

**Singing as Social Life:
Three Perspectives on *Kwv Txhiaj* from Vietnam**

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Abstract

Despite the recent influx of predominantly foreign-produced recordings of Hmong popular music, the vocal art form of *kwv txhiaj* still plays an important role in the daily lives of many Vietnamese-Hmong people. While previous studies of Vietnamese-Hmong music have tended to focus solely on the musical sounds, this article attempts to illustrate how *kwv txhiaj* is made meaningful in live performance by contextualizing the musical examples with ethnographic data. Using Timothy Rice's Time, Place, and Metaphor model (2003) as a theoretical basis, three contrasting case studies of singers and their songs are examined: an elderly woman sings a song she learned at the time of her marriage at the age of nine, a younger woman sings while planting rice in her fields, and another sings about the importance of education at the local government cultural center. Based on fifteen months of fieldwork in northern Vietnam, this study examines a representative sample of performances from the Sa Pa district of Lào Cai province in an attempt to uncover what makes *kwv txhiaj* a vital aspect of Vietnamese-Hmong culture.

Keywords: Vietnam, music, *kwv txhiaj*, subject-centered ethnography

Introduction

Kwv txhiaj is a traditional ballad style that is sung by Hmong people throughout the world. In Vietnam, this vocal art form is so prevalent that the term *nkauj* (song or singer) is often used interchangeably with *kwv txhiaj* in the vernacular. Studies on Vietnamese-Hmong *kwv txhiaj* have tended to focus on the collection of song lyrics and the categorization of songs. Since the

1950s, Vietnamese musicologists have produced two books (Hồng 1997¹ and Dương 2010), a series of articles (e.g. Hồng 2003[1967] and 2004[1975]; Trần (2003[1968]); Trần (2003[1978]); Trịnh and Nguyễn 1978; Lương 2003[1997]), and numerous songbooks on Hmong traditional music which include extensive musical transcriptions of *kwv txhiaj* (e.g. Anon. 1960 and 1961; Hùng 2001, 2002, and 2003). This body of research has been largely motivated by showing how the musical culture of the Hmong differs from that of Vietnam's other ethnic minority groups (cf. Pelley 2002). *Kwv txhiaj* has served as an ideal genre for this exercise because of its perceived historical ties with the Hmong people. The transcriptions have also been appropriated for use in compositions of *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* (modern national music).² The logocentric approaches of these scholars, whose studies are dominated by transcriptions and include only limited descriptions and analyses of the contexts in which the musical activities took place, contrasts with the ethnographic approach of this study.

Outside of Vietnam, scholars have also devoted much time to the categorization of *kwv txhiaj*: Graham (1938:32) listed ten categories of *kwv txhiaj* which he noted among the Ch'uan Miao (Hmong) in China³, Mottin (1980:3-4) outlines twelve he encountered in Laos and Thailand, and Catlin (1981:8) compiled a list of seventeen which she noted among the American-Hmong.⁴ During fifteen months of participant-observation fieldwork in northern Vietnam between 2009 and 2011, most of the singers and instrumentalists I recorded would pause after I requested a title and then tell me that their song was called *nkauj plees* (love song),

¹ Hồng's book was edited and translated into English by Nguyễn Thuyết Phong (1995).

² *Nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* (modern national music) is a genre of music that emerged from politicized attempts to construct a national musical heritage for Vietnam. As part of the process of inventing a national tradition (Hobsbawm 1983), some composers of *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* fused compatible elements of the musics of Vietnam's officially recognized ethnic groups together with the core traditions of the Viet majority (cf. Arana 1999).

³ See Graham (1954) for an extensive collection of songs and stories from this community.

⁴ For further readings on Hmong music outside of Vietnam see works by Eric Mareschal (e.g. 1976), Gretel Schwörer-Kohl (e.g. 1991) and Catherine Falk (e.g. 2003). A more extensive review of the literature on Hmong music can be found in Ó Briain (2012:9-18).

or, in Vietnamese, *bài tình yêu*. This response summarized one of the themes of the song but gave no specific details about content. While love is the most common theme of Hmong secular songs, many other types of song are used in daily life. Furthermore, *kwv txhiaj* songs tend to have layered meanings that shift depending on the social context. Attempts to strictly delineate categories for *kwv txhiaj* are problematic due to the diversity of contexts in which members of the Vietnamese-Hmong ethnic group live and use music. When I pressed my interlocutors on the subject of song categories they would begin to list daily activities such as falling in love, planting crops, drinking rice wine, and herding the water-buffalo. After a while they would inevitably break down in laughter and shake their heads, saying “many, very many”. Similarly, despite his decades of research with the Hmong in Southeast Asia, Mottin was unable to compile a comprehensive set of song categories. At the end of his list, Mottin indicates the limitations of his categories by writing “and many more...” (1980:4). The imposition of categories and subcategories by non-Hmong scholars on this genre has not produced conclusive results due to the diversity of contexts in which *kwv txhiaj* is performed; the categories depend on the social contexts of the performances and are therefore constantly in flux. The song titles used in this article should be understood as describing the theme of the song that was most prevalent during the recorded rendition, and on other occasions the performer might give preference to one or more other themes.

