

**The Shaping of Traditions:  
Agriculture and Hmong Society**

by

**Gary Yia Lee, Ph.D.**

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**Abstract**

This article argues that throughout Hmong history, Hmong agriculture and the associated economic system have been determining forces affecting and giving rise to many social customs and religious beliefs. The paper provides numerous historical and contemporary examples of how Hmong agriculture practices in Asia have shaped important aspects of Hmong culture and religious beliefs.

**Introduction**

In Marx's view, the means of subsistence of a group of people constitute the form through which they express their way of life; and what they are depends on the material conditions determining "what they produce and how they produce" (Marx, 1965: 121, original emphasis). This has been interpreted as meaning that for Marx, the economy determines the structures and contents of the institutions of society, but Engels has argued that other elements are no less influential on the process of social evolution even if economic conditions play the major part in the last instance (Engels, 1970: 76 –77). This theme has been explored further in regard to modes of production in pre-capitalist societies by Amin (1976), Godelier (1977), Gunn (1990), Meillassoux et al. (1981), Hindess and Hirst (1975) and Terray (1972), among others. Binney (1968: 549), for example, states that with the White Hmong he studied in Thailand, "the social system is largely dependent on the continuation of the economic system."

Although Marxist economic determinism may not be a valid theoretical explanation of social organization for all human societies, an attempt will be made here to see if it is applicable to the Hmong. I will examine the way in which Hmong people living in villages in the highlands of China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Burma usually make a living as subsistence farmers and how this relates to their social

institutions in order to see how much agriculture affects the making of Hmong traditions. I will attempt to reconstruct Hmong agriculture through historical sources to find the extent to which the economy influences, or is influenced by, other spheres of living. While some may say that “you are what you produce”, the Hmong may be better characterized as “you are today what you used to produce in the past” as a group, especially after their recent dispersion in culturally different and economically complex Western societies.

In this paper, I take the Hmong to have originated only from southern China where there is clear evidence of their ongoing physical presence and mentions of them in Chinese historical texts along with many traces of Chinese cultural influences (in Hmong language, religion, clan names and social structure), but not from Mesopotamia, Russia, Siberia and Mongolia where no such links exist, apart from speculations by fanciful proponents of Hmong history.

### **Past Livelihood**

The main feature of the economy in Ancient China was the so-called “fire field” agriculture, now more generally known as slash-and-burn or shifting cultivation (Kolb, 1977: 30). The crops grown were millet in the north, roots and tubers such as taro and yam together with fruit trees in the southern coastal area; and rice in the lower Yangtze and the Huai Ho plain – all dated back to “the fifth millennium B.C. as far as the available archaeological data are concerned” (Chang, 1977: 473). In the Chou Dynasty (1050 – 265 B.C.) irrigation was adopted, with the result that agriculture became sedentary and more productive than was the case with the practice of shifting cultivation<sup>1</sup>. This new farming practice led to a

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<sup>1</sup> As pointed out by Chang (1977:37-38), it is only since 1950 B.C. that written materials are available, which enables us to provide a chronological order for events in Chinese history. Before this date, the history of ancient China is based on myths and legends, which lead to much confusion and arguments as to what actually did happen. For a reconstruction of this primeval period, especially with regard to the San-Miao, see Karlgren (1946: 204-255). Chinese historical dates are still confusing, but whenever possible I have followed those recorded in Elvin (1975:15).

big increase in the Chinese population and the emergence of large towns and cities, resulting in these Chinese urban dwellers beginning soon to encroach into native regions<sup>2</sup>.

As the frontiers of Han Chinese society spread through land colonization and military conquests, many of the non-Chinese tribal inhabitants were pushed to higher grounds by Chinese settlement in the bottomland and valleys (Stover, 1974: 67). Tribal fallows were transformed into irrigated terraces by the conquering population, while the original farmers such as the Miao<sup>3</sup> and other tribal groups continued to grow upland rice and taro in shifting fields, supplemented by some hunting and cattle herding (Kolb, op.cit.: 45). In some areas dominated by the Chinese, the natives appear to have gradually adopted methods of intensive agriculture. This differential pattern of responses to Chinese domination may be influenced by the types of country in which the Miao/Hmong<sup>4</sup> and other groups of native people were living rather than other factors.

In 280 A.D., the natives of Hunan, among whom was a sizeable number of Miao were reported to be paying tax to the local Chinese authorities in the form of hempen cloth. Ch'eh (1947: 21) sees this as indicating the cultivation of hemp by indigenous peoples and the existence of handicrafts. By 353 A.D. the native tax was paid in grain, and this continued until 619 A.D. when this grain tax was specified as a rice tax. During the Sung Dynasty (960 – 1276 A.D.), tributes from native chiefs to their Chinese lords included engraved copper drums, cinnabar, rock crystal, timber, tiger skin, musk, beeswax, native cloth and horses (Ibid: 60). Shifting agriculture still predominated among native farmers, but some irrigated

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<sup>2</sup> The terms "native" or "indigenous" are used to denote people who inhabited different regions of China prior to the invasion of the Han Chinese. This is in accordance with usage adopted by Chinese writers referred to in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Chinese sources never mention "Hmong" but only "Miao", a name used today for the Hmong, Hmu and Khoxiong in China. However, "Miao" in historical times includes many other non-Han Chinese people. In this paper, I employ the term in its Chinese context and it may not necessarily refer only to the Hmong.

<sup>4</sup> The descriptive "Miao/Hmong" is used here with a slash rather than a hyphen as in "Miao-Hmong" to conform to the categorisation of the Hmong as a Miao subgroup and not as two interchangeable terms.

terraces were also to be found. This practice was believed to be widespread among them until the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644).

The forms in which tax was paid seem to indicate an indigenous economy characterized by the cultivation of grains such as wheat and rice, foraging for copper and timber as well as bee-hives; hunting for tiger skin, horse-breeding, and cloth-making – a fairly extensive range of undertakings for these predominantly subsistence farmers. An increase in rice production owing perhaps to the adoption of intensive irrigated cropping from the Chinese was attested by the fact that in 1002 A.D. Chinese officials in Hunan were able to obtain a three year reserve of grain from the tribal population in exchange for salt (Ch'eh, op.cit.: 61). As early as the Tsin Dynasty (265 – 420 A.D.), the natives had come to depend on Chinese settlers for salt and fish, which means that economic interdependence existed between the two groups, particularly in regard to the trade of salt for tribal rice.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, the indigenous people were pushed deep into the hills of misty weather and bamboo groves by the Chinese to the extent that most of them could only grow such dry cereals as sorghum, buckwheat, kaoliang (sweet potatoes), beans and peas, and some wheat. By this time, maize had also been introduced for cultivation on the mountains of the inland Yangtze region. It probably originated from the tribespeople in the western frontier area of China where it was reported to be growing towards the end of the Ming period (Ho, 1975: 194 – 195). This new crop was later to become a major staple for Hmong farmers in areas with insufficient arable land or inclement weather for the cultivation of rice.

