

To Tell the Truth

By

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Abstract

This paper is inspired by the reading of Dr. Lee's article in Hmong Studies Journal, Vol. 8: "*Diaspora and the Predicament of Origins: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity*" and my recent, albeit too short visit to Minnesota in order to receive my Eagle Award in Hmong Studies and participate in the Center for Hmong Studies' Conference: "*Cultivating the Past, Interpreting the Present, and Enriching the Future*", at Concordia University, Saint Paul (April 12, 2008). There I met three fascinating Miao scholars from China.¹ There was some confrontation in our respective approach to (H)mong² studies from opposite viewpoints: their, the Miao imagined nation, mine, the (H)mong transnational ethnic group. Once more, I have the feeling that it is the duty of a scholar of my generation to see that (H)mong studies avoid the political and scholastic fantasies of the time, and keep progressing in the only right direction: scientific knowledge. I deal here with three issues: a) the recent development of (H)mong studies in China, b) the content and meaning of a so-called "Hmong/Miao transnationality", c) the faithfulness to (H)mong culture.

A. (H)mong Studies in China:

I have followed (H)mong studies in China for the past 40 years and my personal data collection on Chinese Minority Nationalities [including the (H)mong and the Miao] is quite comprehensive up to the end of the past millennium, but I must confess that the

¹ I am very grateful to Dr. Yang Dao and Mr. Xiong Lee Pao, Director of the Center, for this opportunity and the support they provided me during my stay in Saint Paul.

² Since my article in Hmong Studies Journal Vol. 6, What is the actual number of the (H)mong? I have decided to use a very simple system for distinguishing between the two main divisions of this ethnic group: Hmong and Mong by using brackets around the aspirated H, meaning it may or not be pronounced, when both are involved, and the real pronunciation Hmong or Mong according to the context when only one of them is concerned. In my previous publications I did stick to only one spelling Hmong adding the tribal marker: White, Green, Leng, Striped Sleeves, etc. because at this time, Hmong was a new name in ethnography and it was already difficult to have it properly used by concerned writers (See for instance the H'mong spelling in Vietnam). But I have always known that it was not satisfactory on linguistic grounds at least. When Mong speakers in the U.S. have made an issue of it, Hmong as an ethnic group name was well settled all over the world, and a more sophisticated approach could be undertaken, provided it did not break away radically from the previous spelling. Hence: (H)mong.

picture of the written resources on the (H)mong in China is changing. When, before, field studies were mostly collected in the volumes *Reports on the Investigation Data on Miao Nationality's Social History*³, a series encompassing all the Minority Nationalities of China, recent research is now published in books. And these books generally printed in small number (on the Chinese scale) are difficult to find outside the very province they have been published. Needless to say, Guizhou and Yunnan are the most likely places where to find those books. Unfortunately, they hardly transit from one province to another or to Beijing, Guangdong or Hong Kong, the book business in China remaining mostly labyrinthine.⁴ This is why it is so helpful that Hmong travelers in China collect as many books about the Miao as possible and that copies of these books may find their way to the Hmong Archives in Saint Paul, or/and in the Hmong Cultural Center Resource Library, also in Saint Paul (MN).

After the language barrier, the main problem in using Chinese studies is to distinguish what concerns specifically the (H)mong amidst the already huge literature on the Miao nationality. In *Investigation Data* the local ethnic name of the concerned Miao group is usually mentioned and this is very precious because since the creation of the Miao nationality in 1953 all of the local ethnic designations have been blurred in published material in order to show the “unity” of the Miao nationality. I think I was the first (in an appendix to my 1968 thesis⁵) to point out the three main Miao languages [(H)mong, Hmu, Kexiong or Qho Xiong] corresponding more or less to the same number of what we usually call “ethnic groups”.⁶ Later on, in 1985, visiting some of their villages in Yunnan, I identified the A Hmao, or Da Hua Miao, hidden under their linguistic classification as the “Eastern Yunnan sub-dialect of the Chuantiandian dialect [i.e. (H)mong] of Miao language”. More recently, the Ge or Ge Hmon, have made their way to the media and at least to one anthropologist in order to sustain their claim not to be classified as Miao.⁷

This purposeful blurring of ethnic differences in the past has generated irretrievable confusion among some non Chinese – and not acquainted with the Chinese field – Western scholars. The most blatant mistake is that of the self-taught scholar of Hmong culture, the late O.M.I. French missionary, Yves Bertrais, when he ordered a History of the Hmong in China from a Miao historian of Western Hunan Jishou University, ending up with a History of the Miao and had it translated into Hmong

³ A better translation, taking account of the actual content of this series should be “society and history”. I am here using the common translation in use among English-writing authors.

⁴ Some authors, printing on their own, cannot afford the very expensive price of registering an ISBN number, this prevents their books from being sold in bookstores and exported abroad.

⁵ Later reproduced in my 1972 book : *Un village Hmong vert du Haut Laos* (A Green Hmong Village of Highlands Laos)

⁶ The Chinese source book was translated and published in the same year, 1972, by Herbert C. Purnell as *Miao-Yao Linguistic Studies*, Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Data Paper 88.

⁷ See Siu Woo Cheng's thesis: “Subject and Representation: Identity Politics in Southeast Guizhou” University of Washington, Seattle 1996; and papers: “Representation and Negotiation of Ge Identities in Southeast Guizhou” in Melissa Brown (ed), *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan*, Berkeley 1996, University of California, and “Miao Identity in Western Guizhou” in Tapp et al (ed), *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, Chiangmai 2004, Silkworm Books.

language as a History of the Hmong, that lumps together – as “Hmong” history – historical events concerning mostly Hmu and Kexiong!⁸ This first book of history in the Hmong language certainly deserves consideration; altogether it misleads rather than enlightens its readers at the present stage. In order to save such a well wishing, albeit premature project, we should think of a corrected editing of this book in which Miao would replace Hmong each time there is a question of identity about the concerned population. And in several pages where Hmu or Kexiong are obviously involved, “Miao” again should be appropriately replaced by “Hmu” or “Kexiong”. Then (H)mong readers will have a more accurate approach of their group’s history and its involvement in the general history of the Miao.

The merging of anthropological facts selected in different groups into a kind of synthesis introduced as a first hand analysis is hampering any research progress and produces a ready-made presentation of a virtual nationality vaguely corresponding to the actual ethnicities involved in this construction, as it is often the case in the short Nationality presentation series – including the Miao. In the same way that nationality identity is understood by each ethnic group as a nickname hiding its true ethnic identity, and used as a joker within each group and a wildcard outside, the authors of these short nationality monographs often describe their own group as representing all the others as well. The picture is even more flabbergasting when we look at linguistics: the actual Miao languages are introduced as “dialects” of a purely virtual Miao language⁹. Not even spoken at Esperanto stage! What would Chinese linguists think of us if we pretended that Italian, French, Spanish and Romanian were but “dialects” of Latin and that the people speaking those were only one and the same “nationality”? Fortunately, some recent books and articles on the Miao, concerned in explaining the diversity of “dialects” and costumes have resolutely turned their back to this normative approach and tried to secure real field data for their analysis. Yang Zhengwen¹⁰, in his beautiful field study of the diverse costumes and ornament of the Miao, resorts to the concept of “branches” (Zhixi) that encompasses – according to the context – ethnic groups (Zujiun) and subgroups (Yazujiun). His arguments are quite revealing of the Chinese ethnographers’ inner struggle about the use and abuse of the nationality (minzu) name. He writes (p.45): “Among Minority Nationalities of China such as the Miao, the Yao, the Yi, the Dai, the Hani etc., especially those who never achieved their own common state, their own common writing, tribal cultural differences are great, ethnic boundaries are even more conspicuous [...] Because among the Miao, ‘branches’ are such a prominent cultural

