

## **Hmong Refugee's Death Fugue**

**By**

**Sheng-mei Ma, PhD  
Michigan State University**

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### **Abstract**

The author of this literary analysis pieces together accounts from oral histories, academic literature, popular works and Hmong storycloths to describe the “death fugue” associated with the early narratives of the Hmong refugee experience in Southeast Asia and the United States.

### **Introduction**

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown  
We drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night  
We drink and we drink it  
--Paul Celan's “Death Fugue”

Paul Celan's Holocaust poem suffocates in the black smoke rising from the crematoriums' chimneys, shrouding inmates as well as survivors' consciousness, including daily rituals as simple as drinking milk. A disturbing parallel exists between Celan's death fugue and that of the Hmong, one which mourns their loss in the Southeast Asian conflict since the 1970s. Similar to Celan's fugue, the Hmong's collective story is filled with refrains, thematic variations of demise and death. “I come to this foreign land, / without young brothers, without old brothers, / and the others eat, while I watch like a dog waiting for scraps” (Vang and Lewis 124), thus sings the Hmong woman Lee Txai in a Thai refugee camp in 1980.<sup>1</sup> Her self-image plummets as a result of, among other things, the wretched living conditions and the uncertainty in the camp.

One would like to believe the myth that adversity comes to a miraculous end once refugees of the Southeast Asian conflict arrive in the United States. However, the sense of loneliness, loss, and shame becomes magnified amongst Hmong refugees relocated to the U.S., as Lillian Faderman's informant, Kia Vue, laments in *I Begin My Life All Over*: “Now we ride on their [narrator's children] shoulders, through lands that are of gold, jungles that are of paradise—

and yet I feel we're drowning, like many of our people who did not make it across the Mekong" (174). While praising the United States as golden and paradisaal, Kia Vue subconsciously associates it with the Hmong trauma of fleeing the Communists through the Southeast Asian "jungles" and of crossing the Mekong River to reach Thai refugee camps in the mid-1970s. More revealingly, life in the U.S. is cast as a "protracted drowning." One wonders whether refugees have indeed begun a new life—as Faderman's book title suggests—or they are dying a slow death, evidenced by the eerily similar testimonies of Kia Vue and a host of her compatriots. Their tales of survival are simultaneously a litany of deaths they witnessed and a dirge for themselves. It is this collective affect out of a suspension between life and death to which I wish to lend my ears.

To attend to their death fugue, a comprehensive review of literature on Hmong refugees is in order, from psychology, mental health, education, and journalism to sociology, anthropology, arts and crafts, and oral history. One must be exceptionally vigilant in this review of literature over the past three decades to pick out fragments of Hmong voices. As a pre-literate, refugee community, the Hmong experience comes to us heavily mediated by the West. Social scientists track the Hmong migration pattern; health providers research how to tailor modern medicine to the Hmong's animistic beliefs; English as a Second Language teachers prepare primers based on Hmong folklore. Indeed, without such a conscientious effort of Western scholars and writers, the Hmong saga is in danger of vanishing. For instance, Anne Fadiman's award-winning *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (1997) retrieves what could have become a mere statistic and weaves it into a nuanced portrayal of the Hmong belief and lifestyle. Fadiman elucidates the Hmong perception of "epilepsy" as *qaug dab peg*, literally "'the spirit catches you and you fall down.' The spirit referred to . . . is a soul-stealing *dab*" (20). Charles Johnson laboriously compiles *Myths, Legends and Folk Tales from the Hmong of Laos* (1985), a bilingual edition of Hmong folktales that serves both as a primer of the English language for Hmong and

an introduction to Hmong culture for English-speakers. Marsha MacDowell and others collect and analyze the Hmong story cloths on which part of this essay is based. Such works have created the framework for understanding the Hmong experience.

In accordance with the Holocaust survivor Primo Levi's reluctance to "comprehend" the Nazi genocide, I propose to venture out of the scholarly frame in order to better heed the Hmong death fugue. Levi writes in the Afterword to *Shema: Collected Poems of Primo Levi*: "Perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand, because to understand is almost to justify. Let me explain: 'understanding' a proposal or human behavior means (also etymologically) to 'contain' it, contain its author, put oneself in his place, identify with him. Now no normal man can ever identify with Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Eichmann, and endless others" (53-54). Levi's admonition against understanding victimizers can equally be applied to the victims, for it would be presumptuous for middle-class, first-world readers to instantly "bond" with either Levi or Hmong refugees on the basis of a good book or two. In fact, at every turn of scholarly and artistic representations of mass destructions of this kind, translation and cross-cultural negotiation inevitably take place. One element of the collective experience often falls through the cracks of various disciplinary interpretive frameworks—how victims *feel*. While researchers have played a pivotal role in preserving Hmong oral history, the elegiac, mourning quality of Hmong expression is oftentimes suppressed into a subconscious "tic" amidst the objective, professional façade of scholarship. This essay is in a way a close-up of tics, symptoms of the malaise hidden beneath the appearance of Americanization.

### **Refrains in Cultural Variations**

The most tragic manifestations of such "death by drowning" alluded to by Kia Vue are undoubtedly the Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS) which in the 1970s and 80s mysteriously struck Hmong and other Southeast Asian male refugees in their sleep. Some survivors claimed the attack of a Kingstonian "Sitting Ghost" (*The Woman Warrior* 81) on their chests, pressing air out of their lungs. Western doctors could do no more than attributing the

cases to cardiac arrest in otherwise perfectly healthy men, a great number of whom reported depression and ill-adjustment to the U.S. One journalist has facetiously characterized Hmong refugees' transition from Southeast Asia to the West as moving "from the Stone Age to the Space Age." Hyperbole aside, this journalist does capture the Herculean obstacles facing these new immigrants, obstacles whose psychic impact aggravates what would be termed in psychoanalysis as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

To approach the Hmong refugee experience via the concept of PTSD obfuscates a key difference between the Laotian highlanders and the Freudian model derived from Western history. The notion of trauma evolves from Freud's 1920 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* on "war neurosis" and accident trauma to a more mystical, collective *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Subsequent theorizations by Georges Bataille, Robert Jay Lifton, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and others not only continue the Freudian emphasis on the unwilled, nightmarish recurrences of memory, but also point to a general state of being, one marked by melancholia over loss and irretrievability. All these emotions are shared by Hmong refugees. Yet Freud and his followers take for granted that their patients are afflicted by *post*-traumatic stress disorder, that the trauma is in the past. Two kinds of patients, for instance, figured prominently in Freud's formulation of the theory of trauma: veterans of the Great War and survivors of automobile accidents, both having returned to normal life that they were accustomed to prior to the disruptions. Drawing from a subsequent yet deciding moment in human history, one can put it this way: Holocaust survivors are haunted by memories of Auschwitz; they are no longer *in* Auschwitz. Hmong refugees, on the other hand, have difficulty putting the trauma, so to speak, behind them since they remain in the thick of a disorienting labyrinth, with its linguistic and cultural puzzles, their own heavy dependency on welfare and other social programs, homesickness and a gnawing sense of impotence, dissolution of traditional lifestyle and values, American racism and discrimination, and gradual Americanization of the younger generations.<sup>ii</sup> Instead of *post*-traumatic stress disorder, Hmong refugees face a daily ordeal in the U.S., one

which is much extenuated in intensity compared to that of Southeast Asia but far more persistent now and increasingly irreconcilable, with the onset of old age and the felt diminishing of one's power.

