

CHAPTER 6

Divorced Hmong Women in Thailand

Negotiating Cultural Space

Prasit Leepreecha

THIS CHAPTER CONTRIBUTES a new approach to gender studies and power relations in Hmong society by examining divorced women's active negotiation for spiritual belonging. For over a decade, the activist Network of Hmong Women in Thailand has pressed Hmong society to address divorced women's issues, specifically their postdivorce spiritual status.¹ I investigate the gender ideologies that structure Hmong marriage and divorce practices within the Thai space to illustrate the network's efforts to facilitate cultural belonging for divorced women within existing Hmong patrilineal practices. The network's accomplishments, I contend, were intimately tied to the solidarity among the young Hmong women involved and to their strategic alliances with key Hmong lineage leaders and outside scholars, who helped them raise awareness and garner support beyond their ethnic group.

Divorced Hmong Thai women's experiences of alienation and spiritual exclusion must be situated within an understanding of power. While structural-functional anthropologists such as Emile Durkheim (1995) have identified the many constraints that dominant structures place on people's lives, others such as James C. Scott take a political and anthropological approach to studying how the subalterns challenge such structures. Under the context of domination by rich farmers in a Malaysian village, the poor farmers exercised their own strategies of everyday resistance against the oppressing class structure. At the village level, Scott (1985) found that poor farmers used negotiation, gossip, petty theft, and reduced effort as forms of resistance. He also uncovered similar strategies taking place on a larger scale, such as poor farmers' resistance against the national government's policies that did not benefit them (1990, 2010). French cultural

anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) used the concept of contested "social fields" to explain the ways that marginalized groups competed for power or resources within a prescribed "field," or arena, of social activity. Here, political and cultural relationships maintained by the actions of agents within the field compete for resources or powers that are characteristic to that particular field. I employ Scott's and Bourdieu's approaches to analyze the processes, meanings, and consequences of Hmong power relations.

I also consider the network's activism within larger social conditions in the Southeast Asia region generally and Thailand specifically. Hayami et al. (2012) found that the region has undergone social and economic changes that resemble the family in crisis in the rest of the industrialized world. In Thailand, gender inequality and prevailing attitudes that negatively affect Thai women's well-being remain. Despite the inclusion of gender equality in its 1974 constitution, Thai family law continues to make it easier for husbands to use adultery as grounds for divorce than it is for wives (Songsamphan 2012, 101). Divorce in Thailand had increased from 19.4 percent in 1990 to 26.3 percent in 2000. Although statistical data are not available for smaller ethnic groups like the Hmong, community observations show that divorce among young couples in contemporary Hmong society in Thailand has become more prevalent, generating growing concern among ethnic community leaders. Community leaders tend to view the issue as a consequence of increased participation in globalization processes and the weakening of Hmong social structure. This chapter considers the latter concern about Hmong social structure by examining Hmong women's efforts to change cultural practices around wedding and divorce ceremonies.

Becoming a Hmong Bride

To understand the social pressures placed on divorced Hmong women requires an intimate exploration of wedding ceremonies.² As in other societies, the Hmong wedding ceremony serves as a transition of the bride and groom from single to married status. The various steps in the wedding process signify termination of the bride's membership in her natal clan and separation from its household spirits and the beginning of her inclusion in the groom's clan. Separation of ties at the conclusion of the wedding ceremony can be an agonizing moment for Hmong women because the

transition between her parents' household spirits and the household spirits of her husband's parents has been structured as a complete break.

Unlike some Western wedding practices, in which the bride and groom express their commitment to each other with the symbol of rings in front of a religious leader, the Hmong wedding does not explicitly involve the bride and groom. Instead, a formal, multistep process for the bride to transition from her parents' household to the groom's family has been established and followed for generations. According to Vam Thai Txooj Txhim Yaj (1980), the complete Hmong wedding process contains four components that disconnect the bride from her natal lineage and link her formally to the groom's lineage.³

Lwm qaib (blessing ritual) is the first part, which takes place when the bride arrives at the groom's house. It symbolizes the bride's incorporation as a new spiritual member of the groom's family. Before the bride can enter, a rooster is turned around over the heads of the pair outside the door of the groom's parents' house. As Yaj (1980) explains, the *lwm qaib* is performed by an elder to drive away sickness, death, sadness, crime, burdens, and difficulties, all of which should be blown away by the wind. The ritual also functions as a time to bless the new daughter-in-law, so she may live a healthy and productive life (449).⁴ In Thailand, a *lwm qaib* ritual performer from the groom's family closes this ritual by stating, "From now on she is our lineage member, she is alive as our people, if she dies she belongs to our spirit."⁵ The groom and new daughter-in-law then enter the house through the front door (*qhovrooj tag*). Following this initial ritual, the woman no longer belongs to her natal household and clan spirits, and is under the protection of her husband's household spirits.

The second part is the performance of *pe* (bowing) to show gratitude and to inform the groom's ancestors and elders that there is a new household member. Carried out soon after the *lwm qaib* ritual, an elder guides the groom and his *phijlaj* (best man) to bow facing the house's *hauvplag* (central pole) and *xwmkab* (spirit alter). The elder refers to ancestors, parents, uncles and aunts, and brothers and sisters, and the men bow to them in a show of gratitude and deference. Then the elder guide has them bow to the groom's *pom dab pom qhua* (household spirits) to make them aware of the arrival of a new member.⁶

The third component is *laig dab* (offering whisky and cooked food to acknowledge ancestors and household spirits). It is performed twice during the wedding ceremony to acknowledge the household spirits of both

sides. The first is carried out at the bride's parents' house. The groom's family brings cooked rice and boiled chicken, whisky, and a small glass for the bride's father to offer to ancestors and household spirits announcing the departure of a daughter. The second *laig dab* takes place back at the groom's parents' house to conclude the wedding festivities. Its purpose is to thank the wedding party members and to report the outcome of the wedding ceremony to the groom's parents and elders. Here, it is the groom's father who offers whisky and small portions of cooked food to ancestors and household spirits. He informs them about the official acceptance of the daughter-in-law and asks them to protect her.