This article contrasts with most Vietnamese scholarship on Hmong music by considering the perspectives of the people taking part in the musical activities rather than simply examining the musical sounds. Three women⁵ and the *kwv txhiaj* songs that each of them sang for me are

⁵ While I found that the sphere of traditional instrumental music was largely dominated by men, Vietnamese-Hmong women tended to be much more comfortable singing in public than men. Mottin found that Hmong women also tended to dominate the world of singing in public in Laos and Thailand, and most of his book on singing is devoted to songs that were sung by women (1980). In Bulgaria, Rice notes a similar division in gender roles with regard to

introduced in an attempt to undercover some of the ways that singers make *kwv txhiaj* meaningful in live performance. Structured by Rice's "Time, Place and Metaphor" model (2003), the investigation focuses on how the meanings of the songs have changed for and been changed by these individuals at various times and places in their lives. This approach seeks to derive a set of overarching metaphors about the fundamental nature of music for these women. While the focus is on individuals in the community, each individual case is considered as "a thoroughly social self as it emerges from and reattaches itself to an emergent array of social units and communities" (Rice 2010:109 fn. 15). Ultimately, the aim is to enhance our understanding of traditional forms of musical activity in rural Hmong communities in Vietnam.

The *kwv txhiaj* style forms the foundation of Hmong traditional music theory, and most Hmong traditional instrumental music is based on its structures. Gisa Jähnichen, who conducted research on *kwv txhiaj* in Laos, observes:

Very interesting is the general characteristic of generating absolutely individual melodic lines. In each example and in all the other recordings there was no one song with a repetition of a single melodic line. Avoiding repetitions is therefore a remarkable sign of Hmong song melodies. (2006:210)

In China, Agnew similarly noted "a marked lack of precision in the rhythm, and this leads to considerable difficulty in the recording of the songs" (1939:19). The melodies of *kwv txhiaj* are shaped according to the word tones of the Hmong language. While improvised or extemporized wordplay is one of the fundamental traits of the song style, singers should adhere to the *txwm* (rhyming couplets) at the beginning of phrases. Adjacent phrases tend to be of unequal length

traditional singing practices; he suggests that men usually only sing when drunk or pretending to be because they do not want to outwardly display any emotions (1994:124). I consider the division of roles by gender in musical activities at greater length in my PhD dissertation (see Ó Briain 2012).

because they depend on the wordplay of the singer. As with phrase lengths and rhythms, the scales employed by singers, although typically pentatonic or tetratonic, also tended to vary in pitch by region because they were based on local linguistic dialects.⁶

Rice's model for subject-centered ethnographies is an ideational space that considers data on three dimensions: time, place, and metaphor. Since "we and our subjects experience music socially in multiple locales" (Rice 2003:160), place is conceptualized as a sociogeographic dimension in his model. Suggested nodes for this "projection of the social in space" (ibid.:159) include, but are not limited to: individual, subcultural, local, regional, national, areal, diasporic, global, and virtual (ibid.:161). Time is considered on two planes: chronologically and experientially or phenomenologically. Both of these planes must be considered when plotting the place nodes because they help define the sociogeographic context. The metaphors of Rice's model are concepts of what music is. Suggested metaphors include music as art, music as social behavior, music as symbolic system or referential text, and music as commodity (ibid.:166-67).

These are intended as

fundamental claims to truth, guides to practical action and sources for understanding music's profound importance in human life. Rather than true or false, each claim... is merely limited, one of many possibilities. A given metaphor probably achieves some goals and makes some sense in certain situations but fails to account for the full range of music's possibilities and significance. I further suggest that multiple musical metaphors probably guide action and thought in individual lives, in society and through time. Sometimes... they happily commingle; at others they may become alternative, competing strategies. (2001:22)

Some of the metaphors discussed in this article were verbalized by the people themselves while others were interpreted by the author based on stories told by the singers relating to the music and the time and place nodes which they generated.

