

**Between the Diaspora and the Nation-State:
Transnational Continuity and Fragmentation
among Hmong in Laos and the United States**

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ABSTRACT

Based on fourteen-months of multi-sited, ethnographic fieldwork that compares two Hmong communities in Vang Vieng, Laos, and Sacramento, California in the United States, my doctoral thesis examines how the Hmong diaspora is constituted in the absence of a territorial ethnic homeland. Although scholars claim that the Hmong originated in the southwestern part of China, many Hmong are uncertain about their origins and have lost their connections to the ancestral homeland. This thesis suggests we examine diasporas as a dialectical process involving both transnational continuity and national differentiation. Despite their further migratory dispersal after the Vietnam War, Hmong in Laos and the United States have actively created a transnational diasporic community by maintaining their cultural practices across national borders, particularly in the domains of kinship practices and spiritual rituals.

At the same time, diasporic Hmong have also created partial 'homes' in the nation-states where they reside. Therefore, their ethnic traditions and perceptions are transformed according to different national contexts, such as local socioeconomic conditions, state policies, and access to economic capital. This results in cultural differences within the diaspora. In addition, Hmong in different countries disagree about their relative position in the diaspora in relation to each other, leading to discursive fragmentation. As a result, diasporas are refracted through different national affiliations.

Nonetheless, the sense of national belonging among diasporic Hmong remains partial because they continue to experience social, economic, and ethnic marginalization as an ethnic minority group in both Laos and the United States, which causes them to maintain a diasporic affiliation to Hmong scattered in other countries as an alternative source of ethnic belonging. In this sense, the Hmong are constantly positioned 'in-between' the diaspora and the nation-state.

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Introduction

Conceptualizing Hmong and Diasporas

Although scholars claim that the Hmong originated somewhere in the southwestern part of China, many Hmong have expressed considerable uncertainty about their ethnic origins and have lost their transnational connections to the ancestral ethnic homeland. Their migratory dispersal from China to various countries in Southeast Asia occurred centuries ago, followed by their more recent forced migration after the Vietnam War and resettlement in various countries as refugees.

However, despite the absence of a territorial ethnic homeland that unifies their diaspora, Hmong in Laos and the United States have developed various transnational relationships and maintained their diasporic community through the transnational continuity of cultural practices and socioeconomic interactions across national borders since their dispersal after the Vietnam War (1955-1975). These include economic activities, such as money transfers and circulation of ethnic goods and products, transnational social interactions, and shared cultural practices including traditional funerals, spiritual rituals, and the New Year celebrations, all of which are based on kinship networks.

At the same time, Hmong have created 'homes' to a certain extent in the various nation-states in which they have resided after their resettlement following the Vietnam War. This has caused their cultural traditions and practices to be reshaped and transformed according to different national contexts, such as local socioeconomic conditions, state cultural policies, and access to economic capital in each country. As a result, Hmong's transnational relationships and ethnic perceptions toward each other become inevitably divergent as they are refracted through different, albeit partial, national affiliations which are in turn, positioned in a hierarchical global order.

This thesis is based on fourteen-months of multi-sited, comparative ethnographic fieldwork with two Hmong diasporic communities in Vang Vieng, Laos, and Sacramento, California in the United States, which have developed and maintained active transnational

relationships across national borders. My thesis focuses on the transnational ethnic and cultural continuities in the Hmong diaspora as well as their cultural differentiation and discursive fragmentation influenced by various national differences. In sum, the transnational continuity and ethnic consciousness among Hmong coexists with significant differences and disagreements primarily shaped by the nation-states in which they reside.

Nonetheless, their sense of national belonging remains incomplete because they continue to experience social, economic, and ethnic marginalization as an ethnic minority group in these local contexts, which further causes them to maintain a diasporic affiliation to Hmong scattered in other countries as an alternative source of ethnic belonging. In this sense, the Hmong are constantly positioned ‘in-between’ the diaspora and the nation-state. This in-between-ness is an essential part of the Hmong’s diasporic condition.

The Diasporic Condition: Belonging *Beyond* and *Within* Nation-States

The concept of the ‘Hmong diaspora’ involves the juxtaposition of two words that may initially appear incompatible. On the one hand, the ‘Hmong’ people, especially in the past, have often been represented as an isolated and localized ‘hill tribe’ with a distinctive ‘traditional culture’ at the margins of the nation-state in Southeast Asia and China (Symonds 2004; Tapp 1988; Yang 2009; Young 1969). On the other hand, in more recent literature, they have also been represented as a diaspora (Pfeifer et al. 2013; Tapp and Lee 2004; Vang 2010), a more contemporary notion which celebrates transnational mobility, cultural fluidity, and the hybridity of identity (Axel 2000; Braziel and Mannur 2003: 234; Clifford 1994; Hall 1990: 235; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996: 8; Malkki 1992).

How are these two contradictory scholarly representations of the Hmong people to be reconciled? Are the Hmong a village or tribal people to be understood in specific localized contexts within nation-states or are they a diasporic and deterritorialized people who transcend nations and reside in transnational communities? In my thesis, I argue that these two different conceptualizations of the Hmong people are not necessarily incompatible. The

Hmong do live in a diaspora scattered across various countries and retain transnational social connections and ethnic cultural continuities that cannot be subsumed within specific nation-states. Their diaspora is also not anchored by a specific nation-state that they identify as an ethnic homeland.

Nonetheless, the Hmong also reside in nation-states, and these localized national contexts structure their ethnic experiences and produce affiliations and cultural differentiations that can fragment their diaspora. These different national conditions, such as local socioeconomic living conditions as well as cultural and political influences, have caused their ethnic traditions to be reshaped and transformed and have also led to national affiliations and localized differentiations that hierarchically order their diasporic community.

Therefore, although I also represent the Hmong as diasporic, it is important to recognize that diaspora should not be used simply as an academic label for a group of people. Instead, we need to specifically investigate what makes a certain ethnic group diasporic. The diasporic condition involves not only a migratory history of dispersal, but the continued maintenance of a strong collective ethnic consciousness and transnational communities through cohesive ties to co-ethnics living in other countries. It is therefore important to remember that even Hmong in the past were not completely isolated, tribal hill people but have retained their cultural mobility across national borders and developed transnational connections to a certain extent.

The classic scholarly definition of diaspora refers to a community of displaced people who experienced political or religious persecution and exile, which caused them to disperse from their ethnic homeland to multiple geographic regions around the world (Clifford 1994; Cohen 1997; Harris 1993: 34; Safran 1991; Tölölyan 1996). Some scholars point out that the classic definition of diaspora is limited and should be expanded to understand other causes and types of diaspora in the world (Clifford 1994; Cohen 1997). The

cause of modern diasporas is not just political persecution or coercion, but can also involve a complicated combination of multiple factors including voluntary migration.

For example, Cohen (1997) argues that in addition to classic or victim diasporas, which fit Safran's initial notion of diaspora, there are also economic or labor diasporas (e.g. the Indian and Chinese diasporas), imperial or colonial diasporas (e.g. the British diaspora), as well as cultural diasporas (e.g. the Caribbean diaspora). The development of the concept of diaspora provides a broader understanding of the reasons and causes of people's dispersal and diasporic movement in the contemporary world.

Scholars have commonly agreed that defining diaspora is difficult and differentiating it from the concept of transnationalism can be challenging. It is partly because the two theoretical concepts are not completely independent but are related, especially when looking at groups of people defined as 'diasporic' and/or 'transnational'. According to a widely known definition, transnationalism provides a theoretical and analytical framework for how immigrants 'forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement' (Basch et al. 1994: 7). In general, transnational connections of immigrants consist of those between the immigrant-receiving host country and the immigrant-sending home country (the homeland), which enable interactions between people residing in the two countries across national borders. Much of the immigration literature analyzes transnational relations from this dual, homeland and host country framework.

In contrast, because diasporas are based on a 'dispersal' of ethnic populations from their original homeland to multiple nation-states, this expands the geographic coverage of cross-border transnational ties. Therefore, diasporas involve transnational interactions and affiliations between the ethnic homeland and numerous migrant communities scattered across a number of countries. In addition to these centripetal homeland ties, diasporas are also constituted by lateral transnational relations between dispersed co-ethnic communities in these various countries. Not all transnational communities consist of such extensive

geographical dispersal based on experiences of group exile and displacement. Diaspora and transnationalism are not interchangeable in this regard.

In a similar context, scholars differentiate diaspora from transnationalism by emphasizing the cohesive relationships among the dispersed diasporic communities held together by ‘a distinctive, active solidarity, as well as by relatively dense social relationships, that cut across state boundaries and link members of the diaspora in different states into a single “transnational community”’ (Brubaker 2005: 6). Brubaker, following on earlier studies of diaspora, argues that diaspora should consist of dispersal, maintenance of a homeland orientation, and continuation of active transnational relationships between these multiple communities. In this sense, diaspora involves geographic scattering and disconnection but also the creation of subsequent transnational connections not only between people in the homeland and co-ethnic communities abroad, but between these dispersed communities as well.

It is also possible that transnational ties are weaker among diasporic communities compared to traditional immigrant communities because they are most geographically extensive and multifaceted. In her book about the Indian diaspora residing in the United States and the United Kingdom, Sandhya Shukla (2003: 12) differentiates between transnationalism of immigrant communities, which involve more active ‘crossing [of] national boundaries’ whereas diasporas seem to have a lesser degree of cross-national interactions or activities after the initial dispersal. In addition, transnational ties in diasporic communities may also weaken more quickly over time. Indeed, some scholars point out the possible ‘erosion’ or ceasing of diasporas because of the permanent return of diasporic communities to their homeland (see Van Hear 1998). As argued in this thesis, although Hmong in Laos and the United States have retained strong lateral transnational relationships to each other, they lost their centripetal connections to the ethnic homeland long ago.

The literature on homeland and belonging among diasporic peoples has mostly analyzed diasporic ethnic minorities in the context of their complex relationships to the nation-states in which they reside, and their former ethnic homeland (their country of ancestral/ethnic origin). These theoretical perspectives often analyze how diasporic communities are not always fully attached to nation-states as territorially bounded entities. They shift the academic focus to people in motion, their detailed cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Coutin 2003; Siu 2005; Vertovec 2011) the limits of national citizenship (Ong 2006[1999]; Siu 2001; Soysal 1994), and the impact of a globalized world that allows people to move beyond national borders (Appadurai 1988, 1996).

According to some scholars, diasporas are deterritorialized groups which cannot be sufficiently understood through territorialized nation-states. For instance, in his study of the 'postmodern diasporic identity' of different political Sikh communities, Brian Axel (2000: 22-24) notes that most diaspora studies ultimately 'say very little about the diaspora as a form of belonging and peoplehood' and that they should look at 'diaspora as diaspora'. His view seems to imply that the analysis of diasporas needs to overcome even a minimal examination of the nation-state as a destination of a diasporized people's belonging.

However, such perspectives do not fully consider how diasporic people are still physically residing in specific national territories and develop a sense of diasporic belonging that is not completely free from the nation-state. In fact, scholars have also expressed concern about the overt emphasis on the 'borderless' status of refugees, immigrants, and diasporic peoples in their studies (Hindess 2004; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Sparke 2004: 278; Wahlbeck 2002: 233). They critically discuss the problems of overly celebrating the supposedly empowering ability of diasporic people to transcend the national boundaries (see also Gerson 2001), which risks condemning them to a permanent, liminal and stateless condition.

In fact, other scholars have been concerned about studies that overemphasize diasporic states since they tend to ignore the adjustment and cooperation of diasporized ethnic minorities with host nations, and make it sound like these people are ‘uncooperative and not capable’ of succeeding in national contexts (see Wong 1995). However, such perspectives also unintentionally lead to the position that diasporic ethnic minorities are always doomed to be under the control of the state’s integration policies and interact with the state as an object rather than as a subject.

While valuing those critical approaches, I constantly recognize the importance of having a balanced stance toward a theory of diaspora, since I also do not wish to ignore the increasing power of borderless conditions that certain groups of people do clearly and predominantly experience. If the relationship between the nation-state and the diaspora is always viewed as antagonistic, this undermines the profound impact of diaspora on the nation-state and fails to explain the pervasive coexistence of both ethnic minority statuses at the national level and diasporic identity at the transnational level.

Throughout my thesis, I demonstrate that diasporic communities’ transnational affiliations across national borders and their commitments are not always in conflict with the sense of national belonging to host countries. This is readily apparent when we consider the establishment and development of diasporic belonging among a group of people which have been dispersed from their ethnic homeland. As will be revealed in my ethnographic work, diasporic people do not deny their sense of belonging to a territorial nation-state, when thinking about their current home or former homelands. In short, one can adopt a partial sense of national belonging *within* the nation-state’s territorial boundaries while simultaneously maintaining transnational diasporic connections and cultures *beyond* national borders.

The Distinctiveness of the Hmong Diaspora

There are a number of unique features that make the Hmong diaspora distinctive from other types of diasporas. Unlike many other diasporas, Hmong have not developed a collective diasporic affiliation to a specific territorial nation-state of ethnic origin or expressed desire to establish a new one. As a result, they do not commonly share a vision to return to a specific ancestral homeland. In other words, Hmong are a diasporic group who have developed a 'homing desire' (shown by their continued search to identify the location of their ethnic homeland), instead of a 'desire for the homeland' (returning to or regaining one) (Brah 1996: 180). In this case, the lack of and uncertainty about their territorial ethnic homeland serves as the fundamental basis for constructing a collective ethnic consciousness across the diaspora. Cultures, practices, and identities that are shared across the diaspora do not always emanate from a country of ancestral origin, but are maintained, developed, and transformed within the various countries in which diasporic Hmong live.

Therefore, what keeps the Hmong diaspora together is 'people' rather than a territorial national entity. In fact, diasporas can be maintained through continuities in kinship and specific cultural practices which persist across different nation-states and not simply based on transnational connections and affiliations to a shared ethnic homeland. While many studies of diaspora focus on diaspora-homeland relations, my research examines how co-ethnic diasporic communities dispersed in different countries maintain transnational cultural and social ties with each other.

As the Hmong have taken their ethnic traditions and culture to the various countries to which they have dispersed, these practices have become transformed in the specific national contexts in which they are deployed and enacted. Although traditions are often seen by local peoples as based on an unchanging continuity with an authentic past and homeland, they are constantly subject to change and modification through time and space. Therefore, diasporic Hmong are subject to their local socioeconomic conditions, national cultures, and ideologies, producing considerable differentiation in kinship, ethnic identity, and various

cultural practices in the Hmong diaspora. In so doing, Hmong also affiliate themselves with the various nation-states in which they reside and hierarchically position themselves in relation to their co-ethnics in other countries. In fact, when diasporic peoples compare their lives with their co-ethnics in different countries, they consider their country better and increase their affiliation with it. This leads to discursive fragmentation as Hmong in different countries disagree about their relative position in the transnational diasporic community and how the diaspora is hierarchically ordered.

By examining both continuities as well as cultural differentiation and discursive fragmentation in the Hmong diaspora, my research emphasizes that diasporas maintain simultaneous affiliations with both transnational ethnic communities and nation-states of residence. Therefore, my thesis looks at the *relations* between the diaspora and the nation-state and the continuous presence and influences of both, instead of debating whether one group is truly a diaspora or not, or whether a dispersed ethnic group that has lost its ties to the ethnic homeland is still diasporic. This point resonates directly with what Avtar Brah (1996:16) refers to as ‘diaspora space’, a concept that simultaneously includes both diasporized people (those ‘staying put’ in the various countries in which they have scattered) and those who are ‘indigenous’ (who remain back in the homeland) (16) and the configurations of power that emerge from their intrinsically interconnected relationships across borders. Because Hmong do not have substantial relationship with an indigenous group back in the ethnic homeland, the power relations of their diaspora are between Hmong communities dispersed across different nation-states, such as Laos and the United States.

It is therefore important to examine how ‘individuals and collectivities are simultaneously positioned in social relations constituted and performed across multiple dimensions of differentiation’ (Brah 1996: 242). This ultimately understands diasporization as a process that is not completely stateless and deterritorialized, but is constituted through relations between nation-states of their newly resettled ‘homes’.

In addition, the Hmong diaspora shows that diaspora is a historical process rather than a social state determined by a one-time geographical dispersal. Once a diaspora is initially formed, there can be subsequent migrations leading to the further development of the diaspora. In the Hmong case, there is a considerable time gap between different phases of dispersal and resettlement, which requires historical perspectives to construe their contemporary diasporic community. The history of the Hmong diaspora expands the scope of the analysis since it involves complicated power relationships with multiple nation-states, including China, Laos, Thailand, and the United States, all of which influence Hmong's diasporic condition to varying degrees.

Overview of Thesis

Part I of the thesis provides an overview of the Hmong diaspora and examines its history, the perceptions on their multiple homelands, and local socioeconomic conditions and ethnic relations of diasporic Hmong in Laos and the United States. In Chapter 1, I discuss the Hmong diaspora's ethnic history of dispersal, migration, and resettlement that begins in ancient China and continues into the resettlement period after the Vietnam War. I examine the historical processes of diasporic formation in relation to different national historical events.

Because Hmong have lost their connections to their country of ancestral origin during their long diasporic history, Chapter 2 illustrates how they have become uncertain about the location of their ethnic homeland. The chapter discusses Hmong's multiple theories about their ethnic origins and ambivalent perceptions they have about both China, as a supposedly lost ethnic homeland, and Laos, as a natal homeland. This chapter will ethnographically demonstrate that Hmong's ethnic continuity (a shared ethnic consciousness) is not grounded in or attached to a concrete territorial location of ancestral origin, but based on their fragmentary as well as shared historical memories of exile and migratory dispersal.

Chapter 3 discusses the local socioeconomic status of Hmong in Laos and the United States and their ethnic relations to mainstream society, which are experienced as marginalization and evokes an ethnic minority consciousness across generations. Hmong constantly reaffirm their minority status and express a sense of ambivalent belonging to their ‘partial’ homes of Laos and the United States because of their social and ethnic marginalization. In so doing, this chapter suggests the inseparable link between local contexts in which Hmong reside and their persistent diasporic ethnic consciousness and transnational affiliations with the diaspora, which is often based on partial belonging in nation-states.

In Part II, I examine the ways in which diasporic Hmong living in Laos and the United States actually sustain and promote the socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural continuity of their diaspora through the transnational maintenance of their clan-based kinship and marriage system, familial economic remittances and exchanges, and the practice of shamanistic rituals across national borders. Migratory displacement and geographical separation have not undermined the enduring nature of these practices, which have persisted both locally and transnationally in the diaspora, but rather promoted their cultural and social continuities.

In this respect, Chapter 4 analyzes the transnational persistence and continuity of Hmong kinship practices across national borders, which are based on a socially constructed surname-based clan system. The chapter examines how diasporic Hmong in both Laos and the United States have faithfully adhered to three fundamental kinship principles: clan hospitality, clan exogamy, and ethnic endogamy. I first analyze the way such kinship rules have actually become hegemonic within the diaspora without having to be actively enforced by power structures. However, such kinship hegemonies are gradually coming under discursive critique when they are enacted under different national contexts, especially among Hmong American youth in the United States.

While Chapter 4 analyzes the transnational cultural continuity of kinship practices, Hmong diasporic communities are also maintained by actual social networks across national borders. Therefore, this thesis also examines more concrete, everyday transnational relationships between Hmong in Laos and the United States. In particular, Chapter 5 describes the way Hmong communities in the two countries have engaged in transnational economic relationships based not only on the direct family members but also on extensive clan networks. The chapter discusses the kinds of economic activities (remittances) and exchanges managed by Hmong across national borders and the social meanings of such transnational economic interactions.

Such transnational social connections are also the basis for the maintenance of various Hmong shamanistic practices across national borders, which (like kinship) have also served as a continuing transnational cultural tradition in the diaspora. In Chapter 6, I examine the inherently flexible and mobile (borderless) nature of Hmong shamanism that enables the shaman to project spiritual power across national borders regardless of territorial distance. Hmong in the United States continue to arrange shamanistic services and treatments with shamans in Laos who conduct localized rituals that have transnational effects. I then further analyze how the transnational maintenance of Hmong shamanism in the diaspora has also caused the shaman/client relationship to become individualized and commodified across national borders in contrast to its practice in each local society as a collective, community event based on social exchange. In so doing, the chapter suggests that diasporic people's cultural traditions continue to be maintained transnationally, but in a transformed and modified manner.

As is the case with all diasporas, the Hmong diaspora is not simply characterized by social and cultural continuity across national borders. Part III examines how the Hmong dispersed across various countries produce considerable cultural differentiation based on national differences and global hierarchies between their communities in different countries.

This simultaneously produces discursive fragmentation within Hmong diasporic communities based on their national affiliations with their respective countries of residence.

Chapter 7 specifically compares the Hmong New Year celebrations in Laos and the United States and examines significant differences in this cultural tradition caused by divergent cultural policies and access to economic resources in the two nation-states. Not only has the U.S. New Year festival become much more elaborate and extensive, it is also considerably more commercialized than the version in Laos. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes how such national differences are grounded on a fundamentally similar discourse of ‘equality’ for ethnic minorities in the two countries through which state cultural intervention or noninterference is justified. The changes and modification of the same New Year tradition eventually make Hmong in both countries hesitant to claim greater cultural authenticity but rather, they refer to an alternative place or past where they believe more ‘authentic’ ethnic traditions can be found.

In Chapter 8, I analyze the way Hmong in Laos and the United States hierarchically position themselves in relation to their co-ethnics elsewhere by comparing national differences in their lifestyles, economic and political freedoms, as well as cultural values. In general, Hmong in my study clearly recognize the socioeconomic inequalities, antagonistic political systems, and various other national differences between the two countries. However, they consider their own community and country to be better in the diasporic hierarchy, leading to contrasting discursive fragmentation in their ethnic perceptions of each other along the national lines. Although this diasporic fragmentation occurs mainly at the level of discourse and usually does not disrupt their continuing transitional social relations, such fragmented perceptions indicate that diasporic communities are not homogenous entities removed from specific national contexts. They can also be hierarchically ordered because of the impact of national differences and their affiliations with nation-states.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I recapture the discussions on diasporic people’s dual

affiliations to their transnational communities and to the nation-states in which they reside. The historical ethnic persecution that caused Hmong's initial forced migratory dispersal in the past has diminished and most people continue to reside in the host countries where they have resettled. In this sense, the Conclusion suggests that although there are currently no Hmong diasporic political movements to establish an independent nation-state as a new ethnic homeland, Hmong's efforts and search for alternative sources of diasporic continuities and ethnic consciousness remain significant as they maintain their cultural practices through transnational networks across their 'adopted homelands' (Parreñas and Siu 2007: 29).

From Vang Vieng to Sacramento: Hmong in Laos and the United States

Both Hmong communities in Vang Vieng, Laos and Sacramento in the United States are not completely new to me. Before my doctoral fieldwork that was started in the summer of 2011, I had preliminary field experiences in Vang Vieng for a total of fifteen months working as an undergraduate volunteer assisting various community development projects (between 2003 and 2006). Earlier in my graduate study, I also developed contacts in Sacramento for a total of twelve weeks to conduct pilot studies with Hmong communities (between 2008 and 2010). To some extent, I have become a transnational messenger that connects the two communities on the other side of the world by delivering the news and photos between the families apart.

According to available published data, there are about 260,073¹ Hmong in the United States while 449,600² Hmong live in Laos. There are remarkable national differences between the two countries, including governmental policies, political systems, and socioeconomic conditions. Because I conducted multi-sited research in these two communities as part of the Hmong diaspora, a short introduction to each field site is necessary, focusing on living and residential environments.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau (2010), 'Asian Alone by Selected Groups' (www.census.gov).

² National Statistics Center (2005), 'Results from the Population Census': www.nsc.gov.la (about 8% of Lao nationals, the third largest ethnic minority group in the country).

A Globalized Ethnic Village: Dao Tha³ in Vang Vieng, Laos

During my doctoral fieldwork, I lived in a village located in the Vang Vieng district in central Laos which I will call 'Dao Tha'. Although the official demographic data are not available, according to some of the Dao Tha's oldest residents, there are about 300 Hmong living in this village. Besides my main field site of Dao Tha, I also visited six other Hmong villages in the district for collecting fieldwork materials.

As a residential unit, Dao Tha also has special history. Unlike the two other neighboring villages whose residents were of one ethnic group, Dao Tha was known as a very unusual village that consists of three different ethnic groups living in segregated, but adjacent communities: Hmong (officially named as 'Lao Soung', which means 'highlanders'), Khmu ('Lao Theung' or 'upper middle-landers') and ethnic Lao ('Lao Loum', the majority Lao ethnic group known as 'lowland residents'). The initial formation of Dao Tha was directed by the government, which resettled Hmong returnees from Thai refugee camps in the village along with Khmu families, who were forced to leave their upper-mountain farmlands.⁴

The majority ethnic Lao residents came to Dao Tha mainly because they were unable to reside in the other nearby ethnic Lao villages. In my very first visit to Dao Tha in 2003 as an undergraduate volunteer, the village was still new and very poor, compared to other ethnically homogenous villages built more than thirty years ago. I was repeatedly told that none of the three ethnic groups in the village had wanted to live there with other different ethnic groups and therefore it was difficult to implement new community rules or develop consensus for village development projects.

³ Village names in Laos, as well as the interviewees' names in both Laos and the United States, are all pseudonyms.

⁴ When Khmu families resettled in the village in the 1990s, they were granted land to build their houses but were given no farmland. As a result, the children stayed in the village to attend school while their parents had to live separately on their farms located in the mountains and only came down to the village during breaks in the farming.

For this reason, each ethnic group continued to live in distinct and separated ethnic enclaves within the same village, despite the local government policies to implement multi-ethnic housing and residential arrangements. In the village, the Lao Loum community was located closest to the main *Song* river, the Hmong community was further into the hills across the main road, and the Khmu community was located much further to the north, away from the two other ethnic communities. Unlike the two other ethnic groups, a good number of Hmong in Dao Tha were able to purchase their own rice fields with the financial support from their family and relatives residing in the United States. These fields are located behind their ethnic community and surrounded by mountains.

Before my fieldwork in September 2011, whenever I talked to my former host family in Laos on the phone, I was warned that if I return to Dao Tha village in Vang Vieng, I ‘won’t be able to recognize anything from the past, because literally, everything has changed.’ Indeed, it would be my third visit to the same village but it had been more than five years since the last time I was there. Although tourism had already been entrenched in Dao Tha for a decade and was not really new to me, I was excited but also nervous about returning there with a completely different objective this time (namely, conducting research for my doctoral project).

Sitting next to a serene river and surrounded by picturesque mountains and caves, Dao Tha and the area of Vang Vieng have grown to be one of the most popular attractions for foreign tourists.⁵ Oddly enough, Vang Vieng is called either ‘a tourist’s paradise’ or ‘ghetto’ by foreign visitors themselves.⁶ A popular tour guide book supports such a description:

⁵ In fact, Vang Vieng initially gained its tourist reputation because of its dynamic natural environment, especially the mountain caves along the *Song* river. In the past, the first and largest tour company in the country developed an ‘eco-tourism’ program, specialized for kayaking and cave mountain climbing in the area.

⁶ Based on my conversations with the owners of the local tourism industry and estimates from four different guest houses and hotels in Vang Vieng, the top three largest groups of tourists are from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, followed by Germany, France, and Israel.

When you arrive in Vang Vieng, a usually unappealing town, you'll be faced with a choice: fight or flight [...]. Vang Vieng became known as a mecca for those whose main aim was to take drugs and do little else [...]. Many are here simply to party on a circuit that stretches from Sydney to Koh Phan Gan in Thailand to Goa, India. (White 2010. *Frommer's Cambodia&Laos*).

Dao Tha is about four kilometers to the north of the town center of Vang Vieng, which is more than ten minutes ride by *tuk tuk* (a commonly-used motorized rickshaw and the main form of local public transportation) or twenty-five minutes by bicycle. It is deeply affected by the development of tourism since the early 2000s in Vang Vieng. The banks of the largest main river, the *Song*, which flows along the village, are now lined with countless tourist bars built with bamboo and wood panel that continue endlessly into the center of Vang Vieng. Tourists head directly to Dao Tha as a starting point for their activities, such as launching rubber tubes into the river, swimming, or (more often than not) drinking, dancing, and getting drunk as they move from one bar to another. The bars would play deafening Western rock music all the time.

Although the rural, scenic beauty of the Vang Vieng area with its rivers, mountains, and caves remains, it no longer retained its serenity since the place is now overrun by global tourism. The Hmong and other ethnic groups in Dao Tha village are increasingly living in a globalized space where many types of peoples and their cultures intersect. In addition to foreign tourists, the village is also increasingly visited by NGO and development workers and volunteers, journalists, and governmental officers.

The Hmong in Dao Tha live predominantly as self-sufficient rice farmers who grow their own food in plots of land adjacent to the village. However, like many others in Vang Vieng, they are also engaged in the tourism industry, but primarily as employees and not as owners of tourism businesses. The Hmong have been increasingly (and forcibly) inserted into a 'globalized' village and encounter foreign tourists on an everyday basis. On their way

home from their farms immediately outside of the village, they have to cross the bridge that connects the village road to tourist bars on the other side of the river. Some Hmong villagers lost their cows, who ran away when frightened by drunken and naked tubers along the river. Young students in the village were constantly cautioned to be extra careful when cycling back home after school in the afternoon when it is the peak time for *tuk tuks* delivering tourists to the river. In their rice fields located on the other side of the village far away from the river, Hmong harvest rice under the sun within earshot of the blaring noise of Western hip hop and techno music from the tourist bars.

A couple young Hmong villagers worked for NGO projects as local coordinators and others worked in the tourism industry as restaurant cooks, hotel and guesthouse staff, tour guides, and *tuk tuk* drivers. Some young men without tourism jobs worked at factories owned by multinational corporations. Many other young farmers in the village who had no other source of income considered such Hmong youth with jobs 'lucky'. Little children often swam deep in the river looking to collect dropped money and belongings from tourists at the bars, who often get drunk and unconscious after hours of drinking.

I lived in a farm guesthouse run by a local Lao family right across the river and like other local residents, constantly heard the loud music that blared all day from the different bars along the riverbank. I was never able to even catch a short nap in my room during the hottest time of day. It was a strange juxtaposition as I lived in a small Lao farming village while hearing endless renditions of worldly known English pop songs, such as Adele's 'Set Fire to the Rain' and Jay-Z's 'Empire State of New York'. Ironically, these songs that I grew to hate during my fieldwork have become my favorites now (perhaps because they nostalgically remind me of my life there?). The people in Dao Tha did not really complain about the situation that seriously. Instead, they lived *with* it.

Urban 'Hmong Villages': Sacramento, California, United States

It was November 2012 when I was visiting California State University at Sacramento and giving a presentation about my research in progress to a group of Hmong student members of the Hmong University Student Association. Following Melau Lee, the Hmong student who gave me a ride that day, I scurried along campus, beautifully colored by autumn foliage. As soon as we entered the main student union building in the middle of campus, Melau directed me to the elevator and noted, ‘so you will first meet the board members of our association. They are on the third floor, which we call the “Hmong village.”’ I suspected that I misheard, so had to ask her again, ‘Did you just say we are going to the Hmong *village*?’ Melau laughed as if she expected my baffled reaction and said, ‘Yeah, no one knows why, but we call the lounge area where we hang out the Hmong village. A lot of Hmong students are there, hanging out, doing homework, or just waiting for classes.’

The elevator door opened and before us, more than three groups of students were sitting at tables set along the round wall in an open lounge area. I glanced around this ‘Hmong village’ located inside a modern and renovated university building. The groups of students were chatting, listening to music, browsing the Internet, working on laptops, or eating their lunches while reading papers. Melau said ‘hi’ to one of the groups and gestured to me to approach the group so that she could introduce me.

While I certainly had not expected to find a ‘Hmong village’ in the middle of an urban university campus, this is effective indicative of the geographic layout of Hmong communities in Sacramento, California. Hmong residential patterns in the city and local neighborhoods with high concentrations of Hmong certainly resemble mini-ethnic enclaves and Hmong villages in Laos. Certain streets, intersections, school districts, and sections of city are understood to be areas heavily populated by Hmong residents. In particular, many Hmong in my study lived in the northern and southern parts of the city of Sacramento in predominantly non-white minority communities, where they interact with a wide range of ethnic groups, including other Southeast Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics. On the

other hand, a substantial number of Hmong families in upward mobility moved to the city of Elk Grove (right south of Sacramento), a newer residential community with more expensive homes.⁷

In fact, the residential clustering of the Hmong community in Sacramento is not a coincidence. When Hmong families purchased their individual houses, they did so through their ethnic networks and therefore rented or bought homes in the same location. This was especially possible because real estate is one of the ethnic businesses in which Hmong are active, along with insurance. While the ‘Hmong village’ primarily reflects the proximate geographic locations of Hmong residences, it also symbolizes close relatedness of ‘emotional’ distance within the community based on ethnic networks and clan support. Living in the same city and within close distance, Hmong families found it convenient and easy to visit each other. They spend time together during the week and weekends, not only for Hmong cultural activities and ethnic events such as New Year, weddings, and funerals, but also for American holidays and activities, including Father’s Day, Independence Day, Valentines Day, Christmas, Halloween, as well as bridal and baby showers.

Besides the city of Sacramento, I also travelled to other locations within the Sacramento County to attend various family or community events and conduct interviews. This includes Galt (a well-known flea market for Hmong sellers and customers) and the cities of Stockton, Marysville, Chico (to the north), and Fresno (to the south, where the one-week International Hmong New Year festival is held).

The Hmong actually constitute close to six percent of the total Sacramento city population of 479,686.⁸ California is the state with the largest Hmong population, followed by Minnesota and Wisconsin, and the capitol city of Sacramento has the second largest population of Hmong (26,996) in the state after Fresno (31,771).⁹ Initially, Hmong were

⁷ During my fieldwork, I stayed in a rented room in a house in this neighborhood.

⁸ Sacramento Census Data (2013): <http://data.cityofsacramento.org/dashboards/8456/sacramento-census-data>.

⁹ *Hmong National Development Census Report* (2013: 13).

resettled in other locations (such as Chicago, Illinois, Denver, Colorado, and Spokane, Washington) because of the presence of non-Hmong American sponsors, charity groups, or some previously resettled relatives.

However, they gradually moved from these cities to West Coast and Midwestern cities with large Hmong communities in order to live with family members and relatives in the same area. Therefore, subsequent internal migration further consolidated the Hmong refugee communities in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In the United States, the Hmong are the ninth largest Asian population in the nation and are outnumbered by non-Hmong Laotians¹⁰ (186,013), who also fled the country after the Vietnam War.

Fieldwork and Methodology

My doctoral research was enabled by my ten-year long relationship with the Hmong and other villagers in Dao Tha since my second year as an undergraduate student in 2003. Through a non-profit organization in my home country, I had an opportunity to live in Dao Tha village for seven months and learn about their local lives while helping the local villagers to promote and manage community development projects. At that time, my main responsibilities were assessing the financial needs and mediate communication between the organization and the villagers.

However, when I arrived in the village, one of the first things I was asked to do was actually teach English to the children and young students in the village. My Lao Loum host family, the owner of the farm and the local development project coordinator in Dao Tha, told me that a small group of the Hmong and Lao Loum students in the village already had about a month-long English learning experience at the farm with an American long term tourist. Because of the great interests and enthusiasm from the village youth, my host family wanted to promote English class to the entire village and develop it for a long term project. Although I was initially not sure if teaching English would really help the future of young students in

¹⁰ The ethnic name Laotians (or Laotian Americans) in the United States usually refers to ethnic Lao (Lao Loum).

the village, my experiences through English class generated considerable positive impacts on my social relationships with people in various ways.

The reason that I became particularly interested in the Hmong among the other ethnic groups in the village was because of a brief encounter with one of the Hmong students in my English class. One day, the student, then only a first-year middle school student and now a young father of three little babies, did not go home after class but stayed and talked with me. He asked me a question to which I could not respond: ‘Do you think Hmong people have a country? Where do you think Hmong are from?’ I became interested in why a young Hmong student would wonder about the ethnic origin of his peoples, even though they had been living in Laos for a very long time. What are their historical experiences that led him to ask such question? I eventually came to learn more about the lives of Hmong and their uncertainty about their ethnic history as well as their inseparable, highly transnationalized ethnic ties with their co-ethnics residing in the United States.

My doctoral fieldwork in Vang Vieng, Laos, lasted seven months from September 2011 to March 2012. In Sacramento, I continued fieldwork for another seven months starting June 2012 until January 2013. During my fieldwork, I used qualitative research methods, mainly semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a total of 111 individuals in the two countries (48 in Laos and 63 in the United States). The interviews in Laos include two Hmong individuals from the United States and one from France while the interviews in the United States include two Hmong (officially known as ‘Miao’ ethnic minority group in China) visiting scholars from China. During the interviews, the national Lao language was primarily used in both countries while Hmong, English, and some Thai were also used depending on the interviewee’s preference.¹¹

¹¹ It is known that Hmong have at least two main sub-groups based on minor linguistic differences between Hmong Leng and Hmong Der. However, such distinctions usually do not hinder social interactions or mutual communications, although both groups occasionally expressed stereotypes about each other.

I tried to obtain a sample that was balanced in terms of gender and ages as well as personal background in both countries. However, because of the nature of qualitative research, interviews were not always based on purposive sampling but were also dependent on the availability and willingness of individuals to participate. In Laos, I conducted interviews with 15 female and 33 male participants. In terms of education, only four interviewees had college education (and they were all male) and most of my other interviewees had no formal education or degrees.

In the United States, I interviewed 24 female and 39 male participants. This includes 10 American-born second generation Hmong youth or young 1.5 generation individuals in their twenties (who were born in Thai refugee camps but raised in the United States). As former refugees, all Hmong adults are either naturalized American citizens or permanent residents. My U.S. interviewees have more diversified personal backgrounds. In addition to college students, thirty individuals have Bachelor's or higher degrees and some of the elderly people also had education (up to secondary school level) in Laos, although their educations in the United States often started with high school (after they took English as Second Language [ESL] courses).

The occupations of U.S. Hmong people in my study are also quite varied. A number of them were public school teachers, real estate agents, and insurance sales people, nurse/healthcare service assistants, and social worker. Nonetheless, half of my interviewees (who were not enrolled students) were unemployed (often from previous factory assembly line jobs) or elderly first-generation Hmong who are supported by monthly governmental welfare assistance, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

Based on former contacts I made during preliminary fieldwork in the two Hmong communities, I started with the snowball sampling approach but also obtained new contacts through participant observation and by using community resources and published materials (in the United States), such as business directories, community newspapers and magazines,

and advertisements posted at Hmong markets. Besides interviews, I conducted extensive participant observation and had numerous daily conversations with many Hmong while attending every possible social and community event, which enabled me to compare Hmong cultural activities in both countries, like New Year festivals, wedding ceremonies, and funeral and spiritual rituals. I also participated heavily in everyday Hmong activities in both countries.

In Laos, I worked in the rice fields and vegetable gardens, visited local markets, helped with community projects, and attended family meetings and gatherings. In the United States, during the first month of my stay with a Hmong family, I participated in housework such as cooking, cleaning, and babysitting, which then expanded to other group activities such as grocery shopping, family meetings, various community ceremonies and banquets. I also accompanied Hmong to their work places and clinics and attended the Hmong Christian Church on Sundays. Besides doing interviews and participant observation, I conducted one focus group interview with thirteen elderly Hmong and collected surveys (self-administered questionnaires) with a total of 83 Hmong students from three different universities in the Sacramento area.¹²

Almost all interviews (and daily conversations) were recorded with the informant's verbal or written permission using a digital voice recorder. Field notes were either written down by hand (both countries) or typed into a smart phone (U.S. only) during participant observation and expanded later using a laptop. During a nine-month period after fieldwork, all interviews and field notes were transcribed and then coded separately by country according to recurring and dominant themes using *ATLAS.ti*, a qualitative ethnographic data management program. In most cases, the same codes were used to organize the qualitative data from both countries, but additional country-specific codes were also created, which

¹² California State University-Sacramento (40), Sacramento City College (19), and the University of California-Davis (24).

helped to compare socioeconomic national differences as well as changing ethnic cultures and perceptions.

**Part I. The Making of the Hmong Diaspora:
History, Multiple Homelands, and Ambivalent Belonging**

Chapter 1. History and the Making of the Hmong Diaspora

Although the notion of diaspora is based on the dispersal and displacement of an ethnic group from the ancestral homeland, more empirical and ethnographic studies have demonstrated the continuing national presence in diasporic communities established abroad by examining the impact of both the homeland and the hostland (Butler 2001: 190-191). An exploration of the Hmong's diasporic ethnic history can also be contextualized in relation to different nation-states in which they have lived. However, the history of the Hmong diaspora involves multiple nation-states, namely China, Laos, Thailand, and the United States, not simply homeland-diaspora relations. The Hmong have developed ambivalent and varying degrees of affiliation and belonging to these national communities depending on their individual experiences as well as memories about different historical events.

This chapter primarily aims to provide introductory historical background of Hmong as an ethnic minority group that has lived in multiple nation-states and experienced a number of different historical events. This includes a series of wars and conflicts, displacement, and migratory dispersals that span from ancient China to the Vietnam War. In so doing, the chapter further attempts to provide the background about how experiences and memories of diasporic dispersal have impacted or even conditioned their current ambivalent perceptions and attitudes toward different nation-states, especially their ancestral homeland of China and the natal homeland of Laos.

In the absence of organized historical accounts and documents, the Hmong diaspora is based on a number of uncertainties about its ethnic origins, which has produced incongruent theories of ethnic homeland among different narrators of ethnic history including scholars, officials, and the Hmong themselves. Inevitably, such uncertainty has led to differing accounts of Hmong history, making it impossible to produce a unified narrative of the Hmong diaspora's ancestral origins and subsequent dispersals. In this sense, this chapter will start with arguably the earliest historical period in which Hmong were first

recognized as an ethnic group and their historical experiences of initial dispersal from China to Southeast Asia and their global dispersal after the Vietnam War. This provides background context for Chapter 2, which discusses the multiple theories that contemporary Hmong in both Laos and the United States have of their ancestral origins. This historical context is also important for understanding the Hmong's simultaneous affiliation with their transnational, diasporic ethnic communities and the different nation-states in which they reside, which will be explored in subsequent chapters.

The Formation of the Hmong Diaspora

Based on the available sources, the Hmong diaspora is currently dispersed across about thirteen countries around the world.¹³ Jacques Lemoine (2005:7) claims that there were 4 to 4.5 million Hmong around the world in 2000, including an estimated '2,777,039' Hmong language speakers in China. Lemoine bases these figures on available scholarly and governmental publications about Hmong in China and Southeast Asian countries, as well as estimates of the Hmong population in other countries such as French Guyana, France, Canada, Argentina, and Australia, which are based on a Hmong student's doctoral thesis in France.¹⁴ Lemoine's estimate is widely accepted and repeatedly cited in scholarly work and Internet sources¹⁵ when discussing the entire population of the Hmong diaspora dispersed around the world.

In general, China has been considered to be the Hmong people's possible ethnic homeland, since many scholars claim that one of the 'Miao' ethnic minority groups currently residing in southwest China are actually the 'Hmong', who are assumed to be co-ethnics of the Hmong in the diaspora. However, in China, Miao is a general ethnic category that

¹³ For the estimate of population of the Hmong diaspora, see Appendix 1.

¹⁴ This is a former Hmong French student, Kaoly Yang's doctoral thesis entitled, 'Naître et grandir: les processus de socialisation de l'enfant en milieu hmong', Université d'Aix-Marseille. When I contacted the author in person in order to ask for the original references for the Hmong population data, she referred to Jean-Pierre Hassoun's book *Hmong du Laos en France: Changement social, initiatives et adaptations* as the original source of her data.

¹⁵ An example is *Wikipedia*, which perhaps has the most impact on the public understandings of the Hmong population in the diaspora.

encompasses many other ethnic minorities which are grouped together as Miao, despite their distinctive linguistic, cultural, and geographical differences. In contrast to these scholarly discourses, diasporic Hmong whom I interviewed in Laos and the United States have expressed uncertainty about their ethnic homeland and do not always agree that China is where they originated. Instead, they have produced multiple theories about their ethnic homeland and ancestral origins. At the same time, they seem to have developed a sense of ethnic affinity and emotional connections to the specific group of Miao whom they believe to be co-ethnic Hmong (see Chapter 2). In this context, I use the term ‘Miao-Hmong’ in my thesis for the particular Miao group supposedly known as Hmong in China, instead of referring to them as universally Hmong.

There is a relationship between historical research on the Hmong diaspora and the Hmong people’s own understanding about their ethnic history. Early scholarly history about Hmong ethnic origins and homeland was often based on Hmong oral traditions and cultural practices that narrate their persecution in, and displacement and exile from ancient China (see Barney 1967). Although some Hmong themselves have consulted this scholarly research about their history, it is not always clear the extent to which their own beliefs and discourses are based on such scholarly perspectives. Instead, they tend to refer to their own oral histories and traditional narratives when speaking about their ancestral homeland and ethnic origins in relation to China.

In addition to research about Hmong ethnic origins that focus on Miao-Hmong history in China, there are also other scholarly theories about the ethnic homeland of the Hmong. In sum, these theories can be grouped into three main types:

- 1) The Hmong originated in China.

Hmong outside China are part of the Miao in China. In earlier literature on the Hmong residing in highland of Southeast Asia, researchers heard oral stories from

the Hmong about their ancestry in China and they made the historical links between diasporic Hmong and the Miao in China (e.g., Geddes 1976: 5-25).

2) The Hmong originated in Mongolia.

This theory is discussed in literature as a mythical history (e.g., Lee 1998).

3) The Hmong have a Caucasian ancestry and their ethnic homeland is Russia or the Iranian plateau.

An American historian Keith Quincy (2000) claims that the racial features of the Hmong indicate their ancestral connections to Eurasian Caucasians, although there have been changes in their original appearance (such as eye and hair color) over time.

Among these theories, dominant scholarly opinion finds the first hypothesis (the ethnic homeland of China) to be the most reliable theory.

While it has become a general practice to include all Hmong dispersed in the world in a single diasporic community, it is important to note that the origins of the ethnic group that is currently called 'Hmong' also remain uncertain and Hmong themselves express ambiguity about their ethnic history as well. In fact, it is not clear when exactly the name 'Hmong' appeared and started to be used to refer to the group. Some scholars suggest that the name Hmong was introduced as recently as the 1910s (Culas and Michaud 2004: 70). In my personal interactions, some Hmong people mentioned that a prominent Hmong scholar (Dr. Dao Yang) named their ethnic group as Hmong in the 1970s. Others also said that their former military leader General Vang Pao is the one who coined their ethnic name. Therefore, when examining the history of the Hmong diaspora, it is important to note that there has not even been a consensus about the origin of the ethnic name 'Hmong' and it is not sure whether Hmong is an ethnic name that has persisted from ancient times.

There have been at least two historical phases which led to the current formation of the Hmong diaspora: 1) The initial migratory dispersal of Hmong from their supposed ancestral homeland of China to various countries in Southeast Asia; and 2) their subsequent

dispersal after the Vietnam War, when they were resettled as refugees in various countries around the world. It is important to note that there is a significant time gap of centuries between these two dispersals, which may explain why the Hmong have lost contact with their initial ancestral homeland and become unsure of their ethnic origins in general.

Scholars suggest that Hmong were one of the various migratory people who settled and resided in the central land of China in ancient times, and predate the Han Chinese (Hostetler 2000; Jenk 1994; Tapp 1998). This ancient group of Hmong was gradually pushed to the southwestern part of China (the exact historical period is uncertain), due to constant conflicts and wars between them and other groups. During the Qing dynasty of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, it is known that Hmong and possibly other small ethnic minority groups crossed the border from China to neighboring countries of Southeast Asia in response to these conflicts and resettled in the northern border areas of the region including present-day Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma.

After the forced migration from China to Southeast Asia, the most well-known historical incident that caused the further geographical dispersion of the Hmong diaspora occurred much later. During the Vietnam War (1955-1975), Hmong were recruited by the United States Central Intelligence Agency as soldiers who fought against Communist forces in Laos. As a result, after the war, the Hmong were forced to flee Laos to refugee camps in Thailand and were later resettled to various countries around the world, such as Germany, France, French Guiana, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Argentina.

Between the forced migrations from China and Laos, there is more than a two-hundred-year time gap that has become a significant historical disjuncture. This makes it difficult to investigate the extent and strength of transnational relationships of Hmong scattered in Southeast Asia to their ethnic kin residing in China during their earlier history going back to ancient times. Nonetheless, it is clear that the migratory dispersal of Hmong started in the distant past even before they were recognized with the ethnic name of Hmong

and they have experienced a series of geographical scattering since then. As a result, they lost their connection to their ancient ethnic homeland through time.

Miao in China and Hmong Abroad: Rethinking the Connections to China

Like other ethnic histories, Hmong history is considered uncertain and many parts of it remain unclear, partly due to the lack of reliable historical documents and other sources. Almost all scholars who study Hmong history commonly point out this problem and attempt to address it. In this sense, an overview of early Hmong ethnic history in relation to China leads at least to two major concerns. One is the disparities in how the relationship between contemporary diasporic Hmong and the Miao-Hmong in China is defined and understood by Chinese officials, academic scholars, and the Hmong themselves. Currently, Chinese officials do not recognize Hmong as an independent ethnic group but only use the term Miao, which is one of the officially identified ethnic minorities in southwestern China. Therefore, if one explores the history of Hmong in China from the Chinese state's official perspective, there is a fundamental problem from the beginning, because the ethnic category of Hmong does not officially exist in Chinese national historiography. Only the loose category of Miao has been used rather indiscriminately. This inherently creates confusion in definitions and discussions of the relations between Miao-Hmong in China and Hmong in the diaspora in terms of how their ethnic connections should be understood.

In contrast, while generally agreeing that the ancient Hmong history is difficult to clearly define, scholars clearly distinguish Hmong from other ethnic minorities classified as Miao in China. In addition, although scholars problematize and generally disagree with the official categorization of Hmong as Miao and argue that Hmong are a distinct ethnic group who have their own self-designations, there is not much scholarly ethnographic information about actual Miao-Hmong ethnic identifications in China. Nonetheless, a good number of Hmong in Laos and the United States identify with Miao-Hmong in China and often include

them as part of the same ethnic diaspora, even if they dislike the ethnic name of Miao in general.

Before a certain subgroup of Miao received the ethnic name of Hmong outside of China, their history in China goes back to as early as the Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.¹⁶), when they were living as various individual groups dispersed in the central area of the country (Jenks 1994). Scholars write that, since the late sixteenth century, the constant conflicts and wars between those different groups and the expansionist Manchus, the ruling group of the Qing dynasty, resulted in the forced migration of those groups further to the south and southwestern provinces at the frontier of China (Diamond 1988; Hostetler 2000; Lee 2007: 2-3).

These continuing conflicts killed or displaced a large portion of the Miao group and eventually forced them to migrate to other neighboring countries in Southeast Asia (Entenmann 2005; Hillmer 2010; Tapp et al. 2004; Tapp and Lee 2004; Tapp 1998). Although it is impossible to establish the exact timeline of migration within and from China, it is suggested that the Hmong (Miao, at that time) were considered a pivotal threat by Chinese rulers because of their ‘incorrigible and inassimilable nature’ (Bernatzik 1970; Jenks 1994; Mottin 1980) and they played the most visible and vital roles in the fight against the ruling Manchus (Hamilton-Merritt 1993; Vang 2013). However, I must note that it is difficult to agree with the kind of ethnic characterization of the Hmong by some scholars as ‘violent, brave, or free people’ based on limited information we have of their ancient history.

According to scholars, the official Chinese recognition of Miao already began in the mid-sixteenth century Ming dynasty throughout the seventeenth Qing dynasty (Hostetler 2000: 626; Lee 2007). During those periods, the Miao were referred as *miaoman*, literally meaning ‘southern barbarians’ or broadly, all minorities who had been forcibly dislocated and had resettled in the southwestern areas of what is today Yunnan, Sichuan, Hunan, and

¹⁶ Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.) is different from Qing dynasty (17th-18th centuries).

Guizhou provinces. Deal and Hostetler (2005) translate and introduce the *Miao Album*, one of the few available earlier official documents about Miao, produced by the Qing dynasty, which lists about ninety ethnic groups residing in Guizhou and includes paintings and observational accounts. Each subgroup classified as Miao has a suffix of ‘-miao’ at the end of the name.

Regarding the dubious Miao category used in the officially-created *Miao Album*, Deal and Hostetler (2005: xxvii) note that those numerous groups defined as Miao in Guizhou were ‘derived from characteristics of their outward appearance’ (including hairstyles, the color and women’s skirt patterns and clothing design, behaviors and body movements, daily customs, and dwelling places). As a result, different ethnic minority groups were given names such as ‘Big flowery Miao’, ‘Black Miao’, and ‘White Miao’ depending on the visible features of their clothes. Those features became decisive ethnic markers that not only characterize all ethnic minority peoples categorized as Miao today but are also the basis for certain images and common facts about Miao ethnicity.

As Hostetler (2000: 624) argues, the Qing dynasty could already be considered a modern state in the seventeenth century and therefore sought to culturally and politically differentiate the ruler’s authority and the ‘Other’ living on the frontier. In this sense, *Miao Album* is often interpreted as the Chinese modern nation-state’s desire to acquire more scientific knowledge of its internal Others. For this reason, it is not surprising to see that some other ethnic groups which had no similarities or relations with actual Miao customs and traditions were unwittingly put together in the *Miao Album*, such as Zhuang, Luluo (Yi), and Gelao.

