

## A Critique of Timothy Vang's Hmong Religious Conversion and Resistance Study<sup>1</sup>

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*Hmong Studies Journal*, Volume 9, 22 Pages

### Abstract

We review Timothy Vang's dissertation on the growth and decline of the Hmong Christian church. We argue that Vang's arguments are methodologically and theoretically flawed. Furthermore, we try to show that his dissertation is not so much an objective analysis of Hmong religious adaptation, but rather an attempt to define and subjugate certain Hmong cultural and religious beliefs and practices as backward and inferior to Christianity. We suggest that it is these kinds of problematic arguments, often couched in academic language, that further perpetuate misinterpretations and misrepresentations about "culture" and "religion" in Hmong American communities.

### Introduction

Some have observed, correctly, that there have been only a few published studies on Hmong religious adaptation to western societies (Pfeifer 2004: 7).<sup>2</sup> Given this, it is reasonable to expect that not every published work in this area has been sufficiently developed or reworked. Nevertheless, unless the contents of existing works are taken seriously and debated widely, these studies may contribute little to our understanding of Hmong religious adaptation. It is with this in mind that we have chosen to review Timothy Vang's (1998) dissertation *Coming a Full Circle: Historical Analysis of the Hmong Church Growth 1950-1998*, and to think seriously about this text's implications for Hmong Studies and Hmong Americans. In this time and age of

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<sup>1</sup> We thank the reviewers at *Hmong Studies Journal* for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. We are also grateful to Piyaporn Mary Moua for her helpful critiques and comments on earlier drafts.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier English-language works that discuss Hmong religion(s) of Southeast Asia include works by Lyman (1968), Geddes (1976), and Chindarsi (1976). More recent works that deal with Hmong refugees' religious change and adaptation include Scott (1982), Tapp (1986; 1989a), Lemoine (1986), and Winland (1992; 1994).

persistent conflicts, both across and within ethnic groups, we think it is important to examine ideas that may perpetuate stereotypes and misunderstandings.

We have selected *Coming a Full Circle* as the basis of our critical review, because we think it most clearly exemplifies the kinds of problematic arguments put forth in published texts as well as in everyday social discourse in support of one religion (Christianity) over another (Hmong traditional religion). The biases of these conventional wisdoms have been the source of much acknowledged tensions and conflicts within Hmong communities. In this essay, we discuss Vang's central arguments on the causes of the growth and decline of the Hmong Christian population, especially the Hmong Christian and Missionary Alliance church (henceforth "Hmong CMA"). More specifically, we examine and critique the methods, theories and implicit assumptions that underlie Vang's analysis of religious "conversion" and "resistance" within the Hmong community. We argue that Vang's claims are seriously flawed methodologically and conceptually. Furthermore, we try to show how Vang's study is not an objective analysis of Hmong religious adaptation or worldview, but rather an attempt to define and subjugate certain Hmong traditional practices or *kev coj dab* as inferior to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we point out that the over reliance on religious doctrines and opinions rather than

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<sup>3</sup> Hmong speakers use a number of phrases to refer to Hmong traditional religion, including *kab lig kev cai*, *kev cai qub*, and *kev coj dab (qhua)*. In this essay, we use "Hmong traditional religion" and "Shamanism" interchangeably. We do so because in everyday social discourse, individuals often contrast Christianity (*kev cai tshiab—the New Way*) with Shamanism (*kev ua neeb ua yaig*). Many Christian and non-Christian Hmong consider shaman rituals to be the core practices of the traditional religion (*kev cai qub—the Old Way*). Indeed, shaman rituals—as healing practices—are an integral part of Hmong traditional religion. However, we are aware that Hmong traditional religion is not defined by shamanism alone. Another very crucial aspect of Hmong traditional religion is "ancestor worship." Within Hmong contexts, this generally means the reverence of the deceased, male and female, senior kin members still present in collective memory and the regular performances of Gifts exchange rituals (e.g., *laig dab*, *fiv thiab pauj yeem*, etc.) that sustain the symbolic communication and inter-dependence between the living and the ancestors. Furthermore, Hmong traditional religion can be characterized as polytheism, because many practitioners evoke and believe in the existence of multiple, yet limited numbers of natural and supernatural spiritual forces—chief among them are *Ntuj Niam Teb Txiv*, *Zaj Txwng*, *Xob Laug*, *Yawm Saub* and *Txoov Siv Yig Neeb*. Myths, geomancy, oracles (animal and human), rites of passage songs, *khawv koob*, 'sorcery,' and the interpretation of dreams and rarities also have important meanings and roles in this complex, dynamic religious system.

empirical evidence may lead to other problems such as the distorted interpretations of the dynamic, complex processes many call “culture” and “religion.” Let us begin by appreciating what Vang says he has investigated in his 300-plus page dissertation.

