

**Dreaming Across the Oceans:
Globalization and Cultural Reinvention in the Hmong Diaspora**

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Abstract

The Hmong in Laos did not have any commercially produced media until after 1975 when 200,000 of them became refugees and were resettled in Western countries. Since then, they have produced many Hmong music cassettes, video documentaries and movies in America, Laos and Thailand for the eager consumption of the older members of the Hmong diaspora. These modern songs and videos often allude to aspects of Hmong life and culture in Asia which are missing in the new life in the West. This emphasis on 'images' and texts from the past arises from a deep nostalgia for the homeland, the trauma of war and their relatively recent forced departure, guilt over those left behind, access to capital and modern media technology, and more importantly a world-wide market. It is argued that these moving video images and new singing voices constitute a form of cultural reinvention that connects the Hmong together as a global community, and brings them a new changing identity, a new level of transnational group consciousness both in the diaspora and in the homeland.

Introduction

There are no historical records to show where the Hmong originated from. Some claim that they left Mesopotamia after the fall of the Tower of Babel, then gradually migrated north through Russia, Siberia, Mongolia before ending up in their present location in southern China (Savina, 1924 and Quincy, 1988: 16-17). Others believe that they have always been in this part of China, well before it was taken over by the Han Chinese over the centuries (Ch'eh, 1947; and Yang, 1995). Today, the Hmong number more than 10 million world-wide with 9 million in China (if we include other branches of the Miao nationality). Emigration from China since the middle of the 19th Century resulted in 500,000 of them today living in Vietnam; 400,000 in Laos; 120,000 in Thailand; and 2,000-3,000 in Burma. The end of the civil war in Laos in 1975 also displaced more than 180,000 to the USA; 15,000 to France; 1,800 to Australia; 1,400 to Canada, 500 to Argentina and 110 to Germany.

Whatever their origin may be, the Hmong have always felt like homeless orphans, with small groups separated from each other, or villages every so often on the move, without a true home of their own, living in remote mountains away from other people, without roots and the feeling of belonging. Everywhere, they are a minority, often looked down as backward unkempt hill tribes. I make this observation, not to draw sympathy for the Hmong, but to show that this feeling of transnational alienation plays a pivotal role in what I will have to say about Hmong media production, consumption and cultural reinvention.

This paper will examine the Hmong diasporic media and its different genres to see the extent to which it contributes to the cultural production, cultural maintenance and the development of a transnational identity for the Hmong diaspora. As this is only a preliminary exploration of the subject, I will try to keep my discussion simple without using abstract postmodern jargons, as are utilized in many academic media studies. My focus will be the first generation of Hmong in the diaspora who are the main consumers (mostly women) and producers (mostly men) of Hmong videos. I am not concerned here with the second generation who are much more assimilated into the local cultures and languages of the new host countries where they have grown up, who show little

interest in Hmong videos or cultural traditions, and who have a very different attitude to the homeland of their parents.

Many genres of Hmong videos have been produced from rock music and love songs set in America, to kungfu-style action and war movies, and documentaries on Hmong life in Thailand, Laos or China. There are also Thai, Korean, Indian and Chinese films that have been dubbed in the Hmong language for consumption by Hmong viewers¹. However, these videos will not be the subject of this paper. In order to explore Hmong cultural reproduction and identity formation in the diaspora, my concern here is mainly with Hmong videos (music, documentaries and films) that focus on different aspects of Hmong life and traditional culture in the homeland, on imaginings and nostalgia for the geographic spaces left behind after 1975 by those Hmong who now live in Western countries, spaces such as migration routes, former villages, military outposts like Longtieng, but more importantly people such as relatives and friends who remained in the homeland and who are the subject of much transnational visiting, intense longings and feelings of guilt by older Hmong in the diaspora.

Development of a New Media

It can be said that Hmong media did not exist in its present-day form before the change of political regimes in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. I can remember going to Ban Vinai refugee camp in Northeast Thailand, the largest holding center for Hmong asylum seekers from Laos in 1976, and being asked to help buy two music cassettes of Hmong modern singing that had been recorded in someone's kitchen by a group of young men with much time on their hands and a big ache in their heart. They were happy to have escaped alive from Laos but sad about having to flee the old country, unsure where to go from here and not certain what life would be like. The new songs were in the style of Lao, Thai, Chinese or Western lyrics, but were rather amateurish because the music was only made from empty tin cans and sticks of wood, accompanied by an old guitar. This very rudimentary band was headed by Lis Pheej.

¹ I would like to thank Dr Louisa Schein, Associate Professor in Anthropology at Rutgers University, USA, and a pioneer in Hmong media research, for pointing this out to me and also for her many other detailed comments on this paper, which have greatly enhanced the clarity of my arguments in this revised version.

The words in these new songs often express the guilt of leaving loved ones or family members behind and missing them, and the need for Hmong people to love and care for each other so they would not have to keep running from their oppressors. The songs also expressed feelings of separation from families and friends. In the main, those who composed these new songs were sharing their feeling of loss and calling for help through love and unity, through joining forces to protect themselves, to find themselves a true Hmong homeland. It was as if they were trying to promote Hmong nationalism and pride, now that they were free from the clutch of a much feared enemy. This was especially true of the new music of Lis Txais, a leading member of a messianic movement which was active in the Ban Vinai camp at that time. What is ironic about these patriotic modern songs is that while their lyrics urge Hmong to shed the contaminated cultural elements borrowed from local dominant groups, the melodies imitate the very songs of these groups such as that associated with Thai military marching music.

Before 1976, most Hmong music was heard only through the actual playing of Hmong musical instruments such as the reed pipe (qeej), the flute (raj) or the mouth harp (ncas). For vocal entertainment, young people of the opposite sex sing “kwv txiaj” or traditional dialogue songs to each other during New Year or on special occasions like weddings. This traditional singing consists of poetic improvisation sung without music (what I will call “dry” singing) in a variety of regional styles or “seev suab”, depending on what subgroup of Hmong (White, Blue or Striped) and what geographical locations are involved (China, Vietnam, northeastern Laos, central northern Laos, or Thailand). One has to be very good with words to compose impromptu verses and to sing in reply to the other person at the same time, something that few people can do.

In the early 1960’s with the civil war in Laos going on in full scale, radio broadcasts in Hmong were introduced to disseminate war propaganda, resulting in the recording and playing of a lot of this traditional Hmong music and singing. Listeners also used these “dry” songs to send personal messages to relatives living in other villages or parts of the country. Until 1975, there was little change to this traditional music and its propagation through commercial recording and market distribution. People only had these government radio broadcasts to listen to, or they might be recorded directly by those who knew how to sing or play Hmong musical instruments for their

personal use. All this changed dramatically after 1975. From the early improvisations in Ban Vinai refugee camp, a new culture was born, a new art form came to being after the Hmong started to be resettled in Western countries. The trauma of escape from the homeland and access to modern musical instruments or recording facilities helped to speed up this change. The new songs, often recorded and sold by the artists themselves, were later followed by video documentaries and fiction movies. This new culture would not have come about so quickly and globally if the Hmong had not suffered from the trauma of exile, if they had simply remained in Laos and adjusted themselves to the new political system since there would be no craving to invent the new media and no audience for it.

