

**From *Kwvtxhiaj* and *PajNtaub* to Theater and Literature: The Role of Generation, Gender and Human Rights in the Expansion of Hmong American Art**

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**Abstract**

After they arrived in the US, Hmong refugees expanded their artistic expressions from *kwvtxhiaj* (singing) and *pajntaub* (embroidery) to spoken word performances, plays, painting exhibits, poetry publications, and other creative genres. This article examines the thriving Hmong American arts scene in Minnesota to explain why these refugees invested scarce time and resources in art when they were still busy meeting basic needs and confronting external oppression. It presents the findings from content analysis of Hmong newspaper articles about 62 public art events involving 248 Hmong American artists from 2002 to 2011. The article shows that this ten-year period began with the first Hmong art exhibition and the first book of Hmong fiction in world history. These and other Hmong American art forms addressed three social problems: 1) intergenerational conflict; 2) gender inequality; and 3) human rights violations in Laos and the US. The development of Hmong American art was, therefore, a dynamic adaptation to new diaspora challenges rather than simply an attempt to preserve Hmong culture.

**Keywords**

International migration, refugees, art, intergenerational conflict, gender, human rights, Hmong Americans

## Introduction

International migration creates numerous challenges for immigrants and refugees, including political insecurity, economic disadvantage, familial conflict, and racial prejudice and discrimination. Despite these high priority hardships, a growing literature reveals that international migrants avidly participate in the arts in Europe (Costanzo and Zibouh, 2013; Delhaye, 2008; Escafré-Dublet, 2010; Orlando, 2003; Rogstad and Vestel, 2011; Soysal, 2004), Australia (Ram, 2005; Tabar, 2005), and the US (Fernández-Kelly, 2010; Jamal, 2010; Leonard and Sakata, 2005; Wilcox, 2011). The Hmong followed this pattern when they arrived in the US as refugees from Laos after the Vietnam War. Hmong refugees dramatically expanded their artistic expressions from traditional *kwvtxhiaj* and *pajntaub* to books, plays, paintings, and other creative genres. Why do immigrants and refugees like the Hmong invest so much of their scarce time and resources in art when they are still busy meeting basic needs and confronting oppression in their new society?

Marginalized groups, according to some scholars, use art to resist racial oppression. In the US, blacks often feel excluded from art events organized by whites (Shaw and Sullivan, 2011). Among both disadvantaged (Beighey and Unnithan, 2006) and middle-class African Americans (Banks, 2010:5), black art is "rooted in the desire to respond to and rectify legacies of black marginality as well as continuing black inequality." For example, middle-class African Americans who moved back to Chicago's poor Bronzeville neighborhood used public art as a means of "reclaiming a geographic and historic space for black culture" (Grams, 2010:191).

Asian American art shows strong parallels with the anti-racism oppositional consciousness in Black art (Chon-Smith, 2014). Like blacks, Asian Americans also experience racial oppression because they are less likely to have their ethnic identities recognized by the dominant group and more likely to be grouped together based on physical features (Kibria, 2003; Tuan, 1998). Vietnamese Americans, for instance, have used art to contest the representation of the Vietnam War in US popular culture and historical memory (Espiritu, 2010; Pham, 2001). Similarly, South Asian and Chinese American youth create music adapted from African American rap to express a subcultural citizenship that challenges the assimilationist identities required for upward social mobility (Maira, 2010; Wong, 2010).

Other scholars, however, argue that tensions within the ethnic community are the catalysts for artistic expression by immigrants, refugees, and their descendants. Rather than a response to racial oppression by a dominant group, communities created through international migration use art to adjust to their new transnational lives (Wilcox, 2011). The experience of Bengali immigrants in the US exemplifies this view of art as the expression of changing identities under diaspora conditions (Niyogi, 2011). They engage in artistic innovation to express new ethnic identities (such as the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri) even though they have a rich Bengali literature in India (such as Tagore's prose and poetry). Similarly, China has three official dance forms (classical, folk, and ethnic); yet, Chinese Americans still construct a "Chinese" identity through dance performances in order to combine first and second-generation interpretations of Chinese culture (Wilcox, 2011).