The final part of a Hmong wedding is *qaib faib sia* (chicken for dividing life). Performed at the house of the bride's parents while the wedding party leaves, *qaib faib sia* occurs at the moment when the bride crosses over the entrance of her parents' house. As she straddles the threshold of the house, the ritual performer divides a cooked chicken into two parts. He then explains, "Divide mother's life to mother, divide daughter's life to daughter." Hmong ritual performers explain that this is to separate the daughter from her mother as she begins her new life, another act to spiritually disconnect a woman from her parents' household spirits.

Within these four main components of a Hmong wedding, there is tremendous sadness for the bride. Instead of being joyful, the last day of a Hmong wedding ceremony at the bride's parents' home is often a day of grief, particularly for the bride and her mother. While ritual performers and guests are busy celebrating at the main table full of food and whisky, the bride's mother chooses and packs the traditional Hmong clothes and other valuable belongings that she will give her daughter to signify their formal separation. The mother's face is filled with sorrow, and she often cries while talking with her daughter. Toward the end of the formal marriage ritual, the bride is invited to sit next to the groom and important guests at the special table set aside for them. Elder representatives of the groom insist that she and her elder guests eat and drink this last and most important meal of the wedding ceremony in front of the groom's side.

The *mejkoob* (go-betweens) from both sides sing a few wedding songs, and older brothers of the bride express their feelings and give the bride advice on how to be a good housewife for her husband and a polite daughter-in-law for other members of her husband's household and lineage. Her family also emphasizes the salient role of the bride and the groom in bridging lineage members on both sides. Most importantly, they tell the groom

and his two *mejkoob*, "We give you the top of the rope [the bride], but we hold on to the bottom" (*Hauv hlua peb muab rau nej, qab hlua peb tseem tuav rawv*) (Symonds 2005, 68). This is the only formal occasion in which leaders of the bride's lineage not only coach her but also stress to the groom the important interclan ties that result from the union.

Subsequently, the groom and his *phijlaj* are told by his *mejkoob* to bow to show respect and honor the bride's parents and relatives. The bride's mother and other women from her clan comfort the bride. They express grief and concern, and also share their wisdom on how to be a good housewife and daughter-in-law. Then a ritual umbrella symbolizing the new ties between the two clans is handed over to the groom's two *mejkoob*. The bride's belongings are carried out of the house. A *mejkoob* tells the groom to grab his wife's hands before leaving. The bride does not look back, as it is believed to cause bad luck. As they depart, the bride's parents have conflicted emotions. On the one hand, it is a heartbreaking moment because they have lost their daughter, who will now be a member of the groom's family and clan for the rest of her life. On the other hand, it is a moment of deep pride that their daughter is starting a new life. It reflects their success as parents.

During interviews, Hmong lineage leaders were reluctant to clarify the details of the ritual processes performed during the wedding ceremony, stating simply that it is quite complicated to explain. Observations of many wedding ceremonies reveal that all of the steps signify the removal of a woman from her natal lineage. According to Hmong lineage leaders, ritual is a cultural inheritance created by Hmong ancestors and passed on from generation to generation (*poj ua cia yawm ua tseg*). They believe that the wedding ceremony rituals must not be changed, and need to be performed strictly in the same manner as stated by the ancestors. Performers should not omit or add any part to the rituals. Humans and spirits may impose fines if processes are altered.⁷

The processes were set up by Hmong ritual performers and leaders centuries ago, when Thai Hmong ancestors lived in southwestern China. The aim was to protect families from marital and social problems and ultimately to prevent divorce. Such practices are predominantly controlled by men, especially ritual performers, and they signify a gender imbalance in Hmong society, since men's lives remain intact regardless of their actions, whereas women enter a liminal state of being if marriages end in divorce. How are these processes relevant in contemporary Hmong life in Thailand?

In addition to social and cultural pressures, divorced Hmong women in Thailand continue to face spiritual exclusion, resulting in the need for collective action to challenge these centuries-old traditions.

Pressures on Divorced Women

As a rite of passage, the wedding ceremony lays out the terms and conditions for married status that the network seeks to address (Van Gennep 2004). Scholars who have conducted research among the Hmong in northern Thailand point out that Hmong society is patrilineal; thus, spirit and inheritance are received through the male lineage (Binney 1968; Geddes 1976; Cooper 1978, 1984; Lee 1988). Consequently, the Hmong practice patrilocality after marriage. In cases of marital disputes, lineage leaders of both sides play important roles in resolving issues. Divorce rarely existed in the subsistence economy context in highland villages due to a strong kinship network and the tolerance of polygynous relations. Women's marginal position likely prevented them from questioning such traditions.

Unlike Hmong from Laos living in the United States, whose lives were turned upside down during the Cold War in Southeast Asia, the majority of the Hmong population in Thailand were not involved in the same way. They have not been displaced and resettled in an entirely new and Western society like the Hmong from Laos; thus, the factors influencing family relations differ significantly. However, development programs brought by both Thai and international development agencies into remote Hmong communities since the early 1960s have subsequently influenced Hmong women's understanding of gender inequality in Hmong society (Lee-preecha 2001; Manndorff 1967; Wanat 1989).⁸ This is especially common among young Hmong, who leave the villages to attend school or work in cities. Elders from both sides have less influence on their children's marriage decisions than they had before.