It was not until 1949 when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) identified fifty-six official minorities and declared them to be ethnic nationalities (*minzu*) (Cheung 2004; Schein 2000: 68) in contrast to the majority Han ethnic group. Miao was recognized as one of those *minzu* and the fifth largest ethnic minority group in the nation and it is reported that

more than nine million Miao currently reside in China. However, since the ethnic name of Hmong does not officially exist in China, such estimates include all other sub ethnic minorities in southern China considered as Miao and does not specify the actual Hmong population. Apparently, there is an inherent disparity in the way the state defines Miao as its nationals and the way these people actually perceive themselves. As scholars noted, some of them may not accept their homogeneous categorization as Miao (Harrell 1995; Schein 2000; Tapp 1998, 2002; Yang 2009).

Scholars of Miao in China have critically examined how Chinese official ethnic categories do not correspond to the way ethnic minorities actually identify and perceive themselves. They commonly question whether Hmong in China, supposedly the largest group classified as Miao, can be an inclusive category that represents and encompasses all other Miao ethnic minorities (Lee 2007:2; 1996; Tapp 2002). Based on this, the scholarly definition of Miao is more specific than the official one, which disregards internal differences and self-identifications among the various ethnic subgroups. Scholars are also concerned about differentiating the ‘real’ Hmong from other ethnic minority groups who falsely claim to be Hmong, as if doing so provides them with certain advantages (Schein 2000; Tapp 2002).

In general, scholars divide Miao into four major groups: ‘Hmong, Mhu, Quo Xiong, A Hmao’¹⁷ (Enwall 1992; Lemoine 2008; Tapp 2002:79) and differentiate Hmong from the other three groups mainly based on language and geographic residence. From a linguistic perspective, Tapp argues that the Hmong in China are ‘a particularly clearly identifiable group who do refer to themselves customarily as Hmong, and who speak dialects of the

¹⁷ Depending on the pronunciation, scholars use slightly different names to indicate the same groups. For example: Hmong, Hmu, Kho Hsiong; Hmong, Hmu, Mong, Hmao (Mottin 1980: 5).

Western or Chuanqiandian branch of the Miao language in the Miao-Yao¹⁸ language family; one of the three main branches of this Miao language’ (2002: 78).

His view is based on an earlier scholarly work from 1930s, conducted by David Graham, that the ‘Ch’uan Miao’ in southwestern part of China called themselves Hmong. Another anthropologist of the Miao in China, Schein (2004: 275) also states that ‘only a portion of those identified as Miao—the ones distributed over western Guizhou and parts of Yunnan, particularly the border areas—call themselves ‘Hmong’ in their own language’. In his short article, Enwall (1992: 2) also writes that ‘the Miao themselves use various self-designations and the Chinese traditionally classified them according to the characteristic colour of the women’s clothes’ (as red, black, white Miao).

However, Norma Diamond, an anthropologist of Miao in China who does not specifically focus on Hmong, writes that Miao ‘like others, were participants in localized multi-ethnic economic systems whose members shared some features in common and who were at the same time distinguished from each other by specialized production and activity’ (1995: 97). In addition, Culas and Michaud (2004: 70) claim that a British missionary, who traveled in southwest China and encountered ethnic minorities there, first introduced the ethnic name Hmong in 1911. Considering this, it is highly possible that those different Miao ethnic groups were not isolated but had engaged in frequent social interaction with each other since the distant past. As a result, they not only share customs, lifestyles, and languages but also influenced each other’s cultures in various ways. Therefore, not only is it difficult to accurately identify who the ‘true’ Hmong are in China but also equally problematic to isolate Hmong from other ethnic Miao groups because of complicated

¹⁸ Also known as the ‘Hmong-Mien’ linguistic family. Sharing the similar history of dispersal with Hmong, Yao are an ethnic group currently understood as ‘(Iu-)Mien’, residing in southwest China as well as dispersed around Southeast Asia and also in the United States. Although it is believed that Hmong and Mien share linguistic commonalities, their languages today are no longer mutually intelligible. For more research on contemporary (Iu-)Mien identity formation outside China, see Jonsson (2005) and MacDonald (1998).

relationships between official views and various ethnic minority groups' own perspectives about the Miao category.

In addition to linguistic markers of ethnic difference, genetic research has also been conducted through a DNA project, which collected over 500 individual blood samples and claims that Hmong in Southeast Asia have close 'relatedness' to current Miao in Hunan province (southwest region) and also have genetic similarities with the ethnic Han people in northeast China (Lee 2007: 9-11). Some Hmong scholars have used this finding as valid evidence that the ethnic origin of Hmong is southwestern China and also claim that the Hmong predate ethnic Han Chinese (see Lee 2007: 24).

From China to Laos

It is still questionable when exactly the Hmong started living in Laos. Some earlier studies of Hmong outside China suggest that their migration from China and their arrival in Southeast Asia occurred between 200 to 400 years ago (Geddes 1976: 27). There are some records about the Hmong in different periods of Lao history that document the interactions between the Hmong and nation-state, especially in relation to the French colonial era and the Vietnam War. Although only limited sources are available about the situation and status of the Hmong during the French colonial presence in Laos between 1893 and 1945, there are some documents about their social activities and ethnic interactions during that time. Therefore, it is possible to partially understand the relationship of Hmong with the French colonial administration and their lives before their involvement in the Vietnam War.

Initially, Hmong were both voluntarily and involuntarily contributors to the Lao nation-state under French colonialism by being subject to taxes and the civil duties imposed by the colonial regime (Lee 2004: 441; Tapp 1989a). Some studies also mention that the Hmong fought for the French government to repel foreign invasions, such as Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia in 1940 (McCoy 1970: 68). It is also known that the Hmong assisted with French domination of Laos because they hoped to realize their dream of

establishing an autonomous and independent ethnic district for themselves in the Nong Het¹⁹ area in return for their cooperation (Chan 1994: 8).

According to the Hmong families that I interviewed in the United States, there have been Hmong individuals who lived in the capital city of Vientiane during French colonialism and worked as government employees, especially those with some formal education under the French colonial system. Their position in the government may not have been of the highest rank, but their work experiences with government officials enabled them to acquire some official information and language skills, which much later became useful when they had to evacuate the country during and after the Vietnam War.

Toward the end of the Twentieth Century, Hmong in Laos were subject to the government's nationalist projects that resembled the Chinese state's ethnic unification policy in the 1950s. When the Lao Communist state started to open its doors to foreign countries for economic development in 1997, it also declared a 'single (one) ethnicity, one nationality project', which designated all ethnic minority groups as equal Lao nationals throughout the country. Based on this context, each of the three largest ethnic groups in Laos was given a new official name universally preceded by 'Lao' followed by their residential patterns based on the different elevations in which they used to live. As a result, the major ethnic groups in Laos are officially classified and recognized as Lao Loum ('low'-landers, referring to the majority ethnic Lao), Lao Theung ('upper-middle'-landers, Khmu), and Lao Soung ('high'-landers, Hmong).

The Vietnam War and Predicament of Homeland

As I mentioned earlier, the Hmong had already lived in other Southeast Asian countries of Vietnam,²⁰ Burma, Cambodia,²¹ and Thailand before the Vietnam War long after their forced

¹⁹ Nong Het is a district located in Xieng-kwang province in northern Laos. It has one of the largest Hmong populations in the country. It was also where much of the fighting connected with the Vietnam War took place in Laos.

²⁰ It may be interesting to further study about the reasons that Hmong in Vietnam were not recruited or participated in the war despite the fact that their population is larger than the Hmong in Laos.

displacement from China. The Hmong in these other Southeast Asian countries (including many Hmong currently residing in the northern provinces of Thailand) had little connection to the war and therefore have different historical experiences from those living in Laos, who left the country after the war and temporarily stayed in refugee camps in Thailand.

The Vietnam War not only precipitated the fundamental cause of Hmong's contemporary diaspora but it also redefined the ethnic consciousness and connections of Hmong to Laos and the United States, as well as to other parts of the diaspora. The 20-year involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War was unsuccessful, leaving multiple political and ethnic conflicts, social destruction, as well as tragedy and trauma for many individuals. The impact of the war is still present in people's everyday lives today in different ways, for both Hmong who returned to Laos after residing in refugee camps and those living new lives as a resettled ethnic minority in various countries outside of Southeast Asia.

In Laos, the Vietnam War is also known as the 'Secret War' because of many unrecorded and furtively treated facts about the destruction and consequences that it brought to the country. In accordance with Cold War global geopolitics, the Lao nation-state was internally divided between the Royal Lao Army (the non-Communist successor of the former Kingdom of Laos) and the Communist Pathet Lao, which initiated the Communist regime that eventually established the current Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) after the U.S. withdrawal that ended the Vietnam War. Such severe national political divisions and Cold War politics at the local level created ethnic divisions among Hmong in Laos as well. Both the United States CIA and the coalition between Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnam recruited Hmong soldiers, going to each village and mandating that at least one or more sons of each family should participate on their side of the conflict. As many of my interviewees put it, the war was remembered as 'the worst thing that can ever

²¹ Hmong's presence in Cambodia is based on the general speculation given by different Hmong individuals and scholars but any official data and published research are not found.

happen in one's life that one never, ever wants to see happen again.' They also stated, 'these tragedies are because of America and the Soviet Union, and had nothing to do with Laos.'²²

Although it is widely known that Hmong entered into a military alliance with the CIA to fight against the Communist Pathet Lao during the Vietnam War, it is also important to note that not all Hmong individuals were unified in support of the CIA, but were divided into at least two political factions. The majority of Hmong fought for the CIA against the Communists under the Hmong General Vang Pao's²³ leadership. General Vang Pao also hoped the collaboration of Hmong with the United States would eventually allow them to establish part of Laos as the Hmong homeland. This is similar to the reason why they previously collaborated with the French colonial authorities, which highlights their continued historical desire to establish an ethnic homeland.

The Hmong who fought for the United States were forced to flee Laos after the war to avoid persecution by the new Communist Lao state and ended up in refugee camps before they were resettled to the United States and other countries. However, other Hmong soldiers who fought against the CIA and fought for the Communist Pathet Lao remained in Laos after the war and are currently recognized by local Laotian governments and some of them are given a military pension. The historical legacy of intra-ethnic political conflict can still be observed today in many Hmong households in the diaspora. For example, Hmong in Laos have pictures of their Communist political leaders and the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh at home whereas pictures of General Vang Pao are hung on the walls of Hmong's houses in the United States.

The Hmong's historical cooperation with different regimes, such as the French administration, the Royal Lao Government, the Communist Pathet Lao, and the U.S. CIA can be viewed as efforts by the Hmong leadership to gain independence from political domination and to establish their own ethnic state because of their discontent with various

²² Quotes from various interviews.

²³ General Vang Pao resided in the United States after the Vietnam War and died in 2011.

Lao ruling groups. For some Hmong political leaders in the past, such a future ethnic homeland was possibly imagined as an independent nation-state. However, the Hmong in the contemporary diaspora no longer seem to support such an idea and realize that establishing an autonomous Hmong district in Laos (as an independent ethnic homeland) is not possible nor justified. In this sense, the former political ambitions of General Vang Pao and his followers to take over part of Laos as their own homeland has produced ambivalent and contentious debates, especially among the U.S. Hmong community.

Therefore, Hmong's complicated roles and changing political engagement with different state regimes need to be carefully considered in order to deconstruct the homogenous and stereotypical (and often misleading) ethnic characterization of Hmong as freedom fighters, hill tribes, jungle guerillas, the Lao state's virulent enemy, or even CIA collaborators. If we take into account all these different political relationships of the Hmong to different political regimes in Laotian history, it becomes harder to define a unified and politicized ethnicity for Hmong.

Forced Displacement and Life in Refugee Camps in Thailand

Fleeing from Laos after the Vietnam War in the mid-1970s, Hmong families started to cross the border as a group from different parts of Laos, especially in the northern areas where they were particularly involved with the war on the side of the U.S. CIA. For most of them, leaving behind their homes was not a voluntary or easy decision at all. They could not outwardly share or discuss their plans with others. Many families had to 'flee by night' and suddenly abandon their homes with no warning or preparation.

Once they left home, they had a long journey through Laos and then from Laos across the border to Thailand. Many Hmong people today still have vivid memories of the night of their border crossing. Similar to how differently people remember and experienced camp life (which will be discussed later), the border crossing experience was also remembered somewhat differently depending on the individual and families. Shoua Yang, a

professional woman in her late forties currently living in the United States, for example, mentioned that her family had a relatively endurable journey crossing the border between Laos and Thailand. She said:

My mom was very smart. She was a single mom, but well-prepared and planned. So crossing the border was not too difficult for our family, because she already paid Laotian people to transport us here and there. We carried our clothes, blankets, pots, pans, and rice, so we had all those materials to survive.

On the other hand, many other families crossed borders with incommensurable fears and anxiety. For example, Steve Thao, a successful businessman in his early forties in the United States, remembered the traumatic night that his entire family fled Laos at the end of the Vietnam War when he was only a child. Crossing the Mekong river in complete darkness, his oldest brother, who was only twenty years old and a young soldier under General Vang Pao, was shot in his leg on the Lao side of the border. As soon as the family reached the Thai border, they urgently took the brother to a hospital for treatment but one of his legs ended up permanently crippled.

Similarly, Peng Xiong in the United States still vividly remembered the thirty-day devastating journey of his family to Thailand without knowing the correct route or having proper transportation. They simply followed the mountain ranges in the dark and slept in the bushes. He described a night that was truly dreadful:

People would whisper to parents with little kids crying in the middle of night, “you either silence your kid, or we will all be killed, because the military soldiers could hear the noise and find us.” In fact, that happened to one of my little nephews. We had to feed him opium to silence him. We were able to revive and save him later, but he could have been almost killed [...]. If we hadn’t done that to him, I am sure he could have been a much smarter person. But yes, we all could have died.

Regardless of how differently they experienced the journey and border crossing, many Hmong came to be situated temporarily in a 'stateless' condition in refugee camps in Thailand without being able to make plans for their own future. Their lives and future homes were very much subject to institutional agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner Refugees (UNHCR), which temporarily housed the Hmong refugees from Laos in several camp sites in Thailand, such as Ban Vinai (the largest refugee camp), Chiangkhan, Nam Yao, and Phanat Nikhom as well as Wat Tham Krabok.²⁴ Each family stayed and spent different lengths of time at the camps, depending on when they were designated for resettlement and how quickly the family made a decision to leave. However, at the community level, refugee camps were the very site where the anxiety and uncertainty about the future were experienced.

Writing about Hmong's refugee life and camp experiences would be one of the most challenging and emotionally difficult things for anyone to do. There are various common experiences of refugee life that have significantly impacted Hmong's shared ethnic and diasporic consciousness of displacement and trauma. However, the narratives can also be understood based on notable individual differences in age, gender, socioeconomic status, and familial and kin support available in different camps.

Certain aspects of refugee camp life in Thailand are remembered differently, both negatively and positively, despite the commonly experienced economic hardships, confined living conditions, and physical and emotional struggles. Narrating individual accounts and personal stories is therefore crucial in order to understand the way individuals make connections to the past and develop selective memories in remembering their traumatic experiences. The diversity and complexity of reality emerges, especially when Hmong people describe their refugee experiences. My interview questions about this subject were

²⁴ Wat Tham Krabok is a Buddhist temple that provided a shelter for Hmong refugees who needed to be treated for illnesses and could not leave Thailand. This camp became the last place for Hmong, especially those who prolonged their decision to leave Thailand and return to Laos or resettle in the United States.

rather open-ended and often broad, but that encouraged Hmong to express their feelings freely and recall memories that they wished to talk about first or remembered the most. This also provides the context for understanding how Hmong have developed ambivalent feelings about the multiple nation-states in which they have experienced and currently resided: Laos, Thailand, and the United States.

In the first place, the refugee experiences at the camp were unquestionably difficult and full of hardship, producing shared memories of everyday distress and anxiety among individuals. For example, Xou Her, a *tuk-tuk* driver in his forties, who spent about five years at the refugee camp and then returned to Laos (instead of resettling in the United States), recalled the difficulties, especially the uncomfortable living situation with limited space and freedom to move around. Life in the camp for him was very much confined, compared to his previous life in Laos. Xou said:

Life at the camp was very difficult. You could not go anywhere. Once a week, UN and Thai officers distributed food for us to eat. There was no independent house for each family. Everyone lived in the same place together. Some were relatives, but some didn't know each other. But they randomly grouped us and made us live together under the same roof. After living like that, coming back to Laos was more comfortable. But it was just difficult to buy a piece of land, a car, a house, or find a job after arriving here, because we had no savings.

For many Hmong resettled in the United States, the camp experience was also remembered as a life of extreme hardship. For example, Chong Her, one of the Hmong Christian church members in his mid forties, shared his memory of sufferings in the refugee camp, which eventually made him convert to Christianity as a way to survive in the face of both destitution and illness. His family moved three times to different camps within Thailand until he ended up in Ban Vinai, where he spent the last five years (out of a total of thirteen) before eventually moving to the United States. Chong said:

My life in the refugee camps? [laugh] Many people told me that I should write a book about it. The only way we were able to survive was because of the United Nations. Once a week, they provided us food like rice. We pretty much did everything possible to survive. Even though we were officially not allowed to go outside the camp, sometimes, we sneaked out into the forest and hunted birds and squirrels. We also had lots of bamboos just to eat. So for me, life in the refugee camps, I will never be able to forget it.

In a different interview, Yer Lee, a retired man in his late fifties who resettled in the United States, also recalled the poverty and difficulties with survival during his refugee camp experience. In fact, various Hmong families shared his description. Yer elaborated:

In the camp, we basically had difficulties with everything. At the very beginning of our arrival in Thailand, we had no supporting agencies that helped with water or food. When our pocket money ran out, we had to beg the people at the Catholic charity groups or the monks at the temple. If that also became impossible, we had to go to Thai neighborhoods. [With their permission,] we worked for Thai people to get some money, like cultivating their lands or cleaning the weeds. If not, there was definitely nothing to eat. In that case, everyone just starved and got skinny. We also had no houses, of course. I don't know how else I can describe enough the hardship of life in the camp.

Like Chong and Yer, many Hmong in their mid-forties and older particularly remembered the difficult side of camp life and talked about the negative experiences in the camp.

On the other hand, there are 'other' sides of camp life since many individuals also recalled memories which were not simply about trauma, impoverishment, and desperation. During our interview, another Hmong man in his thirties, Chi Her in the United States reminded me of the need to consciously preserve a balanced understanding about what refugee life was like for Hmong as both a person and as a member of the ethnic community.

Besides the experience of his own family, Chi also learned about differences in refugee life by repeatedly listening to the Hmong radio program²⁵ for two hours every night. He said:

Well, yes, life wasn't easy at the camps, but there was also fun. Hmong in the U.S. sometimes say that Soun (Ban) Vinai (the largest refugee camp) was a village of "heaven", like having festivals every day because there were a lot of social gatherings. I mean, people had different experiences and memories. For some people whose parents had more money than others, the refugee camps could be a place for fun and good memories. But for other people, who had hard journeys and were poor, life in camp must have been miserable, like my uncle. I can understand that the degree of danger and hardship varies a lot, depending on the way individuals remember it.

Chi's statement suggests that we differentiate and take into account individual memories and expressions into more multi-layered and detailed contexts before reducing them only to a collective and homogenous group experience. Indeed, while Hmong had to deal with anxiety and uncertainty about their futures in the refugee camps, they also started to learn how to manage difficulties, new changes, and challenges for their survival.²⁶

Chi's view indeed represents those who made more positive remarks on their refugee experiences, especially among Hmong women in Laos and some Hmong in the United States who experienced the camp as young children. In Laos, for example, Yeng Thao, a grandmother in her seventies recalled camp life more neutrally. According to her, as a mother of many children, her life did not change that dramatically between Laos and the Thai refugee camps. Yeng explained as follows:

Life over there [in the camp] was good since I was able to sit down and concentrate on *paj ntaub* [(pan dau) traditional sewing embroidery]. And we didn't have to pay for food since

²⁵ The Hmong radio program, hosted by and broadcasted for the local Hmong community in the United States can be accessed through a phone or a radio. It has become a popular channel for many elderly Hmong to listen to and also freely talk about various topics about the past and present.

²⁶ For ethnographic study on Hmong people's daily lives in Thai refugee camps, see Lynellyn Long's book *Ban Vinai: The Refugee Camp* (1992).

we got it for free. So it was a OK life. At that time, a lot of people wanted to stay longer in the camp, but the Thai government did not allow that and sent us back to Laos or relocated us to different places.

Both Xou, who expressed frustration about refugee life earlier, and Yeng were actually related to each other by clan affiliation, stayed in the same camp in Thailand, and also resettled in the same village in Laos. Although their living circumstances and external environment might not have been that different, the overall memories that they recalled and spoke about are quite different.

In fact, young Hmong girls in their late teens in Laos who spent their childhood in Thailand recalled that they actually enjoyed being there because there were more opportunities for them as girls, like learning the Hmong alphabet (taught by Western missionary volunteers) and starting to make pocket money by selling their embroideries. However, after they returned to Laos and resettled, many of them ended up not being able to pursue an education, not simply because their parents were reluctant to send their daughters to school but also because the public schools rejected them because they were ‘too late for primary education but too ignorant for higher levels of education’.

Hmong in the United States who experienced the camp when they were relatively young also had some positive memories. These individuals are usually in their mid thirties and early forties and described their camp experiences rather as ‘fun’, because they had ‘nothing to worry about as a kid’ unlike their parents. Steve Thao, for example, shared his memory from a refugee camp life at the age of eight. Although he gave the earlier description about his dangerous border crossing at the end of the Vietnam War that wounded his older brother, he spoke about the enjoyable moment in the camp because of his brother:

You know, my [oldest] brother is a good-looking man. Because of that, I was beloved by many female nurses at the camp in Thailand. They were interested in my brother so treated me really nicely. Whenever I was waiting in line for distribution of a meal, they would

smile at me, wave their hands secretly, and call me to come see them. I got extra chocolates and candies that no other kids could get! [laugh]

It is possible that this seemingly enjoyable childhood memory has become a coping mechanism for Steve that can mitigate his traumatic refugee memories. However, many other Hmong in the United States often confirmed that they ‘did have a life’ in the camps despite their confined refugee status. Those currently in their early forties actually met their current spouses, dated, and married in the camps, which indicated that the life of hardship and uncertainty briefly turned into a special and memorable moment of their personal lives. In addition, ethnic and cultural consciousness as Hmong is also portrayed through the performance of the New Year ceremony in the Ban Vinai refugee camp. In short, efforts to promote ethnic consciousness and Hmong culture continued despite their displacement and uncertainty about their ethnic futures and lives.

Of course, the constructive and even positive memories still do not dilute the fact that the war and refugee experience was difficult and the most traumatic part of their recent diasporic history of displacement and dispersal. However, it is equally important to understand different individual memories that somewhat contrast with the collective and homogenous discourse that focuses on loss and trauma as ways in which individuals make connections to the past.

The End of Camp Life: Resettlement Abroad or Return to Laos?

Both Hmong and international agencies knew that the refugee camps in Thailand were only a temporary shelter and that the Hmong must eventually be relocated and resettled. Hmong initially could not choose the country of refugee resettlement when leaving the refugee camps (Hillmer 2010: 215-220; Long 1993). They were eventually sent to the countries through screening and interviews with foreign agencies and organizations with little consideration of their previous lives. During the screening process, Hmong were also asked for their personal information, such as name, date of birth, and village of residence in Laos

in order to determine the extent to which they had been affiliated with anti-Communist military forces during the Vietnam War. This subsequently influenced their chances of resettlement in the United States and other Western countries.

However, those seemingly simple questions were not easy to answer for many Hmong because the way they remember their personal information did not meet the universal standard required by international agencies. For instance, many of them did not know their exact year of birth or age, because they were not familiar with a Western calendar-based system. Regardless, if Hmong refugees did not give the 'right' types of answers, they were often suspected by officials of giving false accounts of their participation in the war. As a result, they were not allowed to leave the camps but were left behind or the members of families often got separated and resettled in different countries.

On the other hand, there were rumors and horror stories about life in the United States that spread through the camps and made Hmong people reluctant or even resistant to resettlement in that country. Stories like the one from some of my interviewees were spread and shared by many refugees in the camps: 'When Hmong people were still in the camp, they watched movies and saw tall, giant Americans. They started believing that those Americans will turn Hmong into food and eat them! As a result, Hmong had a lot of fears and hesitation to leave for the U.S.' There are of course many other complicated factors that made Hmong hesitant about making quick decisions about whether to leave or stay in the camps. As some of my interviewees noted, it is true that some elderly Hmong also had the fear of losing their tradition of polygamy and cultural marriage practices and that they would have to discard after resettlement to Western countries.

Decades later, the Thai government in 1997 made a final announcement that all the refugee camps must officially be closed. Many Hmong were sent back to Laos around that time while some of them still could not leave immediately and involuntarily became protracted refugees (Hein 1995; Hillmer 2010; Long 1993). However, more recently, those

Hmong left behind in protracted refugee situations were eventually moved to the United States in 2002, 2005, and 2007 and joined their family members already living there. These groups that migrated recently to the United States are currently undergoing remarkable distress from the process of adjustment, similar to those resettled family members and relatives who arrived decades earlier.

Return to Laos

During my fieldwork in Laos, Hmong often shared their memories with me about the day of their return to Laos after years in the refugee camps in Thailand. As a resettled returnee in the Dao Tha village in the mid 1990s, Pao Her and I often had conversations about his experience after spending four years at the Thai refugee camp with his family and relatives. One day, I asked:

Author: At that time in the refugee camp, didn't you want to go to America?

Poa Her: Well, I wanted to, but it was because the [resettlement] project was ended. I mean, the UN did not continue to help the remaining people go to the U.S. They said there are no more countries that will take us and we have to go back to our hometown in Laos. They also told us that if we go to America, everything will be very difficult. We will have to depend on the government's help, which is not stable, and we don't know the language so can't freely move around. We will end up being drug addicts! [laugh] They explained this to us and we listened. I kept thinking about it and thought to myself, "Okay, if they still send us to America, I would go. But since the project was over, well, that's okay. I am a Lao citizen." I decided to come back to Laos.

Author: Was it a difficult trip to come back to Laos then?

Poa Her: No, it wasn't difficult. The UN helped us again with trucks and sent us home. When we crossed the Mekong river bridge, we changed into a big bus again. That's the first time I came back to my home country after many years.

Like Poa's family, many Hmong families left Laos from different parts of the country, not only because they participated in the war but also because of the broader consequences caused by Hmong military actions during the war. Poa's family got separated in the refugee camps and his oldest brother's family and the first daughter (who was married at that time and followed her husband) went to the United States while he and his younger siblings returned to Laos together. Kinship and clan membership played a critical role for many Hmong families during the refugee experience and they tried to stay together when they fled Laos, lived in refugee camps, and returned to Laos. That explains why many families currently live in the Hmong community of Dao Tha in Vang Vieng are related to each other by kin affiliation and clan membership.

After crossing the Thai-Lao border, the Hmong in the Vang Vieng village were relocated at least three times within the district before they were finally resettled in Dao Tha. During their transition back to Laos, these families suffered from inadequate living conditions, no proper water, food, or housing systems. Most of all, young families often suffered from the sudden death of their babies during the processes of return and resettlement because of illness and impoverished living conditions. I did not learn about their babies who died during this period until much later because the parents did not (or could not) include them when introducing their current children to me. Indeed, it was disheartening when I realized that families initially did not mention children who died during the earlier refugee experience and would only talk about them later when discussing past memories. The loss was 'too painful to remember', as one of those parents who lost the second daughter, Xou Her, said.

Those Hmong families eventually moved to several small villages and established a stable life, including at my own field site of Dao Tha village. When they resettled in different villages, each household was entitled to a piece of land to build their own house. The sizes and locations of villages varied depending on the available land, which sometimes

caused contention about land distribution and unequal reintegration of various Hmong groups. However, among the total of six Hmong villages formed after the relocation projects in the district that I visited, the degree of social tension and economic development varied. In particular, one village which I call 'Phu Sok' is known not just as another ordinary resettled Hmong village but as a 'controversial' group of returnees from the Ban Vinai (the largest one) and Wat Tham Krabok (the last one) camps who resisted coming back to Laos until the last minute.

Although there were active social interactions between the Phu Sok villagers and other Lao civilians as well as Hmong visitors from overseas, I was often reminded by other Hmong people to remain 'careful' when approaching the villagers in Phu Sok. According to them, the local government would not consider it 'ordinary' if a foreigner like me developed frequent contact with the Phu Sok villagers without official permission (which is difficult to get anyway) and there can be 'unforeseen' problems in obtaining the villagers' trust. Despite the short distance and easy travel from my field site of Dao Tha village, I was not able to visit Phu Sok until much later when a few students from there, who lived with their married siblings residing in Dao Tha, invited me to their homes.

Therefore, the refugee resettlement and reintegration process of Hmong in Laos have produced differences such as between Dao Tha and Phu Sok, where the villagers have still maintained their lifestyles and connections from their former refugee camps, such as a Christian Church. Indeed, it is necessarily to take into account such specific contexts and differences when understanding the larger social background of Hmong's contemporary lives in Laos.

Hmong Refugees as Immigrant Latecomers to the United States

The Hmong in the United States have over forty years of immigration history since the mid 1970s after their first official arrival in the country from different refugee camps in Thailand. The resettlement process from Thailand to the United States took a number of years, since

Hmong families came from multiple refugee camp locations at different times. Upon the arrival, they were initially sent to various cities depending on the sponsoring agencies, which were mostly U.S. religious and charity organizations, or the location of relatives who had already resettled in the country. However, they later moved internally within the United States, often following other family and clan members. Currently, the largest Hmong population resides in the states of California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In the United States, Hmong are usually grouped together as Southeast Asian or Indochinese war refugees along with Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians and mainly recognized by their military cooperation with the CIA during the Vietnam War. It is important to note that Hmong are known independently as 'Hmong' by the U.S. government in its official documents and not as 'Laotian', which refer to the majority ethnic Lao (Lao Loum).

There are a number of publications that detail and describe Hmong's experiences of resettlement in the United States written by both Hmong writers and non-Hmong authors (Chan 1994; Donnelly 1997; Faderman 1999; Koltyk 1993, 1997; Vang 2010; Yang 2008). These books deftly convey people's narratives, personal accounts, oral histories and autobiographies, all of which can be the basis of understanding the history of the Hmong diaspora through people's lived experiences. Instead of summarizing them, it is meaningful to reflect on the past experiences and memories of my interviewees about the processes and experiences of resettlement in America. When listening to Hmong people's stories, particularly about their first arrival and refugee resettlement process in the United States, I realized that their 'real' hardship was actually not over after they left Laos and the refugee camps in Thailand.

Although many of the Hmong had lived in the refugee camps before they resettled in the United States, most have experienced continuous economic hardship and had devastating memories of the initial period of their resettlement in America, which was not exactly a 'land of opportunity'. An elderly Hmong man in his sixties, Tou Lee, recalled his first arrival

in Washington D.C. in August 1978 at a temporary shelter before he moved to other major cities:

At that time, the IRC (International Red Cross) took my family to the 8th floor of a hotel, which had just a very small room. I lived there for one month. Some days, I didn't even have anything to eat. I only knew the Lao language, but the person who came as an interpreter [a service assistant] was a Vietnamese. I had a lot of children, too. But I didn't know how to go to the market to buy things or how to make money. When my babies were so hungry and crying, there was no one to visit or take care of us. Oh...I was so frustrated! (...) About a month later, I started a job washing dishes at a big factory from sun-rise to sun-set. My life back then was very difficult.

When Hmong families first arrived in the country and were put in temporary governmental housing, there were not enough professionals like social workers and family specialists who could regularly visit them and help out with the process of resettlement. The language barrier also made overall communications difficult between Hmong families and their caretakers, which often discouraged them from expressing their frustrations or explaining their problems.

Sai Lee, one of the earlier Hmong who resettled in the United States, told me about the hardship of resettlement and adjustment to a completely new life among new refugee arrivals. Shortly after his arrival, Sai started to work as a social worker for Hmong communities based on his previous experiences assisting foreign medical volunteer teams in Thai refugee camps. One day, he visited a Hmong family and found out that the family did not know how to use the stove in the kitchen and therefore could not cook at all and got sick, because they barely ate any food for a few days. On his daily visits to different houses, he also made sure to explain and teach families that the water in the toilet is not drinkable while distributing food stamps and aid items to them.

Even for some Hmong professionals who currently hold reputable positions in the community because of their successful careers, their frequent stories of hardship and struggles were not that different. A public elementary school principal in Sacramento, Chue Yang, shared with me his life history of economic hardship before he became a community representative. He spoke about how his family was initially rejected for government-sponsored low income housing, because he was 'too poor to be qualified'. He was laughing when talking about this as if it were a delightful memory from the distant past.

Mai Lor, who worked as a program coordinator at a Hmong community organization, also laughed about her difficult childhood after resettlement. In Utah, the first state where her family lived before moving to Sacramento, she remembered that their lives back then were 'kind of dark', because they could not go anywhere freely but just stayed home. The weather was brutally cold, too. One day, her parents talked about driving a car. Her father told her mother, 'To go somewhere, we need a car. Every time I look outside, I see everyone drives. I mean, if everyone can drive, why can't I?' Both her parents were able to get a car from her neighbor and actually tried to drive it as soon as they got in. They almost crashed into the garage door and were barely able to stop the car. Mai also could not stop laughing when telling me the story.

Life Goes On

There is no published study that explores the relations between Hmong's ethnic minority experiences as resettled refugees in both Laos and the United States and their search for homeland or a place of belonging. From ancient times in China to their more recent migration and dispersal after the Vietnam War, many of my interviewees shared experiences and memories from the past in different ways. Facing both economic and sociocultural hardships in the various countries in which they have lived, they truly have diasporic histories based on multiple displacements and forced dispersal to numerous countries.

However, this diasporic history is not based on a definitive ethnic homeland, a country of ancestral origin, which can anchor their dispersed transnational community and serve as a place where they fully belong and can return. Instead, it has been a history of multiple forced migrations and resettlements in various countries, which in the past led to the desire of some Hmong to establish an alternative country or land that they can call their own and where they can live together. Such imaginings and longings for an ethnic homeland can serve as an escape from their current hardships, political conflicts, and migratory displacements that they endured. In this context, the next chapter will explore Hmong's multiple theories of origin and their search for the alternatives to the absence of an ethnic homeland in the Hmong diaspora and examine their diverse perceptions to their supposed homelands.

Chapter 2. In Search of Homelands and Belonging

Unlike other geographically dispersed ethnic groups, the Hmong do not have a clear and definitive ancestral homeland at the center of their diaspora that is the basis for their ethnic unity and transnational communities. Although the predominant scholarly theory claims that the ancestral homeland of Hmong is China, the Hmong themselves express considerable uncertainty about their origins as a diasporic peoples and do not always adopt scholarly discourses that assume that it is China. Instead, they have developed multiple, incongruent theories of ethnic ancestry and homeland which circulate among different individuals, indicating that China remains a possible, but also contested ethnic homeland. Although they express a sense of co-ethnic affiliation with the Miao-Hmong minority in China, they do not identify or affiliate with the nation-state as a place of ethnic origin.

In addition, it is important to realize that Hmong, like other diasporic peoples, have multiple homelands. Although their *ethnic* homeland (the country where their ethnic group originated) is a product of their initial migratory dispersal from (what scholars claim) southwestern China, the contemporary Hmong diaspora was also constituted after the Vietnam War when Hmong living in Laos were again dispersed to various countries as resettled refugees. As a result, Laos is the natal homeland of diasporic Hmong, since it is the country of origin where they were born.

However, the attitudes and perceptions of Hmong toward the natal homeland of Laos have been quite ambivalent because they have been a socioeconomically and politically marginalized ethnic minority and were forced to flee from the country after the Vietnam War due to fear of persecution by the Communist Lao government. As a result, although China and Laos are both 'homelands' in terms of their diasporic ethnic history, neither really feels like a 'true' homeland for them to which they feel strong emotional attachment and affiliation). Their ambivalent relations to both China and Laos indicates that they have a

diasporic ethnic minority consciousness in which they do not feel they fully belong to either nation-state.

This chapter examines Hmong's own conflicted and ambivalent perceptions about both China and Laos and how they therefore constitute themselves as a diaspora that does not really belong to either nation-state and are therefore a peoples without a true homeland or country. In addition, since their relations to homelands remain uncertain and contested, I will also examine the way Hmong have engaged in an ongoing search for their ethnic origins and have explored various possibilities and theories about it.

Although Hmong do read scholarly work on their ethnic history as part of their search for ancestry, their theories about their ethnic homeland are inferred and retrieved from their oral history, songs and chants, and cultural ritual activities. This chapter will further argue that diasporas do not necessarily have to be based on a definitive ethnic homeland as a territorial center. The transnational ethnic affiliations that keep diasporic communities together can be based on emotional attachments and affiliations with co-ethnic communities dispersed in the diaspora across multiple countries rather than with a dominant nation-state of ethnic origin.

Multiple Homelands and Diaspora

When I began my fieldwork in Laos, I hoped to find some concrete answers about the ethnic origins of the Hmong people and the location of their ethnic homeland, since this has been an issue that Hmong in Dao Tha village in Vang Vieng often spoke about. My Hmong interviewees indeed expressed their personal interest in the topic and actively gave me their opinions. However, at the same time, I was asked numerous times why I chose such a complex and difficult topic, since it will be difficult for me to 'find the right answer'. A twenty-year old man Yer Lee in Laos was one of them. He was always curious about his people's ethnic origins even if his daily life may have nothing to do with his ancestral ethnic homeland. One late afternoon on a dry day in November, Yer rushed up to me as if he had

really striking news to tell me. He was coming from a downtown Internet Café in Vang Vieng. Catching his breath but smiling, he said:

Yer: You know, I just went to an Internet Café and looked up “Hmong” on the Internet! I found out something special and really interesting. It was in the...something like...an online source.

Author: You mean, like an encyclopedia, like Wikipedia?

Yer: Oh yeah. It said “Hmong maybe came from Mongolia.” I think I kind of heard about that in the past. But it was really there [in print]! So what do you think? Before we only knew about China, but now it seems we may also be from Mongolia.

Being fluent in English and capable of using computers, Yer spent most of the afternoon searching about his own ethnic origins online. Although he was aware of the dominant scholarly theory that China is the Hmong ethnic homeland, he apparently remained unsure and wanted to find more information. I was impressed by his enthusiasm and persistent interest in tracing his ethnic ancestry ever since I had first met him several years earlier. In fact, he seemed to become less certain of these scholarly claims once he found other theories online about where Hmong are from.

After speaking with Hmong like Yer, it became clear to me that resolving the question of where exactly Hmong *really* came from was a futile exercise. Instead, I wanted to understand Hmong *perceptions* about their ethnic origins and their current uncertainty about their ethnic homeland. What is it like to live without clearly knowing where your ethnic group originated?

I later realized that perhaps this was why many Hmong people had emotional reactions at the end of my interviews after talking about their confusion, uncertainties, and sometimes frustrations because they did not have concrete knowledge or agreement about their ancestral ethnic roots. They are a diasporic people, but unlike most other diasporas, that

seem to lack coherent, territorial ethnic homeland. There is no definitive country or place of ethnic origin and belonging to which diasporic Hmong feel a sense of affiliation that would promote ethnic unity among them across national borders. As a result, Hmong have wondered about the ancestral history of their ethnic group and have referred to oral stories, legends and myths reproduced over generations, as well as other available resources, such as books and existing scholarly research.

Indeed, many different types of homeland and multiple theories of ethnic origins have coexisted and changed over time among Hmong in the diaspora. There is inevitable discrepancy and conflict between an individual's current home (place of residence) and homeland, as one moves across national boundaries. Although Laos can be considered a natal homeland of birth, it is certainly not their ancestral ethnic homeland where their ethnic group originated in ancient times. As a result, Hmong in the diaspora have also developed affiliations to multiple homes and homelands while continuing their search.

For example, Kia Smith, a 1.5 generation woman in her early thirties (born in Thai refugee camp and grew up in the United States) shared with me her long-lasting and complicated search for ethnic belonging during our interview:

I have asked my [non-Hmong] husband about my homeland: "If someone asks me about it, what do you think I should say?" He said, "You should say China, because that's where you were originally from." But when I heard that Hmong were from China, I was initially very resistant to that...because my dad said that we were from Laos. So I went back to talk to my dad. He said, "Oh, you know, your great, great grandfather probably first came from China." Okay, that was very important information that he could have told us earlier, because we always thought Laos is where Hmong came from. If you asked me [about homeland] in the past when I was very hesitant to say that my people were from China, I would have said, I was born in Thailand [refugee camp] so that's my homeland. But since I

am now working with the Hmong community and teaching them our history, I would say China.

Because of the uncertainty about her ethnic homeland, Kia's non-Hmong white American husband ironically helped to verify the origin of her ethnicity. Kia continued to discuss her ongoing search for homelands as follows:

But now, as I grow older, I would say my homeland really is America. Do you know what I mean? When I see myself in the next fifty years, I see myself investing in this country, voting for people to represent my interests, becoming fiscally invested in the community, and moving certain things forward, so this country becomes my homeland.

While speaking of 'homeland' in her own terms, Kia concluded that the United States, her current country of residence where she grew up, would be where her future belongs and thereby eventually become her adopted homeland, in contrast to her natal homeland of Thailand, her parents' homeland of Laos, or the possible ethnic homeland of China.

In fact, this interview identifies the limitations of the concept of homeland, which is often essentialized as a unitary entity and defined in terms of national belonging, and does not fully encompass the experiences of diasporic people like the Hmong, whose ethnic consciousness is shaped beyond a single nation-state's territorial boundaries. In this chapter, I first introduce and discuss multiple theories of ethnic origins and the search for homeland among Hmong in the diaspora and then specifically examine how Hmong perceive their supposedly lost ethnic homeland of China as well as Laos, the natal homeland after the Vietnam War (1955-1975).

A territorial ethnic homeland is often understood to be located at the center of the diaspora and anchors peoples dispersed across the world by promoting their ethnic unity through an emotional attachment to their country of origin (Tölölyan 1996; Safran 1991). These studies recognize that such territorial ethnic homelands cannot be taken for granted

and that diasporic communities have complicated relationships with it. For example, in her study of the Palestinian diaspora, Helena Schulz (2003: 186-187) demonstrates that diasporic people actually expand the meanings of homeland more flexibly and develop multiple 'homes' in different countries as a way to overcome their state of 'homelessness' because of their exile from the ethnic homeland of Palestine.

Similarly, focusing on the Armenian diaspora, Susan Pattie (1999: 86) illustrates the multiple national centers of the diasporic community that provide a substitute for a single territorialized ethnic homeland, while emphasizing the equal importance of recognizing the presence of the ethnic homeland depending on the individuals' subjective perceptions (see also Lee 2009). Although the literature acknowledges that homeland is not always a singular and territorially coherent nation-state, the existence of a definite place of ethnic origin for diasporic peoples is still assumed. For the Hmong, however, the location of their ethnic homeland remains uncertain and they have different theories of where they ethnically originated.

Nonetheless, because the official history about the Hmong, presented in books, encyclopedia, mass media, and public resources, dominantly claims that Hmong are an indigenous ethnic minority which originated somewhere in China, researchers have hardly questioned or reexamined the way Hmong themselves develop multiple hypotheses about ethnic ancestry and express uncertainty about their ethnic homeland. It is therefore important to examine Hmong's own perceptions toward different nation-states as their homelands, which reveal the untold or dismissed narratives contained in official and national histories (see Duara 1997:4). Although Hmong in both Laos and the United States do not affiliate themselves with the Chinese nation-state, they do express ethnic affiliations to the Miao-Hmong minority currently residing in China. Hmong in both countries have also developed ambivalent perceptions toward their natal homeland of Laos and do not naturally develop an affiliation with it as a common homeland for Hmong scattered in the diaspora.

In sum, neither China as a lost ancient ethnic homeland or Laos as a more recent natal homeland serves as a place of origin that unifies the Hmong diaspora and produces a collective ethnic consciousness or common ethnic identity across borders. The special feature of the Hmong diaspora is that Hmong people's diasporic consciousness is based on a transnational affiliation to co-ethnic 'people' across borders instead of a strong identification with their former natal homeland or to an old, supposedly lost original ethnic homeland.

The Uncertainty of China as the Ethnic Homeland

Although many scholars have defined China as the most plausible ethnic homeland of the Hmong, it is not always clear to what extent scholarly research has impacted Hmong's own perspectives about their ethnic ancestry and history. It is true that Hmong do consult and even read scholarly literature about their history, which, for instance, is sold at Hmong New Year festivals in the United States. This is quite remarkable considering that not all Hmong immigrants in the U.S. have strong educational backgrounds and indicates their interest in and search for their ancestral origins. However, such books and published materials are not equally accessible or available for most Hmong in Laos. More importantly, although Hmong who do believe that their ethnic homeland is China refer to scholarly literature about this, they tend to base their claims more on Hmong folklore, oral history, and ritual narratives and practices, as will be shown below. Such oral traditions about their ethnic history do reference the Hmong presence in ancient China, but they also assume that Hmong are a more ancient people who predate their experience in China.

One example are the chants and songs that are part of funeral rituals, which are of great importance to Hmong communities. In Hmong funerals, the 'soul' of deceased person is considered mobile and borderless, must leave the body, and is sent back to its 'original' place to reunite with the ancestors. The chanter, who conducts the ritual for sending the soul, narrates the entire journey for up to two or more hours by pointing out each stop that the soul needs to pass by until it reaches its 'final' destination. The soul has a long trip of adversity

going through multiple places and encountering different people and overcoming various hardships.

In particular, the chanting becomes lengthy and dramatic when it describes the conflicts and fights against the ‘Chinese enemy’ in distant times. According to my interviewees who conduct such chanting rituals for the community, once the soul overcomes such crisis induced by the war with Chinese groups, they will finally send the soul to its ‘ultimate’ destination, which they cannot name, but is supposedly a peaceful and beautiful place where their ancestors originated. Some of my interviews interpreted such Hmong mythical and oral history to mean that Hmong’s ultimate ethnic origins are an unknowable location that predates their ancient history in China.

Therefore, although roughly half of my interviewees in both Laos and the United States mentioned China as their possible ethnic homeland, they remain rather uncertain about its plausibility since they believe there may have been a more ancient homeland. Indeed, Hmong in my study who told me that they believe their ethnic ancestors were from somewhere in the southern part of China spoke about it in an uncertain manner. For example, one of my interviewees in the United States, Neng Her, pointed this out and remarked, ‘before the Hmong settled in Laos and Vietnam, they were from China. But that’s the farthest that we may have physical evidence for and we are not sure before that. Maybe some still have relatives over there but that’s like the earliest that we can remember.’

When people expressed certainty about China as their ethnic homeland, they also added or implied that there might be another place of origin before China of which they have no concrete evidence. In an interview with Sheng Her in the United States, who often conducts funeral rituals for the community, he initially expressed certainty about China as follows:

Absolutely [Hmong are] from China. Beyond that, I don’t know. If you do your anthropological work, people might have different theories. Maybe we were from

Mongolia before China. We have folklore stories that kind of indicate that we were from Mongolia. But when you compare those people (Mongolians) to us, Hmong are different. So the actual, original homeland of Hmong, we don't know.

In this manner, Sheng's remarks that stressed his certainty about China as the ethnic homeland are based on greater uncertainty about prior places of ancestral origin. In addition, he was well aware of other theories of ethnic origin that were considered credible by other Hmong.

During an interview with Chong Her at his workplace in Sacramento one afternoon, he took a thick book entitled *Operation China: Introducing All the People of China* from his bookshelf and put it on the table in front of me. He told me that he likes to read such scholarly books about the ethnic origins of Hmong and is personally interested in their history. However, Chong did not seem to subscribe to the scholarly notion that Hmong are one of the original peoples of China. Instead, he felt there was an even more ancient homeland for Hmong:

I personally believe that Hmong people came from Mesopotamia, before they went to China. We have someone who has a theory that they lived in Mesopotamia, which is the area of Iraq and Iran nowadays. Thousands of years ago, they moved to Russia, to the west to Mongolia, and they finally settled down in southern China for thousands of years. I truly believe that the Hmong originally come from there and we are the same family and same clan.

Hmong in Laos have also shown similar attitudes and perceptions about the uncertain nature of their ethnic origins in China. According to a short report written by a Hmong college student in Laos in 1972, it was already mentioned that uncertainty over and the search for a homeland was not a new issue: 'Mostly they [Hmong ancestors] did not remember their history well and sometimes told you a mythical history if you asked them a question 'where

did Hmoob [Hmong] come from?’ The answer could be from ‘Tuam Tshoj’ or China’ (Thao 1972: 9). Implicit in this perspective is that some elderly Hmong people depend on their memory about a mythical history while others do not relate this myth to their ethnic homeland. Although many Hmong in Laos believe that they have enough evidence (through oral histories) about their presence in ancient China, they are convinced that there must have been a ‘true’ (but unknown) original ethnic homeland before that period that accounts for the territorial origins of Hmong.

Therefore, Hmong in both Laos and the United States have not completely adopted the scholarly discourse that claims that China is the Hmong ethnic homeland because their oral history seems to indicate that their ancestral origins are found in the more distant past. In fact, existing scholarly debates and research about China and Hmong’s ethnic origins do not always seem to influence Hmong opinions about this issue nor always correlate with their actual understanding and interpretation of their own ethnic history.

In fact, some ordinary Hmong are aware of DNA research (discussed in Chapter 1) that claims to provide ‘reliable’ scientific evidence that China is Hmong’s ethnic homeland. The result of the DNA research was actually mentioned by about one fourth of my Hmong interviewees during my fieldwork in both Laos and the United States. However, among Hmong who felt their ancestors originated in China, only one individual referred to the DNA study as evidence of his certainty about the historical connections between diasporic Hmong and China going back to ancient times. Even those who were aware of the DNA test results clearly pointed out that such scientific tests are not the basis for their opinions. In sum, Hmong’s understandings about ethnic homeland tended to be based on oral traditions and practices passed down through the generations rather than simply referencing scholarly research, with the exception of a small group of individuals.

‘Paj tawj lag’ (the ‘Land of Flowers’) and the Imagined Homeland

For the reasons noted above, Hmong in the contemporary diaspora remain unsure about whether China is their ancient and original homeland and they have not adopted or completely accepted the scholarly discourse on this subject. However, they continue to search for and hope to find an exact and concrete territorial location for their diasporic origins. Instead of remaining permanently uncertain as a ‘peoples without an ethnic homeland’, they continue to search for a territorial land that they can claim as a homeland in the absence of any existing nation-state of their own.

In her extensive study of Pakistani Muslim community in Manchester, U.K., Pnina Werbner (2002) examines the transnational dimensions of Pakistanis in Britain and how they embrace multiple positions and affiliations, such as a Pakistani national identity, Punjabi regional identity, and diasporic identities such as South Asian and Muslim (or the *umma*, a transnational religious community). Such multiple, ‘hybrid’ elements that constitute the Muslim diaspora in large are critical for Pakistani communities and enable them to simultaneously maintain and manage identities based on these different positions through their production of imagined narratives, political discourses, and extensive cultural performances.

Werbner further argues that these Pakistanis negotiate conflicts and social tensions within their immigrant communities and with majority British society (including their demonization as religious extremists in Western politics and public media) by imagining diasporic identifications with broader transnational communities of Muslims and South Asians. This constitutes the ‘diasporic public sphere’, the very site of ‘creative locus of the new imaginaries’ which allow them to position themselves in such conflicts by separating and intermingling different identities (2002: 251-253).

However, imagined diasporic communities are not simply based on transnational ethnic and religious affiliations with those living in other countries. For diasporic peoples like Hmong who do not have a territorialized country of ethnic origin to begin with, the

ancestral homeland at the core of the diaspora itself is often imagined. Because they were displaced from an unknown ethnic homeland long ago and have lost their connections to it, they feel a constant need to recover a place of ancestral origin in an imagined form by producing a historical consciousness reiterated and remembered through their cultural practices, rituals, and oral stories. Therefore, although Hmong may not have the same type of imagined connectivity to diasporic co-ethnics around the world, their multidimensional diasporic identifications are partly based on an affiliation with an imagined ethnic homeland.

During interviews with Hmong in both Laos and the United States about their perspectives on China, ancestral origin, and homeland, I often came across a name of a region called '*paj tawj lag* ([pa-tarl-laang])'²⁷ which literally means 'land of flowers' in the Hmong language. The 'land of flowers' is an abstract, imagined ethnic homeland for Hmong which is also associated with 'heaven' and 'paradise' because it is considered the final resting place for deceased ancestral souls, as noted before. Since I have never encountered this name in scholarly literature about Hmong origins, it appears to be a product of Hmong mythical folklore, where this imagined homeland/heaven is initially not associated with any specific territory or country.

