

THE ROLE OF MEDIA TECHNOLOGY IN REPRODUCING HMONG ETHNIC IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

Similar to people of other ethnic groups, the Hmong have their own myths, legends, and history. These stories were traditionally passed on to successive generations in the form of story telling in daily life and on special occasions. For instance, parents recounted these stories to their children over and over again before bedtime, men shared other stories at night at funerals, and ritual specialists performed them as songs or hymns during ceremonies. Nowadays, the Hmong are scattered all over the world and are a transnational ethnic group. Hmong children growing up in these countries gradually come to absorb their adopted country's nationalism, particularly the nation-state's myths, legends and histories, through the state's "technologies of power."¹ In addition, globalization has brought new, sophisticated cultures and ideologies to the Hmong. Hmong ethnic identity, hence, has been gradually reshaped and eroded by nationalism and globalization.

Hmong refugees from Laos have been settling in Western countries since the late 1970s, and have played a significant role in the reproduction and reconstruction of Hmong identity, particularly through audiovisual and print media. This use of technology and media enables the Hmong to disseminate traditional myths, legends, and histories of suffering at the hands of others through their transnational community. In addition, Catholic missionaries have collected and published Hmong myths, legends, histories, songs, and hymns. Journals have been set up for Hmong who live in different countries to send messages or write articles for distribution.

Numerous Hmong websites to connect, exchange information and discuss issues as well as to encourage activism have been set up. Hence, I argue that while the Hmong scattered in different parts of the world have had their ethnic identities gradually eroded by nationalism and globalization, they are using media technologies to reproduce and reconstruct their Hmongness. Hmong ethnic identity, as defined by shared memory and common sentiment, is being reproduced and reconstructed by media technologies and disseminated through kinship, business, church, and Internet networks.

This chapter necessarily begins with, and is inflected by, my own experience of "becoming Hmong" in a northern Thai village, learning about my culture through narratives and witnessing rituals as a child, then growing up and being exposed to more global narratives and belief systems. This analysis, however, is based on ethnographic fieldwork primarily carried out in the Hmong communities of Paklang in Nan province and the city of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand.² In addition, I made two short trips to meet and interview Hmong in communities in Yunnan province in southwestern China and Lao Cai province in northern Vietnam.

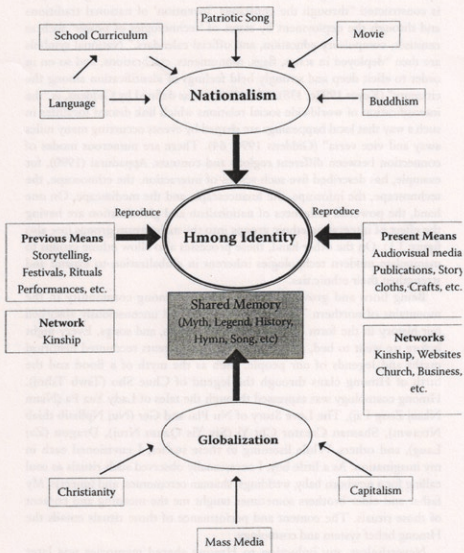
THE SHAPING OF HMONG ETHNIC IDENTITY

Nationalism and globalization have played a significant role in shaping Hmong ethnic identity based on shared memories. The concept of shared memory here is adopted from one of the three elements of collective cultural identity defined by Anthony Smith. According to Smith, a collective cultural identity means "those feelings and values in respect of a sense of continuity, shared memories and a sense of common destiny of a given unit of population which has had common experiences and cultural attributes" (Smith 1990, 179). The shared memories that constitute Hmong ethnic identity stem from their myths, legends, oral histories, hymns, and songs. The concept of "identity" here refers to the subjective feelings and values possessed by the Hmong by virtue of their common experience. Stories embedded in everyday practice are gradually and unconsciously absorbed by the Hmong in childhood. These shared memories include the origin of their ethnic group, the greatness of their own history and their history of suffering at the hands of others. It is not important whether these stories are based on real or imagined historical events, or whether they are intentionally or unintentionally constructed. They are important to the Hmong who share a common sentiment in their contemporary practice.

However, similar to other diasporic ethnic minority people, Hmong ethnic identity, especially among the young, is gradually being eroded by nationalism and globalization. State nationalism, according to Keyes, is constructed "through the conscious 'invention' of national traditions and through the deployment by states of 'technologies of power' such as censuses, compulsory education, and official calendars." National symbols are then "deployed in songs, flags, monuments, celebrations, and so on in order to elicit deep and strongly held feelings of identification among the citizenry" (Keyes 1997c, 338). Globalization, as defined by Giddens, is "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens 1990, 64). There are numerous modes of connection between different regions and contexts. Appadurai (1990), for example, has described five such scapes of interaction: the ethnoscape, the technoscape, the infoscape, the financescape, and the mediascape. On one hand, the powerful influences of nationalism and globalization are having the effect of integrating ethnic groups into the mainstream groups (see also figure 3.1). On the other hand, these processes also allow ethnic groups to manipulate modern technologies inherent in globalization to expand and strengthen their ethnic ties.

Being born and growing up in a remote Hmong community in the mountains of northern Thailand, I gradually and unconsciously absorbed our history in the form of myths, legends, rituals, and songs. Every night before we went to bed, my parents and grandparents recounted historical myths and legends of our people, such as the myth of a flood and the birth of Hmong clans through the legend of Chue Sho (Tswb Tshoj). Hmong cosmology was expressed through the tales of Lady Yua Pa (Niam Nkauj Zuag Paj), The Love Story of Nu Plai and Ger (Nuj Nplhaib thiab Ntxawm), Shaman Creator Chi Yi (Siv Yis Qaum Ntuj), Dragon (Zaj Laug), and others. While listening to these stories, I envisioned each in my imagination. As a little boy, I occasionally observed such rituals as soul calling for a newborn baby, weddings, shaman ceremonies, and funerals. My father and elder brothers sometimes taught me the meaning and content of those rituals. The content and performance of those rituals entails the Hmong belief system and cosmology.

