

Tebchaws: A Theory of Magnetic Media and Hmong Diasporic Homeland

By

Mitch Ogden

Hmong Studies Journal

Volume 16, 25 Pages

Abstract

This article theorizes forms of magnetic media—audio and video recordings—as a metaphor for diasporic memory. It then posits three versions of Hmong diasporic homeland imagination from the most immediate (a return to Laos), to ancestral China, and finally to an imagined utopic homeland theorized as *tebchaws* (DAY-char)—a term connoting place, land, and nation at once. *Tebchaws* becomes a critical piece of terminology that contributes to a theorization of Hmong diasporic homeland imagination. Examples of archival audio and video recordings are interpreted as manifestations of *tebchaws*, which draws heavily upon ecological sonic and visual images.

Keywords: diaspora, homeland, magnetic media, audio, video

Introduction: Magnetic Diaspora

In the bottom drawer of a steel cabinet in the audio/visual room of the Hmong Archives¹, a colorful cluster of audio cassettes rests. Neatly ordered in plastic cases, many of the tapes appear worn and aged. Their vintage brand labels evoke an immediate nostalgia to an era when cassette tapes were the state-of-the-art for home and professional recording. A Certron cassette displays its signature cascade of four crisp, saffron ribbons spilling precisely, evenly down the clean white front. A turquoise Kmart label is faded, dirty, and worn; one faint Hmong name—Blong Thao—is handwritten and struck through with pink ink. Another name—Bliatong Vang—is written in black ballpoint on both sides. The labels on some tapes are bright, clean, and unmarked while other tapes bear no labels at all. These are, despite their unlikely appearance, letters sent from Laos and Thailand—recorded greetings sent from villages and refugee camps to resettled and relocated family and friends in the West.

Creating these audio epistles was a ubiquitous practice for decades in the Hmong diaspora, a sonic exchange of greetings and gossip that sustained relationships at a distance—before the advent of internet telephony and cell phone networks. And yet the cassettes here are only half of the exchange. The messages that originated in the United States and the West are

¹ The Hmong Archives holds an impressive collection of Hmong-related materials. I thank the board and volunteers not only for their generous help, but for their passion and dedication that sustains the organization and its collection. At the time of this research, Hmong Archives was co-located with the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University, St. Paul. Information on their collection and current location is available at www.hmongarchives.org.

conspicuously absent from this archive, as well as most personal collections. But those messages aren't missing, technically speaking. In fact, they are right in the same drawer on the very same cassette tapes. They are present as trace magnetic residuals, one layer below the audible recorded messages. Scarcity of resources in the refugee camps required reusing cassette tapes, recording over the received message in order to reply. Thus, there is virtually no record of what Hmong in the West said to their relations in Southeast Asia. All that remains is a faint magnetic residue: a ghostly murmur in a quiet moment, static, and noise—the gradual degradation of the tape's magnetic integrity. This absent presence of one half of the diasporic conversation represents an irretrievable, yet ever present, component of the archive, and it inverts the tendency to see more artifacts from—and hence greater representation of—the “developed” nodes (e.g. American cities) over and above the “developing” ones (e.g. Thai refugee camps). These audio cassette letters are a rich archive of diasporic history and culture.

Lining the walls of this same audio/visual room are tall shelves stacked with another magnetic medium of the diaspora. Scores of VHS videocassettes are sorted by genre and filming location: music videos produced in Vietnam, dramas filmed in Thailand, and documentary footage shot in China. Although there are a few tapes from mainstream outlets—e.g. public television stations, the History Channel, and independent non-Hmong documentary filmmakers—nearly all of the tapes originate from Hmong producers and production studios across the United States that are part of a thriving entrepreneurial niche industry of Hmong video. And despite the impressive size of this particular archive collection, it is remarkably scant when compared to the vast volumes of Hmong video that have been produced and distributed over two decades². These polyester ribbons—wider than their audio counterparts and capable of encoding both sight and sound—are magnetically marked with images of everyday practices, cultural sites, rituals, and narratives from throughout the diaspora, conveying to diasporic audiences a replication of audio and visual sensations that draws them—magnetically—to the energy of diasporic community. This energy may be both collective and disruptive. That is, the magnetically transmitted sounds and/or images may draw diasporics together through the sharing of media experience, or may reinforce the profound distances—in time, space, and circumstance—that separate them. Diasporic media production works precisely in a magnetic way: it is both attractive and repellant.

The push-pull potential of magnetic force operates upon the thousands of meters of polyester ribbon spooled within these plastic cassettes just as it does upon diasporics spread across as many miles. The technology of these magnetic media makes use of the divalent power of magnetism to record and preserve as well as to erase and obscure. Recording and erasure are central to the utility of our magnetic media as “memory” or “memory storage.” And memory in the context of diaspora follows the metaphors of memory in magnetic media. Images and sounds—the sensory substance of memory—are tenuously and imperfectly converted from actuality to virtuality. They are put down upon fragile and thin surfaces that are susceptible to stretching, warping, twisting, or rupture—each a distortion or disruption of memory. Memory can also be marred—or utterly obliterated—by the presence of a powerful (magnetic) force—some trauma or cataclysmic turn of events. Time and temperature may degrade diasporic memory just as they degrade magnetic media. Improperly stored or infrequently accessed, the

² Since Tou Kong Lee's first narrative Hmong film in 1992, a very active community of Hmong filmmakers videographers has created a large library of films. See Baird (2014) and Schein (2004) for engaging studies of the histories and practices of the Hmong video production industry.

messages may be found incomplete or unintelligible when replayed. Or worse, an aged tape may find itself tangled and twisted by the very mechanisms and magnetic heads used for playback—stretched, snarled, and eventually severed. The rich content of the diaspora—whether put down in human memory or on cassette tape—is fragile while it is durable, corruptible while it is stable.

Furthermore, the recording and playback of magnetic media depend upon an array of equipment that is external to the cassettes themselves. The quality and engineering of a microphone and a cassette deck or a camera and its lens have tremendous bearing on the accuracy of the recording, just as memory's dependence on finite and sometimes unreliable sensors and processors—our human wiring—fundamentally limits and alters the condition of our stored memories. Add to this the art and artifice of editing and sound/image engineering—the metaphorical stand-ins for the manipulation and malleability of human memory³—and you have an idiosyncratic and unreliable medium (and metaphor) for memory that well suits the sometimes unsettled and uncertain status of diasporic community and culture.

This is a study in metaphors. Cassette tapes—both audio and video—are ubiquitous (though now outmoded) carriers of aural and visual messages throughout the Hmong diaspora that contribute to the cultural shape of its diasporic communities. Memories and messages transmitted via magnetic media are both straightforward interpersonal communications as well as symbolic renderings of diasporic space. These sonic and visual symbols are the objects of interpretation in this article, found in the penultimate section (*Magnetic Media: Cultural Productions of Tebchaws*) highlighting magnetic media examples. These symbols, reiterated by a variety of diasporic cultural producers and replayed time and again, are persistent and durable.. And yet they are at the same time ethereal and fragile. In the post-reel-to-reel decades of the latter third of the twentieth century, the cassette itself—a slim and durable container—at once obscures and protects the delicate tape within: that long polyester ribbon with a carbon coating. That scant, infinitesimally thin coating is actually the essential substance for the transference of the signal, the magnetic message. We forget, because we cannot clearly see the process, that the tape is constantly winding and unwinding from spool to spool when it is played. We forget how long—and how fragile—the tape actually is until we see the abandoned audio cassette crushed in the street with its thin brown tape streaming out, strewn and tangled about. Thus, the figure of the cassette—like the cultural figure of the refugee—is a study of both durability and fragility. Both cassette and refugee are imbued with memories and cultural messages recorded on a tapes thin magnetic substrate or a refugee's consciousness. Memories and messages thus stored can both endure and fade.⁴

Furthermore, as a bygone medium, cassette tapes are easily ignored—even spurned—by would be listeners, especially younger generations to whom tapes appear clunky and low-tech.

³ Cognitive psychologists have studied for decades phenomena of false memory—misremembering events or remembering events that never occurred. The terms “reproductive” and “reconstructive” memory distinguish accurate, actual memory from inaccurate or invented memory (respectively). For a foundational study see Bartlett, F.C.(1932). For an accessible conceptual introduction, see Gardiner and Java (1993).

⁴ Garde-Hansen (2011) explores the complexities of memory vis-à-vis media, particularly institutional and mass media. Hirsh & Smith (2002) suggest a feminist approach that challenges the hegemony of institutionalized media practices to consider cultural memory from less institutional media production—like the personal and private magnetic media artifacts considered in this article. Discussions of media and (national) identity formation trace back to Anderson's (1991) seminal argument of the role of print media in the formulation of the contemporary nation state.

