

**Contradictions in Learning how to be Thai:
A Case Study of a Young Hmong Woman**

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**Hmong Studies Journal
2003, Volume 4, 21 Pages**

ABSTRACT

This paper comes from a three month period of fieldwork that I conducted in a green Hmong village in northern Thailand during the summer of 1998. During that time a crisis erupted between a local Thai government organization and the families of “Muban”¹ in which one of my main informants, Ga, a 20 year old Hmong kindergarten teacher, played a major role. Although the conflict remained unresolved at the time I left Thailand, I believe that an analysis of the events, along with an analysis of Ga's role in the crisis, will illustrate the way in which education contributes to the production of new identities which social actors draw on to interpret ambiguous and contradictory social situations. I am not suggesting that Ga's project can ultimately be considered successful in effectively accomplishing such a transformation, but what I do believe her experience shows is the ways in which education, history and politics may impact the production and distribution of cultural meanings, which make such transformations possible. Moreover, the shifting identities members of a culture may craft out of different social discourses position them in and around such cultural meanings thus making it possible for them to pursue contradictory social aims within a cultural formation, and to possibly alter the way in which cultural resources are reproduced. After a brief introduction to the Hmong in northern Thailand and a discussion of some of the social reproduction theory as it has been considered within anthropology and more particularly educational anthropology, the paper will proceed to the crisis and its analysis.

INTRODUCTION

An ethnic minority living in Northern Thailand, the Hmong trace their origins to southern China. On the run from the expanding Han dynasty of the late 1700s and in the search for land many Hmong migrated southward, some to eventually make their home in the mountainous region surrounding Thailand's northern capital Chiang Mai. Muban, where I conducted my

¹ I have used this fictive name in order to respect the privacy of the village's inhabitants.

fieldwork, is located 32 kilometers outside the city of Chiang Mai at an elevation of 1,200 meters. Formally established in 1975, the village is located in a Thai National Forest reserve and the Hmong have no ownership rights to the land. They cultivate the land for subsistence and sale, and the red fertile soil once covered with opium poppies is now checkered with vegetable farms.

The themes of kinship and religion, which provide both a model of and for Hmong ethnicity, find their origin in a common legend often heard in the Hmong villages in the area. As many of the farmers tell it, there was once a Hmong king who was overthrown by his younger sibling. Upon becoming emperor of China that same sibling then waged war on his Hmong brother. Although the Hmong were the elder, the Chinese were greater in number and were able to suppress the Hmong. Forced to flee southward into Vietnam, Laos and Burma, they also moved into Thailand, where I was told "it is because of our small numbers that we do not have any power."² Long processes of displacement and identification by the host countries in which the Hmong live as the "other" have led to a state of internal cohesion among the Hmong; they maintain a closed community, relying on the notion that as "elders" they will eventually achieve their deserved position of power.

Kinship and the maintenance of the clan through the procreation of women are important factors in how the Hmong define themselves as an ethnic group. The household forms the most important social and economic unit in Hmong society, representing a bond between members of the same clan (Cooper, 1983). The woman must do the majority of work to maintain the household, but she must rely on her father (or her eldest male relative) to maintain her connection to her ancestral spirits. Once married, she moves from her father's household to her

² Personal communication with a farmer in Muban, Thailand, June 20, 1998.

husband's family's household, severing her ties to her father's ancestors and ritually reconnecting with the spiritual world through her husband.

Although Thailand was never colonized itself, in the late 19th century the Thai monarchy sought to consolidate its authority by incorporating its boundary tributaries within Bangkok's centralized power. Prior to this mapping of Thailand as a modern nation, the hilltribe people living in the mountains of what had previously been called the Lanna kingdom led a relatively autonomous life. Once inside the boundaries of the Thai State, while no longer external, they did not however cease to be alien. Thus, as popular Thai history has been reconstructed, it is with the advent of mapping that the "entry" of the Hmong into Thailand is recorded.³