This article engages this debate by analyzing the Hmong artistic expressions in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, the largest Hmong American community in the US. Through content analysis of articles about public art events published in the leading Hmong newspaper in Minnesota, the paper identifies three different motivations behind the extraordinary expansion of Hmong American art from 2002 to 2011. First, our data reveal that the most active artists in the community saw themselves as an intergenerational bridge helping Hmong culture to evolve. Second, the artists were disproportionately women and they used various art forms to call attention to gender inequality. Third, both male and female artists often addressed human rights violations against the Hmong in Laos and racial discrimination against them in the US.

## Methodology

This paper applies the content analysis methodology to all articles published in the St. Paul *Hmong Times* from January 2002 to December 2011 (see Sampson et al., 2005 for an overview of the application, reliability, and validity of this methodology). *Hmong Times* was established in 1998 and is "the oldest community newspaper still in circulation" for Hmong in the U.S. (Vang, 2010: 65). About 15,000 copies are distributed bi-weekly without charge at restaurants, malls, social service agencies, and other public venues in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.

With the exception of the occasional editorial, all *Hmong Times* articles are in English. That is typical for Hmong American newspapers and news websites. *Hmong Tribune*, *Hmong Today*, and *Hmong World News* almost exclusively use English text. The most commonly used Hmong writing, which uses the English alphabet, was only created in Laos in the 1950s, and many Hmong have not learned it, not to mention the other lesser known forms of Hmong writings, such as the Pahawh, the Sayaboury alphabet (or *ntawv puaj txwm*), the embroidery alphabet (*ntawv pajntaub*), and others (Smalley, Vang, and Yang, 1990; Duffy, 2007). Far more Hmong Americans, especially among the 1.5 and second generation, can read English better than they can read Hmong. In fact, many, old and young alike, cannot read Hmong at all. It is, therefore, unlikely that the use of English would prejudice the content of the articles in *Hmong Times*.

The content analysis methodology uses a research-constructed codebook to generate a sample of newspaper articles on a specified topic. Hard copies of all articles from 249 newspapers, published bi-weekly, in *Hmong Times* from January 1, 2002 (volume 5, issue 1) through December 28, 2011 (volume 14, issue 26) were visually inspected. Articles were included in the sample if they described a collective art event in which Hmong American writers, playwrights, contemporary musicians, spoken word performers, clothing designers, painters, film makers, photographers, and artists of other genres organized an activity at a pre-arranged time and public location in order to present or discuss their work. Only events occurring in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area were included. Human-interest stories about individual artists were excluded, as were announcements of upcoming events. The newspaper only reported on 'newsworthy' artistic events, not routine performances such as a band at a club. Thus, the sample comprises only unique, special events that occurred once or at most were annual events.

The sampling excludes traditional Hmong culture events, such as the Hmong New Year. Due to traditional versus modern communal factions, Hmong Americans annually organize one

New Year in St. Paul and another in Minneapolis. Many nonprofit organizations, such as charter schools and universities, also hold their own Hmong New Year events as part of their community outreach efforts. Other expressions of traditional Hmong culture that are excluded from the sample are "Hmong Culture Day" events and performances of traditional dance and music (such as the *qeej*).

January 2002 is selected as the start date because it begins the calendar year after the launch of the first exhibition of Hmong American art in a gallery in November 2001. The *Hmong Times* reported only one other art event that year, and that was a reading by a Hmong American author in December 2001. The first annual Hmong Arts Festival was held in 2002, the same year as the path breaking publication of *Bamboo Among the Oaks* (Moua, 2002), the first anthology of Hmong American writing. Content analysis ends in December 2011 in order to track the growth of Hmong American art events over a ten-year period.

