

## **Hmong transnational identity: the gendering of contested discourses**

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### **Abstract**

Hmong women throughout the diaspora are increasingly expressing ‘what it means to be Hmong’ and ‘what it means to be a Hmong woman’ in a variety of media that constitute western popular culture. At the same time, Hmong women residing in different nation-states *live* Hmong femininity differently. This paper explores the contested nature of Hmong identity through an exploration of discourses and practices at global and local levels, with a particular emphasis on their gendered dimensions. The paper argues that global narratives of Hmong identity are analytically distinct from, but empirically intertwined with, the constructions of Hmong identities across transnational social spaces. Through a focus on Hmong in Australia and the United States, the paper highlights the significance of place, generation, gender, religion, class and status as axes of contestation and debate in the construction of Hmong identities.

### **Introduction**

Who are the Hmong? This is a surprisingly common question about the members of a relatively small, but widely dispersed, diaspora<sup>1</sup>. As with all questions that address issues of identity, the answer is complex and highly contested. This paper explores the contested nature of Hmong identity through an exploration of discourses and practices at global and local levels, with a particular emphasis on their gendered dimensions. It thus addresses the recent call for ‘research that emphasize(s) the centrality of gender in studying social change associated with the process of globalization locally, nationally and regionally’ (Chow, 2003:443).

The purpose of the research is to demonstrate the contested nature of Hmong identity, particularly as Hmong become dispersed throughout various parts of the globe and adapt to different national and regional socio-political contexts. The exploration of these contested discourses illuminates the significant roles played by Hmong women in the construction and

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘diaspora’ refers to people who are dispersed throughout a number of countries but who share a common concern for their ‘homeland’ and a sense of a common purpose (Cohen and Kennedy, 2000: 376).

reconstruction of Hmong identity in a global context, thereby revealing the gendered nature of these contested discourses.

There has been a plethora of studies on globalization in the last decade (e.g. Robertson, 1992; Hall, 1992; Rex, 1995; Schirato and Webb, 2003). Globalization is commonly understood to refer to a complex set of social, economic, political and cultural processes that cut across national boundaries and increase levels of interconnectedness (Holmes, Hughes and Julian, 2003: 497). Esther Ngan-ling Chow recently noted, however, that:

Most mainstream theories frame globalization as gender-neutral. Current debates on ... globalization pay little attention to gender and under-represent the experiences of diverse women in specific societal contexts (2003:444).

Furthermore, many of these studies do not adequately distinguish between the processes of globalization and transnationalization. Some globalisation scholars (e.g. Appadurai, 1996; Harvey, 1989) have emphasised the 'detached nature of cultural representations in global flows' (Faist, 2000: 210). In contrast, transnationalization is not deterritorialised; it refers to processes that are grounded in space and place, particularly the nation-state. As Faist (2000:211) has noted:

Whereas global processes are largely decentred from specific nation-state territories and take place in a world context, transnational processes are anchored in and span two or more nation-states, involving actors from the spheres of both state and civil society.

This paper demonstrates that global narratives of Hmong identity must be seen as analytically distinct from, but empirically intertwined with, the constructions of Hmong identities across transnational social spaces. The latter are grounded in the opportunities and constraints of the local contexts which are framed by economic, political and social processes in the nation-state. This distinction between globalization and transnationalization is fundamental to the following analysis of the tensions between global and local identity narratives and the selection of gender strategies in specific nation-states.

This analysis is based on almost ten years of association with Hmong people – mainly in Australia and the United States, but also more recently, in Thailand. This has involved a

wide variety of methods: observation, participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, a survey and structured interviews, document analysis (including books, newsletters, articles on the internet, keynote addresses at conferences), analysis of scholarly publications (by Hmong and non-Hmong), autobiographies and biographies of Hmong (such as students and women), cultural artifacts and other media (e.g. storycloths or *paj ndau*), plays (e.g. 'Highest Mountain Fastest River'), museum displays (e.g. 'Hmong of the Mountains'), comedy skits and videos (e.g. Tou Ger Xiong's 'Hmong Means Free'), poetry and short stories by Hmong-Americans (e.g. in the journal *Paj Ntaub Voice* and the newsletter *Hnub Tshiab*).

I make use of data that has been collected through a methodology known as 'institutional ethnography' (Smith, 2002). In explaining this methodology, Dorothy Smith states:

Institutional ethnographic research and analysis does not displace or reconstruct the experiences of those implicated in an institutional regime. Rather, by locating people's site of experience in the social relations of the institutional regime and explicating what we can of the relations that enter into that experience, we can create something like a map of the relations in which people's own doings and experiences are situated and by which they are shaped (Smith, 2002:40).

