

**Perspectives on Hmong Studies: Speech by Dr. Nicholas Tapp on Receiving the Eagle Award at the Third International Conference on Hmong Studies, Concordia University, Saint Paul, April 10, 2010.**

**Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 11, 12 pages**

**Abstract**

This article consists of the text of a speech delivered by Dr. Nicholas Tapp on the occasion of receiving the Eagle Award for contributions to Hmong Studies at the Third International Conference on Hmong Studies at Concordia University, Saint Paul on April 10, 2010. The speech discusses how the author became involved in Hmong Studies and his assessment of several key issues confronting researchers studying Hmong culture and Hmong populations around the world.

**Key Words:** Hmong, refugee, Thailand, Laos, China, culture, shamanism

This is a very sentimental moment for me, and a great honour for me to be invited here to the heartland of the Hmong community in the US by the Hmong people and Concordia University. It is an important occasion for me because it was in 1983, while I was trying to write my PhD thesis after 18 months of fieldwork living in a White Hmong village in Chiangmai, in north Thailand, that I went to my first conference ever. That was the second ‘Hmong Research Conference’ organized by the University of Minnesota, and attended by Jacques Lemoine, Gary Lee, Yangdao, Bruce Bliatout Thowpaou, Louisa Schein, Robert Cooper and many others.<sup>1</sup> That was my first visit to America at the beginning of my career, which I owe to the Hmong. Now that I am about to retire from the Australian National University where I have been working for ten years, I am invited to the Twin Cities again. So there is something very special about this for me, and I thank again the Hmong and Concordia who have invited me here.

I have been kindly asked to say a few words, and I thought I would talk a little personally as it may be interesting to know why someone like me should have spent most of their life working with and trying to understand Hmong culture and society. What is so special about Hmong culture that it has attracted so many foreigners and people who are not Hmong? Well, of course, Hmong culture *is* very special, as we all know. It is enormously rich and complex and full of unique and remarkable features. And I think for someone who is not Hmong, there may be something ‘romantic’ about this attraction. I well remember what it was that first drew my interest to the Hmong. After my first degree (in English) at Cambridge, I applied for Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), the equivalent of your Peace Corps. I thought they would

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<sup>1</sup> It resulted in the 1986 publication *The Hmong In Transition*, following *The Hmong In The West* in 1982.

send me to India, where I had some family background and where I had travelled in the early 1970s before University. However, to my surprise, they sent me to Thailand, where for two years I was teaching English in a big comprehensive school in southern Thailand. Then came the terrible 1976 military coup of the 6<sup>th</sup>. October, when I saw photographs in the newspapers (although most of them were confiscated) of the students who had been killed at Thammasat University in Bangkok. Indeed some of my own students, aged fifteen or sixteen, were involved in the protests and marches which led up to that event, and came to hide in my house in Hatyai. I thought I should stop working for the Thai government at that time, since I was technically employed by the Ministry of Education through the British Council in Bangkok, and so I wrote to the Minority Rights Group in London to see if they might have any work for me. They said they had not, but could I write an article for them about the “hilltribes” in northern Thailand? So I travelled up from the south of Thailand to Chiangmai in the north during my vacation by myself and took a boat up the Mae Kok river (there were no organized tours then) and spent the night in a village which I only found out later was Hmong. That was still in 1976. I stayed in a wooden house with a couple of Australian backpackers. In the evening some Shan freedom fighters dropped by having just crossed the nearby border from Burma, and we smoked some opium. Outside I could see mysterious people in beautiful dress carrying babies, and water, passing through the evening and speaking to each other in an unknown and mysterious language. Somehow I wanted to know all about them and later I was able to make the Hmong the subject of my Ph.D. thesis at London University and come back to Thailand to do my fieldwork there in 1980-81.

So I think there is some idea of romanticism there, some desire to understand other people and take part in a world which is not our own world. But this urge to understand other worlds and other people is an important one, and it is a part of all of us. Today some people are calling it ‘xenology’ (like ‘xenophobia’), the Science (or Study) of the Other. And it is feelings like this which I think have impelled all those who have spent time with the Hmong and tried to get to know them, from Father Savina who worked in Vietnam in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The Hmong were always described by such people as freedom-loving, honest, fearless, upstanding, egalitarian, not bowing down to anyone else like the Thais or Lao or Chinese who were thought to have such hierarchical societies and habits of servility. They were depicted as free mountaineers, somewhat like the Scottish Highlanders with their clans and tartans living on the hills and mountains and moving about where they pleased. This was an enormously attractive, somewhat romantic, image and I believe it has drawn many Western observers to the Hmong over the past century.

