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## Cultural Identity In Post-Modern Society: Reflections on What is a Hmong?

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There is no easy answer to the question of what constitutes the cultural identity of a person or human group. When is someone a Hmong and what are the characteristics of such a person? How is this personal identity moulded into a shared image at the group level? Some may say that there is such a thing as a true Hmong, but many others will argue that there is no such a person today when many Hmong have been assimilated into the local cultures and languages of the majority societies in which they now live in China, Southeast Asia or in the West.

To grapple with this issue, I will take a dialectic approach which will attempt to arrive at what is considered true by eliminating differences and by synthesising common grounds or potential similarities. I will begin by looking at different concepts from a collective perspective, followed by a similar examination at the personal level focusing on what I regard as being the major characteristics of the Hmong as individuals and as a people. I will then draw my conclusion in the light of the Hmong's diaspora and the globalisation of their contacts today.

### THE COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION

The concern to present a proper group image to themselves and to the world at large, as well as the aspiration to live up to this image seem to be persistent themes among the Hmong, wherever they live. To understand this group image, to know what makes the Hmong "Hmong", I will look at their origin and at some cultural features which distinguish them as a group from other groups. I will examine common grounds and differences to see in what ways the Hmong are similar and in what other ways they are different. Is there a common Hmong identity?

### The meanings of the terms "Hmong" and "Miao"

The term "Hmong" has come to be used internationally during the last twenty years, largely through the advocacy of the Hmong in Laos and through the pioneering work of Dr. Yang Dao (6), who first suggested that the word "Hmong" means "free people". Before this period, the international literature, following Chinese usage, usually refers to the Hmong as "Miao" or "Meo", but this is the term the Hmong outside China use or want to refer to themselves. Regardless of which term is used, most Hmong are hesitant about its meaning as they simply do not know.

Leaders of a messianic movement based in the former refugee camps in Thailand believe that

the term "Peb Hmoob" (Us Hmong) derives from the word "Peb Hmoov", meaning "the Tree Fortunes". The word "peb" can mean either "us" or "three". Hmong messianic legend has it that the Hmong were once delivered from the Chinese by a set of three brothers called "Peb Hmoov" (the Three Fortunes). Previous to this, the Hmong are said to call themselves "Keeb" (Quing or Ch'ing) or "originators". Despite the linguistic similarity between "Peb Hmoob" (the way the Hmong often refer to themselves) and "Peb Hmoov", this explanation seems to have confused Hmong origin with Vietnamese history. The Vietnamese are known as the Quing people, and they were at one time delivered from Chinese domination by the Le sisters, similar to the story of the three Hmong brothers. To complicate matters further, the Hmong in Laos and Thailand have been known as "Meo", a derivative of the Chinese word "Miao". With a slight change in accent, the word "Meo" in Lao and Thai can be pronounced to mean "cat". It is most offensive for many Asians to be compared to an animal, a lower form of beings in their views. For this reason, the Hmong have taken exception to being known as "Meo". The Lao government has complied by referring to them as "Lao Sung" or "Lao of the mountain tops", a term which also includes the I-Mien or Yao people. Thai authorities have taken no official line on the issue. Outsiders in Laos and Thailand may refer to the Hmong as "Hmong" when political correctness calls for it, otherwise the Hmong continue to be called "Meo".

According to Enwall (1992:256), the term "Miao" was used in pre-Quin China to refer to non-Chinese people of Southern China, often in combination such as "Miao Min" (the Miao people), "Yu Miao" (the Miao) and "San Miao" (the three groups of Miao). Later, during the Tang and Sung dynasties, the term "Nan Man" (Southern Barbarians) was used, and it was not until 862 A.D. that the word "Miao" appeared again in Fan Chuo's book *\_Manshu* on the Man Tribes. During the Ming and Quing dynasties, both the terms "Man" and "Miao" were used. The Ming dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) finally saw the term used for the Hmong in today's China where they are now referred to as "Miao-Tseu".

The Hmong in China are today reported to readily accept being called "Miao". Enwall (op.cit.: 258) also contends that the Hmong in China have voiced no concern about the term, and it is impossible to write "Hmong" in Chinese characters (with a nasal 'h'). Regardless of this, the reference to the Hmong as "Miao-tseu" carries shades of ambiguity since it can be defined as either "rice sprouts" or "sons of the soil". The Chinese Hmong may have raised no objection because they are not aware of the ambiguous meanings of the term, or have not been ridiculed by the use of such a name unlike their brothers and sisters in Thailand or Laos.

Among themselves, the Hmong outside China prefer to be called "Hmong" (in the White Hmong dialect) or "Mong" (in Blue Hmong or Moob Lees). Those in China use such terms to designate themselves as "Ghao Xiong" in Western Hunan; "Hmub", "Gha Ne" or "Hme" for a group speaking the same dialect in South eastern Kweichow; "A Hmao" in Northwest Kweichow and Northeast Yunnan; and "Hmong" in South Sechwan, West Kweichow and South Yunnan. These many different terms also refer to the languages spoken by the people concerned whose number is estimated at 7.5 million around the world. Of this number, Hmong speakers are the most numerous with more than 3 million people in China, Southeast Asia and in the West.

