

***Gran Torino's Hmong Lead
Bee Vang on Film, Race and Masculinity***

Conversations with Louisa Schein, Spring, 2010

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Abstract

Bee Vang, of Minneapolis, played the Hmong lead Thao Vang Lor in Clint Eastwood's 2008 *Gran Torino*. He was sixteen when he shot the film and had no acting training. For 27 days on location in urban Detroit he played before a Hollywood crew opposite an icon of the film industry doing multiple takes of each scene and camera angle. The shoot was full of unexpected twists and turns some of which he recounts in these interchanges with Hmong media expert Louisa Schein of the Departments of Anthropology and Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University. Over several conversations, condensed here, Vang and Schein talk about *Gran Torino*, about acting and film critique, about immigrants and stereotypes, about masculinity and sexuality, and about Vang's vision for what needs to change to address problems of race and inequality in and beyond media worlds.

Keywords: Bee Vang, *Gran Torino*, Clint Eastwood, Detroit, Masculinity, Acting, race Asian masculinity, Asian stereotypes, Immigrants, refugees, Hmong, Hmong media

Bee Vang, of Minneapolis, played the Hmong lead Thao Vang Lor in Clint Eastwood's 2008 *Gran Torino*. He was sixteen when he shot the film and had no acting training. For 27 days on location in urban Detroit he played before a Hollywood crew opposite an icon of the film industry doing multiple takes of each scene and camera angle. With no prior experience, the shoot was full of unexpected twists and turns some of which he recounts below. By the end of the production, he had begun to consider switching course from his 3-year pre-Med trajectory to a future in acting, filmmaking and film studies. He began these studies over two years in a pre-college program at the University of Minnesota and is now continuing as a firstyear student at Brown University.

Since *Gran Torino*, Mr. Vang has acted in several stage performances as well as independent films, including in the role of a Korean grad student in the college romance *Anatomically Incorrect*, as a troubled teen son with a speech impediment in the drama *Sunset on Dawn*, as a ruthlessly violent gangster in the action feature *Fallen City*, and as a seasoned kung-fu master in the Youtube spoof *Thao Does Walt: Lost Scenes from Gran Torino* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMaIOFMg64M&feature=related>). He has also spent a great deal of time doing public speaking on the film, the production process, and the issues that have been generated for the Hmong community in the aftermath. His appearances include keynote speaker at a Stockton, California conference on gang violence, panelist at a Los Angeles Paley Center for Media discussion of images of immigrants in Hollywood, and artist/presenter at the Boston Asian American Film Festival. He collaborates with Hmong filmmaker Va-Megn Thoj, with University of California at Santa Barbara Phd student Ly Chong Thong Jalao and with Hmong media expert Louisa Schein on social justice activist projects in print, internet and film.

Schein exchanged ideas with him in several installments between March and June of 2010, then edited the material for readability.

Louisa Schein teaches Anthropology, Women's and Gender Studies and Asian American Studies at Rutgers New Brunswick. She has worked with Hmong Americans for three decades, has done longterm fieldwork in China on the Miao and is author of *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics* (Duke 2000). She is currently writing a book, *Rewind to Home: Hmong Media and Gendered Diaspora*. Co-founder of the scholarly network Critical Hmong Studies Collective, she is also collaborating on two documentary films about Hmong Americans. From the time of the *Gran Torino* casting, she has followed the Hmong actors and Hmong perspectives and the film, placing stories in *AsianWeek and Hmong Today*. With Bee Vang and other Hmong actors and critics she has participated in forums around the country on the film. She also published with Hmong filmmaker Va-Megn Thoj "Occult Racism" in *American Quarterly* on the Hmong hunting murders in Wisconsin and "Gran Torino's Boys and Men with Guns: Hmong Perspectives" in *Hmong Studies Journal*.

