

Hmong Sexual Diversity: Beginning the Conversation

By

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Abstract

In this paper, we describe a participatory workshop we facilitated on the diversity of Hmong sexualities and sexual norms – including our preparation leading up to the workshop and a summary of what we learned – at the 2015 Hmong National Development conference, which marked the 40th year that Hmong have been in the U.S. We also describe our positionalities and stakes in the matter as they helped to frame discussion. Topics discussed during the workshop included the “repressive” construction of “Hmong culture,” gender inequalities, desirability, sexual mores, LGBTQ identities and homoeroticism, virginity, sex acts and pornography. Participants engaged in lively conversation about issues of marriage, reproduction, hookups, sexual play, age and generation, sex education, and exclusion versus tolerance, amply underscoring the multiplicity of viewpoints that are represented among Hmong Americans. Finally, we raise the need for more community dialogues and more in-depth academic inquiry into Hmong sexualities.

Keywords: Sexuality, LGBTQ, desirability, norms, morals, diversity, erotics

How to begin a conversation about Hmong sexualities? Why have such a conversation at all? And what do we mean when we say “sexualities”? In this paper, three scholars with very disparate positionalities recount one approach to starting a dialogue on Hmong sexualities, in the form of a highly participatory workshop at the Hmong National Development conference in the Twin Cities, April 2015. The conceptualization of the workshop stemmed from a brainstorming meeting between Kong Pha and Louisa Schein when their paths crossed at the States of Southeast Asian Studies conference in Minnesota in October 2014. Together we noted that we wanted to break out of molds too often imposed on our respective projects. Schein wanted to get away from the presumptively heterosexual narrative in which Hmong culture was commonly portrayed – by Hmong and other observers alike – as historically conservative and dominative toward women, and consequently as being sexually “liberated” by migration to the West. Pha longed for a forum that would allow for queer subjectivities to be illuminated, but one which would also go beyond the fixity of lesbian and gay politics with which his work had become aligned. From this basic premise, we converged on the notion of plural “sexualities,” a shorthand for the observation that there is great sexual diversity across Hmong communities in Asia and the diaspora, that Hmong live by many norms, that these norms are in flux, and morals are being contested between and within communities. Moreover, sexual *practices* routinely diverge from

whatever might be asserted to be normative, standard, cultural or moral. We wanted to bring out this complexity through a series of open-ended discussion prompts that would allow participants to voice the range of concerns and experiences they were living.

With the conviction that we required a team that would likewise reflect diversity, we invited sociologist Pao Lee Vue to join us, bringing his work on nightclubs and on interracial dating into the mix. We now had a facilitator team comprised of Hmong and white, gay, straight and queer, with vastly different but intersecting scholarly backgrounds in the social sciences and humanities incorporating ethnographic, quantitative survey style, and textual-interpretive methods. As introduced below, we also represented a range of approaches to sexuality activism both within and beyond Hmong communities. We all saw our scholarly lives as places to do activist work through discussion and education, and we concurred on challenging a prevailing sex negativity that saturates American discourse.

Sex Negativity

Sex negativity, as described by Gayle Rubin, derives from the idea that “Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force... This culture always treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges almost any sexual practice in terms of its worst possible expression. Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent. Virtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction and love...” (1993:11)

It was with enthusiasm and also trepidation that we set about crafting a proposal that would make clear to HND that sexuality is a domain demanding far-reaching exploration, and that our goal was to openly and frankly go beyond addressing the well-worn problem areas that have to date received most attention in Hmong deliberations: early pregnancy, abduction and rape, marital infidelity, homophobia, etc.

Preparation, Proposal and Self-Portraits

We were mindful of the fact that in many professional and scholarly venues, sexuality is outcast, not considered a legitimate topic for interrogation. Our proposal sought not only to introduce the workshop, but also to confront sex negativity and justify the topic being brought into the light. We crafted our write-up to address the theme of the conference, “Honoring Our Legacy, Onward to Prosperity,” suggesting that the proliferation of Hmong sexualities since the diaspora to the West has yet to be fully acknowledged. That is, we wanted to take on sexuality in its varied forms in order to understand changes in the course of the Hmong diaspora, and the struggles that have developed around sexual norms, attitudes, practices, and identities. What we proposed to Hmong National Development was worded as follows:

This workshop tackles some of the most difficult questions about sexuality within the last 40 years. In these decades, heterosexual/heteronormative sexualities have dominated discussions about Hmong sexual life, including gender exploitation, morality, and reproduction. We have seen these norms change within the last 40 years, especially with emerging conversations around erotics, interracial relationships, LGBTQ identities,

homoeroticism, and transnational marriages. Hmong Americans have also participated in mainstream debates about sexuality, such as marriage equality, racial politics, private/public sexualities, and women's sexual rights. The West has influenced Hmong Americans, especially as we begin to acquire the language and knowledge to understand and thus debate about sexual morality and norms. This conference will serve as a site where we can begin these crucial conversations that continue to go unacknowledged within our communities. Thus, we contend that a conversation about the politics of sexuality is at its most crucial time.

