

9 Transnational Hmong Protestant evangelism in Mainland Southeast Asia

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Introduction

The Hmong are a subgroup of Miao scattered in southwestern China and the upper Mainland Southeast Asia countries of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma.¹ After the Communists took over Laos in 1975, tens of thousands of Hmong refugees from Laos fled the country and finally settled down in Western countries including the United States of America, Canada, France, Germany, Australia, Argentina and French Guiana. The Hmong were formerly known as ‘mountain people’ in southwestern China and upper Mainland Southeast Asia. Since the colonial period, Christianity from Western countries has been spread among the highland ethnic minorities of upper Mainland Southeast Asia, replacing traditional beliefs (Hefner 1993: 3–7). Christianity as brought by foreign missionaries was one of the various ‘civilizing’ projects to which the Hmong have been subject during their history (Harrell 1995: 4–8). In order to attract new Hmong converts, some pioneer missionaries, such as Otto Scheuzger (1961: 30) have interpreted Yaw Sau, the Hmong God, as equivalent to the God of the Christians. In recent decades, Socialist governments have been concerned about a Messianic movement among some Hmong Christian groups in this region, especially in terms of rumours about the coming of a Messiah. In late April to early May 2011 there was a popular Messianic movement among Hmong Christians in northwestern Vietnam, particularly in the Dien Bien region. Even though the majority of Hmong people lived in remote areas and were strictly controlled by state authorities, through various means of communication they received news about a predicted Judgement Day proclaimed by eighty-nine-year-old Harold Camping, a Californian multi-millionaire who runs one of the largest Christian radio networks in the world. According to Jaweed Kaleem (2011):

He and his fringe group of churchless followers believe that at 6 p.m. on Saturday, May 21, a massive earthquake will make its way around the earth, beginning in Fiji and New Zealand. Graves will open and two hundred million ‘saved’ individuals will float up to heaven. The doomed remainder will live on an unruly earth for five months before God annihilates it five months later.

Keyes (2008: 43–44) and Hoang (2017: 4–7) mention similar religious movements in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, which were alleged by state authorities to be a threat to national security. According to the news media, the Hmong Christians in Vietnam truly believed it and gathered to wait for the return of Jesus Christ. Some 5,000–7,000 people were involved in the unrest. The demands of the protesting Hmong – most of whom were Christians – included more religious freedom, better land rights and greater autonomy. Vietnam sealed off the scene of a rare protest by thousands of ethnic minority Hmong in a remote northeastern mountainous area. Army units were sent in to quash the demonstration for greater autonomy, which started on April 30, 2011. Soldiers stopped people from leaving or entering the Dien Bien region, and electricity and telecommunications were cut. A military source quoted by the AFP news agency said the army had sent reinforcements and ‘had to disperse the crowd by force’. It was reported that there were ‘minor clashes’ but there was no word whether or not there had been any casualties. ‘The situation is still being resolved by all levels of party and government so that the lives of the compatriots there can return to stability at an early time’ foreign affairs spokeswoman Nguyen Phuong Nga told Reuters (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13306362>, 2011).

Recently, according to a source on Hmong Christian organizations in Bangkok, there are around fifty-three families of Hmong from Vietnam, or around 350 people, who have shown up in Bangkok and nearby provinces of Thailand, seeking asylum with UNHCR (Chambers 2020). Pressure on Christianity, particularly among ethnic groups, from Socialist governments occurs not only in Vietnam but also in Laos and China (Leepreecha 2016: 99–123), despite the claims of both Christian groups and Socialist governments of wanting to ‘civilize the uncivilized ethnic groups’, such as the Hmong in upper Mainland Southeast Asia (Harrell 1995: 4–8; Salemink 2009: 47–52). According to Ngo (2016: 6), ‘like the Communist state and its agents, Christian missionaries see the Hmong as “backward” and consider their culture an “irrational” impediment to progress’. Presently, governments of those countries still closely watch and suppress the movement of Christianity, especially among the Hmong ethnic group in Northern Vietnam (Gerin 2020; Hoang 2017: 4–5; Pittman 2019).