But the Hmong have had some part in this too. I once asked an American Hmong, in a helicopter in Laos, why there was so much on the internet and in books about the Hmong in America, but not so much on the Iu Mien or the Tai Dam, and he thought a bit and he said ‘because we Hmong have loud voices’. I was surprised at this, because I had never thought of the Hmong as having loud voices before. Indeed mostly Hmong people, in my experience, prefer not to talk too much, particularly not to talk evil or gossip of other people, or to talk to outsiders about problems seen as ‘inside’ problems. Yet, when I thought about it, I felt he might be right. Because Savina had Hmong who explained Hmong customs and society to him, so did Bernatzik who worked later in Thailand, Geddes in Thailand, Lemoine in Laos, Cooper in Thailand and all the missionaries too, from Txiv Plig Nyiaj Pov (Father Yves Bertrais) back to Samuel Pollard in China in the early 1900s. Everything they knew was the result of their conversations with Hmong people, learning from their Hmong tutors, and doing things together with them. So slowly I began to see that the history of the Hmong and all the descriptions of Hmong culture which we have in English (or French), are as much a product of Hmong contributions as they are of the people who wrote them and put their names on the work.

And of course this gives us, non-Hmong, researchers an enormous debt which can never really be repaid. All one can do is be conscious of it, and try to reciprocate it as much as possible. I also well remember the first time I entered the village of Mon Ya Dai in northern Thailand where I did my first fieldwork in the early 1980s. I was introduced to it by Chupinit Kesmanee who worked at the Tribal Research Centre but has always been a good friend to the Hmong, and by a Hmong who worked for the Royal Project. The headman was a man called Vam Xauv, a Hmong Vaj, and I could not speak very much Hmong at that time although I had had some training in the phonetics and structure of the language. It got much better during my fieldwork, and then it got rather rusty as I started to speak Chinese with my Chinese wife. I now mostly speak Chinese, and it is surprising how many words are the same in Hmong and Chinese when you know something of both languages. Anyway, Vam Xauv heard me say ‘kuv xav kawm kev cai Hmong’ (‘I want to learn Hmong customs’) and write a book about it, and he said ‘well, we have had many people coming here trying to *change* our customs but you are the first one who has ever come here who wants to *learn* about them’. So - he invited me to stay in his house for over a year. I was actually able to pay them back in some ways in the end, when the Communists surrendered and his brother came back to the village with his whole family with nothing, since I was able to help out a bit with rice and some other things. And that was where I mostly stayed (although, since he did not get on with my research assistant, I had to put him with

his family in an empty Yunnanese shopkeeper's house in the next village where I also sometimes stayed). But most of the time I stayed with Vam Xauv. And in a way I became a part of their family, calling him *txiv* and his wife *niam*, so that finally I was formally adopted into the Vaj clan with a ritual sacrificing of a pig and all the young men *ua pe* (paying traditional homage to their elders). So I became Vaj Neeb Vaj and was very proud of it.

I mention this not just to be personal or sentimental, but because I think there is an important point here. Often when I went to villages, particularly in Laos, old women would think I was Hmong just because they heard me speaking some Hmong, and they would ask curiously 'koj yog hmong dabtsi' ('What kind of Hmong are you?'). And it seemed that, really, the colour of my skin and how I looked did not matter to them. Being Hmong meant something else. It means being a person, and *doing* Hmong - *ua hmoob*.

The Hmong are sometimes described as a 'tribal' society. That word went out of fashion in anthropology because people felt it sounded negative and derogatory, but it has now come back again owing largely to the efforts of NGOs and human rights organizations. But 'tribal' really means a kind of social organisation based on kinship, where everyone supports each other at higher and higher levels; a 'segmentary' system a bit like a university where each department competes against each other but unites with all the other departments against another faculty, and then each faculty competes against all the other faculties, but all the faculties unite together as a university against another university. And the strength lies in your numbers. The more people you have, the stronger you are as a whole, as a tribe or a people; the more 'voice' you have.