I will now look at the different forms of transnational Hmong media (audio music cassettes, videos, CDs and DVDs) that have been produced and seemingly consumed avidly by Hmong audience world-wide. Based on the chronological order of their development, these media products can be grouped into the following classifications:

1. Musical Appropriation and Hybridity

In the early years of their resettlement in the US from 1976 to 1983, the Hmong were content to continue experimenting with modern music and Western-style songs. The group that started in Ban Vinai had disappeared by this time to be replaced by a number of individual artists who composed their own songs and who hired local American bands to back them up and record their work for commercial distribution. They then released their music cassettes to the Hmong public through personal contacts or Hmong grocery stores. Some of these early cassettes sold well, especially with younger Hmong refugees in America who were learning to prefer Western-style songs. Notable among these early singers were Es Lis, Lis Pos, Tub Lis Vam Khwb, Toj Lis and Mas Lis Vwj, the latter even making a few concert tours around the US and France.

These early commercial attempts were followed by other young Hmong with artistic ambitions in Laos and in Thailand – both those in the refugee camps and in village settlements. The most successful Lao Hmong singer in this early period was Koob Lisnhiajvws, while in Thailand Luj Yaj and Tsab Mim Xyooj became the favorites. All three made a number of tours to the US in the late 1980's, and later also acted as the leads in a few movies produced by ST Video International, the first video production company set up in Fresno, California, by Xub Thoj, a Hmong refugee from

Laos. Luj Yaj has remained in Thailand, but Tsab Mim later married an American Hmong and now lives in the USA.

Many other aspiring artists also appeared on the scene, especially in America but they were not as successful. Those who succeeded usually have a good rolling voice and the capacity to improvise, to make new genres of songs and music, to upgrade and modernize. Above all, in order to appeal to a wider transnational Hmong audience, it requires that the aspiring artists be able to appropriate lyrics from other cultures including Thai, Lao, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian and the West. This experiment in musical hybridity and simulation is not unusual, given that many Hmong artists and consumers have long been exposed to a vast variety of Asian and Western music.

All of these Hmong singers and musicians are amateurs with no professional training. In the early days, the singing, music and recording left much to be desired. For example, the voice might be flat or the music might be too loud and muffled the voice of the singer. Today, however, with the advent of electronic music and digital recording, many excellent singers have been able to put their talents to maximum use. The field is very fluid with good singers coming and going while new ones appear each year in Laos, Thailand or the US. Even Hmong singers in China have had their songs recorded on videos and marketed. The most famous of the female singers now are Ntxhee Yees Xyooj (Thailand), Paj Muas (Thailand), Ntxhais Yaj (US), Dawb Thoj (Laos), Lis Vaj (US), Maiv Muas (Laos), Mim Haam (China) and Npaub Vaj (US). For male singers, some recent notables include Zeb Vwj (Laos), Yujpheej Muas (Laos), Pov Thoj (Thailand), Ntsaim Thoj (Thailand), Lis Ntaj (France) and Maim Lis (Laos). Although his voice is now faltering, Luj Yaj (Thailand) still dominates even after more than 15 years, due to his many songs being regularly re-issued on DVDs.

It is also worthy of note that styles of singing may differ from one singer to another. While most do soft melodies in the fashion of Thai or Korean singers, some Hmong artists also resort to singing in traditional Lao (molam) style in all its regional variations, this is especially true of singers who live in Laos. To capitalize on the avid consumption by the Hmong world-wide, a number of famous Lao singers (Phouvieng and Ko Viset) have even ventured into recording their songs in the Hmong language! Of course, the younger and more Westernized Hmong artists (whether in Thailand or the US) also do rock and pop music, writing lyrics mixed with English, forming their own bands

and doing their own recording. A few even do rap music. By and large, they appeal mostly to Hmong teenagers in America, so their audience is rather limited.

Many production companies and recording studios have now been established, some in Laos but mostly in America, to cater for this niche market, and companies usually sign up their own singers or actors. They have gone out of their way to try to appeal to the Hmong audience in the diaspora by changing their presentation and the packaging of their artists according to the changing tastes and technologies in the mainstream. Today, for example, few music recordings are done on audio cassettes. Most are done on DVDs through live presentation clips – often with dancing girls in the background and the singer singing/lipsynching in front of them in large public parks, beaches or rice fields. Many DVDs consist of Karaoke music. This visual presentation is clearly influenced by Thai music performances during the last twenty years, sometimes with beautiful sets and expensive costumes for the singer and dancers.

In general, young Hmong dancing girls are used, but recently Lao girls have appeared in Hmong costumes to accompany Hmong singers. This seems to indicate that Hmong music productions have transformed from mono-ethnic transnationalism to poly-ethnic crossing-over. The question is whether this is done because Lao dancing girls are better looking and exotic, thus having more sexual appeal, or whether Hmong music production has gone multicultural in order to obtain a wider audience, to reach out to a wider market. A few attempts have been made to record Hmong traditional dry singing with modern music – a change from “dry” to “mixed” as it were, but this has not been met with a lot of commercial success. On the whole, the most successful are still the soft melodies lamenting about the heartaches of love and the homeland.

A trend in the past few years has been the production of a large number of videos of Hmong traditional “dry” singing by company producers or amateurs (returnees from America who pay village singers and record their songs on video, then edit and package them for sale). They pair up a male and female singer in a competing match to see who could sing the best poetic retort to whom – usually composed mentally on the spot and related to love and hate between men and women. This competition singing is then recorded on video tapes without much editing and processed for sale. The singers may get paid a few hundred dollars each, but the producers make a much larger profit.

Every year, four to five of these video cassettes appear on the market and are usually snapped up by elderly Hmong - who love the tradition and understand the poetic language used by the singers.

2. Documentaries

Documentaries are another very popular genre. In the 1960s, there were documentaries on the Hmong and the civil war in Laos produced by the BBC (“Disappearing World”), NBC (news reports), anthropologists and the American CIA (“Return to Padong”). Others were made about Hmong refugees after their arrival in the US (eg. “Becoming America” and “The Best Place to Live”). But the first documentaries produced by the Hmong themselves in their own language did not appear until the early 1990s, starting with videos on the first few visits to China by American Hmong in search of their imagined lost relatives and the distant homeland of their oral history². This was followed by other documentaries on encounters between American Hmong and other Hmong in Burma, Vietnam and Laos³. A series of two tapes was made pertaining to an international conference in China in 1993 involving Hmong from the West and their Miao counterparts in China⁴. This is the first time Hmong from different countries were able to come together to share ideas and culture, and the videos held wide appeal to other Hmong in the diaspora who could not join them.

The early documentaries, mostly made by Su Thao of ST Universal Video in Fresno, California, were not simply about the life and exotic culture of other Hmong communities in Asia. They often showed the Hmong producer or some other visitors from America in full engagement with the locals, comparing culture, history and life experiences. In some videos, such as those of American Hmong visiting Hmong in China, the visitors even showed their hosts, often assembled in large numbers in some open air venue, how aspects of Lao/American Hmong culture differed from those of the hosts⁵. They shared these differences by singing, playing music and showing each other

² See, among others,

- “Hmong Tuam Tshoj” by Hmoob Video Production 2000, Rochester, MN.
- “Hmong in China 2000” by Nomad Productions, California.

³ For example:

- “Mus Teb Chaws Nyab Laj” (Going to Vietnam, no date) by Asia America Video Production.
- “Hmoob Nyob Phab Mab Teb” (1996) by ST Universal Video, Fresno, CA.

⁴ “China: Part 1 and 2” (1993) by ST Universal Video Production, Fresno, CA.