The content on these cassettes, no matter how important or poignant and no matter how reliably preserved, risks obsolescence and expiration if there is no audience to hear and see it replayed. Similarly, Hmong refugees are easily seen as relics of a bygone era—cultural leftovers from the 1970s and 80s. If subsequent generations in refugee communities and society at large disregard the refugee, their experiences, memories, and wisdom can be lost. Neither a cassette's magnetic resilience or a refugee's survival can guarantee meaningful transmission of a message.⁵

What has been spoken in these audio cassette letters between separated family members and what has been videographically captured on a variety of video cassettes are manifestations of experience and consciousness through the Hmong diaspora. Just as the tape plays by winding and weaving through the playback heads of a cassette player, in the realm of diasporic memory and experience, this polyester ribbon weaves itself through the narratives and experiences of resettlement and replacement. It is long; demands attentive care, winding, and preservation; and requires particular technology and equipment to access it. Tracing this weaving through the lives and experiences of diasporics requires care and attention as well. The metaphorical equipment necessary to access its messages consists of historical context together with everyday community practices⁶. As these vital cultural texts, clinging to their magnetic media, are carefully accessed and unwound, the character and composition of Hmong diasporic refugee identity and experience is constructed. Poignant features are evidenced as diasporics reveal, record, and remember particular living moments—ones that may be forgotten or misremembered in human memory.

Recall the Memorex ad campaign, “It is live, or is it Memorex?” which boasted that superior magnetic technology could render the recording indistinguishable from the original event.⁷ To claim that the recording is indistinguishable from—and therefore equal to—the real thing devalues the significance of the lived experience as well as the value of mediated experience. Simply put, sitting on a couch—separated from your brother or mother by an ocean and more than 10,000 miles—and hearing his or her voice asynchronously on a tape recorder can be a profound emotional, if not spiritual, experience. It is also important to consider that the value of replay—the ability to listen and to see again and again on demand—should not be taken for granted. Some moments are better forgotten while others are better as they are *remembered*, rather than as they are *recorded*. As slippery as cultural events and messages are, they are a practice of interpretation and subject to variability despite the mechanical, magnetic, or digital accuracy of their capture.

The magnetic media examples considered here are generally from the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s—the decades corresponding to the highly active migratory periods of the post-1975 Hmong diaspora. In consideration of the significance of magnetic media in diaspora, it is important to acknowledge the unprecedented accessibility of recording technology through this era. Magnetic tape recorders were, in their heyday, available even within the spaces of the

⁵ The recent debate surrounding Syrian refugee resettlement has thrust the figure of the refugee back into prominence. The extent to which contemporary policies and cultural attitudes are informed by a study of previous refugee migrations remains to be seen.

⁶ In this way, this study follows de Certeau (1984) in a pursuit to understand broad historical narratives through the everyday practices of community members. The seemingly mundane everyday practices of Hmong diasporics—with or without institutional authority or social privilege—provide critical insights into history and culture.

⁷ For a stimulating examination of the complexities of experience and (musical) recording, which engages Memorex's ad campaign, see Mowitt (1987).

poorest villages and refugee camps. Throughout the 1990s, the VHS format made magnetic video recording much more accessible. These recording media afforded opportunities for cultural agency—the ability to create, collect, and share the sounds and images of your experience. Access to relatively inexpensive recording technologies—audio and video tape recorders—was coincident with the political, economic, and militaristic exigencies of the Vietnam War era. In context of the stress of displacement and separation and the uncertainties of resettlement, the agency afforded by recording technologies appears to have been very attractive, establishing media production as a hallmark of the post-1975 Hmong diaspora as audio and video production continues to thrive in active Hmong media markets.

Although magnetic recording dominated media production and reproduction during a critical portion of the history of the Hmong diaspora, at present it is an outdated and largely obsolete technology. The development of a variety of media technologies is described through the metaphor of *generations* (e.g. 3G and 4G networks, where the *g* stands for generation). The magnetic cassette supplanted earlier technologies—namely the physical (grooves of a phonograph and a vibrating needle) and the chemical (wet development for still and motion picture film)—and has been supplanted once (by the optical—laser-read compact disc) and yet again (by the digital—binary media formats) in the incessant march of the generations of recording technology. This sequence of innovation and obsolescence has given each societal generation its own medium and has created a demand for both nostalgic collection (the hipster resurgence of vinyl record collecting) and progressive abandonment (the expensive impulse to “upgrade” your movie collection from one format to the next). Contemporary digital formats are considered by some to be more stable, reliable, and convenient than earlier technologies—including old school magnetic tapes. But there is a competing attraction to older formats, claiming greater authenticity or fidelity for the aural and visual messages. This media cycle is mirrored by the tensions of diasporic generations (especially the 1.5 Generation) to be both repelled and attracted to the previous visions of a diasporic homeland. Just as our media landscape provides opportunities to be loyal to various formats, the Hmong diasporic experience offers a range of diasporic identities to embrace.

These diasporic identities are configured as attachments to a generational series of diasporic homelands described in the next section. This article contemplates magnetic media as both a metaphor and medium for diasporic memory and exchange as well as a medium through which a new conception of diasporic homeland can be imagined. Thus the magnetic audio and video texts of my archive are situated within a distinct diasporic moment, one that continues to advance but is in process of being surpassed by the new(er) media moment in which access and ownership are always at issue. We will see in the magnetic media texts examined, therefore, that imaginations of diasporic homeland have a relationship to previous ones but have also progressed beyond them—subject to the familiar push/pull of the magnetic diaspora and evidence of the generational versioning of diasporic homeland.

Versions of Diasporic Homeland

Stuart Hall (1990) asserts the necessity of a progressive view of diaspora and diasporic identity: “The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and

difference” (p. 235, emphasis in original). Following Hall, we must be careful in appreciating that what is casually referred to as the “Hmong diaspora” is not a single, monolithic movement, but a longer, larger history of multiple diasporic migrations. Hein (2013) describes a “double diaspora” with its dual locations of Hmong origin (Laos and China). And Tapp (2010) argues for a trebled diaspora defined by a sense of loss through a series of departures from China, Laos, and Asia (p. 102). Casual and popular references to “Hmong diaspora” usually refer, rather imprecisely, to the most recent diasporic moment that began around the end of the Vietnam War era in 1975. Neglecting previous migrations disregards the distinctness of their attendant manifestations of diasporic consciousness, each with different trajectories for an imagined homeland. And each diasporic moment, with its consciousness and imagined homeland, has important influence on the contemporary diasporic moment, which is a continuation and confabulation of the whole diasporic history. Consideration of this history with an eye towards theorizing and understanding diasporic consciousness and community necessitates distinguishing two important diasporic moments, which I will call the Qing-era diaspora and the post-1975 diaspora. Distinguishing these two diasporas asserts a necessary reminder that the post-1975 diaspora is part of a longer diasporic historical narrative, and that Hmong in diaspora (that is, the diaspora in the largest historical sense which includes nodes throughout China, Southeast Asia, and the West) are far more fragmentary, diverse, and heterogeneous than a consideration of the narrower post-1975 diaspora usually suggests⁸. Thus, this dual diasporic framework promotes an improved conceptualization of diaspora that resists essentialism and is more harmonious with contemporary theories of diaspora⁹. The broadening of “Hmong diaspora” also gives greater recognition to extended histories of neo/post/colonial activity beyond that of the Vietnam War that has shaped the several conceptions of Hmong diasporic homeland I consider here.

Throughout the Qing-era diaspora, Hmong were situated within and implicated in the astoundingly complex political network that stretched across Southeast Asia for more than a century and a half¹⁰. Because the post-1975 diaspora is fundamentally different and politically more narrow than the Qing-era diaspora, the orientation of homeland imagination will naturally be different between these two distinct diasporas. Furthermore, the Qing-era diaspora was more gradual than the post-1975 diaspora, which occurred abruptly within a single generation, with

⁸ I will follow my own convention of referring to the “Hmong diaspora” when I mean the broadest diasporic history and the general phenomenon of diasporic resettlement. I will specify a particular diasporic moment (e.g. the Qing era or post-1975 diasporas) when particularity is required. However, “Hmong diaspora” should not be read as an assertion of monolithic homogeneity or global ethnic unity through a longer history, the factions and fragments being vital to a proper understanding of diaspora generally—and to the Hmong diaspora specifically.

⁹ In addition to Hall’s aforementioned insistence of hybridity and difference, Edwards (2001) introduces *décalage*—a gap or difference in time or space—as a conceptual framework for diaspora that resists rigid notions of geography and strictly linear migrations. Edwards connects *décalage* to Hall’s seminal notion of articulation—that simultaneous site of separation and linkage, like an elbow joint. That anatomical paradox is precisely what enables fluidity, flexibility, adaptability, and diversity in movement: “For, paradoxically, it is exactly such a haunting gap or discrepancy that allows the African diaspora to ‘step’ and ‘move’ in various articulations. Articulation is always a strange and ambivalent gesture, because, finally, in the body it is *only* difference—the separation between bones or members—that allows movement.” (p. 33, emphasis in original).

