.

The mentioned above comments are differences in custom, habit and sense of beauty of each sub-group of the Thai. However, we hope to give you some cultural specialties and characteristics of each sub-group.

### 3. CHANGES ON THE CLOTHING OF THE THAI WOMEN IN VIETNAM

Going through the historical rises and falls, besides traditional factors, clothing of the Thai women has been changed certainly. However, these changes are different among areas, locals such as that between in center, along side of national road and remote or desert areas; between old people and youths; among different socio-classes, etc. These changes should be classified and presented as bellows:

*Firstly*, this is the change in materials to tailor the clothes. As seen today, except some people belonging to Tay Nhai and Tay Do sub-groups

in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces who still use self-supported cotton cloth, dyeing in indigo but to make only skirts, others in the North West of Vietnam are using industrial cloths to create clothes. For example, black silk or velvet is used to tailor skirts, others color cloths are used to create blouses. In hand with trending to use industrial cloths to create clothing, producing traditional indigo cotton is day by day lessen, because of the lack of need to use.

*Secondly*, there are some changes in styles of blouses. As theory or practice is concerned, we all see that blouses are easy, quickly and much more changed in comparison with skirts or trousers. The blouses of the Thai women are not excepted. In hand with maintaining traditional characteristics such as aluminum buttons that are shaped as butterflies, balm-cricket, etc., these short blouses have been improved with model designs such as swelled shoulders, larger sleeves, buttons on wristbands... Even in some part of the mountainous areas in Nghe An province, the Thai women there are completely using the blouses styled as same as that of the Viet people.

The colors of the blouses are changed in company with their styles. In is obviously seen that the black is main color for the Thai people in previous time but nowadays, this color almost is replaced by other colors for the youth but use for only old women.

Our question that said why you do not like to wear traditional indigo cotton was mostly answered by the women that: it is hot to wear these indigo and black blouses and it takes so much time and labor to create that, though industrial cloths were sold many in markets with cheap prices and easy to buy.

The clearest change of their traditional indigo skirts is the use of new materials to embroider. In fact, in previous days, embroidered threads are silk colored fibres, nowadays; the people are shifting to use new threads

made in China or Thailand. The reason is natural material to color fibres in traditional methods is lessen and lessen, while colorful industrial thread is more and more accessible, cheap and the colors of that is more long-lasting.

The third change is that some of the Thai women, especially young people, governmental staff, teachers, medical staff, etc. in almost areas are getting used to wear trousers instead of skirts. There are some women who wear trousers at working time or in office but skirts at home. It is not considered as their absolutely breaking of the ethnically traditional skirts, but for these women, the skirts are not a pride or self-importance adhering to their life. Wearing skirt is sometimes considered perfunctory. Even some says are heard that some women feel ashamed to wear skirts in public places or in cities. This is reason to have the note for minority ethnic pupils who are entering to reserved schools that says: *“Must bring with you a component of your ethnical clothes”*. Nowadays, in the schools reserving for only minority ethnic people, the pupils must wear their ethnical traditional clothes in the morning of every Monday.

It is less different in rural or remote and desert areas. Up to now, all old women can not accept wearing trousers instead of skirts. However, in previous time, before wedding ceremony, the bride had to prepare tens of skirts; nowadays, number of skirts the brides must bring with to husband houses is lessening. Instead of that, there are some modern goods belonging to their dowry such as clock, thermos flask, and modern clothes that were brought from markets or shops, etc. Formerly, all married women had to wear skirts but in the present days, skirts seem to be worn only in weddings, festivals, etc. Even though, we can see some Thai brides in modern dresses.

We do not know exactly when the Thai women started wearing trousers, but it is estimated that the trousers could be first used after 1954 and has become common since 80-90s. This is duration when work of cotton planting, raising silkworms and weaving were fallen back or lost in many areas of the Thai people due to external conditions.

In short, changes on clothing of the Thai women are different between each areas, locals and social classes. The Thai people in Northwest area have changes in materials but maintain their styles and designs of traditional clothes. While those in Nghe An and part of Thanh Hoa provinces have preserved their traditional skirts but received styles of blouses of the Viet women. The Thai in Hoa Binh and others in Thanh Hoa have absolutely received clothing styles of the Muong women.

In order to comprehend the difference on changing clothes of the Thai, we approximate that: the area for the Thai people in North West of Vietnam before 1954 was close with hard transportation. Thus, other cultural styles found difficult to affect to their traditional culture. Moreover, Northwest area has been considered as center for Thai people in Vietnam. They have been major in the area with higher socio-economical conditions. Therefore, ethnic cultural characters in general, language and clothing in particular would be more superior and firmed. This is proved the effectiveness to woven clothing styles of some ethnic groups belonging to Mon-Khomer group by that of the Thai people in North West of Vietnam.

In Vietnam, the two provinces of Hoa Binh and Thanh Hoa are center areas of the Muong people. Under to pressure of *nhà lang* system, though the Thai were great of number and lived in separated villages, the Thai people had to affected and followed to social and cultural standards of Muong honors. Since living closely and exchanging cultural characteristics between the two ethnic groups, the Thai day by day affected and received

the Muong cultural characters, including clothes of women (mainly blouses and upper hem of skirts). Other aspects in material or spirit culture such as houses, mourning, festivals, etc. could be seen.

Western of Nghe An province is borderline to Laos and transition areas between plain and mountainous land. Due to geographical terrain that mainly found as midland area and called *vùng đồi trước núi*, transportation was rather easy, cultural exchange between different ethnic groups took place easily and soon. As culture is concerned, the Thai people in western of Nghe An have maintained and preserved traditional characters in hand with received Viet cultural qualities; they also were affected by culture of the Laos that is partly shown in designs being embroidered or woven in lower hem of skirts. We can find that, instead of traditional short blouses, the Thai there are getting used to wear jacket-like blouses as same as the Viet women; while, the traditional black skirt is maintained.

#### 4. COMMENTS

As presented above, we can see that clothing of the Thai women in Vietnam shows not only ethnical unity but also differences between areas and sub-groups. The similarities on clothing of women are defined by their ethnic culture and must bring their unified characteristics.

Naturally, during social development, under external and internal pressure such as historical condition, cultural exchange, internal elements, etc., clothing of the Thai women had to have some changes. As a result, it is certain that besides similarities, there must be differences on clothing of the women between areas or sub-groups.

However, clothing of Thai women is till maintaining their own styles, beauty and ethnical characters. In other words, how lovely, graceful and soft the Thai women are with black skirts, *cóm* blouses that have silver



buttons in butterfly-shaped in front and *piêu* turban have not only been praised in poems but have been popular and graceful to other national people as well as to foreigners.

Though the traditional clothing of the Thai women was created with handicraft methods, through generations, the Thai women had gathered much experience, skills on weaving and embroidering. Many garment products made by them are sophisticated and attracted many other people in the areas. Thus, in addition to general knowledge, it is needed to understand specific characters. It is same for similarities and differences on clothing of the Thai women in Vietnam. This awareness is useful to both internal and external scientists on Thai people all over the world.

With atmosphere of regional integrating, in order to present cultural values of the Thai in Vietnam to foreign people, it is firstly needed to carry complete researches and investigations on their traditional weaving and clothing. Then, books and articles about that must be published. The next is that it must be gathered and brought into public. Though presentation and introduction about clothing of the Thai people in Vietnam National Ethnology Museum do not cover all areas of the Thai, it is useful results that bring feeling of pride to all Thai community in Vietnam.