The institutional ethnographer recognises that people are 'expert practitioners of their everyday worlds' and is interested in learning from them (Smith, 2002:21). However, institutional ethnography 'looks for the ways in which the particularities of people's everyday doings bring into being the distinctively generalised forms of the institutional order' (Smith: 2002:29). The aim is 'to locate in their accounts the junctures between the everyday worlds as they told them and how they are hooked into relations that connect them beyond scope of experience' (Smith, 2002:21). For Smith, '(t)he project is analogous to cartography' (2002:21). Importantly, this approach also acknowledges the fact that 'researchers are in the same world that they are investigating' (Smith, 2002:28). Thus, this paper draws particularly on my experiences of participant observation. My aim is to subject the discourses of Hmong

identity to sociological analysis, thereby revealing some important characteristics of the process of transnationalization.

### **Observations in Tasmania and the United States**

#### *Hmong in Tasmania, Australia*

My journey of discovery about the Hmong began in 1993 in Tasmania, Australia, when some colleagues and I were commissioned to undertake research on the settlement experiences of recently arrived refugees in the state (Julian et al., 1997). As we began this research we were often asked, and indeed asked ourselves: Who are the Hmong? Initially, I began to develop an answer to this question on the basis of my own experiences: first in Tasmania, Australia and then in Minnesota and California, USA.

Hmong refugees from Laos had begun to arrive in Tasmania in the mid-late 1970s but it was not until the early 1990s that their presence became visible to 'ordinary' Tasmanians at various sites around Hobart, the state's capital city. One such site was Salamanca Market, held every Saturday predominantly for tourists. The Hmong became familiar faces at Salamanca Market where they sold fresh organically grown vegetables of the highest quality. Their 'Asian' faces and broad smiles ensured that they stood out from the crowd in a city where the local population was (and still is) overwhelming 'white' and Anglo. The members of the extended Hmong families who congregated around the vegetable stalls provided the market with a multicultural presence and their colourful and unique embroidery (*paj ntaub*), for sale alongside the fresh vegetables, provided an opportunity for the consumption of cultural artifacts. Locals were quick to buy the *paj ntaub* for their aesthetic value. The majority were unaware that they were contributing to the maintenance of transnational ties as the proceeds of the sale would be remitted to Hmong relatives residing in Thai refugee camps.

Tasmanians welcomed 'the Hmong at Salamanca' as they became known to locals. The Hmong quickly came to symbolise a new openness to Asia, a new Tasmanian identity that was inclusive of people of Asian origin. The Hmong became an icon of multicultural Tasmania; they were seen to have successfully integrated into Tasmanian society while

simultaneously maintaining their cultural identity, an ideal expressed in government policy statements on Australian multiculturalism (OMA, 1989).

In this context, however, it can be argued that Hmong identity becomes commodified, trivialised and marginalised. The Hmong are represented as 'the exotic Other', as a marketable tourist commodity. This encourages an essentialist notion of Hmong identity which homogenises what is, despite its small size, a heterogeneous 'community'. The dominant representation of Hmong femininity complies with this. Women become the bearers of cultural tradition - cultural icons whose images are a marketable commodity. The Hmong women and children selling vegetables at the market are popular subjects of the 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 2002). Many visitors to Hobart would have a photograph or two of 'the Hmong at Salamanca' in their memoirs. Importantly, however, this image belies the economic hardships and settlement difficulties experienced by almost all the Hmong in Hobart.

#### *Hmong in the United States*

In 1995 I presented a paper in St. Paul, Minnesota, at the First Hmong National Conference. Prior to my departure I wondered if there would be any Hmong people at the conference and I hoped that I might find some opportunities to meet Hmong refugees in the United States.

How unprepared I was for the sight of the conference participants at the first plenary session! They were almost *all* Hmong! More importantly the conference was organised and managed by a group of Hmong women who presented a very visible and highly competent profile throughout the three day conference. The majority of the conference participants were educated middle-class Hmong refugees and their sons and daughters who were college students and graduates. My own conceptions of Hmong women, constructed as they were through my experience of Hmong women in Tasmania and my readings of literature on Hmong women in Laos and Northern Thailand, were suddenly challenged. This confronting experience forced me to reflect on the processes through which alternative Hmong femininities are constructed in different settlement contexts (Julian, 1998). An understanding

of the global and transnational dimensions of Hmong resettlement enhances this analysis of the lives of Hmong women in the diaspora.