### **Hmong Americans in Minneapolis-St. Paul and an Overview of Results**

The Hmong of Laos were allies of the US during the Vietnam War. They were recruited and funded by the CIA to fight communist forces in America's secret war in Laos. After the communists came to power, they retaliated against the Hmong who already suffered severe combat casualties during the war (Hillmer, 2010). Subsequent persecution by the new Socialist regime led many to flee the country starting in 1975 and move to the US as refugees. The first Hmong family settled in Minnesota in November 1975 (Vang, 2008), but sizable numbers of Hmong refugees did not begin arriving until 1979 when over 1,000 Hmong were resettled in the state. Between 1990 and 2000, the Hmong American population in Minnesota increased from 18,000 to 45,000 (Pfeifer et al., 2012). The 2013 American Community Survey of the Census Bureau estimated that there are now 77,500 Hmong Americans in Minnesota, almost all of them residing in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. About fifty-seven percent are US born and forty-three percent are foreign born (Center for American Progress, 2015).

Due to their rural backgrounds, their devastation from the war, as well as their lack of schooling in Laos, Hmong refugees had poverty rates higher than any other minority group in the US (Hein, 2006). Their inability to speak English, coupled with local residents' ignorance of their sacrifice for Americans during the war, among other things, also made Hmong refugees an easy target of nativism in America (Hein, 2000). Throughout the 1980s, the Hmong were regularly described as a "low-caste hill tribe," a "Stone Age" people "emerging from the mists of time," and "a people who made one airplane flight from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup>" (Shulins, 1984; Sherman, 1985). Their traditional beliefs and culture were believed to collide with American legal, medical and social norms in a myriad of ways (Fadiman, 1997). They were also accused of stealing their neighbors' dogs and cooking and eating them and of intentionally pushing their children or asking them to run in front of cars in order to get a big insurance settlement. If these were not enough, they were said to "breed like rats" to be on welfare (Mitchell, 1987). In the 1990s, many Hmong families lost their welfare and SSI benefits under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 while the denigration of their culture continued. In 1998, for example, Twin Cities radio host Tom Bernard, following an infanticide incident in the Hmong community, made racist jokes about the Hmong and their culture in his KQRS radio broadcast. In response to the Hmong community's

complaint, Bernard told his listeners that he would attack anyone he wanted and that the Hmong should “Assimilate or hit the goddamn road!” (Xiong, 2007; Lee, 2015: 351).

In the aftermath of the hunting shooting between Chai Soua Vang and eight white hunters in the Wisconsin woods in November 2004, Hmong Americans and their culture were also condemned along with Vang. The media not only portrayed Vang as a dark, mysterious, and pathological monster who had violated the American tradition of Thanksgiving when he shot the white hunters over the Thanksgiving holiday, they also showed the Hmong as a mysterious and strange people whose culture was so antithetical to the American identity. The Hmong, the media charged, had no concept of and appreciation for the difference between private and public properties (Ong, 2015; Schein and Thao, 2008). Three years later, Law Professor Leonard Kaplan at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, citing Vang’s case, charged that ““Hmong men have no talent other than to kill” and “All second-generation Hmong end up in gangs and other criminal activity.” Kaplan’s remarks prompted outrage and protest from the Hmong American community (Penzenstadler, 2007).