Ch'eh (1947: 110) speculates that the necessity to reserve land for food production arising from the constant shrinkage of their territories, could also contribute to the giving up by many native women of the growing of hemp. Some turned to raising silk worms as a means of making their own fabrics while others became completely dependent on the purchase of Chinese materials for their costumes. This is true equally of those living in Kweichow, or Guizhou in today's spelling (Lombard-Salmon, 1972: 129 – 130

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and 179). With the diminishing of good cultivatable areas, the Miao were reported to have turned their attention to domestic animals as a serious complementary economic activity with such animals as water buffaloes, horses, dogs, goats, pigs, cats, fowls and ducks. Many of these domestic animals were obtained from Chinese traders, often in exchange for timber which was floated along some of the bigger rivers to Chinese trading posts (Vaulserre, 1901: 53).

Forest clearing for agriculture and the felling of trees for commercial purposes led to extensive denudation of mountain slopes and erosion, particularly when reinforced by competition for these resources from the more populous Chinese. To counter this problem, a few groups of Miao and other minorities undertook the reforestation of their environment with fir trees and pines which were then used for sale and housing construction. In Guizhou, the forests resulting from this effort covered an area of 200 miles near the Hunan border (Lombard-Salmon, op.cit.: 128). In Guongdong and Guongxi, “thriving reforestation projects” under clan communal management “have existed for many centuries” (Walker, 1943: 352).

### **The New Cash Crop: Opium**

The earliest opium production in China can be traced back to the T'ang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907) in the provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan and Kansu (Edkins, 1898). During the Ch'ing Dynasty (A.D. 1645 – 1911), poppy planting was reported to have spread to Guizhou and Fujian. By 1836, it was grown extensively in Guongdong, Fujian, Eastern Zhejiang and Yunnan. At this time, opium addiction became so prevalent that most Chinese palace guards, members of the civil service and the military were smoking opium. Partly, this was due to opium imported from British India, which amounted to nearly 17,000 chests (1,215 tons) per year in 1830 compared with 200 chests (14 tons) before 1773 and with 4,000 chests (285 tons) by 1790 (Campbell, 1920: 8). Between 1829 and 1839, opium imports from India totaled more than 1,841 tons annually, close to six times those for the period between 1811 and 1812.

(Owen, 1934: 80). By 1867, opium consumption had risen to 3,903 tons from 333 tons in 1798 (Choutze, 1876: 323).

To a great extent, the increase in the number of opium addicts during the first half of the nineteenth century could be attributed to the expansion of Chinese domestic poppy cultivation. This is true particularly of the peasant and worker addicts who depended on local opium because of its cheaper price and poorer quality compared to imported opium. An Imperial edict prohibiting opium import, smoking and cultivation was issued in 1800, but it could not be enforced as there was a readily available and profitable market. As buyers became more numerous, so did opium merchants and poppy farmers. From 1882, opium poppies were grown not only in the hills, but also in the lowlands of parts of the south-western provinces of China. In Sichuan alone, it was estimated that 850,000 acres of land were producing 23.5 million pounds of opium annually in the 1880's (Spence, op.cit.: 153-154).

In 1861, a British naval expedition up the Yangtse River commented that above Guizhou, the poppy was cultivated in addition to other crops, and "for many miles it was the universal crop" (Sarel, 1861: 62-3). A French expedition up the Mekong also found that opium was one of the main products in the market of Yunnan city in 1868. It further said that opium cultivation had killed so many bees that beeswax was eliminated as a trade commodity (Garnier, 1873: 291). A large part of the plain of Zhaotong, one of the biggest in Yunnan and inhabited by Chinese as well as Hua (Flowery) Miao, was under the poppy (*Ibid*: 342). An English geographer on a journey by land and water across China in 1877, "noticed the red flower of the poppy" in Sichuan where it was largely grown by Chinese farmers along with crops such as peas, beans, wheat and rape; and some districts of Guizhou were under one crop, the poppy "as far round as the eye could reach" (McCarthy, 1879: 491 and 496).

These accounts related to the cultivation of poppy in China do not specify the ethnic backgrounds of the growers. However, there is no doubt that the Hmong began to produce opium in their hill enclaves not long after its introduction by Chinese farmers. They might even have been among the earlier farmers

to exploit this cash crop judging from the evidence that it was first cultivated in abundance in the hills where many Hmong lived before its shift to the lowlands with their Chinese settlements. This conjecture is further supported by the fact that the poppy was grown mostly in the provinces with large numbers of Miao/Hmong and other minorities.

Moreover, we know that the native population did not have enough lands to produce grains for their needs, and that they also had to trade with the Chinese for salt, fish, fabrics and tools. In Guizhou, the basic “money” in commercial transactions for the Miao/Hmong in the seventeenth century was still salt as they were said to dislike Chinese copper coins (Lombard-Salmon, *op.cit.*: 209). Yet salt was controlled by the Chinese authorities. It was, therefore, inevitable that many tribal people would adopt opium as an exchange currency as they still do today in parts of Burma, Laos and Vietnam.

By the early nineteenth century, it was said that the opium poppies cultivated by the Han Chinese had multicolored petals while those of the Miao were of one color and their fruit was bigger; and that Miao girls did not use opium to seduce visitors as did Chinese girls of easy virtue, because of a strict prohibition from their elders and family heads (Ibid: 181). Nevertheless, the Miao uprising of 1855-1881 against Chinese rule in Southern China must have interrupted or even put an end to opium cultivation in many areas, particularly when the Miao were “suppressed with truly barbaric cruelty” by Chinese troops (Meo Handbook, 1969: 13). An account of a French expedition from Yunnan to Hanoi via Guizhou and Guangxi in 1899 did not once refer to opium poppy along the long journey, despite frequent mentions of other crops and trading activities of the Miao as well as descriptions of their gardens, rice terraces and various fruit trees around their villages, including ruins from their rebellion thirty years previously (Vaulserre, *op.cit.* : 26-58).