### **A Summary of Vang's arguments**

The purpose of Vang's study was to understand the determinants of the growth and decline of religious conversion (from Hmong traditional religion to Christianity) within the Hmong populations in Laos, Thailand and the United States from the 1950s to the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Using the Hmong CMA as the focus of his study, Vang argues that the early occurrences of conversion in the 1950s spread rapidly and passionately, a phenomenon he characterizes as a “people's movement.” During this “people's movement,” several families or entire villages converted to Christianity within months; and from here they immediately organized themselves into churches and sent their children to Bible school (Vang 1998: ix). Although Vang strongly supports the belief that this phenomenon was the “outcome of mysterious movement of the Spirit of God” (1998: 59), he also has his own hypotheses for conversion. Vang asserts that conversion can be explained by three factors: 1) the social, political, and economic hardships that Hmong faced during and following the war in Laos; 2) the similarity between Hmong traditional religion and Christianity; and 3) the principle of “homogeneous unit” as it is practiced by Hmong Christians in Hmong churches.

First, Vang argues that “the Hmong become Christians faster when they undergo hardship, suffering, crisis, persecution, or insecurity” (1998: x). Without explaining these phenomena or specifying how such conversion occurred, Vang states, “For the Hmong people, national insecurity is the first reason that made them ready for the Gospel” (1998: 217). During

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<sup>4</sup> Vang defines “conversion” based on group membership. To remain consistent with Vang, we use “conversion” to refer to the change in religious group membership from Hmong traditional belief system to Christianity.

the war in Laos, the argument continues, “most of the Hmong were receptive to the Gospel” because they “lived in constant fear” (1998: 218). Subsequently, the social and economic hardships that Hmong faced as refugees led more of them to be receptive to Christ.

Second, the similarity between the traditional Hmong belief system and “that of the Bible” was a “major factor” that contributed “greatly” to Hmong’s receptivity of Christ (1998: 126-127). Vang contends, “The Hmong are animists. They have always believed in the existence of spiritual beings, including good and evils spirits, angels, Satan (*Ntxwj Nyooog*), and God, the supreme being” (1998: 222). Given this, “*it is not difficult for them to accept the fact that the world is created by God, man sinned through disobedience, and Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came to die for our sins*” (1998: 222, emphasis added). In other words, “when a Hmong hears the Gospel presentation for the first time, he is most likely to affirm that the Bible contains what he already believes” (1998: 126). Therefore, “accepting Christianity brings a major change of lifestyle for the Hmong but not a major change in belief” (1998: 126).<sup>5</sup>

Third, and finally, Vang argues that the growth of Hmong Christian population was largely the result of Hmong evangelizing other Hmong. Vang summarizes this phenomenon as the “homogenous unit principle.”<sup>6</sup> Central to this idea is that “people become Christian most rapidly when the least change of race or clan is involved” (McGavran 1955: 23, cited in Vang 1998: 129). That is, people are more likely to convert to Christianity, presumably, if they do not have to deal with ethnic, racial, linguistic and other social differences during and after their conversion. Quoting McGavran, Vang writes, “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers” and “they want to join churches whose members

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<sup>5</sup> Ironically, it is precisely a change in “beliefs” that many pastors seek when trying to “convert” non-Christian Hmong.

<sup>6</sup> Vang cites Donald A. McGavran (1955) as the originator of this concept.

look, talk, eat, and dress like them” (1998: 166). In short, Vang argues that the Hmong CMA’s application of this principle has contributed “significantly” to the growth of Hmong CMA from the 1950s to the 1990’s (1998: 161).

Despite the receptivity of Hmong people to Christ during times of “hardship and suffering,” Vang believes that Hmong, particularly those in the United States, have become more “resistant” to Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Why? Vang offers three explanations: 1) the rituals associated with Hmong traditional wedding and funeral ceremonies that Hmong do not want to abandon; 2) the “secular” education that is a part of the American higher educational system; and 3) Hmong’s improvement in socioeconomic status (SES).<sup>8</sup>

With respect to the first explanation, Vang cites several rituals that are, presumably, “most difficult for the Hmong to forsake” (1998: 222), but are in “contradiction to the Scripture” (1998: 224). They include the use of the wedding Umbrella to “protect the bride,” the offering and smoking of cigarettes, kowtowing, and the drinking of wine during traditional weddings. Second, Vang cites funeral rituals as additional barriers hindering Hmong’s conversion to Christianity. These rituals include the assignment of specific persons to specific roles (e.g., *cuab tsav*) during a funeral, the calling of relatives to come and pay respect to the deceased, the sacrifice of animals, kowtowing (*kev pe ua tsaug*), and, of most relevance to Vang, the practice of “feeding the spirit” of the deceased (1998: 203-235). As Vang plainly puts it, “what holds a Hmong man back from accepting Christ is not disbelief of the Gospel, but the obligation as a son to continue feeding the souls of the ancestors” (1998: 126). Third, besides the inclination to

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<sup>7</sup> Vang uses the term “resistance” to refer to the absence of conversion. Vang tends to depict Hmong non-Christians as individuals who “resist” Christianity. We disagree with his depiction, but we use this term only to be consistent with Vang’s conception.