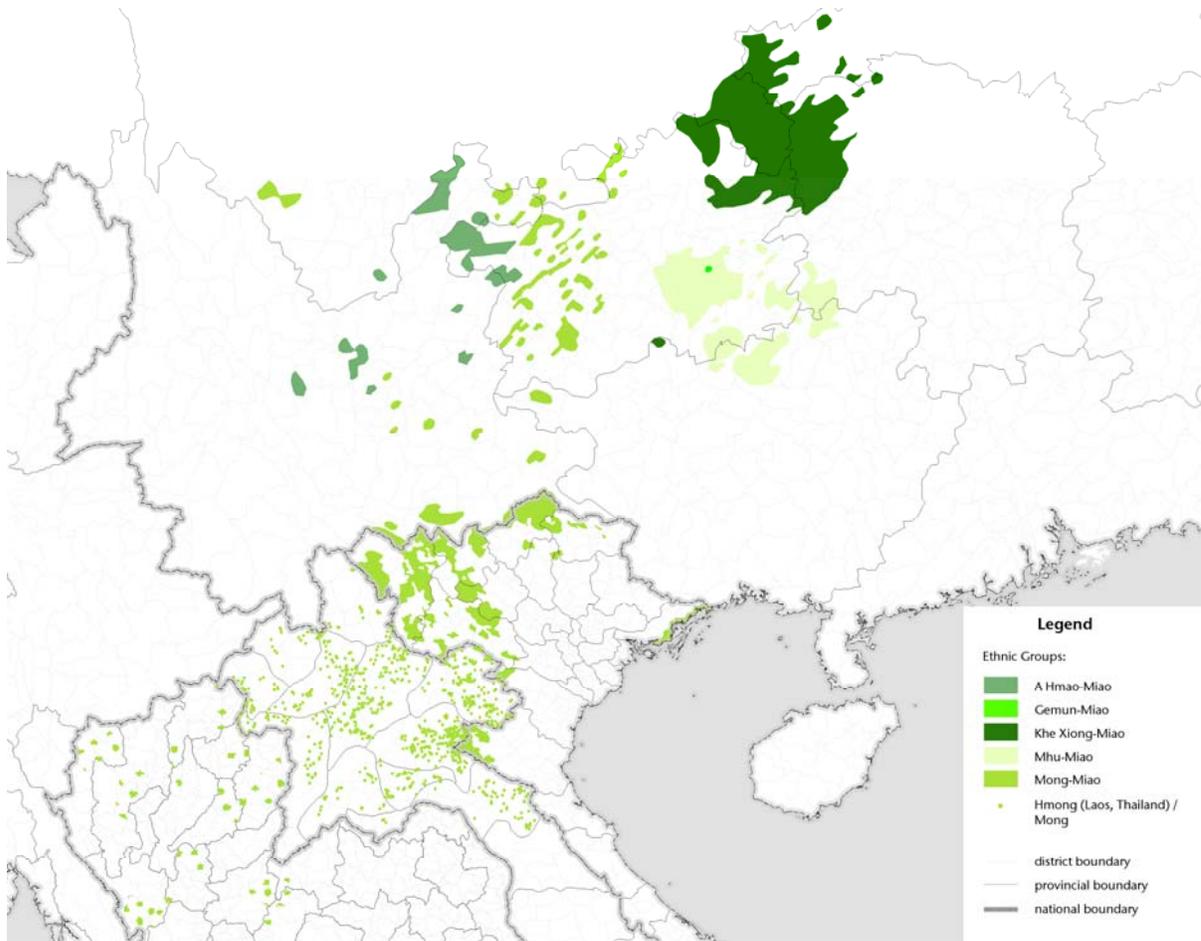
⁸ This book was published in the Hmong language in 1997 as *Haiv Hmoob Liv Xwm*, followed, in 1999, by the Chinese original manuscript published in Guizhou under the title *Zhongguo Miaozu tongshi* “A Comprehensive History of the Chinese Miao” with a slightly different English subtitle on the jacket: “A Comprehensive History of the Chinese Hmong”, probably in order to please Father Bertrais who ordered the work.

⁹ I am baffled when I read this sentence: “the presence or absence of certain terms in Miao lexicon pointed convincingly to the conclusion that they could not have originated farther north than their present distribution.”, quoted from Louisa Schein’s 2000 book (supposed to concern the *Hmu* of South-East Guizhou) by Gary Yia Lee: 2007 who adds “In other words, the Miao have always been in central and southern China where they are today”, while the context shows clearly he obviously means the *Hmong*!

¹⁰ Yang Zhengwen: *Miaozu fushi wenhua (Costumes and Ornaments Culture of the Miao)*. Guiyang: 1998, Guizhou Nationalities Press.

phenomenon, they cannot be ignored by our study of Miao costumes and ornaments. “Branch’s” consciousness influences not only the creation of the form and content of the costumes and ornaments but also marriage and religious beliefs and the perception of the outside world [...] Since the 1950s the Miao have been made a unified nationality in terms of administration and in the eyes of other nationalities. In their heart Miao intellectuals have no doubt about their ‘Miao’ identity whatever their diverse traditional costumes, languages, ethnic groups and subgroups...But one cannot say that the ‘branches’ to which they belong are breaking the substance of Miao identity as a whole and are breaking the unity and cohesion of the Miao Nationality. Branches are an objective fact, an individual cultural result and also the consequence of the Miao ceaseless migrations and the influence of the other peoples they met throughout History.”¹¹ This is exactly my position when I look at the Miao in China from an Indochina (H)mong viewpoint. It is a fact that China has established a Miao political nationality which aims to encompass all the different ethnic groups and subgroups which have been found more or less related to each other by linguists and historians. So far as this political “nationality” category is concerned it belongs to the Chinese political landscape. Chinese (H)mong are only part of it. It does not mean that their language, culture and diverse subgroups have ceased to exist any more. On the contrary, as soon as someone such as Yang Zhengwen goes field working, he meets with anthropological facts that cannot be suppressed despite all the past 50 years’ political pressure in the name of Miao unity. And the same can be said of Hmu, Kexiong, A Hmao, etc., other ethnicities among the Miao political whole.

¹¹ A concept also put forward by Xiong Yuyou: 2003, *Miaozu wenhua shi (A cultural history of the Miao Nationality)*, Kunming, Yunnan Nationalities Press, who remarks (p.22): “Miao branches is an objective fact and at the same time a historical phenomenon created by many factors that we cannot hide [...] and we can still less advocate that the use of all sorts of appellations, because it widens the differences between branches, destroys the cohesion of the nationality.”



Map of the four main ethnic groups of the Miao Nationality so far as we know

Basing his study on the differences in traditional costumes as a marker of different traditions according to ethnic or tribal local groups, Yang has established a first list of 60 cultural branches. For each, he provides the vernacular name of the people and the dialect and/or sub-dialect spoken. These subgroups correspond to a cultural heritage including customs, language and costumes that delineate a tribal entity, but are distinguished here by their particular dress style in a place chosen by Yang to name that particular “branch”. It is actually similar to the tribal groups: Hmong Der, Mong Leng, Mong Njua, Hmong Krua Nba, Hmong Du, etc. we find amidst Indochina (H)mong. 2/3 of these Chinese tribal branches are speaking a kind of (H)mong language, of which, according to the linguistic classification, Indochina (H)mong represents only one dialect. It leaves us with 8 (H)mong groups speaking the same language as Indochina (H)mong.

They are:

-- the Mong Liai [Lia?, Lai?], Mong Pang or Flowery Mong of the “Anbu branch” who inhabit, in Guizhou Province, Anshun, Puding, Zhenning districts. Locally they are called Hua Miao or Da Hua Miao¹².

--the Mong Tlong [Dler?] or White Miao of the “Chahe branch” who inhabit, in Guizhou province, Bijie (their original home), Dafang, Qianxi, Guiyang (*Niaodang, Mengguan* villages) Pingba (*Linka, Xiaba* villages), Qingzhen and Zhenning districts.

--the Mong Plou [Dler?] or White Miao of the “Xilin branch” who inhabit, in Guangxi province, many villages of Xilin and Longlin districts and, in Yunnan province, Guangnan, Funing, Qubei, Maguan, Wenshan, Malipo and Yanshan districts.

--the Mong Plou [Dler?] or White Miao of the “Zhaihe branch” who inhabit in Sichuan province, Gulin, Xuyong, Xingwen, Gongxian and Hejiang districts and in Guizhou province, Jinsha, Chishui, Ren Hui districts.

--the Mong Plou [Dler?] or White Miao of the “Zunyi branch” inhabiting, in Guizhou province, Zunyi and Tongzi districts

--the Da Mong [Tua Mong?] of the “Bianyang branch” inhabiting, in Guizhou province, Luodian, Huishui, Changshun, and Wangmo districts speaking a “Southwestern sub-dialect of (H)mong language”.

--the Mong Pang, or Flowery (Hua) Miao of the “Xuyong branch”, originally inhabiting in Sichuan province, Xuyong district. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, this group, designated in historical books as Chuan Miao (i.e. “from Sichuan”), started migrating, Westward to Xingwen, Gongxian, Junlian, Mozhihua, Huidong, Huili, Muli, in Sichuan, Weixin, Yilang, Yanjin, Dagan, Qiaojia, Lijiang, Zhongdian, Nanjian in Yunnan; Eastward to Bijie, Dafang, Zhijin, Qianxi, Qingzhen, Pingba, Guiyang, Longli, Guiding, Fuxuan, Anshun, Puding, Ziyun, Liupanshui in Guizhou; Southward to Wenshan, Guangnan, Maguan, Malipo, Pingbian, Mengzi, etc., in Yunnan.

--the Mong Pei [Pe?], or Flowery (Hua) Miao in local Chinese, of the Panxian branch inhabiting, in Guizhou province, Panxian and Pu An districts.

To these eight branches we can add the Mong Plu [Dlu ?], or Black Miao inhabiting, in Yunnan province, Kaiyuan, Mengzi, Guangnan, Maguan, Wenshan, Gejiu and Honghe districts. They also exist in Vietnam and Laos albeit their dialect is unintelligible to other Indochina (H)mong. It would be interesting to know how this group is classified by the Chinese linguists. Unfortunately Yang gives no clue to it. Maybe their dialect is close to a second dialect of (H)mong spoken by three groups in his study:

¹² Not to be confused with the A Hmao of Eastern Yunnan, also called Da Hua Miao by the local Chinese.

--the Mong that the Chinese call Xiao Hua Miao “Little Flowers (Small Decorative Patterns) Miao of the “Liuzhong He branch”, inhabiting both banks of the Liuzhong River; on the Southern one, Hezhang, Nayong, Weining and Zhijin; on the Northern one, Bijie and Dafang districts.