While Lao Hmong has not suggested any specific name of location, U.S. Hmong have started to associate *paj tawj lag* with Wenshan (文山²⁸), which is located in Yunnan province, China. Although the 'land of flowers' is more of a literary expression and no one knows how it first appeared in Hmong community discourse, these Hmong have come to believe that it is a small prefecture in China where the predominant population of Miao-Hmong currently live. It is also known that the Miao group currently residing in that particular region share a similar and mutually intelligible language with diasporic Hmong in

²⁷ As will be discussed later in this chapter, the origin of the name *paj tawj lag* (literally, 'land of flower') is not known. However, *paj tawj lag* has come to refer to Wenshan, the actual region in China, and gradually believed by Hmong especially in the U.S. as the possible original place of ethnic Hmong (Miao-Hmong) in China.

²⁸ Known as 'Miao autonomous prefecture'.

other countries, and are linguistically and culturally distinct from other Miao in other regions of China.

However, there are also different interpretations of *paj tawj lag* and debates over whether or not it exactly means Wenshan, since many people recognize the arbitrariness of matching an imagined homeland from Hmong mythology with a specific place in China. In the United States, when I interviewed the two Miao-Hmong visiting scholars from China who were affiliated with local universities, I asked both of them whether they have heard about Wenshan prefecture, which was frequently mentioned by Hmong as a possible location of their ethnic homeland. Both Miao-Hmong scholars responded that the identification of *paj tawj lag* with Wenshan may be a product of recently developed ethnic interactions between some Hmong American tourists who have visited the Miao in southwestern part of China. According to Fei Yang, one of the Miao-Hmong scholars from China, the association of Wenshan with the Hmong's ethnic homeland seems to be a relative new conception among U.S. Hmong:

I don't know how and why Hmong outside China found out about Wenshan [laughs].

Yeah, it's very interesting! Since 2000, more Hmong people from the U.S. have started to visit Guizhou and Yunnan provinces [where Miao groups reside]. I suspect when they returned to the U.S., they talked to other people about those provinces and that's how more Hmong people came to know about Wenshan.

Fei's explanation has interesting implications on two main levels. On the one hand, diasporic Hmong living outside of China (not the Miao-Hmong themselves) are the ones who have connected their imagined ethnic homeland (the 'land of flowers') to a real territorial place existing in China. Because Wenshan is the area highly populated with Miao-Hmong, it is not coincidental that Hmong American visitors came to refer to that place as the actual name of their ancestral homeland.

Therefore, U.S. Hmong have been actively involved in an ethnic homeland-making process as they try to find a precise and concrete location for their imagined homeland and reconstruct their long-lost ethnic ancestry. Although my interviewees in the U.S. noted that the enthusiasm about visiting the Miao-Hmong region of China seems to have decreased over time, for many of them, the mythical place known as the land of flowers has now been associated with a real location in Wenshan, China. In contrast, although Hmong in Laos also use the term *paj tawj lag* to refer to their imagined ancestral homeland, since they have never been to China, they do not necessarily associate the ‘land of flowers’ specifically with Wenshan.

Searching for Ethnic Homelands: Beyond China

Although Hmong discourses about ethnic homeland tended to center on China, my interviewees also suggested a diverse range of other theories about their ancestral origins which are impossible to simply characterize. In fact, it is not possible to list here all the different versions and individual theories of ethnic homeland that I encountered since multiple locations were given for the Hmong’s ethnic origins and there was no coherent and unified historical narrative. This again suggests that instead of attempting to resolve the issue of where the Hmong *really* originated and examining whether China is their ‘true’ ethnic homeland, we should first look at how people themselves understand and make sense of heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting historical narratives of ethnic origin.

Because of these different understandings of where the Hmong people are from, there was no consensus among my interviewees about the ultimate origin of the Hmong diaspora. Instead, the result is disagreement and competing discourses about their ethnic ancestry and history. For instance, some Hmong exposed a theory that they originally came from Mesopotamia or Mongolia. However, Sai Lee, in an interview in the United States, mentioned such theories but also disagreed with them:

Worldwide, the Hmong population is very large. But we don't know where we originated from [laugh]. It always leaves a question mark for me, too. Well, based on the readings, although there is no scientific evidence... I think Hmong might have originated from southwest China. The concept that Hmong might have originated from Mongolia or Mesopotamia—I kind of do not buy that idea.

While collecting these multiple individual Hmong theories of ethnic origin, I remembered the comments of Moua Ly, a Hmong man in his fifties who migrated to France in 1979 whom I met in Laos while he was traveling there. 'It is very difficult to be certain about where our original homeland is because there are no documents or written historical records', he remarked. 'According to Hmong oral history, Hmong originated from Mongolia, and the name of the country sounds so similar to Hmong.²⁹ But we can only speculate.'

Other theories among Hmong I frequently encountered included one from Mor Thao, an elderly man in his seventies in Laos, who spoke about his knowledge of Hmong ethnic origins. On a late Sunday morning, I was invited to lunch at his place with his family. Showing his interest in my interview topic, he shared his theory with me and explained:

Mor: Initially, Hmong lived in the U.S.A. a long time ago and then they migrated to China after many wars. I don't know the details and who took our ancestors to China but after many days of darkness during the journey, Hmong finally reached the land of light. That was how Hmong ended up being in China after escaping from America and no one knows the exact timeline of that. We suspect that our original place was Alaska in the U.S. Once we left Alaska, everywhere was dark. In Alaska, about half of the year is dark and another half is bright, right?

Author: Ah..I guess...have you seen people in Alaska? Do you think they are the same

²⁹ The written Hmong language, known as Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), was created by a French missionary in the 1950s. However, the accurate pronunciation of Hmong is actually [mong], as mentioned in the interview (see also Leepreecha 2008).

ethnic people as Hmong?

Mor: I am not sure. But I would say Alaska was the original Hmong country once upon a time.

Indeed, Alaska was one of the last places on earth I would think of as a possible ethnic homeland of the Hmong. However, ten months later, I came across the same theory during my fieldwork in the United States. In fact, a number of Hmong in Sacramento subscribed to this theory. For example, Tou Vang, a retired man in his late fifties, gave me a series of migratory destinations in Hmong diasporic history. He said:

According to older Hmong people, the Hmong originated from Alaska in America, then they migrated to Mongolia, and then to China. Some old people like my father believed that by coming to America and living here now, we have returned to our original homeland. When we look at Alaskan Eskimo cultures, there are some similarities to Hmong culture. Some people deduced this based on lifestyle and tradition, such as bows and arrows and the millstones when making tofu. So the Eskimos also do that kind of grinding just like Hmong.

This seemingly arbitrary connection between the Hmong and Eskimos in a faraway land, however, is articulated based on personal observations and understandings of similarities in cultural behavior and physical appearance, as well as geographic knowledge.

Among Hmong in Laos, one dominant perception was that their ethnic homeland is Mongolia, a theory that was also shared by some U.S. interviewees. This competed with the narrative that Hmong come from China. For example, Teng Xiong, a man in his late thirties who had higher education from abroad, explained the logic of this theory based on mythical history as follows:

In the distant past, when Mongolia was the most powerful country, there was a General in charge of the whole Asian region. He sent an army to China to ask the

people to cooperate with Mongolia. But when Mongolia became weaker, the General tried to take the army back to his country but many soldiers did not want to go back. I think maybe Hmong were a part of those soldiers who did not want to return to Mongolia. So it is possible that those Mongolian soldiers were the ancestors of Hmong in China.

While speculating on the ancient history of Hmong ancestors as warriors, Teng further elaborated upon his reasoning and continued:

I heard old people saying that in the past, Hmong were much stronger and better than Chinese during wars. Indeed, Hmong were very good at shooting [arrows]. This was how they had been warriors for many thousands years, just like the Mongolians today. Otherwise, Hmong would not have been able to survive through all the wars. Based on these facts, I believe Hmong were once the warriors of Mongolia.

The more I talked with people, the clearer it became that Hmong's perceptions about their ethnic homeland are not as simple or coherent as indicated by official reports and scholarly writings. The other places of ethnic origin suggested by Hmong for various reasons ranged widely from the northern border of India to Siberia, the Iranian plateau, Australia, or even Korea. Others, like Lena Thao, a representative of one of the Hmong community organizations in Sacramento, could not identify a specific name or territorial nation-state as the Hmong ethnic homeland and suggested the following argument:

In Hmong funerals, special songs are sung based on the oral history about traditional homelands that refer to the "land of snow" without naming a country of origin. The soul of the dead is asked to go back to that place with warm shoes and clothes since it will be cold and snowy. If we think about this, China does not have many days of snow. So it must be somewhere else different from China, which has a lot of snow.

On the other hand, Neng Her, a young Hmong college student in the United States, had a different conclusion based on similar reasoning and speculation based on Hmong folklore, which caused him to point to a specific location as the possible homeland of ethnic origin. Neng said:

Based on storytelling and songs from txiv xaiv³⁰ [txisai] and zaj tshoob³¹ [jachong], they call the Hmong's ancestral homeland as where the "sun never shows up," which some people suspect is Siberia. If you look at the pictures of Siberian people, they really look like Hmong, too.

Instead of simply relying on official scholarly histories, Hmong oral tradition from funeral, religious ritual, and wedding ceremonies has provided them with material to speculate about their ethnic origins in an attempt to trace their ancient and ultimately unknown ethnic history. An abstract location, such as a 'land of snow' mentioned above not only expands the geographic positioning of the ethnic homeland but also leaves room for varying interpretations as shown in Lena's above comments.

Connecting to Co-Ethnics but Disconnecting from the Chinese Nation-State

Perceptions of Hmong in Laos toward Miao-Hmong in China

Although diasporic Hmong remain uncertain about whether China is their actual ethnic homeland and have not developed a strong emotional connection to it as the country of ancestral ethnic origin, this does not prevent them from developing emotional connections and an attachment to the Miao-Hmong residing in China. Hmong outside China do not identify themselves as Miao in their own national contexts partly because the word Miao sounds like 'cat' (*meo*) in Lao language and has a derogatory connotation.

Nonetheless, Hmong in both Laos and the United States did express a remarkable sense of ethnic affiliation with Miao-Hmong living in China. Hmong in Laos feel ethnically

³⁰ The last song sung for the rituals at funerals.

³¹ Traditional songs for the wedding ceremonies.

attached to the Miao-Hmong in China through their daily interactions with Chinese Miao-Hmong peddlers, who travel to Laos for business. Likewise, Hmong from the United States have traveled around China and met various ethnic minorities in the southern part of the country and also expressed their feelings of ethnic commonality to the Miao-Hmong in China. However, such affiliations are not a *national* attachment to China as the country from which the Hmong originated but is a sense of attachment to *co-ethnics* living in that supposed ethnic homeland.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, Hmong in Laos are exposed to a highly globalized local environment and actively interact with various transnational Hmong visitors from abroad. A number of them have encountered Miao-Hmong peddlers from China, who visited different Hmong villages in Laos on their motorbikes carrying bundles of herbal medicines claimed to be ‘authentically’ grown by Miao in China and various products like traditional Hmong clothes, jewelry, and other miscellaneous articles.³²

Calling these Miao-Hmong peddlers from China as ‘the same people’, or ‘brothers and sisters’, Hmong in Laos were certain about their common ethnic identity as Hmong. They recognized their ethnic connections to these Chinese Miao-Hmong because of similarities in dress, cultural traditions, as well as the clan system based on the same shared last names. They learned that Miao-Hmong in China still carry on the same cultural traditions like funeral rituals and the New Year ceremony, although some details may have changed due to their geographic separation.

The connections that Hmong in Laos feel to Miao-Hmong from China are not simply based on some presumed and abstract ‘sameness’ that encompasses the entire Hmong ethnic group. Instead, they also believed that Hmong life in general is characterized by ‘constant hardship’ and perceived this as a shared and universal destiny of Hmong everywhere. They even expressed more sympathy to the Hmong’s hardship in China compared to their own

³² Some local Hmong in Laos have also occasionally heard about or encountered Miao-Hmong laborers from China, who came to Laos as ‘Chinese labor migrants’ and work in development projects.

situation and believed that Hmong in China are living in a ‘sterile land’ that is inhospitable for farming and therefore, are very impoverished.

In fact, when I asked one of my interviewees, Chong Lee, a senior man in his sixties, about differences between the Hmong in China and Laos, he noted a common ethnic identity that they share, regardless of the national differences based on the countries in which they live. He said, ‘You know, the life of Hmong consists of waking up really early in the morning, going to the hill, carrying corn, rice, and pumpkins back home, pounding those crops, and then finally being able to eat them. This is the life of Hmong, regardless of where they live.’ According to Chong, all Hmong share such activities, regardless of ‘time and space’. This does not mean that Hmong are forever living an impoverished life in a timeless, isolated world. Rather, this kind of generalized understanding of the Hmong way of life enables Hmong in Laos to imagine a shared ethnic experience and sense of affiliation with Miao-Hmong in China, whom they have never met or known.

Some of my interviewees had positive perceptions to the Miao-Hmong in China and even felt proud of their capability and achievements, simply because of their ethnic affinity and connections as co-ethnic peoples. Many Hmong in Laos believed that Hmong-Miao in China might have preserved their traditional culture better than they have in Laos, given that they apparently brought ‘real and authentic Hmong stuff’ from China, especially the traditional clothes made of old fabrics and designs. As a result, they felt that Hmong in China are ‘smarter’ than them and more capable of producing ‘really beautiful hand-made traditional clothes for the Hmong New Year’, which they no longer make in Laos.³³ The shared affinity of Hmong in Laos to those in China is also illustrated by the following comments from Toua Her:

³³ In fact, I also noticed that the production of hand-made traditional Hmong clothes and sewing (*paj ndau* [pandau]) have remarkably decreased and were rarely found in the Hmong villages, compared to my last visit in 2006.

When Hmong peddlers came from China, I also asked many questions to them. Hmong [Miao-Hmong] in China know how to make books and they are very good and smart. But their government is the Chinese government and there are more Chinese than Hmong. So even if Hmong are smart enough to publish something, they have to publish in Chinese. For people who don't know the details, they would believe that those books are written by some Chinese. But in reality, we Hmong made them. So with that cleverness, if Hmong from all over the world come together and live in one place, then you wouldn't have to yearn for other countries at all.

Despite having no direct relations to the people or to the country of China, Toua expressed his shared feelings of happiness and pride for the achievements of his unknown co-ethnics in China while affiliating with both their marginal status and its potential disadvantages. Indeed, a similar type of indiscriminate ethnic affinity is shown even more clearly when the Hmong develop much stronger emotional connections and attachments to their co-ethnics based on their extended kinship with those from the same Hmong clan (see Chapter 4). In fact, Hmong's extensive kinship system is based not only on actual biological relatedness but also on social relatedness, which is indicated by sharing one of the eighteen clan names. As a result, they recognize the members from the same clan with the same last names as their own family or relatives, despite the notable absence of actual biological relations as well as the salience of regional or national differences.

In fact, when Miao-Hmong peddlers suddenly showed up in the Hmong villages in Laos, they asked around and sought Hmong from the same clan with the same last name and stayed with that family. I was always impressed with the process of turning a total 'stranger' into a very close family member simply because the person shared the same last name and therefore are technically a member of the same clan. This general and extended clan system encompasses Hmong elsewhere and therefore overcomes national differences inherent among Hmong living in various countries in the diaspora, eventually promoting a common

sense of kinship across national borders. I repeatedly had similar conversations with people in Laos about the immediate inclusion of the Miao-Hmong from China based on the extended kinship system. A good example is the following discussion I had with Nou Thao:

Nou Thao: Sure, they [the Miao-Hmong peddlers] can speak Hmong. Those from China were Hmong Thao [same last name], so they are our relatives since we are from the same family. When they came to do business here, they stayed with us.

Author: Really? So I assume they contacted you before they came here?

Nou Thao: No, they never contacted us because they did not know about us until they arrived here. They initially came to do business in Lak 52.³⁴ One time, there was a Hmong guy from China and he was like our brother-in-law. His last name was Yang, but his wife was from the Thao clan. So we are relatives.

Author: Do you know where in China he was from?

Nou Thao: He said that he lives in paj tawj lag [pa-tarl-laang].

Author: How did you feel when you first met him?

Nou Thao: He said, “Oh, I am Hmong [last name] Yang but my wife is a Hmong Thao. So I am your brother-in-law.” So I was of course very happy. We shared food. He ate whatever we had and stayed with us.

It is certainly remarkable (in some sense, even ‘magical’) that this extended clan membership system is indiscriminately applied to all Hmong regardless of the actual circumstances and has an immediate power to cordially include anyone in the same clan from the Hmong diaspora across national borders. However, Hmong people in Laos noted that their genuine hospitality for such unexpected visitors from China was rewarding, since they developed contacts, exchanged news about Hmong people’s life in their respective

³⁴ This literally means ‘52km from the capital city, Vientiane’ and is known as one of the largest urban cities populated predominantly by Hmong people.

countries, and eventually welcomed the same visitors in subsequent years.

Perceptions of Hmong in the United States toward Miao-Hmong in China

Similar to their co-ethnics in Laos, Hmong in the United States have also shown ethnic affinity and extensive kin affiliations with the Miao-Hmong in China. However, the basis of such ethnic consciousness is somewhat different from the way Hmong in Laos have interacted with Miao-Hmong. They seem to be more influenced by individual experiences based on actual visits and trips to China. Because U.S. Hmong have access to greater economic resources compared to Hmong in Laos, more U.S. Hmong have taken trips to visit different places in China and had opportunities to interact with the Miao-Hmong living in that country. About twenty-five percent of my U.S. Hmong interviewees have been to China for different reasons. They traveled around different Miao residential counties in China (which do not necessarily have Miao-Hmong populations) and video recorded the people's daily activities and events. After returning to the United States, some of them turned their personal recordings into DVDs, circulated them around the community, or sold them at Hmong supermarkets or community events.

According to my interviewees, the purpose of their trip was sightseeing and pure tourism, such as exploring the famous cities like Beijing and Shanghai, and was not necessarily to visit Miao villages or search for their ethnic origins. Some of them made business trips or were on academic exchanges while others did not even visit any Miao villages located in rural southwest China. In fact, U.S. Hmong did not indicate that they went to the Miao residential provinces primarily to 'trace their ethnic roots and explore their ethnic homeland.' Instead, they mostly noted that they also wanted to see 'the rural life of China' and observe Chinese society and local living conditions from the perspective of 'American' tourists, not as a returnee experiencing an ethnic homecoming in an ancestral homeland that had been lost in ancient history. Nonetheless, those who did visit different

Miao-Hmong villages expressed their joyful experiences, sharing moments with me when they discovered similarities in cultural activities, appearance, and artifacts.

In fact, U.S. Hmong were struck by what they perceived to be the low standard of living of the Miao-Hmong. A Hmong woman in her late fifties, Mai Xiong, who went to China twice with a group of people from her Hmong Christian church, compared the situation between Hmong in Laos and China from her American perspective in terms of their socioeconomic condition. ‘In Laos, even if you don’t have education you still have the land’, she noted. ‘You can at least become a farmer and can survive there. But China, oh my God, its much more difficult! No land, no water, no place to live.’ Indeed, from the perspective of Hmong in the United States, their co-ethnics in a remote Chinese village seemed to be very impoverished.

‘The Hmong in China don’t live in the city’, Lao Vue, another interviewee noted based on his travel experiences and continued, ‘They don’t have much education, or a piece of land, either. The land is very limited. From my observation, I think Hmong in China are much poorer than Hmong in Thailand and Laos.’ Likewise, many people referred to their emotional sympathy and ethnic connections to the Miao-Hmong in southwest China by saying that they were ‘excited but also sad’, because a lot of them were ‘still very poor without better means to improve their condition’. In a different interview, Chong Her made immediate ethnic connections to the Miao-Hmong when he recalled his two visits to China:

One thing that amazes me is that I really feel connected to the Hmong in China because of their customs and culture there. Wherever you go from one village to another, you really feel that the same culture and same Hmong values are still there. If they realize that you are also part of *Miao-zu*³⁵ like them, they would come to talk to you. Also, it’s the Hmong traditional clothes. If you see their fabrics and dress at the supermarket or other places in China, you can tell “oh, they are Hmong people” and you are able to connect to them.

³⁵ The Chinese term that refers to a broad official ethnic category in China that encompasses all sub Miao groups including Miao-Hmong.

Indeed, Hmong from the United States are not part of *Miao-zu* (Miao people), since it is only an official Chinese ethnic minority label in a national context. Therefore, for people like Chong, the ethnic connection with the Miao-Hmong in China is based on cultural similarities and not any national affiliation with the Chinese state.

Leng Thao, who also visited China and traveled around the country for a total of three weeks, had a similar view. When I asked him whether he felt the Miao-Hmong in China he met were of the same ethnicity even if it was difficult for him to communicate, he responded:

I believe that they are still the same Hmong because of their culture. The marriage custom, the flutes like *qeej* and *raj* [traditional bamboo pipes], all are the same. Dress is the same. You can tell they are Hmong and Hmong dress. It's just that they don't speak the exact same language. But it is not really that difficult or different, either. For example, we say "noh-moh" [eat food, have a meal] while they say, "noh-wah". "Noh-wah" is more like baby talk.

Even if U.S. Hmong have never been to China or seen any Miao-Hmong people in person, they still expressed feelings of affinity toward the Miao-Hmong based on cultural similarities. For example, Sheng Her, who was initially certain about China as the Hmong's original homeland explained as follows:

The reason I am certain about China [as the ethnic homeland] is because we have the same last name with the Hmong in China. Another simple thing that we understand is the bamboo pipe. They blow the bamboo pipe, not exactly the way we blow. But you hear the sound and understand what they are blowing about. That's one of the things that really tell us that we are related. The Hmong in China, I don't know where they migrated from, but they have been living there for many long years.

In sum, a good number of Hmong in the United States have visited China for

different reasons and interacted with Miao-Hmong as tourists. Although such trips were apparently much more frequent and active in the past, before the economic downturn in the U.S., their experiences have enabled some members of the U.S. Hmong community to develop ethnic affinity with the Miao-Hmong in China. In so doing, they have explored possible ancestral connections between Miao-Hmong and themselves that have been lost for hundreds of years despite the fact that they do not strongly identify with the Chinese nation-state as an ethnic homeland of Hmong.

Laos as the Natal ‘Homeland’: The Heart of the Hmong Diaspora?

If Hmong in the diaspora do not have an attachment to China as their ethnic homeland, to what extent can Laos be considered a homeland of sorts? Hmong’s national affiliation with the Laotian nation-state varies greatly depending on the individual. To begin with, Laos is not the ethnic homeland of the Hmong diaspora since it is not where their ethnic group initially originated from, but a more recent, natal homeland of birth for many Hmong who dispersed from that country after the Vietnam War. While accepting Laos as their country of birth, many Hmong in Laos expressed the sense of ambivalent belonging based on their common ethnic minority consciousness and shared historical experiences.

On the other hand, there are some Hmong in the United States who feel alienated from their country of residence and expressed a stronger sense of belonging to Laos. However, others felt that they belong to the United States and had developed ambivalent perceptions toward Laos. In sum, although Hmong in my study had a much stronger affiliation to the nation-state of Laos than China, it still does not seem to serve as the immediate source of the Hmong diaspora’s collective ethnic consciousness.

Perceptions of Laos among Hmong in Laos

In general, Hmong in Laos seem to have a common understanding that Laos is their natal homeland since they were born and have lived there for a long time. They also had a sense of national belonging to some extent, defined by their citizenship status and the concomitant

social duties and rights as the legal members of the nation-state. Their common self-identification of ‘Hmong with Lao nationality [*sansaat* Lao]’ by birth seems to legitimize Laos as a common homeland. In fact, almost all of my interviewees referred to Laos with some feelings associated with the homeland, not simply because they were born there, but also because they recognized what their status as Laotian nationals defines their identity.

For example, Youa Her, a fifty-year-old man, confirmed that Laos is his country by asserting that ‘I have rights here and I own my land as a normal Lao national.’ He then continued to elaborate how the situation is similar with Hmong elsewhere. ‘Right now, we have a comfortable life here [Laos]. Hmong in different countries also have education, good jobs, and development. Like the Hmong in Thailand, they have government jobs as Thai citizens. Those who went to the U.S. are the same. We all are the same siblings but have different citizenships. But they can visit us. That’s it.’

In another interview, Lee Yang, a man in his early fifties, and I had a discussion of a similar issue. When I asked whether he has thought about Hmong people’s homeland, he answered:

Lee Yang: Since I was born and have been living here, I would say Laos is my homeland.

Author: What about China?

Lee Yang: That’s already over. That’s for a much older generation of people, born in China and who migrated from there, but they passed away. The descendants were born here, so our homeland is the same homeland as the Lao [Lao Loum] people.

Author: What about the Hmong in the U.S. or other countries like Vietnam and Thailand? Are their homelands different from yours? If that is the case, isn’t it difficult to preserve Hmong ethnicity?

Lee Yang: No, it’s not difficult. Like the Hmong in America, the old people who migrated there are getting old and will eventually die there. For the younger generation born in the

U.S., their homeland will be replaced by America.

However, such a sense of belonging to multiple homelands for Hmong people is not always a ‘natural’ outcome based on a certain period of time spent in a specific country of birth. In fact, Hmong people in Laos expressed a simultaneous double-sided sense of belonging that includes both their natal homeland and the diaspora. A good example was Nia Her, a man in his late thirties, who talked about his sense of belonging and ethnic identity in the following manner:

As I said, I was born and live in Laos but I am Hmong, that will never change. Those living in England, France, or America, can be the citizens of those countries, as they achieved legal nationality [*sansaat*] after they migrated. But before that, they are always ethnic Hmong [*sonpau Hmong*] who happen to live in that particular country.

At first, Nia’s sentiments seem to be based on his own national belonging and other Hmong people’s different national belonging to each respective nation-state of residence. However, this needs to be differentiated from a simple type of legal belonging as national citizens to a particular country, which is not associated with a sense of ethnic or cultural origins. For Hmong in Laos, their national belonging to Laos defined by legal citizenship gives them some feeling of social belonging and security. However, it is often qualified by their consciousness of membership in the Hmong diaspora, which is seen as the true source of Hmong ethnicity. Therefore, their sense of national belonging is associated with a necessary precondition: ‘as long as they remain Hmong’, regardless of the actual country in which their citizenship is defined. In this way, one can reconcile the discrepancy between a sense of belonging to their current territorial nation-state where they live and the broader diasporic ethnic community.

In fact, Nia further made a distinction between his own individual homeland and the common homeland for the entire Hmong diaspora. In the interview, we talked about the

difference in homelands between Hmong in Laos, including himself, and those in other parts of the diaspora.

Nia Her: I would say my homeland is here in Laos for me [laugh].

Author: What about other Hmong dispersed in many different countries?

Nia Her: Well...I guess there is no homeland for all of them. I was born here, but I guess for those born in America, America will be their homeland. But if I think about every Hmong in Vietnam, China, Laos, Thailand, France, I would say there is no such Hmong homeland for all together.

Nia's perspective illustrates that the current Hmong diaspora can be based on multiple natal homelands in the absence of a country or place that serves as a common ethnic homeland for all Hmong.

Although most current Hmong diasporic communities in the world are based on migratory dispersion from Laos, the country is not a taken-for-granted homeland for all Hmong in the diaspora. Perhaps, Laos can be one of many 'homes' for Hmong dispersed in different countries, to which certain Hmong may feel the closest. In another interview, Xao Lee, a senior in his mid-sixties, had a similar understanding about the current diasporic condition of the Hmong and expressed his regret about the absence of a coherent ethnic homeland that can unite the diaspora since he had a strong desire for a unified ethnic identity as Hmong. He became emotional and got into tears when he stated that 'my feeling is that if you were born as Hmong, you are Hmong regardless of where you reside currently. I am very sad that Hmong have no country so everyone has to live wherever they are.'

Hmong in Laos have also developed ambivalent perceptions of their current natal homeland because they are very conscious about their status as an ethnic minority which does not always fit in mainstream society (see Chapter 3). Instead of emphasizing how Laos is the most proximate homeland for the Hmong diaspora from which they most recently

dispersed, many people in Laos felt that Hmong live in a perpetual, marginalized diasporic state and therefore a country of recent origin like Laos cannot encompass or accommodate their co-ethnics dispersed around the world. Therefore, it is inevitable that Hmong's affiliations to Laos are rather partial and the country does not truly represent the unity of Hmong in the diaspora nor anchor their common Hmong ethnic identity. The perceptions of Hmong in the United States toward Laos are similarly ambivalent.

Perceptions of Laos among Hmong in the United States

While Hmong in the United States perceived Laos as the natal homeland and have emotional affiliations to it to a certain degree, they expressed a wide range of different and more ambivalent perceptions toward the country. Their perceptions and attitudes are divided between people who express almost unconditional emotional affiliation with Laos and those who have negative perceptions, especially because of its political system and underdeveloped national economy. It can be aptly said that Hmong in the United States have developed a 'love-hate' relationship with Laos.

To discuss the diverging perceptions among U.S. Hmong toward Laos, generational differences are also important, since for U.S.-born Hmong and the younger 1.5 generation (born in Thai refugee camps but raised in the United States), Laos is clearly not their natal homeland. For the first generation (mostly elderly Hmong) and older 1.5 generation Hmong (born in Laos and left the country as a child, spent teenage in the refugee camps in Thailand, and then moved to the United States), although the United States is not a homeland per se, over time, it has become a 'home' where they are comfortable and well-situated that has therefore become impossible to abandon. Thus, it is highly possible that the U.S. Hmong community does not share a single meaning of homeland when thinking about Laos (just as they do not agree about the location and meaning of the ethnic homeland).

Although many Hmong in the United States have visited and stayed in Laos freely, many other elderly Hmong men in the United States still felt they could not return to their

natal homeland. They expressed their fears because they were worried that the Lao government may not let them into the country since they left the country because of their anti-Communist military affiliation with the U.S. CIA during the Vietnam War. They still had memories of the repressive Communist state that they fled after the war and worried they might still be politically persecuted if they return. As a result, they continued to feel a strong emotional longing for the ‘nation’ of Laos but could not return because of the Communist ‘state’. This disconnect between the nation and the state was further elaborated, for instance, according to Tou Lee, a retired man in his sixties:

If Laos becomes a democracy tomorrow, I will return tomorrow. I miss the life of nature. This country [U.S.] is very rich, we all know that. But people like me, we still remember the small things in life, such as nature. For people who were initially from there [Laos], if the country becomes a democracy, about 95 percent of us will want to go there, I believe. Now we can't go. As you know, everything over there is Communist. All we can do is just talk and think. We can't help but just miss the life in Laos in the past.

It was apparent that elderly Hmong had emotional connections to Laos that continued to persist. Similar to Tou Lee above, Sai Lee, a Hmong man in his fifties, clearly remembered his childhood in different local regions in Laos before the Vietnam War. He shared with me his emotional reaction when he visited Thailand and went to the land border between that country and Laos. It was the first time he glimpsed Laos since he fled as a refugee in 1979. However, he did not actually enter Laos because he was afraid the Laotian immigration officer would object if he is mistaken as a former Hmong soldier who fought against the Lao Communist party. He recounted the experience as follows:

I put one foot on the so-called land of Laos and the other foot still on Thailand, and I was crying [laughs]. My older brother [who accompanied him] said, “You are crazy! [for crying]” I said, “No! This is the land of my birth. But I cannot step into the country!” I

wanted to go see the village where I was born, and maybe the last place that my school was in...I really have a dream to return there someday before I die.

Indeed, Sai has maintained his strong emotional affinity to his natal homeland, which he had been kept in his heart for over thirty years despite living comfortably in his newly resettled home in the United States. At the same time, he has recognized the social benefits and privileges of his current life, which makes him now consider the United States his 'home' where he enjoys a much higher standard of living than he did in his former natal homeland.

However, Sai spoke of a possible future time when Laos becomes a 'democratic society' and he will return to that country. He added that in that case, Laos will become his primary home and the United States would perhaps become his 'secondary home'. He even pictured his life in the 'true' homeland in Laos and said, 'with my ability and knowledge we can contribute more to that country. So one day, it is possible that Laos can be our destination [of his return].' Therefore, it is important to note that Sai's emotional connection to his natal homeland and ultimate desire to return is not unconditional, but rather predicated on Laos becoming a democratic society.

Although the nation-state is always used interchangeably, it is important to remember that when diasporic peoples express nostalgic longing for their homeland, they may feel an emotional attachment to the peoples but not to the state, which they may dislike for political reasons. This is the basis for the conflicted relations that diasporas often have with their homelands. Nonetheless, some U.S. Hmong noted that even if their dream of a democratic Laos comes true, a permanent return to their former homeland would still not be possible because they have been living for such a long time in the United States as naturalized 'Americans'. From a practical standpoint, it is hard to imagine and assume that they would abandon the privileges that they have earned in America simply because of their nostalgic longing for Laos. As many of them said, these include a much higher economic standard of

living, healthcare, social welfare, insurance, investments, property, education, and economic ‘freedom’ (see Chapter 8).

Therefore, the sense of longing toward Laos as the natal homeland continues to be ambivalent and contingent on political conditions as well as practical considerations. Even if it is highly unlikely that they will ever return to Laos permanently, the nostalgic desire to return to the natal homeland is reminiscent of the longing that diasporic peoples have toward their ethnic homelands. In fact, an expression that still lingers in my mind from a focus group interview is: ‘I still feel like I belong over *there*, even though my body is *here*...’ Despite such inexplicable emotional affinity to Laos, they are well aware of the impossibility of permanently residing in that country after long term separation for various reasons, as one of them remarked, ‘so I buried my *homeland* in my heart because my *home* is here.’

In addition to their fear of the Lao Communist state, there were other reasons the political legacy of the Cold War made some U.S. Hmong reluctant to return to their natal homeland of Laos. This was indicated in various interviews, for example, with Kao Vue, who presented himself as more affiliated with Thailand, although he was born in Laos and spent an equal amount of time in both a Thai refugee camp and the United States. He recently made plans to go back to Laos and serve as a long term volunteer for rural Hmong communities. However, after receiving serious objections from his family about going back to Laos, he instead went to China. Kao explained the situation as follows:

Personally, I wanted to do something very much like what you did. I like to go overseas as a volunteer and teach. That was always my dream. So I applied for a teaching project in Vang Vieng [Laos]. They accepted me, but they wanted me to live with a majority Lao family. I wanted to share that with my family here, but they told me not to go, because they believed that the Lao family will try to poison and kill me [laugh].

Indeed, the older U.S. Hmong express their concerns and fears about the continuing political conditions in Laos which eventually prevents them from feeling fully at home in their natal homeland. This was based on stories about negative experiences in Laos that they had heard from other U.S. Hmong or from ungrounded and fearful rumors about the dangers of the country. In the literature, similar examples can be found in Skrbis's study of Croatian residents in Australia and their refusal to return to the homeland due to their concerns about the contentious political conditions (1997: 443; see also Winland 2002). In fact, political conflicts are often the central source of the divisions and conflicts between a diasporic community and its homeland (e.g. Bernal 2004, 2005).

Likewise, Hmong from the United States that I met during my research in Laos, who were visiting their relatives and friends, also initially had the similar kinds of concerns and worries about their trip. A journey to their natal 'homeland' was not always a joyful homecoming process, although once they arrived in Laos and reunited with their family, their fears did not hinder their emotional attachment to the country and unforgettable memories of their past lives.

Being Hmong and a 'Wandering' People

It is quite clear that Hmong are a diasporic people without a definitive ethnic homeland to which they retain transnational connections and emotional affiliations. Despite scholarly claims that Hmong are originally from China, my interviewees in Laos and the United States did not feel affinity to the Chinese nation-state as their country of ethnic origin and have instead produced multiple theories of their ethnic ancestry. However, they expressed feelings of connection and attachment to their Miao-Hmong co-ethnics residing in China in ways that seemed to supercede national differences and borders. Although Laos is not an ethnic homeland, it has become a natal homeland for many diasporic Hmong since they have lived there for centuries and were born in that country. Nonetheless, Hmong in both Laos and the United States have developed different perceptions toward Laos. While Hmong in Laos have

shown national belonging to their country to a certain degree, their co-ethnics in the United States have developed more ambivalent perceptions to it because of their past political persecution by the Communist Lao state.

The Hmong diaspora's transnational community is based on cross-border ethnic connections between Hmong who are geographically scattered in various nation-states, such as Laos and the United States as well as China, and not centripetal linkages to these countries. However, although these nation-states in which diasporic Hmong currently reside have become their permanent homes, they continue to feel only partial belonging to these nation-states. In this respect, the following chapter will illustrate the current lives and socioeconomic status of Hmong in both Laos and the United States as necessary local contexts for understanding their ethnic experiences as a diasporic people.

Chapter 3. Local Contexts of the Hmong Diaspora: Being Ethnic Minorities in ‘Partial Homes’

In this chapter, I will examine the local socioeconomic conditions and the ethnic minority experiences of Hmong in Laos and the United States. While discussing local socioeconomic contexts and ethnic relations with mainstream society in these two countries, I will focus on how these factors constantly impact Hmong’s ethnic minority consciousness and continued sense of ‘partial’ belonging to the nation-state. With an analytical emphasis on generational differences, this chapter examines the ways in which Hmong in each country have continued to feel and express their feelings of socioeconomic, and ethnic marginalization from mainstream society.

While many of the local conditions under which Hmong live in Laos are shared among both the older and younger generations, the sense of partial belonging by elderly Hmong is initially based on the lack of economic opportunities in an underdeveloped national economy. Despite the prospering tourism economy, they are still economically confined to subsistence rice farming and do not have sufficient sources of income. As a result, most of them rely on unstable and irregular transnational remittances from their co-ethnics in the diaspora. In addition, their historical and cultural marginalization evokes an ethnic minority consciousness among them.

Such ethnic minority and historical consciousness seem to have been passed down to younger Hmong to a certain extent. However, Hmong youth are better integrated in mainstream Lao society, receive public education, and are able to participate in the broader economy to a greater extent, as well as interact more with other ethnic groups. On the other hand, they have become the subject to employment insecurity and ethnic marginalization as ethnic minority laborers in a changing Lao national economy and are vulnerable to the control of foreign, multi-national owners, such as the tourism industry and the factories and mines of multinational corporations.

In the United States, the Hmong immigrant first generation (and some of older 1.5 generation Hmong) have not been able to find stable and well-paying jobs since their resettlement. Some of them were able to find work in the factory assembly lines and other low skilled occupations due to their lack of educational qualifications and language barriers. In addition to their persistent economic hardship as immigrant late-comers, elderly Hmong's feelings of marginalization are profoundly based on their emotional difficulty and distress adjusting to new lives in the United States. They are troubled by spousal conflicts, health problems, drastic cultural differences, and the gang involvement of Hmong youth, all of which are inseparable from their lower socioeconomic condition in the United States as former refugees who do not truly belong in their new home.

In contrast to the elderly Hmong and their parents, most 1.5 generation and U.S. born second generation Hmong have better economic opportunities and a number of them are receiving college educations. However, because they have more social interactions with mainstream American society, they experience more racialized ethnic minority status to a greater extent in their daily interactions. As a result, younger generation Hmong have expressed feelings of ethnic marginalization from experiences at school, the workplace, and various public spaces, as well as from multiethnic peers.

Although the Hmong diasporic community's generally low socioeconomic status and feelings of marginalization may not always be the direct and evident cause of their ethnic minority consciousness in these two countries, their experiences certainly reflect how they consider their current nation-states of residence as only 'partial' homes. This sense of partial belonging emphasizes how they are positioned in-between the nation-state and the diaspora. In fact, the diasporic condition is often characterized by marginalization from the countries in which diasporic peoples reside as ethnic minorities, and this partial exclusion from the nation-state evokes the desire to maintain transnational affiliations with co-ethnics in both the ethnic homeland and the diaspora.

Estranged Lives in the Natal Homeland of Laos

Being Ethnic and Minority

As explained in Chapter 1, the Dao Tha village in Vang Vieng was established in the late 1990s in order to resettle the Hmong returnees from Thai refugee camps and attempt to ethnically integrate them with the majority Lao Loum and minority Khmu groups. Ever since my first visit to the village in 2003, many elderly villagers repeatedly told me that I should be aware of the subtle ethnic tensions in the village. In this context, the head of the village was annually elected and rotated between the three ethnic groups in the name of 'equal' political leadership. Of course, even in the past, there are individual differences in the way people developed ethnic relationships and friendships. The ethnic relations have also changed over the years and there has been much more interaction among the ethnic villagers in their daily lives.

Nonetheless, the history of ethnic tension in Dao Tha is deeply embedded and not easily surmountable. At times, majority ethnic Lao Loum villagers continue to perceive Hmong as former anti-Communist guerillas during the Vietnam War. In everyday lives, they also show various stereotypes about the Hmong ethnic minority. For instance, one chilly morning in early December, I woke up feeling sick and had no appetite. I came out of my room, went inside the kitchen for some leftover steamed rice and hot water, and then sat at a large family table outside. I did not take any side dishes, sauces, soup or cooked vegetables to eat with the rice but just put hot water in the bowl of steamed rice. As soon as I took a mouthful of it, Kham, the distant niece of my Lao Loum host family, suddenly started laughing out loud. Pointing her finger at me, she exclaimed, 'Sister, you eat like Hmong!', indicating her surprise that I was eating food that was typical for 'impoverished' Hmong. I did not explain to her that I ate 'like Hmong' because I was sick and it was how I ate when I would become ill as a child in Korea. Instead, I laughed and simply admitted that 'Yes, I am eating like Hmong.'

Hmong villagers are conscious of the persistence of derogatory ethnic terms like *meo* (cat) to refer to their ethnic group, making them constantly aware of their ethnic minority status. Elderly Hmong explained to me that this derogatory label arose because the Chinese ethnic category of Miao (which includes Hmong in that country) sounds like *meo* in the Lao language. They make sure that I understood that the term is demeaning and that I should never accept it if I heard someone using it. Although younger Hmong are no longer called ‘*meo*’ by their non-Hmong peers (who learned not to use it in their formal education), they were clearly aware of the term and its derogatory connotation. A group of Hmong youth actually told me that ‘if they call us *meo* (cat), I’ll call them *ma* (dog).’

Indeed, in their everyday lives, there are various ethnic markers and stereotypes that other Laotians use to define the Hmong. They can be based on physical appearance, cultural practices, language, or simply, their distinctive Hmong names. The way other ethnic groups perceive the Hmong has indeed been influential and has even changed Hmong cultural practices to a certain extent. According to them, they no longer wear traditional ethnic clothes on a daily basis because they do not want to be ‘picked on and teased’ by other ethnic groups as ‘old-fashioned rural people [*kohn ba:n-no:k*]’. Indeed, one of my interviewees, Xou Her explained, ‘In our real Hmong culture, we are supposed to wear traditional dress in daily life. I also have a set of daily clothes for men—simple black pants and a top. But Hmong no longer put it on everyday, because we are shy in front of Lao people. Now we only put the traditional dress on and take pictures for special occasions like the New Year.’

When I asked Xou about the reason of his shyness, Xou further elaborated, ‘It’s because many people no longer put on traditional clothes every day. If we do, everyone will notice that we are Hmong. I am shy. In my real opinion, I know we shouldn’t be ashamed because it is our culture. But we can’t do that all the time as other people think Hmong are people from the distant past [*kohn kkao*].’ In a different interview, Cha Thao gave me a

similar response when I asked his opinion about why Hmong could not wear traditional Hmong dress any more in everyday life. ‘You can. But if you are the only person wearing Hmong traditional cloth, it is embarrassing!’ he remarked. ‘Everyone will say, “Oh, you wear the old traditional Hmong dress wherever you go?” They will mock you [laugh].’

It is not always clear whether Hmong really stopped wearing traditional clothes because of the disdain for their cultural customs from other ethnic groups or for other reasons. However, it is well-known that Hmong cultural practices have continuously and increasingly been the target of national assimilationist projects to minimize and reduce ethnic differences by unifying (rather than ‘eradicating’ from a state perspective) different ethnic cultures through new national regulations and policies, whenever it was deemed necessary to change, control, and reconstruct them.

As Jan Ovesen (2004: 215) notes, in various national events promoted by the Lao government, such as sports games, beauty contests, and national festivals, ethnic minorities are invited and particularly encouraged to actively participate in the name of Lao national cultural unity. Despite scholarly efforts to critically examine the way the Lao government fails to achieve its motto of ‘unity by equal status’ for all ethnic minorities in national development (Ireson and Ireson 1991), history (Pholsena 2010; Stuart-Fox 1997) and governmental cultural policies (Ovesen 2004), it still remains unclear how these are actually done in practice and to what extent ethnic minorities are affected.

While acknowledging the limited resources on the current ethnic status and engagement of minority groups in Laos, I will introduce an example of such cultural control through the Lao state’s unification policy based on my daily interactions with Hmong students in the village as part of extra curricular activities at the community center. I remember how surprised I was when I first learned that Hmong students recently adopted a Lao first name at school and in official documents as required by the government. These names are based on the national Lao language and completely different from their original

Hmong names.

According to the students, they were asked to register with their newly created Laotian first name at their current school. In official documents at school, their Laotian names would be written and used by teachers. To me, this new rule initially denoted more aggressive cultural enforcement against ethnic Hmong. However, the Hmong students and their families did not seem to be bothered by this newly implemented policy, simply because they did not take their Lao names seriously in their everyday lives and continued to use their Hmong names except in schools and other public institutions.

In addition, the Lao state has also required that Hmong shorten their ethnic celebrations so as not to reduce their educational and economic productivity (and their contribution to the national economy), as will be further discussed in the context of the Hmong New Year in Chapter 6. The Hmong have again complied, leading to an impoverishment of their public celebrations. Considering these cultural policies, Ovesen (1995: 14-15) offers more neutral observations and stresses the government's improved treatment of Hmong:

It should also be emphasized that nowadays the government of the Lao PDR in many ways makes honest attempts to improve the conditions for the country's ethnic minorities, including the Hmong, and to include them into the mainstream of the society. If the Hmong are still in certain respects relatively disadvantaged, this is primarily a reflection of the particular magnitude of cultural and political-historical differences between this particular ethnic minority and the Lao majority population.

Although it is important to recognize that the state's relationship with its ethnic minorities is subject to change and policies of inclusion can be seen as more positive, what Hmong actually experience in their daily lives is not merely a matter of 'difference' from the majority Laotians but constantly reaffirms their ethnic minority status. In other words, the daily experiences and negative individual interactions caused by ethnic differences can

certainly result in the subjective feelings of their marginal status as they are forced to conform to the state's changing cultural control policies without hesitation or resistance.

At the Margins of the National Economy

Although the Lao national economy transitioned from agricultural subsistence to limited development of industry and tourism, it is still in a state of underdevelopment and provides Hmong few economic and educational opportunities. In addition to being one of the few countries in the world that remain steadfast as a socialist and Communist state regime, the Lao government has relied considerably on foreign donors to support the national economy (Case 2010: 204; St. John 2006: 175-176; Ireson and Ireson 1991). Nonetheless, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), one of the international organizations that are heavily involved with the domestic economic development of Laos, classified the country as one of the 48 'Least Developed Countries' (LDCs) in the world and reported that the country did not yet 'graduate' from the LDC status because of 'low income, human assets, and economic vulnerability'.³⁶

Hmong in Dao Tha village have retained persistently marginal economic status in the Lao national economy and their only source of viable income are remittances from their families and relatives in the diaspora abroad. As a result, Hmong clearly have somewhat better economic status than Khmu ethnic people in Dao Tha or Hmong living in more remote and poorer rural villages, who do not have access to transnational financial networks and support from their co-ethnics abroad. However, their socioeconomic status is considerably worse than majority Lao Loum villagers, who have experienced very dramatic increases in income and social mobility in a short time because of their participation in the global tourism industry in Vang Vieng.

Hmong used to be swidden (slash-and-burn) farmers, but when this was banned, they became predominantly subsistence rice farmers. Although there is slight variation in the

³⁶ UNDP, *The Lao Development Journey toward Graduation from LDC Status* (2008).

socioeconomic status of various Hmong households in Dao Tha, their livelihoods mainly rely on rice farming, small vegetable gardens, and raising chickens around their house as well as cows (owned by about one third of families). However, farming or tending livestock is not a sufficient source of income and they usually face a shortage of rice at the beginning of summer, forcing them to buy it on the market at fluctuating prices.

A small group of Hmong mothers would occasionally go to the local market to sell their garden vegetables, such as corn, cucumbers, egg plants, squash, and lemongrass during the harvest season. Since they do not even have stalls, they simply sit on the ground with their produce. However, because there is an abundance of this type of produce during that part of the year, they face considerable competition at the market and their main customers are limited to those who have stopped small-scale gardening and vegetable farming, such as Lao Loum who work in the tourism industry.

During my earlier visits to Dao Tha between 2003 and 2006, the vast majority of the houses in the village were shacks built of wood and thatch. The only homes built from concrete were owned by a couple majority Lao Loum families and about five ‘rich Hmong’ families in the village who had access to U.S. remittances. By the time I returned to Dao Tha in 2011 for my fieldwork, the tourism economy had fully penetrated the region and there were many more cement homes which had been built by majority Lao using their profits from the tourism industry. In contrast to previous years, those without cement homes were now considered to be ‘poor’ with no economic resources.³⁷

By 2011, the Hmong community in Dao Tha appeared to be more economically privileged because a good number of houses were now built with sturdy wood or materials like cement, concrete, laminate, and bricks because of the flow of remittances from abroad. However, it is important to note that the economic disparities among the villagers have

³⁷ The thatch houses that were left were mainly temporary belonged to young students who had moved to the village to learn English in Vang Vieng, temporary labor migrants who were connected to village clans, or newly-wed couples.

remarkably widened due to the development of tourism. The most immediate (and perhaps the only) beneficiary was the Lao Loum villagers who lived in the closest proximity to the river where the tourists spend their time and therefore could take advantage of business opportunities. On the other hand, the local economic livelihoods of elderly Hmong (as well as Khmu) were just as limited as before and not improved significantly with tourism.

The majority of Lao Loum had quickly transformed themselves from poor peasants to rich bar owners catering to foreign tourists. Those Lao Loum who did not own a bar also had plenty of opportunities to work for their neighbors' lucrative businesses. As a result, they not only built two or even three-story cement houses, but also bought multiple motorbikes, cars, and trucks, sent their children to schools in the capital city, and organized group tours and social parties in town. Many of the villagers attributed their success to their 'communication skills' and sociability, which must have been effective to get official permission to enter the tourism business from the district officials, who are also culturally and ethnically the same ethnic Lao.

In contrast to the drastic economic transition of the Lao Loum villagers, none of Hmong or Khmu in the same village established their own bars or directly engaged in or profited from the tourism economy. An exception would be the youth from both ethnic groups who were able to get a part-time job at these bars. However, only a minority of youth in the village were working at the river bars. Others worked for other tourism sectors in town, because the bar cultures were too difficult and different for them to deal with. As many of youth jokingly said, they cannot 'drink and get drunk, do drugs, smoke, and stagger around all day long like *them* [the tourists at the river bars].'

Indeed, the seemingly nicer concrete houses that some elderly Hmong lived in are now contrasted with the continued poverty of their everyday lives. Hmong's economic activities had not changed at all for the several past years despite the rapidly changing local economy and increasing economic opportunities. Instead, it generates more contrasting and

ironic images when elderly people walk to their farms and rice fields with bamboo baskets coming out of their ‘modern’ cement house. Most of the modern concrete homes still do not have bathrooms inside except for a few who could afford such extra spaces because of remittances.³⁸ Many Hmong do have TVs, DVD players, or radios, which other people in the village also owned even before electricity was provided to the village in early 2000, when such devices were run on batteries. Other basic home appliances are simply too expensive for Hmong to afford, and even if they could buy them, they would not be able to pay for the electricity to run refrigerators and fans.

The Hmong villagers share two public water taps inside their own community. In the past, many of them walked to the *Song* river in the evening to bathe, wash their clothes, and draw water for daily household use. However, as illustrated in the Introduction, the *Song* river is no longer usable by the villagers (because of tourists and water pollution) and most of them now use individual hoses to connect to the public taps and divert water to large water tanks at the back of their houses or simply to several small buckets. This often caused frequent water shortages for the entire community.

In sum, Hmong people are not merely ‘the poorest in an already poor nation-state’, but their economic condition has not improved or changed over the years and they have limited access to financial resources and economic capital in a national economy hampered by inconsistent foreign aid, problematic development schemes, and exploitation by multinational corporations in a global economy.

Living on American Dollars: Surviving through the Fragile Transnational Money Chain

What little socioeconomic mobility Hmong have had in the Lao national economy is not purely based on individual achievement and ability but more (as they say) ‘a matter of luck’. In other words, it is made possible by financial support through their transnational

³⁸ According to Hmong in the United States who helped their co-ethnics in Laos to build cement homes, the cost of construction normally exceeds US\$40,000. This is significant from a Laotian economic standard, considering that all construction materials have to be imported from abroad (Thailand) and that they tend to be very expensive and overpriced.

connections with their kin members residing in the United States, who send them remittances irregularly.

Despite the impoverished social and economic life of Hmong, it is true that some of them are increasingly taking part in different economic sectors with better opportunities which sometimes may not be available to other ethnic groups. In Dao Tha, besides individual homes, my interactions with Hmong mostly happened in their fields and farms while cutting rice and planting seeds. However, I also met some Hmong individuals engaged in other occupations. Two Hmong men in the village were *tuk tuk* drivers (a commonly-used motorized rickshaw and the main form of public transportation), and I would often encounter them on the main road in the center of Vang Vieng. In the local market, vendors were increasingly Hmong from different villages in the district, selling not only vegetables, but numerous other items, such as jewelry, clothing, fabric, toys, cell phones, CDs and DVDs, and so on.