⁵ “China Part 3: Nquam Toj Paj Tawg Teb” (1993) by ST Universal Video Production, Fresno, CA

how to toss balls between boys and girls during the New Year – the latter having been lost to the Hmong in China⁶. So a sort of cultural exchange and reinvention took place between the two groups. Later, other Hmong produced documentaries about the Hmong diasporic community in French Guyana who, after arriving from Thai refugee camps in the late 1970s, took up commercial agriculture, fish breeding and hunting for game – a favorite pastime of the Hmong which is no longer available for those in urban centers in the US, France or Australia. Again, although the intention of these documentaries on the Hmong in French Guyana, may have been to educate other Hmong about this community, the nostalgia for the old homeland in Laos has been a recurrent theme. At the beginning of one such video, a young man was shown walking through one of the settlements singing a traditional Hmong song about life in a new land and the sorrow of parting with loved ones left in Laos – with images of Laos flashing back and forth on the TV screen to emphasize the point.

After the opening up of Laos to visitors from the West, many documentaries have also been made there, about the old civil war with interviews of those involved, about places where the Hmong in America used to live, and about Hmong life, New Year celebrations and bull fights - another Hmong favorite not found in the West⁷. Again, the primary aim seems to be the dissemination of images that appeal to the nostalgia of those in the diaspora, not to mention many zoomed images of young girls in their colorful costumes. This tendency to focus on young women may make one wonder whether the producer wishes to admire Hmong costumes or whether homeland girls are also shown to tickle the senses of diasporic male viewers. Perhaps, the producers are attempting to do both. After all, these videos are commercial products designed to have the maximum appeal to their global consumers.

Since 1997, a number of documentaries produced by Hmong ABC Bookstore in Minnesota, have attempted to make a serious contribution to the education of Hmong viewers about their national

⁶ a. “Hmoob Suav Tsaa Hauv Toj Nyob Suav Teb” (1995) by Hmoob Toj Saab Video Productions.
b. “Visit to Kunming, Yunnan” (2006) by Dr Yang Dao and his American Hmong delegation.
c. “Moos Theeb Moos Laim” (2005) by 3 Hmong Motion Pictures, St. Paul, MN

⁷ There are too many bull fight videos, but two good general documentaries are “Phonsavanh and Beyond” (2002) and “Hmoob Lub Yeej Thoj Nam Nyob Thai Teb” (2001) – both made by Hmong ABC Publications, St. Paul, MN. Also “New Year in Hav Rawm, Vietnam” (1993) by ST Universal Video Production.

history and their role in the Lao civil war⁸. The producer, Yuepheng Xiong, made a number of visits to China and joined summer schools focused on Hmong history run by Miao academics. In one video, he was able to show the alleged tomb of the first Hmong King, Chi Yu, and to trace the Hmong migration route to Vietnam and Laos. A university-educated man, he strongly believes in the actual existence of a true Hmong homeland, not just an imagined one, and has attempted to locate this in areas where the Hmong are believed to have lived. He also organizes tours to these historical places in China, and has already made two video documentaries along this theme⁹. What he tries to do may be termed an attempt at recovering “omitted” or missing history as discussed by Eisenstein (1994).

While Yuepheng Xiong tries to educate the Hmong about a Hmong historical homeland, another group which calls itself “The Fact Finding Commission” (FCC) based in Oroville, California, has issued two videos, one in 2002 and a second in 2004, which push the Hmong diaspora’s nostalgia, feelings of oppression and guilt over the edge. These videos not only touch Hmong heart strings, but also have reached the international community and media, resulting in related issues being covered by Amnesty International, the BBC, Time Magazine and even the ABC network in Australia. These FCC videos were made by Hmong guides with Western journalists who went secretly to areas occupied by remnants of the so-called Hmong CIA “secret army” during the Lao civil war¹⁰. These were the Hmong on the Royal Lao Government side who could not escape to Thailand as refugees in the 1970s and 1980s, or who chose to stay on to resist the new communist regime. From an initial group of 16,000 in 1976, there are now only about 2,000 left with their families, scattered deep in the jungles of central northeastern Laos. The documentaries show these recalcitrant Hmong living in rags and under the cover of tree foliage, young men maimed and scarred by years of fighting against the Lao government and Vietnamese troops, children suffering from malnutrition and alleged chemical poisoning from bombs, old soldiers crying and begging to be

⁸ See “Hmong General Vang Pao and the Secret War in Laos, 1960-1975: Part 1 and Part 2” (1997).

⁹ “Taug Txoj Lw Ntshav” (Follow the Blood Trail)” Part 1 (2005) and Part 2 (2006).

¹⁰ “Pleas of Freedom Fighters in Laos” (2000), “Hope Lost” (2002), “Voices of Sorrow” (2005) and “Starvation or Surrender” (2005).

saved from the atrocities of the ruling authorities and young girls allegedly gang-raped and stabbed to death by Lao soldiers.

Although this representation of Hmong suffering in the hands of an oppressive government only applies to a small number of Hmong in Laos (there are altogether more than 400,000 living there), the videos have made Hmong in the diaspora cry tears of guilt and anger, especially in America. They also sent many viewers scurrying for action. Some joined in a “long march to freedom” in August 2004 from Minnesota to Washington DC to give publicity to the plight of “the Hmong in the jungles”, a journey that took two months to complete on foot. Others organized demonstrations against the Lao government in Washington DC, or voiced their opposition to the US Congress passing a bill Normalising Trade Relations (NTR) with Laos. Educated Hmong were called to account as to what actions they had taken or planned to take about the issue. The reverberation of these videos in the Hmong diaspora continues to be felt even today.

A new documentary entitled “Hunted Like Animals” (2006) has been the latest to be made by UN lobbyist Rebecca Summer on the plight of the Hmong at Huai Nam Khao (White Water), Petchaboon, Thailand. Many of the 6,000 refugees there escaped from the jungles of Laos. Apart from the most graphic images of young Hmong being killed by Lao government troops, raped and disemboweled, the documentary carries interviews of Hmong resistance women who surrendered and were allegedly made sex slaves of Lao soldiers, after being passed from one barrack to another. One woman even claimed to become pregnant as a result, as she is seen pleading for third-country resettlement and crying her eyes out.

Thus, Hmong video documentaries have been very powerful in terms of their impact on Hmong identity, nostalgia, longings, and transnational homeland politics. Through the politicized images of videos showing the hopeless resistance in Laos, the Hmong sense of being oppressed, and being victims of a ruthless enemy has been truly aroused, and kept going across the long distance that separates the homeland and the diaspora.

3. Feature movies

For practical and economic reasons, the first few Hmong video movies were made in America in the early 1990s. Being only amateur productions in all aspects, from directing to acting

and editing, these movies were by no means what could be called classics. Some directors only had one camera, so viewers could only watch actions from one angle. Nevertheless, they fired the imagination of many Hmong about the potential of using fiction as a way to transmit culture, feelings and ideas in the diaspora. Many of the movies that followed were made in Thailand or Laos, some by Su Thao and others by then unknown producers. A producer/director would travel from America with a movie camera or two, then try to get together a cast from Hmong villages or the refugee camp at Tamkrabok, to act for him for a pittance. He might already have a script or might invent a story and dialogues with the cast as they went along. As he usually traveled on a tourist visa, the filming would have to be completed within 2-3 months, before the finished product was taken back for editing and release to the market in America, often within 6 to 8 months.

