

**บทบาทและสถานะของชุมชนชาว
เวียดนามในประเทศไทย: กรณีศึกษา
ชุมชนชาวเวียดนามในจังหวัดอุดรธานี**
The role and status of the Vietnamese
community in Thailand: The case study
of the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani*

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความเรื่องบทบาทและสถานะของชุมชนชาวเวียดนามในประเทศไทย: กรณีศึกษาชุมชนชาวเวียดนามในจังหวัดอุดรธานี นี้สามารถเป็นเอกสารอ้างอิงที่ทรงคุณค่ากับงานวิจัยด้านชุมชนชาวเวียดนามในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ได้ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในยุคปัจจุบัน บทความนี้ศึกษาถึงการพัฒนาและสร้างความเข้มแข็งให้กับชุมชนในระยะ 70 ปีที่ผ่านมา พร้อม ๆ กับธำรงรักษาความภาคภูมิใจในต้นกำเนิดและตระหนักในการรักษาคุณค่าทางวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิมของประเทศเวียดนาม ซึ่งสามารถเห็นได้ชัดเจนในกรณีชุมชนชาวเวียดนามที่จังหวัดอุดรธานี โดยเฉพาะบทบาทสำคัญในการเชื่อมโยงด้านเศรษฐกิจ การเมือง วัฒนธรรมกับการพัฒนาความสัมพันธ์หุ้นส่วนยุทธศาสตร์ระหว่างสองประเทศ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่ง ตั้งแต่ปี ค.ศ. 1998 ภายหลังจาก พลเอกชาติชาย ชุณหะวัณ ดำรงตำแหน่งนายกรัฐมนตรีของไทย ซึ่งประกาศนโยบาย “เปลี่ยนสนามรบเป็นสนามการค้า”

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คำสำคัญ : บทบาท, สถานะ, ชาวเวียดนาม, อุตรธานี, ประเทศไทย

Abstract

This paper on *"The role and position of the Vietnamese community in Thailand: The case study of the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani"* will be a valuable reference for the research of the Vietnamese community in Southeast Asia, especially in the current period. Conducting field research as participant observation and qualitative interviews, the paper refers to the development and strengthening of this community during the past 70 years, together with the pride of the origin and the awareness to preserve traditional cultural values of the country. Therefore, we can affirm that the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani is the important economic, political, cultural linkage which boosts the strategic partnership between the two countries; especially after 1988, when Mr. Chatichai became Thai Prime Minister, declaring the policy of *"getting closer and turning Indochinese battle field into a promising market"*.

Keywords : Role, Position, Vietnamese, Udon Thani, Thailand

Introduction

Udon Thani, located in the Northern East of the country, is the fourth largest province in Thailand. The province is also known as the headquarters of the Vietnamese community (Viet kieu)¹ in Thailand with

¹ The way the Vietnamese in Thailand call themselves . In this paper title, we use the "Vietnamese" as written in Order No.45-CT/TW of the Political Bureau on consolidation of the Resolution No.36-NQ/TW of the Political Bureau - 9th tenure on the issues of the Overseas Vietnamese in the new period. In this paper , we use both terms as written in the Resolution and as the way the Vietnamese in Thailand call themselves

its biggest number of overseas Vietnamese living in for many generations. Mr. Vu Duy Chinh, Chairman of the Vietnamese Association in Udon Thani, points out that at the present, the province has totally five Vietnamese villages namely: Ban Chit, Sang Luang, Si Det, Ha Det and Kumphawapi with about 200 households in each village (the biggest village has 290 Vietnamese families)². Most of the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani are immigrants from Laos during the invasion of the French colony in the southern and middle lands of Laos (during March 1946) and their descendants (with over four generations up to now). After 70 years living in Thailand, overcoming many difficulties in the first days of the refugee journey, struggling with many offensives and strict policies of the Thai government then, the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani have put away the barriers in culture and language, not only to survive strongly and contribute to the revolution for independence in their homeland Vietnam but also to succeed in various fields. Finally, the Vietnamese have become a community of prestige, speech and good position in Thailand nowadays.

After their two field trips to Udon Thani (from August 8 to August 15, 2015 and from October 16 to October 21), using the research methods of observation, attending activities and verbal interview, strategic interview based on the theory of community development and rational choice, the authors are going to raise our opinions and assessment of the role and position of the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani particularly and in Thailand generally. This research is also expected to contribute to the implementation of Order No.45-CT/TW of the Political Bureau on consolidation of the Resolution No.36-NQ/TW of the Political Bureau - 9th tenure on the issues of the overseas Vietnamese in the new period.