In addition, I also met and interacted with a group of young students at both the local college and the only national university of Laos. Another group of youth, who studied English with me when I was helping with community development projects before my doctoral fieldwork, were actively involved in the tourism industry. I was also introduced to a few Hmong officers in governmental institutions, the post office, and the bank and had a number of conversations with them. Three young Hmong women in their early twenties in the village shared their working experiences with me in the garment factories in Vientiane (the capital city), which were owned and operated by multinational Thai, Lao, Chinese, and Vietnamese executives. Sometimes parents proudly introduced their sons, daughters, nephews, or nieces who had become successful professionals, including teachers, nurses, doctors, and development workers as well as soldiers.

These diverse working experiences of Hmong are notable and unusual, especially given that other ethnic minority groups outside Vang Vieng may not commonly experience

such diversified economic occupations. However, many of these economic opportunities were made possible by remittances sent by family and relatives from the United States. Such funds were often used to send children to college, which enables them to leave farming and pursue other careers. Likewise, the two Hmong men in Dao Tha who worked as a tuk tuk driver were able to buy the tuk tuk with remittance money.

Therefore, if Hmong in Dao Tha village could not rely on remittances and the economic power of their co-ethnics in the diaspora, they would have no means to deal with their economic marginalization in their limited participation in the Lao national economy. In other words, if this informal but essential transnational ‘money chain’ is broken, it would have severe repercussions on Hmong’s daily subsistence, because they have not been able to establish their own economic niche in the domestic economy. This also means that Hmong’s economic survival in Laos is susceptible and even vulnerable to the changes and conditions of the U.S. economy as well.

In Foreign Hands: The Economic Participation of the Younger Hmong Generation and New Social and Ethnic Marginalization

Many older Hmong are well aware of the continuing problems of the Lao economy, and are quite concerned about their children’s futures. Even some educated Hmong youth in non-agricultural jobs remain insecure and they are still marginalized in the current national economy. The occupations that these educated Hmong youth have entered are highly valued and desired in general, but do not necessarily pay well, such as teachers, governmental officers, and post office workers.³⁹ Therefore, these jobs are respected not because of their competitive salaries, but rather because they require higher education and social mobility.

In contrast, many young Hmong in Dao Tha village who do not have any higher education eagerly seek wage labor opportunities at mines and factories and in the tourism industry, which are often low skilled and low-status occupations. While young Hmong who

³⁹ In 2011, monthly salaries of teachers at public school were 500,000 Lao Kip (the Lao currency, 37 British pounds) (compared to 300,000 Lao Kip [22 British pounds] in 2007).

were doing such work were hardly respected or praised by their parents and other villagers, they were actually seen as economically successful and competitive, especially because of their much higher salaries compared to poorer Hmong. Given that the monthly salary of a daily laborer at the Australian-owned mines was usually over US\$120 up to US\$200 (78-130 British pounds) depending on the project, being miner was considered extremely attractive and desired. Therefore, many formerly unemployed young Hmong in such jobs were willing to endure the inadequate and exploitative working environment.

Nonetheless, their economic status continues to be unstable and precarious in various ways. Many of these young workers increasingly experience various social problems caused by the greater coercive power of foreign owners and managers of multinational corporations, which produces considerable job insecurity, ethnic tension, and social manipulation. In order to examine the issue of socioeconomic marginalization caused by the dominant foreign capital system, I will mainly focus on the case of a mine that had significant impact on Hmong youth workers.

Since 2010, an Australian mining company has launched multiple satellite project sites around the Vang Vieng district and started to excavate mountains and hills that surround the villages in order to develop new mines for copper, gold, and silver materials. This initially seemed to lead to the recruitment of local workers and improve the employment rate of the young villagers in Vang Vieng, including Hmong. However, Hmong youth working at this mine soon started to worry about employment insecurity as well as increasing tensions with workers from other ethnic groups. This was exacerbated by foreign mine owners, who work with Laotian middle men to manage their businesses in the multi-ethnic local environment. Without proper knowledge or local understanding of ethnic divisions, these foreign owners hired and appointed majority Lao Loum employees as managers and directors of subordinate, mostly ethnic Hmong workers. Thus, Hmong often

complained about misunderstandings with their foreign employers caused by mistranslation or unfair assessments given by their Lao Loum supervisors.

It was also reported that Hmong workers were not asked to continue to work for additional projects at different sites without notice, regardless of their work ability and diligence, because their productivity was not fairly graded and reported by their Lao Loum managers. These Hmong workers' subjective feelings of ethnic and socioeconomic marginalization seem inevitable and persist in other jobs that are globally operated and managed by foreigners, who usually do not appreciate cultural and ethnic sensitivities in the local context.

Besides the uncertainty of job insecurity and ethnic tensions, many multinational corporations like mining often mistreat local villagers and ignore their needs and local social dynamics. One remarkable example is how young Hmong men are usually recruited by these companies as workers. When the mining corporation sets up a new project site, only the nearest village that will be affected the most and generate tangible side effects by the construction of the site is granted employment opportunities. For example, when a new mine had to divert electricity provided to a Hmong village called Pha Boua in Vang Vieng for mining operations, they compensated the villagers by accepting fifteen young Hmong men from that village as workers.

No further negotiations were later made with Pha Boua or other villages for other consequences, such as additional electricity power shortages, serious environmental pollution, and unexpected industrial accidents caused by poor working conditions and mismanagement. Eventually, the power outages started to affect other villages in Vang Vieng, including Dao Tha, which was not compensated for the negative impact of the local mine. The entire village repeatedly went through random blackouts during my fieldwork due to the heavy energy consumption of the mine (as well as the tourist bars lined along the river). Despite the shortage of electricity, the mine was operating all day and the river bars

still played loud music (partly because they also put batteries in the large speakers to make sure that the music can be turned on all the time even during power outages). People in the village always put candles and lighters near the meal table in the evening, in case the lights suddenly went off again while having dinner. Although the villagers were subject to this kind of foreign corporate control, they did not receive any benefits from it simply because their village was not located next to the mine.

In fact, the Australian mine is merely one example of the many ways in which foreign and global capital forces, which have already commandeered the Lao economy, are now having an adverse impact on local Hmong villages, perpetuating their socioeconomic marginalization. Hmong often expressed their concerns about the Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, and other multinational companies and the way they operate and manipulate the local economic system. After observing three different types of power transmission towers that were built in the village mountains, one elderly man in the village told me:

You see the gigantic electricity poles on the mountain? The first one, pretty old, was built to provide electricity to Lao people and the second new one was shared by both Lao and Chinese people. The last one is so new and it doesn't even have wires yet. I heard people saying that one will extract electrical power from Laos and then be exported to China directly without benefiting Lao people.

A similar remark was made by Yer Lee, another Hmong man in the village, who once told me about a new cement factory in town that will produce cement not for local use, but for export to China directly. Yer added that unlike the two other previous cement factories also funded by China, the new factory brought their own migrant workers directly from China and did not hire any local Lao people. He then asked my opinion about this economic development: 'So what do you think? Do you think China will "eat [kkin]" Laos in the future after all?'

Therefore, because of their local socioeconomic marginalization, Hmong have become dependent and subject on two external sources of income that they ultimately cannot control. The first are the remittances through their transnational economic network, which is in the hands of their co-ethnics residing in the United States who determine when and how much to remit. In other words, economic marginalization persists not simply based on poverty or underdeveloped national economy but also based on the lack of power over their own economic livelihoods.

In addition, they have now become subject to foreign global capitalist economic control, which has provided them some, but highly exploitative and unstable employment opportunities, and also has had a negative impact on their lives. Although the young Hmong generation has started to pursue more economic opportunities created by global capital, this has not necessarily improved their economic conditions or really ameliorated their marginalization while also generating various socioeconomic problems.

It is true that in contrast to older Hmong, the younger Hmong generation have greater economic opportunities in the local Lao economy and have a chance to earn their own incomes as wage-laborers instead of simply relying on remittances or being rice farmers. They have been able to participate to a greater extent in expanding new industries, especially tourism and factories and mines of multinational corporations, and international development projects, all of which have become dominant sources of national income for the country. However, young Hmong toil on the margins of these expanding industries and are vulnerable to the temporary, insecure, and exploitative nature of their jobs. The main difference is that instead of simply experiencing local economic marginalization from the underdeveloped national economy, they are now subject to the control of foreign capital and the global economy.

Partial Belonging among Hmong in the United States

When elderly Hmong in the United States spoke about the ambivalent relationship with their former natal homeland of Laos, many also described their experiences of constant economic hardship, social and ethnic marginalization, and various struggles with social problems in the United States, which also eventually discouraged them from fully affiliating with the U.S. nation-state. This is despite their legal status as either citizens or permanent residents as well as the greater material affluence and economic resources they have compared to their previous lives in Laos. Their partial sense of belonging to the nation-state in which they reside again emphasizes their ethnic minority status and is also reproduced through the generations as it was in Laos.

In fact, many Hmong in the United States are conscious about their history of economic, social, and ethnic marginalization in the United States since their arrival as refugees in the 1970s. They also currently deal with severe social problems that challenge the Hmong community and their supposed traditional culture. As ‘late comers’ to the U.S. ethnic minority immigrant community, Hmong still experience and suffer from significant cultural, political, and socioeconomic marginalization from mainstream society (Fujiwara 2008: 53; Hein 1993; Zucker 1983). In the literature, the suicide rate among teenage and female Hmong is discussed as an indicator of the struggles and conflicts that they have to confront in dealing with the social pressures associated with cultural and social assimilation (Fujiwara 2008; Rumbaut 1997; Xiong and Jesilow 2007).

Structural Economic Marginalization among Elderly Generation Hmong

The Hmong’s low socioeconomic status and level of education in the United States have been a major concern of scholars as well as the community leaders and members (Chan 1994; Xiong 2013). According to the U.S. 2013 Census Review, a report published by the Hmong National Development organization, the overall poverty rate among Hmong in the United States was estimated as 25 percent in 2010 (*HND Report 2013*: 6), which was

considerably higher than the poverty rate of 15 percent for the entire U.S. population that year. This is commonly perceived as a significant challenge for U.S. Hmong community. In particular, the report presents poverty among Hmong in the three major states where they live, in comparison to the overall poverty rate of the general population. The poverty rate of Hmong in California is 31 percent, which is considerably higher than the overall rate of 11 for the state. In Minnesota, 26 percent of Hmong are considered to live in poverty while the state's poverty rate is seven percent. Hmong in Wisconsin have a 19 percent poverty rate while that of the general population in that state is eight percent (*HND Report 2013: 26*).

In order to fight poverty, many Hmong organizations and individuals from different cities have engaged in nationally-organized events and conferences to improve their community's overall socioeconomic conditions. Some of the young Hmong college students also participate as audience members, deeply sharing the community's concern and social challenges caused by poverty. After attending a national conference for Hmong youth, education, and poverty, a college student, Sao Lee, shared with me his experience and thoughts. Sao said:

At the conference that I attended, people presented statistics about all Asian minorities as well as all other different ethnic groups in the U.S. I saw Hmong people have the highest high school dropout rates and the lowest college graduate rates. The lowest income too, about \$32,000 a year, on average. I do want the Hmong community to know that we are Hmong so we need get more involved.

The average economic status of Hmong in the United States should also be understood more specifically in the context of internal class differences within the community, especially between working and middle-class families. Working class families are often barely above the poverty line and are perhaps the ones who suffer the most. As my interviewees put it, they are 'not poor enough to qualify for social welfare and government

support but they are not wealthy enough to fully support themselves.’ This reality is very clearly addressed by Chi Her, who has been working at an assembly line for the past years:

Oh, life in America is very difficult. Everything is under government economic control over household [home economics]. (...) It’s like we are getting poorer, especially for those people who have less education. If you are really poor, you might get a little help.

Otherwise, you can be super rich so that you aren’t affected, even if there are many things to pay for. But it’s very difficult for those people in the middle, who aren’t the poorest but are not well-off either.

In fact, Hmong families that considered themselves ‘middle-class’ with a relatively comfortable financial situation do not seem to feel that different from those defined as the ‘working poor’ as in the case above. In other words, the problem of poverty for the Hmong community goes beyond the simple measure of low incomes. Middle-class families also suffered from other types of financial difficulties in different ways. For example, Shoua Yang, who works as a nurse at a county hospital and introduced me to her own family as a ‘typical’ middle-class Hmong household, invited me to lunch at her house, which was relatively recently built in Elk Grove (known as a newly developed residential city).

Unlike many U.S. Hmong families in my study that have multiple children (usually more than four), Shoua has two children, both in high school. Talking about her only daughter, who was about to go to college that year, Shoua inadvertently said, ‘in this country if you are middle-class, life is very difficult.’ She has been concerned about her daughter’s college tuition and subsequent expenses that the family could not fully support and will therefore limit her educational choices. Her statement is an indication that the economic hardship that the Hmong community faces is not limited to a homogenously poor group but rather can be pervasive among community members of differing economic status. This kind of economic status of middle class Hmong families actually indicates that economic

hardship also needs to be understood in a broader context of a general American middle class problem that universally exists among different ethnic groups.

Since I repeatedly visited the same Hmong community in Sacramento each year after 2008, I have learned of people's worsening economic condition, especially because of the American economic recession. Hmong women who used to work multiple part time jobs to take care of their family were laid off. Men working at assembly plants, food processing factories, and in other types of manual labor also lost their jobs due to the economic downturn. Some of those who were still employed in these companies continued to work from four in the morning to the late afternoon and were barely paid a minimum wage (less than US\$2,500 a month). Hmong also lost their homes during the housing market crisis, simply they could not continue to pay the mortgage. Many asserted that their life did not seem possible without social welfare assistance, such as SSI (Supplemental Security Income), and other government financial aid programs, which had also been reduced because of government budget cuts.

'Hmong-ness' Endangered: Trauma, Loss, and Persistent Social Problems

In addition to economic struggles, elderly Hmong in the United States also experienced emotional distress because of the various social problems that their community confronts, which constantly reminds them of the loss of what they perceive to be their traditional cultural values. Similar to other recent immigrant communities from diverse cultural backgrounds as discussed in Aihwa Ong's book on Cambodian refugees (2003), Hmong's cultural values and practices often receive considerable criticism from the mainstream American public. In the U.S. media, various Hmong customs practiced in different states drew public attention and controversy, such as their marriage practices (permitting early

marriage under the age of thirteen), hunting activities on open land, and animal slaughter for rituals (see Chapter 7).⁴⁰

When facing frequent public criticism and legal restrictions of their cultural traditions, Hmong constantly dream of a life outside the United States (namely back in Laos) or some unidentified ‘third place’ where they can freely practice their ethnic culture without public pressure or regulations. This reflects how Hmong regard the United States as a partial home where they do not completely belong and how such experiences can even cause them to long for their former natal homeland of Laos. In addition, the Hmong immigrant community has also suffered from traumatic experiences after their resettlement in the United States, which transformed family life into one of violence, crisis, and separation. In particular, many Hmong families have struggled with health problems, the difficult familial relationships between parents and children and between spouses, as well as domestic violence. The community has also confronted social problems among youth some of whom have become involved with gangs, drugs, and crime.

These problems often cause Hmong to develop discourses about how they have lost their Hmong-ness, namely ‘what Hmong should be like’ and have become subject to the negative social environment of the United States as both culturally and economically impoverished and marginalized ethnic minorities. Based on this, Hmong also developed a diasporic longing for a life in the past when they were free of such problems and were more ‘peaceful’ and ‘more Hmong-like’, and hope to return to such an idealized past. Such romanticized desires illustrate their sense of non-belonging in the United States and a yearning for different place and time.

This was illustrated by a Hmong professional mental health therapist at a major hospital in Sacramento and former counselor, who has been working for the Hmong

⁴⁰ Various media reports about these issues can be found through local newspapers and broadcasts, such as *Minnesota Radio*, *NPR Wisconsin*, *Sacramento Bee*, *Fresno Bee*, *Hmong Times*, and *Hmong Today*.

community for the past fifteen years. During the interview, Mia Vang summarized and explained this social situation and social distress found among many elderly Hmong:

My patients are kind of mid-age, like my parents. Because of their social struggles of adjustment, language difficulties, and differences in cultural acculturation with their kids, we are not just dealing with mental illness but with all these factors. I feel like it's more difficult than the general population, who are able to get more support. Knowing that I am Hmong, my patients kind of tell me everything: parenting issues, kids, spouses, these all can play into depression. It seems like the treatment is slower, because there are so many important... environmental and social factors that affect their mental health.

One of the community's major concerns is about increasing health problems. Not only have a lot of studies and government-funded research been conducted on this issue with the Hmong community, many Hmong complained that they frequently suffer from unexpected diseases like diabetes, heart attacks, and high blood pressure. Meeting with people with such diseases and their families, I learned that people call these 'American diseases' and believe that they were never found among the Hmong in Laos. For example, Mo Lee, a retired man in his sixties, expressed his concerns about the impoverished nature and health environment of the United States. He said, 'If I can live as I wish, living in Laos would be better. Nature there is just the same as when I was born. I am used to that environment. Food here is not natural/organic at all. You have to put it in a freezer and it contains chemicals. It's not natural food. Like fruits, in the U.S., there are not a lot compared to Thailand or Laos. Nothing is fresh here.'

As indicated here, such health problems were believed to be more 'American' and caused by the particular living environment in the United States, which Hmong characterized as 'no exercise because of lack of physical labor, too much artificial food, and too much stress', that did not exist in their previous lives in Laos. Mo Lee continued, 'The climate here is very different, too. It is better to be there [Laos]. The weather there is not too

cold or not too warm, so there's no high blood pressure or blood sugar. Hmong in Laos never see people who suffer from heart attacks or stroke. Many Hmong who came to America have those.' Again, for Mo, the difficulties that Hmong experience in their partial home in America makes him nostalgically long for a past life in the natal homeland.

In my interviews and surveys with college students, gang involvement and criminal activities are repeatedly reported as one of the most serious problems that the Hmong community has confronted. Visiting different families, one of the things that I carefully did was look at the family photos hung on the walls in living rooms. During one visit, I unknowingly pointed to the youngest boy in a family photo, who indeed looked cute and was smiling, and asked the woman standing next to me, 'who is he?' She paused and answered in a low voice, 'My youngest brother. He is locked up [in prison]' and added, 'He used to be the smartest, most beautiful one in our family.' Similarly, elderly people in my study expressed their disheartening emotional disappointment and sadness about the criminal acts of Hmong youth.

In fact, there were a good number of parents either had a son who was a gang member and/or was the victim of their criminal behavior. In general, they never mentioned or introduced children who were involved in criminality or in jail. When I learned about them later, other family members secretly told me that the parents could not include those children in their conversations because 'the parents loved the children deeply in their heart and therefore had to disown them.' In fact, the consequence of serious crimes can result in trauma for the parents of children who were criminal offenders or victims of rival gang activity. Therefore, while some parents suffer from the metaphorical loss of their loved ones (to gang activity or imprisonment), others had actually lost children who had been tragically killed by gang activity.

A number of my interviewees wondered why Hmong gang activity had become a problem in their communities and suspected that it is because they live in 'America' a

country that does not allow them to maintain ‘real Hmong culture’ or ‘the way they used to be in their former [natal] homeland’. In fact, the discourses of deteriorating Hmong culture and social problems in the United States are issues commonly mentioned by Hmong in both the United States and Laos. The problematic local conditions that destroy and exacerbate parent-child and marital relationships in the United States are viewed critically by many Hmong. For instance, Moua Xiong, a seventy five-year old man, shared his experiences with me:

For people like me, born in Laos and who came to the U.S. some time ago, life is not that difficult. Only my youngest daughter was born here. But when I look at other families who have more than two or three children born in the U.S., they have so much difficulty. My kids [who were born in Laos], they respect and listen to us. When we taught them, “you don’t steal other people’s belongings, you don’t do this or that”, they will not do such bad things. But oh, right now, the young children in the U.S., we all have such headaches! Look around the neighborhood here and Hmong families. They are not my real children, but they still concern me a lot.

He then compared Hmong lives in Laos and the United States: ‘[In terms of economic standard of living], it can be said it is about seventy percent better in America. But the problems of youth are a much bigger issue here. Social problems like crime are much worse in America than Laos.’

Elderly Hmong of Moua Xiong’s age and many Hmong parents often attributed social problems among Hmong youth in the United States to generational tensions within families and the greater difficulty that parents have raising and controlling their children in the United States. For instance, Mo Lee, who earlier pointed out the problem of deteriorating health among the Hmong, also got disillusioned by the American social system, which supposedly protects the rights of children, but ironically forbids their parents from engaging in traditional and strict childrearing practices. Mo said:

In Laos, when the children do not listen to their parents, they can teach or correct their children. But in the U.S., you cannot say anything. If you do something to the children, they will tell their teachers and cause problems. You know, democracy gives you many rights in this country, but not for the parents. I don't like it.

In a different interview, when I asked Steve Thao, who was often responsible for resolving family conflicts in his clan, he first reacted by saying, 'Okay, you are talking about the most challenging things here' and observed that 'The young kids, when they abuse the word "freedom", they can get into a lot of trouble. Not being in school, not getting good grades, getting trouble with the law.' He then moved on to another community problem of marital relationships among Hmong couples in the United States: 'Mid-age marital life crisis is also an issue. Spouses again claim freedom and say, "Hey you know what, if I am not happy with you, you are free to leave and I am free to leave. And I am not willing to work something out."' That's a social trend found in the Hmong community here and the divorce rate is going up fast.'

In this manner, older Hmong can have a negative perception of the cherished American value of individual freedom. As a result, my interviewees felt that the Hmong community started to struggle with these new social problems only after they migrated to the United States and they lost their perceived traditional values and cultural norms they had in Laos. Ultimately, it is emphasized that those social problems are out of their control and 'against' supposedly traditional Hmong culture and values. In the interview with Steve Thao, the related nature of Hmong's cultural frustration and the new U.S. living environment was again discussed. He stated:

Yes. Hmong people are really "against" divorce. They will do anything to try to work out their problems and keep the relationship and marriage together. But because they exercise too much freedom here in the U.S., they don't go to the Hmong elders to resolve the problems anymore. A few people might go to the Hmong elders, but the couples won't

accept their cultural mediation during family meetings. I don't want to be negative about it, but that's the truth.

As a result, Hmong, especially the elderly people, continue to experience an ambivalent sense of national and social belonging in the United States, not exactly because of any political persecution or oppression but rather because of the loss of cultural and ethnic norms along with persistent life struggles and economic hardships in American society. This leaves a challenging dilemma to the U.S. Hmong community while reaffirming their status as an ethnic minority with a 'traditional' culture that is being lost in the United States.

The 'Hmong World' Disrupted: Perceptions of Ethnic and Social Marginalization among the Young Hmong Generation

Although young Hmong have enjoyed better social integration and education in the United States, their greater exposure to American ethnic discrimination and racialization can also produce a sense of partial belonging to the country. Many Hmong college students and youth faced a similar dilemma about their ethnic marginalization in U.S. society because of unintended racialization caused by lack of knowledge and ignorance by other Americans, the absence of recognition in the U.S. national history, and pervasive ethnic prejudice in their daily lives.

Some Hmong youth are bothered by the fact that relatively few Americans know about the Hmong, indicating how they feel they are more marginalized than other ethnic minorities among the American public. For example, Lor Vang, a senior at college, gave me the following story about his experience of racial and ethnic relations:

There was a guy on the light rail and asked me whether I am Chinese. I said, no. Then he went through other Asian groups, like Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, to find out who I am. I said I'm Hmong, and he looked confused. He asked right away, "What is that?" I was like, 'Where should I start?' So if I usually start with how my parents were initially from Laos, then people normally respond, "Oh, so you are Laotian." Well...not

really... Long time ago, Hmong people lived and came from China. Then they go, “Oh, then, you guys are Chinese!” Oh, well, I have no idea what to say!

In fact, Lor’s and many other young Hmong people’s similar daily encounters further imply that their ethnic marginalization experience is caused from ignorance and lack of knowledge from multicultural society, confirming their status in the United States as a minority without an ethnic homeland that can identify an individual ‘original’ belonging. Some of them pointed out that if Hmong had their ‘own country’, they would at least be recognized. As a result, the Hmong community has been actively working to promote their ethnic visibility in American society.

When I began research about the U.S. Hmong community, I did not quite expect that Hmong youth, including those who were born in Thai refugee camps but raised in the United States and the U.S.-born second generation Hmong would continue to feel that their ethnic group is marginalized in the country in various ways. Among many young Hmong who expressed such concerns, a good example was Lily Moua, a U.S.-born college student, who spoke about the marginalization of Hmong from the country’s national history as follows:

You know, in history classes, they always bring up American history. They talk about Russia, America, and all other countries but almost always avoid Laos. I always wondered why they don’t teach about those Southeast Asian countries like Laos. Even if they talk about the Vietnam War, they never really talk about Hmong and how we contributed. I’ve always wondered why they do not teach that.

Sao Lee, another college student had the same concern and complained about the overall underprivileged ethnic status of Hmong and said, ‘It sucks in high school, you learn histories about other races, but we never see anything about Hmong.’⁴¹

For many Hmong youth who learn about U.S. national history at school or those who

⁴¹ This can be compared to history education and textbooks in Laos which actually recognize the existence and roles of ethnic minorities including Hmong based on the national agenda to promote ethnic unity.

study it for their citizenship tests, the erasure of the historical contribution of their own ethnic group seems perplexing. Indeed, U.S. national history, which is supposedly about all American nationals, does not deal with the Hmong, although their parents and grandparents played a critical role during the Vietnam War in Laos. In general, Hmong did not perceive themselves as simply another group of ‘immigrants’ or ethnic minorities. According to them, they are a special group, who sacrificed themselves and confronted the danger of being exiled from their natal homeland as refugees because they fought for the United States during the war. This is a generally accepted discourse among many Hmong adults in terms of their roles in U.S. national history, as summarized below by Ker Cha, a Hmong language teacher at local high school. Ker said:

In a lot of ways, mainstream Americans think about whether immigrants came to the U.S. legally or not. It is true that for other immigrants, they came to the U.S. because they told themselves, “I need to work hard to make myself better.” That’s different from what is the most challenging and different thing to deal with for Hmong people. We came to America because Americans came to the Hmong [in Laos] and kind of disrupted and destroyed our lives.

The lack of recognition for their contributions to U.S. history makes Hmong feel ethnically marginalized from the nation-state. Indeed, ethnic marginalization is not always based on overt processes of oppression or discrimination of minorities by the majority group. It can also be caused by the deliberate exclusion of these groups from a country’s history and nation-building projects. In other words, ethnic marginalization has as much to do with historical amnesia as it does with ethnic discrimination and exploitation.

While the issue of race and ethnicity must be understood in historical context, the ethnic experiences of those from different backgrounds, age, and social status constantly signify that the official representations of multiethnic diversity that appear in national history or public education do not necessarily improve the public awareness of the Hmong. In fact,

the problem of ethnic recognition of the Hmong in U.S. society is an ongoing issue, even to a thirteen-year-old boy such as Ryan Thao, in his interaction with his friends from different ethnic backgrounds at his middle school. One day, a couple of Ryan's friends at school asked him, 'What is Hmong?' As he realized that he could not give a succinct definition, he and his friends decided to go online to search for information about Hmong. Instead of 'Hmong', his friend typed 'monk' in the web search engine. Ryan had to stop his friends and said, 'What are you typing there? I am not a monk!' He added that his friends picked on and teased him that Hmong is a 'stupid' language. As this shows, such lack of knowledge or ignorance about Hmong ethnicity can sometimes unintentionally lead to derogatory and discriminative experiences even in highly multiethnic and multicultural society.

In fact, much of the ethnic struggles that young Hmong experience are related to subtle ethnic and racial tensions rather than visible discrimination and conflict or blunt racism. That is perhaps why both Hmong elderly people and youth noted that they do not have 'harsh' feelings about their ethnic experiences and felt like they could 'deal with it' or 'ignore it' while continuing to articulate their concerns, problems, and tensions as an impoverished ethnic minority group. But such discriminatory remarks and prejudices are what the second generation and Hmong youth constantly deal with, especially in choosing their dating partners from different ethnic communities.

One of my interviewee's oldest sons has been dating a Vietnamese American girlfriend for years but continue to face uncertainty about the future because of her family's serious objection about his Hmong ethnicity. Likewise, Tony Cha, a college student also shared his difficulty with his romantic relationship with his Filipino girlfriend and attributed it to ethnic prejudice:

When my girlfriend first brought me to her dad, he was saying to my girlfriend in front of me, "If you date a Hmong guy, you are going to suffer. A lot of Hmong guys, they tend to simply use girls." I was like, I'm trying to get away from that stereotype about Hmong

men using girls. Throughout my life, if I date a girl, I will try to be loyal to that one girl. I guess her father thought that if she dates a Hmong guy, she would eventually be heartbroken.

According to Jeremy Hein's study of Indochinese refugees to the United States, ethnic tensions were not just between whites and ethnic minorities but also between ethnic minorities themselves. He claims that 'activities against refugees are closely tied to local conditions and take different forms among whites and blacks' and the existence of different ethnic minorities in the same neighborhood can also cause 'conflict among ethnic minorities, in contrast to the image of dominant versus subordinate groups' (1995: 69).

Likewise, Hmong people's discriminatory social and racial experiences are not always with the majority, dominant group, but often originates from other equally marginalized, ethnic minorities (such as other Southeast Asians who were former refugees and African Americans) or from economically marginalized members of the dominant ethnic group (poor whites). This is revealed in daily life experiences among many young Hmong such as Sao Lee: 'Growing up in Stockton,⁴² I guess everybody didn't like Hmong people. Even other Asian people didn't like Hmong. There were a lot of Cambodians in Stockton, they always picked on Hmong people, and then Vietnamese picked on us, and African Americans did that, too.'

In addition, the government assistance that Hmong receive as former refugees ironically caused African Americans and other Southeast Asian neighbors to develop negative perceptions of Hmong, as competitors for social welfare and job opportunities. In short, it seems difficult to completely overcome the feelings and personal experiences of ethnic marginalization. Instead, Hmong have to deal with it constantly across the generations, as long as they live with their ethnic neighbors and interact with the broader society.

⁴² A city about 76km away from Sacramento, known to be the recent resettlement home of many Southeast Asian former refugees.

Beyond Partial Homes: Diasporic Ethnic Minorities and Generations

This chapter has examined the local socioeconomic and ethnic experiences of Hmong which confirm and evoke their ethnic minority status and marginalization in both Laos and the United States. Although not all Hmong may experience ethnic marginalization in the same way, their perspectives show that they do not fully develop a sense of national belonging to the nation-state in both their natal homeland of Laos and in their new home in the United States, where they resettled as refugees. Such partial exclusion is experienced by both the older and younger generations in both countries in different ways.

In this sense, the lack of full incorporation in local societies is an important part of the diasporic condition. The partial exclusion from the nation-state not only causes Hmong to question their sense of national belonging, but also eventually encourages them to reach out to the diaspora and maintain transnational ethnic and cultural affiliations with each other across national borders. In sum, ethnic marginalization is not only a matter of national politics or overt discrimination but also perpetuated by global power and its continued presence, such as foreign capital in Laos and Cold War geopolitics and their historical impacts on both Hmong communities in Laos and the United States.

**Part II. Transnational Ethnic and Cultural Continuity in the
Hmong Diaspora**

Chapter 4. Kinship Hegemonies and Continuity in the Hmong Diaspora

It was in the early evening of a cloudy and humid day in February in Laos. I was returning to the village from the town of Vang Vieng. From a short distance, I recognized a Hmong man walking toward me, who had just arrived at the farm (where I stayed) yesterday. He walked up to me and asked in Hmong, ‘Are you Hmong?’ He might have wondered because I look like a Hmong person as he told me later. I answered in Hmong, ‘I am not Hmong.’ We both laughed. Coming back to the farm together, I gave him my card with my name and school affiliation on it. His name was Moua Ly⁴³ (Lee) and he told me that he is ‘happy’ to see that my last name is also ‘Lee’ just like his.

Moua was a Hmong man in his fifties who resettled in France after the Vietnam War and was visiting and traveling around Laos by himself. He told me that it was disappointment for him to see how the village had changed because of the tourism and he could no longer deal with the noise from the bars along the river. So he planned to leave the farm guesthouse that day and stay with his relatives who lived in the village. I became curious. By that time, I came to know every Hmong family in the village but I had not heard about anyone who had mentioned that a relative was coming from France to visit them. So I asked,

Author: Who are your relatives?

Moua: I don’t know yet, because I have never met them. But I found out where their house is.

Author: Didn’t you just say that you are staying with your relatives?

Moua: Yes, they are my relatives.

He sounded so certain and firm that I had to inquire further.

Author: But you never met them before and don’t know who they are at all?

⁴³ The Hmong of the Lee clan who resettled in France adopted the spelling of ‘Ly’ for their surname.

Moua: No, I don't. But I know they are my relatives for sure, because their last name is also Lee.

At first, I thought Moua was joking, because I could not understand why Hmong with the same last name would be considered relatives if they have never known each other before. However, since he was so sure of his kinship to a family in the Hmong village by virtue of the same family name, I came to wonder how that family would react to him. The next day morning, I went to one of the Lee family houses that I knew about to see if Moua had really found his 'relatives' and was able to stay with them. The father of the Lee family, who was sitting outside in a circle with Moua, introduced him to me and said, 'This is my brother from France.' His son added that the whole family was very happy to meet his 'uncle from France' for the first time, so they shared food with him and allowed him to sleep over at their house.

It was finally the first day of the annual Hmong New Year festival in Sacramento which the Hmong community had been eagerly anticipating. Instead of celebrating the American tradition of the Thanksgiving at the end of November, Hmong gathered in Cal Expo, the state fairground to celebrate and participate in a three-day traditional New Year event. I attended the event with a married Hmong 'Lee' couple that I grew to know quite well. At their home, they encouraged me to dress up in a traditional Hmong New Year outfit and lent me one of the traditional New Year dresses that their daughter owned. Mrs. Lee, who helped me put on the dress, commented that she thought pink would be 'my color'. She said my outfit was the Chinese Miao New Year dress style and she had bought it at a local Hmong supermarket at a discounted price of sixty-five dollars. Mrs. Lee wore a 'more traditional northern Lao' Hmong style outfit, which was mainly black.

We were looking for the 'official' entrance to the New Year site to make sure that we

would welcome and celebrate the New Year ‘properly’. This year, the New Year Organizing Committee created eighteen⁴⁴ banners that contained each Hmong clan’s surname (*xeem* [seng]) and encouraged every family to pick up their own clan banner and take photos with it in front of a large model of a *qeej* [kkeng], a traditional bamboo pipe used as the symbol of the main festival gate. The female assistant at the entrance, in a splendid gold New Year dress with a large bull-shaped silver crown on her head, asked our surname in order to find the right banner. Sorting through the eighteen identical banners, she quickly found one that said ‘Hmong Lee’ and directed us toward the *qeej* gate to have our photo taken. A good number of families were already there having fun taking photos and changing poses while holding the banner with their clan surname.

Waiting in line for our turn, Mr. Lee turned to me and jokingly said, ‘You are technically Hmong Lee!’, referring to my Korean last name, which is pronounced and spelled in English the same way. The Lee couple’s humorous comment made me laugh but also helped alleviate my slight nervousness about pretending to be a Hmong simply because I have the same ‘Hmong’ clan name. I stood next to the Lee couple and handed my cell phone to the assistant and asked her to take a photo of the three of us holding the ‘Hmong Lee’ banner. No one pointed out that since I am not Hmong, I should not hold the banner of the Lee clan. Indeed, I was ‘Lee’.

What makes Hmong clan kinship, based on a simplified surname system, so dominant and inclusive that it allows even a non-Hmong foreigner like me, who happened to have the same sounding last name, to fake identification and ethnic affiliation with the Hmong Lee clan? The fact that the Hmong in Sacramento have created this ritual at the entrance of their New Year festival symbolizes how the New Year has become a celebration

⁴⁴ The eighteen surnames in English (and Hmong in the parenthesis) are: Cha or Chang (Tsab), Cheng (Tsheej), Chue (Tswb), Fang (Faj), Hang (Ham), Her (Hawj), Kha or Khang (Khab), Kong (Koo), Kue (Kwm), Lee (Lis), Lo or Lor (Lauj), Moua (Muas), Pha (Phab), Thao (Thoj), Vang (Vaj), Vue (Vwj), Xiong (Xyooj), Yang (Yaj).

and congregation of the Hmong clans around the world. In fact, the continuity of the Hmong clanship system, which has persisted across national borders despite centuries of dislocation and migratory dispersal, is a critical aspect of the Hmong diaspora.

Kinship Hegemony as a Process

The transnational persistence of Hmong kinship practices is based not only on immediate biological kin and genealogical ties but their extensive clan system, which is simplified to and represented by eighteen Hmong surnames. Hmong clanship generates a socially constructed sense of familial affinity in both local and transnational contexts and is also the basis for marriage, since Hmong are forbidden from marrying a member of the same clan. This chapter examines how diasporic Hmong in both Laos and the United States have continued to adhere to three fundamental kinship principles: clan hospitality, clan exogamy, and ethnic endogamy. These kinship practices (or rules) are seen as a fundamental aspect of being Hmong and the extent to which members of the Hmong diaspora conform to them is quite remarkable, obviating the need for disciplining institutions or the coercive exercise of power through families, community organizations, or state control.

In this sense, I analyze the hegemonic nature of Hmong kinship within the diaspora as an uncontested order that does not need to be actively and continuously enforced by power structures. In other words, hegemony consists of systems of belief that have become so pervasive and taken-for-granted as the natural order of things that they no longer have to be imposed by the agency of the powerful. They remain unquestioned and uncontested by ordinary individuals, who obey them through their implicit consent (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:23-24).

Clearly, hegemonies are not simply the purview of nation-states. Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony is primarily about the state, in terms of both government and larger political civil society, and is operated and maintained by ideological control of the ruling class. However, diasporas can also develop hegemonies that are equally effective and

powerful, such as kinship in the case of the Hmong diaspora. The three main practices of Hmong kinship (clan hospitality, clan exogamy, and ethnic endogamy) elicit conformity of its members, which ultimately contributes to establish an imagined 'kin' community (cf. Anderson 2006). In some sense, kinship rules are more liable to become hegemonic, because they are often biologized and essentialized through a self-evident discourse of family lineage and blood ties. In addition, the absence of ethnic homeland for diasporic Hmong becomes another compelling reason and justification for them to adhere to their kinship rules. Hmong repeatedly claim that because they do not have an ethnic homeland, their clan and kinship system is what allows them to maintain their ethnicity across national borders and remain as Hmong.

In fact, these kinship rules continue to be pervasive in the Hmong diaspora in both Laos and the United States. Almost everyone voluntarily complies with them, often unconditionally, and there are very few violations which are reported. Hospitality toward clan members, even those who are complete strangers, showed remarkable continuity across national borders and I heard of no cases where Hmong refused to embrace those of the same clan as family. During my ten-year contact with the Hmong community in both countries (since my first visit to Laos), there was only one violation of clan exogamy that was repeatedly mentioned to me, where a Hmong person in the United States pursued a romantic relationship with another Hmong with the same surname. In terms of ethnic exogamy, I have heard of a total of seven cases (in both countries) of Hmong who did not marry other Hmong and engaged in interracial or interethnic marriage.

However, hegemonies (including kinship hegemonies) are never absolute and impenetrable, but can become vulnerable to critical discursive awareness. This can eventually cause them to be challenged and disrupted, especially in diasporic contexts when they are enacted in different national contexts. In both Laos and the United States, the clan hospitality rule, which is extended to even strangers who only share the same surname is

considered to be in danger of weakening among the younger generations. Hmong in the United States are particularly exposed to social forces that can disrupt ethnic endogamy, as they have lived in the society where ethnic exogamy (interracial and interethnic marriages) is common and frequent, especially compared to Laos.

As a result, U.S. Hmong tend to become more conscious about making agentive efforts to sustain their kinship system in response to contrastive sociocultural pressures. Indeed, Hmong of the younger generations in the United States have started to question their dominant clan exogamy rule as well as ethnic endogamy (to a lesser degree) by pointing out the contradictory logic embedded in the theory of biological relatedness. Therefore, as diasporic kinship hegemonies have been transplanted from Laos to the United States, they have become more susceptible to challenge and possible change, although a vast majority of Hmong continue to adhere to them.

Defining Hmong Kinship: Clans, Surnames, and Biologized Discourses

Hmong's kinship system consists of patrilineal clanship based on eighteen different surnames. According to Timothy Dunnigan (1982) in his study of Hmong kinship network in the U.S., the agnatic sub-lineages (the eighteen clans) are the basic units for Hmong refugee communities, and this clan system eased their resettlement process and helped them establish a successful economic network. As Dunnigan notes (1982: 127-131), each segmentary family lineage not only forms an economic unit based on genealogical ties and marriage, it is the foundation of the Hmong's social and political kinship system as well. In their daily lives, the Hmong use the word *xeem* [seng], which means 'surname', but also refers to the clan to which an individual is identified and belongs. This clanship is the foundation for Hmong social organization, not only in local contexts but also transnationally across national borders in the diaspora. It is also the basis for socioeconomic resources and the flow of remittances.

Members of a Hmong clan include those who simply share the same surname and are not necessarily biologically related. They express the feelings of an immediate kin

connection and affinity to the same clan members and extend familial hospitality to them, even if they are complete strangers from a foreign country. Similar to other clan systems, the Hmong also practice clan exogamy and can only marry Hmong from another clan. These kinship rules and cultural understandings are shared by the Hmong across borders and are considered a principle that cannot be violated or changed.

Indeed, exchanging last names is an important and basic part of daily Hmong life since they wish to identify their clan membership and make appropriate kin connections. The kinship affinity that Hmong feel toward other clan members seems primarily based on a social construction. When Hmong meet another Hmong person for the first time, their first question is, ‘What is your Hmong last name?’ (*Koj yog xeem dlaab tsis?*). This is especially important when Hmong youth explore possible romantic relationships, since they have to find Hmong from another clan to date. In other words, the simplified Hmong clan system based on last name expands the primary meanings of biological kinship to much more flexible, non-conjugal social groups.

Hmong kinship practices initially reaffirm scholarly efforts to define kinship more extensively and analyze it as a social and cultural construct that consists of systems of symbolic meanings based on social relations rather than a naturalized system (Parkin 1997: 3; Peletz 1995: 356-357; Schneider 1980: 4-6). The boundaries of kinship membership become flexible and are constantly blurred as demonstrated by scholars who redefine and re-conceptualize kinship through their ethnographies (Carsten 2004; Clarke 2008: 155; Schrauwers 1999: 314-316; see also Kuper 1982: 81).

As these researchers also note, Hmong’s socially and culturally constructed kinship system is still based on biologized discourses that refer to blood-relatedness. In fact, even if we examine non-conjugal and non-biological forms of kinship, it is undeniable that such expanded and more flexible kin relations are still conceived through dominant, genealogical metaphors by local peoples. It is true that the Hmong sense of extended kinship based on

clan membership is understood through heavily biologized discourses of family. Clan members are not ‘real’ sisters, sons, or parents by blood. However, they are referred to by such kin and affinal terms and become similar to members of the family in various ways, although they are not accorded equal positions as blood-related, immediate family members. Likewise, hospitality needs to be extended to all clan members because they are ‘like a family’ and marrying a clan member is analogous to marrying a family member and therefore forbidden. Therefore, Hmong clanship includes individuals without blood ties but only based on the premise that they are likely (and hypothetically) genealogically-related.

Hmong’s flexible inclusion of clan members as kin is made possible because they hypothetically believe that each of the eighteen clans were descended from one ancient ancestor and that they are therefore the children of the same parents. It is generally believed that an individual’s clan lineage can be traced by elderly people’s memories of ancestral genealogies. This kinship belief does not merely exist as an abstract idea about affinity but has actual practical impacts in their everyday lives. In fact, the same clan members are entitled to receive social and emotional hospitality as well as financial support from each other. However, if simply claiming the same last name is the sole way to identify clan members, the system becomes somewhat unreliable, since anyone can claim such affiliation based on the same surname.

Because even kinship systems and rules considered to be social constructions are based on such genealogical reasoning and biologized discourses, they are more likely to become essentialized and therefore taken-for-granted and uncontested. In other words, they become hegemonic. If a Hmong individual does not treat a clan member like family, it becomes similar to rejecting a brother or sister (or another blood-related family member) who has come to visit (or is asking for financial help). In similar context, Hmong are strictly prohibited from marrying a clan member with the same surname because that would be like marrying a family member and is therefore considered incestuous and taboo.

In this sense, Hmong clanship is similar to the concept of universal kin, defined as an unifying source of the African diaspora (Gilroy 1991; Hall 1990; Helmreich 1992). Since the current African diaspora is established based on unidentifiable national origins, it is suggested that its members can alternatively pursue a common sense of kin identity as part of a unified African race based on a shared historical consciousness. This concept of universal kin is emphasized as a way for resettled African diasporic communities to overcome subordination and deliberate exclusion by nation-states that are established upon the specific racial origins (Gilroy 1987).

However, as Helmreich (1992: 245) critically points out, the idea of universal kin has the possibility to resemble how nation-states naturalize their members, borders, and territories in the name of a single, unified national race. He further questions whether such pan-African ethnicity based on common, shared 'black' experiences under colonization can be achieved without excluding individual differences in a manner similar to the othering processes of the nation-state (1992: 245). Although Helmreich does not go into the similarity between national kin and diasporic kin affiliations in terms of hegemony, it can be argued that diasporas can also develop and promote a homogenous ethnic and kin identity to counter nationalist hegemonies through a similar notion of universal, biologized kinship.

Diaspora's Hegemonies

Gramsci's original notion of hegemony has become a versatile theory applied to various scholarship across disciplines in many different contexts. For Gramsci (1971: 12-13), hegemony is the property of the ruling group and perpetuates the state's ideological formation with *consent* of the dominated rather than through coercion by the dominant group (see also Brow 1988; Burawoy 2012: 189; Glassman 2011: 32; Hall 1986: 16; Kunnath 2013: 51).

In her review article, Alonso (1994: 382) succinctly writes, 'Hegemonic strategies, at once material and symbolic, produce the idea of the state while concretizing the imagined

community of the nation by articulating spatial, bodily and temporal matrixes through the everyday routines, rituals, and policies of the state system'. In this chapter, I specifically focus on this particular aspect of hegemony as a constant process and ongoing project that can be sustained by persistent 'cultural inscription' (Alonso 1994: 381). Based on this, my use of the concept of hegemony emphasizes how it consists of belief systems that are so culturally engrained and pervasive that subjects are no longer conscious of being dominated.

However, I also recognize that hegemonies must first be created and manufactured, which is a process that *does* involve relations of power. In the case of the Hmong diaspora, the initial creation of the hegemonic kinship system is not a product of ruling groups or intellectuals who represent state ideologies. Instead, kinship beliefs become effective as an unchallenged hegemonic system, because they are repeatedly taught to children by parents through the socialization process. As a result, they seem to become culturally engrained and taken for granted in the minds of children in their daily lives, obviating the need for the parents to constantly enforce kinship rules once their children become young adults. This seems to be especially the case for the clan exogamy principle.

In addition, ordinary Hmong in the diaspora constantly justify and legitimate their adherence to the hegemonic kinship system by the biologization of clan social relations (as discussed above). More importantly, they emphasize the need for Hmong to comply with the kinship system in the absence of an ethnic homeland that can sustain Hmong ethnicity across national borders. Therefore, although hegemonic systems are naturalized and taken-for-granted, individuals do not simply obey them mindlessly. Diasporic Hmong are aware of the hegemonic kinship system and provide compelling reasons why they must adhere to it faithfully. In other words, hegemonies are subject to discursive awareness, but unlike other cultural beliefs, they are not subject to critical discursive consciousness, since they are accepted as part of the 'natural' order. The rest of this chapter will ethnographically elucidate and highlight the process of kinship hegemony and how Hmong constantly

reaffirm it in the face of challenges that threaten to undermine it.

Discourses about Ethnic Homeland and Diasporic Kinship Hegemony

While biologized discourses of family naturalizes Hmong hegemonic clanship rules, the continuing historical consciousness of Hmong as a formerly persecuted and dispersed people who have lost their ethnic homeland also serves as another compelling reason to legitimize hegemonic kinship practices across the diaspora. Because diasporic Hmong constantly reproduce discourses of an absent homeland, identification with their kinship and clan system becomes a feasible and attractive alternative means for them to sustain their collective ethnic identity. This in turn solidifies and justifies their kinship hegemony. I do not aim to provide a causal link between the absence of ethnic homeland and Hmong's development of kinship hegemony but rather point out that such discourses and consciousness provide the context of how Hmong kinship operates as a hegemonic system.

During my fieldwork in both Laos and the United States, about 90 percent of my interviewees mentioned that their kinship rules are what make Hmong identify and maintain their ethnic identity despite their geographic dispersal and separation. These interviews indicate that Hmong strictly conform to their kinship rules because they believe there is no other concrete way to actually maintain their scattered ethnic community across national borders in the absence of a territorial homeland, government, or ethnic leaders. To put it differently, with the enduring power of their clan kinship beliefs, they can reaffirm and be reminded of what it means to be 'Hmong'. Below are three examples selected among the numerous individual narratives that make such claims:

(1) Neng Her: In my opinion, I think the reason why Hmong work together and stay together without a homeland is because of family ties, especially the last name. If families have the same last name, they treat each other better than people who have other last names. Going through the difficult wars in China [in Hmong history], the clan system must have made Hmong stay together.

(2) Author: [conversation continued in the context of clan hospitality] For me, even if I encounter Koreans abroad who have the same last name as mine unexpectedly, they won't express any special feelings unless they are really my family.

Sao Lee: I guess it's probably because you guys have your own country. There are so many Koreans from Korea so you are used to seeing other Koreans in a foreign country. For Hmong people, we are scattered all over the world, so far from each other.

(3) Author: In your opinion, what makes Hmong people keep their Hmong ethnic consciousness and identity despite geographic separation and how do they maintain it?

Malina Xiong: It is because of our surnames. Even if I do not know the person directly, if the person is from the same clan, they are like family to us. Indeed, we know that we are somehow connected to each other, one way or another, even if they live far away.

As shown here, when Hmong refer to their diasporic history, the strong consciousness that they are a 'people without a country' supports the existential legitimacy of their kinship hegemony and why it must elicit their unquestioned consent. In essence, they suggest it as a way to counter the fragmenting forces of the diaspora, including national differences which have emerged between Hmong living in different countries. The next three sections will describe each hegemonic principle of Hmong kinship and examine how transnationally pervasive they are in the Hmong diaspora.

Clan Hospitality toward 'Strangers'

In their everyday lives, it is a common practice for Hmong to provide family-like hospitality and support to the members of the same clan identified by surname, even if the person is a complete stranger. This was illustrated with the example of Moua Ly at the beginning of this chapter, a Hmong from France who received immediately extended family hospitality by clan members in Laos. This phenomenon was frequently discussed during my interviews in

both Laos and the United States. In Laos, for example, Poa Moua spoke about the broad sense of kin affiliation and common clan identity across national borders:

For example, if you are of the Vang clan, it doesn't matter which country you live in or which city you choose to reside. You are just the same Vang like before. This is not something that you can change. You should love other Vang and you will be beloved by other Vang. If you are from a certain family clan, you will know about everything related to that specific clan, like their specific funeral rituals.

Because of this emphasis on surname as the decisive arbiter of one's clan identity, Hmong broadly imagine the kin connections to anyone that shares the same last name regardless of the nation-state of residence, even if they have never met them nor will do so in the future. This was discussed, for example, by Bea Her in Laos:

In Vietnam, there will be a lot of people whose last name is like mine, Her. The last name Her does exist in China, too. When some Hmong from China came to Laos to sell things, I asked them whether there are Her families in China. They would answer, "Of course, there are a lot of them in China." So that means there are many of my Her family and relatives living there.

This kinship rule is also applied regardless of which country the person is from and thus supercedes national differences. In so doing, this clan-based kinship is applied universally to reaffirm and strengthen their ethnic identity not only locally but also transnationally within the diaspora. Because of this extensive clan-based kinship system, receiving hospitality, care, and support from the same clan members is not a one-time event that coincidentally happens for a few lucky individuals. Many Hmong shared with me their experiences as either the recipient or the provider of family-like hospitality after they unexpectedly encountered Hmong from other places who were part of the same clan. For example, Cha Lee in Laos willingly served as a host for a Hmong peddler from China whose

surname was also Lee. Specifically using the word ‘unity (*samaki*)’ in Lao, he emphasized:

The unity among the same clan is very strong. There was a man from China whose last name was also Lee. He came to Pha Boua [his village], asked people around for the Lee family in the village, and heard about my family. We were really happy to see him for the first time so we let him stay in my house and killed a chicken to cook and treat him well. We felt like real brothers. The bond among the members from the same clan is so strong and special like this.

These perspectives expressed by Hmong in Laos also resonate with Hmong in the United States, who also believe in the continuity of clan identification and kin affiliations across borders. For example, Lena Thao, as a young 1.5 generation (born in Thailand and raised in the United States), considered such extended kin and clan relations as one of the main reasons why the Hmong dispersed around the world continue to feel connected to each other despite their long history of migration and geographic dislocation. She similarly imagined a ‘kin’ community across national borders and expressed her faith in the emotional connections to members of her same clan whom she has never met. Lena elaborated:

We have an extended clan system and we value our kinship very much. Although we have been separated for many years, we know that we are still related to each other. If I go to Germany right now, I will try to find a Thao family. I know they will treat me as a family. I would call them aunt, uncle, and so on, even though I don’t know who they are.