With the subsequent rise of the Communist threat during the period of the greater Indochinese War, this mapped, but relatively unknown area again became the focus of increased interest. The Hmong, previously considered as alien and as being from outside what were now conceived as Thailand's natural borders, were assumed by the Thai government to be the natural constituents of the Communist rebels endangering Thailand's northern borders. In order to prevent their collaboration with the communists, efforts at containing the Hmong were intensified with programs aimed at settlement and integration, as well as the introduction of crop substitution programs. Such programs have found their way to the village of Muban through the operation of the King's Royal Project.⁴

The volatile effects of market globalization and increased environmental degradation, have led the Hmong to believe they can no longer depend entirely on their farms. They are

³ For further discussion of Thailand's history in relation to its mapping as a modern nation see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*, 1994.

⁴ The King's Royal Project is part of a large group of development and welfare programs which began in the 1960s and had as their original aims the elimination of destructive shifting cultivation, the eradication of opium crops, the grouping of hilltribes into settlements, and the integration of these hilltribes into the Thai nation-state so as "to induce the hilltribes to accept the important role of helping to maintain the security of the national frontiers" (Suwannabubpa, 1967:26).

expanding their economic world which is having a corresponding effect on education. Villagers as well as Hmong development workers stated that when the economy and farming are good the Hmong stay at home and farm. When the economy and the crops are doing poorly, the Hmong go to school as a means to finding a better job. The availability of a free Buddhist monastery education for the boys means that the money available for education is now more often going towards providing young girls with the opportunity to attend the more rigorously academic city schools.⁵ Thus, while the boys receive an isolated, more vocationally focused education oriented towards the tenants of Buddhism, it is the girls who are being prepared for higher education at the same time that they are becoming culturally literate in Thai ways of life through greater interaction with the Thai community.

For the Hmong in Thailand ideas about schooling their children are integrally tied to developing a proficiency in the Thai language that will make for greater ease in navigating the Thai marketplace. These concerns have gained importance over the worries of some older Hmong as to how younger Hmong will learn about their own culture and whether Hmong women will remain in the village for marriage. In the past, knowledge for the Hmong was intimately tied to the land on which they lived with knowledge of the spirit world an important measure of adulthood for Hmong males, and success as a homemaker and seamstress being similar markers for females. Being away from village life takes Hmong youth away from the environment in which they will acquire such skills from siblings and parents.

As part of the effort to control Hmong integration into Thai national life, the Thai government created a system of mountain schools using the Thai national curriculum. Students who are able to attend school are taught the skills, knowledge and attitudes that state authorities

⁵ This comment is informed by discussion with professors of education at Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand.

have deemed necessary for producing "good" citizens free of ethnic loyalties who understand their settled social position. This desire to educate the Hmong exists in balance with the Thai government's desire for the Hmong to maintain their "traditional" life on the mountain, as these villages are among Thailand's most popular tourist destinations.

The elementary school used by the children of Muban, located in Old Muban, is about three miles away from the new village along a dirt road. For the most part students walk to and from school each day, although they will jump into the back of a pickup truck making its way to Chiang Mai's markets if a ride is offered. Students are supposed to wear the same school uniforms that their Thai counterparts wear, however, rarely having the money to do so, they mostly attend school wearing a mix of sweat pants, T-shirts and traditional Hmong clothing. Most of the Thai teachers at the school are not particularly pleased that the children wear Hmong clothing to school, but are willing to make allowances. Furthermore, when a carload of tourists ride through the village, the children wearing the most well-made and brightly colored Hmong outfits are pushed out into the forefront as living representatives of Hmong culture; an honor that often gets them candy and sometimes even a few Thai baht. Such actions seem to contradict the school's efforts to integrate the Hmong into Thai national culture as it isolates moments when it becomes more profitable to be identified as Hmong.

The school classrooms are wooden structures built on a base of cement surrounding a dirt courtyard in which the children play during recess. Formal classroom instruction serves to inculcate knowledge of the central Thai language and the essential elements of national culture. Hmong children are educated and socialized to be good Thai citizens, which can be seen when Hmong children unquestioningly fulfill the expectation that each day they pledge allegiance to the Thai national symbols of King, Buddhism and the flag. Thus "the [world] of the village

school continues to prepare children to accept the political and economic inequalities of the state-oriented world of modern Thailand" (Keyes, 1991).