Given this diversity in their name, it is possible that the Hmong in China accept the Chinese term "Miao" for convenience and through forces of history rather than any meanings of the word. The non-Chinese aboriginals of southern China consist of many different ethno-linguistic groups. After many centuries of Chinese control, some might have adopted the name "Miao" without realising how many other groups have had it used for them. Hence, the acceptance of the name by such a large number of culturally and linguistically diverse people, many of whom cannot even communicate with each other except in Chinese. It will be interesting to see whether those who call themselves Hmong will continue to use the term "Miao" or to change to "Hmong" in the near future as advocated by the Hmong in Western countries.

## Mythical Origin

Anyone familiar with the Hmong knows the legend of the Great Flood and the incestuous marriage between a brother and his sister, the only two persons left on earth after the deluge. The Hmong and their many clans are said to be the result of this union (Geddes: 22-24). What is distinctive about this creation legend is that the Hmong in reality condemn incest, and the closest form of marriage between relatives is with cross-cousins. The Hmong practise strict clan exogamy or marriage outside one's own clan, and would not allow any person to break this rule.

Is the Great Flood story an attempt to hide an undesirable group image (incest) or did the Hmong really originate from this brother-sister union? Who were these two, brother and sister, and more to the point who were their ancestors? Were these ancestors not Hmong? Trying to discover the back-ground of the mythical parents of the Hmong is like asking about God's origin, a belief accepted by many but questioned by only a few.

Further regarding the origin of the Hmong, Western scholars have speculated that they come from "the far north" where today's Eskimos live. The link of the Hmong with the arctic probably stems from their stories of a land of stars and snow where they used to live, where the earth is connected to the sky and it is dark for half of the year. Such stories have been found among the Ch'uan Miao in Kweichow, Southern China (Graham).

Based on these stories, Savina suggested that the Hmong could have been the lost tribe in the Old Testament following the fall of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of languages. They could have wandered north from the Holy Land to the Red Sea, the Russian steppes and possibly the arctic, before migrating over the centuries down to southern China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand through Mongolia. The fact that albino people (with blond hair and blue eyes) are found among the Hmong has also been used to speculate on their Caucasian origin (Quincy: 14).

Some Hmong also claim that they have originated from Mongolia. This has most probably arisen from a misconception that there is a link in the syllable "mong" in the two names. Despite the lack of any cultural or linguistic connections with these far-flung places, many Hmong still believe that they have some remote relation with people of the far north, even when they have never met an Eskimo or a Mongol to see if they could at least communicate with each other or share some minute cultural features.

### **Possession of Magic Power**

The belief in their mythical origin has lead the Hmong to attribute supernatural qualities to their legendary heroes and cult leaders. This gives them hope for deliverance from their mundane living conditions, or to compensate for an oppressive political situation from which they have tried to escape, as did the American Indians during their fight against European domination last century. Many Hmong believe that their mythical prophets and chieftains were charged with holy missions against their political oppressors and were endowed with extraordinary abilities.

The very first Hmong king, for instance, is said to be invulnerable, except for his armpit. After numerous attempts on his life, the Chinese could not eliminate him so they sent him a beautiful Chinese princess as tribute. She eventually fulfilled her mission of discovering his weak spot, and thus succeeded in killing him. Although followers of Hmong messianic cults cannot always agree on the details, two of the most recent Hmong kings were reported to be Tswb Tshoj (Chue Chor) and Vaj Yim Leej (Va Yee Leng). The first was said to be the son of a hog, while the second was allegedly a kungfu expert and was born with a flying sword. It is believed that whoever was to find this sword would become the next Hmong king.

The attribution of supernatural power to their leaders by some Hmong may result from a belief in magic and a common expectation that everyone with true leadership abilities should also have super-human qualities. To possess magical abilities also adds an extra dimension to a leader who

can thus claim a direct link with a similar Hmong "king" or "huab tais" (huangti) in the past, thus drawing a larger number of supporters. Although these beliefs have their origin in the Hmong resistance against the Chinese in earlier times, they continue to influence Hmong resistance in other countries. Such beliefs also make some Hmong susceptible to the worship of "deformed" children as kings, and attributing to animals the ability to talk and deliver ominous messages or to predict events of catastrophic consequences.

For example, after the Pathet Lao takeover of Laos in 1975 some of the Hmong leaders who were engaged in the armed resistance against the new regime declared that they had God's protection and their followers would be immune to enemy fire. This alleged power drew together thousands of refugees, desperate to escape from Pathet Lao control (Lee: 212-215). This resistance was crushed by Vietnamese troops in 1978, but remnants of the movement continued to carry on their political struggle in Laos from refugee camps in Thailand or from their hiding places in the jungles of Laos, firmly believing in their messianic mission.

## Settlement Patterns

Another common conception of the Hmong is that they are a people on the move. Every ten years or so, they are said to migrate to a different village after they have slashed and burned the forest around the old settlement for agriculture. They are not permanent settlers like wet rice farmers. This is said to have led them to move freely across boundaries between neighbouring countries. Hence they are found in a large area from southern China to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma.