Based on this belief, Lena further speculated that Miao-Hmong in China must also retain their last names like Hmong outside China. ‘Although sometimes they may be forced to take on Chinese names in order to work in the cities, they must still preserve their clanship’, she concluded.

In a different interview, Ying Thao in the United States explained the hospitality provided to clan members with the same surname on unexpected occasions:

It is the last name that makes us Hmong. Even if I never knew you from before, if you mention that you are from the Thao family, I will treat you like a real family. Generation after generation, Hmong should never forget where they are from, what family they belong to, and our Hmong nationality. You hear Hmong say, “When you travel, I don’t want you to spend money for hotel, food, or transportation. You should stay with us.” Nobody provides free food or a free room like the Hmong. Many other people call us “jungle people”, because Hmong have poor knowledge since the war⁴⁵ but we have a good mind and good heart.

In fact, during my fieldwork, I often observed in both countries how clan hospitality in the Hmong diaspora is mutually assumed and universally practiced among the Hmong even in their first encounters with each other. One example is when Miao-Hmong scholars from China visited U.S. Hmong communities in different parts of the country and were immediately accepted by those who share the same surname as a member of that family. The Miao-Hmong from China, Fei Yang, was surprised and impressed with the spontaneous and well-organized treatment by various members of the entire Yang clan during her two month-long stay in different cities of the United States.

Upon her arrival for academic research at a local university in Colorado, the airport pick-up, accommodation, local transportation, meals, and other activities were already arranged and provided for by different family members of the Yang clan in the area, whom she has never met or known before. Fei’s subsequent visit to California, where I met and interviewed her, was also arranged by Yang family networks between the two states that wanted to welcome a new, ‘real’ Hmong relative from China and develop a kin connection to her. After doing an interview with Fei, I ran into her during almost every important

⁴⁵ In the subsequent conversations with Ying Thao, it is noted that the Vietnam War not only caused Hmong to be separated from Laos but also destroyed their opportunities to participate in education and economic development. Ying often expressed that the war dispelled the possibility of modernization of Hmong as an ethnic people.

community event that I attended including community memorial services, local community cultural events, and the New Year festival in Fresno.

On every occasion, different Yang clan members took turns accompanying and guiding her around and introduced her to me by saying that she is ‘like’ their niece, aunt, or sister (depending on their age and gender position in relation to her). As Fei and I ended up greeting each other numerous times in different places, we both laughed when we again ran into each other at an event and started talking about the way Hmong in the United States treated her like a ‘VIP’. ‘To me, it’s like a mystery!’, Fei remarked. In fact, she introduced herself to me as ‘half Hmong’ because her father is Miao-Hmong but her mother is ethnic Han Chinese and she cannot speak Hmong properly. Thus, Fei actually does not feel completely related to the entire Yang clan in the United States, because of her different cultural and personal background influenced by her mother side as well as her national background. According to Fei, although she clarified this background and her ethnic difference to many Yang clan members in the United States, she was still assumed and treated as the same Yang family member, simply because she inherited the last name from her Hmong father.

In fact, the application and expansion of clan-based kinship is so inclusive that Hmong can sometimes hypothetically embrace a complete foreigner like myself based on my last name as illustrated at the beginning of the chapter. Sometimes, elderly Hmong mistook me for a Hmong woman and asked for my ‘Hmong’ last name. Of course, I made it clear that my last name sounds identical to the Hmong clan name of ‘Lee’ in English, but the correct Korean pronunciation of it in my home country is ‘yi’, so that I am actually not a member of the same Hmong clan! But later on, after being asked the same question numerous times, I ended up answering that I am ‘Hmong Lee’, which often made people

laugh.⁴⁶ This led to amusing discussions about whether to include me in their clan system as a new ‘Korean Hmong’.

Clan Exogamy

In their daily lives, *both* Hmong men and women are strictly banned from engaging in any romantic relationships with members of the same clan even if they are complete strangers from other countries, because they could hypothetically be genealogically related if they trace their ancestry back to the original clan founders in antiquity. Because of such reasoning, Hmong feel that clan exogamy is extremely important and must be passed down to all the descendants of the diaspora.

According to classic studies of kinship, exogamous marriage practices prevail among clan-based groups rooted in specific territories (Kuper 1982:76).⁴⁷ In terms of gender, this was generally discussed in earlier studies on kinship as based on the exchange of women. For example, in his book *Kinship and Marriage*, Robin Fox (1967: 54-69) discusses that general exogamy (based on conjugal relations) is a product of the incest taboo (pertaining to sexual relations) and he explores its possible reasons. However, compared to his discussion of incest, his explanation of clan or lineage exogamy seems rather simplified as he calls it a ‘*connubium*—a system of martial exchanges’ (1967: 176) of women that maintains ‘alliances’ between opposing groups and brings collateral peace in their relations.

However, Hmong people’s emphasis and continuity of clan exogamy is not directly related to the resolution of conflict among the clans through the exchange of women, although I do not deny that it may have initially arisen from the need to reduce clan disputes and maintain harmonious clan relations. Moreover, this exogamous marriage practice has become one of the most important cultural constructs that can reaffirm a common and

⁴⁶ The similarities of clan names between Hmong and other cultures are quite interesting and can be a subject for future study. Some of the eighteen Hmong clan names are similar to how Korean last names are pronounced, such as Her, Xiong, Yang, Khang, Lee, Vang, and Cha. Some of these names are also found among Han Chinese in China.

⁴⁷ Kuper (1982:77) notes that Rivers (1924) considered common descent rather than a common territory.

persisting Hmong identity across national borders in the absence of a territorial homeland and in the face of a long history of dispersion, migration, and resettlement.

Instead of simply viewing Hmong clan exogamy as an exchange system of women that maintains inter-clan harmony, I want to analyze it as a hegemonic system that applies equally to *both* genders. Despite the connotations of the term, ‘exchange of women’, Hmong clan exogamy does not only put restrictions on women’s marriageability, but men’s marriageability as well.

In everyday lives, children of both genders are taught the clan exogamy principle by their parents. A number of my interviewees in both Laos and the U.S. spoke of the need for intentional parental education in order to pass down their cultural and kinship traditions to their children in the diaspora. This would apparently ensure that their children fully accept kinship rules at an early age, with the hope of making future resistance among youth less likely. For instance, consider the following statement from one of the similar responses:

Absolutely, I taught my kids the [kinship] rule when they were young. I told that it doesn’t matter whether the person is pretty or handsome. If you have the same last name, it means you are siblings so you never get involved. That’s been taught for many, many generations and we still believe in it very strongly. We need to tell our kids, “You are family by the same last name, so you are not allowed to date or marry.”

When I asked him whether he taught this principle to only his sons or daughters, he responded, ‘Of course, I taught it to both, all [six] of them.’

Lao Hmong and Attitudes toward Clan Exogamy

In Laos, during my daily visits with Hmong youth who worked at a community center building in the village, I started to notice that Meng Xiong, one of the Hmong girls working part-time for a Hmong embroidery sewing project, frequently received phone calls from unknown Hmong men asking her for a date. I was told that young Hmong men obtain phone

numbers of single women from acquaintances and relatives in order to make a phone calls and start a romantic relationship. The phone calls were made by Hmong men from different villages, cities, or provinces in Laos but also transnationally between Laos and other countries like the United States, France, China, and Thailand. This has become a popular and preferred way to meet a potential dating partner not only for many young Hmong people of marriageable age, but also for divorced and widowed elderly Hmong who seek a new romantic relationship from abroad.

When Meng received calls from unknown men while working on her sewing project, she hurriedly signaled to us to lower our voices so that she could focus on talking on the phone. The other girls giggled and whispered to me, ‘She got a phone call from her *puubao*⁴⁸ (a young, marriageable man)’. When she received such calls from potential future boyfriends, I realized that the first thing she said right after the initial ‘hello’ was ‘my surname is Xiong. I am Meng Xiong in Vang Vieng’, which indicated that the caller’s first question was about her last name. Such exchanges of surnames are to make sure that they are not from the same clan and are therefore qualified to start a romantic relationship.

In fact, marriage customs based on clan exogamy have become a fundamental aspect of Hmong identity. In Laos, the relationship between a commonly shared Hmong ethnic and cultural identity and this marriage rule was an important topic. For example, Lee Yang, a man in his fifties, explained as follows:

Because we Hmong are a single ethnic group, we care about being mother, father, uncle, grandparents, and so on. In our ethnic group’s culture, we can’t marry a person from the same clan. If someone from the Yang clan marries another person from the same Yang clan, this will be the biggest problem. Clan Yang can marry anyone except someone else from the Clan Yang. This is our special Hmong culture.

⁴⁸ The Laotian term, ‘*puubao*’, can simply mean ‘young man’, but it usually refers to young ‘single’ men interested in marriage who pursue a courtship.

In another interview, Youa Her, another man in his fifties, stressed the power of clan exogamous dating and marriage rules and how Hmong obey them despite geographical separation and national differences. By emphasizing family relations among the same clans, Youa said:

Let's say I am a single man and go to America to marry a Hmong woman over there.

When I see a beautiful woman, I must ask first of all, "What is your last name?" If she says "Xeem [seng] Her," then I would say right away, "Oh, my sister!" I can't create a

family with her. This is a Hmong cultural rule that is observed in the same manner in

Thailand, Vietnam, America, Australia, every country. If they have the same last name, it means they are brothers and sisters who have simply been separated for so many years.

Since the surname that one is born with is the key to defining a Hmong cultural and ethnic identity in general, many Hmong expressed their confidence in the continuity of the clan exogamy marriage rule even into the future. For example, a fifty-year-old man Cha Lee in Laos said, 'We still preserve the clan like our ancestors did in the past. For example, I am Hmong Lee, so if I go to Thailand, the same Hmong Lee clan will still uphold the marriage rule. You can't marry them in Thailand if they are also Hmong Lee. This rule is what has been preserved the most, the longest. And we can't change this in the future.'

U.S. Hmong and Attitudes toward Clan Exogamy

Although clan exogamy has been practiced by Hmong in Laos for many generations, it is an unusual practice in the U.S. national context and Hmong are of course aware that it is quite different from standard American marriage customs. As a result of such national differences, their adherence to this kinship rule becomes a more intentional and conscious act, instead of an unreflexive reproduction of a prescribed *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977; see also Johnson 2013). For instance, when I interviewed Chong Her in the United States at his workplace, his wife Kia was present and listened silently, although I encouraged her to engage in our

conversation. When I asked her for her last name, which was ‘Yang’, Chong used this occasion to explain why her last name was different from his because he was aware of traditional U.S. marriage custom where the wife adopts the husband’s surname:

Yes, she still keeps her maiden name. In Hmong culture, when we marry, we don’t change our last name. Some young [Hmong] women who were born and grew up here [in the United States] may have changed their last name [after marriage], but as far as I know, they still keep their last names, too. The reason behind this is that if you are a woman and marry and change your last name to your husband’s, people will misunderstand and think you married your sister or brother [i.e., a person from the same clan]. But that shouldn’t be the case. That’s why Hmong women intentionally don’t change their last names after marriage.

In general, from a scholarly perspective, retaining Hmong women’s surname after marriage may be seen as the achievement of gender equality whereas adopting the husband’s last name (or combining it with their maiden name) implies gender subordination in which the wife is subsumed within the husband’s family identity. For instance, Scheuble and Johnson (1993:747) observe that ‘the examination of marital naming for both prominent and ordinary women is important because it challenges society’s idea of women’s identities and roles’. They further argue that:

the cultural expectation that women are to change their birth names to that of their husbands at the time of marriage is part of the language system which underscores traditional roles in a patriarchal society (Scheuble and Johnson 1993: 747).

According to this perspective, Hmong people should have achieved the highest level of gender equality since women’s clan (maiden) name is preserved after the marriage and doing so is highly encouraged and even mandated to some extent. However, in most

cases, such naming practices have little to do with whether married Hmong women actually experience gender equality.

Instead, the Hmong practice of retaining the wife's maiden name is grounded on a very different logic as elaborated by my interviewees above, which was also explained by many other married couples. Instead of gender equality between wife and husband, it is intended to indicate that the clan exogamy rule has been preserved. For couples, retaining their original clan name after marriage confirms that they had a culturally legitimate marriage with someone from a different clan and conformed to the clan exogamy principle.

Such self-justifications of Hmong naming practices based on clan exogamy become necessary in the United States, where the traditional conjugal practice has been for the wife to adopt her husband's family name. In contrast, in Laos, such a marriage custom does not exist and therefore, the Hmong tradition of retaining maiden names is not incompatible (and had no problem) with mainstream Lao culture. Similar explanations of Hmong marital naming practices were given to me on many other occasions by other spouses in the United States, especially when they thought it necessary and important to explain their kinship culture to a foreign scholar like me in an Americanized context. Therefore, their previously habitual or uncontested compliance with the habitus of clan exogamy has become a more conscious practice that needs to be legitimated in the United States because of national cultural differences.

A similar narrative was repeatedly given by Hmong in the United States, when they explained to me what makes Hmong still maintain their ethnic affiliations with other Hmong dispersed across the diaspora. This was succinctly emphasized, for instance, in the following quote from one of my U.S. Hmong interviewees:

I don't know why we are so attached or feel that way [despite geographical dispersal] but one thing that really keeps us together is, if you are of the same last name, it makes us the same family. If you are Thao, you never ever marry a Thao person. If you do that, it's [an incest] taboo. Say, even if you are Thao [and living in] in Korea, you are still considered as a family and relative member. Other ethnic groups like Laotians, Thai, Koreans can marry people from the same clan [...]. But for us, it is never, ever allowed.

In this sense, the hegemonic compliance with the clan exogamy rule in the Hmong diaspora is not simply based on biologized discourses about how the members of the same clan are like family. According to my interviewees, it has become closely associated with Hmong identity and is a fundamental part of what makes them 'Hmong', enabling them to overcome national differences in the Hmong diaspora. Therefore, to violate this kinship rule is not only tantamount to incest, but would be a denial of 'Hmongness'.

In fact, in both Laos and the United States, I heard of only one violation of the clan exogamy rule that happened a while ago. This was a case of a young Hmong couple in the United States, who initiated a same-clan marriage in spite of the severe opposition from both sides of their extended family. The cost of breaking this fundamental Hmong kinship tradition is that the story of this couple has been constantly retold as a disgraceful example by both Lao and U.S. Hmong communities and how it jeopardizes Hmong cultural identity. During the interviews, almost all people in both countries repeatedly mentioned this single case, despite the fact that it apparently occurred sometime ago, in order to describe their personal concern and shock. It is known that the woman's father refused to hold any kind of traditional wedding ceremony for the couple, which in Hmong culture is considered 'a most serious expression of anger and disapproval of the parents toward their offspring'. 'People asked the husband's father why he did not stop his son from engaging in that kind of marriage. It is certainly disrespectful and a disgrace for the whole clan.', one of my interviewees remarked.

Ethnic Endogamy

In addition to clan hospitality and clan exogamy, ethnic endogamy is another kinship principle that elicits hegemonic compliance despite national and generational differences within the diaspora. Similar to clan exogamy, ethnic endogamy is applied equally to both genders. In other words, men do not necessarily have greater freedom to marry non-Hmong compared to women. In fact, throughout my time, I encountered or heard about only a few cases of ethnic exogamy (interracial or interethnic marriages with non-Hmong) in both Laos and the United States.

In Laos, I knew of two young Hmong men in their late twenties that had non-Hmong spouses. They were actually brothers and both had been educated abroad, worked as governmental officers, and lived in the capital city of Vientiane. There were no cases of ethnic exogamy among Hmong families in Dao Tha village or other Hmong villages in Vang Vieng as far as I learned. In the United States, I have known or heard about only five Hmong interethnic or interracial marriages since my first visit to the community in 2008. Although there are no specific data about the ethnic endogamy rate among Hmong of each country, it seems remarkably pervasive in both Laos and the United States, even among the younger Hmong generations.

Hmong in Laos and Ethnic Endogamy

In Laos, ethnic endogamy as a practice seems to be taken-for-granted by Hmong without questioning its logic or legitimacy and cases of interethnic marriage are extremely rare. However, although they obey the ethnic endogamy principle, the attitudes of Hmong youth in the village toward ethnic endogamy vary and are not uniform. About half of the youth I interviewed and talked to expressed their strong preference for Hmong partners. However, an equal number of young Hmong were not against ethnic intermarriage and said it is okay to marry non-Hmong, ‘as long as the couples do not have the same family name, can communicate well, and really love each other.’

Nonetheless, the youth who initially seemed open to intermarriage in principle also said they had no intention of ever pursuing their own romantic relationships with non-Hmong. This made me wonder whether they were strictly prohibited from interethnic dating by their parents. On the contrary, it seems that they were voluntarily complying with ethnic endogamy on their own and it was not being actively imposed on them, again indicating its hegemonic status. In fact, when I spoke to Hmong parents, many of them said that they are not against intermarriage to non-Hmong and were surprisingly tolerant about youth pursuing ethnic exogamy. Parental responses to my questions about this issue were surprisingly uniform. For example, Yeng Thao and Chue Moua, both in their seventies, expressed their tolerant attitudes toward ethnic exogamy in a similar manner:

Yeng: It is up to them [the youth]. If they [an interethnic couple] love each other seriously, then that is fine. If the *farang*⁴⁹ [foreigner] is going to marry Hmong, we only check if their last name is the same as the Hmong's. If different, then they can marry.

Chue: As long as Hmong marry foreigners who don't have the same last name, it is okay to marry. But among the same Hmong clan, they can't marry each other.

These two answers resonate with all other elderly Hmong interviewees in Laos, who commonly said something like, 'as long as the non-Hmong person does not have the same surname as Hmong's, they can marry. If the couples find true love for each other, that's the best and most important thing.'

However, this apparent leniency of Hmong parents and elders toward ethnic exogamy needs to be examined more carefully. First of all, the possibility that non-Hmong or foreigners would have the same last name as the Hmong is very remote (only some Chinese and possibly Koreans share several surnames with coincidentally similar pronunciation). The two other major ethnic groups in the country, the Lao Loum and Khmu have completely

⁴⁹ In Laotian language, '*farang*' actually means 'French' but it has become a common local designation that universally refers to all Western (white) people regardless of their national origin.

different family name system from the Hmong. Therefore, it is questionable to what extent the parents are aware of such fact and say that they are willing to accept ethnic exogamy as long as the non-Hmong spouse has a different family name. In fact, this rather seems to indicate how older Hmong in Laos emphasize and have faith in the overwhelming importance of obeying clan exogamy and its prevalence. As a result, they seem to be more willing to entertain the possibility of ethnic intermarriage for their children ‘as long as they obey the clan exogamy rule’.

In addition, because Hmong have complied with the hegemonic principle of ethnic endogamy for generations without the use of coercive force, Hmong parents may not see the need to overtly enforce the rule by using their disciplinary power. Therefore, they can profess tolerant attitudes (especially to foreign anthropologists) because they have observed that hardly any youth have ever married non-Hmong. In fact, a good number of Hmong youth in the village expressed skepticism about their parents’ lenient attitudes about ethnic exogamy. ‘It is definitely easier said than done,’ one of them emphasized and elaborated:

They [elderly Hmong and parents] can maybe just say in principle that it’s okay to marry foreigners or non-Hmong but if it really happens, I am sure they will change and seriously object. If you think about it a little further, there are many problems with marriage between Hmong and non-Hmong families. No mutual communication, no cultural similarities are possible. (...) They speak totally different languages to begin with.

Hmong in the United States and Ethnic Endogamy

At first glance, ethnic endogamy appears to be hegemonic in the United States as well. According to a survey I conducted with eighty-two Hmong college students in the Sacramento area, ethnic endogamy is still prevalent among the young generations of U.S. Hmong, most of whom were born and/or raised in the country. In response to a set of questions related to ethnic preferences about marriage and dating partners, *96 percent* of

Hmong students (twenty-three out of twenty-four) who were already in a romantic relationship answered that their current dating partner's ethnicity is Hmong. The only person who answered that his/her dating partner is non-Hmong was in a relationship with a person of Indian descent.

Young Hmong in the United States who preferred someone of Hmong ethnicity as their romantic partners, spoke about their voluntary compliance with the endogamy rule. For instance, Lena Thao, a younger 1.5 generation woman was one of a smaller number of young interviewees who actually believed that elderly Hmong are no longer seriously against ethnic exogamy. Instead, she explained that her desire to marry a Hmong man was a personal preference by saying, 'I don't think intermarriage would be a problem with my parents. It is my personal preference to date or marry Hmong. I want somebody that would fit well with my parents and Hmong culture. It is just something that I would like to continue'. By concluding that ethnic endogamy is something that she voluntarily wants to pursue, it seemingly confirms that her compliance is voluntary and does not have to be imposed on her through the disciplinary power of her parents.

Similarly, in a different interview, a U.S. born, freshman college student, Lily Moua expressed her attitude toward marriage in the following exchange:

Lily Moua: Ah...I actually prefer a Hmong person but I am not a racist! [laugh] I mainly just want to keep our culture together. If I were to marry someone from another culture, I feel like I kind of lose my own culture.

Author: So what kind of culture can you keep if you have a Hmong partner?

Lily Moua: I would definitely say the Hmong language. If I were to lose my language ability, it's like I lose myself, too, because my language is what makes who I am.

It is remarkable that both individuals expressed their preference and voluntary choice for a Hmong romantic partner in order to maintain their culture and traditions in a manner that resembles the desires of their parents and the older Hmong generation.

On the other hand, not all Hmong parents in the United States are lenient or flexible about the ethnic exogamy of their children. In fact, many of them seemed to be less tolerant of interethnic marriage than their counterparts in Laos and said they preferred that their children to marry other Hmong. Parents who were flexible about this possibility were far fewer than in Laos. This may be an indication that the ethnic endogamy principle is not as hegemonic in the United States anymore (see discussion below) and that therefore, parents may feel a greater need to enforce it unlike Hmong parents in Laos.

In practice, U.S. Hmong youth who are in romantic relationships are overwhelmingly complying with the hegemonic endogamy norm in practice, as shown in the survey discussed above. However, the general attitudes of Hmong American youth toward interethnic marriage are different from this reality and they are actually quite open to the idea of dating or marrying non-Hmong. According to my multiple-choice survey question about their ethnic preferences regarding future dating partners or spouses, the majority of students (68 percent) continued to choose Hmong. However, 40 percent chose people of East Asian descent (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean descendants), 22 percent chose other Southeast Asian descendants, 20 percent chose ethnic whites, 15 percent chose Hispanic, and 8 percent chose African Americans. The other thirty-two percent answered that they had no ethnic preferences (respondents were allowed to choose multiple ethnic groups). In addition, there are a few young individuals in the United States who have started to openly and critically question the legitimacy and logic of ethnic endogamy and expressed disagreement with the principle.

Challenges to Kinship Hegemonies?

Hegemonies are never absolute and always subject to possible critical awareness, eventually disrupting the unspoken consent of their subjects on which they are based and making them vulnerable to challenges and resistance. This is especially the case when they are enacted in diasporic contexts in various countries and subject to national cultural differences. My Hmong interviewees in both countries suspected that the kinship principles of universal hospitality toward the clan members and ethnic endogamy are being gradually challenged, resulting in internal, generational disagreements. Elderly Hmong in both Laos and the United States commonly pointed out how the younger generations are no longer interested in their distant clan relatives living abroad whom they have never met or known before and may not unconditionally maintain clan hospitality toward them in the future, which usually requires a considerable amount of time, effort, and financial responsibility.

In addition, second generation Hmong youth who were born and raised in the United States have already started to question the credibility, practicality, and contradictory logic of both clan exogamy and ethnic endogamy, which indicates that Hmong's marriage customs are no longer taken-for granted. Instead of unanimous consent, they are being increasingly subject to critical discursive awareness, which may eventually cause hegemonies to be challenged and even violated in actual practice. These remain future possible threats to Hmong kinship hegemony, since, as indicated in this chapter, none of these principles is being seriously violated in practice at this point. Their dominance is currently being questioned at the level of attitudes and discursive consciousness. In fact, the last section of this chapter briefly discusses how such discursive challenges among U.S. Hmong youth have caused Hmong parents to make conscious efforts to reinforce and reproduce the hegemonic dominance of clan exogamy.

Clan Hospitality and Ethnic Endogamy

Many elderly Hmong in both Laos and the United States are not certain whether the younger Hmong generations will continue to adhere to the culture of clan hospitability toward

extended kin members in the diaspora. For example, Long Her in Laos spoke about this concern as follows:

In our children's generation, it will be like "I don't know them [members of the same clan] and they don't know us." Whenever I think about this, I feel frightened [*ttok jjai*]. Hmong American kids will not know about their relatives in Laos. They only look at book (study) or pictures but do not come here to see or love us.

In the United States, Chi Her had a similar opinion:

I think in the future, Hmong will change and become more like the non-Hmong community. The young generations already do not want to call clan relatives to come and share food. Even when you are in the same place at family gatherings, they won't know who their [clan] relatives are and how they are related to each other.

Both interviewees are quite concerned that family hospitality toward clan kin will be significantly reduced in the diaspora in the future and may be only extended to immediate blood-related nuclear family members living in close geographical proximity. However, since few Hmong youths are heads of household yet, this kinship principle is not being seriously undermined at this point in actual practice. Nonetheless, Hmong elders seem to increasingly feel that measures need to be taken to enforce this kinship principle among youth to prevent it from weakening in the future.

As discussed earlier, ethnic endogamy remains hegemonic in Laos with hardly anyone marrying outside the ethnic group. Although some Hmong youth mentioned they would be willing to marry non-Hmong, they are not actively challenging this hegemonic rule or actually dating non-Hmong from outside of their ethnic group. In the United States, however, more young Hmong are increasingly questioning and criticizing the ethnic endogamy principle, leading to disagreements and some tensions with their parents. This is not surprising, since many young Hmong college students in the United States were born

and/or raised in the United States and they are also exposed to an American marriage culture to a much greater extent than their immigrant parents. They also have much greater opportunities to interact (and become romantically involved) with non-Hmong individuals.

In addition, interracial and interethnic marriage has been socially accepted and common in the multiethnic U.S. society. Interracial marriage between Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans has become increasingly prevalent, and interethnic marriage between Asian ethnic minority groups is gradually on the rise as well (Kitano et al. 1984: 179-180). All of these can provide the context causing more young Hmong to critically reconsider the kinship hegemony of ethnic endogamy.

About 78 percent of my college student survey respondents answered that they think Hmong parents and communities are ‘somewhat’ to ‘very much against’ ethnic exogamy. This indicates the high possibility that the majority of the parents would object if the students were to date and marry a non-Hmong person. Although I did not extensively ask in my interviews or in the survey whether Hmong find their parents’ objections and demands oppressive or unfair, it seems likely that at least some of them are dating Hmong because of parental pressure against interethnic romantic relationships or facing significant objections.

For instance, Tony Cha, a freshman at a local university, discussed how he was currently dealing with the tensions from his family regarding his propensity to date non-Hmong girls. He explained why he insisted on dating a non-Hmong girlfriend at that time despite the objections from his grandfather and other members in his extended family:

Because I don't wanna marry a Hmong girl. I never dated Hmong girls [...]. I find them to be like my cousins. To me, every Hmong person is related somehow. [Author: Even if they do not have the same surname as yours?] Yeah. Somehow I may be related to them through like second or third marriages or as some distant cousins. So either way, I think of myself as a cousin of every Hmong person in the end. That's why I don't date Hmong girls. It's not that they are unattractive.

Clan Exogamy in Question in the United States

There is no sign that Hmong in Laos are starting to question the hegemony of clan exogamy and there have yet been no violations of the rule mentioned. Even the younger generation continues to take it for granted without hesitation. In contrast, the clan exogamy rule faces even greater discursive challenges among the younger Hmong generation in the United States than ethnic endogamy. This is because they often compare the exogamy rule to other mainstream American marriage standards where such clan expectations are virtually unheard of among other (Asian) ethnic minorities. As shown in my survey, because the majority of younger generations still practice ethnic endogamy, they are certainly expected to unconditionally obey the hegemonic clan exogamy rule when they pursue these Hmong romantic relationships.

However, according to some of young Hmong, Hmong kinship rules prohibit same-clan marriages but ironically permit, if not encourages, cousin marriage (as long as the person has a different surname). This has caused those Hmong youths in the United States to discursively challenge hegemonic clan exogamy rules since they question the logic of a system that forbids marriage with a clan member who has no blood ties, but allows cousin marriage that has much higher possibility of biological relatedness. This is related to the influence of American society, where cousin marriage is anathema. Most Hmong American youth use their ‘Americanized’ objection to Hmong cousin marriage to question to logic of clan exogamy. Among them, Chai Xiong, a second generation Hmong American in his mid twenties, critically pointed out the contradiction between the clan exogamy rule and cousin marriage:

In some sense, I disagree [with the Hmong clan exogamy system], because it allows you to date and marry your own cousins. If my siblings are married to different family clans, then their kids and my kids can marry each other. So that’s okay because your last name is

different, although you are related by blood? But if you are from the same clan and have the same last name, then it's not okay to get married, even if you are not [biologically] related at all? This does not make any sense.

Chai Xiong's critical comment was indeed shared by many young U.S. Hmong who raised similar objections to clan exogamy by noting how Hmong allow those who are biologically-related (cousins) to marry but prohibit marriage with clan members by claiming that they are biologically related. In other words, Hmong youth ironically employ the same biologized reasoning that (older) Hmong use to justify clan exogamy by applying it to cousin marriage, exposing the logical flaw of the hegemonic Hmong clan exogamy system in their discourses.

Nonetheless, despite the increasing prevalence of such critical discourses among U.S. Hmong youth, violations of clan exogamy still remain extremely rare in the Hmong diaspora in both countries. It is still significant that the only violation I heard of during my extensive fieldwork was among a young Hmong couple in the United States. However, as more Hmong Americans become adults and marry in the future, there may be more challenges to this kinship hegemony in actual practice. In fact, older Hmong in both Laos and the United States constantly expressed their concerns about whether violations of clan exogamy will increase among Hmong youth in the future by constantly bringing up the example of the U.S. couple who married within the clan. For example, Sheng Her in the United States referred to this extreme case and noted that 'the kids here in America today, they don't know. There was a case where they marry each other even if they have the same last name. But what can you do when they say, "Here, it's America. You can do it." I mean, the parents of both sides should have really stopped [this couple], because you cannot really disown the children.'

From Hegemony to Ideology

This chapter has analyzed the concept of hegemony in the context of diaspora and kinship, instead of simply in the context of the nation-state. Diasporas can also have their own hegemonies, which have become removed from critical discourse and thus become a source of cultural continuity across borders. Nonetheless, diasporic people remain conscious of their hegemonies and provide justifications and legitimating discourses as an indication of their consent. This also motivates their compliance with hegemonic norms that can counter the varying national contexts in which they live, even without oppressive power structures of enforcement and control.

In fact, kinship rules are more likely to become hegemonic because they can be readily biologized and naturalized. In addition, in the case of the Hmong diaspora, the persistence and continuity of their clanship and marriage systems across national borders and across generations is regarded as an essential aspect of 'being Hmong' since they lack an ethnic homeland that can become the basis for Hmong ethnicity and identity.

However, like all hegemonies, the Hmong kinship system is not impervious to questioning and critique. This is especially true for diasporic hegemonies that must be reproduced transnationally in different countries in the face of varying social and cultural pressures from various nation-states. Therefore, not only do hegemonies in diasporas have to be maintained through time (from one generation to the next), but also across geographical space because of the apparent impacts of nation-state of residence. As a result, they can increasingly come under discursive critique, especially among the younger generations in countries where these hegemonic norms are incompatible with the mainstream culture.

Therefore, this chapter has also examined how the dominant kinship hegemony of the Hmong diaspora is increasingly facing discursive challenges among youth, especially in the United States. They are beginning to question the logic of clan hospitality and exogamy as well as ethnic endogamy as they are increasingly exposed to alternative ways of cultural

norms. However, although U.S. Hmong youth critique the dominant kinship system in their discourses, they are still complying with it in their actual behavior as discussed in this chapter. In other words, their discursive ‘resistance’ has not yet been translated into practice and the dominant system is not currently in serious danger of being undermined.

In fact, from a Gramscian perspective, a complete overthrow or abandonment of powerful hegemonies is impossible. By referring to different historical events as a process of revolution followed by restoration of the dominant hegemonic structure, Gramsci explains why these events were not ‘permanent revolutions’ (1971: 113). Although Gramsci’s premise makes any kind of revolutionary movement rather unlikely, his assertion seems to have provoked some scholars to seek the possibility of ‘resistance’ in his theory (see Glassman 2011; Scott 1985).

However, because the dominant Hmong kinship system is facing discursive challenges and pressures from youth, Hmong parents may have to engage in an agentive and conscious effort to maintain and defend it from more serious future threats. It seems that the Hmong kinship system is being transformed from a diasporic hegemony whose pervasive dominance and assumed universality does not need to be enforced by structures of control to an *ideology*, a particular and relative cultural framework that needs to be actively imposed by those in power (parents in this case) on subjects (children and youth) (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:23). This leaves two questions to further explore: 1) To what extent will Hmong families (and perhaps Hmong communities) eventually have to exert disciplinary power and coercive forms of punishment, such as withholding familial and parental support from members who violate kinship rules? 2) Will this be sufficient to deal with challenges and help restore the previous state of hegemony?

Although it is possible that such attempts to exert ideological power may be effective, it is more likely Hmong kinship rules will continue to be challenged in the future (and thus require more active enforcement by families as well as the broader community),

especially in the U.S. national context. Therefore, they may cease to be truly hegemonic and instead become an ideological cultural practice that has to be constantly imposed by institutional structures of power.

Regardless, it is evident that Hmong kinship is currently believed one of the most concrete sources of cultural continuity and ethnic solidarity in the diaspora. Although other traditional cultural practices may not have as much hegemonic power as kinship, they still enable Hmong in the diaspora to maintain and promote continuity across national borders. The next example of diasporic cultural continuity I will discuss is Hmong shamanism, which initially appears to be a highly localized and traditional cultural practice, but has shown remarkable resilience and effectiveness when applied to transnational, diasporic contexts. In order to do so, I will first discuss the nature of transnational socioeconomic relations between Hmong in Laos and the United States, which is the basis for the continuity in their shamanistic cultural practices.

Chapter 5: Transnationalism in the Diaspora: Commodification of Social Relationships in the Familial Economy

As noted in the Introduction, diasporas are fundamentally transnational communities of co-ethnics dispersed across numerous nation-states. In contrast to most transnational immigrant communities that are constituted by social connections between migrant sending and receiving countries, the transnationalism of diasporas is geographically broader since they consist not only of centripetal, cross-broader ethnic relations between those living in the ancestral homeland and co-ethnics scattered across multiple countries, but also lateral transnational social ties and interactions between these dispersed diasporic communities as well. However, because of their greater quantity and geographical scope, such transnational connections across national borders may be relatively weaker (or attenuate faster over time) than those of migrant communities that consist only of two nation-states.

Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 2, Hmong have lost their transnational ties to their original ethnic homeland, resulting in considerable uncertainty about whether their country of ancestral origin is China or somewhere more ancient. Because of the absence of a territorial ethnic homeland as a centralizing and unifying force in the Hmong diaspora, lateral transnational social relations between dispersed Hmong communities in the diaspora have become the key factor that keeps their diasporic community together. In turn, these social connections across national borders are the fundamental basis for the cultural continuity and shared ethnic customs that sustain and unify the Hmong diaspora, as will be shown in the next chapter on shamanism. This chapter will therefore provide an overview of Hmong transnational socioeconomic relations and interactions between Laos and the United States.

Extended Familial Social Networks and the Transnational Economy

After the Vietnam War, Hmong migrated as refugees from Laos to the United States in collective groups that consisted of households, clans, and previous residential villages rather

than as individualized migrants. After staying together in different Thai refugee camps, many families in the same clan were forced to move as a group to Laos and the U.S., as well as to many other countries. For this reason, when Hmong in my study identified the members of families and relatives that they stayed in touch with or assisted financially across national borders, they did not simply speak of their immediate, blood-related family members but included more broadly-related people from the same clan. In sum, Hmong transnational social and economic interactions are between collective groups of extended families as well as clan members rather than individualized nuclear families.

Since their further dispersal as refugees, Hmong in Laos and the United States have developed transnational familial social networks, maintained contacts and communications with each other, and have engaged in the transnational economy through the exchange of goods (herbal medicine, cosmetics, cultural artifacts, and traditional clothes and handmade embroideries, and other industrial goods) as well as through financial, monetary transactions. Among the total of 32 Hmong households that I interviewed in Laos, every household except two had at least one or more family members and relatives of the same clan in the U.S. They not only maintained direct communications on the phone with them but also received either regular or intermittent financial support from those in the U.S. In the United States, among my 61 interviewees, only seven individuals responded that all of their close family members including siblings had moved to the U.S. together and they had no substantial transnational relationships with Hmong in Laos.

During my fieldwork in Laos, I frequently accompanied Hmong youth to local post offices and banks, when they went to collect money sent from members of their clan in the U.S. In the United States, I came to understand the process of economic remittances more clearly, since Hmong in Laos call their relatives and clan representatives and ask for money for different reasons. The request can range from supporting children's education (buying books and bicycles), helping with daily subsistence (buying food and home goods) to paying

for health care for someone in the family and expenses for major events, such as New Year festivals, funerals, spiritual rituals, and so on (as will be discussed in the context of shamanism in Chapter 6). In such cases, Hmong in the U.S. would either send money or checks to Laos by using *MoneyGram* or call other clan members to announce the request and ask for additional monetary contributions, depending on the sum of money requested.

Remittances are often one-directional, since many Hmong in the U.S. usually remit with no expectation of return from their co-ethnics. Most Hmong in Laos acknowledge the receipt of money from their families in the U.S. and express their gratitude when their clan members call them to make sure they received the money properly. However, a good number of Hmong families in Laos develop further transnational economic interactions by sending various items and products locally grown or bought in Laos to their U.S. family and clan contributors in return. Many Lao Hmong families in my study have actually collected a range of items, such as herbal medicine, rice, teas, and handicrafts and sent them collaboratively to their families in the United States.

In the United States, 22 out of my 61 interviewees have been to Thailand⁵⁰ and Laos to visit their family and relatives. More than half of them had made multiple visits to one or more of these countries. Almost all of those who have never travelled back to Thailand or Laos expressed interest in visiting in the future for various personal reasons. A very small number of elderly Hmong expressed no interest in going back to Thailand or Laos mainly because of their former engagement in the war as soldiers and concerns about their safety, security, and political conditions in their natal homeland of Laos.

Through existing transnational social networks between families and clan members in the two countries, Hmong communicate with each other and stay connected across national borders in various ways. In addition to traveling to visit each other and sending and receiving money, they also maintain social relations across national borders and exchange

⁵⁰ Because many Hmong lived in Thailand for an extended amount of time in former refugee camps, Hmong in both countries expressed their emotional attachment to and longing for their time in Thailand.

news by using phones, the Internet, e-mails, social media, as well as through a Hmong radio program operated in the U.S., which is also transmitted to and available in Laos. However, I must note that the relative ease of international travel and virtual communications in a globalized world does not always mean every individual can ‘choose’ to engage actively with and connect to their families directly and maintain close affinity to family and clan members across national borders.

In fact, it is impossible for diasporic families engaged in transnational social and economic relationships to completely overcome their physical absence and the lack of face-to-face interactions. There are also limitations with transnational virtual communication, especially because Hmong in Laos have limited access to email, the Internet, social media, and even phones (many Lao Hmong households did not have phones at home, although some youth use cell phones). Even U.S. Hmong, who suffer from persistent economic hardship as the late comers to U.S. immigration do not readily have access to the Internet or international phone calls. Although the globalization of communications technology may enhance the proximity of the world, it does not do so equally for all populations.

Much of the transnational social interactions and emotional affection involved in cross-border relations is based on the circulation of U.S. dollars sent to families in Laos for various purposes on numerous occasions. In turn, the presence and impact of money is well-received and highly valued by Hmong in Laos in the name of familial ‘love’ as will be ethnographically illustrated below in terms of the social meanings inscribed to the transnational familial economy.

Transnational Familial Love Expressed through Money

On a hot midday of late January in Laos, I was visiting Seng Yang, who was in his fifties, for an interview. On my way to his house, which was located in the middle of a hill and somewhat isolated from other clusters of houses in the Hmong village, I ran into a young friend Yer, who also knows Seng very well. He accompanied me and we both walked to

Seng's house. Seng was at home, remembered that I was coming that day for an interview, and took three small flat wooden stools from inside of his house for all three of us. Sitting on a small wooden stool in front of his house, we started talking. Like many of the families in the village, Seng also had family members who went to the United States after the Vietnam War and have been living there since then. His 'close' relatives, about four or five people including his older brother's son, were living in California and Minnesota. I asked him a rather obvious question, 'Do you miss them?' Seng responded right away:

Sure, of course I miss them. In Laos, we miss them a lot but we don't know if they miss us just as much as we miss them. Sometimes, we call them and they pick up the phone. But they actually don't really call us. That is probably because they are not really interested in our lives anymore. That has become the reality of everyone in Laos and the U.S. these days.

Noticing the notable decline of the interaction and communications across borders with his family members in the U.S. and his underlying regret and sadness, I inquired further how he manages his feelings of loss and longing for his relatives who no longer contact him that often. Seng told me that 'If I miss them, I ask for money. If I have no money, I miss them. So when I don't have money, I call them'.

As soon as I heard this, I paused for a moment, recalling how many times I heard similar answers from other people during earlier interviews. During my fieldwork, people often mentioned that they miss their family members and relatives living in other countries and made the similar connections between money and familial love. I finally realized that the inseparable link between money and feelings of longing for families living abroad are not simply subjective justifications for financial assistance or an overemphasis on material over familial relationships.

When I encountered people in Laos speaking of the interchangeability between

money and love in terms of their transnational relations with family, relatives, and clan members in the U.S., I often thought to myself, ‘You miss your family living abroad...because you don’t have money?’. In my mind, money was simply money. In contrast, missing someone in the family living abroad seems to be an emotional expression and sense of longing, which to me could not be readily commodified or expressed in financial terms. However, I soon realized that I took for granted the separation between the material and emotional realm and did not really interrogate the value and power of money in reassuring familial connections for many Hmong who engage in transnational social and economic relationships between Laos and the U.S. Indeed, seemingly simple and materialistic monetary contributions are not just an insufficient or superficial medium to connect families living transnationally but they are actually an effective way for Hmong in Laos and the U.S. to continue their relationships and social obligations across national borders among extended family members of the same clan.

This becomes clearer when considering the cultural context of Hmong transnational communities, especially when physical co-presence and simultaneous participation are no longer possible for important cultural activities and community events. In Hmong culture, providing physical labor for families and communities and being physically present for family and cultural events are considered extremely important. Simply giving money as a substitute for labor and physical absence would be considered insufficient for local cultural and community events. In local family relationships, it is also required and expected that extensive family members of the same clan will provide physical labor, social and community support, and simultaneous participation. However, it is mostly impossible for Hmong in Laos and the U.S. to be present at each other’s social events and fulfill such requirements and expectations for their family, clan, and community. As a result, Hmong in the U.S. send money and material goods to those in Laos in order to alleviate their economic impoverishment and therefore partially fulfill their family/clan responsibilities by

transnationally assisting those back in the former home country.

In this sense, although remittances and economic transactions are often seen as symbolizing a rather materialistic and ‘inauthentic’ kind of human relationship, it is perceived positively or even accepted as the proper means to express love, longing, and emotional sentiment in transnational, diasporic contexts and replace the lack of personal, face-to-face interactions and commitments. In order to illustrate that money is actually not a limitation but an enabling and legitimate means to express familial love and affection across national borders, I will discuss the particularity of Hmong communities in each country in terms of transnational social and economic relationships.

Money, the Expression of Familial Love: Hmong in Laos

In the middle of my fieldwork in Laos in January 2012, I was talking with three Hmong men from different age and clan groups sitting on a wooden bench outside a house in the village. All three of them confirmed that they have family members and relatives including a daughter, sister, and uncle in the United States living in California and Minnesota. Their family and relatives visited them at least once or more in the last twenty years. They have also received financial support from their families in the U.S. multiple times, especially when there were important family or clan events in the local community, such as *ua neeb* (soul calling rituals for healing), funerals, weddings, and New Year celebrations. But they also frequently received smaller amounts of money, a couple hundred dollars at various times, which they believed they must have used for daily needs and living expenses.

One of our conversation topics was about how or in what way they feel that their familial love continues to be maintained despite being geographically apart from their loved ones for such a long time. One of them told me, ‘Yes, we still love each other, of course. For example, my relatives in the U.S., they still send us money to help us. It is because they love us.’ Another man continued and said he cries when he misses his family in the U.S. I was surprised to hear this because I did not expect that his emotional reaction and longing for his

family in the United States would continue to be that strong after being apart for so many years. He added, ‘Yes, I miss my relatives so much. So I tell them to send money to help me.’

It is not always clear whether materialistic desire precedes emotional yearning and attachment to the family or the latter leads to the desire to request materialistic contributions and commodities. In fact, the two seemingly contrasting values—money as a symbol of economic value and the emotional sense of longing—are conflated to produce a materialized familial love and commodified social relationships in transnational contexts. In the series of interviews in Laos, there was no clear distinction between money and love at all. The money sent from families and clan members and acquaintances has come to symbolize the continuity of social relationships and family networks and it is understood to be the evidence of familial love across national borders.

Money, the Icons of the Heart?: Hmong in the U.S.

While Hmong in Laos expressed materialized longing by making inseparable connections between money and familial love, Hmong in the U.S. did not explicitly express their transnational social relationships in such a manner. Although they believed and hoped that remittances can partially compensate for their physical absence or fulfill their expected roles or commitments to the local Hmong family and clan members in Laos, there was no indication that it is a sufficient way of showing their transnational love for their families. Despite living in one of the most capitalistic countries in the world, U.S. Hmong often mentioned that money is quite ‘insufficient and too materialistic’ to express real love. Many Hmong individuals in the U.S. sent remittances to family and clan members in Laos because they felt it was ‘the least they can do and the most convenient way’ to help. However, they rather critically pointed out that such emphasis on money (mostly made by their co-ethnics in Laos) should not be misunderstood as a proper form of expressing or showing love.

Like many U.S. Hmong who have been in contact and communicated directly with Hmong in Thailand and Laos and have also been back to visit their relatives in those countries, Kheng Xiong in his early fifties, also went to Thailand twice in 1996 and 1997 mainly to visit his friends and make video recordings of his trip. His wife Ka Lee was born in Laos and spent at least five years there until she moved to and stayed briefly in a Thai refugee camp and came to the United States. In contrast to her husband who has vivid memories and longing for his young life back in Laos and Thailand, Ka said that she hardly remembers her childhood in Laos and was not sure about the exact location of her village. Although Ka was also interested in traveling to Laos someday, she still had concerns about accommodations, safety, and other unforeseen dangers travelling to Laos. We continued our conversation about transnational familial ties between the two countries based on their own experiences:

Author: Do you stay in touch with them (relatives in Laos and Thailand)?

Kheng: Yes, we keep in touch, make phone calls, and listen to the people there about how they are living.

Author: Are you really close to them as relatives?

Kheng: We are distant cousins. It's like my grandfather and their grandfather are distant brothers.

Author: When you mentioned that you still stay in touch with your family and relatives, do you frequently help them financially?

Kheng: Sure. In Hmong culture, because we are a family and we live as a group, whenever our relatives have some major events over there [Laos], each of us here contributes maybe about US\$20-50 to help them with the expenses. Also, a couple years ago, we contributed money for our relatives in Laos to

buy a tractor for their farm. We didn't buy it for individuals, but for all of them to share, so one family can pass it around. We do that all the time.

Author: So who is in charge of managing these transactions?

Kheng: Yeah, we have a contact person in our clan over here. Over there [Laos], in all the cities, we have the contacts (from the same clan). They will contact us and say, 'Oh, we have an emergency. Could you help and send us some money?' So here [the U.S.], you call everybody to collect money to send them.

Author: How often do you think this happens?

Kheng: Well, we only do this for the major events. We used to send money for the New Year over there, several hundred dollars. We know some families are not rich in Laos. They may not have enough, so we contribute a little bit for them to share for major events like clan funerals or weddings.

In order to explain the context of remittances to kin in Laos, Kheng first distinguished between living conditions and economic disparities between the two countries. He continued, 'Over there [Laos], they can still farm so they can survive. But here, we cannot survive without money (laugh). So we can only contribute for major events in Laos. I think most other Hmong here contribute money to Hmong Laos in the same way.' According to his explanation, in principle, the monetary contribution of Hmong in the U.S. is limited to emergencies and extensive family events in the Hmong communities in Laos, because he sees farming as the major subsistence economic activity and source of income for Hmong. In reality, this principle is not always followed as many Hmong in Laos ask for 'emergency' remittances quite often not only for day to

day survival but also for purchasing extra consumer and home goods (such as refrigerators, TVs and DVDs, and kitchen appliances).

Many U.S. Hmong who have visited their families and clan relatives in Thailand and Laos discover that they are expected to bring additional money with them. For example, Cheng Her still has a ‘sister, cousin’s son, and a lot of others’ living in a Hmong village in northern Laos. He not only has been in contact with them regularly, but also sent money to them upon their request. He and his wife traveled once to Laos and once to Thailand for a total of one month, more than fifteen years after they came to the U.S. As a father of 11 children, this one-time trip meant a lot to Cheng since he had to accumulate many years of savings despite the economic hardship he experienced as a laborer at an assembly line since resettling in the U.S. He estimated that he must have spent a total of US\$8,000 for the entire trip buying his flight tickets and providing funds for his relatives in Laos, which included paying for a cow and pigs for a feast to celebrate his visit to the village. Even before and after the trip, his monetary contribution and financial support had continued. We discussed this further as follows:

Author: Have you ever thought that it is difficult to keep helping your Hmong relatives in Laos while taking care of your own family in the U.S.?

Cheng: The people living back in Laos and Thailand, if they are ill, they need money to go to the hospital or to do ua neeb (‘spirit calling’ ritual). That’s why I send them money. I send them the money for the funerals, too.

Author: Do you miss them?

Cheng: Yeah, I do. When I call my sister [making crying sounds], she cries every time. (laugh)

Author: So what do you tell her?

Cheng: I say, 'It's okay, don't cry. I will send you a little money, so stop crying', haha! (laugh)

Author: How do you think about their life in Laos?

Cheng: There are some rich families there, but that is not my family. My cousin, my sister, and my relatives have no money. They are still poor.

It is critical that Cheng responded to his sister's emotional reaction and longing by assuring her that he would send her money. Although he did not necessarily believe that his longing can be expressed through and compensated with the promise of monetary contribution, he acknowledged and accepted the way his family in Laos interpreted and valued it. Indeed, money follows the heart, emotional connections, and a sense of longing, all of which are translated into the term 'love' by many Hmong in Laos. When money and love are closely connected to each other, sending and receiving money is actually a mutual way to express and feel familial affection. Although money is not always understood mutually as love and sometimes it is simply a convenient way for transnational families living apart to compensate for their physical absence, it certainly plays a significant role and enables them to stay connected and maintain their social relationships transnationally across national borders.

To conclude, Hmong transnational social relationships between Laos and the U.S. have become quite materialized and commodified, enabling them to remain socially engaged across national borders through the transnational familial economy of sending and receiving money. In this sense, familial affinity and emotional connections among people in the diaspora cannot be taken for granted or simply dismissed as purely 'materialistic'. Instead, they have become an integral part of the transnational social connections that keep the Hmong diasporic community together. The next chapter will continue to analyze such

transnational socioeconomic connections and exchanges by focusing on Hmong shamanism, which has also become highly transnationalized and maintained through familial social networks between the Hmong in Laos and the United States. The transnationalization of cultural practices such as Hmong shamanism and spiritual rituals have produced various changes and modifications among the Hmong in the two countries but also enabled them to continue their social relationships and cultural traditions across national borders.

Chapter 6. Transnationally ‘Traditional’: Hmong Shamanism and the Cultural Continuity of ‘Spirit Calling’

One morning in early March 2011 during my fieldwork in Laos, the loud ring of my cell phone awoke me. It was just past six o’clock, quite early in the morning. The room was still dark and it felt very cold, although it was at the peak of dry season and would get extremely hot midday later on. With my eyes still closed, I barely looked at the tiny screen of my cell phone to check the caller identity but could not recognize the number. As soon as I picked it up, Ji Xiong, one of the Hmong students in the village, started talking. He sounded excited and it seemed he had already been awake for quite some time. He said I should come to his house as soon as possible because the shaman, whom he had talked about for days, had come from Vientiane the night before and was about to resume his counseling service in the morning and conduct *ua neeb* ([*wua neng*], spirit calling ritual) later on. I jumped out of bed and rushed to Ji’s house. His family was busy with preparing for *ua neeb* which was anticipated to take up to seven or eight hours because it was planned for the entire family and therefore a very important event.