We went on to describe some of our goals and their intended effects:

Our workshop neatly aligns with this year's HND theme. We believe that much progress has been made regarding conversations about the differing sexual practices, romantic relationships, and identities. We want to use this conference to discuss these pressing issues, in order to confront the continued struggles that we all face about sexuality. Furthermore, we believe that a conversation in and of itself is an action step towards a bright and prosperous Hmong America. Our workshop will be crucial to research in areas of gender and sexuality within Hmong Studies. We also hope that attendees who attend this workshop will acquire tools to tackle serious programming and curriculum concerns in education and classrooms, in order to promote tolerance and mutual respect for differences. Both presenters and attendees will be able to discuss these concerns with each other, and will be able to take away key points that will impact everyone personally and professionally in the future.

Once accepted and scheduled for a 75-minute session, our task became devising a format that would engage our participants and foster multiple voices. While we thought we already had identified our purposes, our planning meeting proved surprisingly generative. Perhaps the uncharted terrain of this undertaking meant that we had to consider many options to develop a format that could be both provocative and palatable. Over the course of six hours of face-to-face meeting the night before the workshop, we shared stories, anecdotes, strategies and ideas, many transgressive enough that we quickly determined that they should be kept within our small team. In the process we learned more than any of us knew individually about Hmong sexualities, and we wrestled with systematizing the cumbersome amount of material, ever more convinced that the domain of Hmong sexualities is vast and multifold. We settled on a kind of free-listing philosophy that would allow participants to build and add in response to our open-ended prompts. By the end of the night, we had generated an opening that would preface the workshop's candid content, and establish our scholarly and personal stakes in sexuality, as well as our intended format of posing questions to the participants about norms and sex acts.

Our workshop abstract, which eventually garnered the interest of about 120 participants, had been published in the conference program as follows:

This workshop asks difficult questions about sexuality relating to norms, race, morals, pleasure, safety, and queerness. Within the last 40 years, variances in sexual/romantic relationships have become very salient within Hmong communities. However, Hmong debates have revolved more around gender/sexual exploitation, with several unfortunate consequences: First, certain norms are assumed as means to regulate and judge others'

behavior/identities. Second, questions of erotics, pleasure and fulfillment—for various genders—have been deemed morally inappropriate. Third, homoeroticism, bisexuality, socio-economic exchanges, interracial or intergenerational relationships have been regarded as exceptions in Hmong sexual life. Come join a frank discussion about the less-asked questions!

The workshop convened at 8:30 AM in a bright spacious room, which quickly filled to capacity. After waiting just a few minutes to allow workshop participants to get settled, Pha prefaced that we intended the workshop to be frank about sex. Our facilitation would be non-judgmental, dispassionate and welcoming of participants' input, revolving less around any expertise that we might claim than around establishing a protected, neutral space where viewpoints might be debated, but never condemned.

We proceeded to introduce ourselves in turn. Here we summarize our spoken introductions fleshed out to give the reader more of a sense of our respective research and personal stakes.

Kong Pha: I am a researcher and American Studies PhD student at the University of Minnesota who has struggled with the meanings of Hmong sexualities for many years. Personally, I identify as a member of the LGBTQ community, and growing up I struggled to fit into spaces where there was a lack of queer individuals. I have always wondered why there are no conversations about sexuality, when sex saturates Hmong social life in all forms (pressures for marriage and children for example). Thus, my research deals with how Hmong sexualities have been understood over the course of migration to the West, and how Hmong themselves have understood “sex” and “sexuality” as constructs and realities. My research looks at the genealogy of Hmong American sexual construction through the press and academic literature. Furthermore, my activism and community work within Hmong LGBTQ communities, especially with a Hmong LGBTQ collective called Midwest Solidarity Movement, seeks to understand queer youth identities and lived experiences. Taken together, my stakes in understanding Hmong sexualities are rooted in my personal and academic groundings as a queer Hmong American, activist, and scholar.

Louisa Schein: Working with Hmong and Miao communities in the U.S. and China for almost four decades, I never thought I would study sexuality per se. But it has continued to come up in many unavoidable ways over these years of the Hmong diaspora from Laos. I began spending time with Hmong and Miao in China and Thailand in the 1980s, when great upheavals were taking place and people were forced to become more conscious of sexual mores. Hmong sexual morality never came off as conservative to me when I was in Asia. Miao elders in China were proud of their ancient tradition of what they called “free love” which they contrasted with the Han Chinese whose longstanding “feudal” practice of arranged marriage had to be reformed by the Maoist government that demanded that marriage partners be freely chosen. Hmong/Miao teenagers in both China and Southeast Asia courted, sang love songs, and “played” outside of marriage - -and well before they were twenty. Once, in Sob Tuang refugee camp, I slept in the borrowed bed of a teen girl and felt the poke of a stick through the bamboo walls late at night accompanied by a whispered invitation from a boy who did not know that his love interest had been relocated for the night. There were certainly lots of norms that

regulated how “play” was done, but the overall feeling was positive toward sex. When I encountered - in Hmong-made videos I was writing about - the anguish surrounding the trysts of Hmong migrants traveling back to Southeast Asia, it became apparent that sexuality and struggles over morals and ethics were a flashpoint for the strained relations between Hmong diasporics and those left behind. I came to think that one of the ways Hmong mores were thought about was through the nostalgic remembering of a sexual culture that had undergone change with migration.

