

Trans-ethnicity and the Socialist Urbanization of Dien Bien Phu

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ABSTRACT

Dien Bien Phu is located in a marginal area of the once powerful state between SipSong PanNa (China), LuangPrabang (Lao PDR) and Vietnam. It was once the center of SipSong Chau Tai, where the ethnic Tai, then the majority, dominated the area. Local ethnic power was later replaced by the French colonial administration. During the French period, conflicts between ethnic groups intensified, particularly between the black Tai and the White Tai, who wanted to take over Muang Thang (Tai name of Dien Bien Phu), which was traditionally governed by the family of the Black Tai leader. The White Tai, who gained the support of the French, and with that, all the benefits and privileges, had conflicts with other ethnic groups, especially the Hmong, who once benefited from the opium-trade in this area. This gave incentive to the montagnards to side against the White Tai and French and join the “popular participation” of the Viet Minh, which eventually led to a victory over the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This was the beginning of the era that gave rise to the modern-state of Vietnam.

In the construction of the modern Vietnamese nation state, traditional administration by local Tai ethnic groups in Dien Bien Phu was passed to the Vietnamese political system, including socio-cultural systems. In the 1960s, there was a mass migration of Vietnamese peoples to the mountainous areas spurred by the government’s policies on land and agricultural reformation. The state policies called for the reformation of land use and the means of agricultural production. Ethnic peoples were incorporated into the national economy, assimilating in the way of socialist development and market economic processes. Notably, as a result of the renovation policy of 1986, the country opened its doors to global economic processes. Moreover, the district of Dien Bien Phu was upgraded to be a new province in 2004. It became the neo-urban of the new borderline city of Vietnam. This has caused the socialist urbanization in Dien Bien Phu to develop significantly.

This anthropological study will propose the complexity of the relationship between the local, the state and the global in the process of socialist urbanization and Vietnamization. From this situation, the local ethnic population tries to negotiate with the new-coming Vietnamese people in this area as the interplay between center and local, and local and global. The transitional socio-cultural process in Dien Bien Phu will show a good example of trans-ethnicity among these people in contemporary Vietnam.

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