While I met, interviewed, and recorded many Hmong women between 2009 and 2011 this article only considers a representative sample of these. All three recordings were made by

⁶ See Mottin (1980) for a comprehensive analysis of the *kwv txhiaj* style and Poss (2012) for an examination of the relationship between Hmong linguistic tones and musical phrases.

the author in the Sa Pa district of Lào Cai province during this period. After returning from the field, the individual cases were selected based on a number of similarities and differences between them. To highlight some of the more significant of these traits: the similarities or sameness of gender, ethnicity, geographic location (in some part of the Sa Pa district), and traditional song style bind them; the differences of age (young adult, middle-aged adult, and elderly adult), song text subject, and status as amateur or professional⁷ musicians serve to provide contrast. This balance between sameness and difference serves to highlight the diversity of traditional songs and singing practices within one Hmong community in Vietnam. The aim is to demonstrate the variety of contexts in which Hmong songs thrive and to find out what makes these musical activities meaningful to the participants.

Case Study One: The Nine-Year-Old Bride

While the Hmong have always been noted for their free and open relations between the sexes by comparison with the strict and formal hierarchical society of the Kinh Vietnamese, a Hmong wedding ceremony traditionally forms a bond not only between two people but also between two lineages.⁸ Before a wedding, the two families meet to agree on compensation in the form of money, farm animals, clothes, and jewelry such as silver coins from French colonial times or handmade necklaces (*xauv*). Kinship relationships in Hmong society are based on patrilineal descent. Typically, after marriage the bride moves into the groom's house and becomes a member of his family. Her family by birth must be compensated adequately for their loss. The amount depends on the woman's standing in the community; if she is young, healthy, and likely to bear many children the price could be as much as twenty million VNĐ (\$960) plus extras

⁷ There are very few professional Hmong singers in Vietnam. However, the third case study in this article demonstrates how one Hmong woman has been able, albeit sporadically, to supplement her income through singing and working as a cultural representative for the Vietnamese-Hmong people.

⁸ There are certain special forms of marriage including marriage by capture and marriage by elopement which are designed to escape this traditional approach and can be used when a couple falls in love.

including large farm animals but if she has been married previously or has some other social handicap the bride price could be as low as one million VNĐ (\$48) with a few small farm animals. When a wife moves to her husband's house she has to take on many new responsibilities including household chores such as cooking for her new extended family, cleaning the house, and embroidering and washing clothes. The stresses of this transition period can be compounded by her unfamiliarity with the other people in the house and their lack of sympathy for her. For these reasons, and in contrast to many wedding cultures in other parts of the world, typically, a Vietnamese-Hmong bride will be very upset on her wedding day.

When I interviewed Mu Xiong (Figure 1), an elderly woman from Séo Mí Tì village, she chose to sing two songs for me: a daughter-in-law's song (*nkauj ua nyab*), which she learned at the time of her marriage, and a funeral song (*nkauj tuag*), which she dedicated to her late husband. Mu was born in the year of the pig, probably 1923, thus making her one of the eldest consultants who took part in this study. Before Mu was married she used to play *nplooj* (leaf) very well and even claimed that she could play *qeej*, an instrument that is now considered only for men. The marriage arrangements were made by her parents and she had never met her husband before the wedding day. After she married she was too busy with her work as a housewife and a daughter-in-law to make time for playing music. Occasionally she would play when alone but her husband discouraged her from doing so because he did not understand why a woman would want to play music as it only took away from the time she could be doing more practical housework. By the time her children had grown up she had forgotten how to play and decided to give away her instruments.



Figure 1: Mu Xiong watches herself singing on camcorder with the author, 16 June 2010. Photograph by Bernhard Huber.

After the early challenges of her marriage Mu clearly grew to love her husband dearly. Her husband was a shaman who passed away over thirty years ago. When recalling him in conversation she had to hold back the tears. They had eleven boys and two girls together. Mu estimated her extended family comprised as many as three hundred people, and others who knew her in the area supported this claim. Aside from her social position as a widowed grandmother of an extensive family, Mu was important to the local community as an expert in herbal medicine—the skill of being able to “divide the spirits of herbal medicine” (*faib dab tshuaj*; Lee and Tapp 2010:29) tends to be part of the shaman’s skill set but this is not always the case.

Despite the strong bond of love between Mu and her husband which developed after years of marriage, in the days leading up to her wedding, when she was only nine years old, Mu said she was extremely sad. In order to raise her spirits and help her overcome the challenges she would face when she first moved into her husband's home, her grandmother by birth taught her a song about marriage.⁹ Mu said this song made her feel strong when she sang it and she wished to sing it for me so that it might be preserved for her children and grandchildren to learn.