Of course, after the terrible events with the loss of Laos, many Hmong felt they had lost so many people in the wars that it was important to repopulate, and there is some sense in that.

This brings me onto my friendship with Gary Lee (Li Yias) , who was on the Faculty here for some time, which I want to talk about a bit. After the first two Hmong research conferences which were really international in the 1980s, one in 1981, one in 1983, and both at the University of Minnesota, many Hmong national conferences started up and there were international meetings too. But one really international meeting was organized by some French researchers (Jean Michaud and Christian Culas) in France in September 1998 (the First International Conference on the Hmong/Miao of Asia) which was where I met

Gary Lee for the second time. Then, when I moved from England to work in Australia quite unexpectedly, in 2000, I met him again, and we started to do some work together. It is very fitting that in 2006 he should have received the first Eagle Award at Concordia University because Gary is a most remarkable man in every way; a model as a teacher, writer, philosopher and leader. We worked together on a project on the Hmong diaspora in the early 2000s (funded by the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation in Taiwan), and recently we collaborated on a very exciting venture, the Greenwood publication *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, shortly due to be published. But we have inevitably had some points of difference and debate, and one of these was the question which Jacques Lemoine (who also received the Eagle Award, in 2008) has also talked about - the question of the relation between the Hmong outside China, and the related peoples in China.

I realise it is not popular with many of you, but I must say that ‘Miao’ is really not a ‘bad word’ inside China. Outside China it is a very bad word, which is why from the 1970s all serious researchers working with the Hmong started to call them Hmong and write about them as Hmong. But China is really a bit different. I have been doing most of my research since 1986 in China, and living there too for several years now. I have been to Hmong areas in China where they speak real Hmong, in NW Yunnan and SW Sichuan and in Wenshan near Vietnam, where they have the *Qhuab Ke* and *lwm qaib* and *hu plig* and *laig dab* and *ua neeb* and *noj peb caug* and *hu nkauj* and *paj ntaub* and *saib loojmem* and basically the same traditional Hmong customs you could find in Thailand or Laos. But there are two or three other groups whom the Chinese also call Miao, like the Khanao or Hmu in Guizhou and the Kho Xiong in Hunan. To an anthropologist they seem completely different people. They cannot talk to each other and have almost nothing the same. But since 1995, as Louisa Schein (1998) showed, talking about the speech given by Hua Laohu at the International Symposium on Hmong People held in St. Paul that year (1995), their leaders have been coming to the US and calling themselves Hmong, perhaps originally out of politeness because they know the Hmong here do not like to be called Miao and the Hmong here would not know what to do if you called them Khanao or Kho Xiong as they call themselves.<sup>2</sup> Let me emphasise that it is only the *leaders* in the Chinese government and the communist party in China who do this. The ordinary villagers in China know nothing about this; they are Hmong or Khanao, or Kho Xiong or A Hmao, and do not know about the other groups. I realise this is a controversial matter. However, facts are facts. Of course, if you are

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<sup>2</sup> This followed the International Miao (Hmong) Culture Symposium and Economic and Trade Cooperative Conference held in Jishou, Hunan, China, in 1994 after several meetings of the Guizhou Miao Studies Association such as the 1993 ‘Fourth Miao Studies Conference’.

a linguist you can find parts of the three languages which are the same or similar and come from the same roots, just like French and Italian and Spanish which all come from the Latin, and it is quite certain that 2,000 years ago, these groups related to the Hmong in China WERE all the same people! So what and when do we call a people a people, or an ethnic group an ethnic group? And if people want to call themselves something else, shouldn't we respect that?

Gary Lee used to agree with me on this, I think but it is my impression that after he spent his recent period in the United States, he changed his thinking somewhat. We used to have friendly, if sometimes quite passionate, arguments or discussions about this. He would often say, if they want to be Hmong (these other people in China), why not? It was only after some years of these sorts of discussion that I remembered my own experience of being accepted as Hmong in the Hmong village in Thailand, and I began to see how and why he might be right. Because of course, the Hmong social system is *not* a closed one, it is an *open* one, a little perhaps like a society or association which you can belong to or be adopted into and become a member of. And indeed, many children in the past, in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and China, have been adopted from neighboring people, and they are brought up as Hmong in every way. If you want to join us, and *do* like us – why, you can, you are welcome. It can only make us stronger. This is a very open, accepting kind of society, I think, and that may be why Hmong in the US and related people in China are now reaching out arms to each other, even if only among the leaders at present, and saying that they all wish to be part of the same people. And after all, this would only be returning to the situation as it must have been two thousand years ago. Whether it is possible for you to overcome two thousand odd years of factual separation in this way, I do not know, but I see now that you have the right to try to do so. So I, and others I need not name, should probably not insist too much on what is known as the *essentialist* point of view, always assuming there is one unchanging essence to a culture, which it can never change away from and must always remain the same.