Village leaders report that the divorce rate among Hmong couples in contemporary Thailand is increasing at a higher rate than in the past few decades,⁹ and they often identify more relaxed gender relations and decreased kinship influence on social structure as contributing factors. Observations reveal that in addition to being excluded from participating in rituals at their parents' household, divorced Hmong women who return to live near their parents are often treated with disdain by some men outside of their natal clan because they are seen as sexually "loose."¹⁰

As mentioned earlier, a woman is cut off from her natal lineage by the rituals outlined in the wedding ceremony. The practices of marriage and divorce privilege the natal lineage. Therefore, a woman primarily returns to her parents' home following a divorce to seek temporary refuge while she waits to remarry. While a divorced Hmong woman can walk in and out of the house and eat meals with members of her natal lineage, she may not attend any rituals performed for members of her parents' household. She is banned from the following religious rituals: *ua neeb koos plig* (performing the shaman ritual to protect souls of family members), *hu plig* (soul calling in various occasions throughout the year), and *lwm tsiab* or *lwm sub* (ceremonies to drive out evil spirits during New Year events). If she becomes pregnant, a temporary shelter would be built where she would deliver the baby and be required to remain for a month after giving birth (*nyob nruab hlis*). In addition to the spiritual conflicts, daily tensions often occur between her and her sisters-in-law, especially if she has brought her own children into the household. Negative views of the divorced woman are subsequently transferred to her children. Consequently, her parents and brothers often build a small shelter near the main house for her and her children in order to avoid daily and spiritual conflicts. Such traditions and practices in Hmong society create a feeling of disappointment (*tu siab*) for divorced women. A divorced woman experiences alienation and exclusion from normative social practices in both life and death, and the spiritual alienation is complete when she dies. When a Hmong person dies, the body is usually kept in the home where the funeral rituals can take place. However, a divorced Hmong woman's body cannot be kept in her parents' house; instead, it is placed in a temporary tent outside.

Divorced Hmong women in Thailand today express much disappointment about these situations. Shoua Moua¹¹ shares how her experience has impacted her emotionally and socially. Shoua and Kong Thao were both from a mountain village in Chiang Mai province. Kong was studying at a university in Bangkok. When he returned to the village, he met Shoua. They had to marry in 2005 because Shoua became pregnant. The wedding ceremony was held according to traditional Hmong practices. Shoua stayed in the village with Kong's parents and siblings after the wedding while Kong returned to the city to pursue his degree. Shoua did not get along with Kong's mother. The mother-in-law accused Shoua of being lazy for not taking care of the house and not working with her in-laws in the fields. Shoua said that her mother-in-law often gossiped about her to

neighbors. Kong received information from both sides but could not bring about peace between the women.

The conflict reached a critical point in 2009, and based on his parents' suggestion, Kong decided to divorce Shoua. A rumor also circulated that he had a new girlfriend in Bangkok. Kong and his parents finally brought Shoua back to her parents without asking for a return of any of the silver bars used to pay the bride price. Shoua and her daughter lived in her parents' house. According to Shoua:

My daughter and I have lived with my parents and other younger brothers and sisters for two years. I was very disappointed about the way they treated us as though I was not a daughter or their sibling. They didn't allow us to attend any family rituals. Furthermore, my father had refused my request to give me a small plot of land to build a separate house for the two of us. Finally, I decided to leave the village and moved to town since I was not recognized to be a member of my parents' household. I saw no future for me living in the mountain village.

Shoua left her daughter with her mother because her daughter was only two. It would have been difficult for Shoua to take care of her while selling flowers in a lowland market. Despite the tensions in her parents' household, her mother was the only person she could rely on. Shoua's higher income benefited her and her daughter, and since her parents' income from farming was minimal, she was able to support them. Economically, it was a better option for her to work in town rather than live in the village and be dependent on her family. Interestingly, however, moving away allowed Shoua to escape some of the social and cultural oppression from members of her family and the villagers in general.

Migration to larger towns and cities is an important strategy for divorced women to avoid the discrimination in the villages. Being a *poj nrau*j (divorced woman) in Hmong society comes with low social status. The woman is usually the one who bears the blame for the failed marriage, regardless of the reasons, and she often faces contempt from others with whom she comes into contact. Moving from villages to cities not only removes the social pressures of the Hmong community but also is an opportunity for women to look for nonagricultural jobs, even if that work does not always result in higher social status or earnings. City life also provides

anonymity due to the larger populations. These women are also more at ease with their social status living in Thai cities because Thai views on divorce are more tolerant. As Bussarawan Teerawithichainan (2004) explains, "The relative ease of divorce in Thai society is partly owing to its religious tradition. *Theravada* Buddhism does not stigmatize divorce, even though social pressures might be there to maintain a marriage since family has an important economic function."

What impact does migration to cities and towns have on divorced Hmong women? Many have left the villages to live and work in cities or towns, while others travel back and forth. Some are able to maintain close connections with Hmong people due to the availability of modern technology, such as cell phones. Divorced women living outside of Hmong villages have more opportunities to choose new partners, and some couples live together without getting married, while others marry non-Hmong men. For women who are illiterate or unable to speak Thai, however, it is difficult to survive outside of the villages, because interacting with non-Hmong people and obtaining employment require at least some basic understanding of the Thai language.

What do the lived experiences of Hmong divorcees reveal about social practices, and how do they challenge the rigidity of Hmong cultural practices? Despite the complex relationships that divorced Hmong women have with respect to their natal lineage, it is their family that women rely on for survival, especially if they choose not to remarry. To Thai Hmong women, divorced status is a crucial period of time in their lives, since they enter into the "field" of power struggle (Bourdieu 1990). In Shoua's case, leaving her daughter in the care of her mother enabled her to work without having to find child care in the city. Children of divorced women are expected to help their mothers in the future. Even in instances in which sons remain with the woman's ex-husband, they would continue to help their mothers in daily life despite the fact that these women no longer belong to their ex-husband's lineage spirits. If a divorcee has only daughters, she would eventually depend on her daughters and their husbands for support, even though she is not allowed to be a member of her sons-in-law's lineages. A divorced Hmong woman without children whose parents have passed away could still count on her brothers and their children to care for her in her old age. They would provide food and shelter as well as help to oversee her funeral arrangements. Hmong cultural practices do ensure this minimum social security for divorced Hmong women.¹²