Tav ntuj tas tav laus nas es yos,

Now I am old and have lived a long life,

*Kuv leej txheeb nus ntshaw luag tus nyuj
pwm i rov kaus laus,*

Long ago when I was very young my dear
family needed a buffalo,

*Muab kuv qua plhuav lawm tej teb i kab kis
zaub nas,*

So I was used as dowry and had to travel far
to a place I had never been before,

*Kuv leej nam leej txiv yuav ntshaw luag tus
nyuj pwm i rov nkhaus raws,*

I married and my family received the animal
in payment, it was very hard for me,

*Muab kuv qua plhuav tej teb i kab kis taws
ntuj teb,*

I had to go so far into the mountains to
gather firewood in this new place,

*Kuv de zaub tsis muaj zaub daus kub khaws
taw tsis muaj es laus,*

Sometimes walking through the snow, with
it up to my calves,

*Kuv kuv tau daus xib daus npu yaj yaws txij
qhov raws,*

And I had to get food for the pig, even
though the ground was frosted over,

Nes leej nam nes yem yos,

It was really difficult for me,

*Kuv tsis tau kev tseb maj tag kuv tseb maj
tag txuj kev deb.*

I had to go far to plant hemp but the land
was not good and had many stones and
rocks.

*Hmoob txwg Vaj laus tau kuv lub kwm maj
tag kawm kuv lub kawm maj tag daus deb.*

My family sent me to marry very far away
and I carried a heavy bag on my back and
cried with sadness.

⁹ A video recording of this song can be accessed at: <https://vimeo.com/41665694>.

Excerpt from the lyrics of Mu Xiong's *nkauj ua nyab*.¹⁰

The lyrics of the version sung by Mu have clearly changed significantly from the version her grandmother taught her. While Mu described her grandmother's version as though it was a form of social education or therapy, the version she sang for me might be best described with the metaphor of music as memoir as she recounted the hardships she endured after her marriage including the difficulties she had in planting hemp, the birth of a child, the inability of her small child to provide assistance to her, and her difficulty with using the loom and its component parts. Unfortunately there is no recording of her grandmother's rendition to make more conclusive statements about the nature of musical change as it pertains to this song.

Chau Hang, a research assistant who helped me interview Mu Xiong, provided some interesting insights on the performance. Although Chau is not an expert in *kwv txhiaj*, her views are important to consider because they represent a large proportion of Hmong youth in Vietnam who are untrained in the art of the *kwv txhiaj*. Chau thought that I should not include this recording in my study because the form of the song "does not make sense". As is evident when comparing this song to the transcribed lyrics in the third case study, the form of the latter song more closely resembles binary form which is related to the fixed texts of popular songs in verse-chorus form.¹¹ Chau, who has lived in Vietnam her entire life, is explicitly aware of how Hmong culture has been portrayed as lacking in sophistication in the national media. In her opinion, the inclusion of this song would reinforce those stereotypes because she does not believe that the

¹⁰ I am sincerely grateful to Chau Hang, Choua Lee, Lang Yang, and Chi Yang who assisted with the transcription and translation of these song texts. Any remaining errors in the text are solely the responsibility of the author. As I chose to transcribe the songs using Hmong RPA instead of the Viet-Hmong script, I encountered many difficulties with the transcription and translation of the texts. Few Hmong in Vietnam are fluent in either script because neither is taught above an elementary level in formal education. For those wishing to access the complete songs please see the recordings.

¹¹ See Ó Briain (Forthcoming) for an examination of the impact of foreign-produced Hmong popular music recordings on Vietnamese-Hmong culture and society.

extemporized form of the song can compete with the fixed texts of popular songs in verse-chorus form which she regularly listens to. Instead, Chau thought I should use songs in verse-chorus form and which were sung by professional Hmong pop stars from other countries such as the recordings that were available on YouTube. Her wish for Hmong music to be represented by these songs suggests a change in aesthetic taste that relates to fixed versions of the text and also demonstrates her own emphasis on the song lyrics rather than the singer, the social context and the art of improvised wordplay.

By shifting the focus to the singer instead of the song, however, in much the same way as Warner (1994) does for the tellers of folktales, we can understand how *kwv txhiaj* songs are manipulated through time and space in a similar way to other folklore. Now, the “imperfections” can be reinterpreted as participatory discrepancies (Keil 1987) which highlight the personality behind each specific rendition of the song. At this particular time and place, Mu Xiong’s emphasis on recounting an episode from her life through song, thereby applying the metaphor of music as memoir, takes precedence over the desire to adhere closely to the traditional song form.