Put bluntly, the terminus that is SUNDS negates the clinical efficacy of PTSD; dead patients no longer suffer from PTSD. SUNDS being the fini of these refugees' lives, one is compelled to rewind and listen again to their stories from social science studies where the death fugue is coded into statistics and research models. Shelley Adler in "The Role of the Nightmare in Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome: A Folkloristic Study of Belief and Health" recaps the Hmong experience:

The Hmong have undergone a seemingly endless series of traumatic experiences: the war in Laos, the Pathet Lao takeover and subsequent Hmong persecution (including the threat of genocide), the harrowing nighttime escapes through jungles and across the Mekong River, the hardships of refugee camps in Thailand, and finally resettlement in the United States, with not only housing, income, language, and employment concerns, but the separation of families and clans, inability to practice traditional religion, hasty conversion to Christianity, and the breakdown of the gender hierarchy, among many others. (200)

This prolonged dislocation began with the Hmong entanglement in the Southeast Asian conflict. Fighting the Pathet Lao as proxy for the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States during the Vietnam War, the Hmong community sustained a casualty rate ten times high than that of Americans who had fought in Vietnam. "It is estimated," asserts Adler, "that nearly one-third of the Laotian Hmong population lost their lives in the war" (3).

Adler further elaborates the Hmong's hardships in the U.S.: "While difficulties involving language and employment may not be unique to Hmong immigrants, the particular combination of problems involving survivor guilt, the conflict between Hmong traditional religion and Christianity, changing generational and gender roles, and trauma-induced emotional and

psychological disorders is unique to the Hmong refugee experience” (135). Indeed, Mark Thompson in “The Elusive Promise” maintains that the Hmong is one of the “ethnic groups that have fared the worst” in their adjustment to the U.S. ( 46). Witnessing how the uprooting of the Hmong is compounded by their poor adjustment to the New World, Charles Johnson comments that the Hmong face “cultural annihilation” (vi).

The root cause of the Hmong assimilation, as Simon Fass discusses in “Innovations in the Struggle for Self-Reliance: The Hmong Experience in the United States,” lies in their refugee status:

Immigrants to the United States were able to equal or surpass income, employment and occupational status characteristics of comparable Americans within 10 to 15 years of their arrival. . . . Refugees also improved their economic status with increasing length of residence, but progress was slower because they did not self-select themselves for migration. Refugee populations contained significant proportions of people whose motivations or other characteristics would not have led them to leave their homelands, and whose skills were not easily adapted to new cultural circumstances. They were at a relative disadvantage to self-selected migrants in terms of learning English, modifying their original skills, and finding out where and how those skills could be used to increase income. (356)

Fass’ argument is validated by George M. Scott, Jr.’s sociological exposition in “Migrants Without Mountains: The Politics of Sociocultural Adjustment Among the Lao Hmong Refugees in San Diego.” Scott’s premise is that adjustment for immigrants is “one of negotiation trade-off decision making . . . in which the *benefits* accruing from a particular type and level of participation in the receiving society are weighed against the *costs* of having to modify or abandon conflicting traditional sociocultural elements” (ix). Hmong migration, gauged by this criteria, is doomed from the start, as Nancy Donnelly puts it in *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong*

*Women* (1994), "Hmong refugees do not seek new lives, they seek the same lives in a new location, and where possible they use their new opportunities to bolster preexisting social conceptions" (184). Due to such disparity between Hmong expectations and social environment, the Hmong cannot advance economically and withdraw into their traditional culture.

Against this historical background and the medical opinion that "ventricular fibrillation" being the cause of SUNDS, Shelley Adler approaches SUNDS from the standpoint of a folklorist, linking nightmare, or the visit of evil spirit, with SUNDS. She quotes Stith Thompson's magisterial compilation of *Motif-Index Of Folk Literature* (1958) for numerous motifs in folklore whereby people die suddenly as a result of a broken heart, chagrin, grief, or even joy (183). Concluding that SUNDS invariably strikes victims in a supine position, who are completely paralyzed while conscious, unable to move or cry out, as an alien being presses down on them, Adler compares SUNDS with similar deaths in sleep in Filipino culture called *bangangut* as well as Thai and Khmu sudden deaths. The alleged foreign body sitting on their chest is confirmed by the fact that out of Adler's samples of 118 Hmong, "74% of the informants who offered an explanation for the cause of SUNDS suggested an etiology that was directly spirit-related or involved the problem of the absence of traditional Hmong cosmology or religious practice" (199). Adler contends that SUNDS usually occurs in the first two years of the victims' arrival in the U.S., the period when they experience great anxiety and are the most vulnerable. The folklorist maintains that "The supranormal experience traditionally known as the nightmare and familiar to the Hmong as *dab tsog* or *tsog tsuam* acts as a trigger for Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome. The power of this folk belief, compounded with such factors as the trauma of war, migration, rapid acculturation, and the inability to practice traditional healing and ritual, causes cataclysmic psychological, and subsequently physiological, stress that can result in sudden unexpected deaths" (197).

Christopher L. Hayes and Richard A. Kalish in "Death-Related Experiences and Funerary Practices of the Hmong Refugee in the United States" focus on psychological aftershocks of

survival: "Their escape from Laos, however, required a long march through mountainous areas and rain forests, and an eventual crossing of the Mekong River. An estimated 35 percent died during their flight from illness, drowning, starvation, jungle accidents, or Pathet Lao forces . . . The Hmong seldom had time to bury their dead, who were left to rot where they fell; often the ill and wounded were also left behind" (64). The authors assert that the lack of proper funeral and burial processes lead to the refugee's stress and guilt. They are afflicted with "bereavement overload": "The intensity of such bereavement might be expected to increase exponentially when the losses that follow each other in rapid succession include not only deaths, but also losses in status, possessions, familiar surroundings, and separation from loved ones" (64-65). Nor did these refugees, Hayes and Kalish believe, enjoy peace and comfort upon having reached Thai refugee camps. The authors report that "since 1983, thirty-five Hmong have died in their sleep" (65).