Although Hlee Kong was born and raised as a Christian and does not follow animist traditions, it is interesting that her life story differs little from Shoua's and that she encountered similar pressures. Hlee married Nong Khang, a non-Christian Hmong man, in 2003. As is customary in recent Hmong marriage practices, their wedding ceremony was held in a local church, and the ceremony followed Western traditions. They lived with Nong's parents after the wedding. Contrary to the expectation that she would follow her husband's ways, Hlee refused to embrace his animist religion, which led to tensions between them. The situation was exacerbated when it affected other members of the household. In 2007, Nong went to work in Taiwan and left Hlee and their two children with his parents and siblings. Alone and isolated, Hlee reconnected with her ex-boyfriend in the village. When this relationship was discovered, leaders from both sides met and discussed the situation. The marriage could not be saved, and Hlee and Kong divorced in 2010. Since both of her parents had passed away and her older brothers had their own families, Hlee did not move in with any of them. Instead, she rented a small room from a Hmong family and lived there with her two children. Hlee is not accepted as a member of any of her siblings' households.

Without child care, Hlee sent her children to a boarding school in another province. Not long thereafter, she became involved with a married Hmong man with whom she started a small business in Bangkok. After a few months, she returned to her rental apartment in the village. The man now lives with both Hlee and his family, but he does not plan to marry her as a second wife. She explains:

As I'm a Christian, I don't want to be his second wife. Since we love each other and both of us are a new generation of Hmong, there is no need for us to marry according to Hmong tradition. Yet, if he divorces his wife and he becomes a Christian, I may agree to traditionally marry him.

Hlee's situation is not without problems. She is looked down upon by men outside the Kong clan—as well as by her own boyfriend—because she is considered a "public person." With the exception of men from her natal clan, a divorced woman is considered available and is expected to have sexual relations with any man who shows interest. Hence, she is vulnerable to the sexual advances of flirtatious men, even if they are married.

Although a divorced woman may reside with her parents and brothers, they are not able to protect her. Some men want her as a minor wife, while others are merely interested in playing around with her. Her position subjects her to their sexual advances, gossip, and condescending remarks. This precarious situation often leads many Hmong divorcées to accept propositions to become a minor wife, which enables them to escape such abusive treatment. More importantly, even as minor wives they become official members of their new husband's lineage.

Pang Yang, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of four, shared her heart-rending marital strife. Prior to the divorce, she and her husband sold souvenirs to tourists in Phuket in southern Thailand. They left their children in the care of his parents in a mountain village in Chiang Mai Province. Over the course of five years, her husband traveled back and forth to visit the children and his parents, and he brought products from Chiang Mai to sell in Phuket. He secretly had a girlfriend who worked in a restaurant in Chiang Mai city, and in 2009, he decided to marry the single woman as a second wife. Pang did not agree to this arrangement and decided to divorce him. During the clan elders' negotiation, the bride price was not returned to her husband, since his infidelity instigated the divorce. Their assets were divided equally. The two boys stayed with their father, while the two girls lived with Pang.¹³

Because of tensions between Pang and her sisters-in-law, she did not move in with any of them. A small house nearby was built for her and her daughters. Her young age and trading experience made her desirable to men outside her natal clan. A few men became her lovers, while others gossiped about fooling around with her occasionally. Most showed disdain toward her (*sai tsis taus*). Pang's "bad" reputation negatively impacted her natal lineage members. As Pang described:

I had pressures from not just men of other clans who became involved in my life but also men of my lineage. Some of my elder brothers told me, via their wives, not to play around with many men unless there was the possibility of marriage. They said that doing so would make them lose face (*poob ntsejmuag*). (2012)

Among those who visited her, Meng Xiong, a forty-two-year-old man with a wife and three children, seemed the most sincere. To avoid the daily criticisms, Pang agreed to become Meng's second wife in early 2011. This

second marriage failed by the end of the year due to conflicts within Meng's family. Following the second divorce, she placed her daughters in an urban Christian hostel where they are enrolled in school, while she temporarily resides with the family of her younger sister in the same town.

Becoming a second or third wife following a divorce is a path women use to overcome the social constraints of divorced status and gain male protection (*tobhau txivneej*), yet this form of "protection" is often a tenuous one. As illustrated in the preceding cases, divorced women are subjected to forms of male control embedded in Hmong social structure. As public women, they also become threats to married women, and they exist on the margins of their natal lineage.¹⁴ This vicious cycle within the Hmong cultural landscape spurred Pang to join the Network of Hmong Women in Chiang Mai city, so that she could play an active role in fighting against the structural sociocultural oppression of divorced Hmong women in Thailand.

Agents of Change

From within the powerlessness that divorced women have experienced, a newfound sense of urgency to change their patriarchal culture has emerged. While suicide attempts are frequent among Hmong women in cases of forced marriage and when their husbands marry a second wife, few divorced Hmong women respond to this critical time in their life in the same drastic manner. In general, they are able to cope with their divorced status. As Pang exclaimed, "It's better to leave the smoking house, so I can freely breathe!" As they leave an unpleasant situation, some women have hopes of finding a more suitable husband than the one they divorced. Tainted by their divorced status, most do not find a better situation. Even more troubling is that if they do not remarry, their marginal position is transmitted to their children, who are also not permitted to their parents' household spirits. Given these multiple marginalities, individuals have responded in various ways to the lack of a cultural space in contemporary Hmong society available to them.

In the last decade, the Network of Hmong Women has allowed women to collectively address Hmong gender inequality in Thailand. Formed by young married and divorced Hmong women living in urban Chiang Mai in 2004, the network is an initiative of the Hmong Association of Thailand. Its primary goal is to engage with lineage leaders on women's rights

issues and gender inequality that permeate Hmong social practices. Network participants were interested in developing strategies to negotiate with Hmong lineage leaders to change ritual practices in order to empower Hmong women. According to Mee Thao (2011), a key network leader, "Hmong women have a very low social status in comparison to men in our society. It is not just the ideology of inheritance, which predominantly favors men, but also gender inequality in daily practices. Those are the essential reasons behind the establishment of the Network of Hmong Women." She also pointed out that among the one thousand Hmong residing in urban Chiang Mai, the ten divorced women she knows live contentious lives.