In his collection of fifty-five Hmong songs gathered in Laos and Thailand Jean Mottin includes five examples of *nkauj ua nyab* (1980:44-61). As long as these marriage practices continue to be an important part of Vietnamese-Hmong social structure, this song style will maintain its relevance to the community and therefore be sustained as a tradition. But as these cultural practices become less commonplace, as has begun to occur in certain parts of Vietnam, this song style will become obsolete and merely function as an historical record of past traditions.

This case study has demonstrated how Mu Xiong’s experience of music and of one particular song has changed through her life. From her description of the version taught to her by

her grandmother and her framing of the recorded rendition, the metaphors of music as social education or therapy could be interpreted for the former and music as memoir summarizes the essence of the latter version. For Mu Xiong, then, singing this song makes sense of her life cycle and in this way her musical activities can be understood as a fundamental aspect of her lived experience.

Case Study Two: The Horticultural Lover

This case study presents a song which is paired with two types of cycles: the agricultural cycle and the life cycle. The lives of most Vietnamese-Hmong are shaped by the agricultural calendar. In Sa Pa, wet-rice cultivation on terraced fields is and has been for a long time the primary means of subsistence for the Hmong (c.f. Savina 1924; Michaud 1999:3). Rice, corn, hemp, and other crops must be planted at the appropriate times of the season. Neighboring households help each other when planting so that each terraced field is planted at the most fertile time. The importance of this communal work and of knowledge about these practices has resulted in many musical activities relating to this way of life. The primary medium for sustaining knowledge about these local practices continues to be through folklore, including songs.

In June 2010, Chi Yang and I travelled to Sủ Pán village to visit the singer Mu Yang (born 1974). Mu was a neighbor and friend of Chi's whom I had met previously. When we arrived at her house that day the entire family was out planting rice in their fields. The older boys were guiding a water buffalo with a plough through the rice-paddies while the younger children were playing around and passively observing and learning from their elders. Mu's husband was sprinkling feed in the fields that had been ploughed while Mu was following behind and planting the rice stalks. Chi and I offered to help Mu planting the stalks while Mu entertained us by

singing a song about planting rice which Chi found humorous (see Figure 2).¹² I recorded five separate stanzas while in the fields with Mu. As with Mu Xiong, Mu Yang's performance was extemporized and included long breaks between each section while she coordinated the workers.

This performance exemplifies some of the fundamental characteristics of the *kwv txhiaj* song style. As is typical of the style, Mu begins with a sustained upper tonic (Figure 2). On this note she pronounces “tab” (“but”) which does not contribute to the meaning of the remainder of the phrase but is vital to the *kwv txhiaj* style because it forms a *txwm* with the second line, as the third and fourth lines also do. The transcription also illustrates how the tones of the Hmong language shape but do not necessarily fix the melodic line. Note how the “j” (high falling) and “m” (glottal restriction/low falling) tones appear when the melody is descending and the “v” (rising) tone tends to appear when the melody is rising. The “b” (high) tone tends to occur on higher notes while the “g” (breathy/mid-low) tone tends to occur in the middle of the scale. The “s” (low) tone also tends to appear around the middle of the scale in the transcribed section. While this last tone might seem out of place since one would not normally describe the E or G as “low”, in this context the absence of a low A on any strong half-beat of the melody, aside from the last note of the phrases each time, demonstrates how this bottom note is rarely used while the line is moving. The tendency to avoid consecutive repetition of the same melody notes and the use of a tetratonic scale challenge the singer to match the linguistic tones with the pitch tones while also singing lyrics which are comprehensible to the listener and fit into the *txwm* rhyming couplet structure.

¹² A video recording of this song can be accessed at: <https://vimeo.com/41693572>.

♩ = c. 132

(Tag es) Es ntu tag ncuav muag leej,

Tag es cag meb naam.

Noog es yuav coj tej yawb liv es seev ncoj,

Nrug qais yeev yuav coj.

Figure 2: A transcription of the first four phrases of Mu Yang's *nkauj cog nplej*.¹³

In an essay on the “mental world of the unenlightened during the Enlightenment” (1984:9), the cultural historian Richard Darnton argues that “the great collections of folktales made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries... provide a rare opportunity to make contact with the illiterate masses who have disappeared into the past without leaving a trace” (ibid.:17-18). The fixity of the written collections he analyses belies the diversity of versions that would likely have been found within any one community or even told by one individual, as demonstrated in the previous case study. Nevertheless, in showing how the worldviews of the peasants who told these tales were embedded in the stories themselves, Darnton is able to

¹³ This transcription is approximately one semitone higher than the actual pitch which Mu sings at in order to avoid the use of excessive accidentals.

reconstruct their world, albeit fragmentarily. This approach takes the metaphor of fairy tale as social behavior for granted.