Following the suppression of their uprising by the Chinese in 1881, many of them migrated to North Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, bringing with them the cultivation of the poppy and other traditional crops (Robequain, 1935: 84-86). This movement, mostly by the Hmong, is said to have already begun in

1868 with ten thousand persons from Guizhou, Yunnan and Guangxi, and continued sporadically until 1965 (Lam Tam, 1974: 12). Some settled near the border of China and Laos, through to Thailand with a few going as far as the southern most part of Yunnan (von Wissmann, 1943: 28). In Laos, they are believed to have established themselves “less than ten years” in the high mountains before 1883 (Neis, 1885: 58). In 1894, they are reported to have crossed the Mekong to Thailand (Bernatzik, 1970: 29); and could be found as far west as Tak by 1929 (Credner, 1967 : 167).

The economy of the Hmong migrants in North Vietnam and Laos around this period appears to place equal importance on rice, maize and opium (Savina, 1924: 11; and Nguyen, 1977: 15). In areas further to the West, the emphasis, at least in the literature, seems to have been on the opium poppy. In Luang Prabang, Laos, the Hmong were reputed to grow opium in their hilly retreats and to “flood the whole country with their low quality opium” (Neis, op.cit.: 58).

Across the Mekong in Chiangrai province of Thailand, about 150 Hmong had settled on a ridge in 1905 and “their favourite crop was clearly seen to be opium” (Seidenfaden, 1923: 192). Elsewhere in Northern Siam, other groups of Hmong lived “on the cool heights of mountain tops in comparative ease and plenty ... (cultivating) principally the poppy” (McCarthy, 1888: 125). The motive appears to be the same as previously in China: the need for a light but valuable commodity that could be sold, exchanged or traded for money and other necessities which were not available locally. This is in great contrast to those who went to live in southern Yunnan where their economy consisted of “fire-field rice cultivation, maize and buckwheat” together with the grazing of goats and buffaloes (von Wissmann, op.cit.).

This excursion into Miao/Hmong economic history, admittedly partly speculative, suggests certain consistencies or changes linking mythical times to the most recent past. Clearly, the Miao/Hmong seem never to have abandoned shifting agriculture and animal husbandry. They have carried on with their own handicrafts, especially in regard to cloth-making from hemp and blacksmithing. Buffaloes could have been adopted only since their adoption of irrigated rice cultivation, following the example of the

ever-expanding Chinese. Horses appear to have been the basic means of transportation for the Miao throughout their long history in China (Kolb, op.cit.: 44). For many of the non-Chinese people in the southwestern part of the country, their contacts with the Chinese could only have meant their eventual adoption of a new mode of production dominated by Chinese intensive agriculture and socio-economic aspirations. Those who refused this absorption were continually driven into more and more shrunken territories suitable only for shifting cultivation with all its economic and environmental implications.

### **The Contemporary System**

During the five Dynasties (907-960 A.D.), the intensive irrigated rice cultivation of the Chinese still competed strongly against the shifting extensive agriculture of the Miao/Hmong and other hill tribes for land in China. By the end of the Ming Dynasty, many minority groups including ancestors of the Hmong had adopted Chinese methods of agriculture. The acceptance of indigenous people into Chinese schools and the public service also led to further fusion of Chinese and native ways of life, although always in favour of the Chinese. When Chinese control over the Southwest of China became complete in 1856, most hills had been transformed into terraced fields and native settlements into Chinese villages (Ch'eh, op.cit.: 140).

Those Miao/Hmong who resisted this assimilation, retreated gradually to mountain fastnesses where they carried out various forms of subsistence farming. It was the descendants of this group who migrated to Indochina and Thailand with the legacy of their shifting cultivation which still remains with most of them today, particularly in Laos and Vietnam. Those who stayed behind in their original homeland in China appear to have evolved an economy different in many respects from the one in Southeast Asia. In mountain areas, in Western Hunan, swiddening was still found before 1950, but there were wet rice terraces along river banks and in the valleys irrigated by means of water wheels. In both these dry and wet rice fields, the Miao/Hmong usually grew Indian corn, maize, buckwheat, kaoliang, millet, rice and beans. Where the land was too steep or unsuitable for grain crops, oil trees and tea

plantations could be found and sometimes could bring high profits to their owners. Other cash crops were tobacco, mulberries for silkworms, cotton and sugar cane. Fish and bees were kept in addition to domestic animals such as cows, horses and buffaloes, some of which were traded with Chinese merchants (Ling and Ruey, 1947: 54-72).

In Guizhou, according to de Beauclair (1970: 50), the Miao had become “expert fish breeders” and where the land surface allowed, they built terraced fields supported by stone walls and irrigated with water from bamboo pipes. They cultivated rice, maize, millet, turnips and various gourds for use as containers. Other agricultural products included beans, sunflower, tobacco, indigo, cotton, capsicum, red pepper and a variety of vegetables. They kept fowls and pigs, and used dogs for hunting such game as bears, tigers, boars, badgers, martens and muntjaks. Birds and mountain rats were also caught for food.

In northeastern Guizhou, the Miao still used the cross bow in 1947, but those in the Southeastern part had long-barreled guns, reportedly introduced by Chinese soldiers in 1681. In the 1960’s, they could make their own firearms, gunpowder, lead shot and even fuses from bamboo fire. There was a complete absence of tuberous plants such as sweet potatoes, taro, yams or hemp. Instead, wet rice fields, fish-breeding, the cultivation and use of cotton for cloth-making and the construction of houses on stilts had been adopted. The culture of the Miao in this region seems to have been strongly influenced by neighboring Chuang and Tung tribes with their pole dwellings, wet rice cultivation and dependence on cotton (Ibid: 67-68, 82-86 and 90-94).

While the staple food for the Sheng Miao in Western Guizhou was maize and buckwheat, other groups of Miao in Northwest Yunnan and Northwest Guizhou used barley, potato, millet and oats. Only central and Southeastern Guizhou had much rice (LeBar et al., 1964: 67). Many Flowery Miao in Sichuan had no farms, and tilled the lands of the Chinese and Nosu, their powerful neighbours, in exchange for material necessities (Hudspeth, 1937: 10 and 19-20). Those in a more fortunate position kept cows, goats and sheep, because manure was needed to fertilize their farms where in addition to other crops a great

deal of hemp was grown for weaving, although caps and sleeping mats as well as winter jackets were also made from sheep wool and goatskins.

