

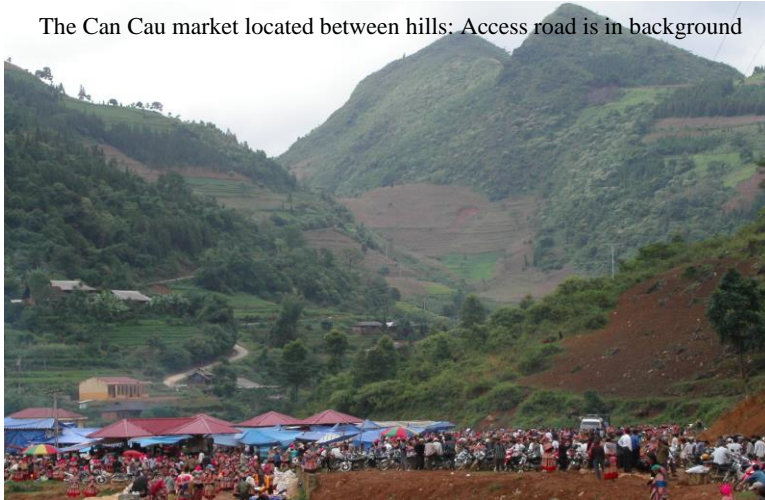
ETHNIC MINORITY MARKET OF SI MA CAI, NORTHERN HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM

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Preamble: *The Can Cau market in Si Ma Cai district, northern Vietnam is a traditional market of the Red Mhong ethnic minority. The Mhongs have been living here for several generations and, the market itself caters mainly for their needs. This is one of the few ethnic markets with its traditional style, glamour and color even today.*

Location: The district of Si Ma Cai is in Lao Cai Province, a mountainous province of northern Vietnam. The district has a common border with China. Si Ma Cai can be reached in about 2-3

The Can Cau market located between hills: Access road is in background



hours of drive from the provincial capital City of Lao Cai. The daily passenger bus service between Si Ma Cai and provincial capital takes a bit longer. Lao Cai to Si Ma Cai road is bitumen surfaced and travels up on the mountain on a winding journey. Si Ma Cai terrain is mountainous where elevation rises up to 2,000 meters.

Population in Si Ma Cai District in 2005 was 26,500 residents living in 13 communes, each of which has several villages. Total number of villages in the district

is 90. The total households are 5,088 of which 4,776 are ethnic minority people that belong to 7 main ethnic minority groups. Of all households, 77% are of Mhong ethnic minority while all ethnic minorities in the district add up to 99 percent of residents. It is for this reason that this district is known as Mhong people's home. Poverty rate among Mhong people is high with over 70 percent reported as poor. Monthly income of poor household is below 200,000 Dong (US \$ = 16,000 Dong).

Mhong ethnic minority: This ethnic minority is commonly known as the flower Mhong due to their head cover which resembles a "flower". The traditional dress of Mhong women is colourful, attractive and provides protection against cooler climate up in the mountains. Traditional dress in fact, is their day-to-day attire too, being worn while at work, out in the field, at home, visiting outside and, of course to visit the market.



The markets: The district of Si Ma Cai has 3 markets of which important one for Red Mhong minority people is at Can Cau, just before reaching the main town centre traveling from Lao Cai City. The market is held every Saturday from about 6 am to 2 pm. The market performs a variety of roles in the lifestyles of the Mhong people, besides being a trading platform.



The Can Cau ethnic minority market is not just a market only. It is the main centre for Mhong people's selling, buying, social interactions and a meeting place.

This article is based on a brief assessment of ethnic minority people in the Vietnam Highlands, carried out by the author in 2007

What is put up for sale? Can Cau market offers any thing and everything in the life of Mhong people. Among the items for sale are food and beverages (cooked and colourful varieties of rice, meals, fruits, vegetables, beverages including local wine), clothes (the traditional clothes with several parts attached), handicrafts produced by Mhong, other household goods, spices (chilies, medicines) and cattle. Household goods include all items used in a Mhong home, some brought in from neighboring China. A large area in the market is dedicated for sale of Mhong clothes, mainly for women.