Where the metaphor of singing as social behavior is most prevalent, Hmong songs can similarly be used as a means of understanding Hmong worldviews. On its most basic level, the text of this song transmits knowledge about the importance of planting at the right time so that the crops will yield a good harvest: “Oh my darling, we are planting late in the season, but the seeds should grow strong anyway.” At this level of understanding, the song could also be categorized as a work song, functioning “as an extension of our bodies doing things in the world around us” (Gioia 2006:38). The steady pulse of the song accompanies the actions of the planters as one by one, tens of thousands of rice shoots are carefully placed in the muddy water of the rice-paddies.

One limitation of Darnton’s textual analysis is its lack of contextual details relating to the performance of the fairy tales. This is where the metaphors are generated and manipulated strategically by the skilled performer. A closer analysis of Mu Yang’s performance reveals layers of linguistic meaning which suggest that she is applying multiple metaphors in the one performance. Through wordplay she uses agricultural production as a metaphor for sexual reproduction. For example, the word “coj” has multiple meanings in the Hmong language such as to deliver, plant or take, or to suggest a change or transition, while it also forms part of the compound word “coj khaub ncaws” (“to menstruate”). In her singing, Mu takes advantage of the ambiguity of this and other words to communicate multiple linguistic meanings; in particular, the fertile ground could be interpreted as a fertile womb and the seeds or grain could also be referring to a man’s semen. Hence, Chi’s laughter while Mu was singing.

This alternative demonstrates how Mu Yang has maximised the impact of her performance through her capacity to communicate on multiple plains. For the location dimension of his model, Rice suggests the following nodes: individual, subcultural, local, regional, national, areal, diasporic, global, and virtual (2003:161). Primarily, these nodes relate to how individuals experience music socially rather than simply delineating the geographic locale in which those experiences took place. An alternative set of nodes are suggested by Mu Yang's singing which highlight the social aspect of the location dimension: communication with her children, with her fellow adults and, more intimately, with her husband. These nodes illustrate how multiple overlapping metaphors are being deployed in the same performance. With her children, the song text communicates knowledge about planting. For them, the metaphors of singing as education, as knowledge transfer, and as work come to the fore. Her performance functions largely as entertainment and as an accompaniment to work for the older children and adults present. The admiration shown for her by those listeners, as evidenced by their tacit observation and occasional laughter, also helps position Mu socially as a respected adult in the community. Finally, with her husband, the song could also be considered as flirtation or foreplay.¹⁴

The impact of Mu Yang's performance could be measured by the degree of success in her communication of these metaphors (music as education, knowledge transfer, social behavior, work, entertainment or foreplay) to their intended audience. The hierarchy of these metaphors must be in perpetual negotiation by the performer according to the shifting time and place nodes. Ultimately, the impact depends on how well the performer understands and responds to these changing nodes. These layered metaphors illustrate the limitations of applying definitive song

¹⁴ This is by no means a comprehensive list and only represents those metaphors that were most evident during the performance I observed. Rice's metaphor of music as social behaviour appears to dominate this list. Considering my position as outside observer, Mu might also have preferred to think of her performance as a representation of her family and of her love for her husband.

categories to *kwv txhiaj*. While this song is ostensibly about planting, it might also be called a love song or a work song, among other themes, depending on the interpretation of the listener.

This case study has illustrated some of the basic characteristics of the *kwv txhiaj* style and demonstrated how layers of ambiguous meaning in the lyrics can permit the application of multiple musical metaphors in one seemingly uncomplicated performance of a song. Mu Yang's ability as a singer provides a certain degree of social status through her ability to garner the tacit positive attention of multiple social groups simultaneously. Her singing motivates those around her to assist with planting rice through her ability to communicate on various levels to a diverse group of family and friends. In doing so, she forms a working community through song.

Case Study Three: The Cultural Ambassador

While the first two case studies presented more typical types of *kwv txhiaj*, this case study considers a song that is associated with a comparatively new type of activity for many Vietnamese-Hmong people, going to school. This case demonstrates how *kwv txhiaj* songs can adapt to new forms of behavior and new activities. Furthermore, it shows how the meaning of a the song can change for the singer as her performance locale shifts from local to regional, national, global, and virtual.