At least as far as Guizhou is concerned, the Hmong economy was dictated by the physical limitations of their environment because only 5 per cent of the province was cultivatable, with rice being the most common crop, then maize, beans, wheat, barley and millet. However, “nowhere is more than one crop of rice grown and the harvest is in September or October” (Mickey, 1947: 5). This is a contrast to areas of Southern Sichuan where the Magpie Miao had intensive agriculture with two crops a year. While millet, barley, buckwheat, maize, kaoliang, cabbage, turnips and tea were grown by the fire-field method on the mountain tops, rice and small quantities of beans, hemp, indigo and tobacco were “raised in paddy fields on the rare stretches of level ground, along the river banks, and behind terraces laboriously constructed on the lower slopes of the mountain” (Ruey, 1960: 144).

Near the border of Yunnan and Guizhou, the Hmong agricultural scene seems to have changed again. Here, among the Ch’uan Miao of Southwest Sichuan, the pattern was akin to that of Northwest and central Guizhou. Rice was the major food item for the well-to-do people but the fields of the poorer ones were so steep that only corn could be grown, supplemented by wheat, oats and buckwheat. Beans, peas, onions, turnips, cabbage, carrots and other vegetables were grown in gardens. Ducks and geese were raised in addition to other domestic animals. Interestingly, dogs and black snakes were eaten by some of the people, a rare occurrence among Hmong in Southeast Asia. Some hunting took place in winter, but there was no fishing or fish-breeding. No irrigation was practiced, but manure was used abundantly on the dry fields which were cultivated year after year owing to the lack of arable land (Graham, 1937: 20-23).

It is, thus, obvious that the Miao/Hmong in China carried out shifting agriculture until 70 years ago, supplemented by wet field terracing where possible. Even after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, rice was still being grown in dry as well as in wet forms, and poppies could be found in “remote pockets” inhabited by minorities (Winnington, 1957 : 72). The introduction of farm

communes in some areas was said to have enabled a number of Miao in Hunan to earn extra income from the pressing of tea for oil and from rice hulling using water power from mountain streams. Income was also gained from brick-making and silkworm breeding (Hsimen, 1958: 26). Claims have been made that Miao/Hmong agricultural productivity and livelihood have been improved through the instigation of land reform and the incorporation of peasant farms into cooperatives by the current Chinese regime (LeBar et al, op.cit: 67-68; and Teng, 1973: 44-45). Today, there is hardly any shifting cultivation left in China, except in isolated areas near the borders of Laos and Vietnam. It has been replaced by sedentary dry upland agriculture that is combined with pockets of irrigated rice growing. Much the same can be said about the Hmong of Thailand.

In Vietnam, it was claimed that the Hmong had benefited from improved water supply, government schools and medical care as well as salt distribution – all rare benefits in the past. It is said that apart from their staple crops, they now grow medicinal plants instead of opium (Nguyen, op.cit. : 15-16). In many areas, they have been organized into lowland farming cooperatives and were reported to have given up shifting agriculture in the highlands so that “their way of life has been completely renewed” (Lam Tam, op.cit.: 59).

There is no way we can check the validity of these claims, particularly with respect to the cultivation of poppy. Refugees who used to live near the border of northern Laos and Vietnam in the late 1960’s told of an unbroken tradition of opium production by Hmong inhabitants of the region, even at the present time when the Vietnamese socialist revolution had been established there for more than five decades<sup>5</sup>. This opium was usually sold to Vietnamese army officers whose troops were stationed in the area. Today, frequent media reports on arrests and execution of Vietnamese heroin and opium traffickers

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<sup>5</sup> Personal communication from Mai Lo Yang, my mother-in-law, whose close relatives are today living in northern Laos. Further evidence on the cultivation of poppy in this area is given by Mr. Nhia Long Lee who left a son and married daughter there before coming to live in Australia after the new Lao communist regime came to power in 1975.

also attest to the continuation of this tradition, despite current efforts by the United Nations Drug Control Program to encourage Hmong opium growers in the border region of Laos and Vietnam to give up poppy cultivation. As in China and elsewhere, a main motive is the need for cash or exchange currency to obtain imported goods, especially salt. Today, salt may be more readily available than in the past, but it still has to be bought together with other commodities.

The quest for salt has always been a need for the Hmong as far back as they can remember<sup>6</sup>. The first recorded trade of salt between them and the Chinese was during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (311-580 A.D.). I have already made reference to this trade in which Miao/Hmong used their rice to barter for Chinese salt. The demand became so intensified that local importation sometimes became insufficient until an Imperial edict during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) ordered that the salt needs of the indigenous people should be fully met. Because salt was a government monopoly which led to excessively high prices, smuggling by some natives occurred and its suppression led to a four year revolt in Hunan in 1043.

A factor in the adoption by the Hmong of opium production in the past and possibly even today could be the necessity to purchase salt, since they could not extract it themselves and had to rely on traders. One cultural consequence of the shortage of salt is that today many Hmong foodstuffs are sour or pickled preserves, because of the lack of salt in areas too distant from trading centres. These dishes are said to include turnips, fish, beef, pepper, eggplants and bracken (Ling and Ruey, op.cit.: 76). After being dispossessed of their traditional lands, many Hmong and other indigenous people in Southern China took refuge in isolated mountain areas which were suitable only for shifting cultivation. The need for outside

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<sup>6</sup> My mother, for instance, recalls that in the 1940's her father and other men in their village had to make a two-week return trip by horse into Vietnam from Laos to exchange their opium for salt, often traveling at night because it was too hot during the day. In years when their opium crop failed, the villagers' major fear was that they would not have salt and would be forced to borrow from others - a step most are reluctant to take. Hudspeth (1932: 265), Ling and Ruey (1947: 75-76) and de Beauclair (1970: 86) all found a scarcity of salt among the Miao in various provinces of China, sometimes so much so that "people fortunate enough to buy it lick it much as a Western child will lick a barley sugar stick" (Hudspeth. 1937: 11).

goods has led in this way to the development of cash cropping, namely opium<sup>7</sup>. Opium was widely adopted because it was light and easily transportable across the rough terrains of the highlands, it fetched a higher price than other crops, and yielded income the first year it was grown. The Hmong in Laos also cultivated the poppy to buy two key metals they needed: iron and silver, which they used to make farm implements and jewelry (Westermeyer, 1982: 44-45). Compared to rice and maize, opium was also the most productive crop in term of monetary value with a yield as high as six times that of rice for the same cultivated land area, so it made sense for the Hmong “to grow as much opium as possible” even at the expense of rice and other crops (Cooper et al. 1991: 33).