### *The Hmong Diaspora*

Significant class and status differences are apparent in the Hmong diaspora. The first Hmong refugees consisted of the political and military elite who were able to exploit pre-war connections with politicians and educators in France or else manage a CIA-sponsored airlift from the military base at Long Tieng. Among those who escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand, those initially selected for resettlement went to the United States. These refugees were the most educated and those who had held higher positions within General Vang Pao's army. By 2002, there were 186,000 Hmong refugees and their descendants residing in the United States (Hmong Resource Center, 2002). The major centres of Hmong settlement are in the mid-west (St. Paul in Minnesota and in Wisconsin) and in California (especially Fresno in the Joaquin Valley and Sacramento, the state capital). The largest urban concentration of Hmong in the world is located in St. Paul. Considerable variation exists among Hmong-Americans with respect to socio-economic status. There is identifiable elite which has achieved educational and material success, as well as a larger percentage which is welfare-dependant and struggling economically. A high proportion of Hmong-Americans are Christians, many having converted to Christianity during their period of time in the refugee camps in Thailand.

By contrast, the Hmong community in Australia is more homogenous. The majority were 'foot soldiers' in General Vang Pao's army, and most arrived after spending a number of years (up to 15 years) in Thai refugee camps. The majority spent most of their time at the same refugee camp, Ban Vinai, which was closed in the mid-1990s. Australia is now home to approximately 2,000 Hmong. The centres of Hmong settlement in Australia have been Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart with a demographic shift in recent years to Queensland sites, namely Innisfail, Cairns and Brisbane. The overwhelming majority of Hmong in Australia have retained their traditional religious beliefs and practices; only a very small minority have converted to Christianity. There is evidence that the Hmong in Australia are viewed as more

conservative than Hmong in other countries of resettlement such as the United States and France (Tapp and Lee, 2004).

### **Transnational Social Spaces**

My initial experiences with Hmong in Tasmania and the United States highlighted the existence of transnational connections, not only between Australia and the United States, but also between Hmong in the 'west' and those who had remained behind in the mountainous regions of Asia. This dispersed yet curiously 'united' population raised a number of interesting questions. In what ways were they connected and 'united'? What did they have in common despite residing in such diverse locations? What were the similarities and differences between them? What was the 'glue' that held them together and for how long would it 'hold'? Would globalization lead to their continued survival as 'Hmong' or were they more likely to fragment and 'disappear'? As Song (2003:118) has noted, given the contradictory nature of globalization processes, the outcomes are by no means straightforward:

(G)lobalization may simply reinforce people's localized sense of ethnic identity because global forms of belonging, including global memories and symbols, are vague and meaningless to most people.

This paper examines this nexus between global and local Hmong identities. The existence of transnational connections among the Hmong suggests they constitute what Faist (2000) has termed a 'transnational social space'. For him:

(T)ransnational social spaces are relatively permanent flows of people, goods, ideas, symbols, and services across international borders that tie stayers and movers and corresponding networks and non-state organizations; regulated by emigration and immigration state policies (2000:309).

Unlike the concept of global networks, the concept of transnational social space emphasises the existence of social networks and organizations 'in at least two geographically and internationally distinct places' (Faist, 2000:197). This opens up the space for a comparative analysis of the distinctive characteristics of settlement in different nation-states. Thus, rather than suggesting a denationalisation process as some globalization theorists have done (see, for

example, Cohen, 1997), Faist sees transnationalization as occurring alongside the maintenance of the nation-state:

The transnational social spaces inhabited by immigrants and refugees and immobile residents in both countries thus supplement the international space of sovereign nation-states (Faist, 2000:200).

One type of transnational linkage that can emerge in such a space is a transnational community; that is, a social grouping characterized by a high degree of social cohesion, moral commitment and continuity over time but one that cuts across one or more nation-states (Cohen and Kennedy, 2000: 375). My analysis of Hmong in Australia and the United States indicates that the Hmong constitute a transnational community. Social ties, especially clan ties, are mobilised between Australia and the United States and identification as Hmong provides a basis of solidarity across this transnational social space (Faist, 2000).

Transnational linkages exist between Hmong in Asia and in countries of resettlement (Schein, 1998, 2000; Tapp, 2004). Importantly, recent research by Tapp and Lee (2004) suggests that these linkages are stronger between Hmong in countries of resettlement in the First World (e.g. between Australia, United States and Canada) than they are between Hmong in First and Third World countries. Such a transnational community has been described as a 'diaspora'. For Ang, a diaspora can be defined as:

the (imagined) condition of a 'people' dispersed throughout the world, by force or by choice. Diasporas are transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original 'homeland' (Ang, 1994:5 cited in Song, 2003:114).