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LS: *Talk about yourself and your interests growing up. Especially your exposure to film and acting.*

BV: I was born in Fresno in 1991, but moved to the Twin Cities as a baby. I remember getting interested in movies at an early age. But my love for film, when I began to appreciate films on a different level, really started at age 9. My family loved to watch Asian movies that had been dubbed in Hmong. We didn't pay any attention to American movies. We watched Japanese, Hong Kong, Chinese, Thai, Bollywood. It wasn't until much later that I heard of anyone like Brad Pitt or George Clooney...

LS: *Do you remember being conscious of race in those early film-watching years?*

BV: No, not when I was younger, but it might have had something to do with the fact that I grew up watching predominantly Asian films. Living in America, though, it was inevitable that I would start watching some movies made in the West. From my early teens, I remember Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*, Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*, Rambo and other war movies. I found the war movies ridiculous: too much action.

Then I saw *Heaven and Earth* [the 1993 Oliver Stone film based on a Vietnamese woman's memoir of the war], and I felt so critical of it as a white man's story about a white savior. I never wanted the Vietnamese woman to give in to Tommy Lee Jones – I was always for her independence. And when she spoke broken English with him, it made me more angry because it emphasized her lack of power. I always preferred films about Asians in the original language with subtitles...

LS: *Did you identify the movie with your own history at all?*

BV: Not really. It just seemed like another war movie. I know that the author – who was a Vietnamese woman - hadn't intended to make a movie. She was writing a memoir [Le Ly Hayslip, 1990, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace*. Plume]. The process of turning it into a movie felt like turning it into lies. I objected to the way the cinematography – like sweeping shots of landscapes - made the actual war seem more beautiful and diminished that it was a horrible and terrifying experience for her.

I remember thinking, though, that if it hadn't been for the war in Vietnam, there wouldn't have been all those war movies and Asians would never have had as much of a presence in Hollywood. Ironically, the war created acting opportunities for us -- even if the roles were undeveloped and we stood for the enemy most of the time.

LS: *How did Americans' chronic confusion of Southeast Asian refugees with Asian enemies play for you personally?*

BV: Well it always made me think that we, as Asians, had to be saved, but also saved from each other. The only way that we could be saved was through Western intervention. Of course, my response at an early age was that we were backwards, cruel and had to be whitened. I kind of took that on, but at the same time, it was a ridiculous idea to me!

LS: *So what went through your head when you started to hear about Gran Torino?*

BV: I never thought I would try out. I heard about the story and the “sides” – the excerpts from the script that were used for auditions—and I was just really repulsed by what I read. I tried to make sense of the characters and their lines. But there were things I couldn't figure out about the relations between Walt and the Hmong characters. For instance, at some point Thao tells Walt “Go ahead. I don't care if you insult me or say racist things, because you know what? I'll take it.” I didn't understand why a character like Thao would say that. Why wouldn't he object to being insulted? What does “taking it” even mean? What was intended by the screenwriter or was this just careless writing?

LS: *The story, as we know, takes place in Detroit and centers on a white man who is probably dying and doesn't have much time left. His Asian neighbors are a backdrop to his search for redemption from acts in the Korean war—*

BV: Of course, those Asians are nothing but FOBs or youth on the streets killing each other...

LS: *Right. So Walt has to teach them the “right” way to behave, and to save the good ones from the bad. In the process, he valiantly takes the fall. Talk about your impressions of the plot, the script itself.*

BV: The thing is, the story can't take place without those Hmong characters, especially mine. But in the end, it's Walt that gets glorified. We fade out in favor of his heroism. I felt negated by the script and by extension in my assuming the role. It's almost like a non-role. Strange for a lead...

LS: *What about the script's portrayal of Thao's masculinity?*

BV: Well first off, the girlfriend part is totally crazy....Walt and the gangsters and the grandma – all of them have nothing but insults about Thao's manliness – or lack thereof. He doesn't cut it in any way and he's not super-hot. So why is it that the gorgeous girl decides to pick him over all the other guys?