While I was in graduate school, my very best friend, who was a highly promising scholar, died of AIDS. We knew little about the disease, how it was transmitted and how it took lives so quickly. Alarmed and bereaved, I became very compelled by the slogan “Silence = Death” for it was clear that society could not intervene against this deadly virus if we did not learn to talk bluntly about transmission, how it happened technically in sex acts, how to prevent it, the mechanics of gay sex as well as the fact that it was transmissible heterosexually. This galvanized me to design courses on sexuality studies for graduate and undergraduate university teaching, and eventually to co-create a Minor in Critical Sexualities at Rutgers. I continue to develop and teach curriculum in critical sexualities, and to mentor student research projects in a wide range of sexuality topics in the U.S. and transnationally.

Silence = Death

The “Silence = Death” slogan was created in 1987 by six gay men in New York City prior to the founding of the well-known activist group ACT UP, with which the slogan later became closely identified. The community of six men realized that they needed to talk to each other, to share information about AIDS, and to begin to challenge the stigma around the disease. Convinced that only speaking up publicly would bring attention and intervention to the growing HIV epidemic, the slogan protested both taboos around discussion of safer sex and governmental indifference to education and prevention of AIDS. It was later supplemented by the slogans “Action = Life” and “Ignorance = Fear.”

Pao Lee Vue: While growing up (extremely poor and Hmong in the U.S.), I often longed for a successful Hmong role model. Although I knew of a few academically successful Hmong individuals, I could not relate to them for various reasons, but namely because they often labeled me as a thug/gangster and excluded me from some of their social gatherings. Since becoming an academic, I have been mostly preoccupied with studying issues that matter to Hmong youth and young adults, because as clichéd as it may sound, I believe that it is important to remember where you came from. Further, in the media and even in much of the academic literature I read as a graduate student, Hmong in the U.S. have often been described by the experience of the first generation as if there is a static Hmong culture or singular “community” representative of the Hmong

American experience. I wanted to give voice to the second generation forward, especially those who were or are often silenced.

When I began researching Hmong youth and their popular practices in the early 2000s, I learned that young Hmong males were cultivating identities reflective of race, class, gender and sexuality. Some of the most memorable moments in my research were when study participants discovered that my spouse is white (or at least appears to be white) or that my children are of mixed race descent. To many of them, I was certainly out of the ordinary, because they were convinced that intimate interracial heterosexual relationships involving Hmong males were uncommon. By the end of my study, it became apparent to me that these young Hmong males were reacting to racist structures that portrayed them through controlling images as foreign, poor and criminally deviant, and effeminate and lacking appropriate masculinity. In my current research on Hmong youth in nightclubs as well as my research on sex, dating and marriage, I am yet again seeing similar patterns in the data implicating both Hmong females and males (see below). As a concerned Hmong person, father and academic, I firmly believe that Hmong people need to engage in open dialogue about desirability and sexuality, and these critical conversations need to happen across boundaries of sexual orientation, gender and generations.

Discrepant Desirability of Asian Women and Men

There is a great disparity between the perceived desirability of Asian women and men in the U.S. While American popular culture often racializes Asian women as exotic and submissive (thus desirable by western hegemonic norms), Asian men are often racialized as lacking appropriate masculinity or dorky/foreign (essentially undesirable by the same sets of norms). While some may dismiss the seriousness of these racist stereotypes, in a paper he presented at the Annual 2013 Eastern Sociological Society Meeting, Vue describes how these stereotypes have real consequences. Among college students (N=337) at a small public university in the Upper Midwest and a small liberal arts college in the Northeast, 61.3% of respondents attracted to females indicated that they would consider dating or having sex with Asian females while only 27.0% of respondents attracted to males indicated that would consider dating or having sex with Asian males. Among nonwhite women, Asian women are the second most desired group only below Latinas (69.4%). Among nonwhite men, Asian men are the second least desired group only above Middle Eastern men (26.5%). Even though respondents included in these figures are overwhelmingly white and heterosexual, other research suggest that Asians and gay men would also respond with similar patterns of racial preference. For example, Tsunokai, McGrath and Kavanagh (2013) find that Asian heterosexual women and gay men are less willing than Asian heterosexual men to consider dating other Asians, which may reflect internalized forms of racism.

As we transitioned to dialogue, we resolved that to encourage egalitarian conversation, we would avoid presenting from the elevated stage and instead move among the participants, posing and replying to questions, and keeping track of responses on a flip chart that all could see. Our first set of topics sought to gauge the opinions and experiences of the participants. From the outset, there were consistently several people raising their hands at any one time – some wanted to weigh in on the issue at hand; others had brought their own topics and wanted to put them on the table. Vue and an HND volunteer worked the crowd, delivering the microphone to all corners of the room.