² The documents of interviews by Hoang Nguyen Kieu Ngan on August 12th, 2015 at the Vietnamese Association in Udon Thani.

Societies and the connectivity of the overseas Vietnamese in Udon Thani province

Currently, there are five Vietnamese villages in Udon Thani, including Ban Chit, Sang Luang, Si Det, Ha Det and Kumphawapi (the four former villages are located near each other in Muang district, Udon Thani city; while Kumphawapi is situated over 30 km away from Udon). Among these villages, in Sang Luang and Si Det (the Crossroad), the Vietnamese are the majority of the population (more than 95%) whilst Chinese or Thai families are only a few. Most of them are doing business, with the neighborhood and social relationship which are similar to the lifestyle in traditional villages of the Vietnamese in homeland³. The Vietnamese in Udon Thani use the Vietnamese language in their communication every time they meet one another⁴. Hence, the networking of the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani is quite strong. We can affirm that the closed living style in villages and solidarity have helped them preserve all the Vietnamese cultural values from abroad.

Regarding the role of community solidarity and tight relationships of the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani, first and foremost, it is to mention the societies of the overseas Vietnamese, of which the purposes of their establishment are to tighten the relationship of overseas the Vietnamese, to provide favourable conditions for them to help one another in daily life, and to create a meaningful play-ground in terms of cultural and spiritual life. At present, there are four societies in Udon Thani province, including: Overseas Vietnamese Association, Thailand-Vietnam Entrepreneurs Association, the Elderly Vietnamese People in Udon Thani and the

³ The documents of interviews by Hoang Nguyen Kieu Ngan on August 12th, 2015 in Udon Thani.

⁴ Most of them are the first and second generations.

Management Board of Ho Chi Minh Historical Area⁵. These societies of the overseas Vietnamese not only facilitates the relations among the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province but they are also an important part of the whole Vietnamese community in Thailand which helps connect the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani and the Vietnamese in Vietnam. Especially, in recent years, the Overseas Vietnamese Association and Thailand-Vietnam Entrepreneurs Association in Udon Thani have achieved various effective and outstanding activities, considerably contributing to the development of the overseas Vietnamese community in particular and Thailand in general. They also created a firm position, prestige and a strong voice not only among the Vietnamese community but also all over Thailand.

In his welcoming speech at the second Congress of Thailand-Vietnam Entrepreneurs Association on 18 Oct 2015 in Udon Thani⁶, Mr. Nguyen Tat Thanh, Vietnamese Ambassador to Thailand affirmed : "I appreciate the Association with its great effort and constant caring for its members to be kept united and to strengthen the solidarity, contributing to the development of Thailand, as well as promoting the cooperative relations between Vietnam and other countries...", "I believe that the new Regulation which has just been ratified right at the time the two countries

⁵ Documents given by Mr. Vu Duy Chinh, Chairman of the Vietnamese Association in Udon Thani.

⁶ The Congress was attended by over 1,100 Vietnamese Thai entrepreneurs in 12 provinces of Thailand. Guests from Vietnam are Mr. Vu Khoan - Former Deputy Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Mr. Tran Dang Phong - Head of Department of Economy - Science - Technology Relations under the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs, Mr. Le Quoc Thinh - Vice Chairman of the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs , Mr. Nguyen Tat Thanh - Vietnamese Ambassador to Thailand , Mr. Nguyen Thanh Hai - Chief Representative of the Vietnamese Commercial Affairs in Thailand,...

are building up the strategic partnership, the ASEAN Community has just been established and the Vietnamese community in Thailand has been strengthened. Hence, the Association has both the advantages of favourable conditions, good opportunities and human resources to develop better, helping improve our Vietnamese community towards solidarity and prosperity, for the sake of our homeland, so that our overseas Vietnamese and our country proudly compete with other developed countries worldwide as the hope of our beloved President Ho Chi Minh.

The Vietnamese community in Udon Thani also established the Arts Society, Funeral Services... to meet the demand of the Vietnamese community, which everyone are eager to join voluntarily. The overseas Vietnamese here are much interested in those activities of cultural and arts performances, singing Vietnamese such songs as: Viet Nam que huong toi- Vietnam- my homeland), Ho Chi Minh dep nhat ten Nguoi (Hochiminh – his best name),... They would keep in touch and keep updated of their homeland by watching TV news and documentaries of domestic issues, especially on VTV channels⁷.