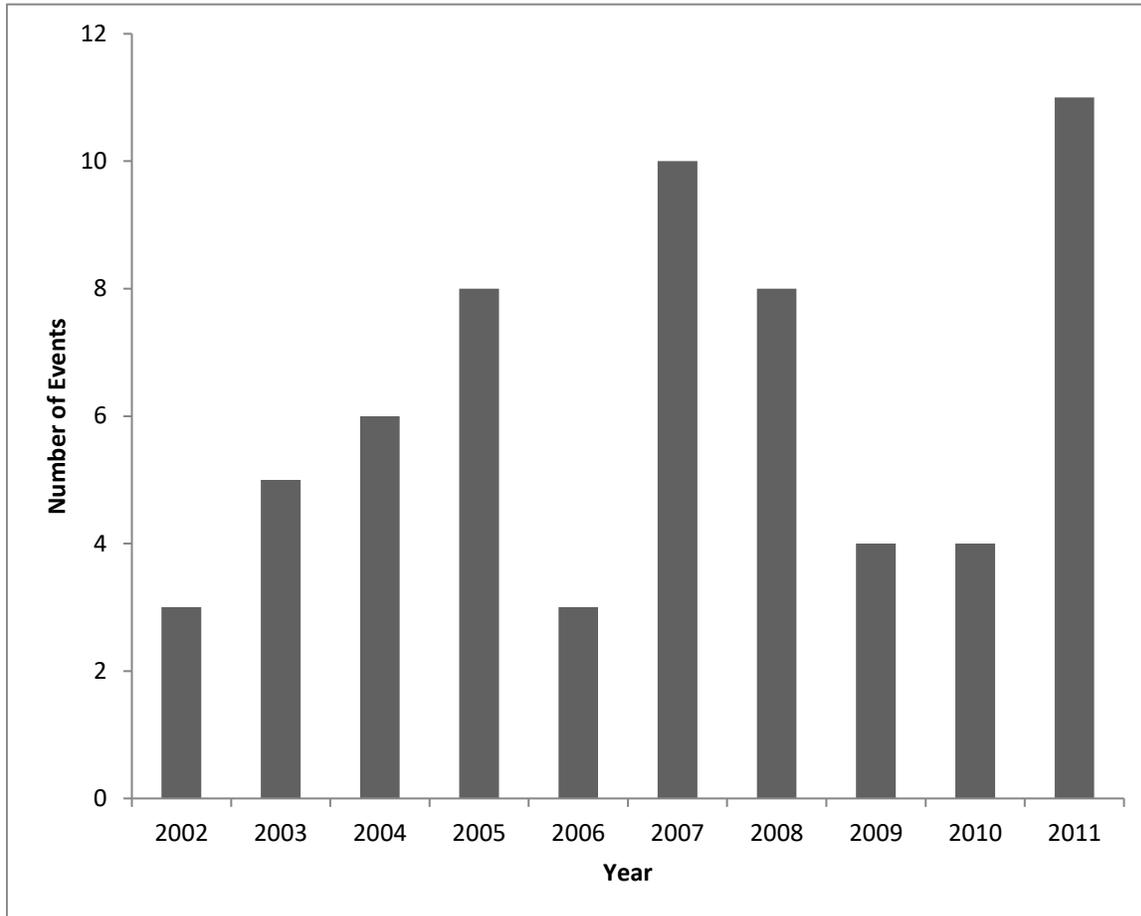
Despite these socioeconomic and racial challenges, however, the Hmong American community in Minneapolis-St. Paul have started a thriving arts movement, producing a wide range of artistic genres. Events began slowly in the mid-1990s and became highly visible in the early 2000s. In 1994, Mai Neng Moua started the annual publication of the literary journal *Paj Ntaub Voice*. In 1998, Kathy Mouacheupao, Cy Thao, and others started the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (CHAT). In November 2001, CHAT organized the first gallery exhibition of Hmong American art. It was entitled "No Word for Art." CHAT's executive director Lee Vang explained this name:

Imagine coming from a tradition that has no word for art; a tradition that has no contemporary art forms; a tradition that had no written language until the early 50s.

Imagine not knowing how to express yourself or how to communicate to others about your expression because there is no word, no tradition to describe what you are doing. These are just some of the many challenges that every Hmong artist faces (quoted in Xiong, 2001).

Since then, Hmong art events have expanded dramatically to include a wide range of other creative activities, including poetry, painting, spoken words, theatre, and music (see Figure 1). Altogether, the community organized sixty-two collective art events between 2002 and 2011. Eleven arts events were organized in 2011 alone—the highest number of events of the decade in a given year. The reports on the art events gave the names of 284 Hmong American artists who attended the events.