¹⁰ Three fierce wars between 1735 and 1873 pitted the Miao (and Hmong) against the military of the Qing Dynasty (Y. Xiong), driving communities to leave the southern provinces of China and beginning to settle in the regions of present-day Vietnam and Laos. Entanglements with French colonials as they started to arrive around 1802 further diversified the diasporic community in SE Asia. The end of the Qing-era diaspora is debatable. It may be convenient to close that period with the creation of French Indochina in 1887, which locked in some territorial boundaries and slowed the open migration in the region. But some may prefer to leave the period open until the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu.

most of the migration actually occurring within the space of a single decade. Though war, threats against safety, and the maintenance of autonomy against outside forces were significant factors in both diasporas, the political complexity of the wars and the temporal profile of the exodus were quite different. These distinctions are useful as we examine the contours of shifting versions of Hmong diasporic homeland imagination. Although much of my analysis of homeland pertains to the post-1975 diaspora in particular, it is nevertheless colored and influenced by a longer diasporic history.

Contemporary scholars of diaspora studies, in many important and useful ways, have pushed back the literalism that tends to characterize diasporas and the positioning of diasporics within their communities. It is accepted, for instance, that a desire for or agitation towards a literal, physical, and (often) political return to the point of diasporic origin—the “mythic” homeland—is not requisite¹¹. In fact, the unequivocal existence of a literal homeland in all diasporic communities has been questioned (Desai, 2004). Thus, while early theorizations of diaspora depend upon a notion of homeland return, such a return—and such a homeland—has subsequently been problematized and expanded to allow for continually evolving and emerging cultural practices and social reckonings of diasporic belonging and cultural identity¹². Following these trends, this project considers three versions of homeland—tracing through the Laos and China towards a new symbolic, metaphorical, and utopic homeland.

Homeland 1.0: Laos

As theorizations of diaspora continue to usefully expand and provocatively reframe the diasporic phenomenon, it is important to acknowledge the persistent existence and political potency of this literal, geopolitical homeland model of diaspora. In many cases, the longing for a literal return to a homeland continues to carry cultural currency in grounded reality of the community. Such is the case for the Hmong diaspora.

Immediately after the exodus began in 1975, Laos was naturally the imagined and anticipated homeland for most of the departing Hmong. The recently expelled civilians retained their fondness for the lush mountains and the relative peace and autonomy afforded by their remoteness. Military leaders were still young and committed enough to agitate and recruit resistance fighters—and to cross back over the border to continue the fighting themselves. Two major bodies of Hmong resistance fighters were immediately organized and actively conducting campaigns in Laos after the fall of Vientiane in 1975, continuing the existing tactical operations and devising new strategies against the Pathet Lao. The prominent leaders of the post-1975 resistance were high ranking officials under Vang Pao. From Thai villages and the Thai refugee camps, recruits were prepared and staged to cross back over into Laos to accomplish tactical missions. The refugee camps became hubs of organization and resource gathering. The resistance became an increasingly transnational effort, not only crossing the Lao/Thai border—with cooperation from Thai border patrols (Lee, 2007a)—but also receiving financial and tactical

¹¹ Safran influentially established political movement towards a literal, geographical homeland as one of the six qualifications of a diaspora (1991). Diaspora scholars have consistently resisted this requirement. See Tölöyan (1996) and D. Boyarin and J. Boyarin (1993).

¹² Later diaspora scholars have followed the work of Tölöyan (1996) and D. Boyarin and J. Boyarin (1993) to develop room for culturally imagined return to homelands. See Desai’s arguments against homeland literalism throughout *Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (2004). Schein (2004) argues for homeland imaginary through Hmong videos.

support from American Hmong and other Hmong resettled in the West, coordinated largely by Vang Pao after his own relocation to the United States. American veterans of the Vietnam War are purported to have lent support to their former comrades at times. Many suspect that support may also have continued to flow from the US government, perhaps through CIA accounts that were managed by some of the same operatives and officials who were originally involved in the Secret War.

An American promise of an autonomous homeland for the Hmong in Laos has achieved the status of potent cultural myth, informing and influencing diasporic Hmong politics in profound ways. The promise CIA operative “Colonel Billy” Lair allegedly made around 1959 when he recruited Vang Pao to gather a guerilla force for Operation Momentum¹³ is popularly referenced in various forms as a validation of this homeland expectation. As sometimes reported, this purported promise also included provisions for the creation of an autonomous Hmong state within the borders of Laos once the threat of Communism in the region had been obliterated. The alleged agreement included a guarantee that America would take care of the Hmong for their service and sacrifice, no matter the outcome of the so-called Secret War. Hmong veterans and elders often languish in the shadow of an undocumented promise with unfulfilled terms.

The June 2007 arrest of General Vang Pao—that central figure of the Secret War and sometimes controversial icon throughout the Hmong diaspora—on charges of plotting to overthrow the Communist government of Laos represents a high profile manifestation of one version of the Hmong diasporic homeland imagination through right-wing revolution and resistance¹⁴. Those anti-Communist Hmong who have remained in Laos since the American withdrawal have been omnipresent in the consciousness of the Hmong community and have experienced increased coverage by journalistic media and human rights organizations¹⁵. The purported hope of these resistance fighters is a free and democratic Laos and the return of exiled Hmong from the post-1975 diaspora. As Lao security forces continue to crack down on the roving pockets of beleaguered Hmong “freedom fighters,” hope for such a triumph wanes. Regardless of the legitimacy of the allegations against Vang Pao, which were dropped in 2009, the specter of the alleged plot merits consideration. This hope for the return of Hmong to Laos or Southeast Asia for the establishment of a Hmong homeland in the region remains of vital importance to many members of the Hmong community. Rumors of weapons and mercenaries as well as an well-engineered attack strategy, on the scale that Vang Pao was charged with orchestrating, could certainly sustain hope for what had become an increasingly desperate cause. Such an elaborate and expensive plot to sustain the vision of return—whether it was merely political show or earnest military machinations—is an assertion of the centrality and potency of this particular version of homeland imagining.

¹³ See Jane Hamilton-Merritt (p. 92). Keith Quincy explains that Lair drew up a document in response to the demands of Hmong elders. Although that document only vouched for the delivery of arms and ammunition, most Hmong it was an authorized treaty and have held fast to a belief in this promise (p. 179). According to Quincy, Roger Warner claims that Lair, as well as Edgar Buell (an American farmer with an informal relationship to the CIA in Laos) made genuine efforts to prepare the Hmong for the eventual and inevitable withdrawal of the Americans (pp. 72–73). But regardless of the actuality of any promises, there is a widespread belief in the Hmong community that they were promised security and protection.

¹⁴ These alleged charges have been discussed extensively among Hmong studies scholars interpreting contemporary Hmong history. See Hillmer (2010), N. N. Vang (2011), M. N. Lee (2015), K. Yang (2013), and G. Y. Lee (2007a).

¹⁵ N. N. Vang (2011) documents the extensive media coverage and human rights activities surrounding Chao Fa and other Hmong resistance fighters (pp. 26–27).

This return to Laos is the expected, conventional model of homeland imagination given the historical context of the post-1975 Hmong diaspora: a bold and direct military movement toward restoration. If the post-1975 Hmong diaspora can be regarded, at least in part, as a diaspora of soldiers, such a literal and strategic—if violent—vision is not surprising. This version of homeland is entangled with the larger historical and political narratives of conflict, including Indochinese colonization, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War—all of which are fundamentally violent narratives of the nation-state. Derived from these nationalistic and imperialistic narratives, the Homeland 1.0 model construes and constrains diasporic imagination in *conservative* geopolitical terms by holding fast to the legitimacy of legally and politically organized territories. Thus this model of homeland imagination reifies the necessity of geopolitical structure, namely the nation-state, as a condition for a diasporic community's cultural and political identity. And the most determined cultural manifestations of Homeland 1.0 push the primacy of the nation-state one step further, organizing for the literal creation of a Hmong state in Laos. Vang (2011) provides a careful account of decades of transnational political activities that have included various plans for an independent Hmong state in Southeast Asia.¹⁶

Whether by militaristic operation or international activism, a hope in a return to Laos seems riddled with hopelessness. And the gradual, generational abandonment of such a hopeless case is inevitable. Immediately after the war's end as Hmong found themselves in refugee camps, many families, encouraged by resistance leaders, declined the opportunity to resettle, remaining in the camps in hopes that they could strengthen the resistance movement and hasten the return. Jeremy Hein (1995) cites refugee interview data from 1988 that reports that ninety percent of Hmong responded that they were unwilling to admit that they would never return to their homeland (Laos), compared to fifty percent of Vietnamese refugee respondents to the same question (p. 48). Such a determined response, in the face of so many impracticalities, is a testament to the pervasiveness of literal homeland imagination. But in the mid-1980s, resettlement rates out of the camps suddenly jumped (Walker and Moffat, 1986), suggesting that hopes for an immediate—or even eventual—return to Laos fell off. As the temporal term of the diaspora continues to lengthen, it is evident that it is not the exclusive—or perhaps even the most prominent—model of homeland imagination. Despite the sustained transnational political activism surrounding Laos, the ascending 1.5-generation leadership throughout the community has largely abandoned the politically charged and polarizing goal of a return to Laos. Rather than clinging to a hope for return to Laos or the outright abandonment of the goal, the rising generation of community leaders are investing energy in activist causes surrounding violations of human rights in Laos and Thailand¹⁷. Although this activity is certainly motivated in large part by a yearning to secure social justice for Hmong coethnics, it cannot entirely escape associations with longstanding resistance ideologies. Generational affinity for the imagined Lao homeland is

¹⁶ The Congress of World Hmong People has publically shared its proposal for a Hmong state to be established in northern Thailand. Gymbay Moua described their vision for the Hmong Federated State, including their efforts working with the international Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) at an event organized by the Hmong Studies Consortium at the University of Wisconsin–Madison on September 19, 2014. The Hmoob Teb Chaws Organization has a stated mission to “Pursue Hmong self-ruled in the mainland of Asia in accordance with international law” (<http://hmongtebchaws.net/mission/>).

