

Introduction

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In 2002 Gary Lee and I were fortunate enough to be given the chance, thanks to Francesca Merlan and other members of the Steering Committee, to organise a panel, ‘Changing Cultural Contexts: Representations of the Hmong’, at the Annual Meeting of the Australian Anthropological Society held at The Australian National University, Canberra (3–5 October). We believe this was the first time researchers on the Hmong in Australia had been enabled to come together to compare their findings in very different fields and to discuss a wide range of different issues concerning the Hmong population and society of Australia. Some seedling money came from a Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange grant for a research project we held (see below), and our thanks are due to the Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation, in Taiwan, for this.

The Hmong, as Gary Lee’s chapter explains, first arrived in Australia in 1975 from war-torn Laos, and many of the chapters here harken back to memories of that traumatic time. They have settled into Australia well as a small population of under 2,000, in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart, and now also north Queensland and Brisbane and, as in other countries of resettlement such as France and the United States of America, their settlement has been characterised by the phenomenon of secondary migration to places other than those of their original settlement. Their early status as refugees was replaced by an innovative sponsorship programme under which those settled here were able to sponsor other close

family relatives to settle in Australia. In Australia, as in other resettlement countries, the Hmong have been active in founding local and national associations to protect and safeguard their interests, and there is alarm about the rapid assimilation of the younger generation and their loss of traditional cultural heritage. The Australian Hmong is a small community, but a dynamic and rapidly changing one.

There have been many workshops and meetings on the Hmong in the United States where they number over 180,000,¹ in particular the Hmong-organised Hmong National Development conferences (see Julian's chapter in this volume), and two international research conferences organised in the early 1980s.² In China there have been several series of national and international meetings of provincial Miao Studies Associations which have included the Hmong together with other non-Hmong Miao people of China (like the Hmu, Kho Xiong and A Hmao) (see, *inter alia*, Schein 1996 and Tapp 2003). In 1998, the first International Hmong/Miao Studies Conference was organised by Jean Michaud and Christian Culas in Aix-en-Provence, France (CNRS, 11–13 September), and the proceedings of this are shortly to be published (Tapp, Michaud, Culas, and Lee, eds, forthcoming). There were plans to hold a second conference, in Australia or Thailand, which have not yet materialised.

From an anthropological point of view the Canberra conference panel was significant in focusing on a topic which has so far not been a particular province of anthropologists in Australia, immigrant communities to Australia itself.³ Although significant and substantial work has certainly take place on these populations (see, for example, De Lepervanche 1984, Craig 1965, Martin 1978, Bottomley 1992, Inglis 1992 and Thomas 1999), in general S.F. Nadel's vision of a union of sociology with anthropology in Australia has not taken place and the main concern of anthropologists here seems to have focused on indigenous communities (in the strictest definition of that word) and those overseas, particularly among Australia's neighbours in Asia and the Pacific. As Bottomley (1998) observed, until now 'anthropologists have demonstrated relatively little interest in the

massive immigrations to Australia and the marked heterogeneity of the population'. We had hoped that by organising such a panel at this particular conference, we might open a way for others to take up more intensive studies of immigrant communities in Australia from the theoretical viewpoint of a contemporary anthropology.

However, contributions came from a wide range of academic disciplines, including music (ethnomusicology), anthropology, sociology, medicine, linguistics and museology. It is certainly the case that the lines between anthropology, history, and geography on the one hand, and anthropology, cultural studies, English literature, and sociology on the other, are running particularly thin at the moment, and it was a tribute to the organisers of this conference that they were able to welcome papers from such a wide range of disciplines.

It must be said that the contributors to this volume represent virtually all the serious researchers who have devoted their attentions to the Hmong in Australia. While encouraged by such work and the rich diversity of backgrounds and interests it represents, nevertheless the paucity of such research to date (and particularly, I may add, the lack of significant research by younger Australian Hmong themselves) on such a significant minority population in the country was somewhat disappointing.