--the Mou [Mon?] or Horned or Flowery Miao of the “Agong branch”. Their Chinese nickname points at their women’s headdress: a huge bun of black hair forming a kind of canopy above the round faces of these young women that the Chinese seem to see as a huge pair of buffalo horns (?). They live, in Guizhou province, in Zhijin, Nayong and Puding districts.

--the Mong Sha [Shua?] or Chinese Hmong of the “Mong Sha branch” who further divide into no less than 6 “sub-branches” along their dress styles and sub-dialects. They inhabit, in Guizhou province, Dafang, Bijie, Zhijin, Jianxi, Pingba, Anshun, Puding, Zhenning, Langdai, Lupanshui, Anlong and Xingren districts; in Guangxi province, Longlin and Xilin districts; in Yunnan province, Guangnan, Qubei, Mengzi and Gejiu districts.

Also included in the large (H)mong “cultural family” are the groups speaking Guiyang dialect, Huishui dialect, Luobohe dialect, Nandan dialect, Zhonganjiang dialect and Mashan dialect. Yang has divided them into a number of “branches” or dress styles that would be too long to detail here. I just mention them to provide a fair picture of (H)mong diversity in China, a matter of fact that should be scrutinized in order to see if it means “different tribes of the same ethnic group” or “different ethnic groups” such as we understand the different Tai groups in the West. A puzzling feature is the fluctuation of ethnic names. For instance, speakers of the Zhonganjiang dialect call themselves “Gemo”, and Luobohe dialect speakers, “Mjo”, instead of “Mong”. Among the Huishui dialect speakers, fluctuation is even greater. People of the “Yunwu branch” call themselves “Mo”, while the “Gaopo branch” or Magpie Miao’s ethnic name is “Mou”, the “Baipang branch”, “Man”, the “Baijin branch”, Mao and the “Yazhai branch”, “Mu”. None of the tribal groups speaking the Huishui dialect call themselves “Mong”. In all likelihood they should be of a different ethnic group.

On the contrary, speakers of the Guiyang dialect usually call themselves Mong or Da Mong. Despite linguistic discrepancies they could be considered belonging to the same (H)mong ethnic group. However facts are not so simple. On the east of the numerous (H)mong settlements are two other important ethnic groups speaking Kexiong and Hmu languages. They also divide in the field into a variety of “branches” and dress styles. The speakers of Hmu language usually call themselves Hmu [Hmau, Mu] or Kanao [Kanong, Kanou]. However, according to Yang, in five instances the name is Hmong (or Mong)¹³ (for speakers of the northern dialects of Hmu language) such as the

¹³ One of the reviewers of this article has remarked “I have recently heard a ‘Miao’ girl from Taijiang County of Guizhou talking to her affinal relatives from Kaili in Guizhou, who call themselves ‘Kanao’, and although she spoke no Hmong she called herself and her group ‘Mong’ (in what I heard as a mid, level tone). Indeed the pre-aspiration seems to be uncommon, and this author’s consistent use of ‘(H)mong’ is indeed a commendable example to us all.” Having no personal experience of this group I feel inclined in following his and readily acknowledge that I may have stuck too slavishly to Yang’s own transcription of his data in the Latin alphabet. The fact is that Hmong cannot be written in Chinese and that it is always transcribed as Mong, the Chinese writers who want to be more precise resorting to a Latin transcription between brackets. Yet, it may not be accurate or may be influenced by the actual Hmong/Miao fashion.

“Shidong branch” inhabiting, in Guizhou province, Taijiang, Shicheng and Huangping districts, the “Gedong branch” inhabiting, in Guizhou province, Taijiang and Jianhe districts, the “Taigong branch” inhabiting Taijiang and Bianbu districts around Taigong market town, their center, the “Liuchuan branch” inhabiting Jianhe district and the “Jiuyang branch” inhabiting Jianhe and Taijiang districts. The use of “Hmong” (or Mong) as an ethnic name by speakers of the Hmu language is the real scoop of Yang’s book. For me it explains Professor Yang Peide’s indignant reaction to my ignorance when during my presentation at Concordia University I suggested that the legendary Miao historical character Zhang Xiumei, born in Taijiang, was not a (H)mong but probably a Hmu. After reading Yang Zhengwen’s book, I know today that Zhang Xiumei could have both spoken a Hmu dialect and nevertheless be called a Hmong (or Mong)! It is just unfortunate that until recently the real complexity of Miao multiple identities never surfaced through the numerous publications of our Chinese colleagues.

B. Hmong/Miao transnationality:

Participants in the 2nd International Conference of Hmong Studies at Concordia University may have been surprised like me by the constant translation in English of the Chinese word “Miao” into “Hmong” and the reverse, among the Chinese scholars invited. It looked surrealistic somehow when it became obvious that none of them was a (H)mong language speaker and reached a peak with Prof. Zhang Chongzhi’s presentation as “Hmong” of the Miao of Hainan whom almost everybody knew are in fact Yao Mun or Lanten Yao. This fact among others I don’t need to detail here illustrates quite well what I call the “ethnic straitjacket” imposed on Miao studies by Miao nationality politics in China. The new generation of Chinese and Miao anthropologists will hopefully succeed in tearing it off one day because it does not imply rejecting the nationality political structure, but only opening scientific research to objective social facts such as ethnic groups and subgroups, instead of enforcing on the people a mythical imagined identity. Apparently the Maoist “white page” syndrome is still prevailing in the field of ethnicity in China! Let me explain my point: when the Chinese translate Miao into Hmong it is not a tribute to (H)mong ethnicity. If it was, they would keep Mong in Chinese. Mong is currently used already by Chinese linguists and ethnographers for designating (H)mong ethnicity and language. They, purposely, use Miao instead of Hmong because they want to consider that Hmong are Miao by essence, ignoring that Indochina Hmong have precisely stripped off a similar “Meo straitjacket” some 36 years ago. As a witness of this epoch-making achievement and the marvelous surge it has given to (H)mong social vitality I feel constrained to clarify this very dangerous misuse of names. Miao, since its first appearance in Chinese books of history meant a category of population. For example the San Miao “Three Miao” of antiquity were obviously more than one people. Its subsequent use which was not continuous but linked to particular periods of the Chinese Empire is also that of a category and we all know that during the Qing Manchu dynasty indigenous people pertaining to different ethno-linguistic groups of South China, particularly in Guizhou province, were included into a generic Miao classification.

The construction of the Miao nationality in the 1950s has tried to focus on groups more or less linguistically related in a vast set of populations speaking a large span of languages known as the Miao-Yao group. The carving of three nationalities, Miao, Yao

and She out of this group is a political compromise between the state representatives and the scientists with a measure of approbation from the local leaders and concerned masses. Needless to say, it does not always fit the scientists neither the people themselves. The linguists classify the vast Punu Yao group among the Miao languages and the Miao of Hainan among the Yao, not to mention the Ge Hmon of Guizhou who claim they do not belong to the Miao nationality at all. With the prevailing tendency of modern China to enforce theory rather than adapt it to reality, some smart-minded sociologists have imagined that nationalities along years could be transformed into consistent ethnic groups. They were stimulated in this erroneous thinking by the lasting misunderstanding of the “nationality” concept among a handful of Western anthropologists of China who stubbornly equated them with what they supposed were ethnic groups. Even more puzzling is the attitude of Western linguists who, not only never question the Chinese presentation of languages and dialects under a vague geographical designation, but also, I suppose in an effort of simplification, have reduced the Miao-Yao whole to a “Hmong-Mien language family”, selecting for naming their linguistic grouping the only two languages of the Miao-Yao group which can be found (since 1975) in America! At this point they certainly meet Chinese politicians’ secret desire that all the Miao would be Hmong outside China and all the Hmong would be Miao inside China. The next step soon to come is obviously that Hmong outside China, being considered as Miao in China, belong to China after all. I don’t know if the Hmong of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, the U.S. and Europe are ready to embrace this idea, but I have no doubt about the general direction of this political move in the name of Miao brotherhood and transnationality.

Back to the anthropological facts, ethnic (H)mong of China are but a part of the Miao political minority nationality and I see no logical way that other Miao (like the Ke Xiong, the A Hmao or the Hmu, etc.) could pretend to be considered as belonging to the same (H)mong ethnic group or change (H)mong from an ethnic name into a category name equivalent to Miao. Reversely, there is no way for the (H)mong outside China to enter the Chinese Miao nationality unless by resettling into China and being granted the Miao minority nationality status. Because they correspond to different levels of the social sphere, we should remember that ethnicity and [Chinese] minority nationality are mutually not transferable.