Ji’s family members who had gathered included the oldest son, who lives in another town and funded the ritual. They had bought pieces of rectangular-shaped grey joss paper that symbolizes money in order to represent the equivalent of 4,000,000 Lao Kip (320 British pounds⁵¹) for the ritual. Unknown amount of joss paper was already piled up at the corner of the house, waiting to be burnt after *ua neeb*. The family invested a lot of time, effort, and necessary materials to prepare for this ritual. Ji told me that the prime concern of this *ua neeb* was to ameliorate the intense poverty and also deteriorating health of the father that the family has been enduring for a long time. After the ritual was complete, the shaman announced that the problem was caused by the grave of their ancestor. The grave of the family’s grandfather was located in the wrong place and the deceased was not properly

⁵¹ The amount of money was decided by shaman who conducted the entire process of ritual and believed that it was requested by the deceased ancestors.

buried. As a result, the family was told that they could not improve their economic situation and that their health would also deteriorate over the generations.

Situating Localized ‘Traditions’ across National Borders

Ua neeb ([wua neng]), refers to both shamans and ‘soul calling’ rituals conducted by them. It is one of the most frequently mentioned Hmong cultural and religious practices, which has become an integral part of their religious, medical, and cultural life in both local and transnational, diasporic contexts. Hmong shamans are present in both Laos and the United States as well as other parts of diaspora and conduct various spiritual rituals like ua neeb in each country for their local Hmong community.

However, Hmong shamanism has also become transnationalized between Laos and the United States in various ways. Hmong people in the United States contact shamans in Laos, communicate with them to arrange spiritual rituals on the phone, and have the shamans conduct the necessary rituals for them in Laos, which are seen as effective in the United States even if the shaman is living far away. This demonstrates that the shaman’s power is not geographically restricted, but can be projected across national borders. Therefore, in addition to conduct rituals in each nation-state, Hmong communities in both Laos and the United States are able to maintain and practice spiritual rituals and continue their healing and religious traditions extensively despite their geographic separation.

When shamanism and spiritual practices are arranged transnationally from the United States with shamans in Laos, this produces a number of important changes and differences compared to locally performed spiritual rituals and services. In Laos, shamanistic rituals, especially ua neeb, are a collective and group activity that usually involves a large gathering and food sharing of family, relatives, and clan members. In contrast, when shamanism is transnationalized between the two nation-states, it becomes individualized and also commodified, indicating how practices that are considered ‘tradition’ are subject to constant modification.

In this chapter, I examine the ways Hmong shamanistic practices and rituals are maintained transnationally between Laos and the United States but are also transformed in the process. My analysis explores the factors that enable shamans' knowledge, effects, and healing powers to persist and continue across national borders among Hmong between the two countries. One important reason that shamanistic healing and services are transnationally effective is because shaman's rituals are believed to be an exploratory journey in the spirit world to reach ancestors through a communication between the souls of the dead and living, which is not limited by the constraints of physical space in the material world.

Spirit calling is done in the world of mobile souls, where there are supposedly no national borders or geographical boundaries. This mobile nature of the soul in turn enables the shaman's power to be effective across national borders and allows him to connect the souls of his living clients and their dead ancestors regardless of where they live or are buried. Because of their unique position as the connector and medium of the souls, Hmong shamans have played an important role for Hmong in the diaspora to maintain transnational familial and ethnic linkages across national borders.

Hmong not only conduct *ua neeb* rituals transnationally, but also continue to share their shamanistic tradition with the wider societies in which they live. In other words, the Hmong shaman's healing power also works for non-Hmong, demonstrating that it is indiscriminately effective across ethnic boundaries as well. In addition, the Hmong are also aware that modern medical treatment (as well as their increasing conversion to Christianity,⁵² especially in the United States) and the shaman's healing power are not incompatible but can coexist. In sum, Hmong shamanism is inherently flexible and it is not a cultural tradition that will die out under modernity but has become a source of cultural

⁵² For more research on how Christianity takes a critical stance toward indigenous religious practices as 'uncivilized and not modern' see Chua 2012; Hefner 1998; Kammerer 1990; Ngo 2010; and Smith-Hefner 1994.

continuity in the Hmong diaspora in a globalized world while also being constantly reconfigured and modified in highly transnational social settings.

‘Traditionally’ Transnational: The Birth of the Shaman and the Elements of Ua Neeb

Hmong’s spiritual rituals and ceremonies consist of different types of practices with several specific terms, such as ua neeb [wua neng], hu plig [hou plee:] and xi plig [si plee:]. In relation to Hmong’s funeral practices, xi plig refers to the chanting ritual conducted after the burials for retrieving the soul of the deceased to return to the grave site and be fed by the family. It is believed that after thirteen days of the funeral, the dead soul completes its journey, reaches the final destination, and reunites with the ancestors. To celebrate and recognize the successful trip of the soul, the family prepares for a meal and conducts a soul calling ritual to re-invite the soul right next to the grave.

On the other hand, the difference between ua neeb and hu plig is not always clear, since both deal with the souls of living people for the purpose of healing and often take place simultaneously. In general, ua neeb is understood as more of a broader process that often includes hu plig. Only shamans can perform ua neeb for healing and curing illness whereas hu plig can be conducted by ordinary people for celebratory occasions like the wedding and New Year. In other words, ua neeb is mainly performed when it is perceived that someone’s serious illness is caused by the ‘loss of the soul’ and therefore a treatment and cure by shaman is crucial.

According to the Hmong perception of illness, when someone becomes ill, that person’s soul is in trouble and has gotten lost. Their explanation is that such spiritual problems are the cause of physical symptoms and other illnesses and therefore, they need to communicate with the souls of both clients and their ancestors in order to find out the exact causes and status of the illness. A shaman’s services are requested by those who seek advice and guidance from the ancestors since shamans are believed as the medium between the souls of the ancestors and their living descendants through ua neeb. During ua neeb, the

shamans literally ask the clients' ancestors about the causes of the illness and their assistance to help to cure and resolve the ailment.

More specific and narrow meanings of shaman's ua neeb refer to actual ritual procedure which involve the shaman covering his face with a black, non-transparent veil while constantly rattling bells made of iron or bronze in each hand.⁵³ If the ua neeb ritual needs to be more elaborate and extensive, there should be an assistant next to the shaman who constantly hits the gong while the shaman speaks out during ua neeb. Such moments can be understood as 'practicing or conducting' ua neeb (the exact moment of communicating between the patient's soul and the ancestors' soul) and are characterized by the high tone of the shaman's voice and his incomprehensible chanting.

On the other hand, ua neeb also exclusively means the entire process of the spirit calling ritual, which has various complicated subsequent steps. For example, when people mention that there is ua neeb, it usually means there will be a large group gathering, animal sacrificing, and food sharing as well as preparation of various items before and after the specific ua neeb performance. To sum up, ua neeb refers to both the shaman and the whole process of shaman's spiritual healing ritual followed by group gatherings, as well as the very specific moments that the shaman actually speaks and calls to the soul.

In order to demonstrate the continuities and modifications of what are considered to be shamanistic traditions in transnational contexts, this chapter focuses on spiritual rituals in a broad sense, which includes ua neeb and other daily services of shamans such as consultations and smaller scale rituals that do not always entail extensive ua neeb preparations. When I specifically refer to ua neeb, it means the action and performance through which the shaman calls the soul. For other cases when I use the word shamanistic

⁵³ Jean Mottin (1984) provides the descriptions about each step of ua neeb in chronological sequence (105-107). For a detailed description of ua neeb and shamanic practices, see Tapp (1989b: 75-80) and for specific definitions of Hmong terminology, see Cha (2010: 131-164).

‘rituals’, it includes not only ua neeb but also other spirit-oriented practices⁵⁴ like nyuj dab [new da:] (calling the spirits of deceased parents and offering them a cow/buffalo on behalf of the eldest son, many years after their death). Because shamans have multiple roles in people’s ordinary lives as a consultant, religious guide, and medical healer who provides assistance for various individual concerns, such as emotional distress, anxiety, financial stability, children’s futures, and family relationships, it is therefore necessary to discuss the different types of services and rituals that have become highly transnational.

Who Becomes the Shaman?: The Birth of the Shaman

Although it is noted that some shamans can be taught and acquire knowledge to become a shaman through intensive education from other senior shamans (Mottin 1984: 103), it is generally understood that Hmong shamans are destined to be shamans by birth. Being born as a shaman means that the person’s soul is chosen and imbued with spirits by the ancestors.⁵⁵ Refusing this innate status seems extremely difficult and rather uncommon. This sense of a shaman’s destiny was evident in one of my interviewee in Laos, Lee Yang’s comments:

Anyone can oversee other kinds of customs like weddings and funerals if one is taught, but in terms of a shaman, you can’t learn to become one. If you can learn, then anyone could be a shaman. Shamans are born, because their soul was selected by ghosts [*pee*, spirit].

Whether a shaman’s power comes to you or not is totally uncontrollable [supernatural].

We can’t give up this ua neeb culture and we have continued it up until now.

When I was attending ua neeb ceremony at Ji’s house in Laos (mentioned at the beginning of the chapter), the mother of a young shaman said that a foreigner like me must be ‘unfamiliar and scared to meet a Hmong shaman’ conducting an ua neeb ritual and she recounted how her son became a shaman:

⁵⁴ For example, a ritual of simply ‘asking’ the ancestors’ souls with buffalo horns about the causes of illness (saib neeb saib yaig [sai neng sai yang]) is a spiritual practice and service.

⁵⁵ This is a summary of who becomes a shaman commonly and repeatedly given by Hmong in my study.

My son's birth was very special and absolutely extraordinary from the very beginning. He was born in 12 months, you know, much later than normal. When he was born, he was really small like a fist. Because of his unusual birth, he became a very capable and famous shaman for the effectiveness of ua neeb. My son became a shaman, not because he was bedeviled but because our ancestors' special soul treasured him so much and got into his soul when he was still in my womb. So there is no need for you to be afraid of him.

This narrative reemphasizes the innate status of a shaman, which also indicates that the birth of shaman is unavoidable and even blessed since the shaman's soul is particularly special and therefore 'selected' (often translated as 'possessed') by their ancestors. I came to wonder whether one cannot give up being a shaman after being chosen or what would happen if one refused the role. One of the interviewees in the United States, Neng Her said, 'Well, it may be avoidable in some cases. If you give up being a shaman, you just become really sick and your body will start shaking all the time, forever. But if you want to stop shaking and being ill, you have to become a shaman and just don't practice it. You just feed the spirit once a year, that's it.'

The fact that people become shamans by birth has important implications for the transnational cultural continuity of shamanistic traditions because it means that there is always a possibility that a new shaman will be born in any Hmong community dispersed across various countries in the diaspora. Thus, the presence of shamans and the tradition of ua neeb are not geographically restricted to one place like an ethnic group's homeland. Shamans can be born anywhere, regardless of gender, age, geographical locations, generations, and other personal determinants. They can perform with their healing power, even among the younger generations. In fact, there are new generations of shamans born in the United States who appear in their community magazines and local newspapers, portrayed

as the successor of their important ethnic tradition.⁵⁶

In terms of gender, there are both *txiv neeb* [tzi neng] (father [male] shamans) and *niam neeb* [nia neng] (mother [female] shamans⁵⁷) who can conduct *ua neeb* equally and provide consulting services. Also, there can be very young shamans in their early age who perform the same rituals and provide the same effective services. All of this nature of being a shaman therefore alleviates concerns that this traditional Hmong practice will eventually die out under the pressures of diasporic migration and modernity in different nation-states of resettlement.

In addition, because Hmong do not have a stable and definitive original ethnic homeland where they could locate their distant ancestors, the geographical positioning of shamans becomes relatively unimportant. There can be individual differences in terms of whose rituals have more powerful effects and good reputations, but there are no judgments and evaluations of their relative efficacy based on territorial location and whether the shaman lives in Laos or the United States. For these reasons, many senior Hmong shamans, who were born in Laos and are currently residing in the United States, are not concerned about the eventual discontinuation of *ua neeb* in the United States because that is not something that people can choose to inherit or discard.

The Elements of Shamans' Spiritual Rituals

Below are illustrations of general spiritual rituals and shamanistic practices locally conducted by shamans and shared by Hmong communities in both Laos and the United States. Each local Hmong community has preserved the common aspects of the ritual, including *ua neeb* and *hu plig* that entail the shaman's chanting and spirit calling as well as larger group gatherings and sharing food afterwards. This also means that Hmong in both communities arrange for animal sacrifices and provide necessary materials and food, such as

⁵⁶ For example, see a story of U.S. born female shaman featured in a local newspaper based in Minnesota: <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/news/2013/04/02/next-wave-hmong-shamans-sandyci-mouas-story>.

⁵⁷ During my fieldwork, I met two female shamans, although I have not seen them conducting *ua neeb*.

joss paper, candles, rice, and good portions of all kinds of meat. Therefore, in contrast to the Hmong New Year tradition and festival, which has been considerably altered in the United States (see Chapter 7), the contents and format of traditional shamanistic rituals remain substantially similar in both countries. Indeed, Hmong shamanism is an example of remarkable transnational cultural continuity as it has traveled across borders to different countries.

Cha Thao, a senior shaman in his sixties in Laos, explained to me how *ua neeb* generally works and is practiced by giving me a short example:

Let's say you fell in the water, like the river, and soon, you became seriously ill. One minute, you feel so warm and then another minute, you feel cold and shake your whole body. In this case, your shaman should do *ua neeb* in the river.⁵⁸ You kill two chickens: one for your forefather and the other for your foremother. Take them to the doorstep of your house, call the soul to come back, and feed the soul. Then you will get well.

In the local contexts, the shaman's *ua neeb* is territorialized and is conducted at the site of the event like the 'river' mentioned in the quote above. Assistance from others and conducting the ritual with a group are also very important parts of *ua neeb* process. The importance of collective participation in the ritual was explained in other interviews. For example, according to Melau Xiong in the United States, whose mother-in-law is an active shaman, the gathering of the community (clan) members, communal cooking and eating, and mutual assistance are all important aspects of *ua neeb*. Melau explained:

Hmong have a lot of gatherings, especially for *ua neeb*. If your kids get sick, they call the shaman to do *ua neeb* and have the family members come over. Everyone together wishes them to get well. There is a lot of cooking, too. When you cook, it's not just for your own family but also for the larger group. You need to set up long tables and serve a lot of food

⁵⁸ The original place where the soul was supposedly lost.

for the people who helped and participated.

Instead of giving more details of each stage of the shaman's ua neeb ritual and the specific terminology used, I simply point out that Hmong's understanding of the soul is the fundamental basis that enables the shaman's ua neeb to be conducted transnationally and remain effective across borders.

Mobile Souls in Borderless Worlds

When shamanistic spiritual rituals that were initially practiced in local communities become transnational and are practiced between Laos and the United States, it is important to understand that the Hmong concept of soul and its mobility is the traditional element that enables shamans to perform their rituals transnationally, making their power effective across national borders. Because the souls of both the living client and the dead ancestors can travel freely, ua neeb can be arranged and practiced transnationally without the clients' physical presence in a specific locale. In narratives about the soul's journey at funerals, the mobile soul has to travel continuously until it reaches its final destination, which is supposedly an unknown place where the ancestors reside.

However, even after the soul arrives at the right place and settles with the ancestors, the soul still has to travel frequently back to its descendants whenever they offer food to it as well as when the shaman calls through ua neeb. The spiritual rituals mentioned earlier, such as xi plig (retrieving souls of the dead at the grave) and nyuj dab (offering a cow/buffalo many years after the parents' death) are also good examples that cause the dead soul to travel and come back to join the feast. The mobile soul is deeply associated with the loss of the Hmong's ethnic homeland. Because there is no agreed to, final destination or territory for the deceased parents and ancestors, their souls have to continue to wander. This feature is well-narrated in funerals, where a special song is chanted along with the sounds of a bamboo pipe (*qeej*) in order to send the wandering soul back to be together with its ancestors.

During the funeral at the Hmong Palace Church⁵⁹ in Sacramento, Sheng Her, the clan representative in his late forties, explained the relations between mobile souls and the loss of the exact location of ethnic homeland. Because the ethnic homeland is unknown, the soul of the deceased cannot be sent to the exact origin place of Hmong. Sheng elaborated:

The soul first goes to the place you were born. When a baby is born, the family is supposed to bury the placenta under the bed on the ground. At my aunt's funeral like this, the chanting will send her soul back to the house [her birthplace] in Laos where her placenta was buried. We don't know where the real homeland is, so the soul cannot really be sent to the homeland. For a lot of us here, our placentas were buried in Laos. So our souls will first be sent to Laos.

Once the soul goes back to its birthplace and collects the placenta, the journey continues until it reaches to the next major stops like China. In different interviews, it was added that once the soul reaches China and tries to cross the border again to wherever the next destination is, it needs to be particularly careful, because there will be attacks by 'the old Chinese enemy'. In that case, the soul needs to pay the Chinese, symbolized by joss paper, so that it can be let go. As discussed in Chapter 1, Hmong's ethnic history in the supposedly lost ethnic homeland, China, is reasserted here, reflecting the conflicts and persecution they endured in ancient times. Indeed, according to this reasoning, the Hmong's coffin is decorated with joss paper, food (rice and rice wine), shoes, umbrellas, and extra clothes, all of which symbolize the necessary materials for survival during the unknown journey. Once the soul passes across the border of China, then it can continue its journey to wherever the ancestor's soul rests in peace.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ The Hmong Palace Church is the name of community hall rented by Sacramento Hmong community to proceed with funerals and it has no relation to the Christian churches.

⁶⁰ In Hmong terms, *lib ntuj* ([li nyu]) is translated and alternately used to refer to heaven and sky (see Cha 2010: 133). But this is different from the heaven of the God in Christianity, since *lib ntuj* is believed to be where the deceased ancestors reside.

In addition, the concept of soul for the Hmong is not confined to the deceased or dead person's soul but the soul of a living person can also be separated and detached from the body temporarily when the ua neeb ritual is performed. The moment of detachment of the soul from the body is when the shaman is communicating with and connecting to the soul of the ancestors, which is understood as 'being possessed by the spirits'. In any case, the shamans are possessed by spirits of both the client and the ancestors as the medium between the two worlds.

Because the shaman's power is manifested through completely mobile soul that can easily travel, clients do not have to live in the same country as the shaman and they do not necessarily need to be physically present in the same place at the same time. This is true even if the ancestors of Hmong in the United States died in Laos. In sum, localized Hmong shamanistic practices have become a transnational ritual practice that remains effective across geographical space because souls themselves live in a borderless world. In this sense, both the shaman's birth and the mobile nature of the soul are the basis for the transnational cultural continuity of spiritual rituals and religious and healing traditions across the Hmong diaspora.

'Tradition' in Transnational Contexts: Individualization and Commodification

The scholarship on transnational religion often points out that the role of religion in transnational social relationships and the continuity of ethnic culture has been understudied in general (Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002: 4-6; Levitt 2003: 849; Tapp 2013: 103). However, there has been a recent increase in studies of the role and impact of religion on transnational communities and scholars have examined how religion is involved in the experiences of immigrants, refugees, and diasporic peoples in the host country.

For example, in his study of the Haitian diaspora in the West Indies, Brodwin (2003: 93) demonstrates that Pentecostal worship is used as both a response to local marginalization, poverty, and discrimination and as a means to narrate people's shared

experiences of migration in the diasporic community. On the other hand, religion can be a source of conflict in transnational communities as analyzed in Bowen's (2004) work on Muslims in France, who face internal political conflict between the French state's domestication of religion in the name of a legitimate 'Islam of France' and the universality of Islam.

Some scholars have also noted that newly resettled immigrant communities in the host society experience dynamic changes in social relationships, especially in terms of traditional gender roles after their conversion to mainstream religions like Christianity (Ong 2003; Smith-Hefner 1994; Winland 1994). While these studies focus on the continuing relevance of religion brought from the homeland or newly introduced in the host country, they mainly refer to 'mainstream' religions such as Islam and Christianity. On the other hand, non-major religious belief systems like shamanism which have not been institutionalized and domesticated by the state and are not based on universalist discourses seem largely neglected, partly because they were often seen as more locally bounded, territorialized, and particularistic and thus even 'outdated' to some extent. As Jane Atkinson (1992: 307-308) discusses in her article, shamanism has been the target of criticism by some anthropologists as an 'outdated' topic in anthropology, although the exact reasons of this criticism are not clearly addressed.

However, shamanistic religious systems can also be mobile and transnationally effective in the everyday lives of many transnational ethnic communities in different countries, demonstrating their continued relevance in a modern, globalized world. Despite the challenges and difficulties that they encounter as they are transferred and implemented in different societies, such religious practices continue to persist and indeed thrive both locally and transnationally. Hmong people's religious belief in ancestor worship, represented by Hmong shamans and *ua neeb* is an appropriate example in this respect. In fact, the transnational practice and power of the Hmong shaman was illustrated by one of my

interviewees in Laos, Lee Yang:

A Hmong shaman's power is absolute. His healing power can be effective all over the world and across countries. In America, when people get really ill, they might go to the hospital, but they still do not get well since they do not know the exact cause or reason for the illness. So they ask around their relatives in order to find an effective and well-known shaman who lives here in Laos. They will contact and talk to the shaman on the phone and send information about the symptoms of the patient. After hearing about the problems, the shaman in Laos will try to figure out what happened to the patient's soul: whether the soul had a bad dream, got into an accident, or fell into the water. He will need some time to process the proper healing rituals. It can take three days, seven days, one month, or even up to three months. The shaman's treatment is not over at this point. After the patient gets well, the family will contact the shaman again and send the updates about the recovery of the patient. Then, the shaman in Laos performs the ritual again to thank the patient's ancestor soul, who guided his *ua neeb* and cured the patient. The power of shaman still works just like before [even when it is enacted in transnational contexts].

While the cultural continuity of shamanism still persists transnationally across national borders, when shamans perform *ua neeb* and provide services to the diasporic community in the transnational context, a number of changes emerge because of geographic separation. First, U.S. Hmong tend to contact shamans in Laos to conduct *ua neeb* rituals and other spiritual services for them (more than Lao Hmong clients contact U.S. Hmong shamans). Because the client's family and the shaman do not live in physical proximity, a large group gathering of extended members of clan in Laos cannot be convened since the family is not present. As a result, the shaman's *ua neeb* is individualized as it is usually performed by the shaman alone without the family (client), who is subject to the ritual, or a group of participants who assist with the ritual. This also means that animal sacrificing, cooking, and sharing of food are left out.

Individualization

For such transnational shamanism, the Hmong family in the United States would call the shaman residing in Laos and discuss their concerns and problems first. The shaman will practice informally his spiritual rituals, such as ‘asking’ and communicating with the ancestors’ souls in order to decide whether it is necessary to conduct more extensive *ua neeb* for the family. The shaman will do a brief check by throwing buffalo horns⁶¹ to examine the problems and foresee whether an actual *ua neeb* ritual is necessary. At this stage, transnational interactions and communications between the shaman in Laos and the family in the United States occur exclusively on the phone during the consultation. It is possible that shaman can already tell the causes of problem and provide instruction about how to deal with it without performing *ua neeb*. But if the shaman makes the decision to conduct an actual *ua neeb* ritual, he or she will further speak with the family in the United States and inform them about the necessary steps and further plans.

The shaman and the family will communicate further with each other in order to decide on the right dates for the ritual and share the contents and plans for it. The choice of date of *ua neeb* can be influenced by whether the family in the United States will actually take a trip to Laos and be present during the ritual or whether they will use the services of a different shaman in the United States to practice locally.

However, since Hmong believe that the physical presence of the client at the time of the ritual does not impact its effectiveness or ability to resolve the problem, in many cases, when travel back to Laos is not feasible or possible, the shaman conducts the ritual by himself in Laos without the presence of the family. In this case, both the family in the United States and the shaman in Laos have flexibility to schedule and plan the actual date of event. Depending on the shaman, some objects that symbolize the client’s body and substitute for

⁶¹ During normal occasions, the horns are not necessarily used for fortune telling. They are used to fix specific dates, confirm special events, or take care of life expectancy, diseases, and health problems.

his/her physical absence can be requested. For example, one of my interviewees in the United States mentioned that when his mother was treated for her illness and receiving *ua neeb* from a shaman in Laos, the shaman asked her to send him her T-shirts that would represent her body.

In fact, I also frequently observed such informal and individualized spiritual rituals on my way to people's houses during my fieldwork in different Hmong villages in Laos. They took place on the side of the road, in a corner of a house, under the trees, or in the middle of the hill, where individual shamans proceeded with their rituals for families and relatives residing in the United States.

One February day in Laos, one of the oldest shamans in the village just completed a ritual under the tree in the middle of the village road for his six-year old granddaughter living in the United States, who fell on the floor and was injured. He performed the healing ritual by himself alone for the granddaughter, whom he had never met but had only seen in photos. After he completed his chanting, he spread rice wine around the corner of the tree and distributed cooked rice, pieces of boiled chicken, and two cooked eggs.

When I learned that he was actually doing a spiritual ceremony for thanking the ancestors after his granddaughter's recovery from her injury, I had a chance to ask him further about his transnationalized ritual and service. I asked whether his shamanistic performance in Laos would be able to bridge souls between the United States, where his granddaughter lives and the spirit world where the ancestors reside, even from a geographical distance. He responded right away, 'Of course, my *ua neeb* worked very well. Living in a separated land [distance and geographic separation] does not matter at all! It's the same thing.'

In another example, Pia Lee, a shaman in his sixties, was busy holding an individual ceremony by himself at one corner of his house right before the New Year in Laos in order to check the necessity of conducting an *ua neeb* ritual to treat the illness in his distant

cousin's family in California, the United States. With two small buffalo horns, he was constantly chanting while occasionally flipping the horns on the ground in different directions.

In fact, he has been frequently doing individualized and informal ua neeb for his relatives in the United States. Earlier that year, he already did ua neeb several times in order to cure the sickness among his cousin's sister's relatives in different cities in the United States. Such rituals were based on transnational communications and arranged between the families in Laos and the United States through international phone calls. The landline phone at Pia's house was bought for this particular purpose by his U.S. cousin when she visited in 2004. Since then, Pia was able to communicate with his cousin and other relatives in the United States and has continued his ua neeb for those families.

In the process of ua neeb, Pia conducted the ritual by himself inside his house without a witness. Depending on the seriousness of the request and concerns, Pia could have done a more extensive ua neeb at his house which would include sacrificing an animal, but he noted that it did not happen yet. 'About ten days after performing ua neeb, I usually received good news from the family on the phone that their situation and problems were resolved.', Pia remarked. Because his successful ua neeb services could be provided transnationally, Hmong in the United States continued to contact and ask him to conduct ua neeb rituals for various issues, especially when family members who were seriously ill did not recover even with Western medicine or surgery. As a reward, those families sent Pia about US\$ 250-300 in return.

Benefits of Transnationalized Practices

Although the content of the transnational shamanistic rituals conducted for U.S. Hmong does not include any extensive community activities, the transnationalized version is not really conditioned or confined by the geographical and physical proximity of the client but has become deterritorialized. As a result, it has become transformed from a socially rich,

collective event to an individual's performance by the shaman without the participation of the family and clan members as witnesses and helpers. Indeed, the healing power of the shaman is believed to supersede the limits of both time and space in terms of its permanence and transnational effectiveness, demonstrating the flexible and contextually adaptive nature of what are perceived to be 'traditional' cultural practices. Therefore, the rituals of shamanism, regardless of geographical location, are an important source of cultural continuity in the Hmong diaspora that has been effectively transferred from Laos to the United States.

For Hmong in the United States, transnationally arranged *ua neeb* can be an attractive option and a way for them to continue their Hmong cultural practices because it is believed that the shaman's power remains equally effective, regardless of where it is exercised. This also obviates the need to hold an extensive event for the entire clan in the United States that demands a significant amount of money, time, and labor. This individualized and deterritorialized nature of shamanism indicates that the Hmong family in the United States cannot witness the *ua neeb* performed in Laos and no evidence through photos or video recordings are provided by the shaman or requested by the U.S. family. This is why many U.S. families rely on shamans back in Laos, who are relatives or family members they can trust. More importantly, the best evidence of the effectiveness of the shaman's transnational power is when the patient recovers from the illness.

This does not mean that *ua neeb* will be practiced only in Laos and its use will decrease in the United States. As mentioned earlier, shamans who can conduct *ua neeb* also exist in the United States and continue to provide their healing and religious services locally for U.S. Hmong communities. In addition to senior shamans who have migrated, those who are born as shamans will also be present in the diaspora, allowing diasporic Hmong to enlist the services of local shamans. In fact, this is another important reason why Hmong

shamanism has persisted transnationally, providing continuity in cultural practices in the local context across the diaspora.

During my fieldwork, the majority of U.S. Hmong actually suggested that performing *ua neeb* transnationally is based on one's choice. In other words, whether they choose a shaman living in their own community or one in another country is up to the individual and their families. Regardless of where the shaman lives, as long as the person is reliable and experienced, the family will contact them locally or transnationally. There are other possible factors that may influence such decisions, such as the cost of the ritual and the time that is saved when it is performed transnationally from Laos.

However, it should be noted that such shamanistic rituals cannot always be freely transnationalized and deterritorialized. If it is clear that the patient's family must host a more complicated ritual to cure a serious illness and that a larger group gathering and animal sacrifice would be necessary, then the ritual must be performed in the local community in a territorialized and collective manner.

Re-Localization of Transnational 'Tradition'

Although the processes of consultation and preparation can be arranged and organized on the phone across borders, it is possible that the patient and the family can actually travel to Laos for the day of *ua neeb*. This is the other way in which shamanism is transnationalized in the diaspora through actual travel of families across national borders back to the natal homeland. Apparently, if the patient is actually at the site in Laos, *ua neeb* and other spiritual rituals can be less individualistic because a larger group gathering and the sharing of food become possible, resembling how it is conducted in the local community.

In fact, it was not uncommon to observe Hmong from the United States visiting their relatives and families in Laos in order to actually participate in *ua neeb* as well as other spiritual rituals, especially *nyuj dab*. When the first son of a family gets seriously ill, injured, or has a dire accident, the shaman examines the causes and methods to cure such conditions.

If it is discovered that the deceased parents who passed away many years ago want a cow or buffalo (the symbol of wealth, strength, and value), then nyuj dab should be performed by sacrificing the cow/buffalo and offer the proper food.

For example, Kong Lee in the United States and his cousin Chong Lee in Laos arranged an extensive nyuj dab ritual months before Kong took a trip to Laos with his wife. Over a month, they talked on the phone frequently in order to discuss overall preparations and make sure everything would be ready by the time Kong and his wife arrived (including the communal gathering and sharing of food). Chong Lee's family in Laos bought and killed a cow for US\$500 and prepared all the materials including rice, cow, chickens, joss paper, and drinks in addition to contacting the clan members in local villages to gather for the occasion.

The cost for the entire ritual was fully paid by Kong before he arrived in Laos as he transferred the money from the United States, which he estimated to be a few thousand dollars for both nyuj dab and the group gathering. In this case, the shamanistic ritual was initially arranged transnationally across national borders, but the actual nyuj dab was localized again in Laos through Kong's transnational mobility and physical presence at the ritual, and all the subsequent traditional ceremonial procedures were followed. To put it differently, initially transnationalized cultural practices, such as ancestral worship, commemoration, and other related rituals were eventually practiced locally again.

Although there are other Hmong people in the United States like Kong Lee who visit their families in Laos with the purpose of participating in extensive rituals, not all individuals can actually travel to Laos. The cost of travel and funds for the ritual are expensive and it is also difficult to schedule a mutually convenient and exact time for the event. In this case, the shamanistic rituals are limited to the shaman's individual and localized performances in Laos and their power is projected transnationally to the United States through the spirit medium.

Commodification

When shamanistic rituals are performed transnationally across national borders, it is not only individualized, but also increasingly commodified. When shamans in Laos practice for the local community, they ask that the family prepare certain items and buy animals for sacrifice, but they usually do not request cash payment for their services. After the ritual is over, the family is certainly obligated to give the shaman something in return, such as the head of the pig (which is believed to be the symbol of shaman's worship) and/or the best part of the cow meat sacrificed during the ua neeb ritual. Giving choice cuts of meat by a male representative (the head of household) is not merely a part of the ritual, but conveys the message that the shaman's hard work is highly valued and heartfelt by the whole family. In this manner, the ritual becomes an act of reciprocal social exchange or gift-giving for services rendered.

In contrast, when shamanism is practiced transnationally in the diaspora, it is not possible for the U.S. family to arrange for an animal sacrifice or communal feast in Laos in their absence or send meat from the United States to the shaman in Laos. Because they cannot express their gratitude to the shaman through fresh meat as a form of reciprocal social exchange, they instead commodify the shaman's services by sending money. Interestingly, some Hmong in the United States mentioned that they are ambivalent about Hmong shamans in Laos receiving cash payment for performing ua neeb transnationally while also noting the cases of shamans in the United States being paid for their local services. For example, one of my U.S. Hmong interviewees, Xiong Lor felt that Hmong shamans in Laos must practice 'pure and genuine' ua neeb and 'that is why some Hmong in the United States seek out shamans in Laos.' In principle, in both Laos and the United States, shamans' services are understood to be a socially beneficial and benevolent service and not a type of work for economic profit.

It might still be debatable whether the transfer of money from the United States to the

shaman in Laos should be seen as ‘payment’ defined in economic terms or a material expression of gratitude toward the shaman. Nonetheless, it is clear that when shamanism is transnationally practiced in diasporic contexts across national borders, the geographical separation between shaman and client causes the relationship to become inevitably commodified.

Instead of being a symbolic act of social reciprocity of benevolence with gratitude, the ua neeb ritual becomes an economic transaction where the client pays the shaman for his/her ‘work’. This undoubtedly simplifies the overall process of ua neeb for Hmong in the United States and makes it much more convenient, since they do not have to spend the time and effort to arrange a sacrifice and feast in their own local community (or travel there). Instead, they can transfer money to the shaman in a manner which resembles economic remittances sent between families in the two countries.

Ironically, it is also quite clear that this transformation/commodification of shamanism is what makes its transnational practice possible and promoted as a new but equally important form of cultural continuity in the diaspora. If Hmong in the United States are not allowed to replace the meat-giving practice with cash payment to shamans in Laos for their services, it would become much more difficult for them to enlist the shaman’s services across national borders, possibility leading to its decline or inactivity in the diaspora.

In fact, my interviewees in Laos confirmed that cash payments for shamans have also become more common in that country. They observed how Hmong shamans in Laos have become used to being paid by U.S. Hmong for their services (or have heard of shamans in the United States being paid) and have begun to charge even local families in Laos a fee as well. Therefore, it is important to realize that the transnationalization of shamanism in the diaspora works both ways. Not only do shamans in Laos influence U.S. Hmong across borders, U.S. Hmong have also changed shamanistic practices in Laos. As a result, the

commodification of shamanism has itself become transnationalized and spread through the diaspora from the United States to Laos.

The transnational continuity of shamanism in the Hmong diaspora is certainly a product of its adaptability to various different national contexts. Not only are souls themselves mobile and readily travel across national borders, shamanism has proven to be a quite flexible ‘tradition’, allowing it to become individualized and commodified in order to adapt to the exigencies of transnational, diasporic life. This is also shown by the ability of shamanism to co-exist with other contrasting forces of modernity, such as Western biomedicine and Christianity and its flexibility and inclusion of racial and ethnic others (non-Hmong) in each country. This is another important reason for its cultural continuity and transferability across national borders in the Hmong diaspora.

Mutual Co-Existence: Shamanism and Biomedical Power in the Hmong Diaspora

In general, shamans in both Laos and the United States commonly face increasing difficulties in maintaining their ancient healing practices because of the encroachment of Western biomedical systems. Although biomedicine is much more predominant in the United States, medical doctors and modern hospitals in Laos are also drastically increasing and highly valued and desired among the Hmong. As a result, the presence of certified and professional medical practitioners in both countries has created some controversy about ‘traditional’ ways of healing both within and outside Hmong communities.

A Hmong pharmacist in Sacramento, for example, who identified himself as a believer of Hmong shamanism despite his medical training, pointed out that shamans’ roles as medical service providers are not valued compared to the Western medical perspectives. According to him, this is because beliefs about ancestor spirits lack ‘research and development of scientific, accurate knowledge’. One Hmong author argues that the extensive labor and effort required for Hmong ua neeb rituals and practices discourage some Hmong groups from maintaining their healing practices. This is believed true for relatively small

clans that do not have much labor power to conduct ua neeb extensively (Cha 2010: 131-132).

In Laos, Hmong's healing practices can also be regarded as under the pressures of modernity, especially since the country has been investing in the development of a Western biomedical system. For example, the Lao government is financially supporting the overseas training of its medical students' and inviting foreign countries to develop modern medical systems in Laos. A young shaman his early thirties in Laos, Poa Moua, shared with me his struggles and dilemmas as a shaman in current Laotian society. He noted that the shaman's authority can possibly be looked down upon, because their status is not approved or recognized by official and authoritative institutions like the government or other national organizations. Poa said:

I am a herbal medical doctor. But because I am not a real medical doctor, my life is not always easy. For medical doctors, patients always visit hospitals to see them. But for a shaman, I have to be the one that goes to visit each individual patient to practice rituals inside their homes. Medical doctors tend to get more credit when they treat patients because of their formal education and official degree in medicine.

However, my actual discussions with Hmong shamans in Laos and the United States indicate that they do not perceive Western biomedicine as a threat to what they believe to be their 'traditional' practices and way of life in simple binary terms. Although there may be disadvantages to being a shaman in a society that is increasingly prioritizing biomedicine, this does not mean that the Hmong shaman's healing power has been jeopardized and their practices are considered 'outdated' by Hmong. Instead, some Hmong medical doctors themselves actually understand the complexities of both 'traditional' healing and the professional and 'modern' medical systems and regard both systems as complementary and co-existing. In this sense, although tradition is often understood to be inherited from the

distant past, it is not incompatible with modernity.

In Laos, one day I was attending a family's nyuj dab ceremony for their parents, who passed away a long time ago in a different Hmong village. A young man was proudly introduced to me by the elders at the site as a promising medical doctor working at the hospital in town. Trained at a major hospital in Vientiane for seven years, the young Hmong doctor asked my opinion about the increasing criticism that Hmong healing rituals are receiving. He shared his thoughts on this issue as follows:

If someone is hurt or gets injured, Hmong will want to be healed by ua neeb rituals according to our customs rather than Western medical treatment. It is because Hmong value the ancestral power very much and highly respects the spirit, as well as having deeper faith in their tradition. But doctors and new religions like Christianity dislike and criticize our tradition, because they believe that when someone gets sick or hurt, chanting and superstitious rituals cannot heal them. In my opinion, conducting rituals is purely based in an individual's faith, respect, and is a voluntary action. So I believe the action itself should not be the target of criticism.

Although the young doctor did not explicitly identify his position, I realized that he had been concerned about this for a long time, despite being a doctor trained according to the Western medical system. He was clearly aware of the differences between what he perceived to be Hmong cultural healing traditions and beliefs and his medical education and training, but did not identify a clear struggle between the two or argue that the latter should replace the former.

This perspective of Hmong in Laos resonates with the personal opinions of many Hmong in the United States despite living in the quintessential 'modern' society. Almost all elderly Hmong in the United States felt that their cultural 'traditions' like ua neeb are not really in conflict or incompatible with modern American society. In Sacramento, I visited a senior shaman, Moua Xiong in his seventies, who had served for 45 years for in both the

Hmong community in Laos and the United States. During the interview, we talked about the elderly people's reluctance to go to hospitals and receive medical treatment, especially in the United States but in Laos as well.

Moua Xiong: Well, they are afraid that the staff at the hospital will tell them what to do. "You must do this and that. You should take this medicine or that. You will live or die." But we are not sure whether that treatment will really cure us or whether the symptoms will remain. But if you practice ua neeb, you will be told, "Oh, now you are fine. You will not die. Everything will be alright." So people will be relieved.

Author: What do you think about the American medical system personally? Do you also go to the hospital?

Moua Xiong: Yeah, for me, it is completely fine to go to the hospitals. Actually, my [US-born] youngest daughter is a nurse working at the hospital. In the past, she would not want to listen to me at all. She said, "Your way is old and incorrect." But right now, she says its "50 and 50." She means that American doctors cannot be right 100 percent of the time, just as ua neeb can't be 100 percent right. You see? The value of ua neeb increased up to fifty percent for her [laugh]. She changed her mind and understands better now. If a person is almost dying, the family will bring the sick person to practice ua neeb. There are cases that those people actually became able to keep living like normal. But if ua neeb fails, the person will die too. Other people who couldn't be cured by ua neeb might go to the hospitals and can get better. Do you understand what I mean? It is different depending on individuals.

Although Hmong shamans are well aware that the social pressure and influence of biomedical power are unavoidable, they do not perceive their apparent traditions to be in fundamental antagonism with modern medicine. In contrast to depictions of Hmong shamanism in the United States as completely incompatible with and opposed to mainstream

American medical culture (see Fadiman 1997), Hmong themselves do not resist or reject Western biomedical care but adopt a much more accommodating position.

Indeed, Hmong's understandings of this complex reality and their flexibility to engage both systems of healing is one important factor that can problematize discourses of 'tradition', which often situate it in opposition to modernity. Such perspectives should be constantly reconsidered in critically understanding the inherently flexible role of specific 'traditional' practices, along with other critiques about misrepresentation and racialization of the culture of 'differences' (Chiu 2004-5: 8; Taylor 2003). In turn, the flexibility indicates that specific cultural and healing systems like Hmong shamanism can continue to persist and indeed thrive in the Hmong diaspora, even as their transnational community is increasingly subject to the pressures of modernity in various countries.

The Inclusive Nature of 'Tradition': Embracing the Racial and Cultural 'Other'

In addition to the ability of Hmong tradition like shamanism to function in the increasingly modernized contexts of the Hmong diaspora, Hmong shamanism is inherently inclusive and can be adapted to multiethnic and racially diverse societies as well. Not only is the shaman's power effective across national borders within the Hmong diaspora, it also works for non-Hmong people as well. In other words, it operates across both territorial and ethnic boundaries. Therefore, while serving as a source of cultural continuity for the transnational Hmong ethnic community, shamanism can also be incorporated for ethnic others in the various countries in which Hmong reside.

There have been occasions when shamans frequently provide services to non-Hmong individuals in both Laos and the United States. Despite the particularism often attributed to local and indigenous religious practices, they can be based on discourse of universality akin to the world's great religions. Although the ethnic universalism of Hmong shamanism was not exclusively discussed during my interviews, it was demonstrated that the shamans' healing power can be used to heal and cure racially and cultural different, non-Hmong

individuals. The following story was told by one of the elderly shamans in Laos about an American doctor treated by a Hmong shaman in the United States:

Once there was a white American doctor in the U.S., who got into a car accident. After being treated and released from the hospital, he got seriously ill again. He went back to the hospital, took medicine, and did everything possible, but he still did not recover. The doctor thought to himself, 'I am a medical doctor, but how come I can't take care of myself?', and he became sad. One day, the doctor remembered his Hmong friend and went to consult him. He told the friend, "I am still young. I don't want to die yet. But I am so sick, from sunrise to sunset." After listening to him, the Hmong friend said, "You should go to see our shaman. Perhaps our culture can do something for you." His Hmong friend took the doctor to a Hmong shaman. After some tests, the shaman said, "Your soul is troubled and very sick. It fell down from the airplane! Now you have to do ua neeb so that your soul can come back. Then, you will get better. I can help you." The shaman cured the doctor's soul and he recovered after ua neeb. Now the doctor respects the shaman like his parent, because it was like, he was once nearly dead but regained his life with the shaman's help. If his dead parents' soul didn't help him, he would have died.

Although it is not clear to what extent the story of the American doctor offers credibility since it is being told indirectly, this is an important example of how the shaman's power is universal regardless of ethnicity and does not discriminate on the basis of racial or cultural difference. Similarly in Laos, I was also told stories about the friendship between Hmong shamans and two elderly men from the majority Lao Loum ethnic group who were living in the same village. They became 'friends' after undergoing ua neeb for their illness and distress in the past.

In everyday life, I often ran into those Lao men, sitting in front of the house with the oldest and well-known Hmong shaman. Greeting and asking them what they were doing, they laughed and told me, 'Nothing, just killing time with friends [laugh].' One of the Lao

men particularly helped the Hmong shaman's family to purchase a second-hand truck from a company in the capital city using his knowledge, personal network, and business skills as the former taxi (*tuk tuk*) driver in town.

While there have always been interactions between majority Lao and Hmong despite their geographically segregated residential communities, the development of such relationships through *ua neeb* is considered special and remarkable for various reasons. As Buddhists, ethnic Lao Loum of course do not seek Hmong shamans and their treatment or visit Hmong families just to spend leisure time together. My observations over a number of years indicate that the social interactions between Hmong and Lao are often limited to official occasions (when there are meetings between government officials and villagers) and issues pertaining to illegal drug (opium) dealing among some individuals. In addition, one cannot ignore subtle tensions that still exist among these two ethnic groups because of the long history of ethnic stereotyping as well as the legacy of the Vietnam War. Therefore, it is remarkable that Hmong shamanism can overcome such ethnic/racial and cultural differences.

Continuity of 'Tradition' in Transnational Context

Hmong's various spiritual shamanistic practices have been maintained locally but have also served as a continuing transnational cultural 'tradition' in the diaspora. Hmong shamanism is 'traditionally' transnational because of the inherently flexible and mobile (borderless) soul and the birth of shamans regardless of geographic location. What makes a cultural practice 'traditional' is not its unchanging nature, but its ability to adapt in face of transnational modernity. These fundamental elements enable the shaman to project power across national borders by connecting spiritual worlds.

On the other hand, when shamanistic practices are transnationalized, the shaman/client relationship also becomes individualized and commodified across national borders in contrast to its practice in the local contexts as a collective, community event based

on social exchange. Therefore, diasporic people's cultural traditions can be maintained both locally and transnationally because of innate flexibility and broad applicability while being constantly transformed and modified in transnational contexts.

Part III
Cultural Difference and Discursive Fragmentation
in the Hmong Diaspora

Chapter 7. Cultural Differentiation in the Diaspora: National Differences in the Hmong

New Year

The Two New Year Scenes

New Year's Day in Dao Tha, Vang Vieng, Laos

On the 25th of December 2011 (Christmas Day), the Hmong New Year's celebration started in Dao Tha. Nonetheless, the village was strangely quiet as I passed by the houses. In fact, if I had not run into a group of little girls in their colorful New Year Hmong dresses, I would have no idea that the New Year celebration had started. After taking several photos for the children and following them to a small open area between the houses in the middle of the hill, I finally found a small group of teenagers in the corner of the village who had lined up in two rows facing each other.

Each youth standing in one line was tossing a tennis ball (*pov pob* [bbo bbo:]) to a counterpart standing in the other line. Three girls in the group, dressed up with a pretty hat and Hmong traditional outfits, found me standing there and asked me to join the ball tossing. I did not recognize any of the boys, who were not dressed in traditional clothes, but simply wore jeans and black jumpers. They were from the other villages and came to Dao Tha to meet the girls. In addition to the group of youth tossing balls, little kids were running around and some of their grandparents were watching them.

There were almost no older young adults in the ball tossing area, especially those in their early twenties since they went to work in the town as usual. In fact, only the little girls who wore the newly-bought Hmong dresses seemed enthusiastic about the New Year celebration. Except for these girls and the small group of ball-tossing youth, the village did not look that different from an ordinary weekday. As many people noted to me, this year, the local Lao government had just stipulated that the Hmong New Year celebration should only last for three days, including the weekend. Indeed, that new policy seemed quite successful. During the three-day celebration, there were far fewer festivities compared to previous years,

when the village was filled with people of all ages wearing colorful New Year dresses who engaged in various outdoor activities and celebrations for the entire week.

New Year's Day in Sacramento, California, United States

On the 22nd of November 2012, I arrived at the Cal Expo fairground with a Hmong couple on the first day of the four-day Hmong New Year festival in Sacramento.⁶² It was still early in the morning and during the weekday (Thursday), but the huge car park was already almost full and we had to circle around the area several times in order to find a spot. Walking toward the entrance area, from a distance, there were several long lines of visitors waiting to enter the site and paying admission fees. Many adults, youth, and kids dressed up in their traditional New Year outfits and were talking to each other as well as taking photos, demonstrating the serious and elaborate nature of the celebrations. The New Year's festivities seemed to have already started even outside the 'official' site.

After a long wait passing through the security checkpoint, I saw rows of countless individual vendor stalls and booths, each with different signs and banners welcoming the visitors on the first day of the New Year celebration. A couple of vendors in the fruits and vegetable aisle told me that they arrived at the Cal Expo at four o'clock that morning so that they could be ready by seven. I decided to walk around the entire New Year venue first in order to get a general sense of the scale of the festival and the activities before talking to individual vendors. I was initially bewildered by the large number of vendors and crowds of people, as well as the various activities, which included fashion shows, music and dancing, and contests. Meanwhile, the group of my female friends asked me to join them to examine the clothing vendors to check out the new fashions for Hmong female dresses. Then they added with a laugh: 'You will become exhausted because even a full day will not be enough to see everything!'

⁶² Sacramento is one of many venues for the Hmong New Year. A list of a number of New Year times and venues in California for 2012-2013: Oroville: 6th-7th October, Stockton: 10th-11th November, Chico: 8th December; Sacramento: 22nd-25th November, Marysville/Yuba City: 3rd-4th November, Merced: 20th-23rd December, San Diego: 22nd-24th December, Fresno: 26th December 2012-1st January 2013.

Cultural Differences among Diasporic Communities in Transnational Context

The two above scenes illustrate the palpable differences in the Hmong New Year practices and festivities in the two different countries of Laos and the United States. Of course, these two countries in which the Hmong diaspora is situated have contrasting political and economic systems as well as completely different social environments. On the surface, such national differences are certainly the product of varying levels of economic development, since the advanced capitalist economy and material resources of the United States may enable more ornate and elaborate celebrations of ethnic traditions to some extent. However, another fundamental cause of the dramatic differences in the way New Year festivals are celebrated at the local community level is based on different national discourses of ‘equality’.

In Laos, Hmong New Year celebration has been reduced because of newly introduced rules by local government, requiring Hmong to confine their public celebrations to under three days (including the weekend). The state control of the Hmong New Year is justified by discourses of *economic* equality for all based on the equal right to receive formal education and engage in national economic development. In contrast, Hmong in the United States have organized more extensive and highly-commercialized New Year festivals across the country. Ethnic festivals like the Hmong New Year are consistent with the celebratory American ideology of multiculturalism, which emphasizes the equal *cultural* right of ethnic minorities to maintain their cultural practices and ethnic tradition. Hmong in the United States are free to organize an elaborate and long New Year festival with various cultural performances and shows and promote their ethnic businesses.

As a result, because of the different economic and ideological conditions in the countries in which they live, Hmong communities in Laos and the United States have come to practice their ethnic traditions in quite different ways. Such cultural differentiation in the diaspora often leads to discourses of where authentic traditions are understood to reside.

However, because diasporic Hmong have lost their connections to their ethnic homeland and acknowledge that their New Year festival has dramatically changed in varying national contexts, neither Hmong in Laos or the United States claim to have more ‘authentic and proper’ New Year celebrations. This also creates self-critical discourses about the ‘inauthentic’ way tradition is practiced in each respective community and causes them to imagine and idealize other places (namely older homelands) as the location of ‘authentic’ traditions.

Hmong in Laos recognize that their New Year has become culturally impoverished whereas their counterparts in the United States realize their version is excessively commodified. This in turn causes them to imagine that an idealized and authentic cultural tradition resides in the past or elsewhere. By comparing the Hmong New Year in Laos and the United States, this chapter will examine how national economic and sociopolitical differences in the two countries generate differences in the same cultural tradition among Hmong diasporic communities as well as produce discourses of inauthenticity.

The Components of the Hmong New Year

Similar to the uncertainty about the Hmong’s ethnic origins, the exact history of the Hmong New Year is also unknown. However, it is considered to be one of the oldest cultural traditions maintained in the Hmong diaspora. In general, Hmong’s New Year can be distinguished from other well-known New Year traditions that were recognized and celebrated locally by other ethnic groups, such as the Lao New Year (*Boun Pimai* in April, based on lunar calendar system), the East Asian Lunar New Year (dates change each year depending on the lunar calendar system), and the Western New Year (January 1st).

The main purpose of the Hmong New Year is to express gratitude to the ancestors for a successful harvest, send away bad luck from the previous year, and wish for good fortune, health, and wealth for the family in the upcoming New Year. The Hmong New Year is based on the lunar calendar system and usually falls around the end of November or December

after the harvest season. Because of the tradition of thanking the ancestors for a fruitful harvest of rice, which is an important and basic economic activity during the entire year, it can sometimes be compared with American Thanksgivings, which coincides with the Hmong New Year celebration period in Sacramento (the fourth weekend of November).

There are some fundamental and basic practices associated with the New Year celebration which have been retained by Hmong in both Laos and the United States. The ‘core’ of the New Year tradition consists of *hu plig* ([hou plee]) and *noj peb caug* ([noh pe jau], translated as ‘Eat 30’), which refers to spirit calling rituals followed by the sharing of the New Year’s Eve dinner with a large group of clan members at individual households. As shown in the shamanistic rituals (*ua neeb*) in Chapter 6, the New Year also involves ancestor worship and indicates how the lives of Hmong are inseparable from their ancestral spirits. In this context, the ritual of *hu plig* and *noj peb caug* require extensive preparation at home as the most essential and important component of the New Year celebration. Similar to *ua neeb*, *hu plig* is a ritual for calling the dispersed and mobile ancestral souls to visit their living descendants and join their New Year’s Eat 30 feast.

