

# CULTURAL HARMONY BETWEEN TAI LUE LANGUAGE AND IDENTITIES OF BAAN THIN TAI LUE, PHRAE PROVINCE\*

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## Abstract

Language is one of the most significant markers of ethnic identification and it has played a crucial role not only in the external perception of an ethnic group by outsiders but also in the self-identification of an ethnic group. It symbolizes identities and it is used to signal identities by those who speak them. Northern Thai dialects and cultures are important since they are the sources of knowledge, culture, traditions, and local wisdom. This article aims to present the cultural harmony between Tai Lue language and the identities of Baan Thin Tai Lue, regarded as the Tai Lue community of Phrae province. More details of Baan Thin Tai Lue are presented in the introduction and passages below to show how it is related and linked in harmony with Tai Lue language.

**Keywords** : Cultural Harmony; Tai Lue Language; Identities of Baan Thin Tai Lue; Phrae Province

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## Introduction

Every culture has its own unique patterns of behavior. These patterns of behavior have been applied to determine an individual's social role and the social role of others in order to understand and formulate self-concept. An individual's sense of identity consists of their view of themselves in comparison with others and the opinion they believe other people may have about them. The sense of identity enables an individual to categorize oneself into a group, to experience belonging to a group, and identify oneself with members of the group.

The Tai Lue people, like other ethnic groups, have their own spoken and written languages. Tai Lue language belongs to the group of Tai languages. The vocabulary used in Tai Lue is mostly dialect or traditional Tai terminology, with few complex meanings. The use of Tai Lue language highlights its particular linguistic landscape as it most directly contributes to its social identity.

Baan Thin Tai Lue is one of the residential areas of Tai Lue people who migrated from Mueang Yong, Xishuangbanna 200 years ago, settling in new areas among other ethnic groups. Their language, cultures, traditions, beliefs, and the inhabitant's lifestyle are all rooted in the identities of Baan Thin Tai Lue of Phrae province. These identities also originate from their unique settlement stories. Tai Lue people have been the producers of wood carving products. Besides, the women are renowned for their expertise in the various stages of traditional woven fabric such as spinning, weaving, dyeing, and embroidery.

All identity features of Tai Lue community of Phrae province have always been recognized and transcended throughout Baan Thin sub-district. Its uniqueness is presented in the following local slogan: Baan Thin Tai Lue, renowned valuable antiques, venerable Jao Khun O-Pas, Thin Than pagoda, cross-border trade, and people in harmony. It is not only contributing to the awareness of community identity, but it is also beneficial for the conservation of Tai Lue community in Phrae province during the present changing world society.

## The Relationship between the Language and Culture

As language reflects human beliefs, realities, and actions within a social community, both language learners and users should have a solid understanding of how language and culture interact. Salzman (2001) claimed that understanding the surrounding culture is essential for language learning since it is related to all features of human life in society.

Language and culture have a complex, homologous relationship. Language and culture are intricately intertwined. They have changed over time, affecting one another and eventually defining what it means to be human. According to Azizakhon (2022, p.11), culture began when speech existed, and ever since, the advancement of one resulted in the advancement of the other. Guessabi (2013, p.17) pointed out that a speech community is made up of all the messages we communicate with one another while speaking a particular language, that is, the whole society understood from the point of view of speaking. He further explained that all children learn their languages through their societies, and during the process of learning a language also learn their culture and develop their cognitive abilities.

Silverstein (2022, p.82) proposed that the communicative force of culture works not only in linking one context to another, but also portraying many aspects of reality. That is, communication is not only the use of symbols to represent beliefs, feelings, identities, or events, it is also a way of bringing beliefs, feelings, and identities into the present context. Language and culture are homologous mental realities. Cultural products are representations and interpretations of the world that must be communicated in order to be lived. Therefore, to speak is to assume a culture, and to know a culture is like knowing a language.

According to Ken Hale (2013, p.17), a piece of culture is also lost when a language loses. It is because culture has a strong influence on the language. This idea is also supported by Salzmann (2018) who claimed that language is a key to a society's cultural past and a guide to social reality. Therefore, an

appreciation for the relationship between language and culture can help to illuminate the diversity of views held toward the use of language.

It can be concluded that culture and language share human beliefs, realities, and actions within a social community. As a result, there is a relationship between culture and language.

### **Local Language maintenance**

The term “language maintenance” is closely intertwined with the term “language shift” in the field of language contact research. The latter refers to the change of ethnic language use by migrants due to the influence of the mainstream language while the term “language maintenance” means the use of ethnic language in some or all aspects of life in the host society in spite of the influence of mainstream language (Hill, 1998). There are many factors relating to local language maintenance.