The Vietnamese community in Udon Thani keep not only the relationships between individuals, among villages and the Vietnamese community in the province but also good connections with other ethnic communities in the region such as Thai and Chinese people. On the traditional Tet holiday, the Vietnamese in Thailand have the other customs like “making Xieu” and “doing Bun”. Making Xieu means that the Vietnamese build up brotherhood with the Thai people, helping and

⁷ Mr. Phan Van Ngoc (Executive member of the Thailand – Vietnam Business Association in Udon Thani) says that almost every household has antenna devices to receive television broadcasting directly from Vietnam (the field trip's documents dated 20th October 2015 by Phan Thi Hong Xuan).

taking care of one another as siblings of one family. In addition, the Vietnamese learn from the Thai people about “doing Bun” in Buddhist temples, which means to do charitable work. The Thai people believe that the more charitable activities anyone can do in their present life, the more happiness and peace they can enjoy in their life-after-death. These activities of “making Xieu” and “doing Bun” prove that the Vietnamese people are always aware of the integration and acculturation with the Thai culture and long for living in harmony and in peace with the Thai people. They also set up many business partnerships and good social relations as neighbourhood with the Thai people.

Besides, Vietnamese members usually keep in touch with families with which their relatives are living in Vietnam⁸. They all prepare sincere and hospitable reception for delegations of visitors from Vietnam, with the feeling of “overseas to meet old friends”⁹.

Through all that evidence, we can see that the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani always raise a good awareness in strengthening the community network. This also shows in business partnerships, assistance in working, preserving daily activities and lifestyle, participating in traditional celebrations and festivals of their homeland, joining in public activities of the village, contributing to develop those departments and

⁸ Mr.Nguyen Viet Trong (Executive member of the Thailand – Vietnam Business Association) says that he has family relations with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development – Mr. Cao Duc Phát. In early 2015, he visited and stayed in Hanoi for one month, and his Vietnamese language was so much better (Field trip’s diary on 19/10/2015 by Phan Thi Hong Xuan in Udon Thani).

⁹ The Vietnamese Thais’ words. Beside supporting, driving the Vietnamese students to villages to do the fieldwork, the Thailand – Vietnam Business Association also offered them free accommodation, giving them money to spend during their field trips.

associations of the Vietnamese community. These practical activities and awareness themselves help the Vietnamese in Udon Thani strengthen their community connectivity, along with the good relationships with all the overseas Vietnamese in Thailand in general, with the Thai people as well as other ethnic groups and Vietnamese enterprises.

Preservation of the Vietnamese cultural identity among the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani

Although the Vietnamese Thai people could not preserve their national cultural identity in a free way in previous time, they still secretly and continuously ensure the safeguarding of Vietnamese language and culture through generations (especially the first and second generations). Only after Mr. Chatichai Choonhavan, former Thailand Prime Minister adjusted Thai's policy of foreign affairs with Vietnam in the motto of "turning Indochine battle field into market" since 1988, the Vietnamese community in Thailand could show and preserve their Vietnamese traditional culture. As the province of biggest Vietnamese community in Thailand, Udon Thani affirmed its clear performance of Vietnamese identities.

Firstly, in terms of language - the priority criterion to distinguish ethnicity, we realized that the first and second generations of Vietnamese in Udon Thani still could use Vietnamese fluently (reading, speaking and writing). They could use bilingual (Vietnamese and Thai language) at the same time. In daily life, most of the overseas Vietnamese used Thai language to communicate with local people and used Vietnamese to communicate with Vietnamese people. Successful Vietnamese or those with stable economic foundation were usually more confident in communicating in Vietnamese in public places than others of the middle class. This is the result of their concern or worry which originated from

the hard time when they were strictly restrained by Thai government in the previous period. It is also the reason why the Vietnamese people at that time could not admit their origin as Vietnamese in the public and resulted in the insufficient capability of using mother tongue among the third and fourth generation.

We had a chance to meet young Vietnamese (of the third generation) who participated in the arts performance on the occasion of the Congress of Vietnam - Thailand Entrepreneurs Association on 18/10/2015. They could only say a few words in Vietnamese language for greetings, introducing themselves and saying "thank you". However, at present, whilst the relations among Southeast Asian countries are being strengthened in a "common ASEAN house", the relationship between Vietnam and Thailand has been upgraded as a strategic partnership, the Vietnamese community in Thailand in general and those in Udon Thani province in particular have been focusing on preserving and promoting the Vietnamese cultural identity, of which the first priority is safeguarding Vietnamese language.