Two important aspects of this transnational community should be noted. First, perceptions of the transnational dimension vary according to social location. As a generalization, Hmong in Australia are more likely to be aware of, and have regular contact with, Hmong in the United States. Hmong in America are more likely to have a vague awareness of the existence of Hmong in Australia; although many of the second-generation do not even have this. Thus, the topography of the transnational community varies in accordance with geographical location.

Second, the members of this transnational community, although united by a sense of shared identity, express their 'Hmongness' in distinctive ways. The Hmong women in Tasmania and many of the Hmong women in St. Paul clearly live their Hmong femininity differently. As Brah (1996) has noted, diasporas are no more unified and homogenous than cultures or communities are. They are 'lived and re-lived through multiple modalities' as 'differentiated, heterogenous and contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common "we" ' (Brah 1996: 184).

The Hmong diaspora is differentiated along the lines of class (and/or status), religion, age and generation, gender and, most importantly, place. Adaptive strategies are selected and identities are constructed in the context of the policies and institutional practices of the nation-state as well as the diaspora. These different terrains offer quite different sets of opportunities, constraints and resources from which individuals can 'choose' their own identities (Song, 2003). This leads to contestation and debate over the meaning of Hmongness in the diaspora. In particular, it produces tensions between 'unity' and 'tradition' on the one hand, and 'diversity' and 'translation' on the other. As Hall (1992:309) argues:

Some identities gravitate to what Robbins calls 'Tradition', attempting to restore their former purity and recover the unities and certainties which are felt as being lost. Others accept that identity is subject to the play of history, politics, representation and difference, so that they are unlikely ever again to be 'pure'; and these consequently gravitate towards what Robbins (following Homi Bhabha) calls 'Translation'.

This paper demonstrates the existence of a diasporic Hmong identity which is constructed in a transnational social space comprised of Hmong refugees and their descendants.

Importantly, however, it addresses the *contested* meaning of Hmongness in this transnational social space through an examination of the variety of voices that constitute the 'diasporic public sphere' (Werbner, 1998). Following Werbner, the diasporic public sphere is:

conceived of as a space in which different transnational imaginaries are interpreted and argued over, where aesthetic and moral fables of diaspora are formulated, and political mobilisation generated in response to global social dramas (1998: 11).

Importantly, however, such debate and contestation 'presumes a *shared space of dialogue*; a space that has to be *created* through voluntary efforts and investments...' (Werbner 1998: 25).

This article demonstrates the ways in which Hmong women in the diaspora have created such spaces as sites for the ‘translation’ of Hmong femininities.

### **The Global Discourse**

When I originally began exploring the question ‘Who are the Hmong?’ I encountered a highly visible, well-articulated and almost *unitary* narrative. My interviews with Hmong in Australia and the United States, together with my reading of books and videos, identified the same story about Hmong identity. This identity narrative is a hegemonic discourse emanating from Hmong-America which is subsequently diffused throughout the more peripheral points of the diaspora. The diasporic public sphere is thus dominated by the voices of (predominantly male) Hmong leaders in the United States. Gary Yia Lee, an Australian Hmong with a PhD in anthropology, articulates the call for a unified Hmong identity that dominates this narrative:

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 ... The biggest challenge for all Hmong is ... to turn our diverse language and customs into one unified and one Hmong/Miao identity ... (Lee, 1996).

This global identity construction is made possible by the existence of clan ties across nation-states together with technological advances in communication (such as the Internet) that enable the maintenance of social ties and the transmission of information on a global scale (Gorman and McLean 2003). However, rather than seeing this unitary narrative as representing internal homogeneity based on ‘authenticity,’ I wish to follow Werbner's (1998) lead in asserting that this is the outcome of limitations in the diasporic public sphere. As the public sphere expands in time and space, other versions of Hmong identity can be discerned.

The dominant identity narrative in the global discourse on Hmong identity can be described as the quintessential ‘refugee story’. It is a ‘heroic’ narrative that incorporates a number of themes: the war and the military; exodus and the refugee experience; and, continuity with the past through a valuing of clan ties, ‘traditional’ Hmong culture and memories of a ‘lost’ homeland. This identity narrative is located predominantly in the past. While it acknowledges the future (through, for example, the value of educational achievement

in the country of resettlement), it does so in the context of a trajectory emanating from the past. The dominant leitmotif is that of ‘the refugee’. In this dominant narrative, Hmong identity is forged on a past relationship with the United States in Laos. It is often articulated in books about the Hmong in America, as illustrated in the following opening paragraph, based on the translation of an interview with a Hmong man, Chia Koua Xiong:

Who are the Hmong?....