LS: *It sends an incoherent message, doesn't it?*

BV: That the dumb, passive, quiet, loner guy can still get the best girl. It pained me that Thao let his masculinity suffer so badly over the course of the story.

LS: *The only manhood he gains is bestowed by Walt, and that's pretty dubious even up to the end....And how did you feel about the character descriptions?*

BV: The Thao character was described as an "Asian Johnny Depp." "A slight, slender Hmong boy with long hair and eyelashes." OK, but I didn't understand the function of those looks in the story. Also I was annoyed at the comparing of Asian men to a white standard of beauty. I mean [chuckles] who's to say we're not even better than Johnny's looks?

LS: *How did you interpret this in terms of your own look?*

BV: I have no idea what look they cast me for. I know I don't look like Johnny Depp. And on set they didn't do anything about my looks, just told me to come as I was...it's still a mystery to me.

LS: *So you were uneasy about the lines and character descriptions. Why did you audition and ultimately take the part?*

BV: Friends kept pushing me to try out. I didn't take it seriously. Didn't think I'd get the part. But when I was called back for another round of auditioning, I realized I wanted to be part of the hype, because this would become a great cultural event of our time, especially for Hmong. Most importantly, my intentions were, as I continued to audition and do my best, to try to improve on the script and the ways Hmong were portrayed. I wanted to create a character that people could love. I decided to commit to developing the role of Thao, making him more complex and credible. I imagined a guy who would chafe at his subordination more. So even when he had to obey, he did it with more attitude.

LS: *Did you feel you succeeded in creating this character?*

BV: I added a lot of intonation and gestures to try to give Thao some dignity. For instance, when my sister is offering me to work for Walt, I raised my voice to a shout to indicate I hated the idea of slaving for Walt. That outburst wasn't in the script. But most of the script was not very open to interpretation and it was premised on his not having any dignity. He needs to be clueless and have no self-respect in order for the white elder man to achieve his savior role. He has to hang his head and absorb abuse. So it makes me wonder how a character like Thao could bring any change to Walt.

LS: *Were you able to draw on parts of yourself or your experience for this role?*

BV: Well that was the idea, from what I could tell. The production process didn't include rehearsals or coaching. Eastwood didn't want us to consult with him. He just wanted us to be ourselves. The plan was for us to be so-called "natural actors," just stepping out of our lives and into the frames. This way the production could move efficiently. So we didn't get the scripts until a week before the shooting started and had no prep time to get into the psychology of the character.

LS: *What did this mean in terms of your process, then?*

BV: The roadblock for me was that I couldn't identify with Thao as the demeaned boy that he was. All the while, hearing that my performance was to be as a so-called "natural," I found myself resisting the character more and more. So I had to draw instead on my best acting skills to counter my feelings about Eastwood's lack of direction. I had to put aside my doubts about the character, and create a contradictory guy who was sometimes just submissive and sometimes struggled to stand up for himself. I wanted him to have depth and complexity. I had to make that up myself...to the extent that it was possible within the script.

LS: *How did you feel about the result?*

BV: That's a difficult one. I know I gave it my all, but at the same time, it doesn't look like stellar acting to me. I just wished that perhaps the physical acting aspect would at least be recognizable. Also, it's funny, when I watch the final product of *Gran Torino*, I often have the impression that the takes they chose for each scene were my weakest. I'm not sure what that's about.

LS: *Say more about the role itself.*

BV: But then I think that maybe it's not about the quality of my acting. It's the fact of the character being unsympathetic because of his weakness. It's an odd thing, as a first time actor, to have to step into a role that's disparaged by the script and humiliated by the other characters. Playing him well is like making a deal with the devil. To the extent that I did a good job, I reinforced that image of effeminate Asian guys who are wimps, geeks and can't advocate for themselves.