¹⁷ Prominent organizations include the Hmong Lao Human Rights Council, the Hmong International Human Rights Watch, and the Fact Finding Commission (themselves a producer of a number of diasporic films documenting the abhorrent conditions of Hmong in the jungle who continue to experience reprisals from the LDPR government for suspected involvement in American allegiance and continued guerrilla resistance).

a continuum of allegiance. As enthusiasm for the Lao homeland has waned, an alternative to such the “traditional” (and improbable) Homeland 1.0 has appeared in the diasporic refugee community. Following a reverse chronology, China emerges as the next version of a homeland target.

Homeland 2.0: China

In 1986, during her ethnographic fieldwork in Ban Vinai, Lynelleyn Long notices increasing interest in China and its status as an ancestral home among the younger “camp generation.” Newly offered Chinese language classes begin to capture the attention of older school-aged children, and one girl even expresses her Sinophilia by constantly drawing sketches of Hmong people in Chinese contexts (pp. 74–75). The timing of Long’s observation coincides with a spike in Hmong applications for resettlement in the West after years of very slow rates of resettlement out of the Thai camps (Walker and Moffat, 1986)—a signal that refugees’ faith in the resistance movement and hope for a return to Laos were dwindling. Within a few years, the Hmong video production niche industry would take shape, creating dozens—then hundreds—of movies by Hmong directors for Hmong audiences, including a wide array of videos that explore China from a post-1975 diasporic perspective—precisely speculating on questions of origin and positing China as the “true” Hmong homeland—truer than Laos. The explosively popular China video series, directed by Hmong video pioneer Su Thao, was launched in 1993 and grew to include three volumes. It captures vivid images of Chinese Miao with their costumes, dance, and festival traditions through the same exoticized ethnographic gaze of Occidental anthropologists upon Oriental subjects—but with a twist. Now the admiration and wonder is framed differently, positioned not only as a fascination with the “Other,” but a fascination that includes an overt insistence to join the Other. Tired, perhaps, of narratives of disenfranchisement and obscurity in an already obscure Southeast Asian history, a desire to secure a place within Chinese history emerges, even if such a place is still obscure and disenfranchised. At least it achieves inclusion into Chinese historical narratives that are important to contemporary global economics and politics. Looking to China as diasporic homeland can be interpreted, in part, as a cultural desire to reframe a marginalized community and be, perhaps, a little less marginal.

This complication converts the moment of ethnographic spectatorship into an exercise of ethnic refashioning as post-1975 diasporic Hmong start to (re)construct a (new) history and geographic origin beyond Laos. This redirection of energy from Laos towards China seems to be a move from the dangerously political to the innocuously apolitical. The trend toward China is also thoroughly academic, built in part upon the work of the well-regarded and academically trained historians like Yuepheng Xiong, who have researched Hmong origins in China and connections to the Miao. His popular, three-part video series, *Following the Path of Blood*,¹⁸ provocatively explores historical narratives of the Miao in China that emphasize the struggle—and survival—against the Chinese oppression throughout the Qing Dynasty. Yuepheng Xiong emphasizes the determination, prowess, and success of ancestral Hmong against daunting circumstances. The first in the series, *The History of Hmong in China*, traces the Qing-era

¹⁸ *Taug Txoj Lw Ntshav*. Each of the three parts bears its own subtitle. Part 1: *Keeb Kwm Hmoob Nyob Suav Teb (History of Hmong in China)* a general overview of the history of Hmong/Miao in China, including a careful retracing of migration routes; Part 2: *Txoj Kev Mus Cuag Huab Tais Hmoob (The Journey to Meet the Hmong King)* a recounting of Wu Bayue, the Hmong king who rebelled against the Chinese from 1795 to 1806; Part 3: *Tsab Xyooj Mem Coj Hmoob Tua Suav (Zhang Xiumei Leads the Hmong to Slaughter the Chinese)* a recounting of the 1855–1873 rebellion against the Qing empire led by Zhang Xiumei.

diaspora in reverse from Southeast Asia back into the southern provinces of China. Tailored to a post-1975 Hmong American diasporic audience, many regard this reconstruction of the migration as incontrovertible fact that establishes a direct connection between the post-1975 Hmong diaspora and the Miao in China. Leveraging the familiar tropes of migration and military resistance, the narratives are rousing and persuasive. This video series continues to generate tremendous interest in—and grounds for a historical validation of—the conceptualization of China as Hmong homeland.

Other scholars, including Yang Dao, have visited China. Yang Dao's outreach to and collaboration with Chinese and Miao scholars at Chinese universities starkly contrasts the antagonistic agitation of Vang Pao, his once-close associate and intense political rival, that aims towards Homeland 1.0. Increasingly, Miao scholars from Chinese universities collaborate with an emerging generation of American trained Hmong studies scholars. As one example, the biannual International Conference on Hmong Studies organized by the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University, St. Paul regularly includes Chinese Miao scholars. In addition, tours and study abroad experiences to China have been organized by universities and cultural organizations across the United States, targeting Hmong students' interests in these diasporic roots¹⁹. Thus, the China homeland imagination enjoys association with the peaceful and progressive domains of education and scholarship rather than the violent and "regressive" overtones of resistance and rebellion. Stripped mostly of its violent valence, the quest for homeland in China may be more attractive and palatable, both to Westerners as well as latter Hmong generations who have come of age in the West. Bolstered by the ever-increasing interest in China's participation in global economies, the move towards an imagined Chinese homeland is also in harmony with broader global moves of the West. As such Homeland 2.0 carries the alluring potential of advantageous economic connections in addition to the satisfaction of historical and cultural grounding in a recognizable world culture. In many ways, Homeland 2.0 is a movement of second generation refugees—the students and aspiring professionals of the post-1975 diaspora who readily embrace a cosmopolitan worldview that sees China as culturally attractive at the same time it is historically connected to—and perhaps emblematic of—their diasporic Hmong identity. Thus the rise of the China homeland imagination animates an important shift that exposes potential for a generational rupture. Or—if not a rupture between first- and second-generation post-1975 Hmong diasporics—perhaps a potential correlation exists between migratory generations and their own particular homeland versions, the first generation favoring Laos and Southeast Asia (1.0) and the second drawn more naturally towards China (2.0)²⁰.

Homeland 3.0: Utopia and a Theory of Tebchaws

¹⁹ Hmong-focused study abroad tours is a topic that deserves further study. There is an apparent increase in activity for Hmong academic tourism that includes destinations in China as well as Southeast Asia. A study of the history of the trends in these study abroad experiences and community tours would provide a meaningful contribution to an understand of Hmong diasporic imagination.

²⁰ This sketch of Chinese origins in the Hmong diasporic imagination should be augmented by the extensive literature on the Hmong and Miao in China. In particular, see Tapp (2001) and Schein (2000). In addition, Chinese scholars also continue to research on Hmong and Miao in China and their work has become more accessible in recent years. There is value in exploring how that Chinese scholarship relates to a homeland imagination of China.

A duality of imagined homelands is an expression of Hall's (1990) hybridity, leading to a third version of diasporic homeland that shifts—or slips—towards a distinct and highly imagined paradigm. This new paradigm exists beyond the plane of conventional community politics, tending towards a rich cultural imagination. This third, “imagined” homeland contrasts the “real” politics of the others or the insistence upon the geopolitical nation-state. Laos as homeland is steeped in profoundly real politics, involving the commitment and exchange of money—and even lives—for a cause.²¹ Similarly, China as homeland demands the actual brokering between and cooperation of political entities (nation states and their embassies) and sustains a tangible, corporeal travel and exchange as academics, tourists, and genealogists. In a vibrant and heterogeneous diaspora, there is a need for a third iteration of homeland that is more imagined and imaginative, existing beyond the spaces of “reality” and practical politics. In the context of this classical version/vision—and in contrast to it—an alternative paradigm of homeland and homeland return emerges.