Nevertheless, my induction to Hmong shared memories was later gradually shaped by national and global influences. At the age of six, I attended school in our new lowland community. In school, I started to learn how to speak, read, and write Thai. In addition to the central Thai language

FIGURE 3.1 The Influence of Nationalism and Globalization on Hmong Identity

(the official dialect used throughout the country) my classmates from the Hmong, Mien, and H'tin ethnic minorities and I also learned the history and culture of Thailand. As students, we had to wear the official school uniform. We had to sing the Thai national anthem and witness the raising of the national flag every morning. After that we had to chant and pray in the Buddhist way, even though none of us were Buddhists. By the end of every week, before leaving for home, we sang a song to praise the Thai king, as our monarch. Every classroom had the three Thai symbols of the nation, religion, and monarchy. The tricoloured national flag symbolizes the Thai nation-state, the Buddhist religion, and the monarchy. Thai nationalism was part of the hidden curriculum in subjects such as history, Thai culture, civil responsibility, and morality. All were based on the central Thai or national base of knowledge exclusively, since the school curriculum was set up by the Ministry of Education in Bangkok. Only Thai national history was taught in primary school. Although some local history was added to the secondary school curriculum, there was no history of local ethnic groups. Importantly, only the central Thai language was allowed officially in the classroom. Speaking local dialects or languages in class would result in punishment, even though students and teachers alike were local people. School, as one of the state's "technologies of power," played a significant role in gradually shaping our local and ethnic identity, aligning it with the nation-state.

In addition to school structure and curriculum, other ethnic children and I have absorbed the state's nationalism through the official language, national songs, historical movies and Buddhism. Central Thai is the only official language allowed in school and government offices. From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, there was a period when the country was threatened by Communists, especially along the border with Laos where we lived. In response to the perceived threat, village scout troops and village volunteer protectors were set up. Nationalistic songs were composed, broadcast and sung widely, and integrated into the process of training these voluntary groups (see Bowie 1997). Movies based on Thai history and legendary kings and heroes were also shown during the training. Buddhist propaganda, known as the *Thammacharik* Project, was set up by the government with the goal of converting highland ethnic minorities (who believe in their own ancestors and household spirits) to Buddhism (see also Prasit L. 2001; Tapp 1986 and 1989a).

In addition to nationalism, my Hmong friends and I also absorbed aspects of the larger context of globalization. For example, in secondary school in a local Thai district, I and other Hmong friends resided in a Christian hostel,

because our villages were so far from the school. It was through the teachings of the Bible that we were exposed to another version of the creation myth. Whenever we discussed the origin of the Hmong ethnic group, some of our Hmong neighbors who had become Christians, especially preachers, often mentioned that we might be the "lost tribe" referred to in the Bible. Subsequently, while studying and working in towns, I came into contact with the history of other cultural groups, countries, and regions that are not directly related to my ethnic group through school, movies, the newspapers, and television. Hence, as a result of living in Thai towns for about two decades, I almost completely forgot the Hmong stories told to me by my parents when I was a child.

While conducting my academic research on Hmong culture, I discovered videos, books, websites, or handicraft items which contained exactly the same myths and stories as those I had grown up with. The stories about Lady Yua Pa, Nu Plai and Ger, and others which my parents told me before bedtime can now be viewed on television. Therefore, this research project was first sparked by my own encounters with cultural products disseminated among the transnational Hmong.

TRANSNATIONAL HMONG AND THE SHARED MEMORY OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Hmong (Hmoob) is the name by which members of an ethnic group inhabiting southwestern China, northern mainland Southeast Asia, and now, several Western countries, refer to themselves. However, in China and Southeast Asia, the terms Hmong and Miao (or Meo) are used interchangeably. The term Miao (literally "rice-plant shoot," "sprouts," and in some sources, "weed") first appeared in Chinese classics under the names Miao-Min, Yu-Miao, or San-Miao.³ It referred to groups of people who inhabited the central plains of the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. This was to the south of the territory of the legendary Emperor Shun, the last of five sovereigns prior to the founding of the Xia (or Hsia) Dynasty (2255–2206 B.C.). Later on, the term "Miao" was sometimes replaced by the term "Man" (barbarians) or "Nan-Man" (southern barbarians), which subsumed all non-Han groups. During the Sung dynasty (960–1279 A.D.), the term "Miao" was used to distinguish the Miao ethnic group from the Mien, the Lao, the Zhuang or Tai, and the Keh-Lao on the upper Yuan River in western Hunan (Cheung 1996, Diamond 1995, Ruey 1972). During the late Ming

(1368–1662 A.D.) and early Ch'ing or Qing (1663–1908 A.D.) Dynasties, the Miao were categorized into two distinctive groups known as the Raw (Sheng) and the Cooked (Shu) Miao, according to their level of sinicization and "civilization." The Cooked Miao

lived nearer to Han centers of settlement or military outposts, came under the control of the state or the appointed local *tusi* [Han-appointed native leaders], and had taken on some Han customs or at least relinquished some of their own customs that were offensive to Han sensibilities. The Raw Miao resisted assimilation, pacification and state control. (Diamond 1995, 100)⁴

In the book entitled *Miao Album*, some of the plates are identified as Kelao, Lolo, Longjia, Songjia, or Yiren. The majority are presented as Miao subgroups. The term "Miao," created by the Chinese government, was still being used to refer to various ethnic groups in southern China until the end of the Nationalist, or Kuomintang regime, in mainland China.

Although a post-revolution Communist government project had academically and systematically classified different ethnic groups of the country, the category "Miao" is still contentious. The Chinese government's project of ethnic identification, based upon the criteria of common language, territory, economy, and psychological characteristics or sentiments, was launched after the Communist Party took power in 1949. More than four hundred groups were registered for approval in the early 1950s. However, by the mid-1960s, only fifty-five groups (nationalities or *minzu*), including the majority Han, were officially registered. All the rest of the groups were classified under these fifty-five categories, based on the above criteria.