Christopher L. Hayes contends in "A Study of the Older Hmong Refugees in the United States" that the psychological problems found in the refugee camps only become enlarged once they arrive in the U.S.—ripped apart from family members and friends, culture shock, and the breakdown of traditional roles (82). Maintaining that the older Hmong in the U.S. are bored and depressed, Hayes identifies "stressors" for older Hmong as "loss of possessions and dependence upon public assistance" (163), "loss of mobility. . . and remaining homebound," and crimes against the Hmong (164), intergenerational conflict (165). Observing a high level of grief and depression among older Hmong, Hayes closes ominously: "Nothing short of returning those who have died, restoring the old traditions and customs, and moving back to Laos, will eliminate the problems which many of the elders face. I have no choice but to conclude from this study that the elder Hmong have few, if any, avenues for restoring what they have lost. Besides remaining family members and a sense of their own ethnicity, the elders have little to comfort them in their old age" (186). Hayes further cites a grim statistic: Long Beach Hmong Association estimates that 90% of the elders in the community suffer from some form of depression (164).

Statistics on the Hmong population elsewhere in the U.S. confirm the sobering percentage in Long Beach. Michele LaRue's "Stress and Coping of the Indochinese Refugees in a California Community" finds that in San Diego while neither Vietnamese nor Hmong refugees "recognized as a stress the young losing the values of the native culture and the adopting the values of the American culture," LaRue's observation and further research indicate otherwise, so much so that "survivor guilt" plagues 81% of Vietnamese and 90% of Hmong refugees, and "helplessness" is reported by 57% of Vietnamese and 65% of Hmong refugees.

Based on a 1982 survey in Nebraska, Jane Ugland Cerhan similarly reports that "most of the 118 Hmong individuals interviewed reported problems with employment, learning English, and prejudice. One hundred percent cited difficulty locating family members as a problem, and nearly all reported suffering from stress and stress-related physical ailments, homesickness, and traumatic memories" (89). Corroboration of Hmong dependency can be found in the Midwest as well. Joseph Westermeyer, Allan Callies, and John Neider write that in 1987, "of 15,000 Hmong refugees in Wisconsin, 85% are on some form of public assistance; and 60% of the 12,000 Hmong in Minnesota received public assistance" (300). While some of the interviewees aged 45 to 64 saw themselves as traditional "grandparents" withdrawn from heavy tasks and hence justified in benefiting from welfare, Westermeyer et al. do not believe that this is a widely-held view (304).

Attuned now to the repetitious motifs in Western scholarship on the Hmong, it is time to entertain Anne Fadiman's fancy of "splic[ing] them [audio tapes] together" (ix), so the native informants' voices may occasionally rise above those of the interpreters and the translators. Although John Tenhula's *Voices from Southeast Asia: The Refugee Experience in the United States* (1991) does not identify specific Hmong interviewees, two narrators among Laotian refugees stand out as likely candidates. Xoua Thao states in "The Sleeping People" that

In America, we are away from our traditional property where we believe our ancestors' spirits live and protect us. We are unable to practice our religion, and

the shaman says that because of this change we have lost the protection of our ancestors and we are very vulnerable. . . . But few people will talk with you about this [Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome], and if you try to talk with them, they will not answer. To talk about it is dangerous—you could become one of the next, the sleeping people. (98).

Fear surrounds SUNDS as if it were a tribal taboo, a scourge befalling the Hmong for their “betrayal” of the Hmong tradition.

In “A Soldier without a Country,” the other possible Hmong interviewee, Mong Pang, exhibits a deep sense of loss: “It was a good life in Laos and I miss my country very much. I want to go back if the Communists get out. I look to that day all of the time. We left so quickly. We just locked the door and left. We don’t know about our possessions or our house. I hope it is still there. I think about relatives and friends” (Tenhula 128). Mong Pang’s sadness may be precipitated by the fact that while he used to be a colonel in Laos, he now works as a janitor. The drop in social status and the inability to recreate an illusion of homeland aggravate depression.

The most complete description of SUNDS comes from a joint study by Joseph Jay Tobin and Joan Friedman. In their 1983 “Spirits, Shamans, and Nightmare Death: Survivor Stress in a Hmong Refugee,” the authors cite extensively from their informant, Vang Xiong of Chicago, who survives a bout of spirit possession:

The first night he [Vang Xiong] awoke suddenly, short of breath, from a dream in which a cat was sitting on his chest. The second night, the room suddenly grew darker, and a figure, like a large black dog, came to his bed and sat on his chest. He could not push the dog off and he grew quickly and dangerously short of breath. The third night, a tall, white-skinned female spirit came into his bedroom from the kitchen and lay on top of him. Her weight made it increasingly difficult for him to breathe, and as he grew frantic and tried to call out he could manage but a whisper. He attempted to turn into his side, but found he was pinned down.

After 15 minutes, the spirit left him, and he awoke, screaming. (440)

Viewing “Vang’s sleeping and breathing difficulties as symptoms of the anxiety, depression, and paranoia that threaten all victims of trauma and extreme stress” (442), the authors speculate that “the Hmong [sudden] deaths may be a form of unconscious suicide mediated by a loss of self-respect, a loss of feeling of control over one’s life, and a loss of will to live in anxious circumstances” (446-47).

Upon hearing this recurring nightmare, Vang Xiong’s American sponsor, a female member of the local Christian church, was taken aback, suspecting that she herself gave forth the “tall, white-skinned female spirit.” Commendable in its level of cultural sensitivity and perhaps quite accurate in its diagnosis of the pressure of acculturation, this interpretation nonetheless fails to take into account the three manifestations in three consecutive nights—“a cat,” “a figure, like a large black dog,” and “a tall, white-skinned female spirit”—which engage in the same attempt of suffocating Vang Xiong. The spirits of the first and the third nights are easily identified, whereas that of the second night is more amorphous, one that resembles rather than is a large black dog. There is, of course, a contrast of colors between black of the second night and white-skinned of the third night, while the black figure is just as intimidatingly “large” as the “tall” white spirit looming above the prostrate victim. In addition to the traditionally Hmong forms of animals, the evil spirit adopts as well the guise of a female, a male backlash against the erosion of their patriarchal privileges in America.<sup>iii</sup>

From the Hmong refugee’s perspective, Vang Xiong believes that he is susceptible to such attacks because “we didn’t follow all of the mourning rituals we should have when our parents died [in Laos]” (444). He escaped from the Communists with his wife and infant in 1978:

There were 74 people in the group we fled with. We walked through the jungle for five days. We knew the communist patrols were all around us. Many in the group demanded we leave our infant behind, that we kill her, because they feared her crying at night would give us away. We refused, and quieted her with opium.