Departing the domains of geopolitics and transnational tourism, we engage the imaginative realm of literary expression to help frame this alternate diasporic homeland. Published in 2001, the prose poem “An Utopia: Visions of My Father” by a pseudonymous writer called Cwj Mem,²² provides a framework for the next version of homeland. Superficially, the trajectory of “An Utopia” seems to be a familiar expression of Homeland 1.0 in Laos; Cwj Mem references this utopia to be the “vision of my father,” describing the familiar conversations at family gatherings in which the men openly speculate on the politics and possibility of their return to Laos “around the circle of cold metal folding chairs.” But as the poem continues, it constructs a highly imagistic portrait of this utopia that deviates from the typical Lao-centric conversation. As a vision, this utopia pushes the dreams of Cwj Mem's father—with others of that first generation—beyond the literal and into the literary with its fictionalized and figurative opportunities. In this patriarchal circle, he reports that “They talk; they always talk: a *tebchaws* for us.” Immediately, Cwj Mem names the place as a *tebchaws* [DAY-char]—a common compound word that draws concepts of “land” (*teb*) and “place” (*chaws*) together for a broadly flexible term that can identify a formal nation state or—more importantly for Homeland 3.0—a less precisely defined region or area. The use of this term—an indigenous and ambiguous one—instead of other, more precise alternatives marks a unique characterization of this vision. Though the piece is written primarily in English, Cwj Mem resists an English title or term for this utopic place, preferring the ambiguity and flexibility afforded by *tebchaws*. I propose that *tebchaws* becomes a critical piece of terminology towards a theorization of Hmong diasporic homeland imagination. Invoking *tebchaws*, Cwj Mem subtly separates himself from the notions of the literal liberation of Laos or the roots-driven return to China and yearns for something else.

Instead, he immediately connects *tebchaws* with ancestral cosmology—a crucial shift from the plane of three-dimensional reality. Hmong cosmology explains that after death departed

²¹ In 1999, two Hmong men, Houa Ly and Michael Vang, both American citizens, disappeared while traveling in Laos. They were last seen on a boat crossing the Mekong River towards Laos. Lao officials refused to conduct an investigation and were uncooperative and secretive in their dealings with the American embassy and the families of the men. The resolution interrupted trade and strongly censured the Lao government. The men were rumored to have been carrying large sums of cash, military uniforms, and flags of the resistance movement that were contributed by American Hmong to support anti-Communist Hmong resistance. Ly and Vang's attempted delivery of such monies and commodities demonstrates the sustained power of the Laos as homeland vision, despite the extraordinary danger.

²² An semi-archaic or obscure term for “pencil.”

spirits journey back to the place of their birth and then on to peaceful realms within a spiritual plane where they remain connected to the mortal lives of their posterity²³. Ancestors are invited to preside over ritual feasts and act as guardians for their progeny. Cwj Mem declares that we will recognize the place—this *tebchaws*—because “our *pog* [paternal grandmothers] and our *yawg* [paternal grandfathers] will be there.” This move towards the cosmological and spiritual further distances the concept of homeland from geopolitical reality and makes the suggestion that the concept of homeland and the mythic vision that has grown up around it might be altogether figurative and cosmological in the first place.

In addition to the presence of the beloved *pog* and *yawg*, Cwj Mem describes the cosmological dimensions of the journey to this utopia:

So I'm waiting, watching, wondering, where and when we'll wind our way 'cross paths or peaks...passing, perchance, some spirit-guarded portals of the past, the future, and find the way the shaman flies to a realm of *zoov* and *plig* where they will let the people live.

This precisely tuned language, highly alliterative, evokes a rhythmic and melodic orality, reminiscent of the language of cultural rituals, including shamanic rites of healing. He invokes that spiritualist paradigm wherein the shaman flies over a spiritual gulf on horseback to the parallel dimension of spirits to guide, rescue, or barter for their return. In this cosmic space, the shaman searches out souls who have become lost in a terrain that is framed and described in terms of jungle topography, evoked by the phrase “realm of *zoov* (jungle) and *plig* (spirits/souls).” *Tebchaws* becomes the ultimate destination of holistic wellness and spiritual harmony—a journey to settle in that sacred shamanic space with no requirement for an eventual return to the land of the living. The ready mixing of allusions to funeral and healing rituals intensifies the poem's predictions of such contentment as otherworldly.

The vision becomes proverbial as Cwj Mem speculates that it will be a place “where every *thaj* [field] will have its *yeeb* [opium] and every family's *nyab* [daughter-in-law] will *xeeb* [conceive children].” Here Cwj Mem paints with a traditional Hmong poetic proverb (*thaj yeeb nyab xeeb*, an opium field and a pregnant daughter-in-law) that connotes peaceful and prosperous, alluding to earlier times when substantial wealth came into Hmong villages through the opium trade. That the author fractures the idiomatic unit and disperses it into an English sentence places emphasis upon the literal allusions of opium production and pregnancy—meanings that might otherwise be subsumed in the idiomatic gloss of “peace and prosperity.” And this lexical scattering also enacts on the page a lexical diaspora that must be drawn back together to restore the semiotic significance and signification of the proverb. Thus, the words of proverb gathered back together from their syntactic dispersal (*thaj yeeb nyab xeeb*) are both visually representative and semantically descriptive of *tebchaws* as utopic homeland.

The historical (if not outmoded) terms of (re)productive peace—opium cultivation and human fertility—“plant” images of seasonal and sexual production, fertility of both the fields and the feminine, and the labor of harvest and delivery. The landscape evoked is rural, remote, and surrounded by lush green peaks—geographically evocative without being geopolitically specific. Cwj Mem allows the irony to dangle—the contradiction of peace against the violence and corruption of the opium trade and its role in ushering Hmong into the midst of the colonial

²³ See Vincent Her (2005) for a robust treatment of Hmong cosmology.

struggle and its eventual path of war and diaspora. Without an explicit rejection, Cwj Mem prompts a diasporic audience to consider whether a state of peaceful living in these terms is likely or desirable.

The mode of literary imagination—the visionary voyage—in “An Utopia” is a vehicle for diasporic and transnational mobility, a function of transnational crossing that animates diasporic imagination. This transnational imaginary is an important space in which notions of homeland can be amended and altered according to current cultural practices and perceptions—a flexible response to the conditions of diasporic life that lends vitality and currency to homeland. Identified here as Homeland 3.0, *tebchaws* is not prescriptive of a monolithic vision of homeland but inclusive of many versions and iterations suitable for the diversity of the Hmong diaspora.

Magnetic Media: Cultural Productions of *Tebchaws*

Cwj Mem’s piece, as a mitigation of the classic vision towards a cosmological one, can be read as being influenced by the discourses of homeland as they circulated through commonplace media and community conversation. I argue that *tebchaws* is articulated as a synthesis of the magnetic media and community consciousness the poet was exposed to at the end of the millenium. With this concept of *tebchaws* as expansive and imagistic version of diasporic homeland, we can return to that magnetic media influences introduced earlier to see manifestations of *tebchaws*. The attributes of *tebchaws* are further revealed by an examination of magnetic audio and video media that contemplates their role in creating and sustaining concepts of longing and nostalgia, diasporic homeland, and refugee economics. Through these magnetic tapes we discover the symbolic and metaphorical shape of Hmong diasporic nostalgia and melancholy and see and hear the rich and tragic tones of loss and separation that accompany the Hmong migration. We come to discover how homeland is decidedly *not* conceived of in (geo)political terms, but rather through powerful and familiar environmental and ecological ones. The concept of the imagined *tebchaws* emerges during the first decades of the diaspora and persists as one that emphasizes nature over nation as the eventual destination of diasporic longing. *Tebchaws* hearkens to a prehistorical condition wherein the Hmong community was rendered as a transnational network (long before the term emerged in political, economic, and corporate discourses) of remote Hmong villages set in distinctive—though varied—landscapes of China and the Southeast Asian peninsula. The proverbial lament “*Tsis muaj teb tsis muaj chaws...*” (Without *land* and without a *place...*) constructs a poetic expression of longstanding diasporic consciousness that is suggestive of the unattainable—and perhaps undesirable—condition of an actual, single homeland in preference of an imagined and magnetic one.

Audio Cassette Tape Epistles: The Call of the Gibbon

The aged audio cassette—with a faded, half-peeled turquoise label—begins abruptly with a loud, staticky recording noise. The sustained crackling comes into slightly sharper sonic focus, and the sounds of a screaming animal emerge from the heavy background noise. Gradually, the sounds of two gibbons calling back and forth to each other at some distance become more and more distinct, more and more recognizable. Eventually we can hear that the small apes’ screaming is accompanied by the pulsing drone of cicadas and other jungle insects, all occasionally interrupted by audible bumps and scratches—odd complements to the remoteness of “wild” jungle sounds. The whole recording is distinctly low-tech and low-fidelity, and the hissing, bumping, and scratching are ever-present reminders of the mediation of the sound

through magnetic recording technology. The medium and the technology involved are not imperceptible. Neither are the human operators. From time to time, as the gibbons scream high in the trees, we hear the voice of a small child, sonically much closer, followed immediately by the hushing shush of an adult voice. This further enriches the context of the recording, maintaining the presence of a human audience and sonic spectators.