In Thailand, for instance, the Hmong are reported to have a group that "changed their localities more than any other hill people" (Young: 46). They are also seen as mountain dwellers, "highlanders", "a hill tribe", a tourist curiosity. In Laos, they are officially named "Lao Soung" or "Lao of the mountain tops". Their frequent migration and preference for mountain living have led Geddes to describe them as "migrants of the mountains". Their isolation is also said to have made them difficult to integrate into the mainstream nation. Thus, Young states that they will not be "absorbed easily by the Thai people or other tribes. They continue to have very strong bonds of solidarity and tight clans."

Are the Hmong really a mountain tribe who migrate regularly? It is true that many Hmong of the older generation dreaded going to the lowlands, as many died from malaria and other diseases they caught during these trips. There are many tragic tales of drowning, sickness and death following visits to "chaw qis" or "the lowlands." They are also afraid to live near rivers for fear of drowning or being "swallowed by dragons." The fear of water means that few Hmong know how to swim. Does this mean that they live only in the confines of their mountains, isolated from the lowlands, the urban modern life?

In Laos and Thailand, Hmong are known to live in the lowlands, working for the government, carrying on commerce or permanent irrigated rice farming. Many of us at this conference are the product of this lowland life, for only in the lowlands could we pursue higher education. The same pattern of settlement can be said about the Hmong in China. Ling and Ruey (54-72) stated that although swidden was still prevalent in the late 1940's in Western Hunan, wet rice terraces were also found along river banks and in valleys irrigated by water wheels. In Kweichow, according to De Beauclair (50), the Miao were "expert fish breeders" and cultivated terraced fields supported by stone walls and irrigated with water from bamboo pipes. In North western Kweichow, wet rice fields, fish breeding and the construction of houses on stilts (instead of the traditional earthen floor) have been adopted as a result of influences by the T'ung minority, their neighbours.

This seems to indicate that not all Hmong are migratory swidden farmers, or are adverse to living in the lowlands and along river banks. Hmong in China and Vietnam have now lived

willingly amid their dominant neighbours in urban or semi-rural areas. Some do farming, others trade or work for wages. Thus, the Hmong appear to be adaptable to both lowland and highland settlement, and are not confined to living on mountain tops.

## So What is A Hmong?

At the level of the individual, being "Hmong" can be attributed to such characteristics as one's birth and look, descent, given names, adherence to certain religious beliefs, and one's identification or interaction with Hmong and other people. I will now look at these factors and their significance for the Hmong.

## Birth and Physical Features

Birth is not only a person's first entry into the world but also the most important mark of one's identity. In Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, Hmong births usually take place at home in order that the child's placenta -- the symbol of one's natural cloak (or "tsho tsuj tsho npuag") -- can be buried in the parents' house (a boy's placenta near the central post, a girl's near the mother's bed). It is believed that the burial of the placenta allows it to be reclaimed by its owner during the latter's journey to join ancestors in the spirit world after death.

In Western countries, where many Hmong now live, nearly all births occur in hospitals and placentas are disposed of by the hospitals. Does this mean that the Hmong born in America, France or Canada will no longer be able to journey back to their ancestors -- at least not dressed properly because they have lost their placenta? Will they be any less Hmong, alive or dead?

After giving birth, the new mother is confined to the house, sleeping near the family fireplace for a month so she can regain her strength. During this period, visitors have to take off their shoes before entering the house, otherwise the mother's lactating milk may dry up. Yet again, this belief is not widely observed among the Hmong in western countries because it is no longer convenient to do so when many houses do not have a central fire place. As well, many mothers no longer need to breastfeed their babies. In fact, some want their milk to dry up as quickly as possible so that they can return to work or do other things they enjoy doing. Are these mothers doing the wrong thing by Hmong birth traditions? Apparently no, as no one seems to have missed the old beliefs and practices.

In terms of physical looks, are there body features which can be said to be distinctly Hmong? Many Hmong seem to think so. They usually comment on the look of a lowland Thai or a Chinese and say that they "don't look Hmong." No one, however, is certain how a Hmong really looks like, but they know a European is definitely not a Hmong. Despite this, Hmong have adopted children from other ethnic groups and these children have grown up into well accepted adult Hmong, regardless of the shades of their skin colours. In France and America we now have Hmong children from mixed marriages between Hmong and White people. These children appear to be well accepted, despite the fact they do not fit the usual image of Hmong. Thus, the Hmong seem to have developed their own image about what they should look like, but also appear to also accept deviations from it.

## Descent and Affiliation

A Hmong person is born into a line of descent. This line consists of the immediate nuclear family and the extended household (as primary group), and the lineage or cluster of blood relatives of the father's side (as secondary group). The sub-clan, or members of the clan who follow the same sets of ancestral rituals, and the clan or people bearing the same family name serving as a reference group. This constitutes a Hmong's social structures in microcosm. Beyond these

structures lies the misty concept of the Hmong nation which further segments the Hmong into different divisions or tribes such as black, blue, white, red, flowery, magpie, river, striped, etc. It is said that in China there are about sixty such Hmong/Miao tribes.