Thai teachers at the school in Muban reported to me that Hmong children do not do well in school initially because they have lead undisciplined lives and they have not been prepared by their parents to behave properly in a classroom environment. Thus when the youngest Hmong students arrive in Muban, they are not really considered ready to be educated. They must first be instructed in proper health and dietary care, in developing their powers of concentration, and perhaps most importantly, in showing proper respect to their teachers and the nation. Much as Rival found in her study of the state education of Huaorani children in the Ecuadorian Amazon, to teach Hmong children "the general cognitive skills of reading, writing and counting requires not only disembedding [them] from the context of daily life", but also from the context of the farm and the village household (Rival in Levinson, Foley & Holland, 1996). Teachers are actually then responsible for creating a new context for Hmong students, and thus dedicate a large part of teaching time to reforming Hmong children's hygiene and general behavior.

To accompany the more formal lessons of the teachers, much informal teaching takes place through an emphasis on having the children imitate the teachers as well as models of "good Thai students". Models are provided in the posters that paper the classroom walls depicting Thai children bathing and brushing their teeth, eating meals from the four food groups paying respect to the Thai king and to statues of Buddha, and generally sitting quietly in the classroom. As many of the teachers I spoke with commented, it takes Hmong children roughly two years to catch up with their Thai counterparts. It would seem that much of this catch up time is spent in creating a new lifestyle for Hmong students and ultimately in transforming Hmong social relations. Thus Thai schools create a new identity for Hmong students by creating new habits

and new experiences, and de-skilling them with regard to what is taught them by their parents in the field, in caring for the spirits, and in the intricate modes of embroidery that adorn their clothes. These skills belong to a former context that exists outside of modern Thai life and hence are implicitly depreciated in relation to the skills associated with becoming a competent Thai citizen.

In 1991 Charles Keyes published an edited volume of studies aimed at examining how local worlds are reshaped by education and in particular analyzing the conflicts that arise when educational changes tend to favor individual ambition at the expense of social responsibility (Keyes, 1991). Included in this edition was a study by Chayan Vaddhanaphuti that relied on a model of social reproduction to examine the implementation of the Thai national education system in minority education settings. Vaddhanaphuti theorized that as the effects of the global marketplace expand into the countryside, primary education facilities serve a vital function in that they provide villagers, often hilltribe peoples, with a means for learning central Thai. Relying on the seminal work in cultural and social reproduction by Bourdieu and Passeron in 1977 he argued that "the village school serves as the state agent of social and ideological reproduction, preparing village children to accept existing social contradictions and inequalities." Thus while village students learn Thai and get access to the local marketplace, they are also reproduced as Thai national citizens who remain loyal to the three aspects of the Thai state (the King, the nation and the Sangha) without reflecting on the true inequities of their social situation.

While I agree with many of the conclusions drawn by Vaddhanaphuti's study, what I am interested in doing here is expanding on those conclusions in a number of ways. The first being by taking into account how the Hmong as social actors become an integral part of the

circumstances through with they are dominated⁶ and the second being by examining the notion of contradiction, defined as the gap which exists between objective social space and members' representations of that space where the actor may find room for improvisation and the potential for resistance against dominant hegemonies (Collins, 1993). What I am interested in investigating is the ways in which student subjectivity is (re)formed through the interplay of the student's home community and the space of the school or the process of education. More specifically, I am interested in investigating the conflicts that are actually experienced by female Hmong students who attempt to weave together elements of indigenous knowledge with elements of new Thai-generated knowledge gained in school in an effort to improvise their personal histories and use education as a tool to alternatively resist both Hmong gender categorizations and Thai ethnic classifications.