In Laos, we helped you fight the war. The Americans came to live with our leaders in our country ... We provided food ... If the Americans came to our house, whatever we ate we treated the Americans equally ... If we found an injured soldier ... we ... carried the American to the base... In some dangerous situations we were willing to let ten Hmong soldiers die so that one of your leaders could live...

We considered Americans as our own brothers... Now we have lost our own country.... (Pfaff 1995: 7).

Numerous videos and books recount the same story of the Hmong exodus from Laos to resettlement in the west: first, of a ‘brotherhood’ with U.S. citizens as a consequence of fighting side-by-side in the Vietnam War. This unique affiliation is extended to America’s allies in the ‘west’, especially to Australians. The Hmong in Australia see themselves as veterans of the Vietnam War and it is from this base that they project their future. In the words of a Hmong man in Hobart:

Lots of plans for the future. I want the Australian government to recognise that we were part of the contingency for the Vietnam War and I want our people to march on Anzac Day as part of that group. I want us to be able to practise our rituals openly and share it with everyone rather than behind closed doors... I also want all my people to be self sufficient and independent of social welfare.

The traumatic experiences associated with exodus and flight are equally important components of this dominant narrative. For the majority of Hmong refugees the flight from Laos was a communal affair. Whole villages and extended families lived in exile in their own country before making their way across the Mekong River into Thailand:

At the time we travelled (there were) quite a lot of people. About more than 100 people travel ... from Laos to Thailand. ... Many villages want to travel at the same time. So quite a lot of people. .. I remember some ... families, they’ve got very young children About two, three years old. And when they reach the very danger(ous) place, for example very close to the communist position, they cannot let any children cry or make noise. So when they cry they do like that, you know (note: interviewee put his hand over his mouth). And sometime children die, you know ... because they cannot

breathe. Some children, they put ... some medicine to make them sleep, and sometime they say 'Oh, that child is very tired now'. But they got too much medicine and sometime children die. It is happen... very bad. (Hmong man in Hobart).

Public events involving Hmong almost always contain accounts of refugees enduring forced migration. Typical is the following keynote speech, from the Fourth Annual National Hmong Conference held in Denver, Colorado in April, 1998. Dr. Mymee Her, a young Hmong woman who is a psychologist in California, declared:

The Hmong are classified as REFUGEES... Hmong refugees come to the United States wounded. Most have been beaten up physically and emotionally. They seek out shelter from whatever country will offer them safety. They have no anticipation of what life holds for them in the country of refuge. They are in a state of shock, not realizing what had just happened (Her 1998).

While this dominant narrative is predominantly articulated by male elites, it is also reproduced by women. This is most apparent in the 'storycloth' (*paj ndau*), a form of needlework first made around 1976 in Ban Vinai refugee camp (Anderson 1996: 30). Commonly, the storycloths chronicle village life in the mountains of Laos, depict religious ceremonies, or illustrate Hmong folktales. The majority created in the 'west' or for the western market, however, recount the transition from village life prior to the war, through the escape from Laos after the war, to life in refugee camps in Thailand and often 'end' with an image of the plane in Bangkok that was to take them to 'freedom' in the United States. As Anderson (1996: 28) states:

The storycloths are a link with the past. They are shared memories captured in visual images, with the embroiderer's needle rather than the camera or the written word. As episodes of social history, they record and pass on information about Hmong customs to the younger generation, especially those born in the United States with no first-hand knowledge of Laos. ... They are a form of non-verbal communication that transcend [sic] language barriers (1996: 28).

While it is highly visible in the United States, this diasporic identity is also evident among Hmong on the diaspora's periphery, particularly in Canada, France and Australia. The boundaries of this 'imagined community'<sup>2</sup> (Anderson, 1983), though, are not spatial; they are grounded in the social networks that constitute the diaspora. This is evidenced by the fact that this global narrative resonates with some Hmong in Bangkok (who communicate regularly on the Internet with Hmong in the United States) and in Wat Tham Krabok (where Hmong refugees are in receipt of financial remittances from Hmong in the United States) but not with Hmong hill-tribes in northern Thailand (Maneeprasert, 2001).

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'imagined community' refers to the fact that, typically, nations (and other types of communities) are conceived as homogenous despite the existence of diversity and inequality within their boundaries (Holmes et al., 2003:498).