As conversation got underway, it became apparent that we would hear from a mix of male and female, gay and heterosexual, a span of ages and, as we discovered, a very broad range of positions. Almost no one explicitly identified in terms of a specific sexual identity, but they found many ways to signal their positionalities – some more personal than others. Generations came into play as participants spoke of their elders, their parents or their children. Some invoked Hmong “culture” or “tradition.” We, in turn, attempted to steer away from blanket generalizations about Hmong cultural norms and to bring out diversity by initially posing the question, in the plural, “What are the moral standards that Hmong are living by now?”

Mores, Gender, and Premarital Sex

Initially, a context of heterosexual courtship was assumed and some female respondents fielded this question by talking about a parental ban on premarital sex that constrained young people and resulted in pressures for early marriage. They also identified a double standard in which girls were much more restricted and morally judged than boys. An older participant recalled her painful divorce by foregrounding the gendered inequalities she experienced in proceedings with the elders. She commented that when she went back to inform her in-laws about her feelings of unhappiness in her marriage, her mother-in-law told her to “ua siab ntev” (tolerate or bear the pain) and not divorce her husband. She relayed being appalled by her mother-in-law’s words, because her mother-in-law – another Hmong woman – was reinforcing gender disparities. In her words, ‘How am I supposed to “ua siab ntev” when your son just cheated on me!’

Commenters, mostly women, were divided in defining the forms of gender expression that their social circles considered normative. While some spoke of pressures to be modest, submissive and sexually restrained, others insisted that those standards were counterpointed by pressures to present oneself in ways that were feminine and beautiful rather than boyish or gender-neutral. Mention was also made of the aesthetic of the very young, girlish, virginal femininity that was so desirable in Asia and that persists as a value for some. Meanwhile, with regard to standards of attractiveness, most concurred that while female “hotness” or intentional sexiness might be judged harshly in some circles, it also was valorized as a competing value in Hmong gender aesthetics.

In terms of the taboo on sex before marriage that some identified, we and other participants struck a different note, pointing out how frequently premarital sex takes place and the degree to which it is expected, even if also morally charged. We stressed the importance of distinguishing between moral and practical norms, noting that if something was expected in practice, no matter how subject to disapproval, it could also be considered a norm. Many

concluded that premarital sex is at this point, in many communities, an intrinsic part of Hmong American youth culture.

The conversation regarding mores about premarital sex led into some of our other questions. We wanted to query who is excluded or condemned when rigid norms are invoked or enforced. For instance, the discussion of premarital sex, to the extent that it built in the notion of courtship and marriage, excluded the pure hookup and playful kind of sexual activity that many participants agreed was commonplace among Hmong youth. We worked on making space for all kinds of discussion of sexual play, and we turned to the term “extramarital” so as to include those, of any age, who engage in sexual activity with others outside of marriage. This forced the question of the status of multiple regular partners, whether within or outside marriage, and some female participants tacitly expressed disapproval of men’s pursuing these liaisons. Notably, gendered assumptions were in effect, as issues around *womens’* marital infidelity remained muted.

Sex Talk, Inclusion and Sex Education

As the conversation went forward, it became increasingly evident that the Hmong “community” is indeed very plural, and that, say, the sex lives of older people, or the education of as yet sexually inactive children, were equally pressing topics. Some propounded the position that Hmong “culture” does not recognize homosexuality, that it is a non-existent identity and that Hmong see it as “unnatural.” But as gay-identified participants began to speak up, it became amply clear that any portrait of Hmong society as narrowly intolerant, as not even entertaining the possibility of homoeroticism in practice, was overstated and smuggled in “heteronormative” assumptions.

The point was also strongly made that the current outness and LGBTQ movement in some Hmong American communities made it untenable to fix a portrayal of Hmong society as unchangingly homophobic. At one point late in the workshop, bisexuality was put on the table, as a participant stood up and spoke out that he felt unrecognized by the overly sharp dichotomization of straight and gay in the conversation up to that point. Collectively we were confronted through this intervention with how easy it can be to create exclusions, even when it

Heteronormativity

What we call “heteronormativity” is the notion that heterosexuality is the norm in sexual life. Not only is sexual life *assumed* to be heterosexual, but it is presumed to revolve around sex, and especially marriage, involving only one man and one woman. Such unions may also be indelibly linked to procreation or development of a nuclear family. According to Michael Warner, heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality is the “elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist” (1993:xxii) This delegitimizes identities, sexualities, and family formations outside this definition.

would seem that inclusion was being championed. The reality that varying LGBTQ or queer subjectivities are found among Hmong in the diaspora means we must make distinctions between mainstream representations of Hmong society as hypermasculine or homophobic and the lived realities of sexual diversity and actual attitudes within Hmong communities.