FIGURE 1  
Number of Art Events Organized by Hmong Americans  
in Minneapolis-St. Paul by Year, 2002-2011



Writing was the main form of modern Hmong American creative expression (see Table 1). When combined with theater--since plays start with written scripts--texts accounted for the majority of work by individual artists and the plurality of collective art events. The advent of Hmong American literature is an extraordinary cultural development given that the Hmong in Laos had just come to use writing more extensively during the Secret War even though they had previously been exposed to multiple forms of writings prior to the 1960s (Smalley, Vang, and Yang, 1990; Duffy, 2007).

TABLE 1  
Genre of Hmong American Art Events and Artists, Minneapolis-St. Paul, 2002-2011  
(in per cent)

	Events	Artists
Writing <sup>1</sup>	33.9	43.5
Theater <sup>2</sup>	8.1	7.3
Spoken Word <sup>3</sup>	0	4.8
Contemporary Music <sup>4</sup>	3.2	17.7
Visual Material <sup>5</sup>	6.5	12.5
Visual Technology <sup>6</sup>	8.1	8.1
Fashion (Clothing)	6.3	6.1
Multiple	33.9	NA
Total %	100	100
Total N	62	248*

<sup>1</sup> Primarily poetry but also includes essays and books of history and autobiography.

<sup>2</sup> Playwriting, directing, acting, and dance.

<sup>3</sup> Rap and comedy.

<sup>4</sup> Excludes performances of traditional music such as the qeej.

<sup>5</sup> Painting, collage, drawing, sculpture, and greeting cards.

<sup>6</sup> Video, film, animation, and photography.

\* 248 artists at 62 separate events; 86 artists appeared at multiple events sometimes with a different genre. Artists who performed only administrative roles at events (36) are excluded from this Table.

Of the 284 artists named in the events, 86 artists appeared at two or more events. The mean number of events attended by all artists was 1.7 and the standard deviation was 2.2 events. Adding the mean and standard deviation (3.9) suggests that an artist who attended four or more events was disproportionately active in the Hmong American artistic community. By this definition, twelve artists were "very active" and two of their demographic characteristics are noteworthy: their age and their sex (see Table 2). The twelve most active Hmong American artists come from a historically distinctive demographic cohort born between 1972 and 1980 in Laos, Thailand, and the US. They are also disproportionately women. It is, therefore, not surprising that intergenerational tensions and gender inequality are among the most prominent themes in their work, along with human rights violations in Laos and the US.

TABLE 2  
Hmong American Artists in Minneapolis-St. Paul  
Who Attended At Least Four Art Events

Artist	Genre(s)	Number of Events Attended	Sex	Birth Year	Birth Place
Ka Vang	Writing, theater	17	F	1975	Laos
May Lee-Yang	Writing, theater	13	F	1979	Thailand
Tou Saiko Lee	Spoken word, music	11	M	1979	Thailand
Bryan Thao Worra <sup>1</sup>	Writing	11	M	1973	Laos
Mai Neng Moua	Writing	9	F	1974	Laos
Katie Ka Vang	Writing, theater	9	F	1980	US
Sai Vang	Comedy	6	M	1980	Laos
Kathy Mouacheupao	Writing	6	F	1978	US
Cy Thao	Painting	5	M	1972	Laos
Kao Lee Thao	Painting, fashion	5	F	1976	US
Seexeng Lee	Painting	4	M	1975	Laos
Shoua Lee	Writing, theater	4	F	1979	Thailand

<sup>1</sup> Worra is Lao but actively participates in the Hmong American community.

### Intergenerational Tensions

Tou Ger Xiong, a comedian, speaks for many Hmong American artists when he explains that he wants to use art to maintain Hmong identity. He is a well-known performer and an important member of the artistic bridge generation who believes that it is “incredibly important for our community to embrace our history through clothing, dance and song. It is through these traditional communication channels that we will collect and pass down the stories of our rich heritage” (quoted in *Hmong Times*, 2012). Seexeng Lee, one of the most well-known Hmong American painters, also worries that “We are losing culture at a greater rate than any other time in history” (quoted in Doeun, 2008). Lee thinks that art can prevent this: “My hope has been that through art pieces I will get the next and future Hmong generations to see the importance of preserving the Hmong identity” (quoted in Doeun, 2009). Kathy Mouacheupao also feels that the early twenty-first century is a critical time for the community:

The Hmong culture is endangered because the language is dying, rituals are less practiced and elders are going to the grave with the cultural knowledge. As a result, the community will suffer unless there are intentional steps taken to prevent the complete assimilation of

the culture. The artistic expression of the Hmong people is still vital and a source of pride (quoted in Doeun, 2011b).