The narratives recounted here support and reinforce an essentialist notion of Hmongness and encourage the maintenance of ideas of 'tradition' and 'authenticity'. Those in the west attempting to reconstruct 'tradition' look to Thailand, Laos and even China for 'authenticity' (Schein, 1998). For many Hmong, visits to these countries are viewed with enthusiasm and valued as a way of reclaiming traditional Hmongness. They serve to reconnect the members of the transnational community with a 'homeland' and thus further strengthen the unity of the diaspora. It can be argued that the maintenance of such connections with the past involves a *reinvention* of tradition which takes the form of a 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1990; Ang 1993). This involves the mobilisation of essentialist views of identity - as inevitable, fixed and stable over time - for strategic, although not necessarily conscious, purposes.

### **Voices of Resistance**

It is possible to identify resistances and challenges to the global hegemonic discourse identified above. Such resistances arise where the narrative of the 'refugee success story' does not resonate with lived experience. These resistant voices arise in local contexts and reflect differences within the Hmong diaspora based on gender, age, class, religion, 'migrantness' and place. They are what Werbner (1998: 12) refers to as voices of 'argument and imaginative creativity.' The voices of resistance are predominantly those of educated Hmong women. However, they have been joined more recently by the voices of Hmong youth, both male and female. The main topics of contestation and debate include clan structure; youthful marriage; cross-cultural marriage; polygamy and levirate; 'kidnap' marriages; women's education; and the significance of Hmong language for Hmong identity.

Hmong women play a leading role in the process of 'translating' Hmongness as they resist, challenge and negotiate new constructions of Hmong femininity (Donnelly, 1994). An emerging reflexivity is increasingly apparent in these strategies as they become articulated in various media. For example, in 1995, a small group of young Hmong women in the United States organised themselves as the 'Hmong Women Educational Delegation' to the 4<sup>th</sup> United Nations World Conference on Women held in Beijing (as representatives of Hmong women

throughout the world). Their brochure stated the following:

After close to twenty years in the U.S., the majority of Hmong women have, for the most part, survived the initial culture shock, and are adapting well to the diverse American cultures. The many opportunities available in the U.S. have been especially beneficial to Hmong women. Each year a growing number of women receive formal education and are finding employment. Beyond family responsibilities they are actively involved in their communities at all levels and in different capacities. They have taken the initiative to promote the advancement of women through economic self-sufficiency and to advocate for Hmong women's representation in leadership positions in the educational, political, and social sectors. In their new roles, many Hmong women find that in order to positively impact their communities, they must obtain leadership skills that are not only sensitive to their culture but also relevant to their gender (HWED, 1995).

New communications media, such as the Internet, provide a means of reaching a global Hmong audience. There is an on-line Hmong Journal and at least one Hmong home page in both America and Australia. Young Hmong people in the United States and Australia discuss issues surrounding Hmong identity in various chat rooms. Hmong women are creating spaces for the articulation of resistances to the hegemonic narrative. In 1994, Mai Neng Moua launched a Hmong literary journal, *Paj Ntaub Voice* which is subtitled '*A Journal Giving Expression to Hmoob Voices*'. Since then she has published an anthology of Hmong American literature (Moua, 2003). The publishers' description of the book is telling:

In this groundbreaking anthology, first- and second-generation Hmong Americans – the first to write creatively in English – share their perspectives on being Hmong in America. ... These writers don't pretend to provide a single story of the Hmong; instead, a multitude of voices emerge, some wrapped up in the past, others looking toward the future, where the notion of "Hmong American" continues to evolve (Minnesota Historical Society, 2003).

*Paj Ntaub Voice* is a journal that provides a site for the construction of alternative versions of Hmong femininity. In the Winter 2001 edition entitled 'Silence' Mai Neng Moua (the editor) states:

When I think of silence, I hear my mother telling me not to ask so many questions, to not speak with so much passion with my hands and face or in the presence of older Hmoob men. I usually associate silence with powerlessness, punishment, and control.... silence is also peace and quiet...

Writing and publishing for Hmoob writers are courageous acts.... Moving from saying nothing to expression, to shouting and loudness takes courage. It is, to borrow bell hook's expression, an 'act of resistance' – of refusing to remain silent, or rejecting the stories and images others have created of us, of refusing to lie down and die quietly, of 'talking back' (2001: 4).

*Paj Ntaub Voice* thus creates a space for the reconstruction of Hmong identity; it serves as a means of resistance, an avenue for challenging the meaning of 'tradition'.