Crisis

During the summer months of 1998, the Thai Ministry of the Interior provided funds to the Job Training Center for Northern Women to provide a sewing class to Hmong girls under the age of 18 in the village of Muban. The original conditions of the class stipulated that girls under 18 years of age would attend class 8 hours a day, for a period of 40 days, and in return for the time spent away from their family's fields they would receive a stipend of 50 baht per day.⁷ At the initial negotiations for the class these conditions were modified so that class was to be conducted for only 4 hours each day, a handful of girls over 18 were allowed to attend, and the original stipend was reduced to 30 baht/day.

⁶ This follows from the efforts of theorists to expand Bourdieu's theories of social reproduction, such as Willis in his study of British working class students and Foley in his study of Mexican-Americans studying in a Texan high school (Willis, 1977; Foley, 1990).

⁷ At the time of this fieldwork, this was roughly \$2.00 U.S.

After about 2 weeks of class the Ajaan⁸ was overheard talking on the phone to her supervisors in Chiang Mai. She was heard to say that it was not a problem if the women wanted to decrease the stipend again from 30 baht to 20 baht as "Hmong girls were too stupid to notice the difference." When word of this got around the village the fathers of the girls became very angry and wondered why the girls had not yet received the stipends for the classes attended thus far. Some of the fathers took their complaints to Ga, the 20-year old head kindergarten teacher, fluent in Thai, who had become the unofficial liaison between the Thai Ajaan and the village.

Ga, not wanting to believe that the Ajaan who she had befriended and come to respect, was as she said to me a "bad" person, confessed that she felt sad and confused. Ga attempted to mediate between the fathers, the girls and the Ajaan, but the situation escalated with the Ajaan threatening to discontinue classes, and finally Ga received a telephone call from the director of the organization telling her to arrange with the headman to come down to Chiang Mai to attend a meeting. Ga felt strongly that she as a young woman was in no position to tell the headman what to do, so when he demanded that the meeting take place in Muban, she arranged for the women to come up to the mountain.

The day of the meeting was tense - the women arrived 2 hours late and Ga was nervous that her reputation in the village would suffer as a result. The women, once there, attempted to explain away the decrease in stipend by blaming it on the cost of extra materials, and they wanted to discount the over-18 year olds as well. Ga mediated much of the discussion as the debate over these regulations went back and forth and it seemed no conclusion would be reached when the women finally agreed not to decrease the stipend. The Hmong, however felt that they were merely being appeased, and as it was not the money they wanted, but rather respect and an apology, they did not accept this offer. Instead the headman wanted to have a meeting with the

Ajaan means "lecturer" in Thai. It is a term of respect used with teachers and monks.

Thai government official in charge of the program to clarify the details. A meeting was arranged for the next day in Chiang Mai, but when the headman arrived at the City Hall he learned that the women had already been there to state their case and the official refused to see him. The end products were that class was over, the government was recalling all the money, and only if there was any money remaining after a new budget was drawn up would the Hmong girls receive their stipends. The headman returned to the village and asked Ga to assist him in writing a letter to the government demanding that the organization be investigated for corruption and that the Hmong girls receive all the money promised them. Over the next few days Ga actively extracted herself from any situation in which she might be called upon to assist the headman in writing the letter, and in our discussions she remained very confused about how to feel and how to act regarding the crisis.

Crisis

In defining their relations, the Hmong and the Thai rely on pre-established characterizations in which the Hmong are viewed by the Thai as minorities dependent on Thai government officers and development workers, and the Thai are viewed by the Hmong as corrupt and discriminatory. From the Hmong perspective, they would rather not use their present situation as dependent minorities to define themselves as an ethnic group and instead look back on a glorious past as a foreshadowing, or as the Comaroff's have referred to it, a "sacred certainty" of the power they will attain in the future. In this light, they see Thai control over their existence as necessary but temporary. In contrast to notions of Thai sovereignty, the Hmong believe that the Thai unfairly took the land on which they live away from them. They claim that the Thai government is corrupt, describing officials who continuously cite "lack of

funds” to explain unfinished development programs. They are aware, however, that subsistence farming may no longer be a future viable mode of existence and thus continue to open up their lives to the scrutiny of Thai development workers, maintaining their position of dependency.