An old woman among us grew too weak to walk. Her sons took turns carrying her on their backs for three days, but finally they were forced to leave her behind, to leave her on the trail with just a bowl of rice, for the Communists were getting closer and our pace was too slow. Finally, we reached the Mekong. Several of the men in our group swam across and returned some hours later with a few small boats. We boarded the boats, and just as we got out into open water we heard shots on shore. We saw another group of perhaps 50 Hmong waiting for boats by the river bank being shot at with machine guns. Men and women and children fell to the ground. Blood was everywhere. Most, if not all, in that group were killed. (444)

Note the precision of numbers. The informant remembers exactly how many people were in his group of refugees and how many survived. A strong sense of group cohesion and an emphasis on practical matters must have imprinted these numbers in his memories. "I feel I left too early but also too late," Vang Xiong proceeds to express the ambiguity of survival: "If I had known, in 1975, how bad the fighting would become in the next few years, I would have left then. But, on the other hand, when I think of my brothers and sisters and their children back in Laos I feel I should not have left at all. I will never forgive myself for leaving them" (445). Such poignant grief is to be echoed over and over again by other survivor accounts.

Chia Koua Xiong in Tim Pfaff's *Hmong in America: Journey from a Secret War* (1995) reminisces that "In 1982 . . . we ran out of bullets . . . We [264 people] left Tha Vieng and departed for the Mekong River. On the way . . . the Vietnamese killed five of our people—one was my son, three were my nephews, and one was a Her family member. [We] had eaten all the food we had carried . . . We cut bamboo to make rafts. . . [and] waited until dusk. . . When all the people were ready, we paddled to Thailand. We arrived at Pa Sa, Thailand [sic] at 5:00 a.m. . . Some of our people got sick. The Thai people who lived along the river brought us food. As a human being, struggling like that was the lowest life on this earth" (55). The same kind of vivid

details of numbers and events haunts Chia Koua Xiong, as is the nature of memories of extreme situations. In addition, refugees' experiences are simultaneously individualistic and universal. Each is haunted by his or her own hell, which resembles one another as a result of the fact that specific vagaries of individual experiences tend to be erased in collective catastrophes. Whether escaping on foot from the north or the south, one is plagued by the same fear and arrives at the same river.

Another of Pfaff's informants, Houa Vue Moua, recalls his tearful departure from the refugee camp and his mother. Fearing that she will never see her son again, his mother was heartbroken, crying throughout the farewells: "So our way of leaving—from Nong Khai to Bangkok, Thailand to come to Eau Claire [Wisconsin]—was like a funeral" (62). The joy of rebirth from the limbo of a camp is so muted by survivor guilt and a sense of self-betrayal that the informant conflates it with metaphors of death. Chia Koua Xiong testifies in a similar vein that life since the relocation has not improved much: "I feel bad because I have been in this country for three years and no one has taught me a word in English. My vision is getting worse . . . I feel bad because I don't know how to drive. . . how to communicate with any Americans. . . When I think about it I cry by myself" (78).

It is fitting to conclude this section with the opening voice of Kia Vue from Lillian Faderman:

Coming here, I know I have become helpless. Everything I do, I just depend on my children. . . . [A]fter about fifteen years [in the U.S.], I don't even know all of my ABCs. I'm like my four-year-old girl—and she even writes her name better than I could write my name. My children laugh at me, and I laugh with them. But when I really think about it, it's not funny. It hurts a lot. It even hurts more if I think about it. (174-75)

Alienation from children deepens Kia Vue's sense of helplessness. In the worst case scenarios, the Hmong legacy of suffering continues in the next generation as juvenile delinquency.

Faderman comments in the Gang section of her book that “The rapid proliferation of Hmong youth gangs is in large part a reaction by Hmong teens to what they perceive as their parents’ social impotence in America” (185). This assessment is echoed by Wendy Walker-Moffat’s *The Other Side of the Asian American Success Story* (1995): “The recent rise in juvenile delinquency among Hmong adolescents suggests that the sense of security provided by the Hmong clan system no longer meets the demands of survival in American streets and schools, and that some youths are turning to their peers instead of their elders and extended family for security” (98). In “Bulletproof Buddhists,” the so-called Godfather of Asian American plays, Frank Chin, explores Southeast Asian youth crimes in San Diego. Chin does not identify Hmong in his essay, relying instead on broad strokes on the condition of refugees’ children. This stems from some of his informants, such as Officer Rick Moody: “With the Lao and the Cambodian gangs, most of them are Buddhist. Theravada Buddhism. Your destiny’s mapped out. And if something happens, it happened, it was mapped out, there’s nothing you can do to change it” (155). While it is commendable for a police officer to brush up on the religious background of his or her “constituents,” the stereotype of Oriental resignation and fatalism worries readers, especially when quoted and legitimized by an Asian American writer, an “insider” of that ethnic group.

### **Refrains in Colorful Threads**

Other than written sources, another form of Hmong creativity offers corroborating evidence of refugee’s death fugue. Having derived from the more traditional *paj ntaub* (“flower cloth” made of painstaking embroidery), Hmong story cloths on the refugee saga allegedly arose in Thai refugee camps and are now a staple in arts and crafts festivals in the U.S. Story cloths are stylized in their narratological sequence of the fighting with Pathet Lao or Vietcong, the escape through jungles, the crossing of the Mekong River, and the arrival at Thai refugee camps, unfolding in several horizontal planes while refugees’ zigzag route brings attention downward.<sup>iv</sup> The tapestry is usually framed by the traditional consecutive triangles or shark-teeth design on all

four sides, which some speculate as an attempt to ward off evil spirits, or as a mimetic representation of the peaks in Laotian highlands.

Horrid memories, surely, need to be contained by narratological stylizations, but such containment, as illustrated in nearly all story cloths, never fails to cease at the exact moment of departure for the West. In view of the voluminous recall collected in "Refrains in Cultural Variations," it is shocking to find that there is scarcely little Hmong refugees would willing share about their American or Western experiences, except, illustrated in Kia Vue's comments, self-elegies and death wishes. A case in point: half way through Sucheng Chan's *Hmong Means Free* (1994), a telling moment occurs when Mr. Xia Shoua Fang terminates the interview abruptly for he "did not wish to discuss his life in the United States" (141). Mr. Fang has just finished narrating the horrendous tale of survival through Laotian jungles and Communist pursuit, but he falls silent at the precise juncture when he is, by any standard, safe and comfortable in "the land of the free." The fleeing, as agonizing as it had been, is nonetheless *recalled*, whereas the present and the long, interminable future in the U.S. are *repressed*. It should not require a Freud's genius to see that Hmong refugees are not exactly healed by the largesse and abundance of the U.S. Rather, their life-after-death is shrouded by a deafening silence on their American sojourn, a sort of death-in-life. The premature closure of Mr. Fang's and in story cloths suggests that the voluminous recall of Hmong escape through Southeast Asia is undertaken *so as to* repress or to counter the un-Hmong-ing in the here and now. The refugee's story serves to construct Hmong identity, which appears to be fast vanishing in the West. Tales of individual survival, however, become an ironic footnote to what Charles Johnson calls "cultural annihilation."