According to Diamond (1995) and Schein (1986), there are at least three major languages spoken by the Miao in China. Each language group consists of several distinct dialects. The first group is the Xiangxi language of Hunan, which has two dialects, each with less than a million speakers. Speakers of this group call themselves by names that are variations of "Gao Xiong" (Qhov Xyooj). Their languages have been provided with Pinyin romanization for school texts and other publications. The second group consists of three dialects of the Qiandong language, found in central and eastern Guizhou. The largest dialect group has over a million speakers and its own pinyin system, whereas the other two have over half a million speakers each but no pinyin systems. They call themselves "Hmu" (Hmub) or "Hmo" (Hmob). The last and most problematic language group consists of the Chuan-Qian-Dian languages, the diversity of which do not fit within

the other two groups. Nonetheless, this group is thought to have retained the greatest proportion of the "ancient" Miao language. Their speech is clearly intelligible to the White Hmong (Hmoob Dawb) and Blue or Green Hmong (Hmoob Ntsuab) dialects of Southeast Asia. Speakers of this group number over two million and are dispersed across Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. They call themselves "Hmong" (Hmoob) (Diamond 1995; Schein 1986). Within these Miao language groups, there are also different sub-dialects and costume groups of Hmong who live in southern China and the northern areas of mainland Southeast Asia.

Due to the invasions of the Han Chinese and the strictures of the Chinese government, the Hmong who were indigenous to China continued to migrate southwest into the Southeast Asian countries of Vietnam, Burma, Laos, and Thailand, from the late 1700s to the early 1800s. The most recent Hmong migration out of China to Southeast Asia was during the Yunnan Moslem or Panthay Rebellion (1855–1873) (Jenks 1994), which was known by the Hmong as "the War of Red Flag and White Flag."⁵ It was just after this period when the Hmong and other ethnic minorities migrated to Southeast Asia that modern states began to be created in this region, due primarily to the influence of European colonial regimes. State boundaries in this region began to be demarcated. Hmong people who were widely scattered throughout the region now became divided by political boundaries and became citizens of different countries. After the Communists took over Laos in 1975, those Hmong who fought alongside the Americans fled to Thailand as refugees. They eventually settled in third countries in the West, such as Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Canada, France, French Guyana, Germany and the United States. The total Hmong population, including other groups of Miao in China, is around ten million. The Hmong are now a transnational ethnic group. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how the Hmong recreate and maintain their shared memory and identity despite being scattered in different parts of the world.

According to Woodward,

Identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. Identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not. . . . Identities may be marked by polarization, for example in the most extreme forms of national or ethnic conflict, and by the marking of inclusion or exclusion—insiders and outsiders, "us" and "them." (1997, 2)

This basic concept is similar to what Jenkins (1996) and Eriksen (1993) discuss. Similarity or sameness, the notion of shared descent, as argued by Keyes (1976) and Eriksen (1993), is a basic element of one's ethnic identity. Legends that express a common origin and ancestors of an ethnic group are an important source of identity, even if members may not be able to trace themselves back to a known ancestor. In addition, a common understanding of their history, including their suffering at the hands of other groups, is gradually absorbed and shared by members of an ethnic group. Consequently, this binary opposition creates the sentiment of difference or distinctiveness. It relates to the power relations between one's ethnic group and others. Hence, for the Hmong, the mechanisms of storytelling, ritual ceremony and song described above are the traditional ways of passing on their ethnic identity from generation to generation. In other words, Hmong ethnic identity is traditionally reproduced over and over again in these oral stories, ritual performances, and entertainment. Tapp expresses this idea as "historical consciousness" in discussing the Hmong ethnic identity (1989a, 176). However, I found in the field sites that only the elders and those who still follow the Hmong traditional belief system still practice and share these memories, because of the broad influence of nationalism and globalization on Hmong society.

Living in the modern contexts of nationalism and globalization, a common Hmong identity based on shared memory is gradually being eroded. In my field sites, especially in Thailand, the state's project of nationalism has been channeled through a national language, a standardized curriculum, popular music, movies and religious ceremonies and practices. Examples of the Thai state's "technologies of power" include state-run compulsory schools, the mass media, official laws and regulations, and the Buddhist clergy (Sangha). These are the major operational means to achieve the central government's policies of nationalism and attempts to assimilate ethnic minorities into the Thai nation-state. Hmong identity has also been affected by colonialism, Christianity and the mass media (see figure 3.1) In addition, arguably the greatest modern event was their involvement in the Indochina War, and subsequent scattering all over the world in far-flung communities. The question is what have the transnational Hmong done to reproduce and reconstruct their ethnic identity?

THE REPRODUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF TRANSNATIONAL HMONG IDENTITY

Nationalism and globalization were brought to Hmong ethnic society through the modernization process. Berman (1988), Giddens (1991), and Tanabe and Keyes (2000) illustrate that the intrusion of the modern world is indeed a double-edged sword. While modernity may bring efficient new practices and scientific technologies, often important facets of local traditions and identity are discarded, as their value in maintaining a cohesive and coherent memory is overlooked or goes unappreciated. To benefit from these outside influences, people must recognize that their values and traditions are under attack by these potent forces. They must make a conscious and determined effort to preserve the main underpinnings of their society so that their communities can resist being swept away into the mainstream, so that they will not lose the memories and values that provide them with the strength to endure as an ethnic group. To survive and prosper in a globalized environment, ethnic history, which has been passed on for generations, has to be continuously carried forward in a process of production and reproduction (Jenkins 1992, 80). In addition, the new ethnic identity must be created and negotiated (Giddens 1990 and 1991). The Hmong are reproducing, reconstructing and reinventing their identity via modern technologies such as audiovisual productions, publications, arts and cyberspace (see figure 3.1). Importantly, these means of technology are disseminated by the Hmong across state boundaries, despite some strict controls.

Both Schein (2002) and Lee (2004) have examined the role of media in linking the Hmong diaspora to the Hmong homeland in Asia. Schein argues, "Media practices, as we shall see, have become pivotal in securing, and even generating, Hmong transnationality" (2002, 229). Regarding Hmong transnationalism articulated by media practices, she emphasizes that "Hmong could be seen to be making space for their very particularized narratives, ones that enunciate their own cultural memories, war genealogies, sentiments of loss, and struggles of resettlement" (*ibid.*, 241). Meanwhile, Lee argues "these moving video images and new singing voices constitute a form of cultural reinvention that connects the Hmong together as a global community, and brings them a new changing identity, a new level of transnational group consciousness both in the diaspora and in the homeland" (2006, 1).