This lack of academic research on the Hmong has been more than compensated for by the plethora of studies of another kind of the Hmong; these have been mostly government-sponsored or local community surveys of population, health, housing, medicine, diet, childbirth, employment, and so on. This has led to a very real 'research fatigue' among the Hmong living in Australia, most of whom are busy citizens with lives and careers to get on with who do not see why they should necessarily be targeted as the objects of other peoples' studies and career trajectories, and where they expect quite legitimately to be told what the purpose of such research is and what tangible benefits they may expect to receive from it.

The panel itself was exciting and interesting I think for all of us, working in separate fields with few opportunities hitherto to meet others with similar interests and research experiences; we

all learned from each other and exchanged ideas in a fruitful and candid way. For me the moral of the meeting came in the masterly summing up by Dr Gary Lee. Almost all of us, in our various papers and presentations, and in the discussions following those presentations (which were unfortunately not recorded), had been concentrating on the distinctive ‘Hmong-ness’ of the Hmong, the difficulties of their adjustment to a new society in Australia, their attempts to find new ways of ‘being Hmong’, and so on. Indeed, in conversations with the Hmong who were not brought up in Australia, it is often difficult to avoid this sort of tenor in general discussions of Hmong issues; very frequently conversations gravitate towards an appreciation of the importance and unique distinction of Hmong traditional customs (*kevcai*) and culture (a view I strongly uphold), fears and regrets at their impending loss by the younger generation, and a variety of practical suggestions for how to maintain and continue Hmong traditional customs (including an idea to send young Australian Hmong teenagers to Asia to teach English to Asian Hmong, and learn Hmong customs and language in return).⁴ But in Gary Lee’s summary, he pointed out how many of the papers, and how much of our discussion, had focused on the importance of being Hmong in a strange and alien setting. ‘But a lot of us’, he said in his dry, Australian way (we were talking English), ‘have been trying very hard to be Australian!’ And *not* being accepted as such, he went on to emphasise, referring to how he felt his soul was Australian, but his face was Hmong, or Asian, so people here inevitably related to him as an Asian and a foreigner. This was a salutary reminder to many of us of the ethnic prejudice and innuendos, the difficulties and lack of understanding, that many Hmong, like other Asian immigrants here, face every day in their struggle to be accepted as full members of society.

The following chapters are based on presentations made at that conference, except that Pranee Rice withdrew her paper on Hmong courtship and marriage in Melbourne and submitted one on menstruation instead. All have been more than fully revised and edited for publication.

Gary Lee’s chapter reflects the experience he has gained, since his first arrival in Australia as a schoolboy under the Colombo Plan in

1965, in dealing with community and refugee or immigrant problems of the Hmong, and the deep knowledge he has accumulated of the Hmong in all their global homes. Factual and unemotional in tone, the chapter provides a masterly overview of the current situation of the Hmong from a sociological viewpoint. Dealing with issues of early settlement, housing and employment, and secondary migration, the chapter also describes the establishment of associations by the Hmong and confronts issues of cultural continuity and adaptation which passionately concern all Hmong.

My own chapter represents some of the findings of a Chiang Ching Kuo Research Project, 'Communal Voluntary Diasporic Public Cultures: Hmong Transnationalism in Asia and Overseas', undertaken with Gary Lee, for which research was carried out among Hmong communities in China, Thailand, Laos, Taiwan and Australia. To a large extent it represents work in progress since it is still planned to extend this project to Vietnam, France, Canada, the United States and other overseas sites of the Hmong, while those already visited require further and deeper research. Nevertheless, the concerns in this chapter with the Hmong as a diasporic community and the changes this is bringing about for the Hmong social structure and sense of identity are echoed in most of the other chapters, particularly those of Roberta Julian and Maria Wronska-Friend.

Roberta Julian's chapter is an example of the kind of work which I feel there should be much more of; based on many years of experience with the Hmong and other migrant communities in Tasmania, and a familiarity with the situation of the Hmong in America, she combines approaches from sociology and anthropology, literary and cultural analysis, together with an historical outlook, to piece together a vision of the Hmong as a community not only in Australia, but also in the world. This chapter is shot through with sophisticated theoretical insights presented in a clear and compelling way, particularly on the varying levels of Hmong Tasmanian identity in Australia, and on the likely effects of globalisation at the local and national levels.