From this historical examination of the Miao/Hmong economy, various forces, which contributed to the diversification of Hmong agriculture, can be discerned. It is evident that the Hmong have been long-standing farmers, and have developed many firmly held beliefs and practices related to the desire for domestic animals and the cultivation of crops, be it through shifting agriculture or irrigated terracing. Evidence in China indicates that “they began planting rice a long time ago” (de Beauclair, op.cit. : 82). Maize and opium were probably adopted during the last one to two hundred years, but they are today so much a part of the Hmong agricultural system that different ways of making use of these crops have

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<sup>7</sup> It has been said that the Hmong of Laos were forced to grow opium because France which controlled Indochina from 1883 to 1954 imposed an opium tax on them in order to earn revenues to finance its local colonial ventures through the Opium Monopoly, started in 1897 by French Governor-General Doumer (McCoy, 1973: 74). This is an issue which needs further research as most of its details are lost in history and the passing of the older Hmong. McCoy sees opium as the main economic force that kept the French in their dominant position, describing Hmong leaders like Touby Lyfoung and Gen Vang Pao as mere colonial opium broker or CIA opium warlord. He attributes the Hmong rebellion 1918-1921 lead by Pa Chay Vue to “French mismanagement of their opium dealings with the Meo” (Ibid. : 77). However, Gunn (1990: 157) who studies the rebellion from first-hand French colonial documents explains its causes as the Hmong “proclivity” to seek political autonomy and their religious belief that the “liberator” or messiah they had been waiting for had arrived in the form of Pa Chay – an explanation which accords more with the Hmong’s own version. Gunn (op.cit.: 160-167) shows that French colonial tax was collected in money form, and French dealings with Hmong opium were in the regulation of its sales through the Opium Purchasing Commission, thereby controlling the price that growers could obtain through the Commission’s middlemen and lowland brokers. According to my own mother (interview, 4 August 2005), tax after WWII was paid to the French in any form people could afford: money, jewellery, opium and domestic animals. The tax was so heavy that a year’s opium harvest was barely enough to meet her parents’ tax obligations. Poor parents with many

evolved. This applies particularly to opium, a crop that possesses both cash and practical values to the Hmong to the extent that they depend on it to satisfy their health and other economic requirements above the subsistence level.

The economy of the Hmong in traditional village settings in Asia very much resembles that of shifting cultivators in many pre-modern parts of the world today. No matter how far back we look into the past, Hmong economic patterns appear to be persistent in terms of the agricultural sector dominating other forms of production. The adoption of shifting cultivation as a way of life is no doubt due to the nature of the environment in which they are forced to live either by a conquering majority or by pressure of land competition with other groups of people. This results in frequent migration because of the lack of suitable lands for permanent agriculture and sedentary settlement. The pattern of shifting farming has been adapted to the cultivation of cash crops such as opium and tea, and is sometimes supplemented by rice growing in irrigated fields.

Despite the occurrence of these permanent fields, swiddening was until recently the most common type of resource exploitation so that it could be regarded almost as a culture for the Hmong. This is still the case in Laos where there is enough land to carry on this age-old method of agricultural production. Shifting farming has been practiced from time immemorial and handed down from generation to generation, with little or no modification of its techniques. Not only is it a process by which the Hmong adapt themselves to the available means of production, it also carries social values and religious customs which serve productive ends. Cohen (1968: 42) defines culture as the artifacts, institutions of organizations of social relations, ideologies and all the “range of customary behaviors with which a society is equipped for the exploitation of the energy potentials of its particular habitat”. If this definition is applied to the Hmong situation, agriculture is obviously a dominant aspect of their society

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children were forced to pawn or sell some of them to get money to pay their tax. The local Hmong chiefs who did the collection apparently kept most of what they collected, especially the opium.

and contributes to the formation of a large part of Hmong traditions and social life. Let us now look at the ways in which agricultural production dominates or affects the Hmong social formation.

### **Impact of Agriculture on Traditions**

A tradition is a way of thinking, behavior or practice that is followed by a group of people from one generation to the next as something they value, something that works for them or makes their life meaningful in the physical context in which they live. Where many such traditions become a coherent set of social usages or customs, they form the basis of a people's culture. In this sense, how much can we say that Hmong traditions are formed by beliefs or practices derived from their economic system, namely shifting agriculture?

#### *a. Hmong use of time:*

Many Hmong traditions are affected by the agricultural cycle in which the Hmong in their village settings are involved. How big and when to carry out one's wedding, funeral and household rituals depend very much on one's wealth and ability to afford them – both of which are determined by one's economic - agricultural productivity. In this context, agriculture does not necessarily determine the contents and performance of these traditional practices. However, the timing of these events is very much influenced by the Hmong farming system, especially in regard to the New Year celebration.

New Year is a time for enjoyment, for welcoming the year ahead and saying good-bye to the one that has just passed. More importantly, however, it is a time for resting, for putting down all tools and spending a few days in the company of family members, relatives and friends chatting, drinking (for the men), feasting, paying respect to village elders, making offerings to ancestors, and courting through singing love songs or playing the ball game (for young men and girls). It is also the time when one is free from the exigency of economic activities to pay visits to relatives in distant villages, particularly the parents of one's wife ("mus xyuas niam tais yawm txiv"). New Year can last from a few days to one to two weeks. With so many important activities for different age groups in the village, how is New Year

determined by the Hmong's mode of production? Here, we can see that agriculture definitely dictates when New Year should be celebrated – usually in November when most Hmong would have completed their rice and maize harvests while their opium poppy plants are still only in full bloom but /not yet mature enough for tapping. In settlements or with households where these agricultural harvests have not been completed, the New Year celebration may be postponed to the following month.

Another example of how a tradition is shaped by agricultural activities is the Hmong courtship system, especially the timing of its occurrence. Hmong young men and girls normally start courting each other at the age of 16 onwards, but most of their romantic encounters take place after dark when all household chores like dinner and cleaning the family home and dishes have been completed – the latter being the responsibility of older girls and young married women in the household. When the girls have gone to bed, then young men who wish to court them would start going to the girls' houses and talk to them through the cracks in the timber wall outside the girls' bedroom. If they are well known already to each other and if the girls' parents allow, then the boys may go inside the house and chat with the girls in front of the fireplace.