However, these studies focus only on videos. For me, the media which play a significant role in reproducing and reconstructing transnational

Hmong ethnic identity are not just videos or video compact disks (VCDS) but also include print (journals and other publications), the Internet, the art of embroidery, and music cassettes. In my field sites, I discovered that the four major influences were publications, videos or VCDS, "story cloths," and the Internet.

Print and the Reproduction of Hmong Identity

Among the Hmong in Southeast Asia and Western countries, the creation of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) script in 1953 (presently used widely in these areas) is not just useful for correspondence among the transnational Hmong, but also contributes to the reproduction of their ethnic identity. The distribution of publications, and the dispersion of the Hmong themselves through different countries after 1975 has coincidentally contributed to the reproduction and reconstruction of their identity. Hmong history, myths, legends, folk tales, ritual chants, and songs have been transcribed, published and distributed widely for easy access by transnational Hmong. Moreover, the use of the Hmong script in distributing information and of modern technologies such as journals and websites also play an important role in uniting the Hmong in an "imagined community" (Anderson 1993).

Miao and Hmong writing systems have been created in different locations and at different times, at least since the early 1900s. Both Hmong and non-Hmong people have created these writing systems (see Enwall 1994; Smalley et al. 1990; and Bertrais 1991). There also have been attempts by governments in Asian countries, where Hmong live, to use national writing scripts to create a Hmong script. However, to date, the RPA system, which was created in 1953, is the most popular writing system among the Hmong in Southeast Asia and the West (Bertrais 1991). Since Hmong people live in so many countries, there are limits to the accessibility of other writing systems based on various national scripts. Also, because it is based on Roman letters, it is easier using the RPA worldwide, especially considering the use of the computer as the major means of transmission. Importantly, this script is used daily among Christian Hmong, in such activities as Bible reading, weekend church meetings, and general correspondence.

One essential element of using of the RPA system among transnational Hmong is the contemporary use of recording, publishing, and distributing stories related to Hmong identity. Basically, leaders of each clan or lineage members who are scattered in different countries draw their family trees using this system. In addition, it is widely used in the process of video or VCD and audio music cassette production, both in the content and on the

cover. Importantly, the books, journals, and websites that use this system of writing have become essential modern mechanisms for reproducing Hmong identity of shared memory and linking them to a shared common heritage in their contemporary situation.

According to Bertrais (1991), a Catholic priest who played a pivotal role in the creation of the RPA writing system in 1953, manuals for learning Hmong, songs, wedding chants, tales and legends, and the War of Pa Cai were published in Vientiane, Laos, between 1963–1975. From 1975–1984, while Hmong refugees from Laos sheltered in Thailand, a more complete version of these stories was collected, published and distributed. Later on, books recording contemporary life and ritual ceremonies of the Hmong in China, especially Yunnan province, were published. Importantly, two books on Hmong history were published. One based on the Hmong refugees of Ban Vinai (Bertrais 1985) and another written by a Miao scholar in Hunan, China (Vwj 1997). These publications become a modern mechanism for widely disseminating Hmong history and cultural practices, which were formerly narrated or performed verbally in Hmong society for the young. In addition to history, Hmong cosmology can be found in the details of these myths, legends, folk tales, songs, ritual chants and proverbs. In the Hmong field site in Nan province, Xyooj, a young Hmong man said “these kinds of knowledge were previously known only among our ritual performers and elders. Nowadays, everyone who is able to read the Hmong writing system can access these stories themselves. Even Hmong students in town can use them as a source of information for their reports and dissertations.”

In addition to books, journals published in Hmong have also played an important role in disseminating contemporary news and connecting Hmong in different countries together. In the early 1980s, young Hmong in Thailand learned about Hmong in China and other Western countries in *Haiu Hmoob* (Hmong Magazine), which was published in St Paul, Minnesota. The magazine was later terminated, but it was soon replaced by *Hmong Forum*, a more scholarly magazine. In the 1990s, the journal *Liaj Luv Chaw Tsaws* (The Nest of Swallows and Sparrow Hawks) was launched in French Guyana. Later on, its name was changed to *Liaj Luv Xa Moo* (Swallows and Sparrow Hawks Send a Message). It is through this journal that we, the young Hmong in urban Chiang Mai, learned Hmong stories and about the lives of fellow Hmong in Germany, French Guyana, and Argentina, for example, since Hmong in different countries contribute articles. Moreover, the journal also serves to teach the RPA system to the Hmong, particularly those in Laos, Vietnam, China and Burma who have less access to RPA reading material.⁶

In conclusion, publications using the RPA script have become one of the modern technologies for recording and disseminating traditional Hmong stories. Instead of learning through verbal communication or observing daily ritual practices, anybody who is able to read the RPA script can have access to these stories. Moreover, the journals, whether in print or online, are important contemporary sources of information on Hmong life in different countries. Transnational Hmong have come to perceive and feel themselves part of an extended group.

Audiovisual Media in the Reproduction of Hmong Identity

Just before the Hmong New Year in late December 2003, the Hmong in Paklang were busy preparing their new clothes and waiting to enjoy the company of relatives and visitors from near and far. But what Noo (a pseudonym) and his wife expected was different. They had been working hard, day and night, producing VCDs for sale, and expected to gain a big profit during the coming major event, since the village is large with a population of eight hundred households with many other surrounding small Hmong villages.

Two months before the Hmong New Year, Noo and his wife traveled to Luang Prabang and Vientiane in Laos to visit their relatives and contact Hmong merchants selling compact disks, videos, and music albums. On the way back, they went to Chiang Mai to buy a new computer to reproduce the VCDs they bought in Laos to sell during the coming Hmong New Year. Soon after they got back home, they reserved a booth at the main playground of the village, where Hmong villagers normally get together for the seven days of the New Year celebration. In the meantime, they contacted another Hmong merchant in Phetchaboon province who has three married daughters who have been living in the United States for many years. This merchant received every new copy of VCD, video, and music album released by Hmong filmmakers and singers in the United States. Noo then ordered many of those items from him to sell in his store, especially during Hmong New Year.