Rather than rejecting Hmong culture, Hmong American artists think of themselves as extending Hmong culture through new artistic mediums such as theater and film. They often articulate how they use art to transform Hmong culture to make it more accessible to the younger generation. As Mai Neng Moua said, "The challenge for us is to create a written tradition that doesn't supersede the oral. We can't let it die out, and we have to be deliberate about that. We have to get the whole community to care about it" (quoted in Haga, 2002). For example, May Lee-Yang published a book for Hmong American children that situates a traditional Hmong folktale in a camping trip in the north woods of Minnesota. Similarly, Ka Vang used a fellowship to travel and collect Hmong folklore from elders so it could be preserved for future generations.

Tou Saiko Lee, a Rap spoken word artist, strongly advocates that youth appreciate Hmong traditions. He includes his grandmother Youa Chang, an expert at chanting traditional Hmong poetry (*kwvtxhiaj*), in a performance they call "Fresh Traditions." Lee wants to "educate our youth to acknowledge and embrace their tradition" and encourages his audiences "to give it up and honor our ancestors who gave us a voice" (quoted in Doeun, 2011e).

Appreciating Hmong traditions is difficult for most Hmong American youth because they have their own generational problems that their elders often do not seem to understand. Katie Ka Vang wrote the play "WTF" precisely to express these intergenerational tensions (Doeun, 2011f). It uses a wide range of genres--poetry, hip hop, spoken word, and rap--to explore the experience of Hmong American youth as they struggle to live with their elders' traditions.

Overcoming these intergenerational conflicts is what many artists use their creativity to express. Sai Vang, a comedian, admits: "I didn't want to be Hmong for a while and I shied away from it. During the past couple of years, I've found myself. I like who I am and I'm proud of who I am. That's given me the energy to give back" (quoted in Doeun, 2007). Tou Ger Xiong, another comedian, shares this view: "Most Hmong households feature members from multi-generations. We need to develop within our young people the tools and skills necessary to build a bridge between generations. Complicating this issue is the fact that our young people are many times caught between two cultures and aren't able to find a sense of balance" (quoted in *Hmong Times*, 2012).

## **Gender Inequality**

In both her personal life and writing, Mai Neng Moua has challenged traditional Hmong gender roles (*Hmong Times*, 2009b). One of the most critiqued features of Hmong culture is the bride wealth practice in which the groom's parents provide a monetary gift of about \$5,000 to the bride's parents. Moua requested that her family not accept a bride price for her, as she did not want to think of herself as a commodity. She and her husband had been married in a church wedding nine months earlier. Nonetheless, Moua's family decided to carry out the bride wealth ceremony without her or her husband's presence. Moua's family saw the bride wealth as an assurance for Moua's proper treatment by her husband as it was traditionally understood.

The most egregious gender inequality in the Hmong American community, as in the US as a whole, is violence against women (Vang, 2013). At a multi-media art show, photographer Kou Vang called attention to this problem. She imprinted photographs of Hmong women on a series of pillowcases that were then hung from a laundry line for participants to view. When asked to comment on this work, Vang replied that her inspiration was "to stop the oppression of Hmong women in our community" (quoted in Doeun, 2004).

Similarly, Kathy Mouacheupao's inspiration to use art to address social inequality came from her position as Community Outreach and Educator at the anti-domestic violence organization Asian Women United. Due to her knowledge about battered women, Mouacheupao was asked to talk with the audience about this subject following a performance of the play 'Hush Hush' written by Lee Vang. As Mouacheupao recalls: "I got to engage 300 people in a conversation about domestic violence. It shifted my understanding of how important the arts could be" (quoted in Doeun, 2011c).