A family in a refugee camp is starting an audio letter “home” to relatives in St. Paul, Minnesota, and they want to open with the gibbon call that was recorded earlier. But to avoid sending their only copy of the gibbon call overseas, they must execute a low-fi dubbing from one portable tape recorder’s speaker to another’s built-in microphone. As you listen you can imagine the two small tape recorders sitting side by side or one being inverted and reversed over the other to align microphone with speaker. And the family is gathered around waiting for their chance to share some words with their family across the world. These refugee audio epistles have been extremely common and important modes of communication throughout the first decades of the post-1975 diaspora. As Hmong became refugees—fleeing Hmong villages, Lao cities, and CIA military bases—they felt the push of military pressure and genocidal threat that drove their migration across the Mekong River into Thailand where massive refugee camps were hastily—and reluctantly—constructed with help from the international community and led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Simple and reasonably inexpensive audio technology appeared throughout the camps and in the sites of diasporic settlement as magnetic tape recorders were brought into service to communicate between friends and family members separated by vast distances. These audio cassette letters became ubiquitous in the Hmong experience, having provided essential communication links for nearly every family on every node of the diasporic dispersion.

The gibbon recording was created by the cousin and hunting companion of a Hmong man with military rank who left Laos soon after the fall of Vientiane and who had spent very little time in a refugee camp before being resettled in St. Paul, Minnesota.²⁴ The exact sonic source of the gibbon footage is unknown, but it seems likely that this cousin went out in the woods with his tape recorder to record some familiar jungle sounds. Whether he had the intention of recording for his resettled relatives is uncertain, but hearing the call of a gibbon is relatively rare, requiring some distance from major human settlements. The impulse to include this distinctive sound on the cassette bespeaks a certain longing for sonic reminders of “home.” Loud and haunting, the gibbon’s scream is evocative of remote wilderness, and it also has an attachment to folk tales, ghost stories, and melancholy owing to its mournful and lonely tone. Ultimately, gibbons scream to call to one another—to make connections across the expanse of the jungle, just as the audio cassette letters communicate across the diaspora.

And we can speculate how hearing this sound might have affected its listener. As I have played the tape for elders and community members, it never fails to be immediately evocative. One particular listener assumed a rather far away look in his eye—such is the transportive power of sound—and recalled the pleasure of being deep in the woods hunting and exploring as a youth. He immediately described the sensation of the jungle space, with its humidity, thick

²⁴ Txiabneeb Vang, personal communication. Part of the difficulty of the archive of audio cassette letters is efficiently and accurately identifying the sender and recipient. Many of the tapes in this collection are a donation from the family of Txiabneeb Vang, but no precise catalog is available and identification of speakers and circumstances is, at times, somewhat speculative.

vegetation, and varied topography. For many the call would certainly conjure particular memories of being out in the jungle—for recreation, sustenance, and, quite possibly, survival as part of the experiences of the exodus flight out of Laos. The gibbon call and accompanying jungle noises contrasts the human cacophony of the refugee camp and the developed din of cities of resettlement. It evokes a complexly layered nostalgia and melancholy. As a sonic representation of “home,” it is certainly nuanced and ambiguous.

The instance of the gibbon call recording prompts a few comments about the genre of the refugee camp audio cassette letter. The gibbon episode is noteworthy, in part, because it interrupts—or defers—the primary communicative intent of these recorded letters. The letters are filled with news and gossip; emotional, often tearful, expressions of loss, of missing family members; and descriptions of deprivation, suffering, and need. As the years pass, beginning in the mid- to late-1970s, the refugee camp audio cassette letter develops very strong generic features. The most dominant are these devastating expressions of sorrow and misery—followed by a request for money to be sent back to the camps from resettled relatives in the West. So prevalent is the *thov nyiaj*—the pleading for money—that it is immediately (and somewhat cynically) identified as a primary purpose of the messages, to the point that the tapes have been resented and sometimes disregarded by the resettled recipients. Beyond requests for direct financial support from family, the tapes beseech sponsorship—that pledge of familial support that could be instrumental in securing permission to depart the refugee camp for resettlement. Thus they are textual sites of intimate expressions of diasporic longing and instruments of a hope for transnational exchange.

But predating the entrenchment of the feature of petitioning for money, the gibbon tape (estimated around 1978) is a purposeful and early example of *tebchaws* that isn't yet preoccupied with the economics of the diaspora. The extended gibbon opening—before any oral greeting or introduction—situates the American recipient immediately into an evocative, almost visceral space. It is a natural space (the jungle), but one that is conspicuously mediated through recording technology. Thus *tebchaws* does not pretend to be some “pure” encounter of the natural. Nature is being *captured* on tape and intentionally *reproduced* (evoking images of controlled breeding) in an act of taming, cultivation, or control that is characteristic of *tebchaws*. As the low-fi dubbing is made, the repeated struggles to keep the children quiet are evidence of the importance and seriousness with which the family treats this sonic—almost sacred—moment of *tebchaws*. The entire tape is an eclectic audio pastiche, moving freely between brief greetings and comments from various extended family members and friends to instrumental and ritual music samples (a contemporary folk song, *khw txhiaj* chanting, and the *qeej*). As the several speakers address the recipients, the ambient sounds of the village are clearly recorded. The crow of roosters punctures the sonic surface on a routine basis. A barking dog, a crying baby, the sizzle of frying meat, and the jangles of a shamanic ritual are layered onto the magnetic substrate as a manifestation of the proximity and abundance of animal and human life and activity in *tebchaws*. Humanity—especially as conveyed through a model of the village or the camp—is never far removed from *tebchaws*, emphasizing again that it does not strive for some conception of “pure” nature, but an inhabited and populated nature. Most of the speakers plead for a reunion with or a return to the family.

And all the while, there is a concession of the constructedness of *tebchaws*, both in its production and consumption. The start and stop of recording means that *tebchaws* is not captured in real time, but as an artificially compressed and selective temporality. With so many voices—

one after the other—and the inclusion of eclectic musical offerings, this cassette gives the illusion (compelling but not convincing) of a large, vibrant gathering rather than the dispersed and intermittent interactions with one or two people at a time. And none of these constructions are a surprise to the listener, who is always made aware of its fabrications by the tape's absolute low fidelity qualities.

Nostalgic Tourist Dramamentary: (Re)Entering Ban Vinai: Utopic Tebchaws

Along with the genre of personal audio cassette letters, videocassettes offer another venue for diasporic communication and exchange. Video documentaries have been energetically produced and widely distributed since the camcorder revolution of the early 1990s. Distinct in many ways from other genres of Hmong videography and filmmaking (particularly music videos and narrative film), documentary emerges as an important text in the discourse and dynamics of diasporic longing. In many cases these are little more than home movies distributed by home production studios. Editing is often minimal and rudimentary. Soundtracks are simple, consisting of a spoken narration and commentary, sometimes with popular music tracks laid down as background. A number of these diasporic documentaries have returned to Southeast Asia—to the refugee camps specifically—very intentionally seeking out a view of these historical spaces and places. A surge of nostalgia seems to have struck with the closing of the Thai refugee camps in the mid-1990s, sending amateur videographers back to Thailand with their cameras, hoping to see what was left behind as the camps were themselves abandoned. Several different videographers and production studios have shot and distributed post-closing refugee camp tours, creating a series of videos that constitutes its own genre. More than just documentary, these tours have a quality of the dramatic as they return to emotionally and politically charged sites, narrating not only the nostalgia that accompanies a diasporic tourist's return, but also constructing utopic visions of more enduring return and restoration—another vision of *tebchaws*.

From a small, independent production company in St. Paul, connected to and sponsored in part by a Hmong travel agency offering tour packages back to Southeast Asia, comes a documentary titled *Zos Vib Nais Chaw Tshua (The Village of Vinai, Place of Remnants)*. Taped and distributed in 2002, this 90-minute dramamentary features a driving tour of Ban Vinai, taking prolonged stops along the way to capture once familiar sights and landscapes and, most importantly, to comment upon their condition and the condition of the diaspora. The videographer's gaze is incessantly trained upon the comparison of then and now, as if the present reality—the emptiness of abandoned fields where homes once stood—threatens the validity of the previous memory and experience. The film opens with a wide shot of the muddy Mekong River, from an intimate vantage point along the riverbank. Panning across the river's incessantly choppy surface nestled within its broad channel, the camera feels, at times, to be hovering over the river—detached from either bank and in suspension above the water's surface. In an almost matter-of-fact tone, the narrator comments upon how many Hmong lost their lives in the crossing. Then, addressing his imagined diasporic audience in an abruptly intimate tone, the narrator asks, "*Nej puas kho siab? Nej puas nco qab lawm?*" (Do you miss it? Do you remember?). He intentionally and purposefully awakens a nostalgic response, dredging deep memories up from the river's silty bed and wondering if the emotional has caught up with the visual. This stop along the tour functions as a momentary memorial that asserts the human element into the landscape; though not a soul is visible to the camera, the audience is implicitly invited to see themselves—and their loved ones—at the edge(s) and in the midst of the river again. Afforded a view from the safety of the shore, this becomes a profound retrospective. For

the many diasporics who have not traveled back to Thailand, it may provide the chance to see again—to *revise*—the images of their own memories in an updated diasporic context that positions them in new political, social, and economic positions. They are reestablishing and reimagining themselves in the landscape—in the space of *tebchaws*.