The first of all is the role of the family at home since the family has close control of the children in terms of communication and transmission of the community language. According to Clyne (2013, p.39), language will not survive another generation unless transmitted in the home or within the family. Besides, the family environment is a motivating factor in the promotion of successful intergenerational maintenance of the community language.

Research had shown that the geographical concentration of community languages in a particular area was one factor that helped maintain the local language. Fishman (2001) argued that community languages were better well-maintained by minority groups who were more concentrated within certain geographical areas than those that were more dispersed. Fishman (2001, p.33) pointed out that, “the smaller the size of a community, the stronger the threat of language shift and death”. Lee (2004, p.18) noted that the geographical concentration of the community in one area allows for the increase of daily interaction and use of the community language outside of the private domain, unlike the dispersed community where the community language was associated

with the home domain only. In addition, Holmes (2013, pp.3-10) found that Chinese, who were living in Chinatowns in the US, were more likely to maintain the Chinese language than those who had left the Chinatown areas.

The maintenance and retention of one's identity have played an important role in the maintenance of the local language. As pointed out by Fishman (1989, p.21), the minority language was an important tool for expressing cultural heritage and ethnic identity. Similarly, Cavallaro (2005, p.36) noted that language was the key factor representing ethnic identity in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Therefore, there seems to be a strong connection between language and identity. The destruction of a language is the destruction of a rooted identity (Fishman,1989, p.28).

In addition, speakers' positive attitude towards community languages is regarded as a factor that can help to maintain the local language. The study by Al-Nahar (2009) investigated language maintenance among the Armenians of Jordan. The results indicated that the Armenians had positive attitudes towards the Armenian language since it was regarded as the most beautiful and useful language and it reflected Armenian identity. Similarly, Dweik et al. (2014, pp.91-94) found that the Arabic-speaking community of Vancouver had positive attitudes toward learning and speaking the Arabic language. They believed that their language was the most prestigious language since it was the language of the holy Qur'an.

The use of a community language in education is a significant factor in local language maintenance since it contributes to developing and maintaining a language. Rouchdy (2013, pp.6-12) conducted a study of the Arabic language among Arab Americans. The results revealed the importance of teaching Arabic as a foreign language in some public schools as well as the increase in enrolments in Arabic classes at universities. The third factor was supported by the study of Gomaa (2011, pp. 114-125) on the maintenance and transmission of Egyptian Arabic. It was found that a higher educational level of the participants was among the essential factors for maintaining the Arabic language. He also pointed out that well-educated parents were more likely to be aware of the importance of Arabic for Egyptian and Islamic identity. Besides,

well-educated parents had a positive attitude towards the maintenance of their community language.

To sum up, all the language maintenance factors mentioned in this section are seen to be essential for the retention and transmission of the local language when it was in constant contact with the majority language. The availability of some of these factors had a great impact on the intergenerational transmission of local languages. These factors seem to work better and are in favor of language maintenance when they are combined with each other. For instance, the role of the family at home was crucial for the maintenance of the community language but needs to be supported by other factors such as the role of the community.

## **History of Tai Lue community of Phrae Province**

Tai Lue community of Phrae province has unique settlement stories. They migrated from Xishuangbanna, the region in the south of Yunnan province, China. The main cause of their migration was the war. The majority of them were captured in order to serve in the military. During their military service, they stayed in Bann Tin village in Yong city, which its cultures and traditions were similar to Baan Thin sub-district of Phrae province. After the war, they settled in the area of Pa Sang, Lamphun, considered a part of Chiang Mai. In 1802, the Burmese army attracted Tai Lue people of Pa Sang. They fled from the Burmese invasion and settled in the abundant land in Ko Sai city (the previous name of Phrae province), later their new settlement was named Bann Thin village. Later, this area was divided into 4 villages, consisting of Baan Lao Nua, Baan Lao Tai, Baan Lao Klang, and Baan Nai. Each village had a leader, called “Lak Baan”. There was also “Pu Kwean”, which means head of a group of villages.

Nowadays, Baan Thin or Bann Thin Tai Lue is a cultural destination that encourages visitors to experience the traditions, language, clothing styles, and other facets of the ethnic group’s lifestyle. This Tai Lue community has temples, attractions, and culinary delights, representing their cultural identities.