They formed a network because as "social capital," the network is a form of power (Bourdieu 1990). It links individuals from a social group together either spontaneously or intentionally. Moreover, a network is constructed for a specific purpose to ignite a social movement (della Porta and Diani 1999; Diani 1992). Social movements arising from women's networks to empower themselves to negotiate with men are certainly common phenomena across the contemporary world (Mountjoy 2008; Scharff 2003). The Hmong network leaders actively organize around the idea of bringing women together. To make it feasible, they planned to organize a national seminar every two years. The first two gatherings took place in Chiang Mai (2004 and 2006), and subsequent seminars occurred in Phetchabun (2008) and Tak (2010). The number of participants increased from 50 in 2004 to 850 in 2010.

According to one female leader, the main reason for the significant increase in attendance is that Hmong women see such events as a brief escape from family and societal pressures. The three days allow them to be away from daily life activities, meet women from various villages, learn about other women's experiences, share their own views, and have fun together. At the end of each event, the safe space makes it comfortable for some women to cry not only with sadness because they are returning to their daily lives but also from the joy of having been empowered to take action that may bring about social change. While the socializing aspects of the meetings are important, participants cite the brainstorming sessions on strategies for negotiating with male leaders to be the most useful. Participants also leave with many new ideas and stories to share with their friends in their villages. Khou Chang, a housewife from Tak province, articulated at the end of the 2010 meeting:

This is my first time to get a chance to attend and meet many Hmong women who face similar problems in our lives. The three days we have been together here are both fruitful and they give me a sense of relief and time away from family and community responsibilities. I will certainly share my great experience here with other friends who didn't get the opportunity to be here. If it is possible, I would like our key leaders to organize the meeting annually and rotate to different provinces so local Hmong women can attend.

When asked if she felt confident using the new ideas she learned from the meeting at home and in her village, she replied that what she learned would be helpful in her interactions with others in the village. She further explained, "In terms of negotiating power with my husband and other Hmong men in the larger village, it is still a long way to go. We need to educate our people more, both men and women, to promote gender equality."

To Hmong women leaders, gender equality entails equal treatment and respect in their families with regard to daily activities, support from parents for education, protection in ritual performance and traditions, and equal access to inheritance of parents' assets (Mee 2011). Hmong women who participate in the seminars realize that achieving gender equality in Hmong society is a long-term process, and they understand that cultural change does not happen overnight.

A fundamental part of the network's strategies is to educate Hmong women about their basic rights. Committee members have organized small workshops in different locations to provide information about the international declaration on basic human rights for women and children. The workshops also include an analysis of cultural and gender power in Hmong society, and address dynamics at the local village level. Some of these workshops are used to prepare local women to attend the national conference. As Mee Thao explained,

Although it is impossible to reach all villages and Hmong women, it is better than doing nothing. We have to nurture and empower them for understanding their basic rights, so they would be stronger in the future. They need to be empowered and well-prepared before taking their individual and local issues to be shared with women from other villages.

One sample workshop was held in urban Chiang Mai for twenty-three participants in 2011. Attendees included single and divorced women. Trainers consisted of both Hmong and non-Hmong experts on human rights. Contents included concepts and practices of human and women's rights at the international, national, and Hmong ethnic group levels. In small groups, participants discussed problems they faced and identified possible solutions. Action steps were developed by the end of the workshop to guide participants.

Collectively, leaders of the network created a list of demands and developed a petition to present to Hmong lineage leaders, which they distributed during a 2005 Hmong leaders meeting in Chiang Rai province (Network of Hmong Women 2005). The petition outlined the following seven points:¹⁵

1. The *lwm qaib* ritual's purpose is to welcome a woman as a new member of her husband's lineage at the door of his parents' house. In cases where she has to return to her parents due to divorce or the death of her husband, we ask for parents to perform the *lwm qaib* ritual to welcome her back to her natal lineage.
2. If a woman becomes pregnant out of wedlock, she must have the right to give birth inside her parents' house. The child's father must pay child support until the child reaches age 20, according to Thai law.
3. A divorced woman or widow who does not want to remarry or return to her natal lineage must be protected by members of her husband's lineage.
4. Parents should support daughters to pursue education at the same level as sons or further because a daughter leaves her parents to get married. Her future is at risk, so education ensures that she can survive when facing problems.
5. The bride price should be changed to "marriage money" for the new couple to start their life together. If it is defined as a bride price, it treats women as objects to be purchased. This sends her husband and his family the message that since they paid for her they are authorized to control instead of honor her. She should not be treated as "a wife under his feet."

6. Child rearing should not give priority to boys over girls. Both boys and girls should be raised as equal human beings.
7. Opportunity should be given for women to go out and learn from outsiders so they can come back with knowledge and experience to support a family.

In addition to these primary demands, the petition provides detailed explanations to support each point. They articulate Hmong cultural practices, such as guidelines for house structure and materials, the design and color of Hmong dress, language in daily life, placenta disposal, and daughters who are better caregivers of aging parents than sons.¹⁶ The Hmong leaders who attended the 2005 conference acknowledged the petition. Some lineage leaders accepted the terms of the petition, while others were reluctant to take any action. Network leaders have had to continue to raise these issues to Hmong leaders at various meetings. To date, the first three points concerning divorced women and unwed mothers have not been practiced in any Hmong village. Some changes to the remaining issues are gradually taking place. Both girls and boys receive support to attend school, which has begun to equalize opportunities to work in the public and private sectors. In particular, Hmong women are involved in selling arts and crafts at tourist sites and local markets more frequently than are men. This has translated into increased power for women to express their viewpoints within families and negotiate their belonging in the public spaces. Interestingly, the most visible changes have been in the areas of education and economics within and beyond Hmong villages. These changes show how women's empowerment improves the status of their families. Issues related to divorced and unwed mothers have been more difficult to achieve because they require changes to preexisting social practices where male domination is intact. To alter them would require men to give up power, and at this time, it appears to be an uphill battle.