<sup>8</sup> Vang does not specifically use the term “socioeconomic.” However, in general, we think that he is referring to socioeconomic status when he writes about how “peace, security, prosperity and self-sufficiency” and duration in the U.S., presumably, led Hmong to become “more resistant” to Christianity.

maintain traditional wedding and religious rituals, Vang vaguely argues that some Hmong basically want to “preserve animism” (1998: 240). As Vang observes,

In some communities, the Hmong mutual assistance associations receive grants from the state and local governments to teach animist practices to the young people. Although the bamboo windpiper (*qeej*) will have to memorize hundreds of stanzas of poetry to play for each funeral, many Hmong young men, junior and senior high school aged, are taking the pain to do so. Hmong animism is not fading away in the midst of Western civilization, but it is being revived from its almost extinct condition one decade ago to a thriving practice. This leads the Hmong to become more resistant to the Gospel (1998: 240).

In short, this means that as long as the Hmong population continues to increase in the U.S., “animism” will thrive and resistance to the Gospel will grow (Vang 1998: 235-236).

Regarding “secular” education, Vang argues that living in the U.S. has provided many Hmong with the opportunity to pursue higher education. Unfortunately, higher education, as Vang sees it, has produced a population that is more “resistant” to the teaching of the Gospel. How? Vang reasons that, “having earned a higher degree means having studied under many secular professors and having been influenced by their world views” (1998: 237). Personal experiences and survey data (discussed below) led Vang to the conclusion that “studying under secular professors like these makes many educated Hmong resistant to the Gospel” (1998: 238).

Finally, with respect to socioeconomic status (SES), Vang believes that the overall increase in SES among Hmong has led to a greater level of “resistance.” “Hmong are ‘more resistant’ to the Gospel during times of peace, security, prosperity, or self-sufficiency” (Vang 1998: x). Specifically, Vang thinks that length of residency translates to increased SES and “the longer they live in the United States, the fewer they turn to Christ” (1998: x). With an increase in SES, Hmong could more easily afford to fulfill expensive but necessary religious rituals and sacrifices. Thus, they could afford *not* to convert. In the next section, we examine the evidence

behind each of Vang's explanations and assess whether they are sound.

### **Critique: Conversion**

To "test" the hypothesis that "Hmong become Christians faster when they undergo hardship, suffering, crisis, persecution, or insecurity" (1998: x), Vang compares in one paragraph the historical situation in South Korea with that of Laos.<sup>9</sup> Vang writes:

While visiting Korea in October 1995, I discovered that national insecurity was one of the main reasons for the South Koreans to be receptive to the Gospel. Seoul is located approximately thirty miles from the border of North Korea. This Communist country has threatened to invade South Korea many times. Living in constant fear makes the hearts of the Korean people ripe for harvest (1998: 217).

With this "discovery," Vang links the case of the Hmong with that of South Koreans, and argues that, like South Koreans, Hmong converted to Christianity primarily because of "national insecurity."<sup>10</sup>

Where is the empirical support for these assertions? Unfortunately, Vang provides none other than the paragraph above. First, we question how Vang "discovered" that an entire nation lived "in constant fear," and that fear of invasion made them ready to be proselytized? We wonder how Vang came to such generalization when in 1995 (three years before Vang's study) government data showed that only 26.3 percent of the population in South Korea defined themselves as Christians (Census of the Republic of Korea, 1995). If "constant fear" leads to conversion, as Vang suggests, then this data suggest that the majority of South Koreans did not experience "constant fear." Yet, Vang claims that "the Korean people" as a nation that lived in "constant fear." How one could claim to know the "hearts" of a nation of people without the

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<sup>9</sup> We want to note that Vang's "hypotheses" do not specify the conditions or environments under which the proposed relationships between the classes of phenomena will hold. As such, any serious testing of these hypotheses will have to await clarification of the concepts involved and the specification of the environments.

<sup>10</sup> Vang vaguely discusses "national insecurity" and "constant fear." In the case of South Koreans, Vang suggests that "constant fear" is a product of "national insecurity," and that the latter is a result of "Communism."

supporting facts of the basic demographics of its population is quite remarkable.

Second, let us examine the theory that Vang puts forth—and he is probably not the only one to have done so—about the relationship between fear and conversion. How does Vang try to establish a link between living in “constant fear” and religious conversion?<sup>11</sup> Vang mentions wars, political upheavals, military casualty, uncertainty for the future in refugee camps, and deprivation of basic necessities as important factors that led Hmong refugees to convert (1998: 217-8). This, on its face, seems plausible. It is plausible, for instance, that political hardships reinforced the Hmong’s already serious conditions of economic hardships, and together, these factors motivated some villages to convert.<sup>12</sup> However, given that the vast majority of Hmong refugees experienced these events, we would expect for a large proportion of them to have converted. Yet, how do we explain the fact that only a minority proportion of the Hmong “converted”?<sup>13</sup> How do we explain the fact that tens of thousands of Hmong who have endured decades of war, persecution, and poverty remain unconverted in Laos, Thailand, and the U.S.?