Mr. Phan Van Ngoc, Vice chairman of Vietnam - Thailand Entrepreneurs Association in Udon Thani told us that he teaches Vietnamese language to his grandchildren every day. Whenever he takes his children to school, he asks them to report all the Vietnamese vocabulary they learnt for daily consolidation. This is how the Vietnamese community do every day in order to keep Vietnamese language from being abandoned by later generations¹⁰. We also had a chance to meet his boy and practiced some basic conversations with him. The province of Udon Thani also maintains Vietnamese classes for young generations of the overseas Vietnamese, among which is the class monitored by teacher Nguyen Thi Xuan Oanh.

¹⁰ Field-trip's diary by Hoàng Nguyen Kieu Ngan in August 2015 in Udon Thani.

Her class has remained successful for many years because she is also a teacher who teaches official curriculum in a Thai school. The students come to her house for tutoring some subjects which they study at school, after that, they stay for a while for practising Vietnamese language. This case helps the Vietnamese class be easier or more sustainable and regular than other cases, in which the classes are inaugurated first and inviting the students after that¹¹.

In terms of family lifestyle, although most of the Vietnamese families in UdonThani nowadays has assimilated to the Thai lifestyle (when in Thailand, do as the Thai do), the Vietnamese still keep their good traditions and cultural identity of Vietnamese people. For example, the young generation still pay respect to the elderly and ancestors, as well as obey their parents and grandparents. More than 90% of the Vietnamese families where we visited have an altar to worship their ancestors and celebrate “death anniversary ceremony” for the deceased family members. One thing special is that almost every Vietnamese house presents the image of Uncle Ho (President Ho Chi Minh)¹². Some families put his image on the altar together with their ancestors or on a separate altar. This is a special mark of the culture of overseas Vietnamese in Thailand and it proves that although they are away from Vietnam fatherland for many years, regardless they have or don't have chances to visit their fatherland; they are all united and towards their origin. The overseas Vietnamese always pay respect to the Father of their Nation, President Ho Chi Minh and they were willing to sacrifice themselves to fight for the liberation and independence of Vietnam in the past as well as they are eager to contribute to the development of their country at the present time. Besides, the image of Uncle Ho and the

¹¹ Interview documents by Hoàng Nguyen Kieu Ngan dated 12/8/2015 in Ban Chích village.

¹² Field trip's diary by Hoàng Nguyen Kieu Ngan in August 2015 in Udon Thani.

ancestor altar is an invisible string that connects all overseas Vietnamese together, reminding them of their common ancestors and origin.

In their daily dining habit, the Vietnamese usually combine Vietnamese and Thailand cuisine, and they also use chopsticks to eat. Regular dishes of Vietnamese meals are: small tomatoes, morning glory, grilled pork, fresh spring rolls, pho, sour nem, sausages... Although the taste is not totally the same as in Vietnam, for these Vietnamese, those foods are the traditional values that they can preserve and be proud to introduce to their new hometown. According to our records, Vietnam restaurants in Udon Thani are much attractive to both Vietnamese and Thai people.

In terms of traditional rituals and festivals, the Vietnamese in Udon Thani have not only preserved basic cultural values of Vietnam but also absorbed collectively other Thai culture values to adapt and integrate. Vietnamese people in Udon Thani have not been converted though it was not easy at all to integrate into Thai culture and society.

For example, in wedding procedure, for marriage of the same nationality, they usually follow the Vietnamese traditions; for international marriage between Vietnamese - Thai or Vietnamese - Chinese, they will celebrate the wedding in both traditional rituals of the two cultures. Sometimes, the wedding is more westernized: the bride wears "soa-re" dress and the groom wears complet suit, the reception party is taken place in a restaurant (like in Vietnam). In a similar way, rituals of funerals are also the combination between Vietnamese and Thai cultures: putting the death people into coffin in the Vietnamese style while praying ceremony in Thai style. Death people are usually buried or cremated as of their family's demand or their own will¹³.

¹³ Interview documents and field trip's diary in Udon Thani by Hoàng Nguyen Kieu Ngan in August 2015.