Which brings me to my final point, and another point of considerable discussions with Gary Lee in the past. We struggled over this book. We had to get it right because it is aimed at schoolchildren and so may be quite important to them in terms of how to understand Hmong in the future. Basically it is designed as a textbook for Hmong studies courses. But it became clear, at an early point in co-writing the book, that we were thinking about rather different readerships. Gary, I believe, was in the beginning mostly thinking about young Hmong readers, and writing for them to understand. I, on the other hand, was more conscious

of a an African American doctoral student I had met at Stanford University in 2008, who told me how he had had many Hmong friends in high school, and how he had always wanted to know more about their background. I felt there must be many more people like him, young Americans with Hmong friends or some contact with Hmong people, who were interested in them and their background and wanted to know more about them, and I tended to direct my writing towards such interested non-Hmong readers.

Obviously, we needed to write for both kinds of reader, Hmong and not-Hmong, and I hope that that is what we have done in the end. Another initial difference between our approaches was that Gary was more interested to emphasise the admittedly amazing achievements of the Hmong in the US in recent years, and highlight all the new art forms of and theatre, poetry and sculpture, music and dance, costume, and the use of the internet and video productions which there have been. I, on the other hand, tended more to write about ‘traditional Hmong customs’ as I had seen and understood them, and as they had been recorded in Thailand and Laos and Vietnam, both so that young Hmong people would not forget about them and also so that others would come to appreciate something of the richness and complexities of Hmong traditional culture. So we had discussions about how important it was if there were lots of first-cousin marriages recorded in statistics in Laos in the 1960s or exactly how people go around the tree at the New Year ritual (*ncig tus pos ncag*) and the extent to which shamans believe in different kinds of *plig* or soul.<sup>3</sup> In the process of the discussions I have come to realise, I am afraid, on the one hand, how very much of Hmong culture has already been lost and is still now being lost. But at the same time I also realized that Gary was right and that I was to some extent stuck in the past; how we cannot keep on clinging blindly to the past; how society and culture change and move on and it can still remain Hmong. For instance, in the film *Gran Torino* I was amused to see Sue telling the old guy, Walt, that in Hmong culture you never touch people on the head – because to me, that signifies Thai, or Lao culture! After living in Thailand for two years where you have to be really careful not to throw your feet about or pat someone’s head, it was a huge relief to be able to live with the Hmong who did not care much about these things, and were famous for not even lowering their heads when the Thai King came to visit. But then I realised that maybe the film is in a sense right about some aspects of Hmong life in the US today; it may be that Hmong in the US have picked up or adopted quite a few Lao or Thai customs and habits, particularly in food, as part of a general feeling of wanting to be known or identified as Southeast Asians in the American population, so that this is part of being Hmong nowadays. I am not sure of the answer to this particular question, but it has taught me not to

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<sup>3</sup> The *pos ncag* is a thorn tree.

stick too rigidly to the past, not to think we know what Hmong culture is just because we saw some parts of in Thailand in 1981.....

I have two or three other small examples of the kind of problems (*teebmeem*) or issues which Hmong researchers have had over the years, which may interest you also and shed some light on this. All of them in a sense raise the question of how much one should be faithful to the present-day Hmong views of things, when so much has changed. For example, Jacques Lemoine (1972) once discussed the possible influences of the Indian God of Death, Yama (who became Yen Wang in Chinese), and the Chinese deity the Jade Emperor (Yu Huang), on the Hmong deities of Ntxwj Nyoog and Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem, and later unambiguously identified Nyuj Vaj [Tuam Teem] with the Jade Emperor (Lemoine 1987, p. 38).<sup>4</sup> We discussed whether this should be put in our book, and Gary's main feeling was that, even if true, it was largely irrelevant to Hmong understandings today. For the Hmong today, after all, Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem is just a Hmong deity, like Yawg Saub, or Ntxwj Nyoog, and there is no point in adding some obscure historical interpretation which anyway may remain to be proved. On the other hand, I felt that such an example might show how the Hmong have always been open to other cultural traditions in the course of their long history and have accepted other cultural influences too, particularly the influences of the great Indian and Chinese civilizations which have formed most of Southeast Asia – as part of an open accepting society. But maybe this is really irrelevant to how Hmong today may think about Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem?