May Lee-Yang's play "Confessions of a Lazy Hmong Woman" addresses a subtler form of gender inequality: the expectation that Hmong women strive to be obedient daughters, wives and daughters-in-law by strenuously cleaning, cooking, and performing other household chores as well as suppressing their own needs in order to meet those of men. In addition to her artistic work, Lee-Yang has been extremely active in organizing creative activities for Hmong American girls and women. She used a "Reading Jam" honoring Hmong women to raise donations to fund an endowment for Hmong Women Achieving Together (Hnub Tshiab) and organized a writing conference for fifty girls and women. Sponsored by the Hmong Arts Connection and Hnub Tshiab, this three-day event entitled "Hmong Women Write Now Retreat" led to a new anthology of writings (Lee-Yang and Vongsay, 2011). According to Lee-Yang: "It was important for us to not only create a space for Hmong women and girls to create new work; we also wanted to share their voices with the world" (quoted in Doeun, 2011a).

## **Human Rights Violations in Laos and the US**

For its annual art show in 2005, CHAT chose the theme "Art for Social Change." CHAT festival coordinator Kathy Mouacheupao stated: "We were really trying to show that art isn't just for entertainment, but that it can be a valuable tool for raising awareness about serious issues that affect the community" (quoted in Lee, 2005). Working with the organization Hmoob Hlub Hmoob (Hmong Love Hmong or HHH) before the event, community members designed t-shirts at local Hmong nonprofit organizations. The design was supposed to reflect someone they knew who still lived in Laos. At the show, the shirts were then hung on a clothes line to raise awareness about human rights violations.

In 2005, HHH joined other groups and organizations, including the Innovative Community Elevation, Fact Finding Commission, and *Hmong Today*, to produce a CD entitled, "The H Project: Silence No More" to "raise awareness about the suffering and genocide of Hmong people who are still trapped behind enemy lines in Laos today" (quoted in Thao, 2005). Each track on the CD represented the artist's personal response to the suffering of the Hmong in Laos. Shortly thereafter, HHH released two VCDs depicting the suffering of the Hmong in the jungles of Laos under communism in the past 30 years. One was entitled, "The War Goes On" and the

other one "Beyond the Mekong." Since the release of the H-Project, according to Katie Ka Vang, one of the artists involved in the project, "some of the artists and participants who took part in the project have [also] gone on to protest other injustices, such as the Chai Vang case (2005); the Hmong grave desecration in Thailand (2006); the Fong Lee case (2009); and other campaigns around the same genocide, have been birthed" (quoted in Caphe, 2009).

Kao Lee Thao similarly produced public art to call attention to the plight of the Hmong in Laos. Departing from her swirling depictions of female spirits, she designed "The Secret War Billboard" and displayed it on University Avenue, one of the central streets in the Hmong American community. Thao explained her motivation for making this piece in 2009: "My aspiration was to create a painted billboard that speaks out about the injustices of the remaining Hmong soldiers, called Freedom Fighters, who fought the 'Secret War' started during the Vietnam War and who continue to fight today" (quoted in *Hmong Times*, 2009a).

The police shooting death of Fong Lee brought the arts for social justice theme to new heights. In July 2006, Minneapolis police officer Jason Anderson shot and killed nineteen-year-old Fong Lee. The shooting was captured on a public school's surveillance video. The footage showed that Lee, who the officer asserted had been selling drugs, was running away and unarmed. A gun near the body, which the officer alleged Lee had been holding, had no finger prints. Attorneys for the Lee family alleged police had planted it. The killing, investigation, and subsequent trial led to public meetings and protest rallies by Hmong Americans.