Community festivals or public occasions which are spectacularly celebrated every year by the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani are the new year holidays (Tet), Independence Day (September 2nd), Uncle Ho's birthday (May 19th). While celebrations for 2/9 or 19/5 are taken place in their public meeting points such as the Head office of Overseas Vietnamese Association in Udon Thani and Ho Chi Minh historical memorial park, the activities for Tet holiday are celebrated by every single Vietnamese family: taking days off, welcoming the New Year's Eve, decorating the apricot and cherry followers together with calligraphy, fruit dishes, giving one another best wishes and giving the lucky money to children. They also usually watch Vietnamese TV channels to enjoy the atmosphere in their homeland through the news on Tet occasions. Although these celebrations do not feel whole and fascinating like in Vietnam, they are still a real cultural Tet holiday of Vietnamese traditions and identity and with real feelings towards their fatherland¹⁴. In addition, although the international women's day (March 8th) is not a national holiday of Vietnam in particular, the overseas Vietnamese in Udon Thani, especially women, also celebrate it quite excitedly and with the atmosphere like in Vietnam. On this day, the Vietnamese community usually have party, cultural performances, while women are dressed in Ao Dai traditional dress, dancing and singing happily. This activity somehow helps strengthen the solidarity and relationship between the overseas Vietnamese and provides them with a meaningful playground.

We can see that although they are away from their fatherland, Vietnamese women in Udon Thani love to wear Ao Dai very much. This traditional costume is not only a symbol for Vietnamese culture and identity but it is also the pride and favourite attire of Vietnamese women.

¹⁴ Interview documents and field trip's diary in Udon Thani by Hoàng Nguyen Kieu Ngan in August 2015.

100% women when being asked, they said that they would love to wear Ao Dai in traditional celebrations, national holidays or in public activities. Most of the overseas women have their own Ao Dai, even in a big quantity of 40-50 ones, which is much even more than the collections of local women in Vietnam, apart from those with specific careers such as teachers, TV hosts, singers of traditional music... *"At the Vietnam Fair in Northeast Thailand, there were more than 500-600 Ao Dai sold just in a short time, in several hours."* claimed by Mr. Nguyen Thanh Hai, Chief representative of Vietnam Commercial Chamber in Thailand at the seminar hosted by Thai-Viet Entrepreneurs Association at Charoen Hotel, Udon Thani on 18/10/2015.

The Vietnamese women in Udon Thani wear Ao Dai not only in public cultural events of Vietnamese community but also in other public celebrations of Thai people. For example, we witnessed many Vietnamese women dressed in blue Ao Dai to attend the Mother's Day (birthday of Thai Queen)¹⁵ in Udon Thani (as it is the symbolic color of the Queen). In their opinions, Ao Dai is such a beautiful costume that whenever they wear it, they feel proud to be a Vietnamese, a member of a community suffering many difficulties and hard time but they still overcame and developed as a successful community, having strong voice and considerable contribution to the Thai society today.

Beside those activities in public holidays, the Vietnamese community in Thailand still preserve the national identity through the building of Vietnamese temples and pagodas. In Udon Thani, there is one memorial temple of General Tran Hung Dao¹⁶ built by the Vietnamese

¹⁵ Interview documents and field trip's diary in Udon Thani by Hoàng Nguyen Kieu Ngan in August 2015.

¹⁶ To be known as the temple of Saint Tran.

people, where many ceremonies and meetings or ritual activities are often taken place. There are two important days which have been reminded by the Vietnamese community in the saying: *"Death anniversary for Father in August, for Mother in March."* On these occasions, local people usually buy incense, candles, calligraphy and other worshipping materials from Vietnam, inviting Vietnamese monks (samans) to come to this temple to do perform rituals in a formal and correct way. The construction of the Vietnamese temple and carrying our ritual ceremonies in Thailand are not only meaningful activities in terms of cultural preservation but also play an important role in connecting the large community of Vietnamese, reminding all overseas Vietnamese in Thailand of their common origin, sharing the same culture, so they have to love one another.

As a tradition, in the first days of the new year, Vietnamese people usually go to visit pagodas and pray for good things. Temples, altars, pagodas and monuments are the worshipping places in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people. In Udon Thani, the overseas Vietnamese have brought along with them the cultural heritage: Saint Tran Temple. Then, is there any Vietnamese Buddhist pagoda in Udon Thani of Thailand, the Buddhism country with more than 90% of the population are Theravada followers?

In the field trip to Udon Thani in October 2015, we were fortunate to accompany the senior delegation led by former Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan and the Vietnam Embassy in Thailand to visit a Vietnamese pagoda near Chaoren Hotel (the venue to host the second Congress of Thai-Viet Entrepreneurs Association). The Thai chief monk told us: "Today, I am so happy and grateful to welcome all visitors coming to this Vietnamese pagoda. And I hope that from now on, this place will receive more Vietnamese visitors. There was a time, no Vietnamese visited this pagoda in the political sensitive period, hence, it became the property of

other people¹⁷. However, since your important visit today¹⁸, the connection between this pagoda and Vietnamese people has been tightened and promisingly more enhanced. Mr. Ba¹⁹ told me to keep this pagoda for the Vietnamese. Meanwhile, there were 7 Vietnamese pagodas in Bangkok and 3 more in other provinces totally 10 pagodas in Thailand. Currently, this number has been increased up to 22, and expanded to the Northeast region of Thailand. There are more than 100 followers practicing Buddhism here, and the other 100 followers in Bangkok, making the total number of 500 Vietnamese practitioners in all over Thailand²⁰.