Clothes made by old Mhong women are purchased by young. Mhong women from different villages around market place flock to purchase their clothes that are woven by older members of their group. Except for handicrafts (which is for tourists), all items for sale in the market are important for Mhong people. Animals are purchased both by Mhong as well as others who come from outside. Sale of cattle and buffaloes is an important source of cash for Mhong people. Ethnic minority people sell their cattle when they need cash for house repair, to buy fertilizer, etc. Buffalo husbandry is a popular livestock activity among Mhong people.

Who visit the market? The majority (nearly 90%) of visitors to the market are Mhong people themselves, women, men and children. Young and old visit market to sell goods, socialize as well as to purchase commodities needed. Almost all mothers carry their little ones to the market tied



on to their back. It is interesting to see that the market has a red glamour because the majority of sellers and buyers in Can Cua market are Mhong people.

A new trend in the market place is increasing numbers of overseas tourists, both to experience market as well as to buy Mhong handicrafts. A few Mhong women are seen selling their handicrafts to tourists, an activity likely to grow in the future. Most Mhong handicrafts can be purchased at the market for a fraction of a dollar that one pays to purchase the same item in town.

The wall decorator clothes are half the price for an identical piece in other towns in the Province.

Why do Mhong people visit market? Mhong people visit the market to purchase what they need in their living including food, spices, fruits, etc. The second reason is to sell whatever they have, in excess of own consumption. Almost all Mhong women carry something to sell in the market. The local wine is prepared and sold by Mhong women themselves, leaving direct cash in their hands. A liter of alcohol is sold for Vietnamese Dong 8,000 (approximately US Cents 50). The sale of several items such as cooked (and colourful) rice, spices, Mhong clothes, fruits centers on women.

The third important role of Can Cau market is socialization. It is the place for them to meet each other, talk and to partake a meal together. This they do



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every week. In the meantime, they enjoy food, taste new food items such as popsicles introduced from outside, and see what is around in the market place. It is a day away from hard work out in the field. In fact, for the majority of Mhong people, visit to the market is an important activity in their weekly schedule. Almost all of the people including the women spend the entire day out in the market, socializing and enjoying with their friends. For some women, visit to the market means walk across difficult terrain for about 3 - 4 hours from their remote villages and a similar length of time to return home, on mid-day, having spent time at Can Cau. It is possible that Can Cau market has an important function in organizing their annual Say Son cultural festival in Si Ma Cai which is held in the lunar month.

Mhong sellers are confined to the outskirts, operating from temporary stalls or from the bear ground. The proper, mainly permanent stalls, are occupied by other minority traders such as the Tae as well as dominant Kinh people. It would be interesting to investigate why Mhongs do not want to sell from proper stalls in their market.

What will help develop Mhong? The improvement of access roads will have a tremendous impact on the life of ethnic minority people, particularly those living in areas of difficult access. Roads in general, will help bring in social services such as health and agriculture, will have positive impacts on the minority people. The low level of the Mhong people's interactions with the wider segment of the society is a reflection of their custom to congregate with themselves. Investigations into their culture, needs, aspirations and livelihoods are needed in order to recognize what improvements are needed and what approaches are likely to be successful among ethnic minority people.



A research agenda!: The low level of contacts between Mhong and the people in the wider society, mainly due to not being able to speak and understand Vietnamese, makes Mhong "invisible" to be contacted by government programs and development work. Moreover, because of their tendency to congregate within their own people, it is difficult to understand their culture and the needs "from outside". In fact, there is only very little

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first-hand knowledge already known about the Mhong's livelihoods strategies and their socio-cultural aspects. Many unknown than the little known to explain their goals and what in deed can be done from outside to help them develop, without harming their identity. It is therefore utmost important that further investigations are made to understand their culture, needs, aspirations and livelihoods. In this regard, several topics are suggested for further research:

- ◆ Health status of women and children and factors contributing to them
- ◆ Nutrition status of children and expectant mothers
- ◆ Significance of crops, livestock and forest in their livelihoods and what is needed to support these aspects?
- ◆ What are the main barriers to their livelihood enhancements
- ◆ Basis for Mhong's interactions with natural resources
- ◆ Customs, rituals and cults in Mhong culture
- ◆ Socio-cultural and economic needs



An elderly woman selling cooked rice



Mhong women selling chillies



The old and young

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