Paklang, one of my two field sites, is an ethnic minority community composed of Hmong, Mien, and H'tin. Among these three ethnic groups, the Hmong are in the majority, comprising around eight hundred households or about 5,500 people. This lowland community was set up as a tribal resettlement site in 1968, due to the impact of political conflict between the Thai government and the Communists in mountain communities along the border of Thailand and Laos. Upon arrival, the government allocated land to each family for cultivation and provided fundamental services and infrastructure for the villages.

The ancestors of the Paklang Hmong migrated from southwestern China to the highlands of what is now northern Thailand in the late 1800s, because of the central Chinese government's expansion into the territory of local independent ethnic groups. The migration that brought the ancestors of the Paklang Hmong occurred at the same time as Hmong in other communities in northern Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar. They dispersed to different mountainous locations in northern mainland Southeast Asia during a period when communications were still poor. This caused difficulties in sending messages among the various groups and sub-clans even lost connection with their members in different parts of the region. Nonetheless, their common ethnic identity, in the form of a shared collective memory and clan system, has been continuously kept alive through storytelling, festivals, ritual performances, and songs.

My research assistant and I arrived in this Hmong village just a few days before the Hmong New Year. As we observed, there were few Hmong villagers renting Noo's videos, but many of them bought his VCDs and song albums, especially in the evening, since they prefer to watch the videos with family members and relatives at night. During the Hmong New Year, we observed Noo's business at his booth at the village playground for seven days. What attracted customers the most was not only the variety of VCDs, videos and song albums, but also the movies that appeared on the television screen in his shop and the sound of Hmong songs on his tape-player. Since there were many customers, Noo had to hire two persons to assist him at the booth. Meanwhile, his wife was working hard at home producing more VCDs to meet their customers' orders.

Although there were many varieties of Hmong VCDs,⁷ videos, and song albums that Hmong people bought from Noo's booth and store, we were interested particularly in those audio-visuals that were concerned with the reproduction of Hmong history and identity. According to Noo, the five best-selling VCDs and videos concerning Hmong history and shared memory were "The Bloody Drum," "Tracing the Bloody Path: Hmong History in China,"⁸ "Hmong General Vang Pao & the Secret War in Laos 1960-1975," "Eight Emperors," and "Lady Yua Pa and Orphan Jao Cua." The first is a VCD of an old Chinese movie made by a Miao group in Guizhou province. The story tells the history of a battle between the Miao and the Han Chinese in Guizhou. The film ends with the loss of the Hmong leader's life. The survivors then migrated further southward. An essential point here is not only the content of the VCD but also the transformation process and dissemination networks. The original soundtrack was in Chinese. However, a Hmong group in Yunnan province had just recently translated it into their

local Hmong dialect. Later, a Hmong businessman in St. Paul, Minnesota, bought the copyright and reproduced it as a video. After that, some Hmong businessman in Thailand got the video and duplicated it as a VCD for dissemination in Thailand, Laos, and back in China.

"Tracing the Bloody Path: Hmong History in China" is a documentary video produced by a Hmong man from Minnesota. The video begins with the video maker questioning himself:

I'm a Hmong among the White peoples, I wonder where I come from and what is my history? The only one thing I have learned from my parents is that I was born in Laos and migrated to the US, but our ancestors told that they originally came from China. I then traveled to trace my origin in China, as told by our ancestors.

He then presents the main places and the history of the Hmong in China that he recorded on the video. One place he showed was the presumed graveyard of Chiyow (Txiv Yawg) who is believed to be the first leader or emperor of the Hmong. The location is west of Peking, the capital of China. However, the highlight of this video is the ritual of erecting a big statue of Zhang Xiong Meh, a great Miao leader in Guizhou province. At the end, the video producer encourages Hmong people watching all around the world to contribute funds to support the Miao people in Guizhou to build this statue and surrounding park. He states, "this is one of the great former leaders of the Hmong people, who fought against the Chinese, in China." According to Hmong villagers in Paklang, the content of these two films was entirely new to them, and no one had seen them before. The film, therefore, is a juxtaposition of events and information among different Miao groups in different places in China. It creates a new visual image of history among Hmong viewers throughout the world.

The third video focuses on the war led by General Vang Pao, a Hmong military leader in Laos between 1960 and 1975. The producer is the same as the second one. He compiled all the videos that Western journalists and American soldiers produced during the Secret War in Laos together chronologically, then explains them in Hmong. The details express the technologically advanced weapons and aircraft that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided to the Hmong to fight against the Communists in Laos and Vietnam. The video ends with the defeat of General Vang Pao and his troops in northeastern Laos. He then led the Hmong in their escape to Thailand, finally scattering to different countries around the world. Although Hmong villagers in Paklang didn't face the same war as those in

Laos, on viewing the video, they are proud of General Vang Pao and share Lao Hmong's feelings of loss. According to Lee, a young man, "Vang Pao is the only Hmong hero in Southeast Asia. The involvement of Hmong in the secret war in Laos caused a great loss to our Hmong people. However, many of our people wouldn't get a chance to settle in Western countries if they didn't lose the war in Laos in 1975." The importance of this video is the reproduction of collective memory (Tanabe and Keyes 2002) among the Hmong, based on recent events.

The next VCD is an action movie dealing with the Hmong fight against the Communists in Laos as well. The story starts in the United States. After the Hmong settled there for many years, a young man, an actor and filmmaker, still dreamed about fighting to regain power in Laos. He then came back to Thailand and Laos to fight against the Communists who controlled Laos. The movie shows the Hmong people being cruelly killed by the Communists. But in the end, the Communists are defeated by the Hmong soldiers. The filming took place in Hmong villages in Chiang Mai and Nan provinces of Thailand. Most of the actors were from Paklang village, so they were also watching themselves in these pan-Hmong roles!