The genesis of story cloths is usually attributed to Thai refugee camps in the 1970s. Sally Nina Peterson in "From the Heart and the Mind: Creating Paj Ntaub in the Context of Community" (1990) cites Joan E. Ritchie's consultant, Mrs. Chang Xiong: "I first saw story blankets in 1975, in Ban Vinai. The Hmong women wanted to make these for themselves, not to sell them. The women think about moving from one country to another country to another

country. The old people worried that the young may not know. They thought, we don't have cameras, we don't have knowledge of writing stories; let us use the needle to make a memory of our customs, our history. Women gave the men the idea and asked to them [sic] to draw the pictures. Women taught the men how to sew" (357). Marsha MacDowell's *Stories in Thread: Hmong Pictorial Embroidery* (1989) provides a detailed account of the division of labor inside the camps: "Bao Lor, interviewed in Detroit by Sue Jillian, believes there are only ten men in the camps responsible for drawing story cloths; they were trained in an art program instituted by Thai personnel, and offered to men only" (5). Because of the lack of art training of masses of women sewers, the job of drawing fell on a handful of males. These drawings were then circulated in the camps to provide blueprints. Sewing immediately caught on since there was little else detainees could have done to earn extra income or to, in the course of waiting for relocation, while away time in an overcrowded camp with poor living conditions. Tim Pfaff unequivocally asserts that, at one point, the designer Jan Folsom selected for Hmong women in the camps patterns and color combinations that would appeal to an international clientele. The level of interest tourists of the refugee camps showed for story cloths led Western relief workers and others to market the products in the first world.

Some three decades after its birth, Hmong story cloths may appear formulaic. But the creator(s), the circumstances of production, the marketing, and the eventual ownership of each piece vary. Figure 1 is a piece my wife and I purchased at an arts and crafts fair held around the Courthouse in Bloomington, Indiana, in the early or mid-1980s. Both of us marginally aware of the Hmong plight through *National Geographic*, my wife, prompted by her artistic instinct, insisted on paying what seemed, for international graduate students then, to be an exorbitant fee for it. Her connoisseur's eyes paid off and I have been using this piece in my college teaching consistently. The Hmong artist was Yer Thor of Detroit. She was kind enough to keep up a correspondence for a number of years and even sent us photographs of Hmong women sewing together as well as newspaper clippings on Detroit's Hmong community. After our several

moves from and back to the Midwest, unfortunately, I lost her address and photographs. Yer Thor was reluctant about one thing, though. I had to be quite adamant before she agreed to “sign” her work, i.e., to sew in turquoise her name on the lower right corner against a backdrop of grayish blue, her choice of threads so close to the background color that it appears to be a compromise between acceding to customer's demand and remaining invisible. Signing and thus claiming authorship over a product seems to her a completely outlandish, even slightly decadent, idea.

Several viewing tiers exist in Yer Thor's piece. The top tier arrays two rows of soldiers firing at each other. Those in light green uniform use Soviet-made AK-47 with its crescent-shaped magazine cartridge and suggest Vietcong, whereas the Hmong army is attired in dark green. Helicopters in the clouds are in the same color as the Hmong unit and can be assumed to be the U.S. aerial support. The second tier is dominated by an airfield where Hmong evacuees with luggages are about to board an airplane. Although critics have long held that the Hmong have no sense of perspective in their story cloths, the diminishing size of figures in relation to the plane gives depth to this scene. The soaring, pointed mountain peaks surrounding the airstrip recalls the evacuation of Long Cheng in May 1975, detailed in Gayle L. Morrison *Sky Is Falling: An Oral History of the CIA's Evacuation of the Hmong from Laos* (1999). Morrison maintains, based on U.S. pilots' and Hmong survivors' testimonies, that the frantic air evacuation transported 2,500 Hmong to safety in Thai refugee camps, abandoning the bulk of Hmong refugees in Long Cheng. These refugees are left to their own devices, evidenced in the stream of Hmong en route diagonally to reach the Mekong River. This journey on foot is punctuated by scenes of the traditional slash-and-burn agriculture, practiced along the escape route for sustenance, and scenes of temporary shelter—breastfeeding, cooking, and the like. Refugees crossing the Mekong River extends the zigzag line across the piece. With Vietcong shooting at them from the shore and intercepted by patrol boats, refugees rely on makeshift bamboo rafts,

inner tubes, and an assortment of buoying devices. There is a lone Hmong male on the river bank firing back at the Vietcong.

That the river-crossing never fails to appear in Hmong story cloths—or in other Hmong oral testimonies, for that matter—is symptomatic of the indelible trauma left on the refugee psyche.<sup>v</sup> Being highlanders, Hmong are unlikely to have grown accustomed to swimming across strong torrents like the Mekong River. In addition, the Mekong seems the final lap before sanctuary, so close to the end of their exodus, yet so fraught with danger and uncertainty. In the river, they no longer enjoy the shelter of the dense Southeast Asian jungle; they are exposed to the elements and hostile fire. Their vulnerability culminates at the very moment of delivery, much as the treacherous maneuver through the birth canal. On a more philosophical level, swimming is not the natural mode of existence: we swim in order to reach the other shore to continue our normal lifestyle as animals on land. Looking back at their experience, Hmong refugees may feel that they have never quite reached the other shore and have continued to “float” as refugees. Death by drowning is a distinct possibility, not only literally at the bottom of the Mekong River, but also metaphorically at the bottom of the American social hierarchy. Yer Thor's Mekong is a metonymy for the perils of refugees.<sup>vi</sup>

The reading of the Mekong as a watershed in the refugee saga is born out both by the form or design of the story cloth and by its content. The white stitches that formulate the river cut across the piece, dividing two blocks of space. The Hmong's position is shown to be drastically diminished once they reach the bottom half of the piece. They are met by border guards, subsequently interviewed by immigration officers sitting behind a desk, and queued up by a traffic controller before boarding buses. Note that in the refugee camps, there are three types of characters in non-black, non-Hmong costumes: border patrols with guns, immigration officers with pens and documents, and traffic control with batons. The only four individuals resting on seats on the Thai side are the officials, proportionally much larger than the refugees being processed, who raise their left hands in a clear gesture of swearing allegiance. The Hmong used to

wield guns and farming tools and control their destiny to a certain extent on the Laotian side of the river. Mekong-crossing leaves them with luggages and backpacks only; even the lone Hmong fighter by the river has vanished. The Hmong loss of power contrasts sharply with the three types of authority figures, culminating in the four figures who “sit in judgment” over life and death. Nature, nevertheless, continues to thrive throughout their ordeal, from their journey on foot to the refugee camps. The Hmong sensibility to nature never wavers even in their darkest hours. The lush vegetation observes the Hmong exile mutely.<sup>vii</sup>

Because sewing human figures one inch in height or less is so difficult, story cloths usually sport cardboard figures with no detailed facial expression. Yet Yer Thor shows expression by not showing it; she intimates human emotions by hiding a human face. The slightly larger couple in the bottom right-hand corner (Figure 2) invites special scrutiny. A couple, luggage in hand, follows the crowd to board the bus. The woman covers her face with both her hands, sobbing, while the man turns to gaze at her and puts his arm around her in a gesture of consolation. While emotions are held in check throughout the fighting, the escape, the river-crossing, the interrogation by officials, and the languishing at the camps, the woman finds it impossible to withhold any longer the grief of displacement upon exiting the refugee camp and Southeast Asia. Yer Thor's story cloth ends on this note—a relocation signifying safety in the West, but one wonders if this should be the natural end of the Hmong fugue. What are we to hear in the silence enveloping Hmong refugee life in the U.S.? Is the final note of a musical composition necessarily a well-wrought closure or is it a mere sigh before expiration?