Today, producers have become more sophisticated in technical production, scripting and acting. I recently met an American Hmong producer in Bangkok International Airport on his way back to the US from a 3 month stint in Laos. He said that he had made 3 movies and 2 musical tapes within this short period, making me wonder about their quality. He had his own actors and singers, and other producers had theirs. According to him, a producer/director would jealously guard his cast and celebrities and forbid them to sign up with another producer. Most of these Hmong movies try to do a hurried or compressed translation of Hmong culture in celluloid form. There are movies about the effects of polygamy and gambling or drug addiction. Like movies made in Hollywood and elsewhere, a favorite theme is love and its many tribulations. However, the most common theme is the Lao civil war and its impact on the Hmong, how they suffered in the jungles of Laos, how they escaped to Thailand and to the West, and how they left behind relatives, wives and children¹¹. Some movies show middle-aged men going back to Thailand or Laos to look for the families they left behind in their rush to seek asylum in a distant country. Other films such as “Niam As Kaj” touch on the problems experienced by “mail-order” brides – naïve young women who left the homeland or refugee camps to marry a man who was already established in a Western country without knowing him well.

¹¹ See, for instance, “Kuv Leej Niam (My Mother)” (2004) by Lee Moua, one of the better Hmong director/producers based in St. Paul, Minnesota

There have also been a few good comedies. A very successful series called *Dr Tom*, made by Mr Nkaj Muas who is based in California, is a parody of a failed diasporic conman who returns to the homeland to live out his sexual fantasies with submissive and money-hungry young girls in Laos, sometimes aided and abetted by his older domineering wife in America. So far, six parts of this series have been made, filmed mostly in Thailand. Another very successful and well-made movie in 2003 by KeyStar Productions is called “*Suav Cwj Ntas Ob Tog Plam*” by Director Tsav Npis Thoj based in Minnesota, USA. Although he is not a professional, his story and the sophistication of his photography, mixed with beautiful images of rustic mountain sceneries and Hmong life accompanied by a truly nostalgic music score – all combine to touch the senses of viewers. Hmong movies have thus encompassed a full range from serious dramas and melodramas to comedies. Some have been flops, but many have been well received, although the quality of acting and production for most still needs much improvement.

To the critical mind, some of the movies are not well made at all, especially those in the fiction genre. In some scenes, you even see the tripod of the camera and other movie-making equipment left on the ground behind or in front of the actors. Sometimes, you can hear the amateur director telling the actors what to do. Some of the story lines are hard to believe and the acting may be so laid back or over-done (especially in the comedies) that it is difficult to sit through the entire film without feeling bored or embarrassed. One has to take them with a grain of salt and, as my mother would say: “just enjoy, do not think too much”. I have watched movies with other Hmong and our reactions are sometimes very different. While they laugh their head off at some scenes, I cringe with embarrassment at the exaggerated and terrible acting or dialogues when some equally amateur actress speaks as if she is reading from the script, or when a family works on the farm all dressed in brand-new Hmong costumes that have probably just been made, so unlike a real farming family.

Globalizing Hmong Culture

Globalization represents social and economic change that permeates communities in different parts of the globe, due to an increased connectivity among societies and their elements as a result of global economic infiltration and transculturation or the merging and converging of cultures, the rapid

improvement in transport and communication that greatly facilitate international cultural and economic exchanges. The term is thus applied to change in social, cultural, and economic contexts (<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/globalisation>). Globalization is sometimes used to emphasize the erosion of the nation state or national boundaries, and the emergence of the “global village”. In this paper, I will use the term to refer to the process whereby aspects of Hmong culture come to be spread and shared by Hmong communities in different parts of the world through the production, marketing and consumption of audio music cassettes, videos, compact disks and DVDs without being hindered by political boundaries or geographical space. It also can also be seen as the imitation and appropriation of music and other forms of media from other cultures around the world by Hmong artists and producers, and the impact of these global media influences upon Hmong culture. Thus, globalization here means global changes to both the production and content of Hmong media across national borders and into different local groups. Not only have these media products become globalized, but so has the technology which allows their consumption in the most remote Hmong villages in China, Vietnam, Laos or Thailand – wherever there is electricity supply.

In 1998, for instance, I and my wife visited relatives in a Hmong village in northern Thailand where we were surprised to see that nearly 40 per cent of the households had a VCR machine and TV set. Ten years prior, this would have been unthinkable. Early in 2004, we sent a video about our life and family in Australia to these relatives. The response (by mobile phone) was that we should not send videos anymore, because most of them now only have DVD players. As most Hmong film producers catch up with the latest developments in recording technology, they release their products mainly in the form of DVDs, forcing consumers in other countries to adapt to these changing technological demands. With the construction of roads and the use of media communications, the social and geographical isolation of Hmong communities world-wide has finally been broken. Without this technology and the capacity of consumers to afford its usage, this process of Hmong cultural globalization would not have been possible during the last 25 years. The Hmong now can reach out to each other – often without having to leave their own home, thanks to the wonder of modern inventions and the Hmong people’s own ability to exploit them.

Production

Almost all of the Hmong videos are produced in America, although they may be taped in Thailand, Laos or China. Most producers started as amateurs, refugees with an itch to share their nostalgia or to achieve an artistic ambition, people who enjoy traveling and video-taping their journeys to educate and entertain others. Most of them make one video and disappear from the scene. Only less than half a dozen of them have continued to make travelogues, music videos or movies over a number of years, especially Su Thao who started in 1990 with his own company and professional editing/recording studio – which he sometimes hires out to other Hmong video producers. On the whole, most only work from their own homes.

There is a Hmong music recording studio in Vientiane, Laos, operated by a music teacher in the Lao National School of Music who is Hmong. As many singers and actors are based in Laos or Thailand, he is often called upon to record their work. When he has time, he may write enough songs to fill a cassette, then pay a singer or two to work with him to record a master tape. He will then sell the master for \$US 1,000 to a visiting Hmong entrepreneur or producer from America who takes it back for duplication and packaging for distribution. The whole process from recording to marketing may take up to a year. It is not unusual for a singer to record his or her own songs and sell the master tape, or handle the sale of the duplicated tapes directly, if more money can be made in this way.

On the whole, however, the production of videos is done by an individual media entrepreneur or a company, especially in regard to movies and documentaries. Payments received by singers and actors are often very low – from a few hundred US dollars to \$US 1,000. Some of the best leading actresses command no more than \$2,000 per movie - anymore than that and no one can afford to hire them. Many of the extras in movies work without payments. In singing competitions of traditional Hmong songs, the artists are paid a few hundred American dollars by the video producer who then owns the copyright to the recording of their songs.

Many of the music CDs and feature movies are designed to entertain, although videos that promote modern music can also be seen as attempts at a new cultural invention to bring the Hmong in line with, or at least as part of the digitised global music community. The production of music tapes and feature movies is also driven by a strong profit motive for many producers, by a desire to make

additional money to supplement their incomes from their normal lines of work (Schein, 2004, personal communication). In other ways, Hmong media producers may also be driven by a desire to salvage and reinforce Hmong arts and culture in the face of constant bombardment from American music and movies which some may consider irrelevant to the ethno-specific needs and consumer tastes of the Hmong.