LS: *Does Thao become a man in your opinion? Does he get stronger?*

BV: I worked on that. It wasn't easy because the scenes were shot completely out of sequence so it was hard to get a sense of the continuity and the progression. I tried to show Thao's change through the physicality of my performances. I hung my head less and less. In the barbershop scene, I made my voice get a bit raspier and more like Eastwood's as they tried to "man me up." I threw in some sassy gestures. By the time I was getting the job at the construction site, I added more of a swagger to my walk. Things like that.

LS: *So did this mean he was achieving manhood?*

BV: I'm pretty iffy about that. For instance, at the end of the barbershop scene, the humor comes from the fact that Thao doesn't know what he's saying. He supposedly tries to talk like the older white men, but stupidly comes up with a line that makes him out to be an object of male gang-rape or something. What the barber and Walt laugh at him for is that he doesn't even know what he's saying. This relies on a kind of a dumb refugee image. The line he says – 'boy does my ass hurt from all the guys at my construction job' – is just nonsensical to him. Only the white guys get the homophobic joke. So, Thao really doesn't grow in this scene; for some reason, the scene ends and segues to the construction site scene. Only there does Thao put what he learned to use, which I find is strange.

This kind of scene could have been done so much better. The script would have been so much tighter if Thao had understood what he was saying and come up with a line that showed that part of his becoming a man was being able to craft his speech to show it. How does that laughable line indicate he's ready to go get a construction job?

LS: *Did you feel like you were playing Hmong in Gran Torino? At what points in the story, if any, did you feel you drew on your Hmong identity to play the role?*

BV: I know there were a lot of Hmong references and scenes in the film, but I didn't feel it in my character. What I felt was being called on to perform the pan-Asian stereotype of the submissive, kow-towing geek with no girlfriend. Plus there's no real reason for us to be Hmong in the script. We could be any minority. And not only that, but Walt is always confusing us with Koreans and other Asians. Even with the enemies he fought in Korea. So Hmong culture, Hmong identity didn't end up seeming so relevant.

LS: *How do you feel about what audiences reflect back to you regarding the film?*

BV: Y'know a middle-aged white guy was telling me the thing he loved most about *Gran Torino* was the interactions between Walt and the Hmong people – that the film "rings true" to him in some kind of way. A lot of people say this. Well -- "rings true" for who? Maybe to people who live in a world where whites are the only heroes. Or to those who take the film as a documentary about Hmong culture. Even other Asians do this a lot. And then they tell me how much they learned about my culture. Meanwhile, what a lot of us Hmong feel is that the film is distorting and *un-true*. I guess watching *Gran Torino* is really subjective. People get all sorts of different things out of it.

LS: *You've said a lot about the Asian masculinities portrayed in mainstream media. Talk about your own background, how you were brought up, what kind of male role models you had...*

BV: When I was young, my Dad was a very important figure in my life. I was expected to follow him around to funerals and weddings and other rituals and help him with whatever he was doing. Through him and my other male relatives, I was learning to be strong and respectable, to shake hands and be good with words. I saw how to be polite, especially to elders -- even to ancestors. It was very important to be able to speak well, including in front of groups, and not make an ass of yourself.

LS: *Would you describe these things as part of masculinity?*

BV: Yes, an alternative masculinity you could say....Y'know helping is a big part of it. There are different takes on helping. Remember the scene in *Gran Torino* where the old white lady neighbor spills her groceries? Thao helps her pick them up, which is nice and Walt is impressed. *But* Thao is contrasted with two other Hmong guys who pass by her and don't help and even make humping motions behind her back. This kind of shameless macho seems more white to me and it makes Thao's helping seem more effeminate. In Walt's eyes, Thao's helping makes him a good kid, but also makes him less masculine. That's the turning point, where Walt decides to make an effort to man him up. To me, it's also where Walt starts imposing his version of white masculinity on Thao. He sees that Thao has the impulse to be respectful and help. But it's not just anyone he helps – it's a senior white lady. At this point Walt *also* sees that Thao can subordinate himself to a white person by picking up her groceries. So he decides that Thao could bend over to take Walt's instruction too...