The last video is "Lady Yua Pa and Orphan Jao Cua" (Niam Nkauj Zuag Paj & Txiv Nraug Ntsuag). This is an action movie based on the well known Hmong folk tale pertaining to a love story between Lady Yua Pa and a young man named Jao Cua. This movie describes the Hmong cosmology as consisting of three worlds, which are the world of human beings, sky world or heaven, and underwater world. Lady Yua Pa's love is Jao Cua, a human orphan. There is a conflict with a son of god in the sky, and his soldiers. Nonetheless, the dragon who governs the underwater world saves them.

Among the Hmong in Paklang, these Hmong films are part of their daily lives, not limited to New Year celebrations. They are also viewed during funerals when neighbors get together during the evenings. Everyday discussions often turn to details of the Hmong videos they have watched. Hence, Hmong people of every age group and gender have the chance to watch the videos and VCDs. Certainly, while profitmaking is part of the purpose of these productions, the films' producers are also motivated by the idea of creating a common feeling and collective memory among transnational Hmong viewers (see also Schein 2002 and Lee 2004).

Common Hmong history, folk tales, legends, myths, and stories of suffering at the hands of others are common themes in other popular VCDs as well. Through the connection between kinship and commercial business, these videos and VCDs are widely disseminated in transnational Hmong communities, even in remote villages in China and Vietnam. In Wenshan

district of Yunnan province, for example, I went to a remote Hmong village along the border of China and Vietnam. Nom Pov Vaj, a Hmong ritual performer in a village of Malipu District proudly told me,

There is only one VCR and television set in our village. Since the owner bought those machines two years ago, we got a chance to view many movies that Hmong in the United States filmed in your country, Thailand, and distributed to our country. Our version of the legend of Nuj Nplhaib, a love story, is also similar to the story in your country. Without these kinds of modern technology and the efforts of Hmong abroad, we, the Hmong in China, would not get any chance to learn about our Hmong people residing in other countries.

On another occasion, I visited a Hmong market in a district of northern Vietnam. A female vendor played music cassettes to attract her customers. After listening for a while, both the traditional and modern songs were familiar to me. I asked her where she got these tapes from. Her response was that they were songs from Thailand and Laos. In fact, she obtained the music cassettes from some Hmong in Yunnan. In addition to audio music cassettes, I also learned from her that Hmong VCDs are popular. Nonetheless, in order not to get in trouble, she didn't display the audio music cassettes and VCDs but kept them in the back of her shop. According to her, there are different kinds of VCDs available in Vietnam. Elders favor the traditional Hmong songs and folk tales, while young people like modern songs and romantic movies. All are produced and disseminated by Hmong in United States, Thailand, and Laos, but they, Hmong vendors in Vietnam, get their products via Hmong in China. According to her, the Vietnamese who own a VCR do a good business showing Hmong audiences the movies. With increasing affluence, some Hmong households are able to buy VCRs and TVs themselves. At present, in that district, at least a few households in each village own VCRs and TVs. On cross-checking whether the contents of those VCDs of popular folk tales were the same as theirs, in both cases Hmong viewers in China and Vietnam said they have the same stories, such as Nu Plai and Ger and Lady Yua Pa. However, some parts of the story are different from the version produced by Hmong in the United States and Thailand.

In summary, Hmong identity is being reproduced over and over in the various forms of audiovisual media. Stories contained in these videos and VCDs are not just based on popular Hmong folk tales but also reflect recent events as well, collectively presenting a Hmong version of history. The widespread and rapid dissemination of these products, hence, could have

much more influence on the sentiments of Hmong viewers in different countries, compared to the traditional methods of storytelling in which the audience just imagined the details of the story while listening to it. In other words, what appears on the screen is easily perceived by viewers, especially young Hmong. In addition, the plot, language, and costumes used in these films also influences audiences. The White Hmong dialect used in these films is widely understood among different Hmong groups in Vietnam and China. Moreover, viewers have also become enthusiastic fans of the movie stars in the films. For example, we brought a group of Hmong from Thailand to attend an international conference in Vietnam. There were also many local Hmong who showed up because there was a rumor that Nu Plai and Ger, two popular Hmong movie stars from Thailand, would be on stage. There is even a Hmong-style pattern, worn by the actress Nu Plai, which has become popularly known as "Nu Plai fabric."

Hmong Story Cloths

Historians of the Hmong use conventional maps, accompanied by erudite texts, to describe their contemporary migrations. Hmong women, on the other hand, have in recent decades designed and retold their history of migration on embroidered story cloths (Cha 2002). I would argue that such cloths are part of the modern technologies used by the Hmong to reproduce their shared memory. The designs are not simply meant to attract customers but also intended to reproduce and retell Hmong history to younger generations and the non-Hmong.

Traditional Hmong textiles designs (in batik, cross-stitch, and applique) are based on stylized natural forms (Dewhurt and MacDowell 1983). Each pattern has its own meaning. The abstract designs are quite difficult for the non-initiated to interpret, although colourful and decorative. However, in their long journeys, Hmong textile designers began to draw and stitch very different kinds of cloths, depicting their daily activities and history of migration. According to Choo Yaaj, a female Hmong vendor in Chiang Mai's Night Bazaar, "these kinds of designs appeared around the early 1990s. It was an initiative of the Hmong refugees in refugee camps to tell their history to young Hmong people who resettled in Western countries and non-Hmong people." She added "As a Hmong scholar, you should buy one piece to teach students and other people about our Hmong history," while I looked through the many pieces she displayed at her booth. Such products and persuasive techniques were also encountered among Hmong vendors at conferences organized by Hmong National Development, Inc. in the United States and at an international conference on Hmong studies in 2006

in Minnesota. On visits to Hmong friends in America, I observed Hmong story cloths hanging on the walls of their homes and offices.