We now examine Vang’s argument that the similarity between Hmong traditional beliefs and Christianity was a major contributing factor in Hmong’s conversion. To illustrate “similarity,” Vang cites the similar pronunciation of the names of prominent religious figures in

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<sup>11</sup> We doubt seriously that Vang has an adequate general theory in this particular study. For a general theory to be adequate, it must specify (1) who or what class of events [A] is doing what to whom or what class of events [B]; (2) the direction of change of [A] and [B]; and (3) the *environment* or condition under which [B] will occur (cf. Stinchcombe (1968: 30-1)). Throughout Vang’s thesis, he never specifies the conditions under which any particular relationship will hold.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Tapp (1989a) recognizes that the “mass conversion” of “Hua Miao or *A Hmo*” (implying Hmong) into Christianity during the 1920s and 1930s in Northeast Yunnan, China occurred during a time when these people faced serious economic and social hardships (living under the rules of Han and Yi landlords). However, rather than argue that these conditions of social and political deprivations motivated conversion, Tapp attributes the mass conversion of “Miao” during the early 1910s and 20s in Northeast Yunnan to Miao’s strong desire for *literacy* (1989a: 75). The desire for literacy, Tapp argues, was driven—legitimated—by Miao’s part-legend, part history of *their* lost, native writing system, and of how, “at some point in the future it will be returned” (1989a: 75).

<sup>13</sup> Here, we are referring to the period during the Secret War and the first decade (1975-1985) of Hmong’s mass exodus out of Laos and Thailand. Still, it is doubtful that significant conversions were occurring during the most tumultuous months or years of the war. There has not yet been a nationally representative survey of Hmong Americans’ religious affiliation.

Shamanism and Christianity. For instance, Vang claims that what the Hmong refer to as *Saub*, *Ntxwg Nyooog*, and *Siv Yis* are the equivalents of God, Satan, and Jesus in Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Vang argues that “the name *Siv Yis* sounds similar to Jesus’ name *Yesus* in Greek” (1998: 122). Thus, the “word *Yis* in Hmong might have derived from the Greek word *Yes-* for *Yesus*” (1998: 122). Without any attempt to question these “similarities,” Vang concludes that “Hmong *already* believe in the existence of God the creator, Satan, evil spirits, a universal flood, life after death, and the concepts of redemption and substitution” (1998: 126, emphasis added).

Undoubtedly, broad and coincidental similarities in ideals exist between “Christianity”<sup>15</sup> and Hmong traditional religion, such as the emphasis on compassion, forgiveness, humility, the upholding of traditional gender roles, etc. But even if we accept that similarities between two belief systems may facilitate mutual integration, similarity does not adequately explain why people “convert”<sup>16</sup> or fail to convert. If similarity were the only impetus for religious conversion, we would expect religious conversion to occur as a bi- or multi-directional process, rather than a largely unidirectional one.<sup>17</sup> Based on Vang’s theory, one would also expect members of Christian sects to “convert” from one sect to the other because they are arguably

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<sup>14</sup> We thank a blind reviewer at *Hmong Studies Journal* for pointing out that *Saub* is not considered a creator in Hmong mythology or cosmology. Our consultation with Hmong elders and review of several Hmong myth stories, wedding songs, and funeral songs, including *zaj qhuab ke* (Showing the Way), lead us to agree with this reviewer that *Saub* is not considered a creator of “*Lub Ntuj Lub Teb*” (Sky and Earth, or World). Given what we know about Hmong cosmology at the moment, Hmong traditional religion may not have had any primary or singular “Creator” of the “universe.” These concepts may turn out to be alien or antithetical to Hmong’s polytheistic beliefs of antiquity.

<sup>15</sup> We put “Christianity” in quotes, because we think that how people actually practice “Christianity” on the ground may differ significantly, perhaps by class, national origin, ethnicity, pastoral training, congregation location and size. The ways in which Hmong pastors and their congregations practice “Christianity” may be unique, and this deserves further study.

<sup>16</sup> For a critique of the definitions of religious “conversion,” see Snow and Machalek (1984).

<sup>17</sup> By “unidirectional” conversion, we mean the tendency of individuals to convert from a less well known religion (e.g., Hmong traditional religion) to so-called “world” religions such as Christianity.

similar in monotheistic beliefs and practices.<sup>18</sup> However, Vang's theory fails to explain why conversions between very "similar" denominations do not occur frequently, or why conversions between very "different" religious systems sometimes occur. Until evidence is put forth to show that individuals who converted to Christianity thought seriously about the similarity between Shamanism and Christianity, and based their decision on such comparison, we argue that Vang's assumption remains just that: an assumption.