LS: *Say more about what's white about that masculinity.*

BV: In my own upbringing, helping – especially helping elders - just didn't feel this way at all. It didn't have any association with femininity....My Dad is a shaman. His sons are supposed to assist him in ceremonies and it's an honor to do that. I felt that a lot growing up. We would carry his stuff and set up for him. We would bow at the right times and we would support him to make sure he was safe when he was in trance. We would sacrifice chickens for him while he communicated with the spirits. I loved doing all that. I will miss it.

LS: *What about helping in relation to women and girls?*

BV: Well, one thing is that men who are courting or married are supposed to convey their caring by helping women with their work. It's not about becoming emasculated and doing women's work. It's about showing consideration and respect...about being thoughtful and helpful with whatever her burden is....Instead of showing himself off in terms of the individual qualities he's supposed to be proud of in himself, it's about a man showing how he can subordinate all this to the relationship. Guys who do this well are *more* desirable to women, not *less* masculine.

LS: *Say more about what your home life was like.*

BV: Growing up I had five brothers and only one sister. So we five boys had to pitch in to make things work around the house. In *Gran Torino* there's all those lines about "women's work" when Thao does the dishes or does gardening. I don't know: Sometimes when we'd have a lot of people in the house for a ceremony or something, I'd be the one washing the vegetables -- and it was no big deal. The work just needs to get done. My Dad would pitch in too.

LS: *So there was no stigma – it didn't make you seem effeminate or gay to do that stuff?*

BV: Well maybe for some people who choose to see these differences. But that's so retro. I love deliberately crossing gender lines and messing with social boundaries. And I actually like

cleaning house and washing dishes. It doesn't feel scary femme to me... Also it really annoys me that it would be associated with homosexuality. What does housework have to do with sexual partners anyway? Asians have enough to deal with being framed as homosexual in the American racial scene. If it's so hard for the mainstream to see us as straight, the last thing we need to do call *each other* gay for irrelevant reasons. Also where does that leave Asians who actually want to be comfortable in gay identities? There's no space for them to own their sexuality...

LS: *Did all the family responsibilities you describe ever conflict with schoolwork? How did your parents value schoolwork?*

BV: Schoolwork always came first. For boys and girls equally. My Dad made us finish our homework before we could play. And then after we played for a while, we had to have reading time where we read stuff that wasn't even assigned for homework.

LS: *So was educational success tied in with gender in any way?*

BV: I've always felt going through my education that my manhood would be partly measured by getting higher degrees after college. But at the same time, my Dad taught us to always stick together and put family first. We always had to balance – all the social stuff, being with Hmong family and everything, we had to do that around the edges of getting our academic work done. I don't know... remember the line in *Gran Torino* where Sue says "The girls go to school and the boys go to jail"?

LS: *Yes of course.*

BV: The thing is, it makes all of us guys who are in school feel invisible. Maybe those *other* Asian Americans are supposed to value education and be super-achievers, but that one little line defines Hmong boys as the opposite. It's like Hmong will always be nothing more than peasants and footsoldiers. In America we'll turn into manual laborers and gangsters. It's like our past determines us forever. I mean, jeez, my parents had basically no education, and that hasn't stopped *us*.

LS: *What do you think of the fact that Sue is the one who says this line?*

BV: It compounds the problem. A lot of Americans – even Hmong – say that she is describing a "truth" of Hmong refugee social life. It makes me so angry! The fact that a Hmong girl says it makes it seem like it's not racist to say such a thing. But those lines were put in her mouth by a non-Hmong writer who invented her. I wish audiences were not so passive and could remind themselves more often about the authorship here...

LS: *What's next for you?*

BV: I have a lot of ideas. I'm on my way to college at Brown in Rhode Island. I'm going to study filmmaking and pursue my acting. And I'm also going to study Chinese and see where it all takes me. Whatever I do, I want to keep social justice work in the mix.