Thus, Hmong video consumption may be said to be a reaction to cultural alienation in an unfamiliar environment, and to cultural deprivation – the inability to keep or practise one’s culture due to the loss of social memories or local legal prohibitions relating to certain ethnic practices such as ritual animal sacrifices or bull fights. This then leads some Hmong to make videos in order to reinvent, to reproduce their culture in the form of inoffensive media presentations. To paraphrase Baudrillard (in “Plastic Surgery to the Other” 1994), this reaction may be best described as the production of one’s missing “other in its absence”, and the need to be able “to continuously refer back to oneself and to one’s image” (body, look, identity, and desire) because circumstances have caused “the virtual disappearance of the other” in us.

Apart from providing alternative entertainment, the relieving of feelings of alienation and the reproduction of one’s culture, a major reason for the proliferation of Hmong videos is the fact that many Hmong in the West now have accumulated enough capital to buy expensive video production equipment, to travel, to pay for local assistants, singers and actors; to hire or set up studios to process and edit their taped images and eventually to package them for commercial release. Material base and capital accumulation in the Marxist conception of the capitalist society have allowed consumers to buy and producers to make/invent, “constantly seeking out new forms in order to accumulate more capital and reproduce more labour” (Woolley, 1999) and, I may add, to be able to afford homeland nostalgia and a large dose of cultural consumption in celluloid form.

This access to capital and labour together with the freedom of expression the Hmong now enjoy in the West has enabled them to produce documentaries, films and music clips in their own language; and to do this without any artistic restrictions. This would not have been possible in a more restricted political and economic environment, or constrained financial situations. More capital now means more power for media production and consumption.

Distribution

As the producers do not have a big budget, there is usually no advance publicity or press conferences by movie stars or singers about their new DVD or movie. In fact, consumers rarely get to see the leading actors or actresses who are featured in the videos they watch. A number of famous singers at least make a few tours across America in cities where there are large concentrations of Hmong. Through these concerts, the sponsors may advertise the works of these artists or even sell them directly to concert goers. In general, most publicity is done as trailers on videos which are on the market. Some are advertised on-line on the Internet, but the majority of video products may not get any advance publicity. Some after-sale publicity may be done on radio when a song is played and the name of the artist is mentioned by the radio announcer. There are Hmong radio stations in Colorado, California, Wisconsin and Minnesota which play a lot of Hmong modern and traditional songs over the airwaves. A number of on-line radio stations also exist. Many of the recorded modern songs are also very popular with radio stations that broadcast in the Hmong language in Thailand and Laos.

The normal channel of distribution is through Hmong stores and grocery shops in various American cities. Once they are bought, people will talk about the good ones from one friend to another, from one country to the next, or friends and relatives may send videos they enjoy as gifts to their acquaintances in other places. As each video may cost between \$US 10 and \$20, there is also a lot of illegal copying, usually between friends and neighbors. Most videos may carry copyright, but some do not. Very few have dates on them, so it is impossible to know when they are made. Some Hmong shops and video stores in America also rent out Hmong videos to their customers who then provide publicity about them by word of mouth through their social networks in the global Hmong community.

Other avenues of marketing include on-line sales through a company called United Hmong Media, stalls run by producers at major Hmong New Year parties in California (at Fresno, for example); or at special events like the Hmong 4th July celebration in St.Paul, Minnesota, a two-day major sporting event which attracts thousands of Hmong from other states each year. Outside of the US, Hmong videos are marketed through Hmong shops in Thailand and in Laos, some of which may

specialize in selling Hmong, Thai and Lao media products such as DVDs, CDs, videos and audio cassettes. A recent practice has been for Hmong in Laos to copy and send DVDs made in America to relatives in Australia or France to sell through their informal network of friends, and then send back the money to them in Laos.

Both production and distribution are transnational in nature. Actors, singers and producers come from different countries to work together. Their finished products are then distributed for consumption world-wide among the Hmong in the diaspora, and with homeland communities in China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Given that most of the videos are produced by amateurs, many in the basement of their homes using hired equipment, it is amazing that these media products have managed to find their way into the “global Hmong village” in all the countries where they live.

Cultural Production and Reinvention

If Hmong videos contribute to the production and reproduction of Hmong culture, what have they done? What dimensions of this culture have been added and what is the outcome of this cultural reinvention? There is no doubt that many homesick Hmong living in exile have returned to Laos, Thailand or China to try and capture those elusive images in their dreams and longings for the homeland. However, it is questionable whether what they imagined is what they have captured on camera. This is true particularly since the homeland has also changed a great deal since 1975. The Hmong in Laos, for example, no longer wear Hmong clothes in their everyday life as they did 30 years ago. Hmong traditional costumes, like those found with their owners in Western countries, have been relegated to the depth of the family trunks to be fished out only for display and wearing on special occasions like weddings and the New Year. They go to work on farms wearing ordinary Western or Lao casual clothes.

A new generation has grown up that has assimilated a lot of the local majority culture, and is less able to remember or follow Hmong cultural traditions. Of course, those in the homeland are still much better at keeping some of the more important customs than those in Western countries since many of them can still live together as villagers, free from influences and impositions from other cultural groups. But times have changed and what is put together as video images of Hmong life and social practices may be rather different from those experienced thirty years ago by the Hmong in

America or Australia. In other cases, video images are mere illusions in the sense that they only represent what happened at the time they were put on tape. By the time the images get edited and packaged for sale, they would be a few months or a year out of date and no longer represent the reality in the homeland.

It may thus be said that the Hmong who watch these videos are only watching a compressed and “delayed reality”, a fake version of their culture and the homeland, for these video images are only what Baudrillard (in “Critical Thought”, 1994) calls “simulacra” – “an illusion of the factual”, of things that pretend to be real but are only simulation of reality. To the smart proponents of postmodernism, video media may have thus stolen the “reality file” and substituted it with the “murderous capacity of (its) images”, to borrow another Baudrillard favourite phrase. To most Hmong, however, video images of their own people in far-distant places are seen as a real representation of their culture. They help the viewers not only to see their culture come alive but also to try and maintain their native language with their children and grand-children in the West by watching videos with narratives and dialogues all spoken in Hmong.

These images may be selective, according to what the producers want to keep, but they are no less real and they help add a new dimension to the life and culture of the diasporic viewers by giving sense to their social position, justifying their beliefs and traditions to their rebellious children, and confirming and bringing meanings back to their confusing transnational life. Thus, for the Hmong in the diaspora, these video images may be more real than the reality of their dreary immediate surroundings which are often devoid of familiar cultural practices and self-presentations, and which give them few occasions to show what it is to be “Hmong” to their children. These ethnic videos can also help bring reality to these children who grow up in the West with little interest and opportunity to see the culture of their parents in close-up and colourful graphic images. These images not only give one pride in one’s own ethnicity, but also can be paused and rewound for study, duplicated and distributed to others, unlike a one-off ceremony in real life which disappears after it is done.

Videos, therefore, have allowed the Hmong, on the one hand, to see their culture put in a show like those that bombard them every day on the silver screen or in the print media. What has

been put on tapes can also be preserved to be seen again, to fulfil one's nostalgic longings and to be learned, changed or improved for later generations. Schein (forthcoming) has coined a most appropriate phrase in a new publication called "Rewind to Home" in which she sees Hmong videos as a borderless commodity which consumers can rewind back and forth to watch whenever they want to see the homeland. Moreover, they can also be used to show Hmong culture off to members of the host country in the absence of any real presentations that the Hmong viewers can make of themselves.