Bouncing gently in the passenger seat of a compact pickup truck, the camera comes upon the prominent brick sign marking the entrance to Ban Vinai. As we drive into the abandoned space of the camp our narrator and guide—in a role reminiscent of the *qhuab ke* funeral chanter²⁵—notes, at some length, the places on the outskirts where camp buildings used to stand. Sites that once housed the aid workers who administered food rations have been converted to rice paddies—an extension and continuation of their purpose of sustenance. “I don’t know when we’ll come back to live together in a *tebchaws* like this,” he muses as we gaze across the flat and hazy expanse. The camera sweeps across the mountains in the background, then cuts to an orchard of mature guava trees, recalling that Hmong planted them. “Do you remember,” the narrator asks rhetorically, “when we planted these trees? We weren’t there to see them grow, but look! How they have grown and matured and are laden with fruit! The Thai have removed many of them, but *these trees* remain as a reminder that the Hmong planted them.” Propelled by the agricultural productivity of the Hmong, even in absentia, he details the diaspora, listing all the locations where Hmong people have ended up—the planting of prosperous communities resonant with the grove before our eyes. Easily evoking biological and horticultural metaphors, the narrator suggests that the germ—the seed—of Hmong community has been left in this soil—the soil of the refugee camp. The exact consequence of this commentary is uncertain, but the hope, or promise, or prophesy of return and harvest is implicit, if somewhat ambivalent.

The status of *tebchaws* as a cultivated nature—where labor asserts a claim upon nature and establishes a sign of presence—is asserted with the image of the guava trees. The ambiguity of the term of the dramaturgy’s title “place of remnants” (is the place populated with remnants? Or is the place a remnant itself?) raises questions whether such a video tour gathers up remnants or whether the remnant—those diasporics rapt in the spectacle—are being gathered back into this videographic space. A 1998 video tour of the recently closed refugee camps (*Cov Qub Yeej Thoj Nam; The Old Refugee Camps*) offers strikingly similar images. As the small crew drives through the abandoned spaces of Ban Vinai, the narrator recalls his own romantic experiences of the camp. The art of love and courting was, he claims, at its height in Vinai as so many young Hmong men and women gathered in the same place. Either as an act of artful editing or serendipity, the crew arrives upon a stand of mango trees laden with ripe fruit. Stopping to pick the fruit serves as a metaphorical demonstration that Ban Vinai is still fruitful, productive—still fertile—after all these years, despite its vacancy, despite the fact that it is no longer cared for or tended. The narrative of perpetual fertility seems to apply to those refugee camp lovers now resettled throughout the diaspora—a claim that the diaspora has been as fruitful as Ban Vinai in the intervening years.

But there is a profound contradiction present in the images from these refugee camp retrospectives. Alongside the reverie of fruit and fertility, the images and the commentary reinforce abandonment. The draw of so many videographers to explore empty and abandoned refugee camps rather than to tour the many vibrant villages throughout Laos and Thailand

²⁵ For examples of the *qhuab ke*—replete with homeland imagery—and accompanying critical discussion, see Symonds (2004), Tapp (2008), and Her (2005).

suggests that the attraction of the magnetic diaspora is powerfully towards those places that were once inhabited, cultivated, and claimed by the Hmong but that are now open and vacant—prone to the imaginative (re)shaping that renders them suitable to the diasporic community. Devoid of humanity or settlements that would encumber *tebchaws* with a living culture and community, the desolate and vacant permits diasporics outside of Southeast Asia the liberty and license of constructing their own narratives without contradictions. The conspicuous absence of Hmong people invites new inhabitation. The proliferation of wild trees, bushes, and grasses are organic symbols of diaspora—flora that require time to flourish. The overgrowth encroaching on the refugee camps functions as a diasporic timepiece, a measure of the temporal duration of diaspora. Their untended growth beckons renewed cultivation—an imagined reclamation of homeland wrapped in the imagery of cultivated nature, of *tebchaws*.

Theory of Fab: Overgrowth and Reclamation

Seen in the dramamentaries, abandoned villages, fields, and camps have been all but erased—or recorded over—from the landscape by the forces of natural (over)growth, recovery, and reforestation. In *The Old Refugee Camps* the crew takes us beyond Ban Vinai to Phanat Nikhom, another of the Thai camps that housed Hmong refugees, where they show us concrete wall ruins, white at the top and light blue at the bottom, protruding from the ground like an ad hoc memorial of neglect. The narrator tells us that this was the site of some camp offices. The cafeteria and hospital have been razed to rubble and a bare foundation. Piles of discarded objects left by those leaving for America still sit heaped. Tall, thick grass grows around and through the array of abandoned cooking pots, castoff household tools, discarded buckets, and sundry forsaken supplies. The thatched roof of a building where food was once distributed has collapsed. “The thatching has rotted away,” the narrator tells us, “and only the bamboo frame remains—where we cut, split, and lashed the frame.” The remnants are being overcome, overgrown.

From *The Village of Vinai, Place of Remnants* a litany of shots returns to sites throughout the sprawling area of the former camp. Both the cinematographic composition and the narrator’s commentary emphasize the decayed buildings and wasted places of the camp and highlight the creep of nature back in their places. A half dozen videos that tour Ban Vinai and other camps make one overpowering visual point: nature is taking back the camps. In the *The Village of Vinai, Place of Remnants*, the narrator delivers an obsessive monologue of *fab* [fa]: weedy or overgrown. The site of the now dismantled barracks is *fab*. The pond where they once bathed and washed is *fab*. The concrete foundation, the soccer field, the pathways—all *fab*. *Fab* everywhere. In commenting further on the small pond, he describes how easy it used to be to access the pond, to reach its edges, but now, overgrown and so *fab fab*²⁶ that you can hardly get there. In his regretful nostalgia, the narrator forgets, however, that when the camp was inhabited, that pond was muddy and frightfully polluted, whereas now the water is clean and clear²⁷. This reveals how the diasporic memory privileges the space of the camp *against* the natural condition of *fab*. *Fab* is an encroachment upon the sacred refugee utopia of the camps, not a natural restoration. Lamenting the return of a wild and unchecked nature emphasizes absolute preference for a cultivated nature in the realm of *tebchaws*. Such an insistence upon cultivation and control is an

²⁶ Doubling an adjective is a means of emphatic intensification.

²⁷ Gary Yia Lee, personal interview.

expression of longing for cultural agency—a fundamental perceived loss precipitated by the diaspora. In contrast to the national preoccupation of Homeland 1.0 and 2.0, here the discourse of nation vanishes, replaced by a new diasporic ecology: the exertion of autonomy over an iconographic nature. In a word, *tebchaws*²⁸.

Conclusion: Abandoning Magnetic Media, the Digital Move, and the Surrender of Homeland 3.0

A striking image from a research trip to Thailand—one of my own magnetic memories—is a provocative sighting of magnetic diaspora media. My lodgings in Khek Noi (Petchabun Province) were set upon a hillside, affording a view of the downhill section of town. The house was built up such that the car port looked directly over a narrow street and the houses built along it. Perched on top of the corrugated steel roof of one of those homes below was an abandoned black video cassette. Apparently discarded—probably by children at play who flung it on the roof—it sat, alongside a Frisbee and a stick, exposed to the intensity of the tropical sun and monsoon rains.



Fig. 1 Abandoned video cassette on rooftop. Khek Noi, Thailand 2007. Photo by author.

The largest Hmong settlement in Thailand, Khek Noi has become a vital diasporic node—a confluence of diasporic activity and a gathering place for diasporics. Here Hmong who settled in Thailand many generations ago during the Qing-era diaspora live alongside Hmong refugees from Laos and the post-1975 diaspora. Some were residents of the camps who managed to resettle in Thailand while others entered Thailand later, some legally and some not, bypassing the camps. Its large population (estimated between 20,000 and 30,000, almost exclusively Hmong) and the diversity of surrounding landscapes—the epitome of *tebchaws* that includes

²⁸ It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the engagement of *tebchaws* with ecocriticism. Those interested in an introduction to this dynamic critical discipline can consult Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), Garrard (2012), Garrard (2014), and Tallmadge and Harrington (2000).

close proximity to villages, farms, and jungle, all within a short drive from town—have made it the hub for Hmong video production. Throughout town, Hmong movies are continuously—and conspicuously—being shot and edited by an ever-increasing number of producers and directors, primarily Hmong Americans, who are drawn by a powerfully attractive magnetic force.²⁹

In myriad ways, Hmong diasporic movies flow through town: produced, reproduced, filmed, edited, purchased, borrowed, and pirated. Thai Hmong—hopeful cast and crew members with aspirations for fame, unbeatable wages, or simply proximity to the most attractive and cosmopolitan cultural scene in the diaspora—are drawn by the force of magnetic media and the presence of Hmong filmmakers—the quintessential “cultural producers.” Cinema continues to hold a position of cultural favor, attracting youth and media culture. At the same time, those who fear the erosion of traditional values or who oppose the sexual promiscuity and degrading moral influence ascribed to Hmong American tourists and the film industry³⁰ are repulsed.