Two other pieces collected in Marsha MacDowell's *Stories in Thread: Hmong Pictorial Embroidery* complement Yer Thor's story cloth. These pieces also follow the left-to-right horizontal arrangement, modeled after the style of writing “in Lao, romanized Hmong, and English” (Sally Peterson 361). Figure 3 displays all the key moments in the Hmong saga: the escape, the crossing of the Mekong, the interview and photographing by immigration officials, the distribution of food and supplies in the refugee camps. The detail in figure 4 is of the upper

right-hand corner, which shows three Hmong males in various gestures of obsequiousness toward the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) visitors. The Hmong fold their hands and bow—one is close to kneeling, whereas the two visitors turn away and are about to leave. The taller male points toward the Hmong for the female to see, as if they are tourists on a sight-seeing trip. The bright yellow of the woman's dress and of the man's hat and shirt, coupled with the man's white suit contrast sharply with the dark, traditional dress of the three Hmong males as well as with the dark blue background cloth. Such color schemes already make the UNHCR visitors stand out in the somber camp universe, even in the brief moment before their exit, while the three Hmong's costume submerge them into the background cloth. In fact, not only is the male UNHCR member in a white suit, so are all the other figures of authority—the immigration officials conducting interviews and photographing applicants, and the person who distributes supplies to yet another bowing Hmong character. The entire piece finds itself framed as well by two white rectangles, setting the boundaries of Hmong refugee life. Perhaps a subconscious transposition of the power of the "white" race onto the clothes of whites as well as onto the context of Hmong experience, that whiteness emerges whenever there is a symbol of life—water kettle in their exodus, water buckets in the camp, and the hut which provides the final sanctuary and a closure to the story. The white house is, needless to say, someone else's home for what would be a permanent accommodation of refugees.<sup>viii</sup> Granted that the recurring white stitches may be purely coincidental as a result of the material conditions at the time of manufacturing this piece at Ban Vinai, the largest of Thai refugee camps, the Hmong dependency on outside forces is presented as a deep humiliation.

Figure 5 follows the same pattern of their escape and camp experiences. The detail of figure 6 focuses on the lower right-hand corner, the finale to the story cloth. This proves to be one of the rare instances whereby life in the U.S. is portrayed. The caption reads "They fly from Thailand to America," which is visualized by the airplane in the clouds and the sun. The plane symbolizes great distance that now separates the Hmong in diaspora. To the left of figure 6, two

figures cover their faces, tears dripping in the dotted white lines, despite the fact that they are showered in the radiance of the sun. One of the buckets is tipped over, its contents evidently spilled out, intimating the emotional outburst of the two figures. To the right, a figure at the end of the plane ride sobs as he listens to the audio cassette tape sent from the camp. Since the Hmong were preliterate, audio and video cassettes were the only vehicles of communication. It is intriguing that the sun appears in relation to the plane ride and, to a lesser degree, to the two weeping figures in camp. The long wait that culminates in the emotional high of the sunny journey sinks into the background murkiness that imprisons the lone crying figure. At the end of the exodus, the lucky survivor, graphically, turns his back on the Hmong, foreshadowing the unforeseen result of "cultural annihilation." Modern amenities, which is supposed to contribute to a sense of well-being, now manifest in the form of a cassette tape of perhaps ill tidings, fueling nostalgia, emptiness, and guilt.

### **Contrapuntally. . .**

One awaits the day when the Hmong and Hmong Americans give us their fugal variations in writing. There are, however, contrapuntal compositions on death by other Southeast Asian refugees. Haing S. Ngor won an Oscar Award for his role in *The Killing Fields* (1984), a film that depicts the Khmer Rouge-occupied Cambodia. Ironically in 1996, Ngor was shot dead in the driveway of his Los Angeles home. Police investigation determined that he was a victim of youth crimes; three members of the Oriental Lazyboy street gang tried to rob him and shot him when he resisted. More recently, T. C. Huo's *Land of Smiles* (2000) offers a new direction for the Southeast Asian refugee experience, moving from social studies by Western academics to voices of refugees and their children, from testimonials and oral history scattered throughout miscellaneous projects on refugees to the refugee community writing back. Any ethnic group in the United States evolves through this trajectory, except the Hmong undergoes a vicissitude much more speeded-up in that they are plucked from a traditional lifestyle in the isolated Laotian highland, thrust into a war, and expected to fit right into modern life in the West.

Much of the refrain elaborated thus far surface in Huo as well. The protagonist is Bootakorn, a Chinese lowland Loatian boy, who swam across the Mekong with his friends to flee from Pathet Lao. Stranded in Thai refugee camp, he was eventually rejoined by his father and the sad news that his mother and younger sister had both drowned in their escape attempt. The novel, in fact, has a refrain of a man singing across the Mekong for his lover, while a corpse of a woman floats by. The lover who is implied to have drowned suggests the loss of his mother and sister. And the singer resembles Bootakorn himself longing for a reunion not only with his family but also with his lost childhood and country. In the strictest Freudian sense, the singer Bootakorn yearns for an Oedipal displacement of his father, a powerful drive contributing to his seething resentment against the father. The powerful metaphor of the Mekong River flows from Hmong story cloths into T. C. Huo's story.

Inside the camp, residents are plagued by boredom and Bootakorn takes long walks on the premises to kill time—a habit continued in the U.S., hinting at a resettlement to nothing but a larger and more incomprehensible camp. After roughly two-thirds of the book set in a refugee camp, the father and son were admitted to the U.S. The book ends with the adult Bootakorn's return to Luang Prabang, Laos, his hometown. During their long stay in the camp and in the U.S., Bootakorn portrays a most unflattering picture of his refugee father. His father is blamed for the death of the mother and sister; he is said to use his poor English as the excuse not to apply himself and adjust to the U.S.; he dozes off in English classes and whenever he can; he depends on his sister in Ohio and other women; he, practically, regresses from a father to an irresponsible child in the U.S. However, his father suffers from a set of shared problems of Hmong refugees detailed herein—inertia, withdrawal, angst, shame. Bootakorn, on the other hand, exhibits much of the refugee syndrome of confusion and rage, especially the Hmong youths' contempt reserved for the powerless elders. Unwittingly, T. C. Huo composes apt "captions" to Hmong story cloths. At this juncture, Hmong refugees, spontaneously and without any orchestration, echo one another in their communal "Death Fugue." The multitudinous threads, like fugal refrains, somehow

interweave into a story of cultural demise of infinite sadness. Hope, of course, always resides in the next generation, but what will their song be when Yer Thor's children grow up to be Hmong Americans? Will it still echo a river that they have never seen? If not and if Hmong refugee's "Death Fugue" comes to exhaust all variations, we may yet hear the first note in a "Life Fugue" from young Hmong Americans.