I am of course well aware that the scientific point of view I represent in this issue goes counter clockwise to a so-called “transnational” Miao identity in the making, which is fostered by A Hmao, Hmu and Ke Xiong Miao politicians and, sometimes, anthropologists¹⁴. But there are also non concealable facts. Among these I put (H)mong

¹⁴ For example, a recent projected panel to a forthcoming International Conference on Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Kunming, China “The ethnic construction and identity under the system of modern state. Case study of Miao/Hmong” is introduced in this way: “In this panel, the focus is on “Miao/Hmong” being a contemporary ethnic group; the discussion is about a series process and the background of *self-construction of “Miao/Hmong” in the context of the state*, and the otherness’ impact on it, which is concerning its history and ethnic-identity etc. A number of aspects are included, importantly 1, *The process of Miao/Hmong constructed as an ethnic group in modern history*, 2, The relationship between the system of the state and ethnic-identity of Miao/Hmong in various part of the world, and *the international exchanges of identity under globalization era...*[italics are mine]” May I humbly observe that a modern state in a global world would better remind anthropologists and politicians that they are talking of

transnationality itself, a two-century-old reality, to which the diasporas in the West have only given a new dimension all over the world. Reversely, I don't see any possible Miao transnationality considering the fact that there is nowhere in any other country than China a sizeable Miao population¹⁵. It does not imply that individual Hmu or Ke Xiong may not enjoy visiting the Hmong or being visited by them. Tai peoples, for instance, are very attracted to visit other Tai groups in China. Why should the Ke Xiong, the Hmu, the A Hmao and the (H)mong not be good friends, business partners, even if not true co-ethnics'?

C. The faithfulness to (H)mong Culture.

Year after year, during my visits to the (H)mong refugees in the U.S., I have met with a growing anxiety among the young generation about a loss of identity, a loss of (H)mong culture, in sharp contrast with the obvious successful integration of (H)mong migrants into their new social environment. I shall summarize briefly here what I think is (H)mong culture and what may be in danger of being lost. (H)mong culture has for infrastructure a very strong social fabric. Similar to language, an ethnic group's social fabric is structured and cannot change easily even when submitted to heavy external pressure. It is my feeling that after their migration to Indochina, Indochinese (H)mong did preserve their original linguistic and social structures as well as the foundations of their culture in, maybe, a better way than their relatives who remained in the Chinese Empire.

Overwhelmingly, 40 years ago, Indochinese (H)mong were not peasants but tribal farmers in the hills. They did not care for landownership and freely wandered in the forested mountains where they carved their swidden. When the land they exploited became too poor, they freely moved to another location they had previously selected. They were also distributed into different tribal groups with distinctive costumes and, sometimes, dialects. A (H)mong village was never a permanent community and could split to join other villages or form a new settlement with other villagers. Only kinship relations, that is: lineage and clan ties were consistent and were the guidelines for close or far away migrations.

a Miao nationality, not of an ethnic group and that, instead of enforcing an ethnic straitjacket, they should free their mind and, turning back to objective facts, acknowledge the actual ethnic groups included in that nationality. It will not endanger this Miao nationality, and indeed, contrary to a Miao ethnic straitjacket, will inevitably bound to be torn off some day.

¹⁵ Except for a small group of Hmu in Vietnam formerly classified in the category Meo, which has opposed being reclassified as Hmong (an ethnic name), blankly observing that they are not Hmong. However, instead of Hmu, their real ethnic name, they have chosen to be called Miêu (Miao), a category name again, probably to follow the example of their fellow ethnic Hmu-Miao in Guizhou and be linked to them. See Nguyen Van Thang: 2007, *Ambiguity of Identity, The Miêu in North Vietnam*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books

(H)mong social structure

In the following diagram, I have synthesized the structure of (H)mong society as I found it in the 1960's everywhere in Laos, except for refugee camps and huge settlements like Longchieng fortified camp which may have had a more urban character. In a traditional context, villages were organized in close kin house clusters I call local lineages, which were further linked to multi-local exogamic clans holding the key to marriage and social reproduction. Twisted together by recurrent alliances through marriage they formed a never ending rope of kith and kin that was the true backbone of (H)mong society. Each settlement was a segment of this rope, which could scatter and join other segments when the circumstances demanded dispersion and regrouping elsewhere.

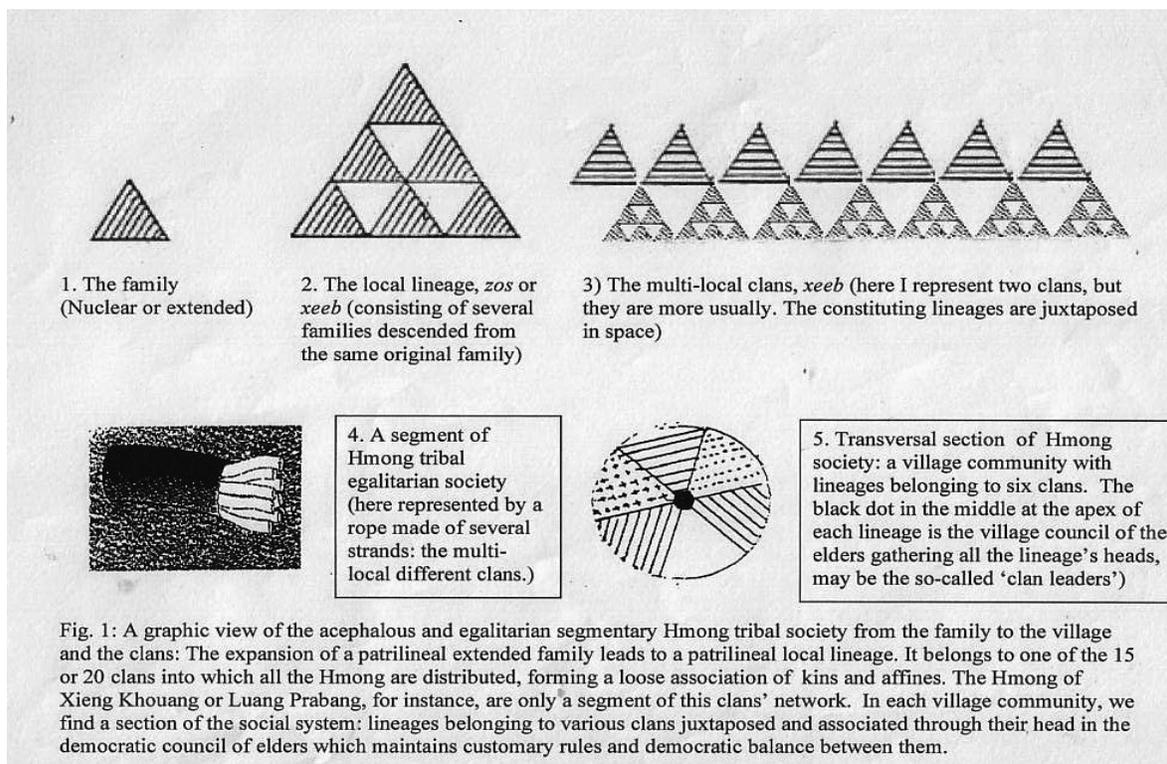


Fig.1: A graphic representation of (H)mong social fabric reproduced from Lemoine (1997).

Tribal society¹⁶

Pervaded by the clan system (H)mong settlements were also distributed into cultural categories, subgroups of different dresses, slightly changing customs, and sometimes but not always, specific dialects adding to the fundamental segmentarity of (H)mong society.

¹⁶ A good introduction to the anthropological concept of "tribal society" will be found in Marshall Sahlins' book, *Tribesmen*. Prentice Hall (1968).

Modern anthropologists of my generation have singled out this type of society, wherever they found it in Africa, Asia, America or the Pacific islands as tribal, characterized by the prevalence of kinship ties, social equality, and an absence of hereditary leadership. It is a real shame that the so-called “post-modern” anthropologists seem to have no idea of the difference between tribal and peasant societies. Some anthropologists, like Tapp (2003), hypothesize that the tribal society we find in Indochina is but a degenerated evolution of a (H)mong sedentary peasant society in China, which existence in time remains to be proven. Chinese authors themselves, like Yang above, write of “ceaseless migrations”. And the numerous cultural “branches” he and other writers mention rather point to a segmentary ethnic group, similar to the tribal society of Indochina (H)mong. Finally, (H)mong migrants in the U.S. and Europe have largely benefited from the tribal system that has ensured them with mobility and protection altogether. For example, in my opinion the Hmong segmentary lineage has greatly supported (H)mong diasporas --and still does-- through both kin’s and affine’s constant communication and assistance over considerable geographical distances.

(H)mong social space

In the tribal system, social space is wide open, never confined to a village community or even a tribe. Thanks to a very strictly exogamic clan system pervading the whole ethnic group and reflected in the kinship terminology, other (H)mong can only be “clan brothers and (true or classificatory) brothers-in-law”. However, in the village surrounding, as much the economy is centered on the household, so much the basic political unit for group action is the segmentary lineage. Thus, individuals enjoy freedom and solidarity altogether wherever they meet other (H)mong. In contrast to other Western anthropologists I don’t think a tribal society structure is easily lost. It fits so well to modern democratic societies and even better to the global economies in the making and represents such an advantage in facing the hardship of modern societies that it can hardly be challenged. This is not the case of the (H)mong oral tradition, even after it has been carefully transcribed and translated into English, French, Chinese, etc. Danger is multiformed and sometimes underhanded and tricky.