I also noticed that the most popular story cloths were those depicting Hmong migration from China to Laos and Thailand. Starting in China, it shows Hmong land being taken over and ancestors being killed, followed by the journey to Laos, through Vietnam. In Laos, they are again attacked, and some killed, by enemies but rescued by the CIA. Many escape by swimming or using bamboo rafts to cross the Mekong into Thailand where Thai and international officers welcome them and take them to refugee camps. Later, they are screened, pack their luggage, get on buses, and leave for the airport to fly to the third countries of United States, France, Canada, Australia, etc. Thus, the story cloths using some versions of the age-old technology of Hmong embroidery reveals more than a scholarly map. These are not only simple stories about migration but signify the painful history of suffering at the hands of others. The story cloths are often used to signify Hmong identity and as teaching aides for younger Hmong and to unite Hmong people on various occasions.

The Construction of Self-Esteem through Cyberspace

In the past, Hmong ethnic minority students in mainstream Thai society were ashamed of expressing their ethnic identity in public. They didn't even want to greet elder Hmong who came down from mountain villages to lowland cities, because they were afraid of being identified by lowlanders as Hmong. However, the recent establishment of Hmong student groups and the creation of Hmong websites is changing the self-perceptions of Hmong youth. By accessing the Internet, they obtain a variety of information from cyberspace, such as their ethnic history, population distribution, and the current situation of Hmong in different countries. Moreover, cyberspace provides them an important opportunity to take action on current problems faced by Hmong people and to have live communication with transnational Hmong.⁹

There are currently about 250 Hmong students in five universities and colleges in Chiang Mai. There are 1,340 Hmong people presently living in urban Chiang Mai. Being enrolled in the school system from primary through to college and university levels, Hmong students have gradually absorbed the nationalist agenda implemented in Thai schools. The school system is an example of the "disciplinary technology," which attempts to forge a "docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved," according to Foucault (1975, 198). One essential regulation of these schools is that the Hmong language is forbidden. The main reason

given by the authorities for this is that students should be able to speak Thai quickly and be able to compete with lowland students for entry into higher education. The underlying idea is to shape non-Thai speaking people throughout the country to become Thai. Moreover, the "proposed world," as coined by Keyes (1991a, 89), was set up to attempt to transform the Hmong students' shared memory through the school curriculum. The school curriculum is drawn from the national and external world of knowledge, especially national history and identity, rather than local or ethnic ones. The nation-state (Thailand), religion (Buddhism), and king (monarchy) are the three common elements everyone, regardless of ethnic background, is exposed to.

Hmong students tended to lose self-confidence, not daring to express their identity in Thai society. Lowland Thai have also created negative images of the Hmong. Throughout the historical encounter with officials and lowlanders, the Hmong have been variously labeled opium growers, forest destroyers, Red Miao (Hmong communists), pesticide users, and amphetamine traders. In addition, the holding of non-Thai names and surnames in official documents also causes trouble in accessing some quality schools and official jobs. Hmong children are ridiculed by lowland schoolmates, as well.

The Internet has become an important source of alternative media presenting Hmong identity and as a means of connecting Hmong to one another. Cyberspace, therefore, can play a significant role in enhancing their self-confidence and expressing their identity to outsiders. The setting up of Hmong student organizations began in the early 1990s. It was also in this period that a virtual community of Hmong in cyberspace began to take shape with their own websites and discussion groups.

There are three examples of how the Hmong utilize the Internet to disseminate messages and take action when there are problems affecting the livelihoods of any one Hmong group. The first was the cutting down of Hmong lychee orchards in Paklang by lowlanders and officials in 2002. The history of the conflict, pictures and farmers' voices were posted on a website and as well as sent to interested individuals and organizations in different countries. Following the messages, funds were raised electronically to support the affected farmers to bring about a lawsuit. The second example occurred shortly after the first. A local newspaper in Chiang Rai province ran a front-page headline declaring "Hmong Dream of having Their Own Country in Next 30 Years, Targeting Northern Thailand." In addition to utilizing radio and telephones, Hmong students in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai also used the Internet to call for a demonstration in front of Chiang

Rai City Hall in October 2001. The publisher eventually apologized for the story. The last two examples both concern the issue of Hmong refugees in Thailand. In 2003, the Thai government tried to solve the problem of the remaining Lao Hmong refugees residing at Thamkrabok monastery in Saraburi province in Central Thailand by relocating them to Tak and Nakhornratchasima provinces, but local lowlanders resisted the plans. In late 2003, the US government, pushed by the Hmong community there, agreed to accept them as migrants. In the meantime, there was an influx of Hmong into Thailand from Laos who were "Chaofa" or opponents of the Lao government. They claimed that they were being repressed and their people killed by the Lao government. Pictures and stories about ill treatment of the Lao Hmong refugees were widely circulated through Hmong websites with a view to pressuring governments to take action. As a result of this, the Thai government started to take better care of the Hmong refugees.

Thus, the use of the Internet has instilled a sense of pride, dignity, and confidence among Hmong students. Social movements, both through cyberspace and physical gatherings, have been launched. Importantly, these are spaces for discussions about their identity and activism. Recently, the Union of Hmong Students in Thailand was set up. Cyberspace has become a major means for them to communicate because they are studying in different institutes throughout the country. In addition to Hmong students in Thailand, they are also connected to Hmong student unions in other countries as well.

It should be noted that in addition to English and national scripts, the RPA has become the *de facto* script used among the transnational Hmong. Just a few months ago, one of my cousins who works in a factory in Bangkok chatted with me on the Internet. He asked me about my experiences with the Hmong in Vietnam, in order to interpret what a Hmong family was telling him while they were chatting live on the Internet. He then told me how he had been chatting with one of the daughters of this Hmong family in Ho Chi Min City. According to my cousin, he and the young lady could not understand each other well in Hmong, and used mostly English. Later, she asked her mother to join in. While talking with her mother, the young lady also typed difficult terms on the screen for him to understand. She used both English and the RPA to clarify some terms.

Another example of live communication through cyberspace surprised me on a visit to a Hmong family in Wenshan in early 2004. The head of the family proudly showed me how he communicates with transnational Hmong. On his desk, he had a computer, headphone, and microphone. After connecting to the Web, he discussed issues affecting the Hmong with

two Hmong men in the United States who were online. At that time, it was afternoon in China, but after midnight in the United States. The Hmong men, one in the United States and the other in China, greeted each other in Hmong.