Spiritually, a Hmong belongs to his line of descent or clan, unless he is adopted into a family with a different clan name. A woman also belongs spiritually to her family of birth unless she marries when she then moves into her husband's line of descent. Once married, she cannot return to the ritual world of her paternal line, even after divorce or widowhood. If she re-marries, she then passes from her previous husband's line to that of the new husband and his clan. A Hmong woman no longer belongs to her parents' ritual domain after marriage whereas a man continues to do so for life.

In terms of marriage, people from the same clan are believed to belong to the same family of origin. The incest taboo forbids persons of the same clan from intermarrying, even though they may not be related by blood. However, this rule does not seem to be observed by all Hmong clans when some do allow their opposite members to marry so long as they are not closely related. Thus, the incest taboo applies to most clans, but not all of them.

Can we use these descent rules and the incest taboo to characterise a Hmong person? Obviously, the answer is no, because all the Hmong clans are still accepted as Hmong, despite the non-observance of birth beliefs by Western Hmong women, and the violation of the incest taboo by some clans. These differences serve only to highlight the fact that Hmong traditions are often very adaptable to suit new situations, and thus cannot be used to characterise all Hmong.

## **Names**

Three days after birth, a Hmong baby is given the "soul-calling" ("hu plig") ceremony during which it is given a name for the first time. A small necklace is put around the baby's neck to keep the soul (or "plig") to the body. The name may change if the child is sick later in life and the sickness is explained by shamans as a dislike for the original name. Other than this, the original name will remain with the person until death in the case of a woman, or until later in married life for a man when he will be given a new "adult" name ("npe laus") by his parents-in-law in an elaborate "renaming ceremony" to mark his attainment of "family man" status.

Most Hmong in the traditional village setting of Southeast Asia have typical Hmong names. However, many of the younger Hmong have increasingly adopted names from the local majority society in order to enrol in government schools or take up mainstream employment. This practice, whether by choice or by force of necessity, is found virtually among all Hmong groups, whether in Asia or the West. Many Hmong parents in America or Australia, for example, now call their children by American or Australian given names. In Thailand, those who enrol in Thai schools have adopted Thai names, and may sometimes change their clan names into Thai-like surnames. It is thus no longer possible to recognise Hmong by these foreign names.

Can we say that people who have given up the use of names are not really Hmong? Does a Hmong name make one a true Hmong? Again, it is not easy to find an answer, for apart from names there are other factors that define a person.

## **Language**

A Hmong is expected to be able to speak the Hmong language which is distinctly different from all other languages. Being members of a minority and living among many other ethnic groups, most Hmong need to learn, in addition to their mother tongue, one or more of the local or national foreign languages. These could be Mandarin for those in China, Lao for those in Laos, Vietnamese for those in Vietnam and Northern or Central Thai for those in Thailand. In the

process, they have also borrowed foreign words from these languages, some of which become assimilated as Hmong. For example, the word "to go" in Hmong is "mus" but many Hmong in Laos have come to use the Lao word "pai" instead, and the word "txiv" (father) is also possibly borrowed from Mandarin. The more educated a Hmong is in another language, the more words from that language the person is likely to use in every day conversations.

Overall, the Hmong language may have some local variations or dialects which are specific to a region or tribal group. However, this linguistic difference in intonation and vocabulary is generally small so that, for example, the White Hmong can usually understand the Green Hmong. But is this always the case? Once again, this does not really hold true. If we look at the broader picture away from Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, if we go further north to Southern China, the Hmong linguistic landscape becomes very complex.

According to a recent Chinese study, there are three major Miao dialects in China which are distinctly different so that the speakers of one dialect cannot readily understand those of the others (Lemoine: 195-200). These are: (1) the "Hsiang Hsi" dialect used primarily in Hunan and the Sung T'Ao Miao Autonomous region of Kweichow; (2) The "Ch'ten Tung" dialect spoken in other parts of Kweichow and some areas of Kwangsi and Hunan; and (3) The "Ch'uan Ch'ien Tien" dialect found in Southern Szechwan, Western and Central Kweichow, Eastern Yunnan and Western Kwangsi (Miao Language Team: 2-3).

These Chinese identifying terms have been rendered more Hmong as Ghao-Xong, Hmu and Hmong through the self-design- nation of their users by Enwall (4-5) who also adds a fourth dialect, A-Hmao ("Ab Hmaob"). These four "languages" are said to consist of more than 30 mutually incomprehensible varieties, each with their own continuum. Ghao Xong is spoken by about one million people, Hmu by two million, Hmong by two and a half million in China and half a million outside China, and A-Hmao (Cifangyan or Diandingbei in Chinese) by about 30,000 people known as the "Flowery Miao" or Hwa Miao who live in Northwest Kweichow and Northeast and Central Yunnan. Thus, we can see that in China the so-called Miao language is really not one single language with dialects, but a number of very distinct languages.