We think that Vang has constructed similarities between Christianity and Hmong traditional religion rather than show how these purported similarities are responsible for Hmong's conversion to Christianity. Nicholas Tapp's (1989a) study, for instance, suggests that the "similarity" between Christian faith and the Hua Miao faith was a socially constructed product and process, rather than a given fact. The introduction of translated Bible teachings by missionaries 'fulfilled' a long-standing, semi-legendary void: Hua Miao's lost indigenous Script; the "discovery" of the foreign-turned-native Script fueled their desire for literacy. Furthermore, Tapp's study of Protestant and Catholic missionary work with the Hmong suggests that successful conversion depended not on the similarity between Christian and Hmong beliefs per se but on missionaries' tolerance for "working with and building upon the beliefs of the people they are seeking to convert" (1989a: 87).<sup>19</sup>

We now turn attention to the "homogeneous unit principle" (HUP). According to Vang, the HUP has contributed "significantly" to the growth of Hmong CMA. To support his argument, Vang refers to data showing that the Hmong CMA church grew from 1,525 to 25,806

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<sup>18</sup> Religious conversion (as opposed to a mere change in group membership) is a slippery concept. The concepts of "conversion" and "transformation" imply a transition between two "different" or (relatively, subjectively) distinct worldviews. If two worldviews were already very similar, it would seem inaccurate to describe transitions between them as "conversions." These are perplexing issues especially if we try to conceptualize "conversion" as an absolute state or thing rather than in terms of degrees!

<sup>19</sup> This probably accounted for Catholic missionaries' greater success relative to Protestant missionaries in winning Hmong converts (Tapp 1989a).

members from 1978 to the end of 1996 (1998: 162). Interesting as these numbers are, they do not tell us much about the link between Vang's independent and dependent variables. The fact that Hmong CMA experienced a 1,592 percent cumulative growth rate tells us nothing about how or to what extent the HUP was responsible, if it was, for the increase in church membership.<sup>20</sup> In fact, by Vang's own admission, from 1991 to 1996, "transfer growth (Christians from the refugee camps) and biological growth (newborn children) by far exceeded the conversion growth" (1998: ix). This means that the overall growth of the church was largely the result of birth and transfer rather than conversion. While it is plausible that HUP could influence conversion growth, the data Vang provides do not allow us to make any determination. This is because the data contain only two pieces of information—total number of members by year); such data do not allow for the calculation of *specific growth rates* over time. In other words, we have no way of determining the contributions of birth, transfer, and conversion to the overall growth.<sup>21</sup>

### **Critique: Resistance**

The second focus in Vang's research is on why Hmong have become "more resistant" to Christianity over time. Vang contends that Hmong traditional rituals hindered them from converting. How did he come to this conclusion? Vang developed a questionnaire that consisted of a single question and eight response categories.<sup>22</sup> He then distributed the survey to "several Hmong non-Christians" (Vang, 1998: 221). How the participants were chosen was never

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<sup>20</sup> Based on the data that Vang provides, the correct cumulative growth rate of Hmong CMA from year 1978 to 1996 is 1592%, not 932% as presented by Vang.

<sup>21</sup> The argument that HUP contributed "significantly" to the cumulative growth rate of Hmong CMA implies that HUP not only influenced conversion growth, but also birth and transfer growth. This assumes that HUP was a more influential factor than birth and/or prior membership when it comes to joining Hmong CMA. This assumption not only lacks empirical support, but it contradicts Vang's own admission that the growth of Hmong CMA was largely the result of birth and transfer.

<sup>22</sup> Vang's entire questionnaire contains a single, *double-barreled* question: What is the main reason that you do not accept Christianity or practice it?

explained. Vang simply reports that “several Hmong non-Christians in Sacramento were asked to choose one of the eight statements as to why he or she did not accept Christianity” and that “many of them refused to participate” (1998: 221). As a result, only 23 questionnaires were completed. Of this, 57 percent chose response option 1 (i.e., “I believe that the Hmong belief system (*kevcai dabqhuas*) is part of the Hmong culture and it is good. I want to preserve it”); 22 percent chose option 4 (“I believe that God exists, but I do not believe that Christianity is the only way to God”); and the rest of the participants marked the other options. Curiously, Vang cites the 57 percent that chose option 1 as evidence that Hmong traditional rituals hindered them from converting to Christianity. Given the highly problematic design and implementation of the survey, we seriously question the validity and reliability of Vang’s conclusions or any conclusions derived from this survey. Until these basic flaws are corrected, we do not see the need to critique the quality of the data any further.

Furthermore, Vang argues that there is a relationship between “secular” education and resistance to conversion. How, then, does Vang define “secular” education, establish its existence, and show that it is linked to religious conversion? Evidently, Vang never defines “secular education.” He does, however, describe the attitudes of “secular” people. For instance, Vang recalls one of his encounters with a “secular professor” who declared, “I believe that God does not exist today. If he did, he must have died a long time ago” (1998: 237). Vang also refers to a biologist who, before converting, used to perceive Christians as “anti-intellectual,” lacking “hard knowledge” and “weak” or “insecure” (1998: 237). In short, it appears that in Vang’s view, anything or anyone who does not uphold Christian beliefs is “secular.”