(H)mong History

Since the last century and singularly after their mass migration to the West, (H)mong have discovered their need for history as a foundation stone in their search for a territory. The obsession with an imagined nation and original territory has proven already quite delusive. And it seems now that the frustration it is engendering is concentrating on a desperate quest for history. I shall first consider the fact that the (H)mong had no writing nor written history until the 20th century does not seem to be such a defect. This is common feature for a tribal society that does not need to claim hereditary leadership nor territory. An oral memory of highlighted events like Pa Chai’s rebellion in 1918 is soon transformed into a legend even before the extinction of actual ocular witnesses, as I experienced in the late 60s. On the other hand, history starts when people need it in their political present. However, in the case of the (H)mong, history can only be made when the people it targets is clearly identified. So far the few existing historical research efforts

that may concern the (H)mong are rather targeting of the Miao, that is at the least four different ethnic groups entering the Miao category. This is why I urge (H)mong researchers to quickly identify all the (H)mong dialects in China in order to delineate a (H)mong language territory into which historical research can be undertaken in Chinese local histories. It is the only way to envision a History of the (H)mong.

My position may seem very conservative and antagonistic to political maneuvering among the (H)mong of the diasporas themselves. Again, I want to stay neutral but I can hardly conceal my worries when I read in Lee's paper mentioned in my introduction the hair-raising conclusion: "The Chinese Miao have recognized the potential of having an ancient history and being the fifth largest nationality in China. They have struggled for this identity over many years and joined hands as one single people with one ethno-name [ethno?, or nationality name?], as this gives them the strength and support, as well as the recognition and respect they need. They refuse to be known only as "hill tribes", "little brothers" and a people without history [...] This issue, however, has not even begun to enter the thinking of the 200,000 Hmong in the diaspora, except that they do not want to be known as Miao because of its negative connotation of earlier times. Yet, the Hmong are today reclaiming their history based on this very identity, on a deconstruction and reconstruction of historical events claimed earlier for the Miao. However, they cannot choose the soft option of simply substituting the name "Hmong" for "Miao" in the historical context of China, as some of them have tried to do, unless they accept the Miao people in Chinese history as their ancestors, and regardless of whether all the Miao groups today speak the same language or not. A second alternative may be to accept to be called Miao in one context and Hmong in another, but this will be confusing and unusual - for few groups of people in the world have multiple names and conflicting identities like Miao/Hmong/Mong. The final choice is to stay with being Hmong and have nothing to do with other Miao groups and their histories. But will the 3.1 million Hmong in China agree to this when they cannot extract themselves from the official classification "Miao"? What will be the long-term consequences? Whatever is decided in the tortuous pursuit of their history with the Miao in China, the diasporic Hmong are now wedged between a rock and a hard place. In the end, they may have to stop being resentful and to learn to take pride in being known as "Miao" like their more numerous brothers and sisters in China who see their national name as a proud group designation with a long past stretching over 5000 years and no negativity."

The author of these startling statements is a Hmong-Australian anthropologist and, I assume, a scientist who does not seem to know the difference in China between a minority nationality and an ethnic group. The (H)mong constitute an ethnic group, not a nation, while Miao is a nationality, not an ethnic group. As Lee mentions himself, the Chinese Hmong drop their Miao nationality identity and "readily switch identity when they deal with the American Hmong by calling themselves "Hmong". And Lee adds: "The Hmong, however, have little desire to change to "Miao" in such encounters, or would do so most reluctantly". My guess is that Chinese (H)mong are proud that their ethnic group has spread the world over and provides them with a transnationality so actively and so vainly pursued by other Miao ethnic groups. They

certainly hope that (H)mong researchers from outside China will help save their own historical, linguistic and cultural data instead of turning their back to the very sources of their culture in the name of a political myth. But the motivations of American and other “diasporic” (H)mong is less clear, especially if their mind is blurred by political ulterior motives like those naively expressed by Lee as follows: “Which would the Hmong prefer, being known as Miao and having a long history stretching back to the antiquity of China with a large global population, or possessing only a sketchy history going back to the 19th century AD when they first converted to Christianity and became known as Hmong, with only 4.5 million members world-wide?” Fortunately, Chinese historical sources can supply missionary shortcomings and errors provided researchers adopt a strictly scientific approach of data. 9 million or 4.5 million are still small numbers compared to the many tens of millions in the Indochina Peninsula in such countries as Vietnam and Thailand and even smaller when compared to the billion and several hundred millions of people in China! Such a limited increase is certainly not worth losing an ethnic identity recognition so dearly won. As for the need to have only one name, yesterday Hmong (while squeezing the Mong into accepting to be named Hmong, that is after another tribe’s name within the same ethnic group), today Miao (renouncing all ethnic identity to embrace an imagined nation), it is a political stance, not reality. Most ethnic groups in the world have at least two names: their self designation and the nickname(s) they receive from other groups that is quite often imposed upon them as their official minority identity by the governing majority. Let us not forget that the extraordinary feat accomplished by the (H)mong has been, indeed, to wipe out a derogatory official nickname and have it universally replaced by their own real ethnic name. And by so doing they remain in the 21st century a rare and precious example of decolonization of the Indigenous Mind!

Endangered (H)mong traditions

(H)mong culture can be viewed as a complex set of individual behaviors in a structured community or as a continuum of expressive language embodying the tradition and the rules, the norms and the casual. (H)mong oral tradition has been for centuries the unwritten charter of their common culture, its only support for their collective memory, the treasured legacy of the successive generations. A formal description of (H)mong oral tradition would divide it into two general categories: poetry and music, and prose.

Poetry and music:

(H)mong are great singers and musicians. The eight tones of (H)mong language can be played on any musical instrument and any sample of their music may be transcribed into words and phrases. Contrarily to what happens in most languages, (H)mong poetry is naturally musical and (H)mong music naturally descriptive. Because of the specific character of (H)mong tonal language, (H)mong traditional poetry is always musical, that is: sung, while (H)mong traditional music is always poetic, that is: phrased in words that can be transcribed right away from the musical notes. This is made possible because the notes and the tones of the words can be equated and identified once they are in a sequence or a phrase. It means that music and

poetry are all the same completely meaningful, both preserving alternately part of the cultural message (there is no musical accompaniment to a song, singing and playing an instrument are always performed in solo). This feature has certainly helped in the preservation of a large number of rituals where singing and music are dominant. Nobody has a complete command of all these texts; the burden of collective memory is divided among specialists of such or such a chant or instrument that has been taught by a master. Almost all major social events, such as marriages and funerals, are a kind of opera with several singers and music players, a stage director, such as the *kab xwm* in death rituals, organizing the show. Songs *kwv txhiaj* (... *plees* [love songs], ... *tuag* ["deadly sad" songs], ... *ua nyab* ["being a daughter in law" songs], ... *ntsuag* ["being an orphan" songs) are plenty and vary from one tribe to another. All courting between young men and women is mediated by singing *kwv txhiaj*. Bitter feelings are also voiced through complaints: *lus taum*. This poetic treasure of great antiquity is steadily disappearing. In Asia as well as in the West a tremendous development of communication tools has replaced local popular singers with DVD stars. Country music (a wonderful agent of integration nevertheless) has given birth to a new (H)mong folklore of (H)mong music and songs aping Western or Chinese artists and largely diffused around the world on DVD and Video clips. Youth in the West but also in Laos or Thailand are attracted by this new wave and we may wonder if parents still teach their children the intangible heritage of traditional (H)mong music and songs they received.

A wedding ceremony is partitioned in scenes each punctuated by wedding songs *zaj tshoob* and the antiphonal songs of both go-betweens of the two concerned families. It is also a ritual, emphasizing family ties and reciprocal duties between in-laws, which is the base of the (H)mong clan system. But now as far as Nong Het in Eastern Xieng Khouang Province of the Lao P.D.R., the young (H)mong marry a modern Laotian way in Western costume for men, half Western half (H)mong dress for women. The old generation and its ceremonial speeches and singing is simply silenced and left aside, while the wedding is transformed into a huge feast to the music of Laotian and (H)mong modern bands on a CD player.

(H)mong funerals are, like Hmong weddings, a kind of musical opera, singers of *nkauj tuag* (chants for the dead) succeeding each other, punctuated by the beating of the drum, and the sad sounds of the mouth organ (*qeej*) playing beautiful poetic partitions (when notes are transcribed into words) about the tragedy of death. They can last from 3 to 10 days, time necessary for all the required participants to come from most distant places. At the very beginning of the death ritual, the *qhua kev*, "showing the way" chant is an initiation of the dead to Hmong metaphysics, from the origin of man to its ultimate destination: rebirth among his own descendants and thus is a powerful symbolic manipulation of the process of death itself for ensuring social reproduction¹⁷. On the last evening, *hmo qhua txiv*, the night when all the guests have arrived, the *txiv xaiiv* assembly conducted by one or two singers urges all the participants to voice out any wrongdoing or debt of the dead during past life that should be put right before he (she) leaves for good. When accounts have been settled and the dead is free of any unsuspected attachment to his (her) past life, all the members of the mourning family,

¹⁷ See my study, Jacques Lemoine : 1983 *L'initiation du mort chez les Hmong*, Bangkok, Pandora.

xyom cuab, kneeling and holding a burning joss stick, piously listen to the "blessings" *foom kom*, another singer addresses them in the name of the dead. Next morning, the dead will be presented with all the sacrifices of his siblings and in-laws and buried at the end of the day. The prestige of a great (H)mong funeral and the detailed cross-examination of each participant's deep feelings toward the dead about to leave have a definite influence on bereavement which is mastered detail after detail in the course of a several days-ceremony. It also underlines a large social network of kin and in-laws far beyond the scope of everyday life, a reminder of what a never ending family (H)mong tribal society actually is. The preservation of death rituals is even more essential to the preservation of (H)mong culture than the wedding ceremony is. (H)mong in the US have spent huge amounts of energy preserving their funeral rituals. They have bought huge funeral homes able to accommodate thousands of participants and feed them in incorporated kitchens. Animal sacrifices are performed in (H)mong slaughter houses in order to meet state regulations. Christian and Bahai'i religions have certainly introduced variants, the impact of which should be carefully measured. But I have no expertise in this field.