On the other hand, Hmong videos act as witnesses of the cultural changes already taking place in Hmong society or at least point at the direction of change in which is heading. Although some depict Hmong in their rural villages with the women in full Hmong costume doing farming work, many also show them in America living in large cities and running shops. There are even songs that extol the benefits of city life and formal education. The singer and dancing girls are dressed in suits or the latest international fashion¹². Documentaries of New Year celebrations show Hmong men in their best Western attire and the women in evening party dresses. They drive expensive cars and live in two-storey brick houses in suburban America or Thailand. Viewers thus clearly see a group of people that have adapted and changed, that have modernized and caught up with modern life – like many mainstream global communities.

These cultural changes and inventions are evident from a DVD released recently of the 2003 Hmong New Year open-air function in Luang Prabang, Laos. Instead of the traditional ball games played between boys and girls, there is only a big crowd gathering in front of an improvised stage where well-known Hmong singers perform their best songs one after another in front of young dancing girls. The singing in the DVD is interspersed with comedy acts designed to mock undesirable practices like drug and opium addiction and laziness. The crowd in DVD loves the comedy acts and is enthralled by the singing. The modern songs, first made popular through videos,

¹² See for examples:

- a. "Xav Muaj Tus Hlub" (no date) by Cib Xyooj and produced by Hmoob Toj Siab Productions, Sacramento.
- b. "Hlub Yog Ab Tsi? (What is Love?)" (no date) by Hmong Original Entertainment, St. Paul, MN. This is a collection of modern Hmong songs by American Hmong singers dressed in the latest cowgirl outfits and with names such as Valley, Stacy and Daisy and joined by a guest singer from Thailand, Tshaus Hawj.

have become a part of their entertainment culture. It is a modern concert they now see, not just a traditional New Year celebration filled with ball games.

Cultural Maintenance

Hmong transnational videos which focus, among other things, on cultural frivolities left behind in the old country, serve to make fun of them for the enjoyment of their diasporic viewers. This is true especially of those Hmong movies with stories involving middle-aged men returning from the diaspora to lure young women in the homeland to marry them as second wives only for many of the latter to be abandoned when the men run out of their green dollar notes. Because of the frequent use of this theme, these videos are sometimes seen as a vehicle to perpetuate traditional practices that continue to exploit homeland women by involving them in polygamous marriages – something that the male protagonists can no longer have access to in Western countries.

This argument is made particularly strongly in a recent paper by Schein (2004) called “Homeland Beauty: Transnational Longing and Hmong American Video” in which she discusses the first of the very popular movie series that is already mentioned, *Dr Tom*, first made in 1995 in Thailand by expatriate Hmong from America. The protagonist is an unemployed middle-age shiftless swindler who returns to Laos after years of living by his wits in America and who now pretends to be rich and single – throwing money left and right when in the homeland, but actually borrowing and conniving from all and sundry when back in America. Bragging his way through the homeland, he gives himself the title of Doctor (which is very highly regarded in Asian societies) in order to elevate his social status and open more doors to his womanizing and other sham activities. One of his deceitful schemes involves talking a poor old Hmong woman into agreeing for her young daughter to marry him – for a few weeks before he has to return to his first wife in America.

Schein sees this Hmong parody as the epitome of homeland “erotics” (sexualised longings) and gendered exploitation – bundled in a new art form without locatedness, floating in the murky waters of the diaspora and transfixed by the excruciating gaze of post-modern nostalgia. She argues that the “terrain of Hmong American politics has become irrevocably intertwined with media texts... [which]...should be seen as embedded in sexual cultures and in turn as constituting and reproducing

them. It is not surprising that Hmong homeland nostalgia should be saturated with eroticism...”

(op.cit, p.2).

For Schein, the homeland through this video has become an object of sexual fantasies, a site for “recuperated passions”, a “reconfigured structure of intimacy”. It has become an ever-shifting gendered landscape of longing represented in the form of a ripe young girl, full of feminine charm to be lusted for and used by middle-aged Hmong visitors with pockets full of American dollars, then left behind to a life of tears and false promises. Although tears are streaming down her face, she refuses to marry her old suitor, the young man from her familiar and poor locale. She is happy to wait for her balding and obese but seemingly rich sugar daddy from the West even if she has to wait forever. Although Schein also identifies many other roles and gives other explanations for these Hmong videos, she may be justified in her allegory which sees the homeland as a fresh-faced seductive woman and the Hmong in the diaspora as old lechers longing for and waiting to pounce on this innocent young girl.

Nevertheless, the Hmong in the West have avidly used these videos for many years without ever thinking of their depiction of things in the homeland as objects of sexual desire. They only see them as consumer items that have filled a big void in their lives as refugees. They have found them to be entertaining as well as educational. They may contain stories about old men trying to score with younger women, but that is also found in many societies. These videos recreate cultural traditions that have now been lost to the new generation of Hmong – even those in the old country. It does not mean that they will perpetuate polygamous marriages and mid-life male sexual fixations, given the law against polygamy in the countries the Hmong now live in. If they contain images of ageing men’s romantic longings for younger girls, whether in a movie or a documentary, these longings have always been accepted as an integral part of the Hmong culture in the homeland and not a new aberration emanating from sexually deprived Hmong males in the West. In reality, many Hmong mores have changed since 1975 with polygamy and marriages between older men and younger girls being actively challenged, often from educated Hmong women. When they are imaged on videos, these old romantic practices may look as if they are only common to Western Hmong men because

these videos often dwell on the latter's transnational subjectivities, but in reality they are aimed to ridicule such practices.

Aside from "homeland erotics", what these Hmong videos in general help maintain is a love for the Hmong culture, for Hmong villagers singing traditional courting songs, for those Hmong in the diaspora to see traditional Hmong New Year and religious rituals being performed unhindered in their traditional setting in the mountains of Laos – some of which they can no longer carry out in the West because of laws prohibiting the use of live animals for them, or because few know how to perform them anymore. These videos have also brought to reality Hmong folk tales and legends that have been passed down from one generation to another in Hmong communities across Asia. This has helped reinforce and maintain the culture by making these famous stories come alive in living colour with characters played by real-life actors and actresses.

During one of my visits to Laos in 2002, I was waiting for a bus at Salaphukhun, south of Luang Prabang, to return to the capital of Vientiane. During the long evening wait, I ventured into a shop run by a Hmong woman who had two married sisters living in America. She invited me into the shop's back room and I was surprised that she had a VCR in this outback part of the country. I was even more surprised to see her family watching a Hmong movie that was recently made in Thailand by Hmong American producers. The movie is a favourite folk tale called "Nuj Nphaib thiab Ntxawm" or "Nublai and the Heavenly Last Princess". The hero is an orphan – a favourite Hmong theme - who excels in the playing of the reed pipe, and is rewarded with the love of the beautiful youngest daughter of the King of Heaven.

My host told me that this was everyone's favourite Hmong movie, because it is based on a popular story in the Hmong oral tradition. Now she does not have to tell the story verbally at night to her children any more. She can just put the tape in the VCR and everyone will be enthralled. It not only entertains, but it brings alive a long tradition of oral story-telling. They love to watch it, because it is something they can see with their own eyes and can identify with – something that shows a Hmong village and people in their traditional costumes, their rice fields and their mountain living. It is not a story about Hmong in America, laden with cultural longings and work problems, surrounded

by expensive cars and material possessions – something viewers in the homeland find hard to connect with.