Another example is the term *saib loojmem*, or 'sighting the veins of the mountains' for a gravesite or a house or a village when it is first set up. In the past I had often translated this as 'sighting the veins of the dragon' because '*long*' in Chinese means 'dragon' and all through Yunnan province where the Hmong use a lot of the local Yunnan dialect (and for the Yunnanese traders in Laos and Thailand who used to have close contacts with Hmong), *longmai* means geomancy or the 'veins of the dragon' in the landscape. But as Gary pointed out to me, *looj* (*long*) after all does not mean dragon in Hmong; that is *zaj* (which of course I knew very well) and dragons are basically frightening and fearsome creatures for many or most Hmong (although I think this may have been influenced by the Lao idea of *nyak* or 'ogre'). It doesn't really matter what we put in the book in the end. What matters is that we had to talk about these things. And the point is that there is a real question here about how one writes about culture when it is changing, and whose views

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<sup>4</sup> Nyuj Vam Tuam Teem actually means the Great Palace of Nyuj Vaj, since Tuam Teem derives from the Chinese words for 'great palace', as Lemoine (1972) showed, but as he pointed out, such traces have long been forgotten by the Hmong.



one represents. *Loojmem* certainly ‘really’ or ‘originally’ means the veins of the dragon (as I see it). But it is true that instead of saying *loojmem*, the Hmong can also say, more simply, *memtoj*, or (literally) the ‘veins of the hills’. So while ‘dragon’ is correct as I see it, it may not correspond that well to present-day understandings of the Hmong who do not know Chinese.

A final example was a discussion between me and Jacques Lemoine which took place some years ago, or rather an argument. This time I was more on the ‘Hmong insider’s’ side, than on the ‘outside researcher’s’ side, and I felt we had no right to go beyond ordinary Hmong understandings into some esoteric or secret knowledge which had maybe only originated in one shaman’s understanding. When the shaman chants in *ua neeb* shamanism he invites, together with many other spirits and deities and natural forces, the spirit of the *leng nkau* which I had thought, like Mottin (1981), must mean ‘parrot’ or ‘parakeet’; or, as I put it somewhat carefully, ‘the special spirit of shamanism usually translated as the spirit of the parakeet’ (Tapp 2000). But this was much criticized by Lemoine (2002). Lemoine had in fact earlier claimed there was a special shamanic understanding of this term. The common Hmong understanding of it as ‘parrot’, which Lemoine said both Mottin (1981) and Moréchand (1968) had followed, was quite wrong, according to his own Master Shaman, Tchou Yao (Lemoine 1987). Actually, this important spirit summoned by the shaman was the Clairvoyant Spirit(s), or Spirit(s) of Clairvoyance, and the Hmong term itself came from the Chinese *ling-qiao*, which means ‘subtle’ or ‘ingenious’ (Lemoine 1987).<sup>5</sup> In my published response to Lemoine’s critique (Tapp 2002) I pointed out that I had been aware of Lemoine’s claims in his 1987 book, but that I had followed the ordinary Hmong understanding of the term, since for example Heimbach (1979) translates *leeb nkaub* as ‘parakeet’. However, in his unpublished comments on my response, Lemoine (n.d.) went further than just saying there was just an esoteric shamanic understanding of the term, as he had done in 1987. He now claimed that the word for parrot (or parakeet) is in a different tone from the one used by shamans. A parrot, Lemoine notes, should be *leeb nkaub*, with a high level tone on the first tone, while the spirit conjured by shamans is the *leej nkaub*, with the first word in a high falling tone. He said he had made the same error as me, Mottin and Moréchand originally, and that Tchou Yao had laughingly corrected him.<sup>6</sup> And he cited Bertrais’s (1964) dictionary to show that *ua neeb leej nkaub* is to perform shamanism qui *réussit bien* or *tombe juste* - the Spirit ‘which is correct’, which ‘succeeds, which hits the nail on the head’