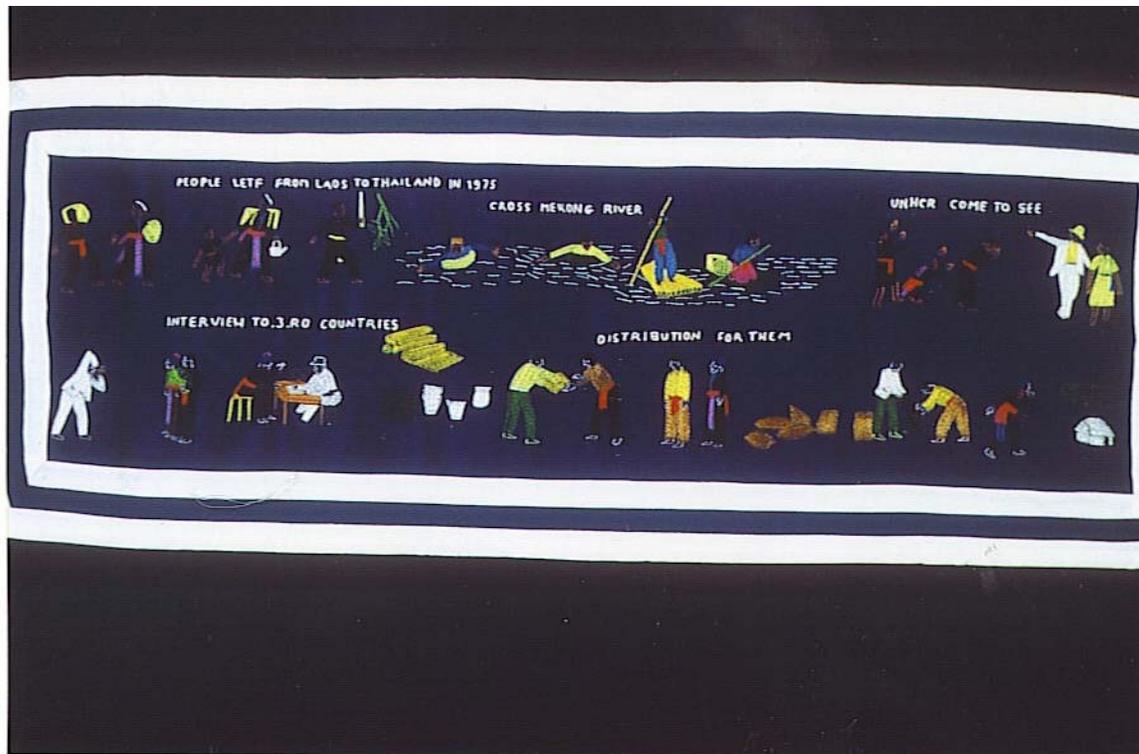
**About the Author:** Dr. Sheng-mei Ma is Professor of English at Michigan State University.



Fig. 1: Yer Thor's story cloth on the Hmong refugee saga. Author's personal collection



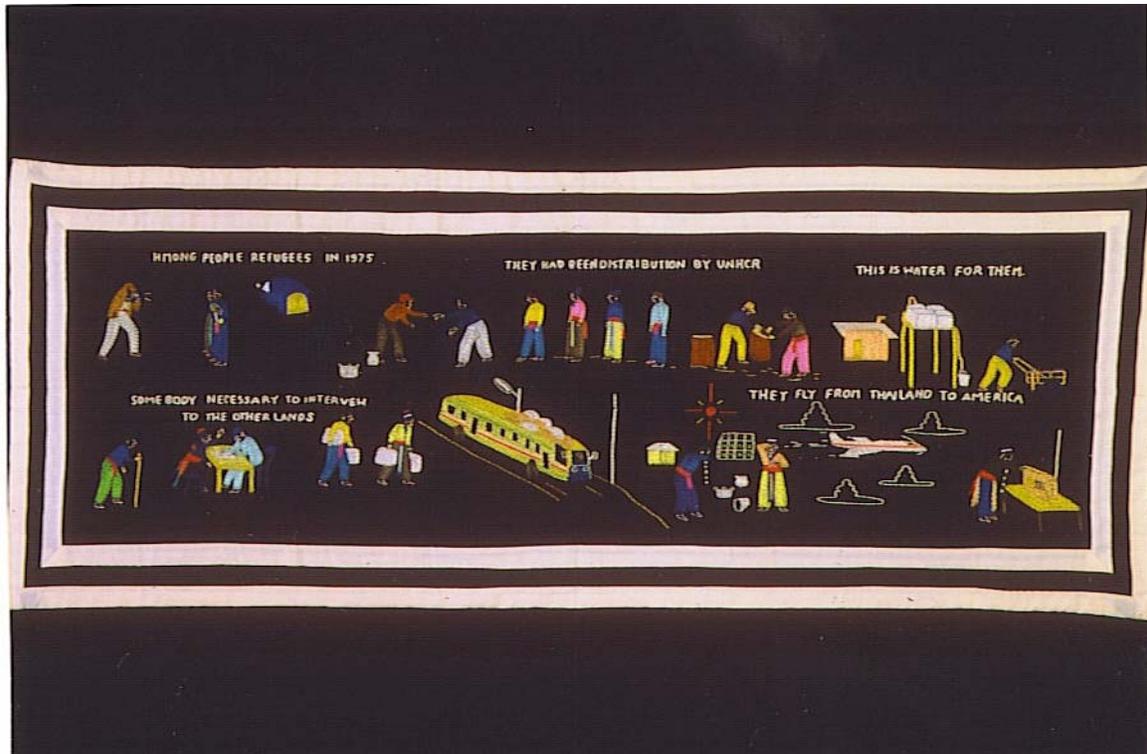
**Fig. 2:** Detail of Yer Thor's story cloth. Note the slightly larger couple in the bottom right-hand corner.