As for the Thai, the Thai government believes it has saved the Hmong from their naturally primitive and abject lifestyle of swidden (slash and burn) agriculture and opium addiction. Through elaborate rituals, such as the “graduation ceremony” described in this paper, the Thai government congratulates itself for its benevolence in allowing tribal minorities to attend school with the hope of integrating into the larger Thai society. They do not question, however, why this process of integration will only be considered complete when the Hmong embrace Buddhism and allegiance to the King, speak only Thai, and comport themselves in the manner of a Thai.

Embedded as they are in this historically situated field of signs and practices, there exists a level of mutual misunderstanding between the Hmong and the Thai allowing for social interactions to develop without serious conflict. The Thai government relies on the lack of local Hmong social institutions to assert control, and the Hmong in striving to strengthen themselves economically rely on the aid provided by the Thai government in gaining access to the marketplace. Educational programs, such as the one provided by the Job Training Center for Northern Women, aimed at women’s participation in the Thai economy, bring with them increased opportunities for learning as well as heightened possibilities for misunderstanding and thus unsettle the nature of Hmong-Thai interactions. These new educative experiences impact the structure of Hmong social activities by providing models of what knowledge is and how it should be acquired based on Thai cultural norms and pedagogic practices.

Ga was one of the relatively small group of Hmong village students who after finishing 6th grade at the mountain school went on to high school. At the time of this fieldwork she had also just begun a correspondence course to receive her bachelor degree in business. While her brothers close in age were shrouded in the saffron silence of the Buddhist monastery school, she worked as the head kindergarten teacher in the village. Thus her knowledge base had in many ways come more from the interactions she had experienced with members of the Thai community, allowing for the production and continuity of social practices and habits not belonging exclusively to the world of the Hmong village.

Ga realized that in placing an emphasis on education she was refusing the path customarily followed by young Hmong women toward marriage and a family. Although her choices were not free from the criticism of Hmong men, who believed that she was placing her own education over Hmong ideals of the woman's role in the family, education had brought her a greater understanding of her own feelings and most importantly to her she hoped that it would give her an opportunity to become successful and sufficiently well-off financially to take care of her mother's material needs later in life. This was important as Ga's mother was the second of her father's five wives and had no son to attend to the family spirits for her if her husband died first. Finally Ga believed that education was the only way to counteract some of the prejudice she knew many Thai people held toward the Hmong.

In fact, Ga's success in school, fluency in the Thai language, and Thai ways of life restructured her social relations, bringing her a great deal of attention, both from the Thai sewing Ajaan and her colleagues who relied on her to help them navigate Hmong village life, as well as the villagers of Muban who relied on her to act as a broker between the village and Job Training Center. By learning new skills relating to the social expectations of the Thai world surrounding

her, she had taken on multiple new identities, which she relied on to move back and forth across social boundaries and gender role definitions.

In accord with Hmong attempts to expand their economic base, the Center's stated purpose of working in the village was to provide Hmong girls with a skill so that they need not turn to prostitution as a way of making money in a failing economy. Unfortunately, supporting a daughter's turn to prostitution has often been a tactic that Thai families in underdeveloped areas have relied on for making money in hard times. (Muecke, 1992) Coupled with this fact is the belief held by many Thais that Hmong women are promiscuous. Before the recent trend towards education, the average age for a Hmong girl to be married was in her early teens. (Cooper, 1983) While courting at a young age continues to be common, there is little evidence that Hmong girls are engaging in premarital sex. One might argue then that efforts to control the large number of Hmong women entering the Thai workforce are not related to insights into Hmong social relations, but rather are related to attempts to thwart the continuing prevalence of this industry.