Music

Hmong use very simple musical instruments:
--The flutes (*lub raj* [*raj nplaim* "reed pipe", or *raj ntsia* "fife" or *raj nploog* "kind of clarinet", the Jews harp (*ncas*) and even sometimes blowing a leaf (*qvw nplooj*) are used to play love songs in tunes as an alternate to singing. These instruments are usually played by young nubile girls and boys.
--The mouth or reed organ (*rab qeej*) and the drum (*nruag*) are usually reserved for the funeral and various commemorative rituals for the dead. The drum is exclusively reserved for death rituals. Both instruments are played exclusively by males. The reed organ, *qeej*, can be played in a dancing show, the only kind of dancing preserved by the tradition among Indochina (H)mong. Today modern (H)mong songs are played and accompanied on the guitar and there is some worry that the transcription of notes into words may be lost in this process.

Prose:

When Hmong speak out their feelings, they have a natural eloquence that they use in the long discussions when the council of lineage elders gathers to solve a problem or decide in a trial. Prose has a lesser part in rituals, it is used only for addressing the dead or the ancestors, or spirits. It needs no learning and storytellers are just remembering the stories and myths they heard, each teller being free to add one's own talent. This makes the memory of historical events particularly fragile and past events are quickly forgotten or finally incorporated into revisited myths. Hmong culture does not really care for history¹⁸. But it has quite well preserved Chinese proverbs, the *paj lug*, mostly used in the course of trials to support one's point. Backing one's point with Chinese proverbs, the prestigious *paj lug*, shows one's deep knowledge of what it is wise

¹⁸ Unless we believe, as some naïve commentators like Savina and others do, that Hmong myths and legends really tell us about their past instead of their present. See Lemoine 1987 on the myth of origins of the (H)mong, Miao, Yao, Tai.

to do. When Indochina (H)mong were still in China the *paj lug* must have been used at the local Chinese official court. It has remained a show of erudition and wizens. The more traditional prose is provided by the stories, legends and myths when the Hmong have to tell about the past. Since the creation and broadcast of a Hmong Latin script in the 60's, texts of all kinds have been gathered and part of them published. A partly mythical, partly factual history has emerged. Hmong culture is more accessible to study among the more recent literate generations.

Transcription and translation of (H)mong oral tradition

In Laos, Thailand and Vietnam collections of stories, songs and rituals have been preserved in writing and some of this has also been done in the US. I can only name here the most illustrious: Mottin, Bertrais, Johnson following the path of pioneers in China: D.C. Graham and Ruey Yih Fu among the Chuan Miao (see Mong Pang p. 4 supra). To most of the published translations, the original transcription in the (H)mong language is added and provides a very valuable corpus on (H)mong traditions for the future generations. Each translator tries to render (H)mong language in English, Chinese or French according to the explanations of his assistant(s) and his own sense of writing in his own language. After first translating into French the beautiful sample of Qhua Kev I had recorded amidst a funeral ceremony in the village where I was studying in 1965, I was worried that it needed also to be translated into English and vainly tried a few English friends on that project until my good fortune sent to me in Chiang Mai to the already renowned Scottish poet Kenneth White. Not only was he living and teaching in France and publishing in French, but was looking, at the time of our encounter, for pieces of ethno-poetry. When I gave to him my French translation of the Qhua Kev and explained my unfulfilled wish to have it translated into English, he volunteered at once and a few months later gave me in Paris, his beautiful rendering into English, the well known *Showing the Way*. I mention this story because I have found in Lee's paper referred to in my introduction a quite irrelevant criticism of this beautiful book and this for the second time¹⁹. Dr. Lee who thinks he has an "emic (insider) perspective" -- although he speaks another dialect and belongs to another tribe of (H)mong than the one possessing this Qhua kev -- finds that translating the following two verses:

[Puj Yawg] Nyob ntuj qhua teb nkig / Ntuj txag teb tsaus

by "[the ancestors who] lie under burning skies on the scorched earth/ under icy skies on the dark earth" should be "correctly translated 'under dry Sky on brittle Earth, cold Sky on dark Earth". If this is the emic perspective to render this "poetic funeral chant", the reader would like to know what this pedestrian sentence may eventually mean for a Hmong. Kenneth White also asked me about my rendering in French for which he had some difficulty to find the right words. In fact I had asked my Mong informants in the village. Obviously these two verses were two images but I could not see them very clearly. My Mong informants from their emic perspective explained to me that "earth becomes brittle because it is so dry when the sky is burning hot and that (in the cold season) the sky without sunlight makes earth look very dark". After this emic explanation, I could, I think, render both images which

¹⁹ See also Dr. Gary Lee and Dr. Nick Tapp: "Current Hmong Issues: Updated 12-Point Statement" in www.garyyiale.com (February 2007) p.3

were even stronger in the English rendition. I hope that my and Kenneth White's other readers enjoy participating in the Mong envisioning of nature in its extreme appearance, which is thought to be the faraway abode of the ancestors the dead has to find at the end of his long journey.

The point I want to make here is that translation without misunderstanding implies a real access to the meaning and, in poetry, to the images that convey this meaning. (H)mong culture has often suffered in the past of superficial "etic" notes, deficient transcribing and poor and erroneous translations. Often, it has seemed nonsensical and this character comforted early missionaries in their well wishing eradication of strange superstitions! My own experience is that there is not a single part of (H)mong culture which is meaningless and detrimental to the social life of the group. I shall give for example their rituals of life and death which embody their metaphysics in its social context and (H)mong shamanism which embodies their everyday fighting against illness and misery for protecting the living.

Rituals of life and death

Rituals are the traditional way of backing a culture, and Hmong rituals of life and death are a unique and beautiful tradition. Functionally, they aim at preserving and reproducing the social dynamism from one generation to another. The life of a newborn starts with the ritual of calling in its soul on its 3rd day and giving it a name. According to Patricia V. Symonds (1991: 185-186) "After birth the child's third soul (the *plig*) is not considered to be in its body for the first few days...at dawn on the third day, the oldest male member of the lineage (hu *plig*) calls the soul to be reincarnated into the newborn body...It is males then who are responsible for creating the social individual". She draws a parallel between this first soul calling ritual of the third day newborn and the *Qhua Kev*, "showing the way" of reincarnation to the dead, a parallel which I think logically founded. Many times in their life, and at least once a year at New Year the (H)mong call in the souls, the source of life.

Death rituals are the most important part in the life of the (H)mong. They happen regularly as a matter of social obligations and they all exemplify the link of solidarity between clansmen, lineage brothers and sisters, close family kin and in-laws. Most of the social contract is enclosed in the different roles assigned to specific kin and in-laws. They also expound much of Hmong metaphysics, first in order to initiate the dead to his or her part in the succession of rituals which are all intended to be a departure and a severing from the social web.

Qhua kev cares for the soul of life, *tus plig*, which is ultimately destined to reincarnate and leads it safely to its ultimate destination: the womb of a woman married to a patrilineal descendant of the dead person. As soon as it has been recited to the dead, the incoming visitors and participants proceed in turn to the individual crying, *nylav*, they address to the dead, hand in hand with the body -- a beautiful lament that reveals the high degree of emotion existing in Hmong social relations, as though society was but a large single body with one mind in rejoicing and suffering.

On the last evening, *hmo qhua txiv*, the night when the guests are crowding, the *txiv xaiiv* assembly conducted by one or two singers urges all the participants to voice out any wrongdoing or debt of the dead during the past life that should be put right before he (she) leaves for good. When accounts have been settled and the dead is free of any unsuspected attachment to past life, all the members of the mourning family, *xyom cuab*³, kneeling and holding a burning joss stick, piously listen to the "blessings" *foom kom*, another singer addresses them in the name of the dead. Next morning, the dead on "his (her) horse" *nees dab*, that is his (her) stretcher, is taken out of the house through a hole in the front wall and led by the drum player, the *qeej* player, the chief mourner and a daughter in law carrying a burning torch to show the way to the soul of the bones, *plig pob txha*, to an open space at the outskirts of the village and the body fastened to the stretcher is installed on two posts. There, in the course of a busy day, several cows are offered, sacrificed and cooked nearby, the first one must be killed by the chief mourner, if the dead person is a woman, a special cow from her dowry is added, then each son offers a cow, another one representing a collective bride price is offered by the sons in law, the last one being the cow offered by the daughters of the dead. This large amount of meat is used to feed the large crowd attending and to share between all the main participants. Shortly before sunset on the same day the body led by the *qeej* player, the daughter in law carrying the torch and the chief mourner, is carried to bushes at some distance from the sacrificial area, where it is buried with a minimum attendance.