The reason for this activity to take place at night is because these young able-bodied persons are needed for farming work during the day. Sometimes, courting may take place at the girl's farm during the day if a boy is free from agricultural work for his family, but this is usually rare. Some may attribute the night-time courting to the fact that Hmong young people are too shy to court each other in front of the girl's parents, or that they may find the dark of the night more convenient for other more adult activities. Nevertheless, night-time courting as a Hmong tradition is clearly dictated by the division of labor between the old and the young together with the family's preoccupation with urgent agricultural work during daylight hours.

*b. Hmong Belief System*

The most important sphere of Hmong society, which is greatly influenced by farming, is the Hmong belief system. Hmong believe in spirits, which comprise “tamed”, or household ancestral spirits, and “wild” spirits or those which dwell in trees, rocks, streams and other places of nature. Calls and offerings are made to both categories of spirits to obtain their protection in any major undertakings, including all forms of agriculture and trade. Human beings possess souls, but “crops, domestic animals, silver, gold and money also have souls; and if people can attract these souls to come to live with them, then they will prosper” (Chindarsi, 1975: 31). Because of these strong beliefs, the Hmong have many ceremonies for spirits and souls. In agriculture, these rituals consist of offerings of paper and incense to the nature spirits of a site selected for swidden during clearing in order to prevent their interference in work. Before planting, a simple call with the burning of 3 incense sticks may be made near a stump or any prominent area in a field to ask for spiritual cooperation and help. This act is performed by the owner of the swidden or by the spiritual head of the household or the lineage, with the promise that an offering will be given later if the crops grow well or are free from natural calamities, and if the yield is satisfactory.

Based on my own observation of the Hmong in Thailand (Lee, 1981: 163-166), such a promise is usually honored at the end of the harvest season, and may consist of a chicken, some paper money, a few glasses of rice wine and some incense sticks together with the appropriate incantations of thanks. In any one year, quite a few chickens may be killed for this purpose. Each household would have a roughly made straw altar in every swidden for agricultural ceremonies of this type. It can also sometimes be found in wet rice fields. However, it is not mandatory that all households observe these ceremonies. If a crop fails, then no offering will be made.

Sometimes, no calls for spiritual assistance are made for the purpose of having good harvests. If a crop grows well enough, nothing of a religious nature will be done. When a crop does not grow or is ravaged by pests, then household and “wild” spirits may be invoked to come and give their protection. If

the situation improves, an offering similar to one described above will be given at the end of the agricultural cycle. This practice holds equally for wet rice and maize when there are droughts or recurrent storms. If these natural mishaps are severe enough, a direct offering of chicken may be made without first calling on the protection of the spirits with the promise of a sacrifice. In no instance are there any other animals offered apart from young chickens.

Thus, supernatural beliefs involving agriculture include the attribution of agricultural success or failure to the goodwill and interference of spiritual forces. According to Chindarsi, the encountering of certain types of snake, a tiger or other wild animals of a vicious nature during the clearing of a field is seen as an indication that the spirits of the area do not allow the use of the field and new site will have to be found (Chindarsi, *op.cit.*: 55 –56). Before a farmer burns a newly slashed swidden, the spirits are asked to move temporarily elsewhere until the work is completed. On the last trip to take a harvest home, the household head will call on the souls of the crop (“plig qoob plig loo” – pli klong pli laung) to come home with him so that next year they will bring more harvest. Similar customs are reported elsewhere. For instance, the Black Miao of China, are said to make offerings to the spirits of the granary and to abstain from noisy amusements such as the playing of the reed pipe from the time of planting until the harvesting of rice (de Beauclair, *op.cit.* : 82).

Prior to when a new crop of rice and maize is eaten for the first time, some of it is cooked carefully and is offered to the household and ancestral spirits before being consumed by the household members. This is referred to by Graham (*op.cit.*: 51) as “the ceremony of tasting new grain” (“noj mov nplej tshiab”). Usually a chicken or small pig is killed for the ceremony and all the ancestral spirits are invited to join in the feast. This ritual is observed only among those who grow their own crops in recognition for the protection of their ancestors and in reverence for their importance in the spiritual world of the household. Those who do not grow these crops do not make this offering. Among the poor, this first-fruit ritual consists of the offering of a cake made of the new grains of rice or corn, and no

animals are killed nor is anyone invited for a meal. In some settlements, the first cucumber to be picked for the year is also offered to household spirits, but the practice has not been reported among other groups of the Hmong.

It has been stated that the Hmong do not have many agricultural rituals and that most of the existing practices are desirable rather than obligatory since those who observe them are fewer than those who do not (Chindarsi, op.cit. : 56; and Geddes, 1976 : 168). However, this is not always the case in some areas where every household often carries out ceremonies in at least some of its bigger swiddens. These ceremonies are not obligatory, but the Hmong appear to place great faith in them. The fact that they require only chickens, rice wine, paper money and incense means that they are affordable, unlike other rituals offered to ancestors involving the killing of oxen and pigs. The practice of these rituals may be more prevalent in areas of Hmong settlement with declining agricultural productivity, which leads to uncertainty about one's livelihood and increased need for supernatural interventions. Calling upon spiritual guidance and help provides the farmers with at least some psychological assurance in a situation where crops are subject to the whim of the weather and to poor soil conditions. Rituals of this nature may have the purpose of integrating the efforts of the workers and giving them confidence with "the belief that divine aid is available" (Norbeck, 1964: 216).

Malinowski (1915: 636 and 1921) even goes so far as stating that magic is a technological aid in material production, providing initiative and stimulus to producers and setting their pace of work. If this view is adopted, the Hmong may be said to use magic as a means of production to supplement their own labor and implements in their attempt to achieve successful crops. As Evans-Pritchard (1965: 45) suggests, however, the chief benefit from the performance of a rite may not be to secure practical ends but to prevent tension or anxiety from rising among the believers. Rituals thus act as economic incentives and as a prevention of conflicts. Firth (1951: 133 and 139) has pointed out that central to the understanding of an economic system is the nature of incentives or forces which move people to take certain courses of

action rather than others. The choices they make are influenced by at least four factors: (1) the dictation of group or national opinions; (2) the convention of work organization; (3) the values given to time, labor and the products of labor; and (4) the efficiency of the means of production. Purely economic motives are not sufficient explanation, and we will need to examine also the relationship between socio-cultural inducements and material forces operating in the economic sphere.