The presence of Saint Tran Temple and Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas in Udon Thani, Thailand, in our viewpoint, is beyond the cultural symbol of Vietnamese identity, and it affirms the cross-cultural exchange as well as good relations between overseas Vietnamese and Thai local people and other ethnic groups in Thailand.

The new position of the Vietnamese community in economic activities

In our interview with Mr. Nguyen Quang Trung, Chairman of the Thailand - Vietnam Entrepreneurs Association (tenure 2013-2015) at the Head office of the Association in Udon Thani province on 10/8/2015, responding to our question about whether the Thailand - Vietnam Entrepreneurs Association and the sub-division in Udon Thani have had any support or provided employment for overseas Vietnamese, Mr. Trung made a joke that "The Association and the Udon Department could not

¹⁷ Named by the locals as the Chinese Pagoda (Tau Pagoda).

¹⁸ The pagoda is expected to be handed over to the Vietnamese in 2016.

¹⁹ The former Vietnamese chief monk of the pagoda.

²⁰ The fieldwork documents by Phan Thi Hong Xuan on October 19th, 2015.

bring any employment to any overseas Vietnamese, as they all become self-employed and rich people.”²¹

Vietnamese people in Udon Thani are proud to affirm that none of them are employees, which means that they all run their own business and do not depend on other people. As our field research, currently, more than 95% Vietnamese people in Udon Thani have a good economic background. Most of them are doing family business by themselves, while some of them are doing their own business successfully and have a strong position in the Vietnamese community as well as local authority. They also provide many job opportunities for local Thai people and also Vietnamese immigrants from Vietnam in recent years, making a considerable contribution for the Thailand economy.

Particularly, most of the third generation of Vietnamese in Thailand have obtained higher education such as master and doctoral degrees, or have studied abroad then come back to work in Bangkok in high-class positions such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc. Several of them are working for Thai government and become an upper intellectual class with the prestige and strong voice in the society.

The majority of business activities of Vietnamese people in Udon Thani are in the field of commerce and trading. There are some markets where the Vietnamese business people are the major composition such as Ha Det (the Five Interchange). Vietnamese business people are also successful in other sectors like restaurant, hotel, food manufacturing and trading (nem, spring roll, sausage²², ...), clothing, jewellery, construction

²¹ The documents of interviews by Hoang Nguyen Kieu Ngan on October 8th, 2015 at the office of Thailand - Vietnam Business Association.

²² Mr.Ho Van Lam, elected President of Thailand - Vietnam Business Association (2015-2017), is known to succeed in trading the Vietnamese pork rolls and sausages.

materials, etc. They do their business not only within their villages but also in other provinces, and even export to foreign countries.

We would like to introduce a representative of successful Vietnamese entrepreneurs: Mr. To Van Thung, founder of Udorn Samaki Company which specialises in construction (building roads, bridges, airports and hotels, villas). He was praised by many Thai media and press, also received honorable degree of Business Management by Kensington University, Los Angeles (USA). Mr. and Ms. To Van Thung had the honor to be received by His Majesty the King of Thailand and the Queen. Former Prime Minister of Vietnam, Mr. Vo Van Kiet also paid a visit to Mr.Thung's house during his official visit to Thailand.

Not only contributing to the Thailand economy, Mr. Thung is also a generous man who has plenty devotion given to his Vietnam fatherland, especially his hometown in Nam Dinh province. On 6/5/2011 he sent his daughter, Ms. To Thi Loc, to Vietnam to grant 50 millions VND for the construction of the two kindergarten classrooms in the Tram Huong Village, Yen Phong ward, Y Yen district of Nam Dinh province. This was the 20th time Ms. Loc presented her parents' hope to contribute to the development of her homeland in Vietnam (Assc.Prof. Nguyen Quoc Loc, lead author, 2004, Researching on the Vietnamese community in Thailand, HCMC Open University, pg.108-109).