## Tai Lue Language

Language is a symbol of national identity, the Tai Lue language is similar to Lao and Thai, and is also close to the northern Thai dialect. The Tai Lue language belongs to the Tai-Kadai language group. It has been spoken in China, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. In Thailand, this language is usually written traditional script, which is similar to the Lanna script of Northern Thailand. However, the majority of Thai and Laos people have little knowledge of Tai Lue script, except when the traditional script is preserved in the monasteries.

Although both Lanna and central Thai languages are used to communicate in daily life, people in Bann Thin sub-district still maintain their oral history, they use Tai Lue language in daily communication. This spoken language is used by most families in the community and it is especially popular among adults and the elderly. For example, they use the word “Kok” which means “coconut shell” in English instead of “Kala” (central Thai language). They use the word “Sai Hung” which means the belt in English instead of using “Khem Kad” (central Thai language). In addition, there is a village song which calls “Moo Hao Chao Bann Thin”, representing the mindset of Tai Lue’s previous generations. It also illustrates their rural lifestyle in harmony with nature and Buddhist beliefs. It can be interpreted as follows.

Moo Hao Chao Baan Thin (We are Bann Thin villagers.)

Tham Kin Nai Tang Son Meng (We do right livelihood.)

Tong Seng Keun Doi Long Kao (We walk up and down the mountains.)

Ngan Nak Moo Hao Soo Tai (We are hard workers.)

Khum Sat Tang Lai Mee Ngo Kwai Loor Lar Maar Thang

(We take care of cattle. We have many cows, buffalos, mules, donkeys, and horses.)

Tor Pai Ja Mai Non Kang (We no longer sleep in the forest for a night.)

OOK Jak Pang Kai Meng Tun Tee (We come out of the forest for work.)

OOK Ma Kang Nee Por Dee Ma Jur Paa Phaa (There is Thod Phapa ceremony.)

Kor Por Mae Naa Aaa Jeur Tan Ma Roum Tham Boon (Let’s make merit together.)

Tham Boon Soon Than Wang Nib Phan Nai Chat Na

(We make merit to reach Nirvana in our next life.)

## Lifestyle

Tai Lue people of Baan Thin sub-district, Phrae province are primarily farmers. They cultivate a wide variety of crops, such as rice, fruit, and vegetables, for both consumption and trade. They frequently trade meat and vegetables for necessary items. They are also good silversmiths. The women's specialties are weaving and embroidery. Traditionally, Tai Lue men wore blue jackets, dark blue bell trousers with bands of red, yellow, or white, and large white turbans. The women wear light blue embroidered jackets adorned with small silver pieces. They also wear red or scarlet skirts and turbans.

## Government

Tai Lue people regard the village as the most important political unit in society. A headman leads each village, and a father leads each family. There was a head of a group of villages called “Pu Kwean” Each village had a leader, called “Lak Baan”.

## Architecture

Their traditional architecture is widely recognized. The home without nails is a distinctive feature of Tai Lue architecture. Their house is usually constructed with tropical hardwood such as teak, Siamese sal, and Burmese sal. The Tai Lue style windows are in a form of sliding windows, called “Pra Too Phong”. The number of steps for a staircase should always be odd (7 or 9). It is believed that if the number of stairs linking two stories is even, this house belongs to the dead. The bedroom is regarded as their private room in which the bed faces towards the east to avoid the death position. According to Tai Lue tradition, they hang white or red curtains as room dividers. The flower-printed fabric is also used as curtains.



Besides, there are some wooden temples situated in their community. Their wooden temples are situated in a prominent location and are often decorated with mirrors and paintings.

## **Beliefs**

Most Tai Lue professes to be Buddhist. However, most of them have mixed elements of Buddhism with their traditional animistic beliefs (the belief that non-living objects have spirits), known as “Phee”. They often seek help through supernatural spirits and objects. Besides, ancestor worship (praying to deceased ancestors for provision and guidance) is also common. If it is not appeased, their ancestral spirits cause illnesses. The people also believe that each village has a guardian spirit, as well as various spirits that are linked to the elements of nature.

## **Conclusion**

Language and culture have developed together and it has played influenced role each other as they evolved. When people interact with another language, it means that they are interacting with the culture that speaks the language. Tai Lue language, regarded as an asset of Baan Thin sub-district’s cultural identities, is a very unique dialect language spoken within Tai Lue community of Phrae province. It represents the social values, perceptions, and identities of Tai Lue culture. The cultural harmony between Tai Lue language and the identities of Baan Thin Tai Lue is the way in which Tai Lue people of Phrae province share human values, realities, and behaviors. Therefore, they feel proud to celebrate their linguistic and cultural solidarity as language establishes the system of representation and transmission of cultures over the generations.

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