The power of the corporal soul remaining with the body in the grave is so strong that it can show itself as a ghost (*xyw*). After 13 days, the chief mourner invites it to visit its former house where it is fed and honored by its family before being sent back to the grave. This is the *xi* ritual, the purpose of which is to deter the dead from coming back as a ghost and gently sever once more its ties with the living. Then after a few months or a couple of years, the *plig* soul is called back in order to be set free to reincarnate after new sacrifices and a ritual, *tso plig*, similar to the funeral. It should not come back any more, will be considered as a protecting ancestor and fed with the other dead of the family at various occasions, especially New Year. A few years later, a last cow sacrifice, *nyuj dab*, the cow for the ghost, to the now dead for long to whom the ritual links more obscure forebears whose names have been forgotten, puts an end to the long lasting obligations of his (her) surviving kin. Any one trying to escape these ritual obligations risks seeing illness and misery falling upon himself or his family; reversely, the participation in death rituals reinforces the basic adherence to Hmong ethnicity.

Shamanism, as psychotherapy and other kinds of healing

One prominent marker of traditional (H)mong ethnicity is certainly the number of shamans and the high frequency of their performances in everyday life. Less conspicuous but still very characteristic of the (H)mong are their various traditions of herbal or magical healing. (H)mong traditional healing presents four options in front of current illnesses:

- Healing with herbal medicine, *tshuaj*. It may be carried on by any housewife learned in plants but there are also patented specialists, the *kw tshuaj*, herbalists who have learned from a master.

- Healing by uttering magical Chinese spells, *khawv koob*.
- Healing through strong spells *khawv yeej* to scare away the evil spirits
- Healing after a shaman's diagnosis, *ua neeb saib*, followed, only after recovery, by a healing sacrifice, *ua neeb kho*. Both actions can only be executed by a shaman, *txiv neeb*.

The part of healing left to shamanism in (H)mong culture are very clearly the cases that medicine and even magical spells are powerless to treat. They face an unknown phenomenon that only a shaman will be apt to identify. In their own perception of the phenomenal world (H)mong shamans consider that it is divided in two parts, the part our eyes can see and the unseen. The unknown phenomenon provoking illness in the patient may lie hidden in the unseen as most of our psychosomatic diseases also are. Similar to our various psychotherapists, shamans can deal in the unseen because of their special power to penetrate this part of reality. And their power consists in gathering a task force of spirits from the unseen and using them to explore it and find the ultimate cause of illness to be neutralized. In other words shamans are men who can enter the world of their patient's mind and intervene in it just like a surgeon penetrates his patient's body in order to right the wrong and/or remove it.

The shamans' healing power is provided by their spirit helpers (*neeb*): shamans, like any other human being cannot actually see the unseen, their spirits who come from it can and are able to move freely in it. They are the perfect tools of the shaman for his exploration and healing intervention. When the spirit helpers join the shaman who has called for them, he is seized with a trance that materializes their presence all around him. He can then examine his patient's symptoms according to the information he has received from him and/or his family. Shamanic exploration consists of an equation with two unknowns: 1, which part of his patient's living system is at stake? 2, which unseen spiritual power endangers it and where does this happen? The answers to both questions dwell on (H)mong folk religious beliefs in the existence of a soul commanding the body's life, and the presence of a number of powerful spirits. The shamans' view organizes these random beliefs into a logical system of mind analysis and the mastering of a whole spectrum of mythic pathology.

From the experience of the *plig* soul of life as a marker between life and death, shamans have developed a more complex and comprehensive analysis of the living energies (or *ntsuj* souls) necessary to man's life. These 12 vital souls are participating in the body's life at special junctions. Any loss or disruption of one of them that

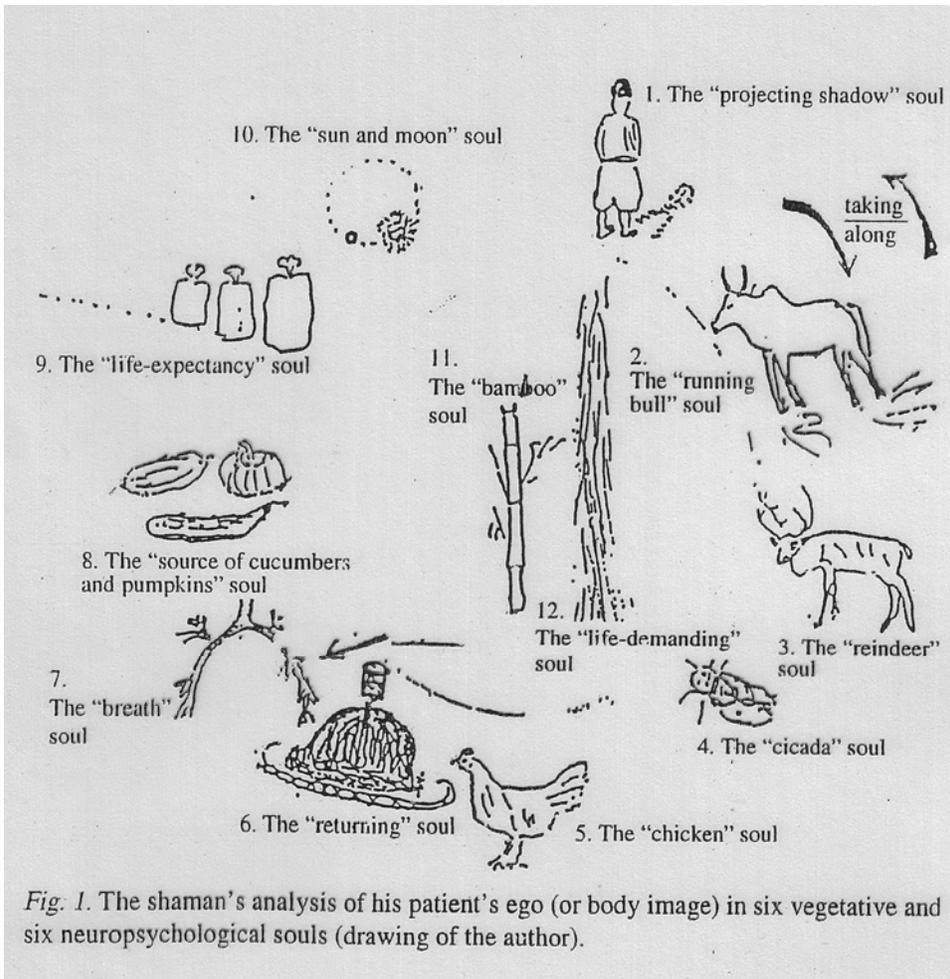


Fig. 2 An analysis of the patient's body image extracted from Lemoine 1997.