I was introduced to Sung Thao through her son, Sai Yang. Unusually for a Hmong man, Sai studied for a university degree in Hanoi. He was teaching the basics of Hmong traditional music to friends of mine at the National Academy of Music when I met him. When I first visited their house on the outskirts of Sa Pa town, Sung's husband Ga Yang did most of the talking. Despite developing a close friendship with her son and making regular visits to their house, this social dynamic continued throughout my fieldwork; as with many other Asian societies, patriarchy is the dominant social system for the Vietnamese-Hmong. In Sung's house this

hierarchy was exaggerated by Ga's professional position as director of the Sa Pa Cultural Center (*Phó Giám đốc Trung tâm Văn hoá Sa Pa*). Led by Ga, their family frequently took part in cultural performances locally in Sa Pa, occasionally in the major urban centers of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and once in southern China.¹⁵ When Sung was not working as a cultural ambassador, she sold textiles in the local market. For this work she had to be proficient in both the Vietnamese and Hmong languages. However, in a documentary film in which Sung sings two songs and introduces one (*Nghệ Nhân Giàng Seo Gà: Phim Thuộc Dự Án Suu Tâm, Bảo Tồn, Âm Nhạc Dân Gian Của Gia Đình Nghệ Nhân Giàng Seo Gà, Dân Tộc Mông, Sa Pa, Lào Cai* [*The Artist Giang Seo Ga: A Film to Collect and Preserve the Folk Music of the Artist Ga Yang and his Family, in Sa Pa, Lao Cai*] 2004), she speaks in Hmong and her husband translates into Vietnamese. A similar performance of the patriarchal social structure was enacted when I requested to meet Sung for a formal interview and to record her singing.

By January 2011 I had given up trying to get to know Sung informally because the ingrained social structure made this too challenging. My preference was to converse with her in her home but Sai told me I had to request a formal interview via her husband. Ga invited me to his office in the Cultural Center to talk with her. Ironically, the building could not have been more culturally sterile. In his office, the walls were painted plain cream with nothing hanging on them except moisture-damaged paint. An old computer on a desk in the corner was wrapped in plastic to avoid a similar fate. I sat chatting with Sung in Vietnamese while we waited for Ga to join us. As soon as he sat down she stopped speaking directly to me. Instead, she responded to my questions in Hmong and Ga translated into Vietnamese. When I requested it, Sung chose to sing a song which Ga translated as *bài đi học* (going to school song).¹⁶ Her rendition was

¹⁵ As I departed the field they were preparing for another international performance tour to Laos.

¹⁶ An audio recording of this song can be accessed at: <http://soundcloud.com/lonan-2/nkauj-kawm-ntawv>.

tempered and lacking in enthusiasm compared to other singers I had heard: the tempo was slower, the volume was lower and the song was shorter than any other I recorded. As is evident from the lyrics of this song, the theme and content also contrasted with the majority of songs I had recorded. This made me consider why she had chosen this particular song.

Yuav am ntuj, teb ncuu nes kwv tij, kwv viv luag niam, has am.

Hey everybody, brothers and sisters, family and friends, listen to this.

Yuav ca teb, li hnov phau ntawv xwb leej, tsaab zov qha peb li leej, has am.

This thing, this special book, we have to protect it and keep it dry, it will help us.

Peb yuav tsaws daim kev ntawv xws leej, tsaab rov rom ntej, es peb li rov ua tau lawv lub zoo neej, has am, yuav ca ntaj, teb li hnov phau ntawv xws leej, tsaab rov qha peb li tseeb.

We must carry this special book by our side, study diligently and learn from it, and then we will have a better life.

Peb yuav raws nraim kev ntawv xws leej, tsaab rov tom qaab peb li txoj, tau hlawv peb tej, caag kuv txiv keeb.

We will follow the path of these words carefully, or we won't improve our situation, we will not burn our land in the old way.

Yuav ca ntaaj, neeg xeev kuas tsheej, mus tau sawv es,

Hey everybody, to have a better life, to improve our situation,

Peb yuav kawm tau taab meem, tsaab es xws ntawv e.

We have to study, keep this book close and safe, and we will have a better life.

Yuav ca ntaaj, neeg xeev kuas tsheej, mus tau nce es,

Hey everybody, to have a better life, to improve our situation,

Peb yuav kawm tau zoo leej, tsaab kwm ntawv npe nes kwv tij, kws li los nej, has am.

We have to study and be honest good people, keep this book close and safe, and we will have a better life.

The complete lyrics of Sung's *nkauj kawm ntawv*.