As stated before, there have also been an increasing number of videos that depict traditional Hmong singing often in matching pairs with a male and a female singer who try to outwit each other with improvised love songs. It is not certain if the appeal of these tapes lies in the fact that they are often very entertaining – depending on the wittiness of the singers, or whether they fulfill the craving need of the diasporic Hmong for a musical tradition that is seen as truly Hmong, not something mixed and borrowed from other cultures. The most popular recording of this form of competition singing came out in mid-2004, involving a Hmong woman singer, Maiv Suav Yaj (May Shua Yang) who was brought from Vietnam to Laos and put in a singing match with a well-known male Hmong singer in Laos, Kum Xyooj (Ku Xiong). The Vietnamese Hmong could sing in 12 regional varieties while the Lao Hmong could only do with two, so she became the winner to the delight of on-lookers and viewers.

This new emergence of traditional Hmong music and folk tales on videos can be seen as contributing to cultural maintenance by sharing Hmong traditional culture in the homeland with viewers in other countries, by putting poetry improvisation and folk stories in moving images to make them come alive and become more real, more relevant. In this way, the videos allow people to see not only the lives of other Hmong, but also their own folklore and legendary tales in full colour. They make it easier for viewers to engrave them in their memories, like the cultural images which are stored on tapes and can always be retrieved for enjoyment or learning.

Diasporic Identity Formation

In an article called “Mapping Hmong Videos in Diasporic Space”, Schein (2002) attributes the hundreds of Hmong videos made in the past 20 years as resulting from Hmong refugees in America drifting “back and forth to Asia” – with a portable camcorder - “for some” (the producers), “and participation in an imagined and highly media-constructed supranational community for many more” (the consumers). In the process, they are all engaged in “identity exchanges” or the sharing of each other’s perceptions of what the Hmong are and their social positioning in their separate countries and as an transnational ethnic entity in the world at large (Schein, forthcoming). These

videos make those who produce and those who use them into a borderless virtual community bonded together across national boundaries and time by their mutual interest and, one may say passion for this art form. It reminds them of who they are, where they used to be and where they are socially, culturally and spatially located today in relation to other cultures and peoples. It also points to what they can become and can change into as a group sharing common cultural values and traditions, since culture changes constantly and so does one's identity.

According to Woodward (1997),

"Identity can be seen as the interface between subjective positions and social and cultural situations... Identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. Identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not." (pp. 1-2).

That videos and other media forms can reinforce and serve as identity representations is clearly demonstrated in the statement by the American singer/actor "Ice Cube" who declares that "my music is a product of who I am and where I came from. I'm made in America. I'm not from Mars or nowhere else." (Best and Kellner, 1999).

Media images are powerful in connecting people to each other, because they are seen as representations of individuals and cultures at the local, national and transnational levels. They bring into sharper focus ideas and "symbolic systems" to provide possible answers to questions of individual and collective identities such as "who am I?; what could I be?; who do I want to be?" (Woodward, op.cit., p. 14). Media images help shape the social and political concerns of producers and consumers, as well as drive their "social and cultural changes" (op.cit., p.1). For the Hmong diaspora, media production and consumption have made its members sharply aware of other Hmong in other countries, of what they have in common in spite of their many differences. More importantly, they make Hmong consumers see in what ways they are different from other people around them, other groups who are not Hmong. Videos have brought them a more focused social consciousness about themselves as a people and as a transnational nation.

Gilroy (1992, p. 19), defines black identity as an ongoing transnational process within a region united by its historical heritage of displacement through slavery. The Hmong identity can be

conceptualised along much the same transnational paradigm, united by a loss of homeland to a more powerful foe which forced them to be displaced and scattered around the globe with only some hazy memories to sustain them. The moving images they see on the screen of their television sets make these memories come alive, and help them feel that they are seeing their own real people talking at them across great divides of space and oceans. Viewers feel the pain of those they see fainting at airports in Laos saying good-bye to relatives returning to America, crying at funerals or sobbing in their diasporic suffering. They experience delight seeing Hmong children laughing and running in rice fields, young girls singing love songs or dancing to the tune of the mournful “qeej” music or the long flute. It makes them feel that they are in touch with other Hmong people with whom they feel belonged, despite the physical distance between video viewers and the subjects they watch.

Thus, Hmong homeland videos, one among a number of genres produced globally, enable Hmong exiles to make vicarious visits to their co-ethnics in other locations, to sample cultural traditions that are missing in their present lives, and to recapture the past as part of a process of reconstructing a new identity based on the sharing of the same culture, language and history. These videos thus can help to shape the group’s evolving image of itself or national identity, an identity which can be seen as a “production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 1990, p. 222). The video images may also heal the trauma of war in Laos, the bloodied forced displacement to Thailand after 1975 in which thousands of Hmong died, and the reluctant eventual resettlement in Western countries. Many left behind relatives, friends, personal possessions like domestic animals, houses and land – all of which are still fresh in their memories after 30 years. Video representation of homeland issues enables Hmong to reach back and feel in touch with this recent history. By interpreting past events from their own perspective and in their own language, it helps them to understand these events and to accept them. This, in turn, may make it easier for them to let go of their guilt and nostalgia so that they can adapt themselves to new and changing situations in their lives.

In addition to making consumers feel connected through a common identity and a shared longing for the homeland, Hmong videos have also made viewers raise their self-esteem and pride in the knowledge that they too can make and watch movies about themselves and are thus no less

inferior to other people around them. Many Hmong women have told me that they are no longer restricted to watch Chinese, Thai or American movies or even the local TV stations, some of which they find hard to understand and enjoy. Hmong videos are easy to watch and have expanded their range of home entertainment. In this way, these celluloid products have made life easier for the Hmong, and have consolidated their sense of individual, group and cultural worth. Although they are social constructions based on “social imaginaries” (Pfeifer, 2004), they act as “contestation” between sites of dominant Western discourses and Hmong minority texts, as the acting out of cultural politics between the viewers and the broader community, as depictions of contention between the past, the present and the future.

However, an issue to consider is that “identity is interactional, not constituted in a historical vacuum” with “a boundary between interpretation and fabrication”, as eloquently put by Tapp (2004, pp 21-22). At some point, there is a need to return to “real history” and “authentic culture”. In the course of their long migration from China to the West, with many stops in between, the Hmong have been influenced by many local cultures. Those in the diaspora, for example, have adopted Lao and Thai customs such as the baci or wrist-stringing ceremony and other Buddhist beliefs. They play hand ball games during New Year celebrations, which is not done by those in China. They use the reed pipe (or “qeej”) as a major symbol of their ethnic identity, but this musical instrument is not found among every group of Hmong in China, their former homeland. In the face of this array of differences and the lack of well informed research on Hmong cultural history, attempts to interpret Hmong culture as seen on videos may lead to the possibility of producers fabricating inauthentic “customs” and a distorted sense of identity.

Media Hegemony

Thus, a very subtle but no less important impact of Hmong videos is the influence that producers may have on viewers in regard to their personal interpretation and understanding of the homeland, its history and its culture. What viewers see is what producers choose to give them, for only selected images are put together in documentary narratives, singing clips or fictional movies. The end result may be what Gramsci (1988: 192) calls “hegemony” or “the creation of a new ideological terrain... a reform of consciousness”, based on the imposition of the beliefs and values of

the dominant class (producers) on the general community (consumers) for the latter to accept and share in the former's social and cultural practices.