The lack of progress in some areas, however, has not discouraged the network leaders from continuing to build their own capacity. In late 2012, they began conducting participatory action research. Led by Mee Thao and Joom Xiong, a small group attended a workshop on women's health promotion in Bangkok. They developed a proposal on strategies to empower Hmong women and submitted it to the Thailand Research Fund, which approved it in early 2013. The project was implemented in Mae Sa Mai,

a Hmong village close to Chiang Mai city, from February to July 2013. The research team included fifteen members representing local Hmong lineage leaders, elder widows, network participants, and university researchers. Local Hmong researchers conducted focus group discussions with male lineage leaders and divorced and senior women. They identified twenty-one problems that Hmong women in their community faced. One of the most urgent issues was the lack of spiritual belonging for divorced women, highlighted by the Hmong women's stories discussed earlier in the chapter. Hmong women's fight to be able to return to their parents' spiritual households is important because ancestral worship is patrilineal. As women, they are not allowed to establish their own spiritual households.

Following the conclusion of the research activities, the team organized three meetings with Hmong lineage leaders and official leaders in the village. The team reiterated the need for ritual performers to conduct a ritual to reunite a divorced woman with her natal family's household spirits. The leaders understood the problems faced by divorced Hmong women, but they were reluctant to take action due to the long-standing fear of negative consequences associated with divorced women. A breakthrough came in early October 2013, when seven key ritual performers in Mae Sa Mai village were invited to meet with the research team. The ritual performers explained that it was possible to perform a ritual to reunite a divorced daughter with her natal family. They pointed out that at the end of the divorce negotiation, the ritual performer already officially and symbolically handed the divorced daughter to her parents and thus affirmed (*phum*) her reunification with her parents' household spirits. The challenge, they argued, is that Hmong parents normally do not pay attention to such procedures and actively invite their divorced daughters to attend household rituals. It had always been culturally possible for a divorced woman to rejoin her family's household spirits, but long-lasting practices to segregate them from their natal family, compounded with the stigma of divorce, prevented parents from following through with a ritual to welcome back their divorced daughters. After listening to ritual performers' clarification at this meeting, male leaders of three families agreed to ask village ritual performers to perform the *phum* ritual the following week. The religious backgrounds of those three families include Hmong animist beliefs, Buddhism, and Christianity.

This ritual represented a fundamental shift in the way divorced women are perceived. In addition to family members, participants included four

invited ritual performers, members of the research team, forty representatives of Hmong ritual performers, and network board members from other Thai provinces. Outside scholars and staff from funding agencies also attended. For the family who practiced Hmong animist beliefs, the ritual began with a soul-calling ceremony. After the required food items had been placed on the main ritual table, the four ritual performers stated that they were bringing the divorced daughter back to her parents. Tying strings around her wrists, they affirmed that "from now on she is allowed to attend any ritual ceremony performed by the family." They also blessed her and the family. The guests were also invited to tie strings and offer blessings. At this moment, the daughter and parents shed tears of happiness as they hugged one another, an unusual physical gesture in Hmong culture.

In the afternoon following the ritual, participants gathered in the village meeting hall to share their views. A few women from other Hmong villages spoke and cried. One stated, "Today is a historical day for the Hmong women in Thailand on reuniting divorced daughter with parents' family. We, the Hmong women's rights, had been ignored for generations. I expect to see the extension of these three families to Hmong in the whole country and also around the world" (Paiv Thao 2013). Two male ritual leaders, one from Nan Province and one from Tak Province, indicated that they planned to perform the *phum* ritual for their divorced daughters during the Hmong New Year at the end of December 2013. Following the successful event in Mae Sa Mai village of Chiang Mai Province, members of the research team were invited to present their research experiences and the ritual ceremony at a national Hmong leaders' annual meeting in Nan Province in early November. Other local Hmong networks also invited them to share their work. Most importantly, Hmong women's groups from Laos and the United States visited the village in January 2014 to learn from the research team. Mee summed up the experiences:

We have already come to a right direction. Researchers who are mostly villagers and lineage ritual performers clearly understand what is the root cause of the problem and then cooperated to bring about change. The accomplishment of our participant action research is a great transition of Hmong belief and practice which will provide a cultural space and equal rights for Hmong women. It's not only the issue of divorced Hmong women but also other women's issues that we encounter so we have to continue to advocate more.

Mee acknowledges this important stride, but she is also quick to point out that much work remains to be done to achieve meaningful gender equality within Hmong society.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Hmong patriarchal ideologies and practices, divorced Hmong women's coping strategies, and the Network of Hmong Women in Thailand's negotiation for cultural space within Hmong society in contemporary Thailand. Observations and ethnographic fieldwork reveal that divorced Hmong women have established their own strategies to cope with community pressures. Young Hmong women who have access to formal education have played a crucial role in leading a grassroots movement to put pressure on male leaders to change patrilineal practices that have been detrimental to divorcees regardless of the reason for ending a marriage.

The network's efforts have made a dent in patriarchal Hmong culture, but perhaps what is more important for researchers and community advocates is the need to carefully examine loopholes within patriarchal cultures to bring about change. For nearly a decade, divorced women and progressive young Hmong women and men called for change in ritual performances to welcome divorced women back to their natal family only to find out that the divorce negotiation process already included measures to support such ritual. Clearly, without their voices and the circulation of their petitions to Hmong male leaders and people and agencies outside Thai Hmong society, this success may not have occurred. The network has expanded its impact to reach more young Hmong women and men, in addition to Hmong women's networks in other countries, and networks of other ethnic minority women in Thailand. What was a small group of fifty women in 2004 has transformed to a movement that has caught the attention of international organizations and conventions concerning women's rights. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, has been translated and publicized in Thai and ethnic languages, including Hmong. Leaders of the network often refer to the convention when dealing with Hmong women and men who are leaders in local communities. There is, thus, a greater awareness of women's rights and opportunities beyond Hmong villages that has begun to take shape around the way that

divorced Hmong women see themselves and how others perceive their situations. While it will take time to gain greater power within Hmong social structure, the heavy burden on the shoulders of divorced Hmong women has been somewhat lifted. Hmong women in Thailand no longer struggle alone to negotiate cultural space.