Other outstanding examples are Tran Van Khoa (automobile trading), Nguyen Quang Trung (tole manufacturer), Phan Van Ngoc (school founder), Phan Van Binh (owner jewellery chain shops in Udon Thani), etc. All of them are successful start-up business people, from their empty hands to big asset, with respectable social position and strong voice in the local authority, also a good spiritual assistance and the pride of many overseas Vietnamese.

During his speech at the Thai-Viet Entrepreneurs Forum on 18/10/2015, Mr. Nguyen Quang Trung, Chairman of Thailand - Vietnam Entrepreneurs Association, informed that “In the previous year, the Association received nearly 200 business delegations with more than 300 Vietnamese entrepreneurs in their visits to exploit the market and to seek for trading partnerships. The Association also helped member enterprises to sign commercial contracts with local companies in Vietnam. At present, the Association is encouraging its members to support for the campaign of Vietnamese government about giving priority to Vietnamese products. Many overseas Vietnamese enterprises have imported products from Vietnam to distribute and retail in Thai market, contributed to the trading turnover of the two countries, actively carried out many promotion and advertising activities of enterprises of the two countries, boosting the investment opportunities in Vietnam, especially the direct cooperation between enterprises of the provinces in Vietnam and Thailand.

The political position and affection of the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani for their homeland Vietnam

The relation between Vietnam and Thailand was through ups and downs in the history. However, since 1988, when Mr. Chatichai became Thai Prime Minister, he affirmed the policy of “getting closer and turning Indochine battle field into a promising market” and since 2013 so far, the strategic partnership between the two countries have been upgraded as comprehensive partnership. This milestone broke the ice of the bilateral relation between Vietnam and Thailand in more than 30 years. It is a must to mention the role of overseas Vietnamese. First of all, to attain this achievement, the Vietnamese community in Thailand has to build up a stable position.

"...today, all of you are the citizens of Thailand and have Thai nationality, hence, this is the special relation that brighten the close relationship between Vietnam and Thailand, making it a better solidarity. Nowadays, all Vietnamese Thai people living in Thailand have Thai nationality, marking the blooming of trading partnerships and cooperation between Vietnam and Thailand. There will be no barriers for the development of our bilateral relation", remarked by Mr. Prachuab Chaiyasan, Chairman of the Thailand - Vietnam Friendship Association, at the Thai-Viet Entrepreneurs Forum on 18/10/2015.

Indeed, the Vietnamese community here has continuously developed in all aspects. In particular, the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani is said to well integrate with the local society where they are living, abiding by Thai laws and joining the local culture with Thai people, contributing to the local economy and building up good relations with local authority and residents.

In their core values of Thai culture, the second important thing after Buddhism is the role of money, as quoted in the idiom: *"money is both a fairy and a buddha"*. Therefore, people with prosperous financial background have a strong voice in the community, are respected and appreciated in the society. It is not an exemption for the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani province. In that regard, these successful business people here all have a good position and certain influence to local authority and the Thai government in general. (Petandsugus, n.d.; Soupap, 1975)

"Today, overseas Vietnamese in Thailand have been successful and developed, got rid of poverty. Definitely, all overseas Vietnamese people, as member of Vietnam country, should be prosperous. In order to achieve happiness and a bright future, we should build up a solid

economic foundation, in which the economy of Udon Thani province is the strongest. This means an important position in overseas community, which is the pride of our Vietnamese people when living together with Thai people...", quoted by Mr. Co Van San, Chairman of Vietnam-Thailand Friendship Association.

After settling down their life in the new hometown and building up prestige and trust of local authority in their first stage, the overseas Vietnamese thought of asking the Thai people to buy the land and step by step, they persuaded the authority to support for their project of building the Memorial historical park of Ho Chi Minh in Udon Thani.

"If there had not been for the lobby of local authority and without their support, the overseas Vietnamese could not have built this Memorial park of Ho Chi Minh relics of 2000 square metres in this city, no matter how much money to contribute", Mr. Nguyen Viet Trong, executive member of the Association told us upon our visit to this park on 19/10/2015.

Mr. La Dinh Duc, another executive member of the Association also added: *"nowadays, the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani has a closed relationship with local authority. In term of education, any good students in Vietnam who desire to study abroad in Thailand are eligible to receive full scholarships and sponsorships which cover all living expenses and tuition fees for university degree and post-graduate study in Udon Thani"*²³.

In our interview with overseas Vietnamese here, most of them claimed that the current policy of Thai Government is really good and all Vietnamese are treated equally with the legal rights as any Thai citizens; therefore, the trust and prestige of Vietnamese community have been affirmed strongly in the local authorities.

²³ The fieldwork documents by Phan Thi Hong Xuan on October 17th, 2015.