Next, let us examine Vang’s evidence for the existence of secular beliefs among the educated Hmong population. The closest, albeit crude, evidence Vang presents comes from his

finding that “some Hmong non-Christians in Sacramento who responded to [his] survey indicated that because of education, they have become self sufficient and have no need for God” (1998: 238). Based on this, Vang is convinced that “having earned a higher degree means having studied under many secular professors and having been influenced by their world views” (1998: 237). However, Vang provides no data at all for us to evaluate the backgrounds or any other attitudes of the respondents in his survey. All we know about the people who make up the category of “some Hmong non-Christians” is that they are an *unknown fraction* of the five individuals (of 23) who did not check response options 1 and 4 in Vang’s survey.<sup>23</sup> We have no information about these individuals’ age, gender educational level, or the contexts under which they gave responses. Given this limitation in the data, we have no way of determining whether or not there is a correlation between the intensity of secular beliefs and educational level. Vang simply assumes that higher education produces secular beliefs and that such beliefs make people resistant to conversion. A consistent problem in Vang’s thesis results from his assumption that there is a relationship between *X* (e.g., secular education) and *Y* (e.g., resistance to conversion) *without having first established that X exists.* <sup>24</sup>

Moreover, if formal education breeds secularization, and if secularization leads to resistance, we would expect the U.S. population to have a greater level of resistance to Christianity, since its average educational attainment is much higher than that of Hmong

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<sup>23</sup> Of the 23 individuals who responded to Vang’s survey, 79 percent chose options 1 and 4. The rest (21%) of the participants chose other options, including option 6, which states, “Because of education, I believe that I can help myself. I have no need for Good.” Vang cites this to support his argument on education and resistance.

<sup>24</sup> We wish to point out that Vang suggests numerous other reasons for resistance. These include the notion that church members “do not have any lost friends,” (1998: 240), the “wrong methods of evangelism” (1998: 241), the supposedly overrepresentation of the “unsaved people” (1998: 241); inappropriate soliciting of non-Christians by businesses and Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc. For instance, Vang states, “Telephone calls during dinner time to advertise products and services, salesmen knocking on the door asking permission to show their ‘not-sold in the stores-products,’ and evangelists from the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses have made the Hmong a more resistant people” (1998: 246).

Americans. By extension, if secularization leads to a reduction in Christianity, then we would expect secularization to lead to a reduction in all sorts of religion, including Hmong traditional religion.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps it is because Vang assumes an inevitable link between formal education, secularization, and resistance that he labels the younger generation of male leaders in the church as “spiritually dry and weak” (1998: 258) and incapable of leading the church towards “spiritual growth” (1998: 258).

Finally, to test the hypothesis that improvements in socioeconomic conditions lead to greater resistance, Vang conducted a survey with 200 members in the Hmong CMA church. Of these, 190 individuals completed the survey. The results show that 46 percent of them accepted Christ when they lived in Laos, 26 percent accepted Christ in Thailand, and 28 percent accepted Christ in the U.S (1998: 220). This means that 53 people accepted Christ after they have arrived in the U.S. Of these 53 people, approximately 24 (46%) accepted Christ within three years of arrival, 19 (35%) did so after four to ten years, and 10 (19%) did so after ten or more years. From these figures, Vang concluded that “what is interesting is the fact that the longer they are in this country, the *less likely* they are to accept Christ” (1998:220-221, emphasis added).

We argue that this conclusion is completely flawed because it has nothing to do with the data. These proportions do not and cannot say anything about the probability or likelihood of conversion over time. They simply reflect the breakdown of the occurrence of conversion in terms of percentage in different time intervals among the 53 individuals. They tell us *when* a proportion of the event (“accepting Christ”) occurred, not the likelihood of the occurrence of the event within a population. In order to support Vang’s argument, the data must show that the proportion of conversion has decreased over time within a given general Hmong population,

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<sup>25</sup> We thank a blind reviewer at *Hmong Studies Journal* for pointing this out.

after controlling for other important variables such as age, education, etc. Apparently, both the appropriate data and the knowledge of probability were lacking in this case.

### **Problematic Interpretations**

How, exactly, does Vang characterize the Hmong's traditional belief system? Vang characterizes the Hmong traditional belief system as backward and inferior to Christianity. This characterization is most apparent in Vang's presentation of the key practices associated with the traditional wedding ceremony, where he provides extreme examples of cultural practice and exaggerates their usage, meanings or consequences.

In discussing *kev pe* (kowtowing), Vang claims, without any evidence, that "it is not uncommon for the groom and his best man to bow as many as four hundred times" (1998: 228).<sup>26</sup> How the "400 bows" came about is mysterious as much as it is interesting; Vang does not provide even anecdotal evidence. It is something that we have never seen or heard of in our more than 30 years of living with the Hmong community, and in our conversations with Hmong elders and cultural specialists who have seen numerous weddings in their own lifetimes. If we follow Vang's understanding that *ob pes* (two kowtows) are required per person announced, 400 kowtows would be the equivalent of having 200 immediate family members, first cousins, and household spirits on the list. Even if one allows for the very slim possibility that such an extreme case could occur, to claim that it is "not uncommon" is utterly misleading.<sup>27</sup> Yet, it

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<sup>26</sup> Vang calls the act of "*pe*" bow; however, we refer to it as kowtow, as it involves and is usually referred to by Hmong elders as bending of the knees (*qhau lub hauv caug*). In Vang's understanding, the obligatory list includes "spirits of the house down to the parents of the bride, her uncles, aunts, brothers, grandparents and great grandparents who have died" (p. 228).