**Fig. 3: Stages of the Hmong exodus: the escape, the crossing of the Mekong, the refugee camp. Artist unknown. Michigan State University Museum collection.**



**Fig. 4: Detail of the upper right-hand corner in figure 3. Note the three Hmong males beseeching the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) visitors.**



**Fig. 5: Another story cloth on the Hmong plight. Artist unknown. Michigan State University Museum collection.**

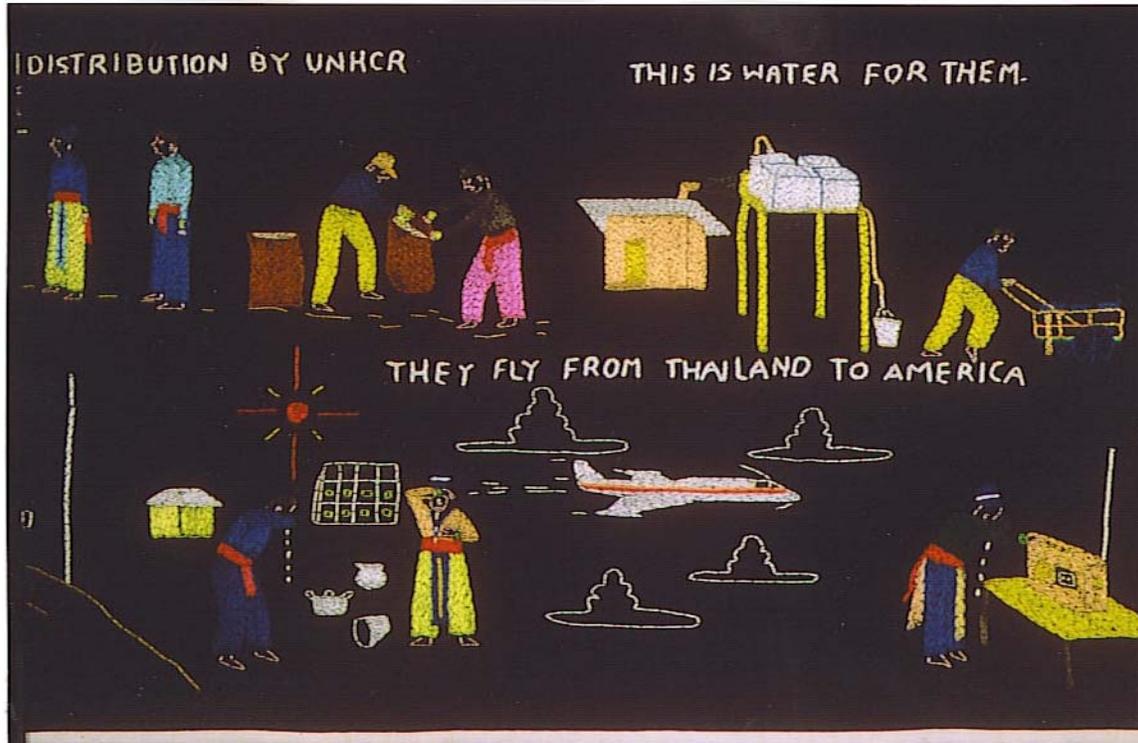


Fig. 6: Detail of the lower right-hand corner in figure 5. Note the crying of the three figures.

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Notes

<sup>i</sup>. A similar lament is sung by Mai Hang in Nancy Donnelly's *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women* (1994):

Now we have come over here and the New Year has come.  
But we don't kill the pig, and we don't have a party.  
We have no boars, for we have no land,  
Nowhere to plant our rice and corn.  
Because we have no animals, we cannot have a New Year,  
We cannot invite anybody to come.  
We live on rock. We have no spirit money or incense to burn.  
...  
We have food, we have clothes, but we don't have our country.  
We have clothes, we have food, but our family is homesick.  
(59)

<sup>ii</sup>. Nancy Donnelly uses the patron-client relationship to discuss the Southeast Asian refugee existence in the US: "Refugees enter the United States in a condition of dependency. Clientelism is a fact in the heart and essence of refugee resettlement. Clearly the largest patron is the federal government, and there are many other clientelistic networks" (92).

<sup>iii</sup>. Nancy Donnelly points to a joke to suggest the gender instability. Donnelly writes: "When we get on the plane to go back to Laos, the first thing we do is beat up the women!" This joke "has a complicated ironic underlayment of male unhappiness and helplessness, a concatenation of unemployability, of sudden economic value placed on women work, of men's fear of losing power in their families (22). Women were also laughing because women were supposed to laugh along when a male makes a joke. "In addition, they could easily laugh because

they did not expect a plane back to Laos. No Hmong woman has ever told me she wanted to live in Laos again” (22). The last sentence may be a bit too arbitrary. In Sucheng Chan's *Hmong Means Free*, there are women who said they wish to return.

<sup>iv</sup>. The Michigan State University Museum boasts of a large collection of story cloths from refugee camps and from various American cities. The two pieces of story cloth that I analyzed herein are housed at MSU and are included in Marsha MacDowell's *Stories In Thread*.

<sup>v</sup>. Janet Rice in “Hmong Women's Group Using Traditional Quilting to Recover from Depression and Post-Trauma” (1999) conducts a study of thirteen Hmong women, who were using traditional quilting as a way to fight depression and post-trauma. Seven out of the thirteen or so story cloths feature the crossing of the Mekong River. One piece visualizes the Southeast Asian jungle, four depict the rural village, one presents Christmas. Janet Rice and the Hmong chief therapist create pieces dealing with the treatment in Minnesota, a here and now distinctly absent in the Hmong pieces, with the exception of one piece which merges the Mekong River with the Mississippi River. This is the one and only depiction of the U.S. from the thirteen Hmong women.

<sup>vi</sup>. It is ironic that in view of the centrality of the Mekong River in the Hmong refugee experience, Hmong is mentioned in passing on one occasion only in Milton Osborne's *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future* (2000). Hmong's marginality to the history of Southeast Asia is evident in that Osborne alludes to them in connection with the Central Intelligence Agency operations during the Vietnam War. See Osborne, pp. 203-204.

<sup>vii</sup>. The most dramatic contrast of violence and nature is in Jane Hamilton-Merritt's *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (1993), which contains three drawings far more gruesome than Hmong story cloths—scenes of decapitation, stabbing death by a bayonet, bondage and rape, sodomy with a sharp nail, disembowment, and crushing infants on the rice pounder. Each of these drawings is framed by trees, plants, grass, and

river. In fact, a naked woman is tied between two luxuriant palm trees and raped. Another carnage takes place amidst flourishing plants, as if nature is totally indifferent to or silently indicts against the unfolding inhumanity. As Hamilton-Merritt does not explain the origins of these three drawings, one can only say that the design is atypical, the content graphic, the violence overwhelming. The receding mountain and river in one of them suggests an artist well versed in the Western concept of perspective and depth. It is more likely to be the work of, say, one of the few male artists who drew the story cloth's blueprints in the refugee camps.

<sup>viii</sup>. White in many Asian cultures is the color of death. Mourning garbs and coffins are often draped in white. But the Hmong culture does not seem to view whiteness in this fashion.