Naficy and Teshome (1993) discuss how the media is used by members of the Iranian diaspora to put what they "imagine" about the homeland into image form. The "imagined" is thus transformed into "the imaged" – for viewing and appreciation of the lost past and the distant homeland. People forced into exile often have to deal with the dichotomy of "having culture and making culture" in the face of what I call "cultural deprivation", loss of their former identity and the need to reassert oneself in order to survive as an ethnic entity. Thus, one of the important influences of diasporic media production has been the idea that "if I do not have culture, I produce culture" by imagining, making up, imitating or borrowing. This may be partly what the Hmong video makers have done, and their idea of Hmong culture has been adopted or at least allowed to exist in celluloid form by the many other Hmong who consume their products not only in the countries of exile but also back in the homeland.

Apart from the imposition of subjective cultural translation by video producers, there appears to be a strong streak of patriotism and enforced nostalgia ingrained in many Hmong videos – whether in documentaries, music DVDs or the movie features. Many of the taped images, the Hmong traditional music used (whether singing or instrumental), the narratives in the documentaries, the dialogues and story lines of the movies (war, separation and homeland nostalgia, inability to fit into a new country due to language and cultural differences) – appear to be imbued with the desire of the producers to remind the captive viewers of the homeland, to harp back on who and what the viewers are, and above all to appeal for those living "comfortably" in exile not to forget "the plight" of those they have left behind in Laos, China, Vietnam or Thailand. Many of the modern songs, for example, urge Hmong listeners to unite, to work hard, to progress in life and to love each other as a community¹³. Sometimes, a whole cassette may contain these songs. In some instances, the singer may lament about the new lonely life in distant America and how much he misses his family and

¹³ See "Hlub Kuv Haiv Hmoob (Loving My Hmong People)", 2005, DVD sung by Paj Muas and produced by Apple Video Productions, California.

friends who stay behind in the longed-for homeland, as in the following excerpt from a Karaoke DVD by Ntsaim Thoj (Jai Thao):

Living alone in this country fills my heart with sorrow

Every day I wander in tears from one place to another

I so very much miss the people I used to know

With the beloved homeland I have all left behind¹⁴

It is as if the producers deliberately try to create or prolong the nostalgia for the homeland in the Hmong diasporic consciousness, or to make it stronger for those already suffering from it. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that some producers even seem to try to force their own longings and homesickness on the viewers by stressing emotive images for their audience such as images of traditional Hmong costumes in a song clip, of Hmong villages and farm life in a documentary, and of old places those in the diaspora used to live in. At New Year functions, singers may be asked to sing about whether those in the diaspora still miss those in the homeland, making both the singer and the audience cry – as in the following song by Lis Lwm (Lee Lue) at the 1998 New Year celebration in Fresno, California:

My mother and father, how are you doing now?

My mother and father, how are you living today?

Do you ever think of me, the one you left behind

Do you think about me, you know I am still alive?¹⁵

Su Thao, as already mentioned, has made many movies, documentaries and song videos. His company has released tapes on the Hmong involvement in the Indochina War, starting with the French in Dien Bien Phu in 1954 to the end of the Vietnam War in 1973¹⁶. He is not a historian and he never interviewed any of the players in these wars, but what he did was to go the places of battle, to film where the fighting took place and to bring back colorful images of the imagined history in

¹⁴ From a song entitled “Going Far Away and Missing Those of You I Left Behind”, in *Best 2004 Hmong Karaoke Collections* produced by All Pro Productions, Fresno, CA, USA. Songs with similar theme can be found with nearly all Hmong singers, both modern and traditional. The list is too long to enumerate.

¹⁵ From the video documentary “Hmoob Lub Neej Ib Vuag Dua” (Hmong Life in Passing), produced by Suab Kub (Golden Voice) Productions, St. Paul, MN, USA, 2001.

¹⁶ See “The Hmong of Vietnam” (1996) by ST Universal Video Production, Fresno, CA.

other people's minds. In 1998, while he was making a documentary on the Lao Government's treatment of the Hmong in Laos after 1975 without doing a lot of research, he told Schein (2002, p. 235) that he hoped his project would have the desired "emotional impact" on viewers, for "if they don't cry" after watching it "they are not Hmong". The excellent 2005 travelogue video called "Moos Theeb Moos Laim" (Muong Theng Muong Lai), previously mentioned, also pays visit to relics of the French defeat in Dien Bien Phu while also occasionally urging viewers and the Hmong the narrator/producer met during his trip to Vietnam to love each other, not to forget their shared Hmong identity and destiny as a transnational minority.

There is thus an attempt to use videos to arouse emotions, a love for one's ethnic group and for the past, a kind of forced patriotism, controlled nostalgia for the "imagined" homeland through the power of the "imaged" in the media products consumed by those living in exile. This may arise from a real sense of loss and the trauma of war, the sudden forced departure from the homeland that Hmong video producers want to share with their audience, to bring out the desired emotional impact, and maybe to appease the nostalgia this first generation of the Hmong in the diaspora have so acutely felt and continue to feel. By this very appeal, producers may also be able to convince Hmong consumers to part with their money for these video products. This is not to say, of course, that producers fabricate or falsify some video images in order to fulfil their own interpretation of reality about Hmong history and traditional culture in the homeland, so as to captivate more consumer interest and more acceptance of their commercialised media products by those living in exile. Consumers longing for a homeland will perceive their own reality in the images made by video producers. What is in question is the fact that producers often control the kind of images they select for presentation – at the risk of falsifying this reality so much longed for by the consumers.

Hmong videos, therefore, can constitute the means by which producers exert their dominant discourses and cultural interpretations on viewers, as well as putting their homeland longings and feelings into work in order to realize their artistic dreams - and also earning some money on the side as one of their primary motives. Making these videos is hard work and the financial returns can be minimal, but the satisfaction of having produced a work of art, having a message to pass on and share can make it well worth the trouble. For the consumers, videos help them understand their past as

interpreted by producers, or fulfill their curiosity about places they long to see but are separated from for political and economic reasons. The media images feed, generate and increase the fantasies consumers hold for these locations, for homeland objects of subjective erotic desires and for sites of “recuperated passions” for transnational imaginings, as Schein (op.cit.) vividly puts it.

Conclusion

Those enterprising individuals or companies who produce Hmong videos may be primarily interested in making financial profits from their media products. However, they may also be driven by other factors such as: (1) attempts to satisfy their own homeland longings and those of the video consumers; (2) the wish to entertain and educate their fellow Hmong; (3) the desire to consolidate and assert the identity or existence of the Hmong in the global community; and (4) the need to upgrade or add to Hmong culture through preserving what is practicable and borrowing to add what is desirable from other sources. In this way, the Hmong culture has been reinvented, maintained, changed, and brought up-to-date as it were, while such media products also help in the expansion the Hmong cultural capital.

The current high demand for these products have made them an integral part of the diaspora, a part closely tied to an imagined homeland, a vicarious journey that many viewers cannot make in person but can share transnationally in celluloid form from their living rooms. These ethnic videos are thus used in place of reality for their viewers, as substitute for the diasporic journey that is often made in their minds – at least in so far as the ageing first generation of Hmong exiles are concerned. The diaspora from China has been more than a century and many ties with that distant past were already severed, but the memories of Laos are still fresh in the minds of many Hmong. Many connections remain, so the nostalgia is still very alive. With the second generation, their future production and use of the media may be completely different. Many young Hmong have already lost the language they need to connect with other Hmong, and they are not interested in the homeland so acutely longed for by their parents. Their ties to the past and with relatives in other countries will be virtually non-existent and nostalgia will no longer be such an issue.

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