Participants acknowledged that sex was both a taboo topic but also a topic that many discussed or joked about quite openly. At one point when some workshop participants were emphasizing the sexual conservatism of elders, Vue interjected that while he was growing up it was quite commonplace to hear Hmong elders – both women and men – talk about sex using very explicit language even to the point in which sexual organs were described in vivid detail. A few participants agreed. Ironically, while some seemed to hold that their parents were quite “repressed” and had not taught them about sex, their parents – through informal means of socialization – *had* taught them about sex – so much so that participants recall teasing and joking about sex with their peers at very early ages in grade school.

Indeed, there was lively deliberation about the issue of sex education. The question of parents’ or elders’ responsibility to make young people sexually aware became a subject of brainstorming, as people posed dilemmas of whether to talk about sex with children, at what age, and what to say. While most concurred that some form of knowledge transmission was crucial to prevent early pregnancy and disease transmission, there was debate about how such knowledge should be conveyed. Exchange took place between facilitators and participants as the tone became one of collective problem solving. Many participants avowed that sex was not a topic that could be broached with parents or other elders. Some asserted that in fact Hmong do plenty of information-sharing about sex, but it is peers, cousins, classmates or others closer in age who confide in each other. One participant asked for advice on the *right* way to talk to their child about sex. Although we avoided prescriptive solutions, facilitators and participants alike offered anecdotal accounts as appropriate (including Vue and Schein talking about their own parenting), but stressed that there is no universally correct approach. In order to “move onward” as the conference theme had suggested, we floated that the new generation of Hmong parents in the U.S. might consider nonjudgmental dialogue with their children, including a matter-of-fact acknowledgement that even among Hmong there is diversity of sexualities.

Additionally, there were discrepant standpoints on early pregnancy or even teen sex. A parent commented that while she *preferred* her children not to have sex as teenagers, she would understand and accept it if her children were to have sex with people whom they love. This may have been a direct rebuttal to an earlier college student’s generalization that Hmong mainly view sex as a means for reproduction, rather than pleasure. For this college student, it had been communicated to her early on by her family members that sex should be for procreation, not for her enjoyment. The parent among the participants had perhaps made her comment to reference that sex can indeed be an outcome of love, and not merely just for having children. Schein brought in again the long “traditions” of sex-positive play among Hmong/Miao in Asia. While considered within the parameters of courtship, these norms nonetheless condoned – even codified through customs such as the singing of antiphonal love songs at festivals – young peoples’ ardent pursuit of sexual contact premaritally. This illumination is two-fold. While the mother’s comment conveyed attitudes around morality and opinions about teen sex as “love” as opposed to “pleasure,” it also revealed the extent to which parents and children communicate or think about each other’s sex lives.

It is noteworthy that religion was not raised by participants in relation to Hmong morality and that participants by and large declined to identify their own religious identities. At several points, Schein raised the question of Christianity. She recalled the positive attitudes and openness she encountered among some non-Christian Miao in China and Hmong in Laos and Thailand, and questioned how Hmong norms might have become “conservative” over history. The impact of Western/Christian morality would have been felt by some Hmong as early as the encounter with missionaries in Southeast Asia. As more Hmong were converted and became very serious practitioners of Christianity, those morals would have become incorporated and naturalized as Hmong cultural standards such that large sectors of the Hmong world became more disapproving of non-reproductive and extramarital sex. This in turn would have produced the skewed impression, especially for some who were critical of these standards, that it was precisely the permissiveness and hypersexuality of some *Western* sexual cultures that stood to ‘liberate’ or “modernize” Hmong sexuality. Christian mores having been thoroughly “indigenized,” enfolded into the construction of Hmong tradition as conservative, now would make it possible for the ostensible “repressiveness” of Hmong earlier generations to be called out by Hmong American youth. Aside from this moment, the role of religion in shaping mores remained unproblematized throughout.

The Repressive Hypothesis

In his classic work, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, philosopher Michel Foucault posed questions that are worthy of attention in thinking about what is accomplished by calling out the purported repressiveness or conservatism of Hmong culture or of Hmong Christianity: “Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?” What Foucault argued was that the naming of such repression had the effect of distinguishing the speaker as somehow beyond it: “If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets the established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom” (1980: 6-9). The stakes were high, Foucault implied, for this “freedom,” too, stood to become normalized in ways that condemned others.

Pornography, Virginity, Variety

At one point well into the discussion, we posed pornography as a potential site of moral contention. Participants were immediately very vocal, with both middle-aged and college-aged members chiming in. It was striking to see the variety of topics linked to porn as commentary jumped from person to person. Attitudes ranged from acceptance to apprehension. Some participants were not too keen on the consumption of porn and some suggested that it is an extension of the heterosexual male gaze. Two particularly outspoken middle-aged women suggested that watching porn might have spurred Hmong men to have unrealistic expectations in

the bedroom – that “they (Hmong men) see it and want to do it.” These women theorized that this has led to marital problems, even divorces. While these women seemed to maintain that consuming pornography can be damaging, some college-aged participants argued otherwise. One young man, perhaps in his early 20s, suggested that viewing pornography was necessary for him to obtain knowledge about sex because there is so much pressure for heterosexual men to perform even if it is their first time. He intimated that he lacked sexual experience with another person and was possibly a “virgin.” Another college-aged male participant shared that porn allowed him to explore other acts beyond vaginal sex. For him, vaginal sex dominated the conversations he had growing up with family members, relatives, and friends. Porn exposed the possibility that oral sex or anal sex could potentially be acts that are permissible and/or pleasurable.