In addition, many other Miao speak languages which do not belong to the above four dialects. For example, the Miao on Hainan Island speak I-Mien or Yao but not Miao. Smaller Miao groups in Kweichow, Hunan and Kwangsi use only Chinese or the T'ung language. With today's diaspora, French, English and Spanish have been added to this long list of languages used by the Hmong. Some parents speak these languages in addition to their mother tongue but for the younger generation the local foreign language has become the only language they know. Many Hmong children in the West are no longer fluent in Hmong, and many refuse to use it with their parents.

From this brief overview, it is obvious that the Hmong do not all speak the same language or dialect. Despite this, they still see one another as part of the Hmong or Miao family. Therefore, language alone does not make one a Hmong, as a foreigner may learn to speak Hmong fluently but is still not seen as a Hmong. Many participants in this symposium, for instance, need interpreters to communicate with each other, but they consider themselves and are accepted as Hmong.

## Religious Beliefs

Traditionally, the Hmong are known to practise ancestor worship and spirit rituals, at least among those in Southeast Asia. These consist of ceremonies that are performed in each household in the case of ancestral spirits, and in the open air in the case of farming or territorial spirits. The Hmong also believe in the existence of souls, and often perform soul-calling ceremonies when a person is sick. Shamanic trances ("ua neeb") are commonly used to reinstate a wandering soul as a means to cure sickness, even among the Hmong living in Western

countries. This is sometimes complemented by the use of herbal medicine and magic formulas or "khawv koob" to extract bad spirit from the body of the sick person, or to heal a broken limb. All these practices stem from the Hmong's beliefs in spirits and the ancestral after world.

One distinctive set of Hmong rituals is those related to death. A Hmong person has to be given elaborate funeral rites, otherwise the soul of the dead person is believed to remain in limbo, unable to join the ancestors in the other world or to be born again ("thawj thiab"). For this reason, all the important steps of a proper Hmong funeral have to be observed through the playing of the following reed pipe ritual music: "qhuab ke" (showing the way chanting), "qeej tu siav" (last breath reed music), "qeej tsa nees" (helping the person mount the horse for the heavenward journey), and "qeej sawv kev" (raising the body to get it on its way to the spirit world just before burial).

Without all the right steps taken and proper rituals performed, a dead person would not be received by the ancestors. For example a well-respected Hmong man died two years ago in California, USA, but was dressed in a formal Western-style suit rather than the traditional Hmong funeral costumes: his spirit was said to have come back to the family and told them that he was not able to find his way to the ancestors until he has the proper Hmong burial clothes.

These religious beliefs are still held by the majority of Hmong, including many in the West. For many decades now, however, both in China and in Southeast Asia a number of Hmong have become Christian, some Catholic, others Baptist or Fundamentalist. Since their settlement in the United States, this conversion to Christianity has continued unabated. The Christian Alliance Church is now said to be the biggest, and is operated by the Hmong themselves with missions in Thailand and even Southern China. This conversion has driven a large wedge into Hmong society in America as the more fundamentalist converts refuse to interact with their non-Christian relatives, or to take part in the latter's ancestral feasts -- seeing them as sinful pagan practices. The incursion into different religious practices has always divided the Hmong, and is now a major cause of division, even among those following the same religious beliefs.

Despite these religious differences, the Hmong in America continue to see each other as Hmong. Those who have changed religion may be seen by ancestor worshipping relatives as having sold out their ancestors but not their Hmong identity. Again, this seems to show that ancestral rituals and the beliefs in spiritualism are not necessarily the sole indicators of being Hmong. Even among the Christian Hmong, many have discovered that worshipping the same god as White Americans does not really entitle them to be accepted into American churches: many have to fund their own evangelical activities and subsist on the support of other Hmong. Hence, they need to keep their Hmong identity for their personal and spiritual survival.

## **Self-Identification and Perception by Others**

From the above discussion, we can see that being a Hmong does not depend on the possession of a cultural or physical feature particular to the Hmong. A number of factors characterise a person as Hmong, including: being born Hmong, having a Hmong name, speaking a Hmong language, belonging to a Hmong clan and observing Hmong rituals. But is this enough? Some will argue that it is, and I would agree -- to an extent. However, we may be born Hmong, but may not necessarily want to remain Hmong. This has happened to many Hmong-born persons, those who are adopted or who married into a different ethnic group and have completely cut off all links with their Hmong relatives by choice or by force of circumstances. There are also those who may, for social or economic reasons, benefit from not being known as Hmong, and prefer some other identities such as Thai or Chinese because of similar body features. Some may change their Hmong names or learn to speak the other group's language so fluently it is difficult to tell them apart.



For people in these situations, is it possible to forget their Hmong origin? The answer is likely to be both "yes" and "no." Some can but others may not be able to totally escape from their "Hmongness." This is because one's identity is also defined by birth and assigned by members of the other groups we interact with: No matter what we do to imitate them, they will one day discover our origin and put us back there. It is easier to pass over when we have similar physical features and skin colour, but more difficult when we do not look the same.