Maria Wronska-Friend's chapter adds to this vision of a diasporic, far-flung community nevertheless firmly located and

situated in Australia, by presenting the results of her extensive work with and knowledge of the Hmong community of north Queensland. Her research has been an active and participatory one since she has been instrumental in organising a number of exhibitions and events connected with the Hmong community. By focusing in detail on changes in the traditional Hmong costume, and the new meanings it has gathered in the Australian context, she also shows us how contemporary image and the cultural heritages of history intersect for the Australian Hmong. And by examining the provenance of particular items of clothing she succeeds in providing a fascinating account of how these articles of material culture express and embody the close familial relationships which are today located in disparate and widely separated quarters of the world.

More importantly for the future of the Hmong, the combined use of varied costumes from different parts of the world and different Hmong sub-groups points to a more generalised postmodern Hmong group image, reflecting a truly global Hmong identity.

Catherine Falk's masterly study of Hmong music as expressed through the *qeej* reed-pipe instrument also shows us this instrument as an icon of contemporary as well as historical cultural identity and points to its current dissemination globally on the internet. Yet this chapter reflects more deeply on the relationship between musical and social forms generally, and provides an historical account of the reception and development of the instrument in changing cultural contexts, based on intensive textual and ethnographic research, which is of great value. Her suggestions as to the very great antiquity of this instrument in the Chinese records are extremely interesting and may point towards an early shamanic use of this famous instrument in China.

Pranee Rice Liamputtong's chapter reflects but one aspect of her wider and far more extensive work on the health and traditional medicinal system of the Hmong community in Australia (see Liamputtong 2000). The interest in Hmong medicine and health has of course been a general one, particularly in the United States where a number of books now testify to the

strength of this system and the shock of its encounter with Western biomedicine (such as Fadiman 1997). Here we hear Hmong women talking frankly to other women about highly personal issues in a way which alerts us to the significance of other systems of belief and medical approaches. This chapter also reflects aspects of the wider interest in issues of gender among the Hmong which has been approached by several writers and is a growing field of study.⁵

Finally, Nerida Jarkey's chapter deals with what is perhaps at the heart of all anthropological inquiry: do people of different languages and different cultural backgrounds have radically dissimilar ways of understanding the world? Raising the question of cultural relativism in its most extreme form, the chapter focuses on a particular detail of Hmong linguistic structure in order to show that, in this instance at least, no radically disparate worldview is involved. The chapter will be of interest not only to comparative linguists, but also for showing how general scientific theory and understanding depends on the use of concrete ethnographic example, in this case taken from the rich field of the Hmong language.

The authors hope this book may serve to give a general reader some idea of the wide range of issues which research on the Hmong in Australia has covered, as well as a basic introduction to this fascinating and not well enough known community. We also hope the book will be of interest to members of the Hmong community in understanding why they are so frequently the objects of fascinated research attention. In many ways the book is a tribute to the richness and importance of the cultural system the Hmong of today have inherited, and we think that interest will be shared, and appreciated, by most members of the Hmong community. In other ways more abstract issues to do with the effects of globalisation on local communities, social changes and the relationship of minority groups to the state, are also being addressed in these pages through the use of Hmong examples, and we hope this collection may also make those more general interests more comprehensible to average members of the Hmong community. Beyond Australia the book should be of interest not only to those who work on, or with, the

Hmong in many other countries, but should also contribute to general understandings of processes of social change among recent immigrants to new countries of settlement, the relations they may hold with homelands and the new relations forged with other diasporic communities overseas.

Finally, both editors and contributors would like to express our sense of deep gratitude to members of the Hmong community in Australia, who have helped all of us in various ways with our research projects. Without their assistance, none of this work would have been possible and we thank them for their time and patience in answering what at times must seem very repetitive and meaningless, if not intrusive, questions. We hope that in some way the results of this research feed back to that community in the form of an increased general understanding of what it means to be Hmong in an Australian setting, and perhaps also an appreciation of how hard it may be for those of the Hmong who have also been struggling, as Gary Lee's summary at the Conference so well put it, to be accepted as Australians.