*C. Hmong Migration, Labor Division and Gender Roles.*

Having established that agriculture is closely related to Hmong religious beliefs, let us now look at the links between agriculture and Hmong social structure, as well as their forces of production and the distribution of goods. This interrelationship is nowhere more evident than when the Hmong have to migrate for economic reasons and their clan structure is changed as a result; or when they have accumulated goods and savings that help elevate their social position, thereby differentiating people on the basis of wealth. Moreover, agriculture also requires careful management of time and the forces of production through mutual help, labor exchange and the division of labor, thus setting a paradigm on the allocation of certain specific tasks to specific members of a family's work force on the basis of age and gender.

The Hmong tradition of moving settlement every few decades after the land around their old village became exhausted, has been attributed to the need to find new farming land. This pattern of migration in time of peace and the lack of a sedentary residential tradition are often dictated by an economic imperative – the never-ending quest for agricultural land and other economic opportunities. Although this migratory tradition has largely stopped in countries with heavy pressure on land use like China and Thailand, it has not prevented individuals or families from moving from one place or even one country to another to look for new economic prospects. For Geddes (1970: 1-11), the commitment to opium growing by the Blue Mong of Thailand in the 1960's was the major factor in their residential instability through frequent moves from one settlement to another in search of new poppy fields, in the

fusion and fission of some households or lineages, and in clan dispersion during different stages of their migratory lives.

Usually, Hmong economic migration is made with members of one's clan or with the idea of joining them in their settlement. In such a context, the clan or lineage remains intact and mutual support between its members can be maintained. Sometimes, however, a few members may decide to migrate, while others stay behind or join relatives elsewhere. In this case, clan fission will occur. If these original members of a clan become separated for a long time over great distance without contact, they will eventually forget their original affiliation and their clan rituals. Over time, some members will even change details of these rituals so that they can no longer trace each other through the ritual system. This clan dispersion and ritual change are often found among the migratory Hmong of Southeast Asia, a change in the social structure brought about by economic factors. If a family becomes separated from other lineage members through migration and does not remember its lineage rituals anymore, it may decide to join another group by the same clan name but with a slight difference in the mechanics of its ritual performance such as nine piles of meat instead of five for the door-spirit ceremony. Such a family will then have to adopt the rituals of the adoptive group in order to become part of their lineage. It is in such a circumstance that clan or lineage fusion takes place. It is not unusual to find changes that occur in this manner to the clan and social organization of the Hmong – again very much the result of economic factors requiring people to migrate and to change ritually in order to gain acceptance in an expedient manner. Where there are no economic needs that force them to migrate, there will not be change to their clan rituals and composition. As stated by Geddes (1976:128), “a settled condition would mean not merely a change in economic patterns but a considerable alteration in social life as well.”

In situations where productivity is high and a family manages to accumulate large amounts of savings, the male family head may decide to increase its farming outputs by increasing the size of its labor force. This can take two forms: (i) paying for hire labour, or (ii) acquiring additional wives and

having larger families. Some men may marry more than one wife for other reasons, but it is often economic success that enables them to engage in polygamy, usually to show off one's economic status while also increasing the family work force pool. Thus, "additional wives are gained by economic success which in turn they facilitate" (Geddes, 1976: 128). In this manner, agricultural productivity through the cultivation of opium and other cash crops can be said to have given rise to the Hmong's institution of polygamy and its survival. Unless there is law or sanction against it, it can be expected that the rate of polygamy will be low or non-existent in places where economic productivity is low and most producers are poor. Polygamy, agricultural productivity and a high-yield ecology are therefore closely interrelated.

If agriculture is a determinant aspect of the Hmong's ability to increase their work force or to accumulate goods and social status, it directly affects the structuring of their society by differentiating its members on the basis of wealth. Agriculture is thus the main factor in promoting the existence of the "prestige sphere" identified by Dalton (1971: 14-16) in which economic and agricultural goods play an important role in major life events. The more goods displayed, exchanged or used during ceremonies marking certain turning points of life, the more they improve one's social position and status in society, thus enhancing one's prestige.

In the pastoral environment where the Hmong make their living, the level of productivity depends on both the available means of production (land and tools) and the relations of production or relations between the producers/workers (members of a household unit, wives and children). For the Hmong, these relations of production may result from marriage or the fusion of households and clans, supplemented by hired labor and other forms of work organization.

Cooper (1980) distinguishes "five basic forms of work organization" among the Hmong of northern Thailand: (i) cooperation, (ii) direct paid labor, (iii) indirect paid labor, (iv) commercial labor, and (v) labor exchange. Apart from household and family labor, cooperative labor and labor exchange

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are the most common forms among shifting subsistence farmers with the unit of production being the nuclear family or the extended household and with simple tools used in all forms of production.

Economic undertakings are thus based on social relationships within these two primary groups, and cooperation rarely extends beyond the household level. Cooperative work involves people pooling their energy and tools together to perform a task designed for the benefit of the group involved as a whole, such as a village getting together to build a bridge or a common fence that belongs to the whole community. Labor exchange involves members of two or more families taking turn to work on each other's fields for a specified number of days. This is a common method of gaining extra labor when the task at hand has to be completed quickly such as planting or harvesting.

More enduring than communal work organization and labor exchange is the division of labor within each family work unit. The Hmong division of household labor is based on age and gender. The aged and the young are given lighter tasks while the more able-bodied adults are given work that is heavier and more time-consuming. The following agricultural and household tasks are usually allocated to both men and women: clearing undergrowth to prepare field, planting, weeding, harvesting, and carrying crop home. The men are generally responsible for: cutting trees to clear a new field, burning the felled trees and other dry vegetation to prepare a field, ploughing and caring for horses and cows. Tasks that are assumed by women only include feeding domestic animals, cloth-making, cooking, cleaning and washing up. Older children of both gender assist with: caring for pigs, chicken and other animals; collecting firewood and water; pounding rice, grinding maize, and caring of younger children (Cooper et al., op.cit.: 38). In addition to this household division of labor, men are given the roles of village conflict resolution and family ritual performance. It may appear that Hmong men assume more roles and responsibilities than women, but in reality the women are the ones who have to work the hardest and longest. They get up at the first crows of cocks (the Hmong's natural alarm clock) in the early morning to

cook for their families and their pigs while the men continue their sleep. They are also the last to go to bed after finishing pounding rice for use the next day, or sweeping the floor of the house.

This structuring of roles and responsibilities in the Hmong household under situations of shifting cultivation is again dictated in the main by the agricultural base, the need to ensure the best use of available manpower and the maximum economic returns for the family unit. This is despite gender roles being based also on ideologies derived from a Confucian male-dominated society as is the case with the Hmong whose social organization is modeled much after that of the Chinese.