The question thus becomes whether a Hmong who does not mix with other Hmong can still be seen as Hmong. Again, the answer depends on whether the person concerned will one day face the ultimate test of rejection or acceptance by his or her adopted non-Hmong group. Further, a person's sense of belonging may be tested by reactions to seeing a member of his or her group of birth being abused or mistreated. This seems to be a strong attribute of most Hmong, the bond of solidarity in the face of adversity. Whenever possible, Hmong usually come to the defence of other Hmong, the defence of the group's honour and survival. This group feeling is sometimes so strong that the Hmong-Australia society, for instance, refuses to accept as members anyone (Hmong or non-Hmong) who have betrayed the Hmong people or have ill-treated them.

## WHAT MAKES A HMONG "HMONG"?

Given the above features at both the group and personal levels, what can we say about being "Hmong"? This is an open question which really has no one answer, because any one or all the attributes discussed so far can make a person a Hmong. Depending on where the person lives and what he or she does, some attributes may be more important than others, but Hmong everywhere have at least a number of these attributes. This situation applies to any other ethnic group. Feelings of affinity, mutual acceptance and belonging through certain shared beliefs and activities propel members of a group to mix and relate to each other.

## Being Hmong is Sharing a Collective Consciousness

Many features of Hmong identity stem from their cultural symbols, their perceptions of themselves in relation to other groups, and their status allocations into superior or inferior social positions. The Hmong like to see themselves as an in-group called "peb Hmoob" (Us Hmong) in contrast to outsiders who are seen as "mab sua" (strangers). This classification puts the Hmong in a clear social category in relation to other groups of people: "mab sua" stands for all the things which one does not understand, things which are foreign but not necessarily objectionable to the Hmong. Thus, "peb Hmoob" is the inclusive concept used to bring home the fact that there is a collective Hmong identity, a collective Hmong consciousness. This collective image is represented by certain very distinct social values and material objects. The most commonly cited value is that "Hmong have to look after their own" (Hmoob yuav tsum hlub Hmoob). This is like a supreme commandment, although it does not mean that all members of the group will be able to fulfil it.

In terms of material symbols, the following objects are seen as typically Hmong: the reed pipe or "qeej", the long flute or "raj nplaim", the mouth harp or "ncas", and the women's colourful costumes. Although there are other ethnic groups with reed pipes in China, the Hmong reed pipe consists of a longer mouth piece and 6 reeds attached to a blower while the reed pipes of other groups are either longer or shorter. The colours of Hmong women's costumes are also used to identify the divisions or tribal affiliations of each Hmong group such the White Hmong (with the women's skirt being White), the Green Hmong (with green dye batik patterns on the women's skirts), the striped or arm-band Hmong (with the sleeves of the women's shirt having black and blue bands), and so on.

These are the more important cultural symbols of the Hmong: both at the abstract and material

level. The Hmong value them and hold them up as typical images of their culture. When they see one of these objects, they know that the person holding that object is a Hmong. For example, the Hmong in America visiting those in China were said to have gone there with a reed pipe in their hands. When the Chinese Hmong see this, they immediately identify with the visitors, thereby feeling much closer to each other than if they see no such object or costumes.

## **Being Hmong is Being in Relationships with other People**

As suggested by Goffman, we have many images of ourselves which we present in every day life to other people based on our expectation of them, and which others give to us based on what they expect of us. These expectations are readjusted all the time, to suit the needs of the moment and the roles we play. In order to meet these changing expectations, we need also to change, to improve and shift our positions. This may also require us to learn from other groups as well as from ourselves so that images of ourselves can be used to our own advantages.

For this reason, the Hmong need to learn to interact with others effectively, so that we can work with each other for mutual benefits. To do this, we have to become competent people through:

- 1) being self-confident, flexible, tolerant and understanding;
- 2) being genuinely dependable, and responsible;
- 3) acting on the basis of evidence, firmly held values and beliefs;
- 4) feeling that one's own life is important;
- 5) being open to new experiences and ready to learn; and
- 6) being in control of one's emotions and life situations.

While most Hmong have sought only to live simply and peacefully with a very down-to-earth existence as subsistence farmers, others have actively promoted certain ideal modes of behaviour through participation in messianic movements and activities to generate what they see as desirable group qualities. These mythical aspirations aside, we will truly be Hmong if we can weave together a post-modern Hmong identity, a sort of mixed Hmong "cultural pastiche" by using our old traditions and ideas, by borrowing from other sources to shape a new group image to fit the demands of the post- modern world.

We cannot accomplish this by staying inside our houses and saying there is nothing we can do because we are not educated enough, or that there is no need to discover new things because we are already the best. We have to learn from all sources. I do not mean that we have to go to colleges and get degrees only -- this too but mostly we need to learn informally from books, from discussions, get to know ideas about life. This will inspire you to greater heights, give you much more joy in living, and above all open your eyes to new things, make you see clearer and farther, make you outward, not inward, looking. Introspection is good but looking outside yourself gives you better direction.

## **Being Hmong is Being Effective Parents**

For some Hmong, it may be enough to be competent people and to relate positively to others. For many, however, we will need to be more than competent Hmong: we need to become better human beings, to have better visions. By this I mean we need to be good parents and responsible children because, like charity, character formation and cultural appreciation begin at

home. If parents do not foster the love of their own culture in their children, how can children know and accept that culture? If parents insist on being right and unquestionable, how can our children think or act for themselves?