Note on Orthography and Usage

Throughout this book, we have adopted the standard Romanised Phonetic Alphabet (RPA) system of orthography for Hmong developed by Bertrais, Heimbach, and Smalley (see Heimbach 1979). In this system, the final consonants indicate one of the eight Hmong tones, and so should not be pronounced as consonants at all, while a doubled vowel indicates final nasalisation. Thus, 'Hmong' is spelt 'Hmoob', the -b ending indicating a high level tone, and the 'oo' pronounced as 'ong'. There are no final endings to syllables outwith final nasalisation, otherwise this system would not work. The only other real peculiarity of the system is that 'x' is pronounced exactly like the English 's', while 's' is pronounced something like the English 'sh'. I understand this peculiarity was the result of incompatibilities between the system developed by the Roman Catholic, and that developed by the Protestant, missionaries who worked with the Hmong at that time. A preliminary 'h' indicates initial aspiration, through the nose.

Between the two main cultural divisions of the Hmong outside China, the Hmoob Dawb (White Hmong) and Hmoob Ntsuab (Green Hmong), RPA was developed mainly for the dialect spoken by the White Hmong, which displays systematic variations from the Green Hmong dialect (for example, of tone). In fact the Green Hmong pronunciation of this term for themselves is not pre-aspirated, and so should really be spelt 'Moob' or (in ordinary English approximation) 'Mong', and recently the American Green Hmong have begun a campaign arguing for the name to be changed to accord with their own usage; thus, they would prefer to be referred to as 'Mong', and not 'Hmong'. While this is a perfectly reasonable point, we have retained the normal spelling of 'Hmong' here because it is so generally known and accepted, and it would be confusing to general readers to do otherwise. It may be that at some point in the future, the Hmong community as a whole will decide to change the spelling of their name, or will agree to be known under two separate names, and if that time comes we should of course follow the usage which has been agreed on. At the moment, however, there is no such agreement, and so we have retained the more traditional usage.

'Ntsuab' itself is a colour term which refers to a tone midway between 'Green' and 'Blue' in English. In some earlier works (for example, Geddes 1976 or Nusit 1976) the Hmoob Ntsuab were referred to as the 'Blue Hmong'. However, the shade is closer to 'Green' and 'Green' is the more correct translation of this term, and is therefore the one which has been adopted here. It should be added that there is now some dissension about even this term, since some of the Green Hmong in the United States have recently objected to the use of this term, which they find is derogatory, and prefer to be called 'Moob Lees' (Mong Leng) instead. This is in fact historically incorrect; while the Hmong from Laos tend to think that 'Hmoob Ntsuab' and 'Hmoob Lees' are interchangeable terms for the same group of people, in fact the Hmoob Lees are, or were, a distinct group who seem to have become assimilated to the Hmoob Ntsuab in Laos and Thailand but remain distinct in Vietnam today.⁶

Footnotes

- ¹ The 2000 US Census gives a figure of 169,482 for those identifying only as Hmong, 186,310 for those who identified as Hmong as well as another ethnic group.
- ² The Second Hmong Research Conference ('The Hmong in Transition') was held at the University of Minnesota on 17–19 November 1983; the First in 1982 ('The Hmong in the West').
- ³ A notable recent exception would be the work of Thomas (1999).
- ⁴ The problems here would probably be the reluctance of most Australian Hmong teenagers to go to Asia at all (see Tapp, this volume), together with the dangers of life in Asia for them, particularly regarding their personal security and health (Gary Lee, personal communication).
- ⁵ See, for example, Donnelly (1994) and Symonds (2003), besides a growing number of contributions by younger Hmong women.
- ⁶ See Lemoine (1995); Hmoob Lees or 'Multicoloured Hmong' are known as Meo Hoa in Vietnamese, the Hmoob Ntsuab or 'Green Hmong' as Meo Xanh.