The following poem expresses another young Hmong woman's oppositional positioning in relation to her Hmong identity:

Everyday.  
Between personal and professional:  
The world does not consist  
Of Hmong issues alone.  
Even though they hit closer to home.  
There is no global, 'bigger' picture  
In the Hmong community.  
We're all struggling.

It hurts to read the paper these days.  
Between individual, family and community  
Because I am a lone Hmong woman  
I'm appreciated more outside of the home.  
My individuality is validated.  
I'm expected to compete.

Not for affection.

While my sister waits to have  
A late night conversation with me,  
And the dishes lie dirty in the sink.  
Letters unanswered.  
One more meal with the relatives, missed.

One less argument I get to hear.  
Between sinner and saint:  
The amorphous, ever-present double standard  
That slips unacknowledged to the back of our minds.  
The 'good Hmong girl' façade  
I will never be able to live up to  
Believe me, I've tried.  
For 18 years, I've tried.  
And the label I now carry  
In private, in jest...  
Just another day. (Yang 2001:46).

The importance of such sites is also evident in the opening paragraph of a contribution to *Hnub Tshiab*, a Hmong women's publication:

As I thought of this article, many of the issues I have faced as a single Hmong woman in her mid-twenties came to mind. Should I discuss the functional reasons why marriage is so important in the Hmong culture, especially for women? Or do I talk about the lack of eligible, older Hmong men? Better yet, should I complain about the attempts by my relatives to find me a good husband as if it were an unfortunate

circumstance that I was single instead of a conscious choice? Thinking it over, though, I decided that all those questions boiled down to one fundamental truth – the Hmong community is still trying to learn how to treat the increasing number of Hmong women who, like me, are making the choice to stay single in their mid-twenties (Yang 2002: 1).

The oppositional voices of Hmong women and young people are also being heard in other arenas such as theaters and art galleries. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, the new ‘Theater Mu’ has become an avenue for Hmong actors and Hmong plays, and in April 2002, an alternative art gallery held an exhibition of works by Hmong-American artists. In addition, the field of popular culture is a newly emerging and extremely significant site for the expression of these voices. At the 2002 Hmong National Development Conference Youth Forum in Milwaukee a wide range of popular cultural acts were on display - from break dancing to poetry – with young Hmong women well-represented.

Importantly, these resistant and oppositional positionings (see Hall, 1976/2002) are collective strategies. Gigi Durham (1999) has criticised the dominant views of resistance among young women in that they typically adopt a model of autonomous individuals. She argues that this overlooks ‘the crucial role of women’s relationships with other women in their constructions of social reality’ (Gigi Durham, 1999:215). Many of the strategies discussed above demonstrate the successful translation of Hmong identity through the collective activities of Hmong women. Significantly, these resistant readings are also informed by ‘other’ discourses including feminist analyses of women of colour and Asian-American narratives and practices. Thus as Hein (1994) has noted, in the context of US race relations, the Hmong identity has shifted from that of ‘migrant’ to ‘racial minority’.

### **Hmong femininities – global and local discourses**

As Hochschild (1989) has argued, gender strategies are constructed by drawing on ‘the cultural notions of gender at play’ (Chen, 1999: 589). This paper has demonstrated that there is more than one ‘cultural notion of gender’ available to the Hmong in the diaspora. One of these is a global narrative that draws on an essentialist discourse in an attempt to offer a Hmongness that unites the diverse groups of Hmong throughout the world. It is grounded in the past, emphasises ‘tradition’ and constructs Hmong femininity as an icon of cultural

tradition. It resonates most strongly with first-generation Hmong refugees and is articulated in the diasporic public sphere predominantly by male elites in the United States. It is a hegemonic narrative that is diffused throughout the diaspora and provides a powerful discourse of Hmongness in countries on the periphery (including Australia).

For many Hmong women and Hmong youth who have grown up in the west this global narrative offers an important sense of belonging to ‘community’. It provides a ‘rootedness’ in the past that enables a sense of stability and continuity in the face of their lived experiences of disruption and trauma. On the other hand, this narrative offers little in terms of ‘recipes’ (Schutz, 1967) for survival in the diaspora where ethnic identities and gender strategies must be constructed in terms of the political, economic and social realities of the nation-state. This situation invites resistances to the global narrative. If the narrative is to remain relevant and survive at all, it requires ‘translation’.