According to Barry, Child and Bacon (BCB-4A), there are at least six aspects to the training of a child:

- 1) obedience training through setting limits and not going over them;
- 2) responsibility training through participation in household tasks;
- 3) nurturance training through being helpful to other siblings and dependent people in the family;
- 4) achievement training through competition or imposition of standards of excellence;
- 5) self-reliance training to take care of oneself and to be independent of the assistance of others in providing for one's needs; and
- 6) general independence training to learn to act without being dominated or supervised too often.

Most Hmong parents strive to be good to their children, but perhaps stress too much obedience and nurturance training at the expense of the other aspects. There is a need for Hmong parents, in the West especially, to learn other ways of parenting which will agree more with their new Western life style and the new cultural values adopted by their teenage children. This requires that they become effective in conflict resolution, in producing "win-win" situations rather than "win-lose" outcomes. Parents who demand absolute obedience from their children only makes one side win, the parents. If you allow your children to win also, they will learn to respect you and to listen to you more. Being good parents means being effective managers of our families. Some people are born managers, but most of us have to learn to manage and to make decisions. Unfortunately, few parents believe that they need training to be parents, to be leaders and managers.

The survival of the Hmong culture rests with Hmong children, and the children have to know and take pride in that culture in order for them to adopt it, to pass it on to future generations. Thus, being Hmong also means being good parents, looking after the future of our children and not leaving it to chance, and above all acting as custodians of the Hmong culture by passing it down to future generations. Hmong parents in the West face a most difficult task, and they need guidance and support to be effective parents as well as to be effective cultural carriers. They face an array of conflicting rules and values from their own culture and the mainstream society. We have to adapt to this diversity, whether we like it or not. This cultural diversity can enrich us if we know how to preserve our own cultural continuity.

If our children respect us and listen to us, then like strangers they will gradually learn our culture, skills and beliefs. As suggested by Carrithers (10), what the younger generation makes of things done by their parents must reflect the young people's own situation and needs: they should not be merely imitating their parents like parrots, because real understanding is being able to do something new for yourself with what you have learned, not just copying blindly. Our children need to accept who and what we are by knowing our language and culture as these give us our identity, self-respect and confidence in our own abilities, our future, and the future of our children.

### **Being Hmong is Living in a House of Many Rooms**

An American Anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn (246), once said that "human life should remain as a house of many rooms." The world no longer operates as if human societies are isolated from each other, unchanged by the mass media, modern technology or contacts with other cultures. According to Clifford (10), we can no longer speak about other cultures as "primitive", "pre-literate" or "without history". To do so would be to see them as mere caricatures frozen in time and isolated from the influences of the most powerful economic and political systems around them. No society is isolated today. The encroachment of capitalism and government into the heartlands of the most isolated tribes means that virtually no human groups have been left untouched. Many have been changed by this encroachment materially if not culturally, often forever.

In the words of Clifford (22), people in different countries now "influence, dominate, parody, translate, and subvert each other.... enmeshed in global movements of difference and power." Cultures never hold still: they are alive, constantly evolving, adapting, being borrowed, forced upon one another. They are like moving pictures on a screen (Wolf: 387). For the Hmong in their many different settings, new trends and ideas emerge all the time, both within their own society and from outside. Thanks to the initiatives of Xu Thao and other enterprising Hmong in the United States, we now have international movies dubbed in Hmong, Hmong videos and feature movies, documentaries, music and dance adaptations from all sources far and wide (Indian, Japanese, Lao, Thai, American, and Chinese). There is now even rap music in Hmong. This represents real progress and shows that the Hmong culture can be dynamic and not static, can develop and change.

The ability to travel freely to other countries where Hmong live and the informal Hmong mass media have allowed the Hmong people to rediscover each other, to see each other on videos. Hmong girls in Australia and America have now adopted the colourful Hmong traditional costumes from China in their dances. The modest Hmong Quarterly "Liaj Luv Chaw Tsaws", published by our Hmong community in French Guyana, has become an international Hmong voice: through it we can now share thoughts and read Hmong stories or news written by Hmong in many countries for other Hmong.

A Hmong is Hmong when he or she reaches out to other Hmong. We are not one single homogenous group located in one single geographical area, but a multi-ethnic and multilingual community living with many people in many countries. We are a community numbering in the millions but without any geographical boundaries. We have to accept these facts and to meet their many challenges without fear and without shame. We need to recognise that despite all the differences in languages, life styles, religion, customs and economic status, we are but one people. We are challenged by the need to adopt a common Hmong writing for all and not the many scripts we now use. We are challenged by the need for a common history book incorporating all the local histories of the Hmong in whatever countries they now live, and not the myriad versions we now have. We need to share our house of many rooms with each other, with our friends and our neighbours.