Notes

1. I have observed the development of this network since its inception. Observations have taken place during various meetings and workshops since he was invited to participate as an adviser. From June to December 2012 and February to July 2013, he interviewed women participants and key informants. He has observed many wedding and funeral ceremonies as a result of growing up in a Hmong village and years of working with Hmong in other villages.
2. I acknowledge that Hmong wedding ceremonies in Asia and in the diaspora have incorporated practices from the different contexts, but our collective experiences suggest that expectations, restrictions, and the stigma attached to divorced Hmong women transcends all national borders. I thank Drs. Chia Youyee Vang and Ma Vang for helping to edit this chapter.
3. For more detailed Hmong wedding processes, see Yaj (1980).
4. Translation from Hmong to English by author.
5. Observation of Tua and Pang's wedding ceremony in the Highland village of Chiang Mai Province, January 2010.
6. It should be noted that *pe* is performed three times: when the bride first enters the groom's parents' house, at the bride's parents' house where the wedding ceremony takes place, and at the groom's parents' house after coming back from the wedding ceremony.
7. Interview with Bla Thao Xiong in Mae Sa Mai Hmong village of Chiang Mai Province, and Pa Cheng Lee in Paklang village of Nan Province.
8. Thai government and international agencies did not pay attention to Hmong and other highland ethnic minorities until the late 1950s. Modernizing initiatives included setting up resettlement sites and bringing socioeconomic development programs to mountain villages. Part of the efforts included "Thai-ization," an effort to assimilate them into Thai culture. Long-term consequences for the ethnic Hmong included a weakening of kinship structure and exposure to issues of gender equality.
9. Interview with Lou Xiong (pseudonym), a Hmong lineage leader in a mountain village of Chiang Mai Province, April 2012. According to Lou Xiong, during the last two decades, only around one out of ten couples divorced (10%); however, today that number has increased to about three or four out of every ten couples (30%–40%).

10. Marriage within one clan is a taboo in Hmong society. Even after a woman's husband dies or she is divorced, no man of her natal clan can marry her. She is still considered a sister or daughter of any man in her natal clan.
11. All names of the interviewees in this article are pseudonyms.
12. It should be noted that today the Thai government provides free health care and a small subsidy for anyone over the age of sixty.
13. This is a normal tradition in Hmong society. After they grow up and get married, sons have to take in wives and inherit their father's lineage, while daughters leave and become members of their husband's household and lineage.
14. If a divorcée becomes a minor wife, she may reside in the same house with her husband and his first wife, but she will always have a lower social status within the family. If the first wife moves out to join a married son and his new family, the second wife may live with the husband in the same house and may exercise more household power.
15. Translated from Thai by Prasit Leepreecha.
16. In Hmong tradition, when women still gave birth at home, the placenta of a baby boy was buried at the central pole (*ncej tas*) of the house, while a baby girl's placenta was buried under her parents' bedroom. The central pole symbolizes the household spirit, which the boy will inherit when he grows up, while the bedroom represents fruitful fertility, where the girl will give birth to many children when she grows up. Today, however, most Hmong women give birth in a hospital, where the placenta is disposed of as medical waste.

Works Cited

- Binney, G. A. 1968. *Social Structure and Shifting Agriculture of the White Meo*. Final Technical Report to Wildlife Management Institute, Washington, D.C.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Chang, Kong [pseud.]. 2010. Interview with Prasit Leepreecha in Tak Province in April.
- Cooper, Robert G. 1978. "Unity and Division in Hmong Social Categories in Thailand." In *Studies in ASEAN Sociology: Urban Society and Social Change*, edited by Peter S. J. Chen and Hans-Dieter Evers, 297–320. Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises.
- . 1984. *Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response: A Study of Settlement and Economy in Northern Thailand*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- della Porta, Donatella, and Mario Diani. 1999. *Social Movements*. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Diani, Mario. 1992. "The Concept of Social Movement." *Sociological Review* 40:1–25.

- Donnelly, Nancy D. 1994. *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Edgar, Andrew. 2002. "Bourdieu, Pierre." In *Cultural Theory: The Key Thinkers*, edited by Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, 30–32. London and New York: Routledge.
- Geddes, W. R. 1976. *Migrants of the Mountains: The Cultural Ecology of the Blue Miao of Thailand*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hayami, Yoko, Junko Koizumi, Chalidaporn Songsamphan, and Ratana Tosakul, eds. 2012. *The Family in Flux in Southeast Asia: Institution, Ideology, Practice*. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press.
- Kong, Hlee [pseud.]. 2012. Interview with Prasit Leepreecha in Chiang Mai Province in June.
- Lee, Gary Yia. 1986. "White Hmong Kinship Terminology and Structure." In *The Hmong World 1*, edited by Brenda Johns and David Strecker, 12–32. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Southeast Asia Studies.
- . 1988. "Household and Marriage in a Thai Highland Society." *Journal of the Siam Society* 76:162–73.
- Lee, Pa Cheng. 2012. Interview with Prasit Leepreecha in Paklang village, Nan Province, in October.
- Leepreecha, Prasit. 2001. "Kinship and Identity among Hmong in Thailand." PhD diss., University of Washington.
- Manndorff, Hans. 1967. "The Hill Tribe Program of the Public Welfare Department, Ministry of Interior, Thailand: Research and Socio-Economic Development." In *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*, vol. 2, edited by Peter Kunstadter. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- McCaskill, Don, and Ken Kampe, eds. 1997. *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- Moua, Shoua [pseud.]. 2012. Interview with Prasit Leepreecha in Chiang Mai Province in July.
- Mountjoy, Shane. 2008. *The Women's Rights Movement: Moving Toward Equality*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Network of Hmong Women. 2005. Letter of petition to Hmong leaders (in Thai).
- Scharff, Virginia. 2003. *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- . 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Scripts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- . 2010. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