The scene of the discarded rooftop video cassette, therefore, articulates the oppositional forces—the push/pull inherent in (diasporic) magnetic media. The sounds and images transmitted are connective, yet controversial. The media is commonplace—to the point of becoming a mundane commodity, valued but disposable. Intended as entertainment, it is rendered a child’s plaything—carelessly treated and eventually abandoned. Furthermore, the abandoned video cassette marks the neglect and excess of memory. What is wound within the plastic case, while it is *virtually* visible when viewed through a VCR, is practically invisible by non-technological and non-invasive everyday practices—a reminder that the complexities of a diasporic imaginary are not always externally apparent.

Spotted in 2007, this discarded magnetic tape represents the rejection of an increasingly outmoded medium and its particular rendering of imagined diasporic homeland in favor of yet another new medium and a new diasporic message. The move to optical digital media “redefines” (and casts into high definition) the discourse of homeland from magnetic to algorithmic. The binary conversion of digital media and its finite mathematics is a move towards rational discourse that privileges analytic computation over the power of a (controlled) “natural,” magnetic force. Thus we see an impending progression from the constructed and cultivated

²⁹ No fewer than a dozen film crews were actively shooting movies during at the time of my visit in October 2007. I was in Khej Me following one of those crews directed by Moua Lee, a respected Hmong American filmmaker. Locals participate in the filmmaking industry as cast and crew, and increasingly as directors and cinematographers as Hmong American producers begin to outsource the on-the-ground work. Although film shoots have become commonplace, small clusters of locals—old and young—frequently gather to watch the filming of a scene.

³⁰ A number of emotional controversies surround the suspect actions of Hmong Americans on tour in Thailand and Laos, especially as it pertains to cases where Hmong American men court and seduce young Hmong women, often asserting a (false) pretense of interest in marriage and emigration arrangements. Hmong American filmmakers are particularly branded with this illicit behavior. Va-megn Thoj produced a documentary film, *Death in Thailand* (2002), that stridently accuses a Hmong American filmmaker of wrongdoing following the suicide of a young man girl who had apparently been devastated by her lover’s unwillingness to fulfill his promise of marriage. And Hmong movies, which include narrative themes of infidelity and corruption, are often accused of eroding stable Hmong cultural values—importing the unsavory values of the West. Later reports (April 2008) came through the channels of Hmong human rights organizations that five young Hmong women from Huay Nam Khau [(aka *Dej Dawb*, or Whitewater), the quasi-refugee camp established a short distance from Khek Noi to house several hundred illegal Hmong immigrants from Laos who claim political persecution but have been labeled as economic refugees and hence not eligible for asylum] allegedly being lured away to participate in a pornographic film with Hmong American filmmakers. They returned sexually assaulted and humiliated. This tragic event casts yet another shadow over the Hmong film industry as a vehicle of exploitation and sexual violence.

natural spaces of the imagined diasporic *tebchaws* towards a new paradigm, yet to emerge—a production, duplication, and distribution of diaspora that is produced, duplicated, and distributed via emerging digital technologies. The pending release of *Homeland* 4.0.

About the Author:

Mitch Ogden is an Assistant Professor of English & Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Stout. His research focuses on cultural production in the Hmong diaspora, and he is specifically interested in media production, literary publication, and literacy practices. As a digital humanist, he is currently working on a project digitizing a set of sacred texts written in the *Puaj Txwm* alphabet of the *Is Npis Mis Nus* religious community in Thailand. For twenty years, Mitch has been involved in the Hmong community as a translator, organizer, scholar, editor, and teacher. He is a co-advisor for the Hmong Stout Student Organization. Mitch lives in Menomonie, Wisconsin with his wife Christa and their five young children.



References Cited

- Anderson, B. R. (1991). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Baird, I. G. (2014). Chao Fa movies: The transnational production of Hmong American history and identity. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 15(1), 1-24.
- Bartlett, F.C. (1932). *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Boyarin, D., & Boyarin, J. (1993). Diaspora: Generation and the ground of Jewish identity. *Critical Inquiry*, 693-725.
- Cov Qub Yeej Thoj Nam (The Old Refugee Camps)*. (1998). Videocassette, Moonlight Productions.
- Cwj Mem. (2001). An Utopia: Visions of My Father. *Paj Ntaub Voice*, 8(1), 15.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*, 1980 (S. Rendell, Trans.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Desai, J. (2004). *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of Diasporic South Asian Film*. New York, Routledge.
- Duffy, J. M. (2007). *Writing from these roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American community*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Edwards, B. H. (2001). The uses of 'Diaspora.' *Social Text*, 19(1), 45-73.
- Garde-Hansen, J. (2011). *Media and memory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gardiner, J. M., & Java, R. I. (1993). Recognising and remembering. In Collins, A., Gathercole, S. E., Conway, M. A., & Morris, P. E. (Eds.), *Theories of memory* (168-88). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Garrard, G. (2012). *Ecocriticism* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Garrard, G. (Ed.). (2014). *The Oxford handbook of ecocriticism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Glotfelty, C. & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In: J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference*. (pp. 222-237). London: Lawrence & Wishart.

- Hamilton-Merritt, J. (1993). *Tragic mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the secret wars for Laos, 1942-1992*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hein, J. (1995). *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: a refugee experience in the United States*. New York, NY: Twayne Publishers.
- Hein, J. (2013). The double diaspora: China and Laos in the folklore of Hmong American refugees. In M. Pfeifer, M. Chiu, & K. Yang (Eds.), *Diversity in diaspora: Hmong Americans in the twenty-first century* (209-232). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Her, V. K. (2005). Hmong cosmology: Proposed model, preliminary insights. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 6, 1-25.
- Hillmer, P. (2010). *A people's history of the Hmong*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press.
- Hirsch, M., & Smith, V. (2002). Feminism and cultural memory: An introduction. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 28(1), 1-18.
- Lee, G.Y. (2007). Diaspora and the predicament of origins: Interrogating Hmong postcolonial history and identity. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 8,1-25.
- Lee, G. Y. (2007a). *The Hmong Rebellion in Laos: Victims or Terrorists?* Unpublished manuscript.
- Lee, M. N. (2015). *Dreams of the Hmong kingdom: The quest for legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Long, L. (1993). *Ban Vinai, the refugee camp*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Moua, G. (2014, September 19). *The Hmong state*. Address at the Hmong Studies Consortium, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.
- Mowitz, J. (1987). The sound of music in the era of its electronic reproducibility. *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, 173-97.
- Quincy, K. (2000). *Harvesting Pa Chay's wheat: The Hmong and America's secret war in Laos*. Spokaen, WA: Eastern Washington University Press.
- Safran, W. W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: A journal of transnational studies* 1(1), 83-99.
- Schein, L. (2000). *Minority rules: The Miao and the feminine in China's cultural politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Schein, L. (2004). Homeland beauty: Transnational longing and Hmong American video. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 63(2), 433-463.

- Scott, J. C. (2009). *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Symonds, P. V. (2004). *Calling in the soul: Gender and the cycle of life in a Hmong village*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Tallmadge, J., & Harrington, H. (Eds.). (2000). *Reading under the sign of nature: New essays in ecocriticism*. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press.
- Tapp, N. (1990). *Sovereignty and rebellion: The White Hmong of northern Thailand*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Tapp, N. (2001). *The Hmong of China: Context, agency, and the imaginary*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Tapp, N. (2008). Qha ke (guiding the way) from the Hmong Ntsu of China, 1943. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 9(1): 1-36.
- Tapp, N. (2010). *The impossibility of self: An essay on the Hmong diaspora*. Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag.
- Tölölyan, K. (1991). The nation-state and its others: In lieu of a preface. *Diaspora: A journal of transnational studies* 1(1), 3-7.
- Tölölyan, K. (1996). Rethinking diaspora(s): Stateless power in the transnational moment. *Diaspora: A journal of transnational studies* 5(1), 3-36.
- Vang, C. Y. (2010). *Hmong America: Reconstructing community in diaspora*. Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Vang, N. N. (2011). Political transmigrants: Rethinking Hmong political activism in America. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 12, 1-46.
- Walker, W., & Moffat, D. (1986). Hmong Children: A Changing World in Ban Vinai. *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 10(4), 54-56.
- Xiong, Y. (1997). Summer Program offers Students rare opportunity to learn Hmong history in China. *INK: Hmong Magazine*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://www.hmongnet.org/hmong-au/chmong.htm>
- Yang, K. (2013). The American experience of the Hmong: A historical review. In M. Pfeifer, M. Chiu, & K. Yang (Eds.), *Diversity in diaspora: Hmong Americans in the twenty-first century* (3-53). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Yang, K. K. (2008). *The latehomecomer*. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press.
- Zos Vib Nais Chaw Tshua (The Village of Vinai, Place of Remnants)*. (2002). Videocassette, Waixang Pictures.