During the morning of New Year’s Eve, the preparation starts with a father or grandfather (as the head of household) chanting as he sweeps every corner of the inside of the house using handmade brooms made of bamboo sticks and tree leaves. This symbolizes a sweeping-away of bad luck, misfortune, and any regrets that the family experienced during the past year. After the sweeping and chanting is complete, the household head sits on the ground and throws the split buffalo horns numerous times onto the floor while continuing to chant in order to foresee and wish for good luck in the coming year.

The family also renews the altar in the middle of the living room by replacing incense sticks and joss paper (which represents money). In front of this altar, cooked

chickens (one must be a rooster) are offered as well as boiled eggs,⁶³ which symbolize the wealth, prosperity, and love of the entire family. In the same evening, *noj peb caug* (Eat 30, the New Year's Eve dinner) should be conducted at each individual house by offering more cooked chickens with freshly cooked rice to the guests, who are mostly from the clan members.

In short, the common structure of the Hmong New Year in both Laos and the United States has three basic components. Based on the individual household, the *hu plig* (soul calling) ritual is performed in preparation of the New Year celebration. This is followed by *noj peb caug*, which is a dinner-gathering of clan members and then, during the New Year's day, public celebrations are held with a few day-long entertainment activities, such as *pob pov* (ball tossing with pairs of men and women) within the community. Among these three components that constitute the entire Hmong New Year celebration, Hmong in both Laos and the United States believe that *hu plig* and *noj peb caug* have changed the least and have been maintained by both communities with little variation. Indeed, these private, small-scale celebrations at home are considered to be a continuing and essential foundation for the New Year tradition regardless of which country Hmong reside in the diaspora.

Over time, there have been a few minor changes to these fundamental elements of the Hmong New Year depending on different national contexts. For example, during the *noj peb caug* dinner on New Year's Eve, the gathering and sharing of large meals in each household were usually done in one night in Laos, because each family from the same clan takes turns visiting surrounding clan households in the same village. Family visitors are repeatedly served cooked chickens and rice along with alcoholic drinks.

In the United States, however, because families live in different parts of the city, the only time they have for visiting clan members for dinner is on weekends. Therefore, *noj peb caug* had to be scheduled on different weekend dates before the actual start of the New Year

⁶³ The numbers of eggs are said to be the same number of people in the family, normally with an extra one that symbolizes the wealth and well-being of the family.

festivals in Sacramento. As a result, all four weekends in the month of November ended up being fully reserved for visiting different families for the Eat 30 dinner.

National Economic Differences in Diasporic Ethnic Traditions

In contrast to the private aspects of the New Year celebration, which has generally remained similar in the two countries except for such practical modifications, significant national differences have emerged for more public New Year ceremonies and events in the Hmong diaspora. In fact, while reviewing my fieldwork materials, I am struck by how little materials I have about public New Year celebrations in Laos in contrast to the abundance of data I collected during the U.S. Hmong New Year festivals in three different cities in California.

The much more extensive and elaborate nature of the U.S. Hmong New Year seems to partly reflect the significant economic disparities between Laos and the United States. Hmong diasporic communities in the United States have greater access to economic resources to commercialize their ethnic traditions and celebrate them lavishly. On the other hand, the Hmong New Year in Laos lack materials, special markets, or other economic activities to enhance the scale and festivities of the celebration.

The Absence of Commodification in the Hmong New Year in Laos

As discussed in Chapter 3, many Hmong in Vang Vieng are socioeconomically marginalized as peasant farmers or wage workers in tourism or mining industries, which does not provide them with sufficient income or economic resources. Therefore, their main source of income tends to be irregular remittances from their families abroad. Most Hmong families in Dao Tha village relied on economic remittances from their transnational kin networks in the United States and other parts of the world in order to meet their financial obligations for the New Year. However, even with the financial support from their co-ethnics in the United States, Hmong do not have enough economic means to develop a more expansive New Year celebration that they desire.

Before the New Year celebration, Hmong villagers go to nearby local markets to buy food and goods they need to conduct the spirit calling rituals (hu plig) and the Eat 30 dinners (noj peb caug). The costs of necessary supplies and food, such as meat, clothes, drinks, joss paper, and candles, rise steeply during that time of the year. For example, chickens are in great demand for ceremonial rituals (hu plig) and for treating guests during the large group dinners. Although almost all Hmong households raise chickens at home, the actual numbers of fully-grown chickens ready to be eaten are quite limited and cannot meet the high demand during the New Year season, causing them to buy large numbers of chickens from local markets and farm owners. As a result, during the Hmong New Year celebrations, the price of chickens suddenly increases because of high demand. This often caused bitter complaints and concerns among many Hmong families with limited budgets.

Only a few families were able to purchase a small pig (300,000 Lao Kip, 25 British pounds) or large portion of red meat (usually over 70,000 Lao Kip per kilo, six British pounds) from the markets using extra financial support and remittances from their family and relatives residing in the United States. This allowed them to provide more food and host a ‘fancier’ feast. During the noj peb caug (Eat 30) visits to different families in Dao Tha, one family served a bigger portion of grilled pork with other regular dishes like rice and boiled chicken. However, even this family was apologetic about the ‘impoverished’ food for his guests and explained, ‘In the past, our parents lived in the farthest highlands so they were able to raise pigs, cows, and had much wealthier New Year celebration. Right now, we can’t raise that kind of livestock and became poor, so we can only perform smaller scale celebrations like this with small amount of meat.’ This indicates how Hmong in Laos have become unable to celebrate the New Year to their satisfaction because of economic constraints.

Some elderly Hmong often compared the gradual impoverishment of their New Year celebration in Laos with their past New Year in Thai refugee camps and said that even

during that uncertain and unstable time, their celebrations involved more economic activities and were more vibrant than in current day Laos. There was also more selling and buying of goods in temporary informal markets within the major refugee camps and extensive ball tossing activities for many days throughout the festivities (see also Long 1993: 169-172).

The overall lack of economic resources partly accounts for the small scale of the Hmong New Year celebration that are mainly confined to individual households. As a result, there was also little collaboration between different Hmong villages in Vang Vieng in order to hold collectively-organized economic markets for New Year festivals together. Instead, the celebrations are dispersed among single villages, each of which have their own activity like *pob pov* (ball tossing) and therefore kept small in scale.⁶⁴

The Commercialization of the Hmong New Year in the United States

In contrast to their co-ethnics in Laos, Hmong in the United States clearly have many more economic resources to mobilize and host their New Year festival extensively. There are also plenty of Hmong ethnic businesses which can participate in order to promote their goods and services. In addition, Hmong are able to charge fees for admission, booth rentals, and parking. As a result, they have the means to organize a much more extensive, elaborate, and longer New Year events, which draw Hmong from different communities throughout the country. Not only do local Hmong communities (such as in Sacramento) have ornate New Year festivals, an international New Year festival is held annually in Fresno, which organizers estimate is attended by about 25,000-30,000 people. The members of the International Hmong New Year committee in Fresno expect that the number of attendees

⁶⁴ This may be the case especially in central regions of Laos like Vang Vieng where the Hmong population is relatively small, in contrast to northern Laos or the outskirts of the capital city of Vientiane. For example, northern areas of Laos and the city of Lak 52 ('52km' from the capital, Vientiane) with substantial Hmong populations may possibly have longer and more public New Year festivals.

will increase significantly each year, since they are now able to host the festival in the city's Fairground.⁶⁵

Similar to many other ethnic festivals in the United States, such as the Chinese New Year in San Francisco (see Yeh 2008) and the 'Nisei Week' of Japanese Americans in Los Angeles (see Kurashige 2002), the Hmong New Year has also become an important site of economic activity for both Hmong businessmen (vendors) and potential customers (festival visitors). Many individual businessmen, shop owners, insurance sales persons, and realtors set up booths to advertise their services. Overall, the range of items and commodities sold in the New Year markets is diverse and very extensive. As many Hmong observed, one can find 'everything' at the New Year.

Ethnic food vendors can be found at booths for barbeque meat, drinks, papaya salads, various snacks, and even Chinese style hot pot. Other individual vendors sell ordinary consumer items (clothing, accessories, daily necessities), produce (fruits and vegetables), harvested rice, herbal and pharmaceutical medicines from Thailand, Laos, and China, and numerous DVDs and music, including songs and videos by Hmong artists and directors and popular foreign dramas. The sale of informally imported goods (based on personal networks) demonstrate the transnational economic reach of U.S. Hmong in the diaspora. There were also photo booths for visitors wearing traditional dress to take photos with specially decorated and painted background images of nature and villages in Laos.

Other popular booths sold books and published materials related to Hmong history, autobiographies, literature, culture, and lifestyles. I encountered and spoke with many Hmong of different ages at these booths who expressed personal interest in learning about their own history and collecting published materials about it. Therefore, Hmong's ethnicity, history, and cultural identities can be readily commodified and commercialized in American

⁶⁵ In the past, there have been two different sites for the New Year in Fresno organized by a general organization committee consisting of eighteen clan representatives. As of 2012, this clan association has been discontinued.

society. For example, a good number of vendors created T-shirts and fashion accessory items using the name Hmong and phrases that can promote their ethnic visibility. This is a form of ethnic self-representation for their own community, but also targets non-Hmong festival visitors.

Some vendors at the festival site even commercialized the former Hmong military leader, General Vang Pao⁶⁶ by selling posters with his image, small statues, and portraits as well as books and documentary DVDs about his life. Other items included commemorative wall clocks, decorative badges, and accessories with the General's image. In addition to these diverse economic activities, the New Year is also the main site for promotion and advertisement by individual non-profit organizations, such as local university student organizations, social workers and local health centers, and religious organizations, all of which distributed brochures and pamphlets as well as provided consultation services inside the booths.

There are also plenty of cultural performances and contests, such as the Hmong Beauty Pageant, pop singing, dancing, acting contests, and fashion shows with traditional Hmong outfits, as well as other traditional games which are played during the entire New Year period. Representatives from the Hmong radio station and TV programs as well as online Hmong film rental services (e.g. 'Hmongflix'⁶⁷) were also present. They were also in charge of videotaping and broadcasting the various festival activities.

Like many other ethnic beauty contests in the United States, the Hmong Beauty Pageant promotes the public image of Hmong as socially well integrated, 'good' American citizens. These narratives are found during the interviews with individual beauty contestants on stage and considered important criteria to qualify as a beauty queen. For examples,

⁶⁶ In the past, the Hmong New Year usually started with a commemoration of their refugee experiences during the Vietnam war. For this reason, the former military leader General Vang Pao used to give a keynote speech on the very first day to officially open the New Year. After the General's death in 2007, this official event has been replaced by an announcement by the organizing committee's representative.

⁶⁷ The copied version of American online movie rental website 'Netflix'.

interview questions included, ‘How will you bridge the Hmong community and broader American society as Miss Hmong?’, ‘What are the virtues one should have as Miss Hmong and a public representative of the whole community?’, and ‘How will you contribute to and promote our community?’ In this sense, the standard of ‘beauty’ in the contest is not always about outer appearance but also requires a ‘proper’ Hmong ethnic identity and cultural representation of their community to the wider society.

Finally, the Hmong New Year festivals in the United States involve not only local Hmong but those from other cities and states as well as other countries of the diaspora. They are widely publicized online through websites as well as through social media, none of which are available for Hmong in Laos. The largest Hmong New Year in Fresno uses ‘International’ in its festival title and there are numerous individuals visiting from countries such as Australia, Canada, and France. Some Hmong from China, Thailand, and Laos were also present (their trips were funded by their families in the United States). The public and international promotion of the festival, along with the economic opportunities for ethnic businesses and consumers are important reasons why it is well-attended and generates much more interest and enthusiasm than the New Year in Laos.

Multiculturalism and State Discourses of Economic and Cultural Equality

However, economic reasons alone cannot sufficiently explain the differences in the New Year celebrations in Laos and the United States. For instance, although Laos is technically underdeveloped, not all festivals and holidays in the country are impoverished or small-scale with low public visibility. In fact, Laotian national holidays have become remarkably commercialized and extensively celebrated in Laos.

During my fieldwork, it was quite a contrast to see how national holidays including the Lao New Year (*Boun Pimai* in April) were promoted, advertised, and commodified in the center of the capital city, Vientiane. Numerous vendors and sales booths selling various consumer goods and expensive items imported from Thailand, Vietnam, and China were set

up along the Mekong riverbank and competed to attract customers (similar to the Hmong New Year in the United States). In such cultural events, the Lao government not only allows the promotion and expansion of commercial activities, many important government officers show up to give speeches and participate in opening ceremonies that are video-recorded and broadcast through the national media.

State Cultural Control and Economic Equality in Laos

The reason that the Hmong New Year in Laos is diminished in scale is not simply the result of a lack of economic resources, but also governmental cultural control in the name of economic ‘equality’. During my three visits to Laos over a ten-year period, one of the remarkable changes in the Hmong community was the reduction in the length, size, and scale of public celebrations during the Hmong New Year. Public group activities and outdoor events, which normally lasted from at least a full week to months, were shortened to a maximum of three days (including weekends) due to recent governmental mandates, which caused the New Year to be mainly celebrated in private among individual families rather than with the larger community. This reduction of the New Year celebration was a product of a meeting that was held in 2011 between local government officers and Hmong village heads and clan leaders in the district of Vang Vieng.

Hmong villagers were informed about the New Year policy and asked to conform to it after the decision was made. During the interview, Kong Her, one of the village elders clearly explained this outcome as follows:

Our culture and traditions like the Hmong New Year must conform to theirs [the Lao ruling group], since we live with Laotians, who are Buddhist. In the past, we tossed the balls and dressed up with traditional clothes for at least a full seven days. In some Hmong villages, it lasted even for a month. We would not stop until our parents came and finally said, “Okay, we need to finish the New Year. We should now go back to the rice fields.” Right now, we are not allowed to celebrate that long anymore with the new

governmental law. Students should go to school and workers should go back to work.

It's quite different from when we were living far away in the mountains.

After repeatedly being given similar explanations for the reduction of the Hmong New Year by different individuals, I had an opportunity to interview a Hmong governmental officer in the local district office and speak about governmental policy and changes to the New Year. According to Cha Lee, a Hmong administration officer in his fifties, the new policy was inevitable and necessary because of the need for Laos to become a 'modern' country by increasing its citizens' 'commitment and diligence to education and hard work as well as improving their time management'.

From the official perspective of the Lao government, such cultural control over the Hmong New Year was not intended to 'reduce' ethnic traditions and cultural diversity but simply to make their traditions more adaptable and appropriate for a modern country with a higher national standard of living. It was meant to enable every ethnic group to fully participate in national economic development by granting them equal rights to pursue educational opportunities and increase their economic productivity. In fact, the ideological justification for this policy is contained in the Lao national constitution, which states:

The State pursues the policy of promoting unity and equality among all ethnic groups. All ethnic groups have the right to protect, preserve and promote the fine customs and cultures of their own tribes and of the nation. All acts creating division and discrimination among ethnic groups are prohibited. The State implements every measure to gradually develop and upgrade the socio-economic levels of all ethnic groups. (Article 8. *Constitution of The Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2003.*)

In this constitution article, two different values, the equal right to preserve ethnic customs and partake in national socioeconomic improvement are treated as if they were the same or could be achieved simultaneously. Therefore, the Lao government seems to have a

certain type of ethnic multiculturalism. However, it is clearly implied that if minorities celebrate cultural differences too much, it prevents the state from ‘upgrading the socioeconomic level of all ethnic groups’. The Hmong New Year is a good example which demonstrates that the preservation of distinctive ethnic cultural traditions and practices can be in conflict with economic productivity and social mobility as defined by the state. According to this perspective, if Hmong were allowed to truly develop their cultural activities and festivities like New Year ceremonies, it would interfere with their economic productivity.

As a result, such ethnic activities are implicitly disapproved by the state, which prioritizes national economic growth through development and education as the most important agenda for its citizens. Therefore, although it is not explicitly stated in the constitution, ethnic groups are allowed to perform their distinctive ethnic cultures and traditions ‘only within the permission of the state’. This can be rather a conditional and ambivalent type of multiculturalism.

In fact, the distinctive cultures of ethnic minorities, positioned at the margins of the nation-state, are often seen as a threat to state regimes to promote national unity (Eriksen 2002[1993]: 121-122; Toland 2009[1993]:1). In particular, the cultural traditions of such minorities have been at the center of nation-state’s dual project of modernization and marginalization. Government policies and state agencies in Southeast Asian countries treat various ethnic minorities ambiguously as both the subject of ‘civilization’ and modernization and a threat to national security and unity (Duncan 2004: 1-3; see also Leng 1980). Because of this ambiguity, states often produce self-contradicting and ‘selective’ policies for their ethnic minorities either by glorifying or reducing their cultural differences and diversity (Clark 2001: 427; see also Salemink 2007). This demonstrates the limits of national unity and true accommodation of minority cultures while reproducing oppressive state control in different ways.

In this manner, traditional ethnic cultures and multicultural differences are tolerated but ultimately subject to nationalist projects of modernity, defined by both national economic development and the creation of a unifying and dominant national culture. Although the policy to promote education and development seems to apply to all ethnic groups in Laos, it specifically targets the Hmong, given that they are the only ethnic group that celebrates the New Year distinguishably and publically instead of simply participating in the state-promoted Laotian National New Year celebration.

In addition, ethnic traditions that are publically visible are especially subject to state control, since they are seen as conflicting with national priorities. This is especially true when considering Hmong's other traditional practices besides the New Year. Although the Hmong have been told to modify and reduce their New Year festivals to conform with state agendas, other aspects of Hmong's traditional culture have not been targeted, such as marriage customs, religious practices (ua neeb), and funeral rituals, all of which are undertaken privately within individual Hmong homes.

While scholars point out that the Lao government has consistently promoted equal rights and espoused egalitarian relations with its ethnic minorities and cultures at the official level (Bourdet 1996: 78; Stuart-Fox 1997), they also analyze how these ideologies are still rooted in the viewpoints and centrality of the dominant ethnic Lao group (Cincotta-Segi 2010: 1; Ovesen 2004: 222-223; Pholsena 2002). Following a Leninist socialist definition of ethnic diversity, the Lao ethnic policy similarly emphasizes 'national equality' by preserving and promoting 'the minority traditional culture through schools of dancing, music and handicrafts' in order to achieve the highest level of assimilation and (material) historical progress (Pholsena 2002: 181-183). Indeed, national equality for all, defined and granted by the Lao state and narrated in state policies, the national constitution, and official governmental documents, is highly conditional and based on unequal ethnic positioning.

Multicultural Ideologies and Cultural Equality in the United States

On the other hand, the U.S. government does not regulate or control ethnic minority festivals because of multicultural ideologies that permit and even encourage different minority groups to maintain their ethnic cultures. In general, multiculturalism is based on the notion that all cultures are equal and should be preserved by granting ethnic minorities the right and freedom to practice and display their cultural differences.

Based on this, the U.S. multiculturalism does not perceive ethnic festivals and minority cultural traditions to be a threat to national unity. It rather assumes that the manifestation of cultural differences by immigrants and ethnic groups will not impede their inevitable social and cultural assimilation, thus making it unnecessary for the state to exert power over minority cultures. In addition, as cultural diversity has become part of American national identity, the government is not concerned about how ethnic festivals may reduce national economic productivity. Therefore, the state minimizes its control over minority cultural events, and its presence during the Hmong New Year festival is limited to law enforcement in order to prevent crime and violence and ensure public safety.

Some scholars have problematized the celebratory nature of multiculturalism, pointing out that such ideologies fail to recognize internal politics and economic disparities among different ethnic groups (Eller 1997; Yeh 2008). Schiller et al. (1995: 50-52) argue that multiculturalism allows immigrants to maintain 'sentiments' toward their homeland (through cultural practices and identity) without developing substantial transnational connections with it, which enables them to be 'fully embedded' in American society. Multicultural ideologies also essentialize ethnic cultural differences while ignoring the fact that the actual inclusion of these ethnic and racial others remains insufficient. Those who question multiculturalism also note that it creates social separation instead of promoting national unity (Eller 1997: 250-251).

It is true that multiculturalism incorporates the seemingly contradictory objectives of achieving the preservation of cultural differences while promoting the incorporation (and assimilation) of ethnic minorities into mainstream society. In fact, it is not always clear to what extent the multicultural ideologies actually empower the Hmong communities to promote and substantiate cultural identity and representation. What enables the ornate and extensive Hmong New Year celebration in the United States is largely because Hmong freely and eagerly pursue economic opportunities and voluntarily engage in the self-run capitalist market system. Therefore, it is important to critically approach the various shortcomings of U.S. multiculturalism on different ethnic minority cultures.

Nonetheless, although U.S. multicultural ideologies do not necessarily cause Hmong to engage in extensive New Year festivities, it does grant them the freedom to do so without substantial governmental scrutiny and control. The lack of U.S. state intervention in minority cultures is based on both multicultural ideologies and the entrenched and hegemonic nature of capitalism in the American economy, giving minorities like the Hmong the freedom to extensively and freely engage in ethnic festivities. In the following section, I will discuss the specific case where the state intervenes when there is a perceived threat to public security and safety during the New Year events.

The only manner in which the U.S. state is a political presence and exercises control over the Hmong New Year is through police surveillance and law enforcement that require mandatory security and safety rules for all ethnic community events. The presence of security guards and law enforcement agencies in ethnic festivals has not been discussed in the literature. It is perhaps another example that shows cultural events of different ethnic groups are initially considered ordinary and not political by the local governments. Many ethnic festivals simply do not have any local policemen at the sites.

However, the intervention and control of the state become visible and immediate when the cultural events involve any possible violence and criminal activities. This is shown

in a number of previous incidents at the Hmong New Year festivals, when Hmong gang alliances and their fights and shootings caused local state governments to immediately shut down and cancel the rest of the New Year events at various sites.

During my fieldwork in the United States, some young Hmong that I became acquainted with suggested to me to come to the Hmong New Year in their different hometowns, such as Stockton, Marysville, Chico, and Merced, all in California. Before the main New Year festivals in Sacramento and Fresno, I decided to attend the New Year festival in Stockton first. It was held earlier in November only for a weekend and at a smaller scale because of the relatively small Hmong population and financial situation of the city.

After arriving at the festival site in Stockton and waiting in line to enter at the entrance, a security guard was screening the visitors and checking their bags and purses individually. After the long wait, when it was my turn, I was asked to open my small purse by a male security officer. I felt like I was going through the airport security checkpoint. Indeed, it was unfamiliar and a bit uncomfortable for me to do so at the Hmong New Year festival. This new experience of security and safety was indeed repeated and became routine everywhere else at Hmong New Year festivals. Security checkpoints may be a way to prevent unforeseen conflicts and violent activities with weapons, but it has become a standard practice after 9/11 with increased concerns about national security and the war against terrorism. The Hmong New Year organization committee members pay careful attention to meet the security standard enforced by the city of the New Year location. This often leads to the creation of security and safety associations by Hmong volunteer groups as part of their cooperation with local law enforcement offices.

In October 2014, while writing this chapter, there was a news report about a shooting among groups of young Hmong men during the Hmong New Year festival in Chico, California as reported in the local newspapers:

Several Asian men from two cars were allegedly firing at each other before crashing separately in the parking lot behind Panda Express. (...) According to police, the suspects were in the area for the Hmong New Year celebration at Bidwell Junior High School. The event was supposed to continue Sunday, but officials determined the event should be canceled following Saturday's incident. (5th October 2014, 'Police release names Saturdays gang shooting suspects', *Action News Now*.)

Similar to the previous years, a series of shootings, conflicts, and gang-related fights led to an immediate cancellation of the festival and an increase in police officers and security guards at other New Year venues in different cities and states.

'Authenticity' is Elsewhere: Discourses of Ethnic Tradition

The practice of ethnic traditions that have become different in the diaspora ultimately raises issues of cultural authenticity as different communities position themselves along a scale of authenticity based on the extent to which their cultural forms resemble those originally practiced in the ethnic homeland. However, because Hmong communities in Laos and the United States have lost their ethnic homeland as a point of reference and realize that their New Year practices have been dramatically modified in different national contexts, neither of them claim to have retained the original, 'authentic' New Year tradition. For Hmong in the United States, the excessive commercialization of their New Year in a highly capitalistic society is seen as the cause for the loss of cultural authenticity.

Meanwhile, for Hmong in Laos, the serious reduction imposed on their New Year festivities by limited economic resources and the Lao state indicate that they have come to practice a more impoverished version of New Year compared to the past. While critically reflecting on the way their New Year festivities are no longer authentic, they imagined and idealized an older and more remote homeland as the location where a more genuine New Year tradition can be found. For U.S. Hmong, this is the natal homeland of Laos whereas for

Hmong in Laos, China as the possible original place for a 'pure' and more authentic tradition. As a result, they do not have a coherent or congruent discourse of authenticity of their New Year tradition in terms of its location and time.

The ongoing experience of authenticity and inauthenticity among Hmong is relevant to long standing debates about authenticity and tradition. In the Introduction of the well-known book *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm asserts that invented tradition is 'a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past' (1983: 1). He further argues that nation-states utilized invented traditions as part of their political agenda to produce a unifying national identity and solidarity and homogenize certain groups of people (see also Babadzan 2000: 134-135). According to postcolonial scholars, the colonizers, instead of nation-states, are the agents which represent authenticity by establishing the contrastive images of the colonized in order to consolidate the racial hierarchies (Bhabha 1994; see also Taussig 1993).

Because Hobsbawm emphasizes how invented traditions repeat and mimic certain aspects of the past as a continuation of previous cultural forms, they inherit a great amount of content from earlier cultural forms as they attempt to establish continuity with past traditions. Therefore, his theorization is still based on the assumption that there are traditions which are authentic that have been passed down from the past (Hobsbawm emphasizes 'rigidity' to define such 'authentic' traditions) and inauthentic (invented) which have been created and deployed for political purposes and nationalist agendas.

This has led to other criticisms among different scholars. For example, Mark Phillips in his edited book points out, 'most if not all traditions could be seen as invented, at least in their beginnings—a thought that must surely be followed by the realization that any lasting tradition must be in process of continual reinvention' (2004: 5). Anthropologists have also

commonly argued that tradition is the product of constant (re)construction in the process of reforming identity⁶⁸ and the concept of authentic tradition is often illusory (Linnekin 1983: 241) and more or less Western/European-centered (Handler 1986:2; Vann 2006). Some scholars defend tradition as an actual continuation of modernity, not the opposite (Graburn 2001: 10) with constant changes and disruptions (see also Bruns 1991: 6-8). Thus, one should examine the impact of multiple factors and discourses about how people perceive authenticity and traditional identity (see Clifford 1988; Jackson 1991, 1995; see also Jackson and Ramirez 2009).

In short, the scholarly literature emphasizes that trying to gauge the authenticity of specific cultural forms is futile, because all traditional practices that may have once been considered authentic must have always been invented at some point and they have constantly changed over time. Given that Hmong in both Laos and the United States continue to imagine and pursue an alternative and older place (the homeland) as the source of authentic tradition, it seems that authenticity cannot be achieved or established on an absolute basis. It is rather in constant flux as traditions are continuously modified and reconfigured under the pressures of a capitalist modernity or ideological state control.

In this sense, Hmong's discourses of authenticity are gauged not only by temporality but also spatiality. When authenticity is understood in transnational context, geography and space become important for the diasporic community's understanding of authentic traditions, which are usually understood to be spatially located in the ethnic homeland. Cultural practices among peoples in most diasporas are seen as newer modifications of older traditions passed down from their country of ancestral origin. In other words, time is mapped onto space, so that the ancestral homeland is seen as the place where ancient and old (and

⁶⁸ In the case of authenticity and tradition, scholars broadly discuss the causes of identity to claim authenticity in terms of cultural (Linnekin 1983; Clifford 1988), ethnic and indigenous (Jackson 1995; Jackson and Ramirez 2009), and national (Handler 1988) identities.

thus authentic) traditions reside and diasporic communities scattered across different countries are where newer (and thus less authentic) traditions have been generated.

However, because diasporic Hmong are uncertain of the location of their ethnic homeland and have lost their transnational connections to it, they do not have a precise spatial basis for locating cultural authenticity. Therefore, when discussing their New Year festivals, Hmong in both Laos and the United States generate discourses about authenticity and tradition based on multiple territorialized places of origin (that is, both the natal and supposed ethnic homelands). For this reason, those who are critical about how the New Year is practiced in their respective country still seem to believe that once there *was* a ‘correct’ form of tradition in another country in the past, and there still might be somewhere, although they cannot always precisely determine exact time and place. For diasporic peoples like the Hmong who are spatially and temporally displaced and detached from ancient (and supposedly unchanging) homelands, authentic tradition is never in the here and now, but always somewhere else and in the distant past.

Imagined Authenticity among Hmong in Laos

Because Hmong in Laos have significantly reduced and truncated their New Year festival due to financial and state ideological pressures, they do not claim decisive ownership of a truly authentic and traditional New Year. In particular, many Hmong in Laos expressed their concerns and regrets about the loss of their traditional New Year. Some of them lamented how the ornate dresses that used to be sewn and worn in the past by both men and women of all ages have disappeared in recent times, especially among the younger generations, who have lost traditional sewing skills.

For example, Ying Cha, an elderly villager in his seventies, expressed his opinion about this generational sense of loss and how he believes that China is where Hmong still produce traditional New Year dresses and costumes. He said, ‘In the past, Hmong’s life was all about sewing. But if you look at the young generation now, they do not have any

knowledge about it. It's not the same as "Pa-tal- lang"⁶⁹ in China. The traditional dresses you see now in Laos are brought from China. Our traditional cloth making is forgotten here.' Although Ying Cha did not elaborate on the reasons why young Hmong generations do not practice or know about traditional sewing, it is clear that many young female Hmong are busy with school, careers, or household duties and do not have time or opportunities to continue sewing all day at home.

During my short visit to another Hmong village in Laos, a group of villagers sat around and also had a discussion about their disappearing New Year dress-making traditions. During the conversation, Cha Thao first stated in a critical manner, 'We are also lazy and don't make our own clothing. But that's not the only reason.' He continued, 'Hmong do not have our own factory that can make a lot of traditional New Year clothes. We have to do everything by hand, 100 percent hand-made.'

Sia Yang, a young mother who did not know how to sew New Year dresses, joined our conversation and supported what Cha said. She explained that these days, Hmong women buy New Year dresses from the Hmong peddlers from China or at the large Hmong market in various cities. Sia elaborated another practical economic reason for the loss of New Year dress making: 'If dresses are really hand-made by Hmong women, they will be very expensive and we cannot afford them, although we know they are of high quality. If any factories do produce the Hmong New Year dresses and sell them at the markets, Hmong will buy and wear them, because they will be more affordable. But we don't have factories.'

As another Hmong women also pointed out, Hmong New Year dresses for women were currently sold at between 800,000 and 1,000,000 Lao Kip (60-80 British pounds) for a full set (hat, top, inner blouse, and skirt excluding silver jewelry), which is too expensive for

⁶⁹ 'Land of flower', known as Hmong's supposedly unknown, lost ethnic homeland. It does not refer to a name of any existing place but is speculated to be somewhere in Wenshan prefecture, southwest China. For more discussion on this imagined place of Hmong's ethnic homeland, see Chapter 2.

most Hmong to afford.⁷⁰ Sia's statement confirms that currently in Laos, the production of New Year dresses by Hmong has declined, forcing them to purchase machine-made clothes from Hmong vendors from China or in bigger cities in Laos.

This reminded me of an interview with elderly Hmong people in Dao Tha village, when I asked them whether they think their New Year practices have not changed as much as the Hmong New Year in the United States. Instead of making a temporal claim on authenticity by arguing how Hmong culture in Laos is original and more traditional than their U.S. co-ethnics, they felt that Hmong in neither country had preserved their cultural traditions properly. Most of them remarked, 'I don't think Laos truly carries on the real New Year anymore because we do not celebrate it that extensively like before. Maybe Hmong in China practice the real New Year, because they still continue to make a lot of traditional clothes by hand.'

Although Laos is an older (natal) homeland for Hmong in the contemporary diaspora, the changing conditions in local society and the discontinuation of past ethnic practices actually discouraged Lao Hmong from claiming that they are the original and authentic practitioners of Hmong tradition in the diaspora. Therefore, by making temporal and spatial assessments about their loss of authenticity over time, some Hmong in Laos vaguely imagined that China would be the original place where authentic Hmong cultural traditions have been preserved. According to Hmong in Laos, China has a greater association with the distant past compared to Laos as the possible location of the ancient Hmong ethnic homeland.

The Natal Homeland and 'Authentic' Tradition among Hmong in the United States

On the other hand, Hmong in the United States make a different claim about cultural authenticity by imagining Laos as the place of unchanging and therefore authentic traditions.

⁷⁰ The monthly salary for jobs in the public sector, such as school teachers and administrators, was below 500,000 Lao Kip (40 British pounds). Although some younger Hmong have such jobs, most older adults are still engaged in subsistence farming and do not have significant incomes.

Hmong criticize their own New Year festival as inauthentic and no longer traditional because it has become excessively commercialized and commodified. Similar to how Hmong in Laos speculated that their New Year traditions might be practiced more authentically in China, this results in assumptions and idealization of Laos as the place of authentic, pure, and never-changing Hmong tradition.⁷¹ In this sense, their temporal judgments about authenticity also have a spatial/territorial dimension similar to their co-ethnics in Laos.

In discussing historical and theoretical perspectives on authenticity, Lionel Trilling notes that concerns about authenticity in modern times are based on the anxiety of a loss of ‘sincerity’ as the evidence of one’s existence. Starting from the sixteenth century, Trilling argues that the meaning of sincerity, which is used to define a life that is ‘sound, pure, and the whole’ has come to refer to ‘the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretence’ (1971: 13). He then continues a Marxist discussion of how a state of anxiety is caused by a loss of humanity through the domination of ‘money’ in human life. He concludes that ‘money, in short, is the principle of the inauthentic in human existence’ (124). Trilling’s perspective can contextualize the particular way Hmong in the United States have come to feel that their loss of authenticity and their New Year traditions are a product of the predominant capitalist condition under which they live.

Because Hmong in Laos are seen as living in a less capitalistic and poorer society, Hmong in the United States feel the New Year there is more authentic in contrast to their lives dominated by money and commodities, which makes them feel less pure and less culturally sincere. In this sense, their discourse of authenticity is also based on economic status (money), not just on time and place that makes them feel the way they practice culture is less authentic.

⁷¹ On the other hand, many Hmong in the United States in the next chapter claim that they have done a better job of preserving traditional Hmong culture because they have more economic and community resources. However, such discourses are far different from making authenticity claim on Hmong tradition and it is rather based on the way they maintain the tradition by promoting and systemically organizing it.

For example, Keng Xiong, a state government officer in his early fifties, felt that since the New Year in Laos is not as commercialized as it is in the United States, Hmong there must be able to maintain more extensive and proper New Year celebrations. Although he has not returned to Laos and observed the New Year there since he left the country after the war, Keng still believed:

In Laos, the Hmong New Year it is very traditional and important. Here, it is too Americanized! We have to spend a lot of money and celebrate the New Year at different times toward the end of the year and in different places. So we need to charge visitors [admission fees at the New Year festival], to financially support it and not be in debt. But in Laos, they don't spend any money because they still celebrate it only once during the year, for more than one week, and everyone does it together.

Other Hmong in the United States similarly expressed the firm belief that Laos is the location of a more authentic Hmong culture based on self-criticism of their materialistic and capitalistic market-oriented New Year festival. Another interviewee Brandon Xiong, in his mid-forties, particularly regretted the commercialization of the New Year in the U.S. national context and strongly reacted as follows:

It is sad to say that nowadays the Hmong New Year in the United States is becoming more and more a money-making event. The Hmong New Year has been contaminated and it is not really about the Hmong New Year at all. If you go there, it will only be about selling food and other goods, just like going to a flea market. Our New Year cannot be like that, if you really want to preserve tradition and say, "This is the real Hmong New Year."

Indeed, Hmong's self-criticisms of their highly capitalistic New Year contribute to the idealization of the same tradition as performed in Laos. Many Hmong in the United States believe they have lost cultural 'sincerity', as their New Year tradition is determined by

materialistic conditions and has become all about marketing, advertising, making money, and selling things. According to them, this contrasts to the supposedly sincerer and ‘true’ nature of Hmong traditions in Laos, their natal homeland where people are still uncorrupted by money and capitalist profit.

It is not surprising that Hmong in the United States express their faith in the Hmong New Year in Laos and its authentic nature by assuming that Laos is a more traditional and static society that keeps old traditions alive in contrast to the constantly-changing (and inauthentic) capitalist modernity of the United States. A Hmong woman in her forties, Ka Lee, also idealized her natal homeland in terms of its cultural authenticity: ‘The New Year has been one of the most important parts of Hmong tradition for many generations. For the older generations, it is very important for them to continue to maintain that custom for younger generations. I know in Laos it will never change because that is the most important aspect of Hmong life there.’

However, such emphasis on the preservation of past cultural traditions in the natal homeland does not seem to consider the changing nature of ethnic cultures in Laos and the pressures of modernity that Hmong in that country have also come to face. Undoubtedly, even a ‘traditional’ and less capitalistic society is never immune to change due to economic development and state’s changing policies over ethnic minority cultures. As discussed earlier, Hmong in Laos can no longer extensively celebrate the New Year as they had in the past and felt this cultural tradition had become diminished and impoverished because of their lack of economic means and state pressure in the name of economic equality.

In addition, many younger Hmong in Laos are also not interested in or aware of traditional dress making methods and as a result, the handmade clothing production had ended several years ago.⁷² Although these are the issues at stake for Hmong in Laos, their co-ethnics residing in the United States do not seem to be aware of or recognize them but

⁷² In fact, that is what I first noted in Dao Tha when I returned to Laos for fieldwork, six years after my previous visits.

still tend to unknowingly idealize and ascribe temporal continuity and authenticity of tradition to Hmong living in the natal homeland of Laos.

Authenticity Still Matters

Such discourses among Hmong in Laos and the United States clearly reveal that both communities believe that they have lost their authentic Hmong New Year tradition but imagine that it can be found elsewhere. The search for an authentic culture has both a temporal and spatial dimension, since such traditions are seen as belonging to and inherited from the past and also geographically located in homelands. For Hmong in Laos, authenticity belongs to their ancient ethnic homeland of China, and for Hmong in the United States, it exists in the natal homeland of Laos. Diasporic Hmong imagine that in both countries, ethnic traditions have been better preserved, providing a temporal continuity to the past.

In this sense, discourses of authenticity in the diaspora depend on the extent to which the conditions of the country of current residence change ethnic minority traditions and cultures and cause them to deviate from what they believe as past traditional and pure forms. In contrast to U.S. Hmong, who criticize that capitalist wealth and money corrupts a pure and traditional ethnic culture, Hmong in Laos actually felt that it was precisely their lack of money that made them unable to produce and purchase traditional New Year dresses and fancier materials and food and maintain their authentic cultural practices like in the past.

Therefore, authentic traditions are not always incompatible with economic modernity since they can provide people with the resources necessary to maintain their ethnic traditions. This perhaps explains why Lao Hmong did not overtly resist or criticize the state's control over their New Year in the name of economic equality and opportunity. If the promise of economic modernity ever reaches the Hmong, it would eventually enable (not threaten) the authentic practice of their traditions.

For Hmong in the United States, however, capitalist American modernity has ruined authentic Hmong tradition with excessive commercialization and commodification, which provides the basis of the idealization of Laos as the host of original tradition. This implicitly reveals that the U.S. multicultural ideology of cultural equality may allow ethnic minorities to freely preserve their traditional cultures to some extent, but does not always produce satisfying, authentic experiences, especially under predominantly capitalistic economic systems. As many U.S. Hmong have indicated, cultural traditions cannot be practiced authentically in a market-oriented multiculturalism.

I would therefore like to suggest that the notion of authenticity continues to matter not because it can be clearly measured or judged, but because it is a relative construct based on the positionality of diasporic communities in relation to each other (as well as to their homelands) through time. Thus, the discourses of authenticity become indispensable for both peoples in the diaspora, as well as those in natal and ethnic homelands, all of which are constantly subject to the changes of modernity and the nation-state as they practice their cultural traditions in multiple local societies.

Diasporic Cultural Differences in Trans/National Contexts

Substantial cultural differences have emerged between the way Hmong in the diaspora practice their New Year tradition depending on the national differences of the countries in which they reside. Because of varying levels of national economic development, there is no doubt that Hmong in Laos do not always have the economic means to organize large, extended, and elaborate New Year festivals, like their co-ethnics in the United States. However, this cultural differentiation in the diaspora is also based on differing national ideologies. The nation-states of both Laos and the United States espouse multicultural ideologies based on ethnic equality.

Although both the Lao and U.S. governments emphasize equality for minorities, what they mean by ethnic equality is quite different and they implement it in their own ways:

equal economic opportunity in the case of Laos versus equal cultural opportunity in the case of the United States. Ironically, the same ideological principle of equality for minorities allows the Lao state to engage in cultural control by restricting ethnic minority festivals (because from the state's perspectives, they conflict with equal participation in economic productivity as well as educational development) whereas it causes the U.S. state to withdraw from direct cultural control (since it would conflict with the right of all ethnic minorities to maintain their equally-valued cultural differences).

Hmong in Laos and the United States recognize the inevitable changes and modification in the way they practice the New Year tradition because of the different social, political, and economic conditions in their own country. Because of these changes influenced by national contexts in the Hmong diaspora, neither the Lao or American Hmong communities feel that they have properly maintained authentic New Year practices from the past. Therefore, diasporas can develop substantial discourses about cultural inauthenticity and view genuine ethnic traditions as located in the past and in homelands of natal or ethnic origin.

Because diasporic Hmong have lost the original ethnic homeland to which they can ascribe authenticity in their traditions, they do not have a uniform discourse about authenticity. Instead, they have come to idealize and imagine other co-ethnics in the diaspora as the possible 'authentic' community that maintains proper and unchanged traditions from the past. In short, the Hmong New Year is the complex site that is influenced by both national economic conditions and state ideologies about ethnic cultures and traditions, which in turn generates incongruous discourses of in/authenticity among diasporic members.

Chapter 8. Discursive Fragmentation and Hierarchical Positioning of Diasporas

During an interview in his large living room in Sacramento, Moua Xiong, an elderly Hmong man in his mid-seventies, was explaining to me why he believes Hmong in Laos and the United States have remained similar despite their long separation since the Vietnam War in two countries with remarkable national differences:

Our culture depends on our place of residence because Hmong have no homeland. We do not have a country of our own, so we don't have a special place in America where we can practice Hmong rituals like funerals. Whatever we want to do here, we need to borrow a place from *them* [by which he meant, 'the government, non-Hmong ruling group']. This is the same in Laos, as Hmong must always follow what *they* require. There has been no real change. [emphasis mine]

Moua Xiong clearly noted that Hmong in Laos and the United States are not that different from each other because as a people without their own country, they have to remain a permanent ethnic minority in any nation-state and must seek permission from 'them'. However, although Moua indicated that Hmong's positionality as a minority has 'never changed', this can also mean that diasporic Hmong living in different countries have not remained the same. Although Hmong are similarly positioned as ethnic minorities everywhere, they are subject to the power structure of different countries. Therefore, their minority experiences as diasporic Hmong are not homogeneous but refracted through the nation-state. This can eventually cause them to position themselves hierarchically in the diaspora by constructing national differences in the process of imagining and differentiating themselves from their co-ethnics living abroad.

National Differences and Hierarchical Ordering of Diasporas

Many Hmong in Laos and the United States reflect on the extent to which their ethnic communities have become different after living apart for more than three decades. They

predominantly compared and discussed national economic differences between the two countries and the resulting impact on their lives. Almost all Hmong I interviewed, regardless of their age, gender, and personal experiences, noted that the two countries in which Hmong live have remarkable disparities in terms of national economic growth, development, and living standards and their resulting global economic status. Indeed, differences in the national economic status of Laos and the United States may be the most obvious and straightforward way for them to make status distinctions among Hmong in the two countries.

However, internal diasporic hierarchies are not simply based on economic development and national wealth, but are also a product of other types of social positioning, which do not always privilege the United States over Laos. This is especially true in the case of Hmong in Laos, who do not consider themselves less important or inferior to the Hmong community in the United States simply because Laos suffers from an impoverished national economy.

While acknowledging the large disparities in economic status between the two countries, Hmong discuss how national differences have produced cultural differences in the diaspora. In turn, these comparative comments serve an important basis for Hmong to hierarchically position themselves in relation to each other, producing contrastive claims about how their country provides ‘better’ or ‘superior’ conditions of living over the other. I refer to this as discursive fragmentation in the diaspora since Hmong in different countries do not agree about their relative assessments about each other.

This chapter explores the extent to which national differences are believed to cause diasporic people to competitively position themselves in a hierarchical order by focusing on the discourses of Hmong in Laos and the United States and the way they construct national differences. Not only do they critically ascribe different negative cultural characteristics to each other, they attribute them to different aspects of the two nation-states which they regard unfavorably. As a result, certain national images and characteristics are created, such that

U.S. Hmong are ‘less respectful, unhealthy, spoiled’ while having less individual social freedom under the dominant capitalist American system. On the other hand, Hmong in the United States ascribe the images of ‘politically corrupted, economically and culturally deprived’ to their co-ethnics in Laos by referring to its Communist government and economically impoverished condition as the determinant of such characteristics. These national differences are believed to be the main cause of the cultural and political differences between the two groups of Hmong and are used as the basis for claiming a superior hierarchical position in the diaspora.

Thus, the way they make references to the economic, cultural, and political aspects of the nation-state as the manifested contributor of differences among diasporas is not self-evident but markedly relational. In other words, diasporic Hmong represent their countries not as coherent nations in entirety but through the selective discourses. Instead of being nationalistic or simply adopting national agendas, they rather use a particular feature of the nation-state to make evaluative generalizations about themselves and their co-ethnics. The ‘nation’ here is seen in relation to the diaspora.

In this manner, not only do Hmong imagine transnational continuities in their diasporic community based on shared cultural customs and ethnic solidarity, they also imagine differences between their separate national communities. They do not agree on the nature of these national differences in the diaspora, leading to discursive fragmentation. Nonetheless, such fragmented discourses based on transnational relationships across national borders make diasporic Hmong more conscious of their own lives in their current nation-states of residence. Thus, diasporas and nation-states are not antagonistic but are relational constructs that inform each other.

Perceptions of National Economic Differences

The gap in national economic status between Laos and the United States is probably the most prominent difference that both Hmong communities address when comparing

differences among each other. Because of the salient and factual national economic differences, there are some initial agreements on them among the members.

A 'De Facto' Difference: 'Wealthy America' Versus 'Poor Laos'

The perceptions that Hmong in the United States have about their co-ethnics in Laos are predominantly based on differences of national economic status. The higher economic status of their country is what U.S. Hmong affiliate with the most and is an obvious means to compare themselves to Hmong in Laos. For instance, Lena Thao, in her late twenties, clearly noted that the economic differences between Hmong in Laos and the United States is the most noteworthy, a sentiment shared by many other U.S. Hmong. She said:

There are a lot of differences, like economic growth. After we came to America, we have become assimilated to a wealthy society. But in Laos, it's still a Communist, poor country so whatever resources or money they have are what their relatives in the U.S. sent. And that's all they have. I have friends who went to Laos to visit. They said that Hmong there are still living like how they lived 30 or 40 years ago.

Economic disparities between the two countries were frequently emphasized during other interviews. Malina Xiong, in her forties who visited Laos a couple years ago, first mentioned that she is still 'very sad, whenever I think about Hmong's poverty in Laos.' She shared her observation from her previous trip to Hmong villages in the northern part of Laos. To her, poverty is the biggest problem for Hmong in Laos, which has also become strikingly different from her own life in the United States. Malina continued:

It's obvious that poverty is everywhere back in my country⁷³ [Laos]. Some of the major cities may be growing and people move there but their national economy is still the same. The population grows but there is no work for them. [...] Also, when people live

⁷³ Malina constantly referred Laos as 'my country' after clearly defining that she feels the United States is her home country (not technically same thing as homeland) since she belongs there. However, she often called both Laos and the United States as her home country in a distinguishable manner.

in the city, they don't have a good school system for kids. If the city kids cannot access good education, it could be even worse in the rural areas.

Like Malina, many Hmong in United States continued to refer to Laos as their 'home' and 'my country'. This is an important aspect of the Hmong diaspora that reveals that Hmong in the United States are still emotionally connected to their former homeland and co-ethnics residing there. However, this emotional affiliation with the co-ethnics in the diaspora coexists with salient disparities of national economies that produce perceptions of considerable inequality between the two communities. In a different interview Leng Thao also called Laos his own country, even though he previously defined the United States as the country where he belongs. Based on his trip to Laos in early 2000, Leng succinctly compared Laos and the United States in terms of economic differences. He said, 'If you are not lazy, you won't die in this country. You have choices to go to school, to work, and you can do whatever you can to earn money. But back in our country, because of the Lao economy, you don't have choices to make things work out. It's very different.'

In fact, some Hmong interviewees in Laos supported those views of U.S. Hmong and had positive assessments of their counterparts in the United States, acknowledging that the greater socioeconomic development of the United States has led to a higher state of general knowledge among Hmong living in that country. For instance, Poa Moua pointed out that U.S. Hmong's higher economic status can also produce more advanced knowledge and better intellectual capacity among them, although the causal relations between the two are not always self-evident. Poa said, 'The U.S. is a very rich country and here [Laos] is a developing country. I think people living in a rich, developed country also have higher thoughts and better ideas. But people in developing countries do not yet develop their knowledge, so they have lower understanding.'

Likewise, Lee Yang explained how differences in national socioeconomic levels in the two countries certainly influence individual knowledge and skills and the way Hmong

make a living:

Since Hmong have been living in the U.S., they have higher knowledge, because they have a lot of educational institutions. They can also work in various places. Living style and dietary culture have also become different. In Laos, on a daily basis, if we want to eat, we must do physical labor by using our hands and feet. But for them, if they want to making a living, they use their brains and knowledge [*shomong*].

In a series of interviews with Hmong in both Laos and the United States, it is commonly assumed that national socioeconomic conditions determine the way people make a living, manage their social and familial relationships, and even how they think (in terms of ideas and knowledge). Therefore, some Hmong in Laos seemed to agree with U.S. Hmong about their superior positioning based on global economic hierarchies. However, other Hmong in Laos did not assume that the greater economic status of the United States simply produced benefits for Hmong living there and pointed out some of the negative aspects of living in a country with economic wealth. This produces discursive fragmentation where different diasporic communities do not agree about their relative positioning in relation to each other.

'Rich Body, Poor Heart': The Other Side of National Economic Hierarchies

Although Hmong in both Laos and United States recognize the clear national economic differences between them, Lao Hmong differentiate between economic wealth and general social well-being, claiming that the latter does not always correlate with the power of the national economy. According to them, simply because the United States is wealthy, it does not mean that the country provides the highest level of social well-being for its residents. In fact, this perceived discrepancy between national economic growth and individual well-being is encapsulated in the frequent expression, 'poor heart ([*tuk nai-jjai*]), rich (comfortable) body ([*tua sabai*)]', which refers to U.S. Hmong.

In contrast, Lao Hmong characterize themselves as having a ‘rich (comfortable) heart ([*sabai*⁷⁴ *jjai*]), poor (tired) body ([*tua meu-oi*)]’. This discourse that contrasts life in the advanced capitalist United States with life in the underdeveloped Lao national economy is shared among many Hmong in Laos and some of their co-ethnics in the United States. For example, in Laos, a middle-aged male farmer, Tou Yang said:

The good thing about living in the United States is the value of money since the American Dollar has a higher value than Lao Kip. But inside their heart, Hmong in America are poor ([*tuk nai-jjai*]). Here, we can’t make much money, but our heart is comfortable ([*sabai jjai*]). It’s up to you here [Laos]. If you want to work, you can work, but if you don’t, you don’t have to...Living a leisurely life is fine.

This view was shared by some Hmong residing in the United States, like Chi Her, who has been working at a local assembly plant for a number of years. Like many other Hmong adults, born and raised in Laos, Chi has living experiences in both Laos and the United States, which serve the basis of his perception and judgment of the difference between the two countries. He spoke to me about the overall national differences between Laos and the United States by also employing the ‘rich body, poor heart’ discourse:

The life of Hmong in the U.S. is very different from those in Laos. In Laos, everything is *sabai* (comfortable). Things are up to you and you can do anything you want in the mountains, hills, and fields. You can also own your gardens and don’t have to waste money paying taxes. The only difficulty is that the national economy is still undeveloped. This country, America, is *sabai* in terms of food. But things are not easy here and there are many bills to pay. You may earn a lot but you also have to spend as much as you earn. This gives many people headaches and hardship.

⁷⁴ ‘Sabai’ in the Laotian language is used frequently in various occasions with positive meanings of ‘well-being, happy, comfortable, sound, and good’. It is also a key term that Hmong in the two countries repeatedly use to talk about their national differences.