In the old days it is said that wherever a Hmong might go he would always return home, return to his beloved highland. These days, however, this is not always the case, as many Hmong are scattered in many areas, many directions, creating disloyalty and divisions. The house of many rooms has become a divided house, a neglected house. Unless we come back home more often or permanently, our house risks being a deserted house and eventually a ruin. To be Hmong, we need to look after our own house. This house is held together by our leaders: they are the posts holding the house together. The posts need to support each other, and other parts used to build the house need to stay together or else the house will fall down.

We need to remember that no matter what clan we belong to, this should be used only to define our marriage rules, and not as something that divides us in other areas of life. Our clan differences should not be used to override our unity of purpose, our common identity. Hmong of

one tribe or clan should not distrust or betray those of another clan. If we avoid favouritism by treating each other as equals, we will be able to stay together to support the house of many rooms and many tribes. Other people around us build monuments and write books about their leaders: we need to do the same to celebrate the achievements of our great leaders, not just criticising them but these leaders should also set examples to show they deserve this. Our house should not be destroyed by ourselves, but should be kept in excellent repair so it will provide us with comfort and protection against our adversaries. Additions and extensions should be made to our house so that it can grow bigger to accommodate new members, new ideas which will help us survive as a nationality in humankind's long march to the future.

### **Being Hmong means living by certain commitments and social values**

There is a French proverb which says "tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner" or to know all is to forgive all. As stated by Beattie (127), the more we understand each other's cultures, the more we are likely to show mutual tolerance. The Hmong, no matter where they are, need to know that the total sum is always bigger than its parts: the overall global Hmong identity is greater than its many local differences and groups. To stay Hmong, we have to accept that we are a people with other identities as well as our own. More importantly, we need to commit ourselves to certain moral values such as: equality, honesty, ability to compromise, fairness, flexibility and sensitivity to other people. We are Hmong but also American, Chinese, Lao, Thai, Vietnamese, French, Argentinian, Australian or Canadian. Being a Hmong in America is not the same as being an American Hmong or Hmong American: the first still keeps his culture and language, the second has lost them.

We need to fulfil our responsibilities as citizens of our respective countries of adoption, but we need to appreciate our "Hmongness." In order to meet the challenge of unity in the face of this diversity, progress in the face of hardship and deprivation, the Hmong need to come together more often as we are now doing at this conference. We need to be united in our goals, to adopt a common language so we can talk to one another, and a common writing so we can communicate. We need to share our hopes and fortunes, to discuss our concerns and plans, to work together and to give of each other. For the Hmong, there is only one road ahead if they want to avoid eventual extinction. That road is the road to progress and redemption, redemption from a past of isolation and distrust, poverty and ignorance, submission and dependence. We need to come out of our own darkness into a new life, a life of prosperity and a life of hope.

### **CONCLUSION**

I have taken a post-modern approach to my discussion of Hmong cultural identity. This, I believe, is the most appropriate at this juncture of world history and the development of the Hmong. Human societies have now reached the stage where they now actively engage each other. This engagement has resulted in a world which consists increasingly of blended rather than discrete cultures, a cultural mesh or "pastiche" which mixes all styles and materials, borrows from all sources and rejects traditionally accepted standards. Post modernism sees the world as passing through the modernist stage when the so-called "less developed" countries were treated as separate from the more modern societies, to one where they blend with, or borrow from, each other economically and socially on the modern stage.

Using this approach, I have tried to explore in this paper the common patterns as well as the paradoxes in Hmong culture. I have used the knowledge gained through this rediscovery process to see how cultural features are given to the Hmong and how the latter reject or incorporate these features into their group ethos. Like other human groups, the Hmong have benefited as well as suffered from their group image or identity: it has been used to their own advantages and the advantages of other people as during the Vietnam war where the Hmong's reputation as hardy soldiers was exploited by both sides of the conflict with devastating effects. One of these

effects is that many Hmong people are now refugees in America where their cultural identity is fast changing. If it was not for the concern for this identity we would not have organised this conference today to discuss its survival.

So many of our Hmong women have transformed their beautiful embroideries into large commercial banners, bed spreads and quilts depicting Hmong history. Their handcrafts now adorn houses, bedrooms and museums around the world. The biggest challenge for all Hmong is how to apply their joint skills, like our women's handicraft skills, to turn our diverse language and customs into one unified and one Hmong / Miao identity, guided by a new set of multicultural social values selected from the many Hmong groups and other people they live with. We cannot achieve this until we look at our shortcomings, broaden our minds by listening more to other people, by becoming tolerant, assertive, knowing how to speak and act without hurting people.

When this is done we will be able to join hands and achieve the freedom we yearn for: freedom from poverty and ignorance, freedom to learn and progress, freedom to get together and to share, freedom from exploitation and from contempt, freedom from our own greed, freedom from idleness and neglect of our families, freedom from too much freedom in the West and its effect on our children. We have to do more than talk, we have to act today and every day. We have to change, to overcome our narrow mindedness, our arrogance, our clan politics and divisiveness. The Hmong will be able to maintain and develop their post-modern identity with pride and freedom from fear only if they all join hands to look after each other's interests, when they stop turning against each other because of their clan feelings or parochial differences.

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