It is obvious that the trust and prestige of the Vietnamese community in Thailand will help boost the comprehensive partnerships between Vietnam and Thailand, among them is the important economic relation, which is insisted by Mr. Nguyen Quang Trung²⁴: *"In the context of strong, fast globalization and integration and the case of Vietnam in particular, together with big challenges and opportunities, we - overseas Vietnamese entrepreneurs in Thailand, have been actively promoting for enterprises of the two countries, boosting the investment from Vietnam, especially the trading partnerships between small enterprises of the two countries, so as to prepare better for the integration of small and medium enterprises into ASEAN Economic Community in the near future. The Thailand - Vietnam Entrepreneurs Association wants to affirm that all companies in Thailand as well as in Vietnam are not only the linkage but also your companion as of our commitment with the enterprises. We would provide the most favourable conditions and best support to both investors of Thailand as well as Vietnamese ones."*

Through these activities, the overseas Vietnamese in Thailand are the integral part and resource of Vietnam. The Vietnamese community in Thailand is the linkage in politics to boost the good relations between Vietnam and Thailand and serves as the bridge in terms of economy which contributes to the development of the two countries. In recent years, there have been many Vietnamese people in Thailand investing and doing business back in Vietnam. In addition, the overseas Vietnamese in Thailand

²⁴ Speech at the "Thailand - Vietnam Entrepreneurs" seminar in Udon Thani on the afternoon of October 18th, 2015. The forum was participated by former Deputy Prime Minister - Mr. Vu Khoan, the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs, Department of Economy - Science - Technology Relations, Vietnam - Thailand Friendship Association, Vietnam - ASEAN Friendship Association in Ho Chi Minh City, and nearly 200 entrepreneurs from Thailand and Vietnam.

are also the friendship linkage in terms of solidarity and the spirit of sharing and caring responded to charitable campaigns, donations and social activities in Vietnam.

Responding to our questions about their contribution to their homeland Vietnam, the overseas Vietnamese said that every year, they all make donations for victims of natural disasters like floods or typhoons as called on from their homeland. About the fund of the community, they usually divide it into two parts: one half is for Thailand, the place where they have lived and grown up; the other half is for Vietnam, their ancestors' homeland. Mr. Tran Manh Hong, Chairman of the Elderly People Association of Udon Thani, asked us some information about the TV reality show "Conquering yourself" in Vietnam, expressing the hope to send money to help the poor in Vietnam²⁵. This is really a support of greatly financial and spiritual significance, which the overseas Vietnamese community offers to Vietnam.

Conclusion

After 70 years living in Thailand, overcoming many obstacles and difficulties, the Vietnamese group in Udon Thani has developed as a strong community and played an important role and position in the region where they are living, in Thailand and Vietnam alike.

In terms of connecting the community, they have built up many strong and prestigious societies, conducting many practical and useful activities in order to bring the Vietnamese closer with one another, to link the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani and the Vietnamese in different regions throughout Thailand.

²⁵ The documents of interviews by Hoang Nguyen Kieu Ngan on August 12th, 2015 in Udon Thani .

In terms of preserving national cultural identity, the first and second generations in the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani still keep the diverse cultures of Vietnam, in terms of spoken language, daily lifestyles, national costumes, rituals of weddings and funerals, ancestor worshipping, paying respect to President Ho Chi Minh by erecting his portrait at home and celebrating his birthday anniversary on May 19, as well as other new year celebrations and National Independence Day on September 2. Despite the impacts of the acculturation and cross-cultural interactions, with the rational choice, the third and fourth generations of the overseas Vietnamese almost no longer use the Vietnamese language or understand the Vietnamese cultural values as comprehensively as the first and second ones. However, they are trying to preserve the Vietnamese culture by keeping daily meals and community festivals, attending the Vietnamese language classes, wearing Ao Dai on national holidays of the two countries.

In terms of economy and politics, the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani-the hub of the overseas Vietnamese in Thailand, has definitely made a respectable role in economy and politics and offered many job opportunities and employments for the residents, making a considerable contribution to the development of Udon Thani province and Thailand. Together with the oversea Vietnamese in other provinces, they are continually building up and promoting the role of Thai-Viet Entrepreneurs Association, connecting the Vietnamese entrepreneurs in all over Thailand, building up good relations with local authorities and representatives of the Vietnamese government in Thailand, joining many cultural, economic and political exchange programs of the both countries. All these activities have been boosting the comprehensive development of the relations and cooperations between Vietnam and Thailand.

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