Problems of American Wealth: Discourses of ‘Immorality’ among Hmong in Laos

Despite the incommensurable and obvious national economic gaps between Laos and the United States, diasporic Hmong’s perceptions about them further diverge in contrasting ways. The comments that Hmong in Laos had about the changes of behavior and values of the U.S. Hmong were often critical in nature, ascribing the changes negatively to the highly developed economic status of the United States. They believe that U.S. Hmong are less altruistic and more selfish as they have become ‘Americanized’, referring to their predominantly economy-oriented lifestyles. In so doing, Lao Hmong seem to make a rather arbitrary causal connection between the higher national economic status of the United States and the negative characteristics it supposedly produces among U.S. Hmong.

Many of my interviewees in Laos attributed the perceived cultural differences between themselves and U.S. Hmong to economic inequalities between the two countries. For example, Xou Her, who recently bought a tuk tuk (a commonly-used motorized rickshaw and the main form of public transportation) with his relatives’ remittances from the United States, spoke critically about how life in the United States had changed the behavior of his relatives:

In the past, we lived together so our *nitsai* [nature/personality] was the same. But now, they moved to America and have lived separately for a while, so they have forgotten about us in Laos. If I ask my old friends in the U.S. who used to live in the same hometown and hang out together, “We are old friends, can you help me financially?”, they would answer, “Oh, I have a lot of debts. Although I have cars and a house, I don’t have money to help you.”

Their nature has changed. They are forgetting us.

Xou Her also added that he is more concerned about the future generations of Hmong in the United States who might eventually become detached from the Hmong in Laos and stop caring about them. The U.S. Hmong’s relative economic wealth has given the

impression to Hmong in Laos that their co-ethnic's social relationships and even cultural behavior have been changed by living in a wealthier country and they no longer share the value of 'helping, caring, and supporting others with money'.

This is not merely a personal account, but also has broader implications for the larger diasporic group, since helping each other economically is believed as an essential part of being ethnically Hmong. In other interviews, similar critical comments were frequently made in terms of how Hmong in the United States have become 'selfish and less caring' in contrast to 'the way Hmong are supposed to be'. According to Pao Her, a farmer in his late fifties, 'Hmong are supposed to look after each other, in terms of our living condition and to make sure everything is all right with our families, relatives, and friends. I only know a little about America, but they do not seem to know how to live together and take care of each other. They have become Americans and they live like Americans.'

Likewise, many Hmong in Laos attributed other negatively-perceived cultural differences of U.S. Hmong to the greater economic status of the United States. As Cha Lee in his fifties, who has been working at a district office, stated, 'Hmong in Laos and the United States have come to think differently. Hmong in Laos respect people more. In the United States, the Hmong community there has changed and does not have much respect anymore since they are economically developed (*patanaa*).'

In a different interview, Tou Yang, a farmer in his late forties, similarly and critically pointed out that the way Hmong in the United States manage social relationships is less emotional and intimate but more formal and strictly organized, reflecting the general characteristic of American sociality. While explaining national and cultural differences, he opined as follows:

Oh, everything is different [between Hmong in Laos and the United States]. Nothing can be similar. For example, here [in Laos], if I want to visit somebody to have fun, talk, and be with them, I can certainly do that anytime. But there [the United States], it's impossible. If you just visit your friends without giving them a phone call [advanced notice], they will close their door in front of your face. So different!

In a different interview, Kong Her, a farmer in his late fifties, had more poignant reaction to how Hmong in the United States have changed in the way they treat and respect elderly Hmong:

Hmong in the U.S. go to study, get educated, and live in a place where they don't see any relatives or family around. All they do is go to school, come back, and study. So even when the grandparents go to visit their grandchildren they don't take care of their grandparents anymore. They would say, "Oh, why do these old people come to stay with us for this long? Go away!"⁷⁵

In fact, Kong Her explicitly compared the U.S. situation to Laos by saying, 'In Laos, we don't act like that. I would say we still know how to love other Hmong and how to respect their grandparents and great-grandparents. Over there [in the United States], what kids learn is only English and they no longer respect the Hmong language and culture.'

Therefore, many Hmong in Laos do not believe that the superior economic development of the United States always leads to positive outcomes for their ethnic community and instead, they point to the negative consequences of living in a wealthy society. Such comparative evaluations allow them to claim a higher cultural status in the diasporic order by indicating that Hmong in Laos have maintained proper (respectful) cultural behavior and are therefore better than U.S. Hmong, who are losing what are considered to be traditional cultural values because of the corrosive effect of American

⁷⁵ Although Kong's statement appears subjective and somewhat biased, his negative perception is not completely imagined but based on the information that he learned from his relatives and acquaintances, who actually visited their families in the United States and shared their experiences.

society and its excessive modernization.

However, such discourses among Lao Hmong about their co-ethnics in the United States directly conflict with how U.S. Hmong portray themselves, producing considerable discursive fragmentation between the two diasporic communities. They strongly emphasize how they use their superior economic status to financially help and economically develop the Hmong community in Laos. Many Hmong in the United States perceive the Hmong in Laos as subjects who need the financial, educational, and charitable assistance that is enabled by their economic power. Indeed, their discourses about national economic differences emphasize how they transform their economic superiority into a moral consciousness based on ethnic sympathy toward their co-ethnics in Laos.

The Power of Wealth: Discourses of ‘Morality’ among Hmong in the United States

Hmong in the United States perceive themselves as members of a nation-state at the top of the global economic order and recognize their overall higher status compared to their poorer compatriots in Laos. They often regard their community as the center of the Hmong diaspora because of the greater socioeconomic and political power of the United States compared to other countries in which Hmong live and feel that they can possibly assist them to develop their national economies and promote unity among the Hmong diaspora.

Although U.S. Hmong often emphasized their lower socioeconomic status in the United States and how they suffer from economic marginalization in the local contexts, when asked to reflect on the lives of their co-ethnics in Laos (and elsewhere), they feel well-off in comparison as members of a wealthy nation-state. They are therefore empowered internally within their diasporic community. In this manner, U.S. Hmong’s nationalized economic discourse and relative diasporic positioning also reproduce the global hierarchy of nation-states. To some extent, Hmong in the United States seem to have internalized American discourses of the country’s economic power and the need to assist the less

fortunate living in underdeveloped countries. For example, Steve Thao, a professional man in his forties, said the following:

I believe that all eyes are on the Hmong in the United States. I haven't been to China, but from the stories that I heard from other people, when Hmong Americans visit them, Hmong in China are very happy and they are waiting for us to support them. I heard they even call us "Hmong from the big land." The United States is not necessarily that geographically big, but it's a prestigious and powerful country. Hmong in Thailand and Laos also want the support, contribution, and leadership from the U.S. So if I just generalize, I would say Hmong in the U.S. will be the leading group of Hmong [in the diaspora] in the years to come.

Similarly, Lena Thao also confirmed this view of U.S. Hmong's capacity to help their co-ethnics by saying, 'We have Hmong [in the U.S.] serving in higher offices and law agencies, or the United Nations, working for policies for global Hmong people. So I would say Hmong in the U.S. have more economic means and political power to hold the leadership and help the whole Hmong community.'

Even some young U.S.-born Hmong Americans who have no experience living in Laos similarly compared the economic and political conditions of the United States and Laos and were convinced that their country is the most important community among the Hmong in the world. Lily Moua, a female college student, explained why the Hmong in the United States should play a leading role as a representative of the entire Hmong diaspora because of their economic development and democratic capabilities:

I would honestly say that America has more economic resources and definitely has more money than Laos. We have perhaps better laws, too and living in democracy, we have a lot more rights as citizens and are more educated as opposed to people in Laos. They are passive and do what they were told by the government, especially the Hmong women and

children, who are in a weaker position.

In fact, a good number of Hmong in the United States felt that their superior access to resources in the country should be the basis for assisting and looking after other less developed, and poorer Hmong communities elsewhere in the diaspora. When I asked Hmong people in the United States, I received similar answers, such as the following of Peng Xiong, another professional in his early thirties:

I think in terms of education, experiences, and in terms of having more *freedom*, Hmong Americans are in a better position to impact and [influence] policy changes, non-governmental actions, and even governmental actions in the world (...). I think we do have those advantages (...) and I really hope that Hmong Americans take leading roles and reach out other Hmong folks in the world. [emphasis mine]

In a different interview, Ying Thao, a former veteran from the Vietnam war in his sixties, also had such benevolent sentiments:

I think the leading role [in the diaspora] should be taken by the United States in the future, because there are Hmong who care and look after Hmong groups everywhere in the world. They [Hmong Americans] have a good idea of how to communicate with other Hmong in the world. In some rural areas and the countryside in China, we still have Hmong who are very poor and have no education. We feel for them and Hmong here will have a good idea about how to help them.

Likewise, Yia Lor, a real estate agent in her thirties, tended to idealize the overall sociopolitical and economic conditions in the United States by saying, ‘Honestly, I would say America is the most important country in the world, because we are in the American tradition that has more kindness and fairness to teach and learn how we can [financially]

help other Hmong in the world. If they were to find people to represent the Hmong community, I think it would be better to have someone from the U.S.’

Keng Xiong, a man in his early fifties working at a state enforcement office, directly related lack of political freedom to poverty (lack of economic freedom) in Laos by pointing out that Hmong in Laos still suffer economically because the Communist Lao government discourages and controls efforts by U.S. Hmong to financially assist their co-ethnics and improve their economic situation. As former refugees that fought against the Communist Lao state during the Vietnam War and fled the country, a number of Hmong in the United States do not feel free to return to help their co-ethnics in Laos, especially for the long term and through visible participation in Hmong’s everyday lives. Keng expressed this concern and elaborated that the difficulties to improve Hmong’s economic status in Laos are caused by political conditions in Laos:

I would say, if Laos were free like any other countries, we would go over there and help the Hmong financially, making their lives easier. But because that country is not free for us to go help Hmong or educate and teach them, that’s why they are so poor. If we can help them to change, their life in Laos will be better. [...] So Hmong in the U.S., we have a better life here.

In fact, it is generally known that international NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) in Laos must closely work with and conform to governmental policies and regulations. There is a very informal but taken-for-granted expression describing this situation: ‘In Laos, NGO is really GO [Governmental Organizations].’ Therefore, U.S. Hmong’s discussions of national economic differences between Laos and the United States not only lead to moral discourses about assisting less fortunate peoples, they are further developed into discourses about the lack of political freedom in Laos, as will be discussed below.

The discussions of national economic differences between Laos and the United States are further developed into the discourse of freedom, between U.S. economic freedom *to* pursue economic opportunities and individual social freedom *from* capitalist economic controls for Hmong in Laos. The contested definitions of freedom reveal how the same concept of freedom is deployed differently when refracted through different national contexts, although the concept is difficult for Hmong themselves to clearly define.

Contested Economic Freedoms and National Hierarchies

Hmong in both Laos and the United States repeatedly mentioned freedom when comparing their lives, claiming that they enjoyed greater freedom than their co-ethnics counterparts, therefore positioning their community as better and higher in the diaspora. However, what the Hmong mean by ‘freedom’ is quite different in each country and is influenced by the different economic, political, and social conditions of the nation-state, revealing how the hierarchical ordering of the Hmong diaspora remains fundamentally contested and unsettled based on discursive fragmentation.

In contrast to scholars concerned with universal definitions of freedom and philosophical debates, anthropologists focus on how freedom is manifested in social relationships and contexts. In this sense, freedom in anthropological perspective is commonly defined as a relational and contextual concept and the ‘antithesis to unfreedom’⁷⁶ (Leach 1963: 74). This means that when people evaluate the degree of freedom that they possess, they usually do so by comparing themselves to what is not freedom among other social groups or different societies. In fact, the understanding among U.S. Hmong about the unfreedom of their co-ethnics in Laos is what enables them to positively reflect on and appreciate the greater freedoms they enjoy as American citizens and permanent residents in a democratic and capitalist society. Not surprisingly, Lao Hmong have contrasting discourses

⁷⁶ Leach defines unfreedom as a ‘state of servitude’.

about freedom which again emphasize the negative aspects of living in the American, capitalist nation-state compared to Laos.

Hmong in Laos: Social Freedom from Capitalist Economic Systems

Hmong in Laos claim that they have more social freedom in their country, ironically because of their underdeveloped economy and the non-capitalistic, subsistence-farming economy under which most of them live. They compared the freedoms they enjoy to what they perceived to be the absence of freedom among their co-ethnics in the United States who live in an oppressive, over-worked capitalist economic system that leaves little time for leisure. For example, for Nia Her, a young farmer in his mid thirties, village life in Laos allowed him considerably more flexible work schedules unlike the American capitalist system based on wage-labor and control over worker productivity:

For me, Laos is a better country for living, because I can freely live a natural life and go wherever I want. In America, it is a life constrained by time. Every day at 7:00am, you must go to work. If you miss just one hour, they won't pay you for that hour. Also, if I want to go visit my relatives here in Laos, I can of course go anytime. But for them [in the U.S.], it is difficult to do that, because they only have one day off from work each week. This means that they will have just one or two weeks to visit their relatives over the entire year. So living in my own village here in Laos is better.

Another interviewee Toua Her, also a farmer in his forties, compared the two countries in terms of economic disparities. He did acknowledge that their economic lives in Laos are 'insufficient' since they still rely on farming and added that even some wage-workers in Laos are day laborers without a secure and stable income while workers in the United States earn a monthly salary in addition to receiving benefits. However, when comparing his country and the United States, Toua actually claimed that lack of individual freedom, implicitly defined as free time for leisure, is the problem of an American capitalist

economy based on wage-labor. He explained:

When you live as a farmer in Laos, even if you just stay home because you don't want to work, no one will complain or scold you. As long as you harvest your crops and keep sufficient rice in storage for the rest of the year, you will have enough *freedom* to do what you want. Over there in the U.S., you get upset easily [*ook jja*], because if you take one day off, your salary will be reduced right away. You have to worry whether you have enough money to pay for many things all the time. [emphasis mine]

Based on this observation, despite the lack of economic wealth in Laos, Toua felt that 'life in Laos is much better. It is more comfortable here.'

The discourses of freedom among Hmong in Laos again emphasize the negative aspects of the wealthy American capitalist system, which restricts freedom to socialize and pursue a leisurely life. Although they acknowledge global economic hierarchies between the United States and Laos, they do not perceive themselves to be subordinated or inferior in such a system. In fact, they regard their own economic system as superior in regards to freedom.

The underdeveloped Lao economy and the country's relatively weak government also provide other (economic) freedoms for Lao Hmong as well, since they are less subject to governmental and bureaucratic control in terms of paying bills and taxes. In fact, during my fieldwork, I frequently observed that the local government in Laos has recently started collecting utility (electricity) bills. Hmong in the village explained that billing is a relatively new practice and they were not familiar with it in the past. However, the Lao government bill collectors did not strictly enforce or effectively collect money from each household. When the bill collectors went around the Hmong village on their motorbikes, they shouted to people in the house from the street, 'Pay your utility bills for the past month! You haven't paid for several months. Your fees are now 25,000 Lao Kip (two British pounds)!'

In response to such requests, Hmong from inside their house would simply respond, ‘I have no money yet. Please come back next time, I’ll pay then!’ The collectors would then soon leave the house and move to the next one (which would likely respond similarly) without making another appointment or leaving a warning notice. Currently, paying bills and taxes are indeed a very informal and flexible practice for both Hmong residents and government agents in Laos, which also shows the lesser degree of subjugation to governmental control compared to the United States.

In this case, the contrast is not between completely different economic systems of Laos and the United States, since both countries have utility bills and taxes like other countries. It is more about how Hmong in Laos do not yet feel completely subjected to the national economic system, mainly because of the lax and ineffective enforcement by state power. This of course does not mean that Lao Hmong experience no state economic control at all. As discussed in Chapter 6, the Lao state has effectively imposed cultural control over the Hmong New Year celebration in the name of promoting national economic development and productivity.

Therefore, it is still questionable to what extent Lao Hmong will continue to reconcile their national poverty (lack of economic power and freedom to pursue wealth) with their relative social freedom from the dominant capitalist economic system as the country continues to develop economically. Perhaps Hmong in Laos may not necessarily be completely free from economic pressures (such as keeping work schedules or paying taxes and bills) but they subjectively *feel* more freedom *compared to* the much more strict U.S. economic system to which their co-ethnics are subject. Such seemingly simple national economic differences further indicate that Hmong in Laos partly affiliate themselves with the nation-state (its relatively less developed economic condition) and use it to position themselves in the diasporic hierarchy by comparing their lives with their co-ethnics abroad. This may help alleviate the frustrations about national poverty that Lao Hmong have

persistently expressed (see Chapter 3).

Hmong in the United States: Economic Freedom and Political Rights

On the other hand, Hmong in the United States believe that the underdeveloped national economy in Laos lacks economic freedom to maintain a decent standard of living and that restricts consumption of goods. Most Hmong in the United States did not consider their current economic lives and working conditions to be oppressive or exploitive but rather took it for granted as members of a hegemonic capitalist system. Instead, they cherished their economic power and freedom as a most essential right that enables them to enjoy a ‘better’ life, which seemed to mainly refer to materialistic affluence and financial power as consumers in a capitalist market.

Such perceptions again reveal their discursive fragmentation with Hmong in Laos, who perceive U.S. Hmong to be less free because they lack the social freedom from the constraints of wage-labor and the capitalist system. The perceptions of Hmong living in the United States generate interesting and fundamentally different, if not opposed, understandings of the concept of economic and social freedom as claimed by Hmong in Laos. Ultimately, Hmong in the United States claim that their country is better because it provides greater economic freedom compared to Laos, thus reversing their hierarchical positioning in the diaspora by using a different definition of freedom.

Mee Lee, a retired Hmong woman in her late fifties, viewed the wealth of the United States as the basic way to gain freedom, which she implied was based on economic means and income. Because for Hmong living in the United States, freedom to fully participate in a capitalist economy and earn wages is an unquestionable and fundamental right, it is obvious for them that their country allows that freedom as a highly developed economy. Mee said, ‘The difference is that here [United States], it’s a free country so you can do whatever you want to make money as long as you don’t do anything bad. But in Laos, you have to work really hard [because it’s a poor country]. Of course, if you work hard, you will feel free, too,

but their country is just too poor and not the same as here.’

Interestingly, her statement directly contrasts with the way in which Hmong in Laos characterized their co-ethnics in the United States as lacking freedom to live a leisurely life in a capitalist system. In another interview, Neng Vang, an insurance sales agent in his late forties, also pointed out that Hmong people in Laos lacked economic freedom. By stating that ‘nobody can stop’ people from pursuing and achieving their economic goals in the United States, he emphasized how education can lead to economic freedom, such as running a business, making money, and improving one’s standard of living. Since Neng noted that educational opportunities are not readily available in Laos, he simultaneously implied that the country is in a lower position than the United States:

Most of my family and other Hmong in Laos do not have education. They just go to the farm and work in the fields. Of course they don’t have *freedom*. This country, you have education and you know how to run a business and make money. That’s *freedom*. You can go to school and nobody can stop you from making your dream come true. [emphasis mine]

The tendency of Hmong in the United States to emphasize economic freedom indicates that they do not find their current national economic system oppressive, which can also reveal how they have become subject to capitalist national hegemonies to some extent. Indeed, most U.S. Hmong consider the economic freedom of accumulated wealth to be an indispensable precondition for other kinds of freedom. This resembles Zygmunt Bauman’s discussion on freedom, which defines individualistic freedom in the context of capitalism. Bauman argues that ‘Modern renderings of freedom and definitions of capitalism are articulated in such a way that they presume the necessity of an unbreakable connection between the two and make the supposition that one can exist without the other logically flawed, if not absurd’ (1988:44).

Indeed, capitalism is fundamental to discourses about freedom and unfreedom, especially for diasporic Hmong. For U.S. Hmong, capitalism provides them with the freedom to pursue economic opportunities whereas Lao Hmong cherish their social freedom from capitalist control. In short, Hmong in both countries maintain critical perspectives on their co-ethnics' relative lack of freedom (influenced by their own national economic condition), thus reproducing hierarchies on the basis of the different national discourses in which they are embedded. Such contested discourses reveal how the same concept of freedom is deployed differently when refracted through different national contexts, regardless of what their actual economic living conditions are really like.

Cultural Hierarchies among the Hmong Diaspora

The Perceived Cultural Superiority of the Hmong in Laos

In contrast to national economic status, ethnic culture was considered especially important for Hmong in Laos when positioning themselves in relation to their counterparts in the United States. In contrast to Hmong in the United States, who regarded their modernity as an ethnic asset that enables them to better preserve and transmit a perceived traditional Hmong culture, Hmong in Laos tended to feel that it was precisely this American modernity that had caused their co-ethnics to lose traditional Hmong ethnicity and proper cultural practices.

The majority of Hmong in Laos felt that different national social contexts have produced significant differences in how Hmong practice and perform their cultural practices. They commonly pointed out that lack of ethnic villages and availability of communal facilities among Hmong in the United States limits their ability to perform certain customs properly. As a good example, funeral rituals based on cow sacrifice were commonly brought up as an essential part of funeral practices.

Sacrificing cows in public spaces in front of the house is considered the highlight of the funeral ritual, because it is believed that the cow's soul is connected to and should be exchanged with the dead body's soul through the ritual. However, in the U.S. social

environment, animal slaughter in public spaces for private purposes is not tolerated and Hmong cannot perform the required ritual of cow sacrifice at the funeral site. This limitation and difference were illustrated and compared, for instance, in the interview with Kong Her in Laos, a man in his late fifties:

Our relatives have been living in the U.S. a long time so whatever they do is like what other Americans do. For example, in our funeral tradition, when someone passes away, Hmong Americans can only go to a community center for the funeral that they rented for the ritual. But it is not their real home or village, and they don't own that place. For us Hmong in Laos, this is not allowed—funerals must be done at home in the village.

The emphasis on proper practice of funeral customs was also similarly made by Chong Lee, another man in his fifties, during our interview:

In the U.S., Hmong cannot practice our culture in the same way as we do in Laos, for instance, in terms of funerals. When someone passes away [because the casket is placed in a community hall instead of a private home], anybody can show up at any time whenever it is convenient [regardless of clan affiliation]. So the family cannot properly pay respects toward the deceased first. Usually, Hmong should go outside the house to sacrifice the cow, but Hmong Americans cannot do it outside, so have to stay inside everyday until the end of the funeral. So they no longer really know who the Hmong truly are.

Such discourses about cultural differences in funeral practices caused by the constraints of living in the United States imply that Hmong in Laos have done a better job of apparently preserving Hmong traditions and that the country therefore enables them to practice a more proper ethnic culture. By critically stating that Hmong in the United States 'no longer know who the Hmong truly are,' Chong is implicitly placing them lower in a cultural and diasporic hierarchy of authenticity.

In fact, because the United States prohibits ritual sacrifice of animals in public spaces, during a funeral in Sacramento that I attended, the cow sacrifice was performed separately on an American farm, where a Hmong family had purchased cows for ritual slaughter. At the proper moment during the funeral, the clan representative directing the proceedings called a group of Hmong men on the farm to initiate the ritual sacrifice. Later, about seven cow carcasses were delivered in a truck to the funeral site (a community hall named ‘the Hmong Palace Church’, rented for the purpose of conducting funerals) for butchering, cooking, and consumption by the guests. This is a good example of how diasporic Hmong living as ethnic minorities in different nation-states have come to conform to different national regulations and modify their cultural practices accordingly.

In addition to funeral customs, a number of my interviewees in Laos claimed that they also conduct other cultural practices more properly and ‘traditionally’ than Hmong in the United States. According to Cha Thao, an elderly man in his late sixties, the major rituals of the New Year are also better maintained among the Lao Hmong community:

Hmong in Laos perform our culture better and more beautifully. Hmong here always celebrate the New Year between December and January, because it depends on the completion of the harvest and when we have new, fresh rice. This is a correct way to practice the New Year. In America, it’s different because they celebrate the New Year on various dates during different months. So I think Laos is more important and better.

Similarly, Kia Her, who discussed the relative positionality of Hmong communities in Laos and the United States, also believed that the U.S. Hmong community does not sufficiently maintain what she considers to be traditional Hmong culture. Kia said, ‘I think Laos is more important than the U.S. A lot of Hmong in the U.S. said that Hmong culture there has changed as the Hmong went to live with *them* [Americans]. In my opinion, their culture in

the U.S. is impoverished [*tuk yak*⁷⁷]. Whatever they practice, it is not the same as Laos anymore.’

However, it is important to note that Kia’s comparative cultural assessment was made after he initially discussed national economic differences that position Laos in a much lower and impoverished condition than the United States. According to him:

Laos is very different from the U.S. There are not enough things to eat, and not enough jobs. In the U.S., whether you have education or not, there’s always work for you. You can wash clothes (laundry business), wash the dishes, work as a cook, or make dolls. There are also jobs like cleaning buildings and making candies or snacks [...]. Nothing is available in Laos. Life is very hard.

Therefore, although the advanced state of the American national economy is acknowledged and valued, such economic superiority is not seen as necessarily promoting ethnic customs or subverting hierarchical orders, indicating that not all individuals subordinate culture to economic development.

In fact, it is important to remember that Hmong in Laos were actually reluctant to claim cultural authenticity (in a way, cultural superiority) due to the changes in their local practices caused by the state policies as discussed in Chapter 6. However, they persistently consider themselves to be in a better position to maintain more a ‘traditional’ and ‘correct’ culture *compared to* their co-ethnics in the United States. In other words, their culture may no longer be considered that authentic compared to the past, but it is still more authentic than the ethnic culture of U.S. Hmong. Therefore, what is important is not whether national contexts are producing cultural differences among diasporic Hmong. Instead, the relational and relative positioning among diasporic communities is what produces hierarchical discourses about national differences.

⁷⁷ Original definition is ‘being poor, poverty’.

Cultural Power of the Hmong in the United States

In contrast to the criticism of Hmong in Laos about the way ethnic cultures are practiced in America, the U.S. Hmong do not stress perceived differences in such cultural tradition as the main factor that determines their hierarchical positioning in the diaspora. They either think their cultural customs have not changed that much in the United States compared to Laos or even claim that the U.S. Hmong community has better economic resources and capacity to practice and maintain Hmong culture compared to their co-ethnics in Laos.

For example, according to Kao Vang, a woman in her late fifties, ‘Our culture is almost similar, just a little bit different in the funeral. In Laos, the dead body should be placed in the house and open to the visitors. But here [in the United States], the body is put in the casket.’ Sitting next to us, Kao’s husband agreed with his wife’s view of the cultural similarities and continuity among Hmong in the two countries, implying that whatever differences have emerged are miniscule and do not ruin the essence and meanings of funerals.

In a different interview, Chi Her explained that Hmong in the United States are even better at maintaining and promoting ‘traditional’ Hmong culture because of their better resources and organizational capacity based on their higher economic position and power. In his statement, it is implied that America’s economic position in the global order and the greater educational and social opportunities in the country can promote Hmong culture and perceived traditions more effectively. According to Chi:

In terms of culture, if I compare Hmong in Laos and the U.S., Hmong in the U.S. do not dress up in traditional clothes as much, but they learn about our tradition much more extensively. In Laos, everyone is very poor so they are just busy making a living and forget about learning our traditions. Here, people learn a lot. Even very small kids already know how to play the *qeej* [a bamboo pipe instrument], because they learned at cultural organizations or with some elderly Hmong instructors. If you have kids and want them to

learn Hmong traditional culture, you can take them to those places. We can afford to pay a little bit of money to teach our kids these traditions.

This perspective reflects many other views of Hmong in the United States, who actually consider themselves in a better position to maintain and perform their culture and ethnic customs, including promoting and embellishing them. In terms of cultural hierarchies between Laos and the United States, Brandon Xiong, a school principal in his mid-forties, claimed that:

Culture and heritage continue to change as they adapt to different environments. Hmong in this country will do things a little bit different from Hmong in Laos, France, and so on, because of different living environments and laws. But I think we [Hmong in the U.S.] do things better and more extensively by expanding our knowledge because we have seen other people do certain things and added those to ours. For example, funerals. Ten years ago, we did not see Hmong hiring flower services to decorate the top of the casket but now we go to every single funeral, you see the caskets decorated, more beautifully.

Therefore, for Hmong in the United States, there is no inherent tension or contradiction between modernity and 'tradition'. In fact, it is believed that the economic and social resources of modern societies like the United States enable ethnic and cultural traditions to be maintained, indicating how tradition is not incompatible with modernity. They feel that they are also at the center of the diaspora in terms of Hmong culture, despite living in a highly economically modernized society. It is precisely their claim over modernity and economic development that they believe will preserve and further improve what they perceive to be Hmong ethnic traditions.

As a result, some of my interviewees argued that U.S. Hmong should be the most important and leading community in the diaspora not simply because their country is the most modernized and economically developed, but also because this provides them with the

greatest economic and educational capacity to maintain Hmong ethnic culture. In other words, their justifications for the superior hierarchical positioning of the United States is also based on ethnic culture and ‘tradition’, which is enabled by (instead of opposed to) modernity. This is shown in an interview with Mia Vang, who observed that:

Here [in America], people are in many research fields and have high education so they can keep our culture alive. Even though the Hmong are spread out within the U.S., I think we are more equipped to continue the culture because of the higher educational system here. Other countries like Thailand and Laos are maybe a little bit underdeveloped to do so, although I don’t know much about China.

This again indicates that such hierarchical discourses among diasporic peoples are very much based on partial affiliation to the nation-states in which they live.

Political Differences and Hierarchy

Contrasting Political Systems and Contested Claims of Superiority

In his edited book on freedom from an anthropological perspective, Bidney (1963: 20), writing during the Cold War, argues that the world is divided into two conflicting political systems: Communism (which he defines as ‘Totalitarian Democracy’) and Liberalism (‘Constitutional Democracy’). According to him, ‘Both sides profess themselves as the champions of freedom and appeal to the uncommitted peoples of the world for support and allegiance’ (Bidney 1963: 20). Although we no longer live in such a starkly bipolarized world, considering that Cold War geopolitics continue to be relevant to the Hmong diaspora, it seems inevitable that both Hmong communities in Laos and the United States not only claim ownership over freedom based on conflicting economic systems, but political systems as well.

For Hmong living in the democracy of the United States, political freedom is regarded as unimaginable in Communist Laos. However, Hmong in Laos reject such

assumptions and praise the individual political success of Hmong in the country, believing that similar political opportunities are limited for Hmong in the United States. While this discursive fragmentation is the basis on which members of the two communities claim higher political status over each other, they also show that both are highly influenced by contrasting state ideologies and political discourses.

Lao Hmong Perspectives

Unlike Hmong in the United States, Hmong in Laos hardly mentioned political systems in comparing themselves to their co-ethnics in the United States. However, in another illustration of discursive fragmentation, the Communist Party system in Laos, which was regarded negatively by U.S. Hmong from a democratic context, was perceived positively by some Hmong in Laos. This is because it has enabled members of the Hmong minority group to become successful government officers.

The global political hierarchy (that places liberal democracies higher than authoritarian and Communist regimes) is challenged, if not inverted by Hmong in Laos, producing their own positioning of diasporic communities. As a governmental administrator, Vang Lee compared national political systems between Laos and the United States and positioned the Lao Hmong community higher in terms of political opportunities and achievement as an ethnic minority. Vang explained:

Hmong in Laos are entitled to a lot of opportunities and are placed in the highest position in the government. Do you know that in the National Assembly, the first member ranked the highest out of 11 is a female Hmong person? This means that Laos has already achieved gender equality and equal rights for all. This kind of achievement and success is very unique for Hmong in Laos and cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

By pointing out the examples of a few Hmong individuals who achieved political power and status in the nation, Vang highlighted Hmong's political success as only possible within the

Lao political system. He also prioritized the political achievements of the Hmong over national economic hierarchies by saying:

The U.S. is the most developed and richest country in the world but its citizens cannot be compared to Hmong here in terms of individual political success. The highest status that Hmong Americans can achieve is still lower, like a city mayor or some local governmental officer. However, if you go to the national museum here [in Laos], you will learn that the most prominent national hero in Lao history is a Hmong.⁷⁸ This shows that our country really values Hmong's contribution. The only problem that Hmong in Laos have is that there are still many households with poverty and low knowledge overall.

Vang emphasized that the statue of this Hmong individual is the biggest one displayed in the museum and therefore, he believes that the political contribution of the Hmong to Lao national history is highly valued and recognized by the Lao government.

U.S. Hmong Perspectives

While Hmong in Laos emphasize ethnic cultural practices and did not extensively discuss the impact of the different political systems of the two countries, Hmong in the United States frequently mentioned the political problems of Laos. They discussed how the current Laotian political system has produced negative cultural and ethnic consequences among Hmong between the two countries. Just as Hmong in Laos felt modernized American culture and lifestyles had led to undesirable cultural characteristics among their counterparts in the United States, U.S. Hmong had critical comments about certain behaviors of Hmong in Laos, which they believed was a product of their Communist political system. This illustrates another discursively fragmented discourse between the two diasporic communities along national lines.

Hmong in the United States attributed ethnic differences to the divergent political

⁷⁸ This Hmong national hero that Vang Lee refers to is a young Hmong leader in Lao national history who was recognized as a 'freedom fighter' by the country during the Japanese invasion. (Later, I visited the Lao National Museum and found the statue that he described.)

systems, focusing especially on the Communist political system in Laos. According to Mo Her, a retired man in his fifties, the U.S. Hmong are (General) ‘Vang Pao Hmong’ (the political military leader of the Hmong who initiated the alliance with the CIA during the Vietnam War). In contrast to this, Mo coined the term that Lao Hmong are ‘New Hmong’, who stayed with the Communist regime for over thirty years in Laos and therefore have become socialist.⁷⁹

In a different interview, after expressing no interest in visiting Laos, Ker Cha, a public school teacher in his forties, also explained the reason of his disillusioned image of Laos, which he attributed to the negative behaviors among Hmong living in a Communist country. He asserted, ‘I know the living environment in Laos and what life is like there. Because there, it is a corrupted Communist country, you never know what to expect. In recent years, Hmong people in Laos have also become corrupted, greedy, and perhaps a little brazen in terms of finding ways to get money.’

Since Ker also has a long personal history of sending remittances to financially support his (distant) relatives in Laos whom he never met, he seems acutely aware of how an underdeveloped Communist economy contributes to economic hardship of many Hmong in Laos. He uses this as the basis to speculate on the Lao political system and imagine the negative consequences of living there.

Discursive Differentiation and Diasporic Communities

Despite being members of a transnational diasporic community, Hmong have developed affiliations with their different countries of residence, positioning their own country as superior because they have better cultural, economic, and political status as well as enjoy greater freedom than their co-ethnics living in other nation-states. When dispersed and resettled minority communities constantly position and think of themselves in a diasporic context, they do so by comparing themselves to co-ethnics residing in other nation-states.

⁷⁹ Because Laos became a Communist country after the Vietnam War, the present Hmong community in Laos are considered ‘new’ since they are living in a ‘new’ national political system.

However, because of their ethnic and socioeconomic marginalization within the nation-states in which they reside, their affiliations with these countries become meaningful and positive *only* in comparative diasporic context, because they feel better-off in contrast to their co-ethnics elsewhere. In this respect, diasporic communities' national affiliations are not necessarily based on a genuine adoption of nationalist perspectives but rather constructed in relation to each other.

Although many Hmong in the United States believe their capitalist economy, namely freedom to pursue economic wealth and engage in various labor opportunities, places them in a better position than their co-ethnics abroad, Hmong in Laos actually find that the American capitalist economic system constrains and limits individual freedom as a social being. In addition, both communities engage in highly contrastive and contested discourses that hierarchically position themselves in a better and higher status based on the various other criteria, including cultural customs and political systems.

It is important to note that such discursive fragmentation does not necessarily cause actual social fragmentation between Hmong in Laos and the United States, either by disrupting or causing tension in transnational social relations across borders or by causing conflicts in social interactions between them when they visit each other. However, it can provoke diasporic communities to critically rethink assumptions of transnational ethnic homogeneity and social cohesion and recognize the importance of the national contexts in which all diasporic peoples live. Therefore, diasporas continue to be positioned in-between forces of the nation-states and their own diasporic communities. There is certainly transnational cultural and ethnic continuity among diasporic peoples across borders, but also differences and discursive fragmentation along national lines.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Diasporas and Nation-States

'We never had a government of our own, but we live as a *people*', Nou Thao, a Hmong villager in Laos, remarked at the end of the interview in a calm but robust tone as he stared into light of the sunset that came into the dark room through his half-open wooden door. Nou's succinct response reflected similar sentiments by many other Hmong with whom I spoke.

Indeed, because the Hmong do not have a definite ethnic homeland, they identified first and foremost as a diasporic 'people', instead of as nationals who are members of particular nation-states. My thesis has explored what it really means to live as a 'people without a country' and attempted to understand what makes the Hmong preserve such a diasporic consciousness while residing in specific nation-states. I have analyzed how they participate in shared daily social, cultural, and economic activities across national borders despite their geographic dispersal and the lack of a specific homeland or ethnic and cultural origins.

Because of the absence of a country of ethnic origin that serves as a territorialized center of a diasporic identity and community, the Hmong diaspora consists of co-ethnics scattered across various nation-states. Nonetheless, Hmong do not passively accept their homelandless condition with an attitude of resignation. Instead, they continue to discuss how it affects their lives as minorities in various nation-states and actively search for ethnic origins and belonging, even if they are simply imagined homelands.

Belonging to a geographically scattered group of Hmong people instead of a nation-state has multiple possible meanings for diasporized groups. It enables them to live beyond the nation-state's territorial boundaries to a certain extent, since they are embedded in transnational networks across national borders and develop ethnic affiliations with diasporic co-ethnic communities located elsewhere. They can also freely imagine a cohesive ethnic

community and a collective ethnic solidarity in the diaspora that overcomes national boundaries and territorial presence. However, this does not consign diasporic people to a permanent stateless status, because the concrete presence of the nation-state remains significant in their daily lives. This condition contextualizes how Hmong also positions themselves transnationally in the diaspora based on the countries to which they partially belong. Diasporas are relational since they can be defined by some sense of belonging to multiple nation-states. As a result, the Hmong diaspora continues to persist as a community by partially adopting a sense of belonging *within* nation-states while simultaneously maintaining their diasporic cultural and social continuities *beyond* national borders.

Nonetheless, diasporic Hmong continue to be socioeconomically, culturally, and ethnically marginalized in these two countries as ethnic minorities and feel that they still ‘partially’ belong to the nation-state. Therefore, in addition to not having their ‘own country’, they have developed ambivalent feelings toward the origin country of Laos and their adopted country of the United States. Although Laos is the geographic center as the ‘de facto’ natal homeland of much of the contemporary Hmong diaspora, Hmong in both countries have ambivalent perspectives and relationships to it because of the Communist government and their continued status as ethnic minorities in the country. Instead of being a definite homeland of the Hmong that provides centripetal unity to the Hmong diaspora, Laos has rather become one of the lateral transnational communities of dispersal that are hierarchically positioned in relation to other nation-states in which Hmong reside.

In the United States, Hmong are latecomers to the U.S. immigrant community who suffer from economic hardship and social problems. Although some members of the Hmong American second generation can consider the country as an adopted homeland, it remains a country of partial belonging because many of them have not yet become full members of the ethnonational community.

In short, diasporas are characterized by partial alienation to multiple nation-states, which is historically constituted through both international politics that produce forced dispersal as well as internal national inequalities that can result in socioeconomic and ethnic marginalization. Such a condition of national non-belonging is exacerbated among diasporas without ethnic homelands, making the Hmong truly a people without their own country. This distinctive situation of the Hmong diaspora contextualizes its ongoing effort and actions to promote diasporic affiliations and ethnic affinity across national borders through transnational cultural and social continuities and connections. This partly overcomes national boundaries and produces a collective diasporic ethnic identity across national borders.

This thesis has therefore examined how Hmong have maintained their diasporic community by continuing their cultural practices and ethnic traditions across national borders based on extensive transnational social kin networks. In order to examine such transnational continuities in the diaspora, I focused on Hmong kinship practices and shamanism. The dominant kinship principles based on surname clans are not merely a practice continued locally by Hmong in Laos but continued to operate across national borders in the diaspora and have indeed become hegemonic in diasporic contexts to evoke a common ethnic identity and solidarity. Members of the same clan are considered kindred and subject to reciprocal hospitality and Hmong are expected to conform to clan exogamy and ethnic endogamy. The biologization of kinship, along with recurring discourses of the absent ethnic homeland causes the Hmong to adhere unconditionally to their kinship system despite different national contexts and discursive challenges from the younger generation of U.S. Hmong.

Another cultural continuity in the diaspora is Hmong shamanism, based on the notion of mobile souls, shamanistic births, and religious and spiritual healing rituals. Although shamanism is often seen as traditional, localized practices, the Hmong ancestor worship culture has been flexible and adaptable and persisted transnationally in the diaspora while

being simultaneously transformed in local context. The shaman's spiritual rituals remain effective across national borders while being individualized (from a social, community-oriented event) and commodified when practiced in transnational contexts. Both kinship and traditional shamanism have had a powerful effect for diasporic Hmong and counter the forces of fragmentation in the diaspora, allowing them to continue their Hmongness across national borders.

Despite the importance of transnational communities that maintain socioeconomic and cultural continuity in the Hmong diaspora in ways that partly transcend national boundaries, the diasporic Hmong community has also been influenced by the different nation-states in which they currently reside. My thesis therefore also focused on diverging ethnic perceptions among Hmong in Laos and the United States and the differences in cultural traditions and contrastive discourses which reflect the impact of different local socioeconomic conditions, cultural policies, as well as political conditions in each nation-state. In particular, I examined how Hmong cultural practices have become differentiated by analyzing the traditional New Year celebrations in both countries and how the mutual ethnic perceptions of these two diasporic communities are discursively fragmented according to national differences.

The Hmong New Year effectively illustrates the impact of national differences, specifically the remarkable economic disparities and contrastive political systems between Laos and the United States. Depending on the accessibility to economic resources in each country, Hmong's celebration of the New Year has been reduced in length, public visibility, and complexity in Laos while it has become an elaborate, well-attended, and excessively commercialized ethnic festival in the United States. This change becomes further salient in the context of multicultural policies in the two nation-states, which result in cultural restrictions by the Lao government in the name of equal economic opportunity, and limited

government control in the United States because of the equal right of minorities to maintain cultural traditions and differences.

National differences in the Hmong diaspora have also produced contested and sometimes negative perceptions about co-ethnics abroad. Hmong in Laos and the United States have contrasting perceptions of and disagreements about the in/authenticity of their cultural traditions, economic versus cultural superiority, and ideologies about freedom and different political systems. These diverging perceptions highlight how diasporas can often be discursively fragmented and cause different diasporic communities to position themselves hierarchically in relation to co-ethnics elsewhere. They also illustrate the partial affiliations of diasporic peoples to different nation-states.

Throughout my thesis, I have therefore grappled with a double-edged condition of the Hmong diaspora. On the one hand, there are compelling transnational continuities in cultural and kinship practices that ensure Hmong in Laos and United States stay connected to and actively engage in various relationships with each other across national borders as a diasporic 'people'. On the other, their cultural practices and mutual perceptions have become refracted through different national contexts, producing cultural differentiation and discursive fragmentation that reflect the influence of their respective nation-states.

The National and the Transnational

In this sense, my research on the Hmong diaspora contributes to an alternative way to understand theories of diaspora and diasporic communities. First, it suggests that we should examine how diaspora as a social formation resulted from the mutual reconfiguration of the national and the transnational. Scholars have pointed out the co-existence of national and transnational and their impact on migrants and their hosts (Brah 1996; Glick Schiller et al 2006). They argue that localized studies of particular ethnic migrant communities should not neglect the way the migrants' lives are influenced by national policies, politics, and cultures. Likewise, scholars emphasize the impact of transnationalism on non-migrant domestic

citizens residing in nation-states by noting that many contemporary national social circumstances are now influenced by cultures and economies brought by migrants from abroad in an increasingly transnationalized world.

As scholars on transnational migration point out, transnational influences on local peoples are connected to migration and mobility, since migrants maintain socioeconomic and cultural connections with their country of origin (see Smith 2006; Vertovec 2001). However, it is important to remember that individuals do not always have to migrate in order to become transnational and conduct lives which are socially linked to other countries. Those who do not move across national borders and remain in the sending country also develop and maintain transnational relations with co-ethnics who have migrated abroad. They can therefore be equally affected by cross-border social forces as those engaged in transnational mobility.

In this context, my study has attempted to clarify and specify the nature of both national and transnational influences on localized diasporic Hmong residing in Laos and the United States. Lao Hmong are definitely shaped by the national economic and ethnic context of Laos, but they are also influenced considerably by the shared transnational socioeconomic and cultural space that incorporates their co-ethnics living in the United States. They do not always migrate transnationally across national borders, since there is little contemporary Hmong migration from Laos to the United States except for marriage migration (see below). However, while remaining within the confines of the nation-state, Lao Hmong lead transnational lives that are embedded in cross-border cultural and socioeconomic relations with the United States, which may be just as important for their daily social and economic well-being as the influence of national conditions in Laos.

Likewise, U.S. Hmong are also impacted greatly by the national socioeconomic conditions and mainstream cultural influences in the United States. While also being embedded in transnational connections with Lao Hmong, they are perhaps less dependent on

them since they do not rely on their co-ethnics for their economic livelihood and social activities. They seem to have greater agency in the transnational relationship, since they are the ones who send remittances to support loved ones in Laos, make return trips to visit them, and help sustain their community events and cultural rituals. Therefore, the transnational relations that constitute diasporic communities may be more significant for the Hmong in Laos than they are for Hmong in the United States. Hmong's everyday lives and cultural and socioeconomic activities ethnographically illustrated in my thesis indicate that the impacts of trans/national power are not the same for different groups in the diaspora.

Second, my thesis demonstrated the importance of internal difference and conflicts that many diasporic groups experience. Much of this is the result of the clear national socioeconomic and cultural differences in which they are embedded, as shown in this thesis. However, the hierarchical differentiation and internal fragmentation of diasporic communities is also a product of cultural *continuities* that are the outcome of their participation in transnational connections and interactions. This is not to represent the distinctive nature of each diasporic community as a homogenous entity by neglecting the clear national differences causing internal tensions and disagreements among diasporic transnational peoples. Rather, it is to point out that discursive fragmentation often emerges because diasporic communities are committed to maintain the same cultural practices and ethnic 'traditions' across national borders through an interest in the political and social conditions of their co-ethnics in other countries. Indeed, disagreement in the diaspora is based to some extent on commonality, mutual participation, and congruent ethnic interests.

National difference is generally assumed to be the source of the Hmong diaspora's fragmenting discourses and ethnic perceptions. Indeed, different political systems and national conditions between Laos and the U.S. are considered seriously by both Hmong communities in critically reviewing their own lives in each country in relation to their co-ethnics residing abroad, regardless of whether their understanding of these national

differences are based on personal experience, transnational communications, or simply their imaginations.

Nonetheless, Hmong people's discursive fragmentations and disagreements in both countries are also about remarkably common and interconnected aspects of their lives and the sharing of similar values and objectives. These include the desire for greater economic development and wealth, the importance of retaining ethnic culture and 'traditions', and the equal value they place on social and political freedom that commonly exist in *both* countries. In other words, disagreements about shared and common aspects of life can often create internal tensions between national communities in the diaspora as well as ambivalent feelings toward each other. This may also be the case with broader global issues and international relations. In Biao Xiang's (2014) analysis of the Chinese public's perception of transpacific relations with the United States, he argues that the interconnectedness of the seemingly conflicting political and economic regimes of the two countries reveals a Chinese desire to become 'similar' in order to 'compete' with the U.S.

This point was specifically illustrated in Chapter 7 about the Hmong New Year festival and in Chapter 8 about diverging discourses between the Lao and U.S. Hmong communities. The two chapters particularly illustrated the ways and strategies that each Hmong community has chosen to take, in order to promote common Hmong ethnic and cultural identities within their local communities as well as transnationally. Indeed, both communities' active engagement and extensive participation in the same ethnic cultural practices provided the fundamental source of different discourses and incongruent perspectives, including the relative 'authenticity' of their shared ethnic traditions. Their assessments of national differences in terms of social freedom, economic wealth, and lifestyles between Lao and U.S. Hmong in the diaspora were also based on these shared common values. In short, diasporic communities experience complicated daily politics and different perceptions toward each other based on shared and common transnational

interactions and communications.

My research focused on such transnational relations and argued that we not only examine those between the diaspora and its original homeland but also lateral transnational linkages between dispersed co-ethnic communities residing in various countries. In this sense, transnationalism is important not only for understanding the extent to which diasporic groups are involved in common interactions and exchanges with each other across national borders but also to compare the differences and disparities that exist among the co-ethnic communities dispersed across multiple nation-states.

Finally, I wish to point out that a transnational perspective allows us to examine the way diasporic groups selectively and strategically position themselves in a global context. The fact that diasporas are often based on transnational continuities and commonalities of course does not mean their specific communities are characterized by egalitarian relations. As noted in Chapter 8, diasporic communities in different countries are not only discursively fragmented but also position themselves hierarchically in relation to each other, which reflects the global inequalities between the nation-states in which they are located. This illustrates how the members of diasporas are also embedded in and affiliate themselves with different national ideologies. Such global positioning is critical for understanding many contemporary diasporic peoples who have experienced the shared processes of persecution, exile, and displacement from their homelands and resettlement in new countries.

In this sense, scholars need to further consider how diasporas are constituted and internally differentiated by hierarchical orders of national power and their impact on the way diasporic members transnationally connect to each other and produce discursively fragmented ethnic discourses. Over time, nation-states become more salient for diasporas as its members live in them for extended periods and eventually develop new nationalized homes.

In sum, my research on the Hmong diaspora suggests another way to examine how diasporas are a social formation that results from the mutual reconfiguration of the national and the transnational. In this sense, this thesis sheds light on how diasporic practices are based on shared transnational commonalities but are also nationally defined and locally manifested. This overcomes binary analyses that posit the nation-state against the transnational nature of diaspora. In so doing, my thesis suggests we examine diasporas as a dialectical process involving both transnational continuity and national differentiation across borders.

Further Research

My perspective on diasporas can be expanded to include a number of related topics for future research. In particular, I would like to explore the gendered and religious dimension of the Hmong diaspora through further multi-sited fieldwork. The gendered aspect of Hmong diaspora can be examined through a study of marriage migration from Laos to the United States. Unlike other diasporas that continue to develop through subsequent labor and family reunification migration and return migration to the homeland, marriage migration is perhaps the only predominant type of transnational mobility in the contemporary Hmong diaspora.

As discussed in the thesis, Laos and the U.S. exhibit considerable economic disparities as well as different social and political systems and cultural policies. Marriage migration patterns thus far have consisted predominantly of Hmong women moving from Laos to the United States to marry U.S. Hmong men. Recently, however, young Hmong men in Laos have started to engage in romantic relationships with older women from the United States and some of them eventually migrated to the U.S. for marriage. This trend is slightly different from a 'traditional' perspective on marriage migration, which involves women as the dominant migratory subject.

By examining different patterns of marriage migration, I would like to investigate the extent to which socioeconomic inequalities between the two nation-states influence the

gendered relationships between the spouses. This will allow me to further examine the impact of national hierarchies on daily politics among individuals as well as transnational diasporic communities. In addition, I would also like to explore how the two diasporic communities in Laos and the U.S. respond in a critical manner to the processes of marriage, migration, and settlement.

As part of my work that contextualizes the complex ethnic experiences of diasporized Hmong in different local societies and analyzes their transnational dimensions, I am also interested in the emerging power of Christianity, especially among Hmong in the United States. In addition to shamanism, this is another important religious dimension of the Hmong diaspora. It is important to understand the internal differences and diverging perspectives among diasporic communities caused by the advent of this new religious orientation among Hmong in the United States and its possibly transformative impact on Hmong cultural practices. Although Hmong Christians in the United States have developed transnational influence in the diaspora by differentiating themselves from the ethnic traditions of non-Christian Hmong (such as shamanistic rituals and funerals), they have also attempted to integrate their religious values in traditional Hmong activities, including New Year festivals.

In this context, further research should closely look into how Hmong American Christians develop discourses about universalism and modernity in contrast to the particularistic nature of traditional Hmong culture in the U.S. and during their missionary trips to Hmong communities in Southeast Asia. Such future research will further strengthen the main theme of my thesis, which argues that diasporic communities are embedded in local and national differences while continuing to be influenced by transnational interactions and affiliations across national borders.

Appendix 1.

[Estimate of Current Population of the Hmong Diaspora]

	Estimate	Source	Estimated Year	Data Collection
China	4-4.5 millions	Lemoine (2005)	N/A	N/A
Laos	449, 600	NSC Lao PDR ⁸⁰	2009	Self calculation ⁸¹
Thailand				
Burma				
Vietnam	896, 239	CEMA ⁸²	2003	National survey
Cambodia				
France				
Germany	77	Yang (2003)	2002	Unclear
Australia	2,190	ASB ⁸³	2006	National survey
Canada				
United States	260,073 ⁸⁴	Census Bureau	2010	National survey
French Guiana	2,120	Clarkin (2005)	Unclear	Unclear ⁸⁵
Argentina				

⁸⁰ National Statistics Center, Results from the Population Census 2005: www.nsc.gov.la.

⁸¹ 8% of total Lao nationals.

⁸² <http://cema.gov.vn/index.php>.

⁸³ Australian Statistics Bureau.

⁸⁴ U.S. Census Bureau 2010. Asian alone by selected groups: <http://www.census.gov>.

⁸⁵ The author's personal estimate based on the interviews he conducted.

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