<sup>27</sup> Kowtowing occurs at several different stages/moments during a traditional Hmong wedding ceremony. What Vang refers to is the period during the wedding ceremony, referred to metaphorically as "bull grazing" (*txog tus cavv piam thaj lub caij laij nyug*), which is a time to *recognize* the families and extended families of the groom and bride. Although the procedures vary from region to region and by dialect, the following procedure is usually followed in a traditional White Hmong wedding: the two *mej koob* of the groom's family's side (*mej koob* are wedding song specialists who have been asked to serve as messengers, partial mediators, and witnesses between the

seems unlikely that Vang has *never* attended a Hmong wedding ceremony done in the “traditional” way. Vang opposes the practice of kowtowing because he interprets it as a form of unnecessary, unholy religious worship. Appealing to the Bible, Vang professes that “bowing down to someone is a form of worship which is forbidden by the Holy Scriptures” (1998: 229).

Second, in discussing ceremonial drinking during the traditional Hmong wedding, Vang exaggerates the inflexibility of cultural practices and the deviant behavior that results from them. In Vang's portrayal of the traditional wedding, “wine is used from the moment the *mej koob* of both parties begin the negotiation to the time that the marriage feast is completed and the bride and groom walk out of her parents' house toward the groom's home. By that time the groom is heavily intoxicated and may have to be carried away” (1998: 227). “Heavy intoxication” is a result of the 16 rounds (32 shots) of drinking required of every individual sitting on the main wedding table, including the groom. In short, ceremonial drinking promotes intoxication, and therefore, such ritual is morally wrong according to Vang. “Paul instructs Timothy to ‘use a little wine’ because of his ‘stomach’ and ‘frequent illnesses,’ but he strongly speaks against drunkenness. He warns that drunkards ‘will not inherit the kingdom of God’” (1998: 228).

We do not doubt that ceremonial drinking persists and that overdrinking can lead to

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two families), tell the groom and his *phij laj* (“best man”) to stand side-by-side near the main living room door, with their front facing the *Xwm Kab* (benevolent house spirit altar) and their backs facing the door. One of the two *mej koob* then leads the groom and *phij laj* to kowtow in recognition of the bride's parents and brothers (2 kowtows per person), paternal grand parents (2 kowtows per person), uncles and aunts (2 kowtows for all inclusive), the bride's first-male-cousins (2 kowtows for all), and elders of the town (*kev txwj kev laus*, 2 kowtows for all). After this, the *mej koob* then gives the sacred Umbrella to the *mej koob* representing the bride's family's side, who then returns the favor by having the groom and his *phij laj* kowtow in recognition of the groom's side of the family: his parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and other close kin. Once this is completed, the *mej koob* of the bride's family's side recites a list (written or recalled from memory) which contains the names of living male (and some female) family members of the bride, her aunts and uncles, her first (male) cousins, and benevolent spiritual beings (Spirits of the sky and soil and house spirits, such as *Niam Txiv Xwm Kab Los Yej*). Upon reciting each name, the groom and his *phij laj* must kowtow twice in succession in recognition of each individual. Sources: Communication with Nhia P. Xiong, a Hmong practitioner and teacher of *zaj tshoob*, *txiv xaiv*, and *qeej*, born in Luang Prabang province, Laos (Marysville, CA., July 3, 2008); Ya Va Thai et al. (1990). *Kab Tshoob Kev Kos: Liaj Lwg Tus Cag Txuj Rhwv Mwg Tus Cag Peev*, Javouhey, Guyane: Association Communautaire Hmong.

intoxication or health problems. What is utterly wrong and misleading, however, is (1) Vang's oversimplification and overgeneralization of a "cultural" practice, which has not only varied from place to place but also undergone significant changes, and (2) his assumption that Hmong make no distinction between ceremonial drinking and alcoholism. By conveniently taking a socially stigmatized practice (alcoholism) and associating it with Hmong culture, Vang redefines—by categorizing—an ordinary practice (drinking) as a cultural practice. Next, the "cultural practice" gets, albeit subtly, juxtaposed with the currently acceptable, moral norms of the dominant American society, in order to suggest that elements of "Hmong culture" are basically backward and uncivilized.

Finally, in Vang's interpretation of the social significance of the wedding Umbrella (*lub kaus*),<sup>28</sup> he argues that

Reliance on the umbrella to protect the bride home, to keep her soul from being stolen from the evil spirits is *superstition*. The Lord always protect His people (Deut. 23:14; Psa. 5:11). Only those who are without the Lord is without protection (Num. 14:9). [sic] Such people may *psychologically* depend on the umbrella to protect them. Christians need the face of the Lord to shine upon them and give them peace (Num. 6:24-26) rather than the *fragile umbrella*" (1998: 228-229, emphasis added).