According to Ga, this was one of the first songs which Sung learned. During my fieldwork she was in her early fifties and all of her children had reached adulthood, so it was unlikely that she had taught this song to any of them recently. Sai's wife had had their first baby

a few months previously and this might have been on her mind. The location dimension, however, suggests a more dominant metaphor. The Cultural Center was not only her husband's place of work but also the space where ethnographic data on Hmong cultural practices were collated, regulated, and re-presented nationally. Due to her work as a cultural ambassador for the Hmong,¹⁷ Sung would have been aware that any recording might be disseminated in the regional, national, global and virtual spheres. In that space and time, Sung's roles as representative of her husband and family and, perhaps more prominently, of the Hmong people came to the fore. This metaphor of music as group identity supplanted the metaphors of music as social behavior or education which is implied by the song lyrics.

Sung's choice of this song is related to how the Hmong are represented in the national media. Ethnic minority children in Vietnam from low-income families (this includes most Hmong children) are exempt from paying fees and receive financial aid and free school supplies to encourage their attendance at school (Truong 2009:10). Despite this, the Hmong continue to have disproportionately low attendance numbers and this has become a point of contention between them and the Viet majority.¹⁸ The benefits of school attendance to the agricultural lives which most Hmong live are not immediately apparent. Furthermore, teaching is predominantly done through the Vietnamese language; in 2008, for example, there were reportedly only two teachers of the Hmong language working in Lào Cai province (Truong 2009:13).¹⁹ Sung's choice of this song, therefore, can be interpreted as reflecting her sensitivity to these issues and her desire to change the national image of the Hmong with her cultural representations.

¹⁷ This is an informal title which I have attributed to her, Ga and Sai.

¹⁸ A number of Viet people complained to me that the Hmong were lazy and that if their own children were given the same scholarships they would be much more diligent in attending school.

¹⁹ To contextualise this statement, there were 146,147 Hmong people living in Lào Cai province in 2009 (http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=515&idmid=5&ItemID=10799, accessed 5 July 2011).

On a local level, Sung is encouraging Hmong participation in formal education; on a regional and national level, Sung is using her position as a cultural representative to portray the Hmong as a studious people who are using the education subsidies provided by the state to ethnic minority groups in a positive way. Finally, on the global and virtual levels, which are introduced by the presence of the researcher and the recording device, Sung ensures that she sings a song which perfectly fits the couplet style of *txwm kwv txhiaj*. This suggests her addition of the metaphor of music as art. This case demonstrates how movement along the location access of Rice's model can drastically alter the intentions of and the metaphors which are applied by a singer or musician.

Conclusion: Singing as Social Life

In *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (2008), Thomas Turino argues that “musical participation and experience are valuable for the processes of personal and social integration that make us whole” (ibid.:1). Similarly, with the aid of Rice's model, I have demonstrated how the metaphor of singing as social behavior or social life is evident in all three of these case studies of the *kwv txhiaj* performances. Nevertheless, the prevalence of this metaphor underemphasizes the role of *kwv txhiaj* in positioning individuals in (or outside of) other types of social groups. In order to clarify the distinction between the various contexts of the activities more detailed, case-specific metaphors had to be generated. These included music as education, entertainment, foreplay, knowledge transfer, social behavior, therapy, and work.

In addition to these metaphors, each of the studies highlighted particular traits of the perpetually evolving *kwv txhiaj* style in Vietnam. To begin with, Mu Xiong's performance suggested that the lyrics of Vietnamese-Hmong *kwv txhiaj* might be best understood as fluctuating rather than fixed texts. Songs are manipulated by performers in reaction to their

social circumstances. In this way “singing is a site for the renegotiation of identities” (Sugarman 1997:24). Analyzing Mu Yang’s performance with Rice’s model demonstrated that the skill of a performer depends on their successful manipulation of musical metaphors according to the time and place nodes which the singer was attempting to communicate across. Mu Yang’s case also illustrated the limitations of applying song categories to *kwv txhiaj* through her use of multiple overlapping themes. Finally, Sung Thao’s school song represented a comparatively new version of *kwv txhiaj* where the use of a prescribed text limited the role of improvisation in her performance. Her song might be representative of a future path for Hmong singing in Vietnam, whereby written or at least standardized texts might become the norm, as appears to be occurring with Hmong in other countries.

For the Vietnamese-Hmong, the practice of singing is not only an “emblem of social identity” (Feld 1984:405); in performance it articulates and has the capacity to manipulate social identities. This article has illustrated how various forms of identity including gender, marital status, level of education, ethnicity, and age are communicated through the *kwv txhiaj* style of singing. This vibrant cultural practice is used as a medium for social interaction in rural Hmong communities of northern Vietnam by communicating and constructing ideas about their social world. *Kwv txhiaj* maintains its relevance (and therefore continues to be a sustainable traditional musical practice) to the Vietnamese-Hmong people through its ability to help them make sense of their daily lives.

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