We also heard from a college-aged woman who commented that she too enjoys watching porn and emphasized that it was not just for men’s consumption but for women as well. She was also perhaps one of the most vocal in questioning the concept of “virginity.” As she and others pointed out, there are many forms of “virginity” that extend beyond heterosexual intercourse with a penis and vagina. Younger workshop participants suggested that there can be oral and anal virginity as well. Such discussions led participants themselves to pose the question, ‘When does one lose their “virginity”?’ Indeed, can a person only lose their virginity once in their lifetime? Does oral sex or anal sex count? Is it the act of penetration itself that determines “virginity”? Is “virginity” affected by masturbation and sex toys? Despite the candid nature of discussion, even on this topic there was never a moment of awkwardness or silence, because the eagerness to talk was so overwhelming. A young college-aged man, remarking that the conversation revolved too much around heterosexual pornography, quickly chimed in that Hmong Americans also watch gay pornography, and some ultimately engage in homosexual acts. This young – self-identified gay – man stated that his heterosexual female friends also enjoyed watching male gay porn, similar to how heterosexual men watch women perform lesbian acts in pornography. This young man’s point was that gay male pornography was not only consumed by others who are not gay men, but also that pornography may not always be for the consumption of the heterosexual male.

As mentioned earlier, some participants were disapproving toward porn and some suggested that pornography is sexist, with another young man associating to the question of whether women actually enjoy anal sex, or whether anal sex among heterosexuals is an extension of male supremacy. In fact, another young man questioned the extent to which one should view porn. He commented that while porn may be pleasurable, *too much* porn may have adverse effects, perhaps leading to addiction or interference with other life activities. A gay participant was frustrated at the direction of the conversation and spoke up toward the end. He noted that it seemed there were people accepting anal sex, pornography, or even teen sex nowadays, and yet there were still people who did not accept LGBTQ individuals. He asked why and how we can move toward accepting homosexuality as central to Hmong sexual life, rather than merely acknowledging homosexuality as a marginal form of sexuality.

What We Learned: Beginnings

Having revisited many of the topics discussed during the course of the brief workshop, we turn now to the question of what these discussions showed, what could be taken away from the spontaneous sharing of such a multifarious set of issues and perspectives. In retrospect, what

was demonstrated was, first, how great is the desire to speak more, and more openly, about sexuality concerns. Despite the early hour, many showed up on time and ultimately did not want to disband, some staying until almost thirty minutes *after* the 75-minute session was slated to end. Even then, individuals lingered, extending the discussion by bringing us their personal issues and visions for the future. Two college students from California came forward and expressed a desire to bring this conversation to forums at their own institution. With this in mind, we could say that the conversation had indeed begun.

Second, the multiplicity of viewpoints made amply clear that among Hmong Americans there is contention, experimentation, moral stress, pressure, tolerance, acceptance, and rejection of all kinds of sexuality. Importantly, such plurality by no means indicates that “anything goes” among Hmong Americans. To the contrary, judgment, pressure, or regulations regarding sex in Hmong communities has been keenly felt, often tinged with ambivalence and mixed signals over what is acceptable, pleasurable, or permissible versus dirty, unnatural, immoral. Whatever might have been constructed as Hmong “sexual culture” was slippery, could not be fixed, and thus could not be easily opposed or reformed. Instead, individuals and families are navigating uncertain waters as they attempt to work out mores and practices for themselves and those close to them. We thus launch this conversation from the premise that there exist norms, but they are more varied than what we may think and that Hmong Americans move through multiple communities that regard sexuality in highly disparate ways. In a way, our workshop showed that all kinds of social sectors, old, young, women, men, gay, straight, hold divergent views on sexuality. What could be brought out more is that these views may shift even within one individual as their social circles shift and they shuttle between moral and practical norms.

To say that Hmong communities do not talk about sex does not capture the extent to which sex is in fact communicated in the household or in different Hmong social circles, even if sometimes through indirection. Furthermore, sex is currently understood in several ways: reproduction, love, marital commitment, pleasure. Of course, this also renders visible divisions over whether sex in general, and teen/early sex in particular, should be policed on moral grounds. What does this say about teen/early sex not as love, but as pleasure? And, concomitantly, about teen sex leading to pregnancy? The nuances remain to be expanded, but the discrepant views are illuminating. While it did not come in for discussion in this venue, one of the issues this forces is the status of abortion – which has become amply available to Hmong Americans over the last forty years, despite uneven availability by state – as opposed to early marriage as a way of handling premarital pregnancy.