How does Vang know that the beliefs of one religious system are "superstitious" while the beliefs of another system are not? Vang does not bother to address this question because, apparently, he already believes that Christianity is the truth. By conveniently defining Hmong cultural practices as "superstition" and Christian beliefs as "truth," Vang tries to establish the former as irrational and inferior, and the latter as rational and superior. Rather than try to inquire about or understand the social functions and meanings of this practice from the perspective of his research participants, Vang chose to interpret and characterize these practices based on his own

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<sup>28</sup> The meaning and use of the sacred Umbrella in Hmong's wedding ceremony deserves further in-depth study.

reading of the Bible.

### Conclusion and Discussion

We have reviewed Vang's central arguments on the growth and decline of Hmong conversions to Christianity from the 1950s to the 1990s, and we have shown that there are multiple flaws with Vang's methodology and theories. What lessons can be drawn from this critique?

We want to highlight two things. By portraying the *beliefs* of Hmong traditional religion as "compatible with" Christianity, Vang appears to be pursuing a strategy—to borrow Nicholas Tapp's apt phrase—to "work with rather than against the beliefs of the people they are seeking to convert" (1989b: 99). However, Vang never discusses or considers the possibility of the reverse: Christianity is compatible with Hmong traditional religion, and that religious conversion is never a simple, one-directional phenomenon. To do so would be inconsistent with Vang's underlying assumption and argument that key *practices* of Hmong traditional religion are not only *incompatible* with Christianity, but ought to be abandoned completely. We think that such arguments reflect the influence of religious doctrines and doctrines of classic assimilation; it not only leaves little room for accommodating diverse beliefs, but also it actually distorts the social reality of Hmong's religious conversion.

We would like to suggest that Hmong's "conversion" to Christianity, whether in the past or present, involves complex processes and responses. In their encounters with new social circumstances, Hmong are active agents in synthesizing attitudes, beliefs and practices. Such syntheses are likely to produce a kind of syncretic cultural-religious system, whose salient and useful "features" are determined by individuals' interactions with others in their present social

circumstances. We tend to agree with other observers who have described Hmong as active agents in “selectively incorporating and/or superimposing specific Christian beliefs and practices onto their own” (Winland 1994: 40).<sup>29</sup>

Second, by caricaturing cultural practices and their meanings, Vang achieves his unstated goal: to portray Hmong traditional religion as backward and inferior to Christianity and therefore in need of liberation, or, to put it bluntly, in need of cultural cleansing. If Hmong resist Christianity, according to Vang, it is because they are unwilling or unable to abandon “superstitious” beliefs and practices, especially the feeding of [*read*: worshipping of or submission to] the Ancestors. From this view, becoming “Christian” means not only condemning these practices but also defining oneself in opposition to everything—past, present and conceivable—that one regards as “non-Christian.”

What is most striking about Vang's thesis is that it articulates all of this without much attempt at concealing its underlying assumptions. The assumptions we have discussed here, of course, exist and circulate far and beyond the covers of Vang's dissertation. A systematic analysis of news articles produced about Hmong during the past twenty years by major publishers around the U.S. reveals that, among other things, the assumption about the static, unassimilable quality of Hmong culture remains pervasive.<sup>30</sup> Unless students of Hmong Studies challenge these assumptions (and others) directly, they may continue to be reproduced as legitimate ideas—ideas which too often are presented as credible scientific “facts.” When individuals or groups act on these “facts,” they may contribute to the growing tensions within

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Tapp has also argued that cases of Hmong messianism reflect Hmong's “complex reaction *against* missionary influence, an attempt to control an alien belief system by internalizing it and making it one's own” (1989a: 81).

<sup>30</sup> Xiong, Y. S. “Racialization Processes: Hmong in the American Mass Media.” Unpublished manuscript. Department of Sociology, UCLA.

contemporary Hmong American communities.

*Coming a Full Circle* has, no doubt, encouraged us to reflect on how we know the things we know. The questions it raises are highly interesting and socially significant. We hope that our critique of *Coming a Full Circle* can bring about constructive debates and discussions on not only diverse social phenomena related to “religion,” but also on research methodology and theory. As mentioned at the outset of this paper, the number of published studies on Hmong religious change and adaptation remain few. Yet, the quantity of published texts means little if the studies in them lack quality data and analysis. As sociologists, we would like to think, as Zusman (2005) reminds us, that the goals of science are to understand, explain, and hopefully, predict social phenomena. While limitations in research are undeniable, we think the questions raised in Vang’s study could be more effectively pursued by drawing on empirically supported theories, using appropriate research methods, and carefully analyzing empirical data by checking for potential biases during the interpretations of human actions, meanings, and events.

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**A Critique of Timothy Vang's Hmong Religious Conversion and Resistance Study by Nao Xiong and Yang Sao Xiong, Hmong Studies Journal 9: 1-22.**

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