LS: *What are your social justice issues?*

BV: In terms of my own activism, I've been working on Hmong and Asian visibility stuff. I've done a lot of public speaking on *Gran Torino*, and I try to increase awareness of some of the racial issues in the film...and in the production too. I'd like to get more audiences to see that films can't help being about race if there are immigrants and minorities in the mix. They can never be simply universal human stories about heroes who get redeemed or whatever.

LS: *Other issues you try to make visible?*

BV: Well, there's also the issue of class and mobility for minorities. I feel like the racial barriers to economic improvement that exist in the US are not acknowledged enough. You can see this in *Gran Torino* too – in the scenes where Walt implies that all Thao has to do to be good enough for a job is to become manly like a white guy. If you look at the lines in the barbershop scene though, it's all premised on his being ethnically different and not getting the jokes. By the end of the scene, he's still the clueless immigrant kid. The film acknowledges that he's not just like them in terms of his job prospects, but then it denies that difference by having him go and get a job successfully...

LS: *Where do you see yourself going with film production?*

BV: One thing about the whole *Gran Torino* experience is that it's made a lot of us younger Hmong people more serious about making movies. We need to get behind the camera and tell our own stories. We need to create sophisticated characters and act them with depth. We can only go so far with trying to make the mainstream accountable to portraying us better. I'm writing a few screenplays myself....

LS: *Say more about the future you envision for Hmong filmmaking.*

BV: Since *Gran Torino* there are lots more Hmong Americans in their twenties and thirties making their own amateur films. And also applying to film programs. Some of these people are getting their works into film festivals and distributing in Asia. This is promising because we have a lot of stories to tell. And they'll be Hmong stories, but not just *the* Hmong story. We need great scripts, complex, relatable characters, and high production values. Controlling the images of Hmong people *in* the films is just the first step. Our films also need to be high quality and show the level of art we are capable of. For me, I'm looking for substance, deep ideas and amazing performances...

LS: *Any more thoughts on the future of Hmong-made film?*

BV: I'd like to see it professionalize. In the past couple decades Hmong film producers on tight budgets had no choice. They had camcorders, wrote their stories and shot and edited them by themselves. I want to see more ambition in the next generation. We can get much better quality films if we raise money to have full crews who can make sure that lighting, sound, extra cameras, etc. are all taken care of. And I'd like to see more variety in scripts, including more ensemble casts and crews. It's not like everything we make has to be a Hmong movie. We could be part of

coalitions with people from other ethnicities working together to make films that speak across social borders. I want to be part of a wave of new Hmong filmmaking that goes beyond just being Hmong and showing Hmong.

For more resources on the Hmong perspective on *Gran Torino*, see <http://grantorinocritic.blogspot.com/> as well as Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj's article from the *Hmong Studies Journal*, Volume 10 <http://hmongstudies.org/ScheinThojHSJ10.pdf>

About the Authors

Bee Vang played the Hmong lead Thao in *Gran Torino*, and is now a firstyear student at Brown University. Since *Gran Torino*, Mr. Vang has acted in several independent films, including: *Anatomically Incorrect*, *Sunset on Dawn*, *Fallen City*, and conceived and produced the Youtube spoof *Thao Does Walt*. A social justice activist, he has also spent a great deal of time doing public speaking on *Gran Torino*, the production process, and the issues generated for the Hmong community as well as advocating for cross-ethnic coalition politics in confronting media racism.



Louisa Schein teaches Anthropology, Women's and Gender Studies and Asian American Studies at Rutgers University. She has worked with Hmong Americans for three decades, has done longterm fieldwork in China on the Miao and is author of *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*. (Duke 2000) She is currently writing a book, *Rewind to Home: Hmong Media and Gendered Diaspora*. She is also collaborating on two documentary films about Hmong Americans, one on health issues with Va-Megn Thoj. Recently, she has been doing activist work with Thoj and Bee Vang on activist projects directed at the after-effects of *Gran Torino*. Communication about this interview may be sent to Schein at: schein@rci.rutgers.edu