Although we were unable to discuss all of the topics we had planned for, the topics that *were* discussed (pornography, virginity, anal sex, for example) were concrete and encompassed many voices, including many who expressed sex-positive stances. With just the topic of “pornography” alone, we could see the range of acts and attitudes attached to sexuality. If we reflect on the young porn viewer who stated that he was using it to increase his sexual proficiency, we see the intersections of gender and sexuality, and of morals with pragmatism, in a sexually active social field. This young man’s case helps to shed light on how some young Hmong men may find hegemonic masculinity oppressive, even as they remain reluctant participants in this normative gender culture. That a woman insisted that porn is not exclusively for men also reveals the plurality with which young people live gender norms, and the tension between feeling themselves to be Hmong versus American in their choices, preferences and acts.

Female openness to pornography, then, could be seen on the one hand as accepting a kind of oppression of women, but alternately as embracing a kind of gender liberation.

The case of pornography, then, yielded a surprisingly fruitful exploration touching on morals, sex education, sexism, media, pleasure, marital expectations and much more. Porn, then, cannot be reduced to a signal of older vs. younger, or sexual conservatism vs. sexual liberation, but, rather, can be encountered as a means by which regulation or judgment is performed in order to question to what extent, *and how much*, sexuality and sexual acts are permissible. Our point here is that even younger Hmong have their own norms, regulations, and judgments around porn that cannot be seamlessly aligned with the notion of “liberal sexuality.”

Notably, this raises the key issue of whether the mores and judgements of a given person are more shaped by their communities and affiliations or by their own adjudication of the range of possible positions and choices. This reminds us of how important is the interpretation of the individual and their immediate community in a field of competing mores and values, that the bifurcation of Hmong and American is in some ways far too blunt a dichotomy to be useful in charting Hmong sexualities. Indeed, the changes over the life course of individuals poses another complication. College age emerges as especially crucial, and some participants narrated the ways that their stances had shifted in college as they were exposed to an almost limitless array of possible activities, memberships, ideas and political platforms.

Rubin’s Democratic Morality

One of the founders of the field of sexuality theorizing, and of what has been called the ‘sex radical’ standpoint, Gayle Rubin advocated a “concept of benign sexual variation” and defined an alternate to what she saw as conventional Western morality: “A democratic morality should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide” (1993:15).

Looking Forward

In a debriefing after the workshop, we noted the vast array of topics that were left hanging, unresolved, and even unentertained. We thought harder on what it really meant to think about sexual diversity and to encounter it as benign, which in turn led us to attend to some of the omissions and silences that marked our short workshop. For instance, how and why was female same-sex sexuality not discussed at all? When could female homoeroticism be considered truly erotic, versus just a display or an act? We pondered on this, since the point was brought up in the workshop that Hmong male homoeroticism does not necessarily equal “gay.” Can the same be said about female-female relationships?

There were many more acts about which we would expect responses to be rich and diverse. We deliberated over the role kissing plays in regards to public displays of affection and

more private sexual communication. When did kissing come into play as a sex act for Hmong? Is kissing regulated? We wondered whether Hmong Americans are engaging in sex acts that, while some may say are quite commonplace among the general population, some might also say are too perverse, such as 3-way hookups, using sex toys, paying for sex or engaging in sex work. Although mention had been made and some interest had been suggested regarding BDSM and the novel/film *Fifty Shades of Grey*, one participant interpolated that “If this (i.e., BDSM) is allowed, it could be a slippery slope. What else would become permissible? Like I watched this thing about sexual cannibalism...” Although her statement halted conversation, the brief dialogue reveals that a great deal needs to be unpacked with regard to social constructions of what is erotic perversion.

Our extensive conversation about pornography still left critical questions unaddressed. For example, what are Hmong adults’ takes on whether children and teens can be exposed to porn? Are there differing standards for still images, such as magazines with nudity, versus, say, hardcore videos with moving images of explicit acts? How do people feel about rough, dirty, or unromantic sex in pornography? Are these forms of sex being played out when Hmong are actually having sex? What norms and standards about “sexiness” and “ugliness” in porn do Hmong maintain? How is attraction determined, and what standards of beauty are being upheld? Do porn standards translate into aesthetics and gender expression in practice?

It is clear from our initial conversation, and the lingering questions, that porn remains a site where debates around power and gender are raised for Hmong of all ages. How much are Hmong producing porn, with Hmong actors and actresses, and how much of it is being consumed? We wondered whether Hmong-produced porn would be set in Southeast Asia or the United States. Pha wanted to push the conversation on pornography further by posing the question of whether participants themselves would do porn or would allow their own family members to engage in porn production. This question proved difficult for participants as many did not consider or anticipate themselves or their family members to become producers or performers in porn.

Despite our discussions of sex education, there was more to be said about prevention. What do various Hmong Americans think about condoms versus other kinds of prevention? Is there a valuing of condoms because they prevent disease transmission, or is heterosex focused on methods such as the birth control pill for deterring pregnancy? Is the risk of disease transmission and/or pregnancy pushing people to explore other “safer” types of sex acts, such as oral and/or non-penetrative, no matter how non-normative?