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<sup>5</sup> See Lemoine (1987), p. 25 (footnote \*\*). The Chinese ‘q’ is pronounced like ‘ch’ in English, so it sounds like ‘ling-chiao’, But that is in Mandarin, the northern dialect of Chinese. In all the southern Chinese dialects, which the Hmong would have heard, the Chinese q is pronounced k (like Bei-king becomes Pe-king), so in the south it would sound like *ling-kiao*.

<sup>6</sup> In fact Lemoine (n.d.) criticises both Mottin and Moréchand for not consulting the definition in Bertrais’ (1964) dictionary, but it is this very definition which Moréchand (1968) follows in his description of *ua neeb leej nkaub* as a special shamanic rite.

(Lemoine n.d.). However, Mottin's collection of shamanic chants (1981) did translate *leej nkaub* both as the parakeet and main spirit of the shaman, while there may be some question about which tone the spirit summoned by the shaman is in. In any case I still felt that the ordinary understanding of the term would be 'parrot' and that therefore we too should probably stick to the more normal, everyday, understanding and translate the term used for a spirit as 'parrot' (and I said this in my final unpublished response to Lemoine; Tapp n.d.). These differences of opinions and emphasis between people who try to understand Hmong culture are important in that they show not only how much Hmong society and culture are always developing and changing, or what mistakes researchers can make, but also how difficult it sometimes is for researchers to know how to keep up, or how close to Hmong understandings they should try to be.<sup>7</sup>

So I have learned some valuable lessons over these last few years and I would like to thank again all Hmong for those lessons which I continue to learn as Hmong culture itself changes and the society moves on in so many new and different, but still Hmong, ways. Thankyou. *Ua tsaug*.

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<sup>7</sup> See also 'Current Hmong Issues: Updated 12-Point Statement' by Gary and myself on Gary Lee's website ([www.garyyiale.com](http://www.garyyiale.com)) under 'Topical'.

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\_\_\_\_\_n.d. 'Untitled' (response to Lemoine n.d.) (see unpublished correspondence deposited at Hmong Cultural Centre, St. Paul).

## About the Author

Nicholas Tapp graduated in English Literature from the University of Cambridge and has an MA in Southeast Asian Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London). His Ph.D (also from the University of London) was in Social Anthropology. In the past he has been Lecturer in Anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, and at the University of Edinburgh, and Professor of Anthropology at the Australian National University. Currently he is Professor Emeritus at Australian National University and Chair of the Department of Sociology at East China Normal University in Shanghai where he directs a programme of studies in Anthropology. For 30 years he has researched and carried out intensive fieldwork on the Hmong peoples, part of the Miao minority in China. He has worked with their communities mostly in Thailand and China, but also in Laos and Vietnam, and recently has researched the diaspora of Hmong refugees from Laos in France, Canada, Australia and the USA, and their return visits to Asian homelands. His main books have been *Sovereignty and Rebellion: the White Hmong of Northern Thailand* (Oxford University Press, 1989), *The Hmong of China: Context, Agency and the Imaginary* (Brill, 2001), and *The Impossibility of Self: An Essay on the Hmong Diaspora* (Lit Verlag, 2010). His edited books include (with Chien Chiao) *Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups in China* (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1989), and (with Don Cohn) *Tribal Peoples of Southwest China: Chinese views of the Other Within* (White Lotus, 2003). *The Hmong of China* was described as 'one of the best contemporary ethnographies of any minority in China', by *Revue Bibliographique de Sinologie* (2001) and the *Choice* review of it in 2002 said 'This book should convince anyone of the value, not just to scholarship but to the human spirit, of publishing texts and contexts'. His first book was said to be a 'rich and insightful study' by *American Anthropologist* (June 1992) and 'as much literary as it is anthropological' (*Journal of Asian Studies*, August 1991). The book he co-edited with Chien Chiao in 1989 pioneered the study of China's ethnic minorities among foreign scholars, and for the past two decades he has supervised PhD students working on areas of China, Burma, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Nicholas Tapp is a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and of the Royal Asiatic Society in London.