In October 2009, Hmong American artists organized "Up In Arms: A Night of Hip Hop and Spoken Word to Honor Fong Lee and End Police Brutality." Tou Ger Xiong was one of the emcees, and musical performances included Tou Saiko Lee and the well-known Hmong bands Post Nomadic Syndrome, Hilltribe, and Poetic Assassins. In 2010, Tou Saiko Lee produced a music video about the shooting entitled "In the Memory of Injustice," which was shown at the annual Qhia Dab Neeg Film Festival. The following year, Lee helped found the youth group United Prodigies, which he described as follows: "We value standing up for ourselves and being aware of issues that affect our community from racism in the media, cultural identity to police brutality. We are a group of volunteers that have a vision for youth to get up, and get something impactful" (quoted in Doeun, 2011e).

## **Conclusion**

Hmong refugees and their descendants in Minneapolis-St. Paul are a valuable case study for analyzing why international migrants create art. Following the failed US military effort to contain communism in Southeast Asia, tens of thousands of Hmong in Laos escaped to Thailand. In the Ban Vinai refugee camp, they invented a new art form, the story cloth, an extension of the embroidered flower cloth (Peterson, 1988). Hmong refugees devoted their time and resources to making story cloths in the refugee camps because these items provided critical income for them. Story cloths were readily sold to tourists in the camp as well as Hmong and non-Hmong consumers in the US and other countries where Hmong refugees resettled, such as France, Canada, and Australia (Cohen, 1990). But why would they invest scarce time and resources in poetry, painting, plays, and other creative activities after resettlement in the US where they

struggled to meet basic economic needs and adjust to challenges such as culture shock, mental health issues, youth delinquency, and white racism?

To answer this question, this article employed the content analysis method to analyze events reported in *Hmong Times* from 2002 to 2011, a period of increased art events and drastic cultural change for the Hmong in Minnesota. The data reveal that solving social problems was the primary motivation for the advent of new Hmong artistic expressions in Minneapolis-St. Paul, during this period. Rather than simply preserving the Hmong culture, Hmong American artists used a wide range of art forms to express changing ethnic identities under new diaspora challenges in the US.

Hmong Americans made art to in response to two internal conflicts. First, the artists sought to solidify intergenerational ethnic bonds during a period of heightened tension between older and younger community members. The most active Hmong American artists came from a distinctive demographic cohort born in Laos, Thailand, and the US during a period of immense historical transition (1972-80). These Hmong American artists intentionally chose to play an intergenerational role to mediate changes in Hmong culture. They saw themselves as perpetuating the Hmong culture's traditional respect for people with skills in music, song, and crafts, as well as jewelry, ornate clothing, metal utensils, and other objects of daily life. But the artists also extended the culture through new artistic mediums such as theater and film in order to make the culture more accessible to the younger generation. In fact, many artists specifically stated that it was their responsibility to use art to educate future generations about the history and culture of the Hmong people.

Second, Hmong American artists used art to critique the Hmong patriarchal culture and call for greater gender equality for Hmong women in the US. Given the patriarchal features of traditional Hmong leadership roles, it is noteworthy that seven of the twelve most active Hmong American artists in Minneapolis-St. Paul were women. The most active artist was a woman (Ka Vang) who attended seventeen art events from 2002 through 2011. Like the male artists from their community as well as artists from other ethnic or marginalized communities, these female Hmong artists saw themselves as agents for social change. In 2011, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman declared May 21 “Kathy Mouacheupao Day” to honor her artistic leadership of the most prominent Hmong American arts organization in the city (Doeun, 2011c).

In addition, Hmong Americans employed art to address external conflicts. Between 2002 and 2011, the community had to unfortunately witness the killing of dozens of Hmong in the Lao jungles as well as the police killing of Fong Lee in Minneapolis. In response to these tragedies, Hmong American artists used their talents to mobilize the diasporic community to advocate for greater human rights in Laos and the US.

In conclusion, during a period of rapid social change following international migration, cultural practices, such as the Hmong New Year, help to preserve a group's traditions and identity. Art, by contrast, provides an ethnic group with the ability to address new identities and inequalities produced by the diaspora. Hmong American artists, therefore, are not isolated individuals expressing personal creativity but a network of activists confronting social problems within the ethnic community as well as those caused by external oppression.

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