*d. Hmong Life in the Diaspora*

After 1975, most of the 240,000 Hmong who fled the new communist Laos to seek asylum in Thailand found permanent settlement in various Western countries. As a dispossessed people used to a pastoral way of life, most Hmong prefer to live in the hills with a cool climate and lush vegetation, in locations which allow them access to farming, animal husbandry, hunting, foraging and some fishing. For this reason, about 3,000 Hmong decided to go to French Guyana where they could resume life as farmers in a tropical environment, and where they could also continue their tradition of hunting for game in the nearby forests. In France, a large number moved to the southern city of Nimes where they eventually managed to dominate the local vegetable growing business. In Australia, more than half of its 1,800 Hmong population moved to North Queensland where they could grow bananas and live in a rain forest environment, the only area in the country which reminds them of their former farming life and homeland in Laos.

The majority of the 180,000 Hmong who resettled in urban America were initially resigned to factory work and a life in overcrowded cities, but soon migrated to small towns where they engaged in market gardening such as those who now live in the Central Valley of California, or in Wisconsin. Smaller numbers later migrated to Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma or South Carolina and nearby states to do chicken farming. The more forward-thinking Hmong see this as a regression to a pre-modern life. For

others, this return to agriculture gives the people involved the freedom to work for themselves, to make a living in a sector in which they are skilled in or where they will obtain more financial benefits. It is also an ideal opportunity to satiate their nostalgia for the imagined homeland, they're longing for familiar landscapes that have shaped so much of their traditional way of life.

Among the traditions, which the diasporic Hmong find difficult to change, but which put them at odds with the new societies are spiritual healing practices through shamanism and funeral rites. In Laos, they have been able to practise freely their religion of ancestor worship, traditional medicine, and their elaborate funerals. In the West, however, the social environment is very different. There are laws prohibiting the slaughtering of animals in the home as required by Hmong ancestral rituals and healing ceremonies. The most common use of animals by the Hmong is for the "soul-calling" ceremony when a person falls sick and the sickness is believed to be caused by the soul having been taken from the body by evil spirits. In such a case, a young chicken is killed so its soul can be used for exchange with the soul of the sick person, a remnant from the old belief in evil spirits living in nature and the need to give them offerings.

An anachronistic aspect of Hmong diasporic life is the continued use of traditions that harp back to a subsistence pastoral mode of production, despite the Hmong now residing in complex and highly urbanised environments and making a living from occupations far removed from agriculture. Beliefs in spirits continue along with most of the traditional rituals associated with these beliefs. During funerals, for instance, the soul of a dead person is still given an offering of cattle and pigs to take to the Afterworld to be raised and used in time of hardship. A Hmong funeral is a major social event lasting up to a week or ten days, especially if it involves an elder in the community and when the family has access to money as in the USA where funeral-pooling funds are common among the Hmong. Often, more than ten oxen are slaughtered as food for visitors and sacrificial animals for the dead person, even in the face of offending neighbours and local authorities. The offering is made while the animals are still alive, so it has been

difficult but not impossible to hold proper Hmong funerals in the diaspora where funeral homes are usually quiet places for a short one-hour mortuary service and not the killing of large animals and ritual performance that last up to three days.

A story recently circulated that a Hmong woman who died in Chicago was given sixteen sacrificial oxen, so many that she could not look after them all in the Afterworld and had returned to take a nephew to go and help her. At least, that was how the nephew's sudden death at an early age was explained. The persistence of these funeral customs points to the Afterworld, the world of the Hmong ancestors, being a pastoral heavenly place where animal husbandry is a major economic activity. Again, this seems to indicate a leftover impact of an old mode of economic production that has been strongly engrained in the Hmong psyche, culture and ritual system. For the Hmong living a radically different life in the West, Hartley (1988: 1) puts it aptly when he writes in a different context that "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" In saying this, I am not implying that the past and its cultural traditions are now irrelevant, but only try to point out the depth of influence exerted by agriculture and its associated practices on Hmong traditions, even in new post-modern situations.

### **Conclusion**

It is obvious that agriculture is closely interrelated with other aspects of Hmong society. The Hmong have developed a productive system suited to their needs within their restricted environment, and they possess simple farming tools, which require only the use of human labor, apart from work animals such as horses, buffaloes, or oxen. Where domestic manpower is insufficient to meet their agricultural demands, hired workers are employed particularly in the production of opium. Agriculture is incorporated into the social system through the medium of the household and its members acting both as producers and consumers of agricultural goods, and it is supported by the religious system which sanctions and gives value to many of the agricultural activities. While it may still be the case for the majority of Hmong in the homeland in Laos and China that "you are what you produce", this no longer holds true for those

living in the diaspora in Western societies where it may be more correct to say that “you are today what your ancestors did for a living long ago”.

In this paper, I have used the Marxian concept of a mode of production as consisting of an economic base, a juridico-political superstructure and an ideological superstructure (including religion), with the economic base being the determinant factor (Terry, 1972: 97-98). From my discussion of Hmong agriculture and its impact on traditions in other spheres of Hmong society, it is evident that the economic base has been determinative in shaping many Hmong beliefs and practices, especially in the religious sphere. This is true of the Hmong in general insofar as other spheres of their society are constrained by the capacity of the agricultural base to sustain them. This would agree with the view advanced by Lefebvre (1972: 15) that the economy determines social relations only in the sense that it puts limits to the activities and performance of groups and their members in different areas of their lives by imposing shackles around them and by arresting their potentialities through the lack of economic means to achieve them.

The Hmong traditional economic system provides not only economic gains for its participants but also cultural and religious benefits derived from social customs and religious rituals that evolved from the people’s agricultural practices and ecology. Judging by the agricultural rituals they observe, it would appear that dry shifting cultivation was dominant over other forms of production. In this sense, many Hmong traditions have been shaped by dry land agriculture, but their development has also been restricted by the remote geographical confines in which the Hmong have been forced to live or the constraints of subsistence farming they have adopted. To this extent, agriculture is clearly a determinant force in the last instance in Hmong society, affecting and giving rise to many social customs and religious beliefs.

**About the Author:** Dr. Gary Yia Lee is an anthropologist who has written extensively on Hmong culture and economic development in Asia and diaspora countries. Dr. Lee’s research website may be viewed at [www.garyyiale.com](http://www.garyyiale.com)

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