- Songsamphan, Chalidaporn. 2012. "Private Family, Public Contestation." In *The Family in Flux in Southeast Asia: Institution, Ideology, Practice*, edited by Yoko Hayami, Junko Koizumi, Chalidaporn Songsamphan, and Ratana Tosakul. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press.
- Symonds, Patricia V. 2005. *Calling in the Soul: Gender and the Cycle of Life in a Hmong Village*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Teerawithitchainan, Bussarawan. 2004. "Modernization and Divorce in Thailand: 1940s to 1970s." *Journal of Population and Social Studies* 13, no. 1.
- Thao, Mee. 2011. Interview with Prasit Leepreecha in October.
- . 2013. Interview with Prasit Leepreecha in July.
- Thao, Paiv [pseud.]. 2013. Interview with Prasit Leepreecha in Petchabun Province in October.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. 2004. *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge. First published in 1960.
- Wanat Bhruksasri. 1989. "Government Policy: Highland Ethnic Minorities." In *Hill Tribes Today*, edited by John McKinnon and Bernard Vienne. Bangkok: White Lotus-Orstom.
- Xiong, Bla Thao. 2012. Interview with Prasit Leepreecha in Mae Sa Mai village, Chiang Mai Province, in September.
- Yaj, Vam Thai Txooj Txhim. 1980. *KabTshoobKev Kos: Liaj Lwg Tus Cag Txuj, Rhwv Mus Tus Cag Peev*. Javouhey, Mana, Guyane Francaise: Association Patrimoine Culturel Hmong et Association Communaute Hmong.
- Yang, Pang [pseud.]. 2012. Interview with Prasit Leepreecha in Chiang Mai Province on June 2.

· III ·

Art and Media

Claiming Place

• • • • •

On the Agency of Hmong Women

Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs,
and Ma Vang, Editors



University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London

Copyright 2016 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by the University of Minnesota Press

111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290

Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520

<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vang, Chia Youyee, editor. | Nibbs, Faith, editor. | Vang, Ma, editor.

Title: Claiming place : on the agency of Hmong women / Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs, and Ma Vang, editors.

Description: Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015022458 | ISBN 9780816697762 (hc) |

ISBN 9780816697786 (pb)

Subjects: LCSH: Women, Hmong—Social life and customs. | Women, Hmong—Social conditions.

Classification: LCC DS509.5.H66 C53 2016 | DDC 305.48/895972—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015022458>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

21 20 19 18 17 16 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction: Hmong Women, Gender, and Power <i>Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs, and Ma Vang</i>	vii
Part I. History and Knowledge Formation	
1. Rewriting Hmong Women in Western Texts <i>Leena N. Her</i>	3
2. Rechronicling Histories: Toward a Hmong Feminist Perspective <i>Ma Vang</i>	28
3. Rethinking Hmong Women's Wartime Sacrifices <i>Chia Youyee Vang</i>	56
Part II. Social Organization, Kinship, and Politics	
4. The Women of "Dragon Capital": Marriage Alliances and the Rise of Vang Pao <i>Mai Na M. Lee</i>	87
5. Hmong Women, Family Assets, and Community Cultural Wealth <i>Julie Keown-Bomar and Ka Vang</i>	117
6. Divorced Hmong Women in Thailand: Negotiating Cultural Space <i>Prasit Leepreecha</i>	144
Part III. Art and Media	
7. Hmong Women on the Web: Transforming Power through Social Networking <i>Faith Nibbs</i>	169

8. Stitching Hmongness into Cloth: Pliable Identity and Cultural Agency <i>Geraldine Craig</i>	195
9. Reel Women: Diasporic Cinema and Female Collectivity in Abel Vang's <i>Nyab Siab Zoo</i> <i>Aline Lo</i>	220
Part IV. Gender and Sexuality	
10. Thinking Diasporic Sex: Cultures, Erotics, and Media across Hmong Worlds <i>Louisa Schein</i>	249
11. Dangerous Questions: Queering Gender in the Hmong Diaspora <i>Bruce Thao</i>	280
12. Finding Queer Hmong America: Gender, Sexuality, Culture, and Happiness among Hmong LGBTQ <i>Kong Pha</i>	303
Afterword <i>Cathy J. Schlund-Vials</i>	327
Acknowledgments	335
Contributors	337
Index	339

Introduction

Hmong Women, Gender, and Power

Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs, and Ma Vang

THIS COLLECTION EXPLORES the myriad roles Hmong women have played in society and the gendered ideologies embedded within the discourses that have surrounded them. In the literature on the Hmong, women have often been portrayed as victims of their patriarchal culture and of the wars that have dotted their history, as well as trapped between their cultural social standards and global industrialization. They are sometimes simply viewed as an emerging group beginning to “come into their own.” In addition, early work that was dominated by anthropological and area studies often produced static depictions of Hmong culture and society as “primitive” and premodern, and in which gender relations—particularly portrayals of Hmong women—were central. These ideas became entrenched in academic and public discourse and have continued to heavily influence post-1980 research and literature on Hmong patrilineal society, portraying the exotic Hmong women as marginal yet crucial to the function of their society (see, for example, Symonds 2003; Rice 2000; Donnelly 1997; and Fadiman 1997). This book problematizes those portrayals and the academic paradigms that supported them, and re-examines the historical positions Hmong women have played in society. We locate our discussions in cultural agency as it relates to expressions of power throughout this volume and extend multiple critiques from myriad disciplines of existing scholarship about Hmong women. In doing so, we hope to de-essentialize the Hmong woman and reposition her as an agentic individual situated within a nexus of ever-shifting political, social, and cultural power structures capable of resisting and deconstructing forms of oppression.

Claiming Place is a collection of critical scholarship that counters the popular narrative about Hmong women by exploring how changing