Hello, my Hmong friend from China. Welcome to this live discussion group. (Hmong man in America)

Hello, how are you doing? Today I would like to introduce my new Hmong friend who is a visitor from Thailand to join our discussion as well. (Hmong man in China)

We welcome both of you in joining us. (Hmong man in America)

My Hmong friend in China typed in RPA. After a few minutes of conversation between the Chinese and American Hmong, a message appeared from the man in America,

What time is it over there? It is already after midnight here. You have to excuse me for going to bed first, otherwise I will be late tomorrow for my school classes and work. I'm so jealous of you guys in China and Thailand since you haven't been pushed to study and work very hard like us in the US. As I learned from my parents and listening to you, I guess Hmong life over there has freedom. I will have to work hard, save more money and take a vacation to travel there in order to meet you and relax.

He then disconnected from the group. My host then proudly said to me,

You see, now we can easily connect and discuss. Even if we live in different parts of the world, we share the same feelings and can disseminate messages very fast via modern technologies of communication. We, the Hmong people, do not need to struggle to have our own country.

To reiterate, the Hmong, especially urban youth, are not just surrendering to the forces of nationalism and globalization but have struggled to maintain and construct their ethnic identity. The use of RPA and Internet technology has become a major platform for young Hmong to study their own history, circulate their ideas and current situations, and even campaign to take action on some situations faced by the Hmong.

CONCLUSION

Discussing myth, history and political identity, Jonathan Friedman argued that "History is very much a mythical construction, in the sense that it is a representation of the past linked to the establishment of an identity in the present" (1992, 195). He further states "It is not my intention to pass judgement on the truth of such histories but, rather, to understand the interplay of factors involved in their production" (*ibid.*, 192). I have argued that Hmong ethnic identity has always been constructed and reproduced through various means. For the Hmong, one essence of their ethnic identity is a shared memory of their history as represented and retold in myths, legends, hymns and songs, regardless of whether they are real or constructed. Traditionally, Hmong ethnic identity has been strategically reproduced over and over again in everyday forms of practice such as storytelling, rituals, and celebration over generations.

In the context of nationalism and globalization, the Hmong, an ethnic group scattered throughout different countries, have had their ethnic identity dramatically eroded and influenced by states bent on assimilating them. Instead of being entirely swept away by these forces, the Hmong, especially those who have had to resettle in Western countries since the end of the Vietnam War, have utilized media technologies to conserve, reproduce and reconstruct their ethnic identity. This chapter has shown how the most important mechanisms being used in the reconstruction and reproduction of this ethnic identity among the Hmong in Pakleng and urban Chiang Mai include audiovisual media, publications, story cloths, and the Internet. These technologies are also used by the Hmong in Yunnan and in Lao Cai province in China and Vietnam respectively. In addition, other aspects of Hmong culture such as traditional kinship networks, products and information pertaining to their shared history are also being widely disseminated through new trade, church, and cyberspace networks.

As a transnational ethnic group affected by globalization, the Hmong are using appropriate media technologies to unite, reproduce social memory, and recreate their identity. Their "community of memory," to borrow Keyes's term (2002, 21), has been emphasized over and over again by "reference to the past through remembering" (*ibid.*). Significantly, reflecting their recent migration, these new vehicles of social memory and identity (journals, story cloths, videos, websites, etc.) have been constituted and circulated worldwide. Moreover, the contested past and identity of the Hmong are being actively discussed by young people in cyberspace. Surely, a new ethnic identity will be created and shared, even if these discussions

are out of the reach of those Hmong who have less access to modern media and technology. Hence, although the transnational Hmong have no place or nation-state of their own, they have an imagined community for themselves in a globalized world.

NOTES

- 1 As used by Cohn and Dirks (1988), and Foucault (Rabinow 1984), technologies of power are those means that the state imposes upon different ethnic groups who live within the boundaries of the state, in order to be in line with those of the nation-state.
- 2 I was assisted with parts of the ethnographic fieldwork in Thailand by Apai Wanitpradit.
- 3 It is not at all clear that the San Miao of classical sources were actually the ancestors of today's Miao, including Hmong. According to Schein (2001, 39), although the official *Brief History of the Miao* asserts that "the Miao lineage can be traced to the 'San Miao,' . . . More recent publications on Miao history have continued to debate the meaning of the 'San Miao' phrase itself as well as its relation to present-day Miao."
- 4 Due to the complexity of identifying the "southern barbarian native groups," during the Qing periods the famous "Miao albums" "were initially designed to educate officialdom about the habits and customs of various non-Han ethnic groups in order to be able to govern them more effectively" (Hostetler 1995, 5). According to Diamond (1995, 102), these "albums usually include some eighty-two different groups, but some cover half that number or less." Hostetler (2001, 159), meanwhile, points out that the obscurity of the Miao Album is that it illustrates "non-Han groups in various parts of south China, including Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangdong, Hunan, and Taiwan."
- 5 Interview with *Tooj Tsaab Haam*, Wenshan, Kunming, November 11, 2002.
- 6 In addition to the *Hmong Learning Manual*, other dictionaries have been published and widely distributed, such as *White Hmong-French Dictionary* (Bertrais 1964), *White Hmong-English Dictionary* (Heimbach 1968), *White Hmong-French Dictionary*, by Yang Dao, and *English-Mong-English Dictionary* by Xiong (1983).
- 7 Most of the original videos produced from the US have been converted to VCD, since VCDs are cheaper and the Hmong in Thailand own more VCD players than video players.
- 8 Recently, a second volume was released under the title *Taug Txoj Lw Ntsav: Txoj Kev Mus Cuag Huab Tais Hmoob*. It is about the rebellion led by Hmong King Wu Bayue against Chinese oppression from 1795 to 1806 in Hunan and Guizhou provinces.

- 9 In my view, the use of the Internet by young Hmong in Thailand and Western countries is normal. However, I was surprised on witnessing young female Hmong guides, dressed in beautiful traditional costume, sitting in front of computers in a remote tourist district of Vietnam.