The question also arises as to what were the Thai government's implicit motives in providing this class. One Hmong development worker believed that the unstated objective for this class was to stop the Hmong from differentiating themselves through dress and to force them to adopt a style of dressing while off the mountain that is less readily distinguishable from the way most Thai people dressed. In fact the Thai Ajaan told me that she believed the class was good for the girls because it had the potential to make them "appear more civilized." This perspective is related to the paradoxical nature of Thai governmental attempts to control Hmong life. By maintaining control over Hmong women's access to the Thai marketplace the government is in fact perpetuating their dependent status. Just as in the school, by replacing indigenous forms of knowledge with state controlled and sanctioned forms of knowledge, they

are reinscribing social inequality onto what should essentially be a place where Hmong and Thai relations are equalized. For the Thai State to allow Hmong clothing, such a distinctive marker of Hmong ethnicity, to gain currency within the local marketplace, would be for the Thai State to allow the Hmong to exert a certain measure of autonomy. Furthermore, allowing for Hmong dress to become commonplace might also demystify the tourist trade.

To round out this picture we must also turn to an examination of the reasons why Ga attended this class. Ga didn't necessarily believe that she would learn anything substantially new. She claimed, along with a number of other girls, that she was doing it because her "friends were doing it" and it was "something to do." As for the money, Ga told me that the villagers had decided to pool the stipends to be deposited into the village youth fund. I would suggest that Ga attended the class because it was something different from the daily routine of the village; it gave her an opportunity to talk with Thai Ajaans, to dress up in Thai clothing, and to spend her afternoons practicing how to interact in a more Thai-centered world.

The importance of her relationship with the Ajaan made it difficult for Ga to believe that the Ajaan had actually called the Hmong girls "stupid." Initially, she wanted to believe that it was a misunderstanding and she resisted responding to the villager's complaints. But as she was pulled further into the situation between the two groups she herself began to question the various inconsistencies in the Ajaan's stories. Her initial questions regarding the Ajaan's character were soon replaced by demands for the truth. As she recognized that she could no longer contain the conflict and that her own relationship with the Ajaan was deteriorating, she turned to the village authority, the headman, to mediate. Although her status as head kindergarten teacher and university student, as well as her fluency in Thai, initially supported her attempts to structure an

intermediary role between the two groups, she explained that as a young woman she no longer felt comfortable in this role.

In many ways Ga did not fit the model of woman provided for her by Hmong symbols of gender. Evolving social situations, such as increased attendance of Hmong girls in Thai schools, allowed her to experiment with gender roles; however, the contradictions of this particular situation confounded her regarding what role she could really play in this crisis. She was distressed that the Ajaan continued to lie about the situation. She had trusted the Ajaan and their relationship seems to have validated for Ga her attempts to break out of traditional gender roles and form a bridge for herself to the Thai community. Even when she decided that the Ajaan had been wrong and wanted an apology, she remained concerned about whether the women still appreciated her. She even expressed to me that she hoped both her words and her actions had impressed the women while at the village meeting.

Once the village headman became involved, the predicament could no longer be confined to the relations between an Ajaan and her students, but instead became a predicament between the Hmong villagers and the Thai government. With the suggestion of the letter, Ga's earlier ambivalence regarding the Ajaan's fault returned and she questioned the efficacy of detailing their complaint to the Thai government. I believe that it was at this point that she realized her personal stake in the situation did not have a place in how her male elders viewed the predicament. Although the definition of Ga's role as a Hmong woman had been relaxed to the extent that she could devote greater attention to her studies, this greater freedom was allowed only in relation to greater Hmong-Thai interactions. It was allowed only in order to ensure that Ga could maintain her position as a Hmong representative in the Thai marketplace. It was not, however, to provide her with greater freedom within Hmong social relations.

The headman claimed to have the interests of the women at stake. He said, “We must make the Thai understand that our women are not stupid. The Thai cannot take advantage of them.” Although discussions of this situation were often cloaked in the language of honor and shame, I would suggest that it was not only the girls that the headman was trying to protect. Rather he was trying to avoid a situation in which the villagers became classified as “difficult” and became branded with a bad reputation. The headman was critical of the government’s actions, but he was equally aware that such projects brought increased opportunity to his villagers. Documenting the situation was one way of attempting to ensure that one interpretation of the events, the Thai interpretation, could not eclipse another, the Hmong interpretation. However, by presenting the voice of the Hmong headman in the letter, Ga might be compromising the greater autonomy she had practiced at school and the new view she had of herself as independent and capable.