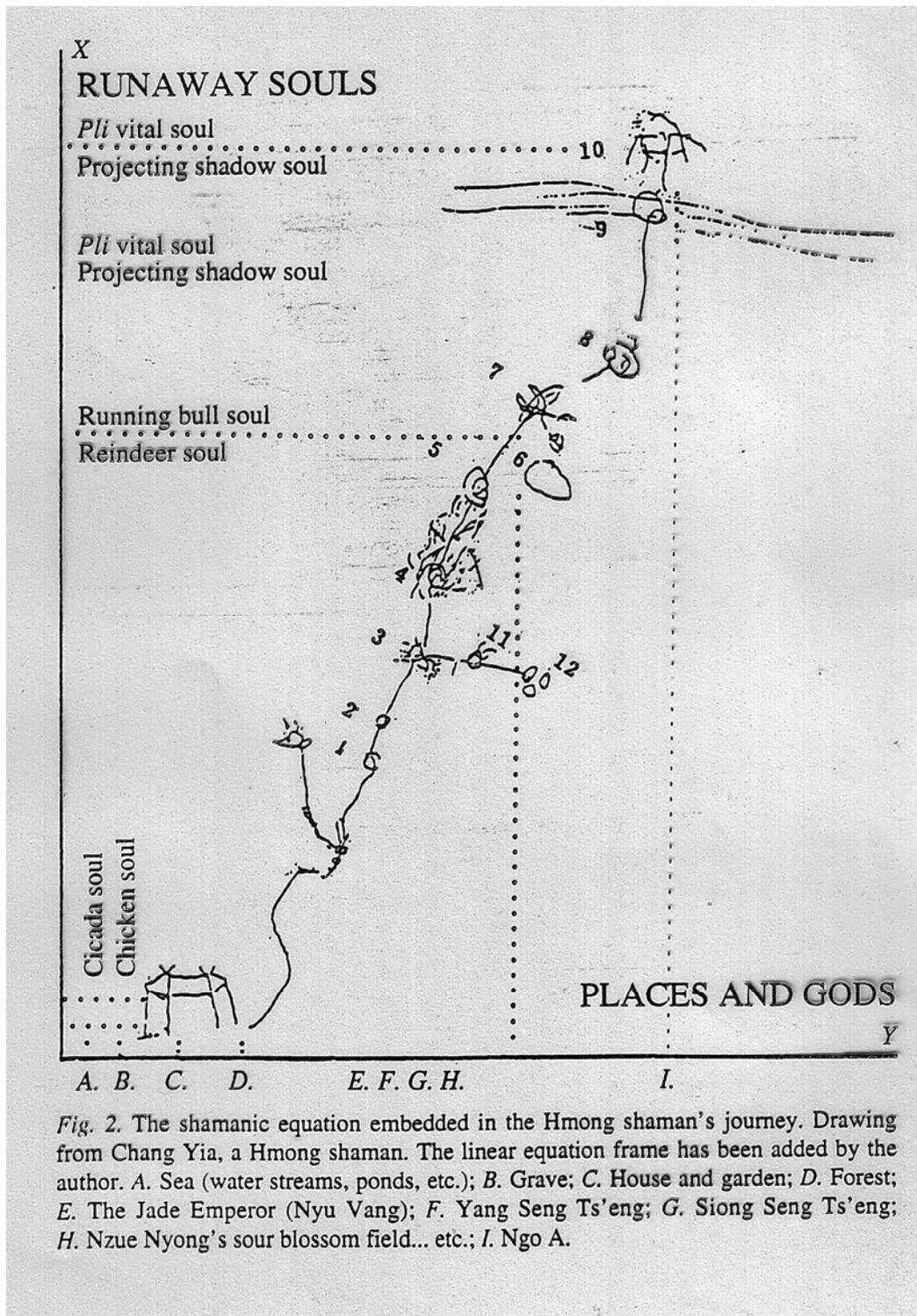


Fig. 2. The shamanic equation embedded in the Hmong shaman's journey. Drawing from Chang Yia, a Hmong shaman. The linear equation frame has been added by the author. A. Sea (water streams, ponds, etc.); B. Grave; C. House and garden; D. Forest; E. The Jade Emperor (Nyu Vang); F. Yang Seng Ts'eng; G. Siong Seng Ts'eng; H. Nzue Nyong's sour blossom field... etc.; I. Ngo A.

Fig.3: The shamanic equation extracted from Lemoine 1992.

jeopardizes the body's working order may endanger health. The spiritual world is the realm of images of illness and misery seen in the form of specific evil spirits portraying different kind of illnesses. The creation of (H)mong shamans has been to cross the threat

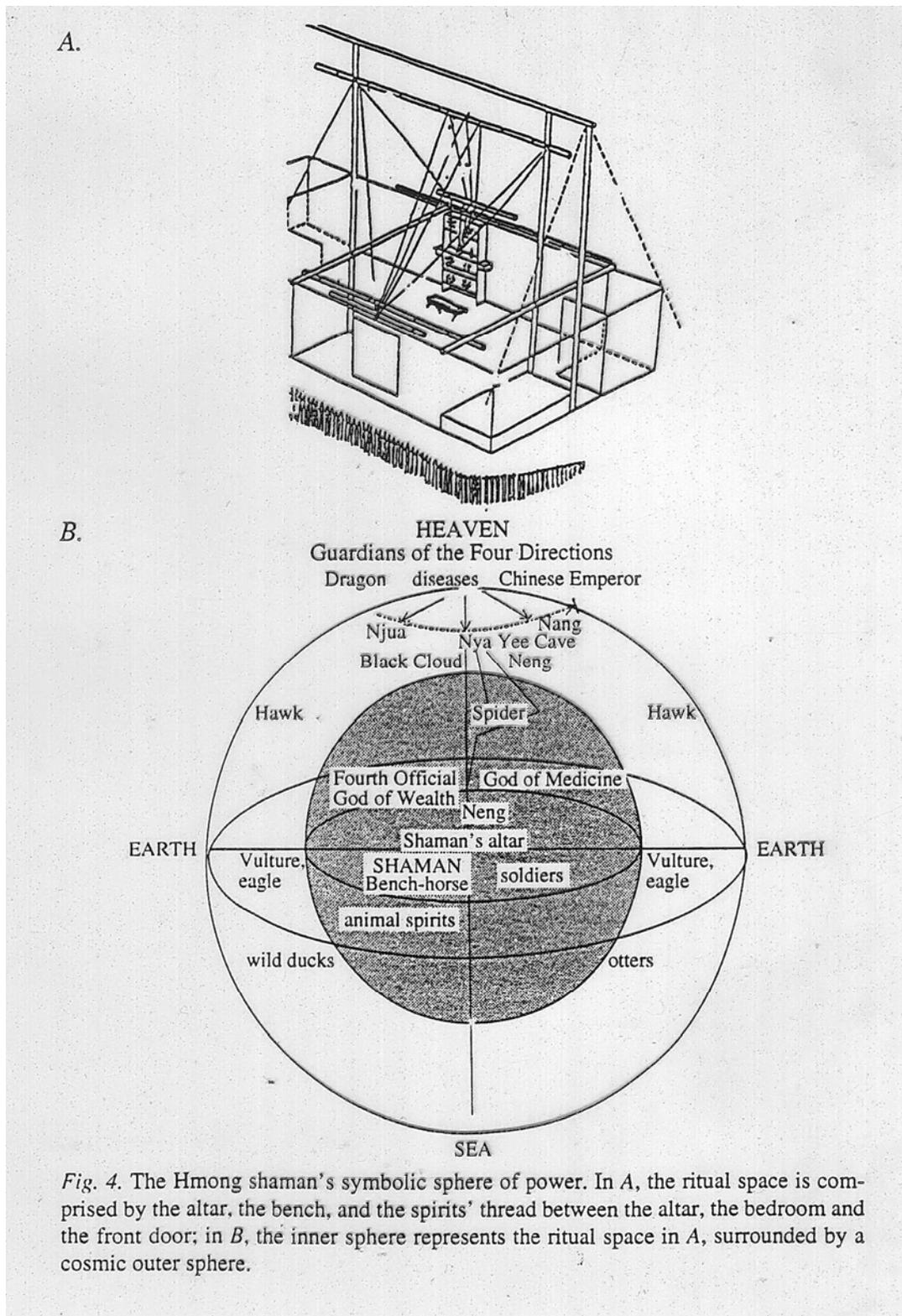


Fig. 4. The Hmong shaman's symbolic sphere of power. In A, the ritual space is comprised by the altar, the bench, and the spirits' thread between the altar, the bedroom and the front door; in B, the inner sphere represents the ritual space in A, surrounded by a cosmic outer sphere.

Fig. 4: A graphic representation of the shaman's power of healing, extracted from Lemoine 1996.

implied by all of a fixed itinerary following a progression of successive stages that he envisions as the path of a journey in the unseen, each stage possibly concealing a

specific lost soul, at different distances from his patient. At the end of the trip there remains only the soul of life, *plig*, on its way to reincarnation after it has reached the other side of the bridge between this world and the other world. If the shaman and his spirit helpers can catch it before it has been washed, it can still be taken back from beyond the portals of death. If it has been washed of all memory, reincarnation is underway, the shaman's intervention has failed and the patient is bound to die.

This shamanic equation with two unknowns is the support of the shaman's intense quest for understanding his patient's trouble. He is himself in a state of expanded consciousness with the help of his spirit helpers. Among the spirit helpers, envisioned by the shaman in human, insect or animal shape, two of them in human shape always stay by him stimulating his trance or reporting to the blind man everything that is happening in the unseen. Others are responsible for specific tasks in the coordinated actions of his task force. In this process the shaman in a trance reveals a split, multiple personality. For instance, while he recites the unfolding of his journey, he listens to his own words as if they were uttered by his informing spirit and tries to visualize in his mind the successive images they evoke. At the end of his journey, the trance stops, he parts from his spirit helpers and comes back to ordinary reality with a diagnosis and the series of provisional measures he has taken in the beyond that he may disclose to his patient. If the diagnosis is congruent with the affection, the patient will feel relieved and shortly after call again for the shaman's healing performance. This time, in order to strengthen his healing, every action or promise previously done in the unseen has to be reenacted and fulfilled in full daylight with the participation of the patient and actual sacrificed animals and realistic exorcism of the house with the shaman's sword, etc. This "healing" performance ends the shaman's role for this patient. It is also time for him to be remunerated with a share of sacrificed animals, etc.

In the light of this brief outline, (H)mong shamanism should appear as a powerful psychotherapy based on a logical system of analysis of the life and death drives common to mankind everywhere, despair and loneliness engendered by illness, psychosomatic unbalance and loss of the body image that the shaman ultimately restores as a token of his patient's recovery. In the (H)mong diasporas in the West the number of very qualified shamans is decreasing drastically from one generation to the other in spite of the fact that shamans' spirit helpers are inherited inside the same family. Because they don't understand anymore their father's and grandfather's noble art, distressed people of the new generations prefer to take their neurosis and hysterias to the county's psychiatric hospital rather than to utilize the more conventional and faster way to recovery offered by the shamans.

Conclusion:

(H)mong identity and culture have always been mighty protectors of (H)mong populations around the world. If the uprooted generations of (H)mong migrants find it so difficult to understand who they are, the reason is that no logical picture of their traditions is ever offered to them. They have to be content with only sketchy aspects and no general understanding. Can they really be proud of a nonsensical tradition that they

receive with all the sophisticated critical apparatus they learned at school? Instead of looking for some miraculous explanation provided by Miao history in China, (H)mong scholars should strive altogether to provide a truly clear presentation of (H)mong society and culture for the generations to come who will need to integrate their origins in all the aspects that modern research can elucidate. I hope and would be very proud indeed if the preceding pages could serve as a starting point in such a direction.

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