Comparative analysis is a powerful tool. The differential trajectories of Hmong identities in Australia and the United States demonstrates the existence of both a *global* narrative of Hmong identity and the construction of various Hmong identities in a *transnational* social space. The global narrative offers a sense of unity in the diaspora while simultaneously providing the base material for resistance and/or ‘translation’ in different local contexts. In the United States, Hmong women and youth have extended the diasporic public sphere by creating spaces within which to voice resistant readings of Hmong identity. In doing so, they act as powerful agents of change. The strategies they have chosen look towards the future; they anticipate the survival of Hmong identity in the west via its translation.

The Australian context is quite different. The repertoire of adaptive strategies (including gender strategies) available to the Hmong is more restricted. As a very small and dispersed population with generally low socio-economic status, the Hmong in Australia have limited resources to draw upon. For Hmong women in Australia, the global narrative provides the dominant ‘cultural notion of gender at play’. At the level of the nation-state, the rhetoric of multicultural policy in Australia ‘encourages’ the presentation of Hmong identity.

Typically, however, multicultural spaces in Australia are aimed at the white middle-class or the tourist market - the identities presented are essentialist and 'traditional'. As Hage (1998) has argued, they are limited to representations that sustain 'fantasies of white supremacy' among the dominant majority. In Australia, multicultural policy thus reinforces the power of the global narrative; it does not offer spaces for 'translation'. Consequently, while in the United States, resistance takes the form of 'translation' and reinvention in 'the third space' (Bhabha, 1990), the lack of such spaces in Australia leads to 'a wholesale rejection of, or disinterest in, Hmong cultural traditions' (Tapp, 2004).

Given Australia's ambivalent relationship with Asia and 'Asians' (Ang, 2000), spaces for the creation of hybridity are limited. They include an emerging media in the field of popular culture (see Ang et al., 2000) but the Hmong have limited access to these. Nevertheless, there are two such spaces available to the Hmong. Significantly, both are grounded in the transnational social space. One is the internet and the other is the transnational 'community' of Hmong women. First, the internet offers a space within which Hmong in Australia can engage in the translation of Hmong identity. It is used by Hmong youth and is dominated by Hmong in the west (Tapp, 2004). Second, Hmong women who have made their mark as 'trailblazers' (Bays, 1994) in the United States have become increasingly aware of the situations of Hmong women in Australia. Through e-mail communication and visits to Australia, they have begun to establish transnational ties. Importantly, these ties are not clan-based: they are *gendered* ties between Hmong women. Educated Hmong women in the US are offering themselves and their experiences as resources for the translation of Hmong femininity in Australia. The ultimate goal, however, is to contribute to the survival of Hmong identity in the diaspora.

And what of the role of the ethnographer? In so far as the ethnographer also tells a narrative of Hmong identity, she adds her voice to the cacaphony of voices in the diasporic public sphere. She extends the diasporic public sphere into the world of the academy. As more and more Hmong take up opportunities for higher education in the west, these academic

discourses become another resource to draw upon in the ongoing construction of Hmong identity in the diaspora.

### Conclusion

So, who are the Hmong? The answer depends in part on who is narrating the identity, who is reading that identity, and who is performing it. Identities are not fixed and essential. As Stuart Hall has argued, identities are *positionings* (1990:53). They are dialogic, highly contextual and inherently political. Identities are not free-floating. They are territorially grounded lived experiences and as such they are constructions in progress. This paper has focused on the contested nature of Hmong identity in the diaspora. It has highlighted the significance of place, generation, gender, religion, class and status as axes of contestation and debate in the diasporic public sphere. At the same time, however, it has demonstrated that the global discourse across transnational social space is an important resource influencing the selection and performance of local identities and gender strategies.

Furthermore, we have seen that identities are not constructed in a deterritorialised space. Hmong women in the United States have been actively constructing spaces within which they can 'translate' Hmongness by expressing alternative versions of Hmong femininity. These spaces have not been created in Australia. Thus the translation of Hmongness is less visible and the pressures to assimilate are greater. In this context, the transnational ties offered by Hmong women in the United States (and other First World countries) provide an important resource for resistance and translation.

It is important to acknowledge that the 'telling' of identity narratives is itself a political activity. This paper has highlighted the identity work surrounding the maintenance and translation of ethnic identity among Hmong women. While this is a matter of concern for the Hmong themselves, this focus is equally a product of the interests of the researcher. For many Hmong, the meaning of Hmongness is far from central to their lives; it may 'only be part of the story of subjects in transnationality' (Grewal, 1999:823). This paper has shown that if we wish to know these stories better, we need to encourage the development of the diasporic public sphere and to listen more carefully to the contestation within it.

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