With regard to practices of birth control, how are decisions made about aborting pregnancies and what is their moral status? We also wondered whether vasectomy and other forms of sterilization fit into the conversation about safe-sex, sex education, and pregnancy. What is normative around sterilization? Permanent sterilization may be an interesting, and perhaps uncomfortable, topic to discuss, especially for those who view sex as strictly for reproductive purposes. What then are the possibilities, consequences, and politics of sex when reproduction is permanently averted?

Ultimately, we concurred that a conversation going forward might need to be harder hitting on questions of difference, and perhaps exploitation. More could be said about what is

defined as rape, and what other kinds of social pressures result in unwanted sex, or perhaps in unprotected sex. How do Hmong Americans feel about the widespread media accusations of force used on very young women, especially in abduction marriage and gang rape contexts? We also wondered what forms of commercial sex were in practice, whether there was any formal sex work or other kinds of sexual-economic exchange taking place, and how did members of the community regard these practices?

Schein raised critical questions around clubbing, which is also pertinent to Vue's research. For example, what does female-female eroticism mean on the dance floor? Would male-male dancing be acceptable? We contemplated the extent to which "American" forms of dancing were being practiced in nightclubs. That is, does lap dancing, grinding, and fondling occur, and are there norms and regulations around such acts? Are such acts considered "American," "just fun," or sexual foreplay? Lastly, what kind of dancing is acceptable for older or younger people?

Relatedly, we would like to see future treatments confront hard questions about social location and sexual partnering. What is the current practice and perspective on transnational sex, i.e. Hmong Americans seeking trysts or marriage partners overseas? When there is a large age disparity – especially to the point of what might be considered "intergenerational sex" – is there a moral overlay for some members of the community and not for others? How is this defined and evaluated? Are there differing definitions of "too young"? At what age does a young person become appropriately sexual and with what ages might they have sex or partner acceptably in Hmong eyes? When are these unions to be childbearing? We wondered whether and for whom sex between older and younger people would be considered rape or sexual abuse. Can there ever be romantic love between such couples, or are other forms of erotics at play?

Likewise, what are current takes on interracial sex, dating and marriage? Indeed, an older male participant in the workshop, perhaps in his early 40s, asked whether we had data about Hmong people's attitudes on interracial relationships specifically. To his dismay (he was quiet for the rest of the workshop), Vue's survey research on sex, dating and marriage were limited to college students who are overwhelmingly white. In fact, for various reasons, much of the academic attitudinal research on sex, dating and marriage focus on the attitudes of whites and, to a lesser extent, blacks. Yet, even studies that specifically focus on the perceptions of Asians in dating preferences still do not reflect Hmong people's attitudes specifically.

Academic inquiry about Hmong people's current attitudes about interracial dating – as well as their attitudes on the various topics we have discussed throughout this paper – would lend insight into how Hmong are approaching life in the U.S. How are they managing the attributions of sexy desirability for Asian women, and conversely the negations of sexiness so commonly attributed to Asian men – especially in popular cultural contexts where Hmong and other Southeast Asian men are simultaneously portrayed as hypermasculine gangsters (see Schein and Thoj 2012)? A corollary point of interest could be how Hmong Americans approach their sexuality in relation to fitting into their perception of the American "mainstream." Specifically, do they view sexuality and assimilation as intertwined and do they craft their sexualities or seek certain sexual partners in keeping with their visions of "Americanization"? Of course, such inquiry should be cautious to not overgeneralize because, as underscored here, Hmong people vary greatly in their standpoints as much as in their identity categories, such as sex, sexual

orientation, age, gender, or religiosity, and this affects how they engage with dominant images. How are debates about these issues proceeding forty years after migration to the U.S. began? As the conversation continues, we will be able to begin to gather responses to many of these remaining questions.

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Kong Pheng Pha is a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at the University of Minnesota. His dissertation, currently entitled "Queer Refugeeism: Constructions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Hmong Diaspora," examines how ideas of being "refugees" helps to construct and inform the ways Hmong racial, gendered, and sexualized representations and constructions are understood through time. Furthermore, his dissertation explores the stakes that these constructions of gender and sexuality have on contemporary Hmong youth identities, community formation, queer subjectivities, and queer theorizing. He is passionate about social justice and uses research and activism together to fight for racial and queer justice.



Louisa Schein teaches Cultural Anthropology, Women's and Gender Studies, and Asian American Studies at Rutgers. She works with Hmong/Miao in China and the U.S. and is author of *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press 2000), and co-editor with Purnima Mankekar of *Media, Erotics and Transnational Asia* (Duke University Press 2012). She is co-director of two documentaries on Hmong Americans, *Better Places* (2011) with Peter O'Neill and *Shamans, Herbs and MDs* in-progress with Va-Megn Thoj. Co-founder of the Critical Hmong Studies collective, her recent work, collaborative with Bee Vang, concerns media, masculinity and sexualities.



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