Her desire to protect the Ajaan and consequently to protect some of the individual choices she had made for herself clashed with her desire for an apology. Her ambivalence about assisting in writing this letter reflected how the pulls of different values and groups can produce strong conflicts in the individual personality. As Ashis Nandy (1983) has pointed out, the ultimate violence of a colonialist endeavor can be found in the fact that the marginalized come to internalize the prejudices of the majority culture and become implicated in the circumstances through which they are dominated. Hmong culture demanded that Ga support the cohesion of the group, but her school experience provided her the elusive promise that she could attain a degree of independence that Thai society was not truly prepared to grant her.

Through her discussions with me, Ga made it clear that she believed her participation in the Thai educational system had opened up new opportunities for her. Her life was no longer

defined by the limited roles which women played in Hmong social structure, but rather was expanded by a new awareness of the opportunities available to educated Thai women of her generation. Her life dreams were dependent on her maintaining access to the Thai marketplace just as much as they were dependent on maintaining her status in the village. She could neither alienate a Thai Ajaan nor her village headman. Ga often resisted the role that the older women of Muban had modeled for her, but even in her resistance she could not remove herself from her social milieu. This may be due to the fact that increased opportunities for self-expression, such as attending school, were provided for her in part as extensions of larger Hmong desires to find a way to express themselves. In addition, the school did not fully provide the greater independence Ga believed that it did; rather it also operated to prepare Ga for her role as a model Hmong citizen, one who lives on the borders of Thai life quietly contributing to a peaceful tourist economy.

Conclusions

Although the Thai government provides development programs for the Hmong in their villages and is involved in educating their youth, the Hmong remain the “other” who according to the Thai government need to be controlled. The Thai control the land on which the Hmong live, they control the content and form of Hmong education, and through the Job Training Center for Northern Women they might even be said to be attempting to control Hmong women’s sexuality. The goals of the Thai government are contradictory in that while they seem to be directed at integrating the Hmong more fully into Thai social life they actually serve to solidify social inequalities.

It is education and the school, however, that also opened up a new space for Ga that allowed her to visualize her social world in a way that seemed to provide for her a more equal

position. She saw education as providing her a space within Thai social life that allowed her to break down many of the barriers erected by confining Hmong gender relations. She was able to conceive of a life for herself in which she would not be dependent on a man, and would be able to provide for herself and her mother's family.

Ga was forced to question these visions, however, when they came into direct conflict with the Thai education system on which she relied; an education system aimed at ensuring that Ga uncritically accept her place within Thai society as a minority citizen. Thus, the Thai Ajaan on whom Ga relied could not truly support Ga in her quest for greater autonomy, nor could Ga continue to uncritically support a system that did not provide the opportunities she imagined it did. However, by having placed her trust in the Ajaan and ultimately in her own choices, Ga was able to refuse a participatory role in the communal demand for justice. Her refusal should not be seen as a way of supporting of the Ajaan, but should be viewed more as a way of pushing the gender boundaries of the Hmong community.

There existed a contradiction in how Ga pictured her world and how it actually operated. Within this space Ga experimented with new roles for herself and although in the end she neither supported the Thai Ajaan nor the village headman, it was at the intersection of Hmong gender ideologies and Thailand's minority policies that she was able to consider the possibilities of drawing on cultural resources from multiple contexts to pursue her individual goals. She could invest herself in the solidarity of the Hmong as a cultural minority pitted against the Thai, while at the same time she sought to take advantage of the more open gender definitions of Thai society. Although Ga ultimately chose not to act, her situation allows us to consider the ways in which emergent cultural understandings affect the ways social agents use education as a tool to craft identities, which alternatively resist both confining Hmong gender categorizations and

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confining Thai ethnic classifications. This study also shows the ways social agents appropriate existing cultural resources and orientations, and in so doing may have the potential to alter the way such resources are reproduced.

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