Christianity is one of the world religions. One factor in its rapid spread worldwide was the coexistence of Christianity and colonial imperialism rooted in European countries during the colonial era. As Robert Hefner (1993: 7) pointed out, ‘building on ideas of the nature of magic, sciences, and religion widespread in the late nineteenth century, Weber had argued that the key feature distinguishing traditional and world religions was the superior rationalization of the latter’. It is impossible to separate Western colonialism from civilization or modernity, which holds to the evolutionary thinking that Western people and culture are more modern and rational. Such ideology and perceptions include the Christian faith, which is at odds with local traditional beliefs and is considered to be more powerful, as illustrated by encounters between Christian and Hmong traditional beliefs. It is important to note that Protestant evangelism in the colonial period had been done by face-to-face communication: Western Protestant missionaries spent days in walking to Hmong mountain villages, where they lived with the local people

who then responded to Christianity. However, in the contemporary transnational Hmong context, I found that Hmong Protestant pastors in the United States and Thailand utilize different means, in a globalized world, to evangelize Hmong living in the Socialist countries of China, Vietnam, Laos and Burma.

Historical development of Christianity among the Hmong/Miao

Western missionaries began to evangelize the Miao people in Southwest China and the Hmong in Indo-China in the late nineteenth century. In 1899, Samuel Pollard, an Englishman belonging to the London Missionary Society, first encountered the Hua (Flowered) or Ta Hua (Greater Flowered) Miao in the area of Zhaotong in northeast Yunnan, China. At the time they were experiencing political and economic pressures from Han Chinese officials and their Yi (Nuosu) landlords. Large numbers of Miao people receiving medical aid also paid attention to Pollard's teaching about God, and Jesus as the Saviour, and were converted by him. Although Pollard died in 1915, his students continued to work with local people, preaching to them and bringing them to faith in Jesus. In addition to Pollard, other groups of missionaries also started to work with Miao groups. They included missionaries of the China Inland Mission, Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists (Enwall 1995a; Pollard 1919; Tapp 1989b: 100). However, the propagation of Christianity in China had faced serious trouble since 1949. Christian activities were further suppressed during the Cultural Revolution, which began in August 1966 (Bates 1968: 199; Fried 1987: 104). Consequently, Western missionaries who worked with the Miao and other ethnic minorities in China moved out and many of them went to work among the Hmong and other highland ethnic groups in Northern Thailand.

In Vietnam, although French Catholic missionaries were active by the early 1600s, they did not reach the highland home of the Hmong people until the late 1800s or early 1900s. French missionaries, colonial officers and merchants interacted with Hmong and other highland people in the border regions of Vietnam, Laos and China in the early 1900s. The activities of these missionaries ceased with the ending of the French colonial regime and the transfer of control to the Vietnamese Communists in the mid-twentieth century (Enwall 1995b; Michaud 2004: 307–308; Savina 1924). Local Hmong and Vietnamese missionaries, however, continued their activities with Hmong villagers in the highlands of Northern Vietnam, particularly in preaching, Bible teaching and literacy development. Recently, in spite of the Vietnamese government's strict control of foreign groups (including individuals wanting to look into religious or human rights issues), it is estimated that the population of Hmong Protestants has grown to between 150,000 and 300,000 (Denney 1999; Ngo 2015: 278, 287; Prat 2019). This figure alone has sparked concern in the Communist power base, with roughly thirty Hmong church leaders being jailed or detained during the late 1990s to early 2010s (Christian Persecution Report 1999; Ngo 2010).

In Myanmar (Burma), Tapp (1989a: 72) noted that there was some Baptist influence among White Hmong groups in the Eastern Wa state of Burma during

the 1920s. According to Vang (1998: 302), the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) had reached the Hmong before 1964. Presently, there are still some Hmong Christians in Myanmar. Although there was no expatriate missionary presence among the Hmong communities in Myanmar, Hmong Christian missionaries from the United States occasionally met leaders of Hmong Christians from north-eastern Myanmar in Rangoon and Northern Thailand. Although Hmong Protestants from Myanmar attended the *Yexus Fest*, an international event of Hmong Protestants gathering in Chiang Mai in 2014 and 2017, the number of Hmong Christians in Myanmar is not clear at this point.

In Laos, the situation is similar to that of Vietnam. Although the first French Roman Catholic missionary arrived in 1642, the missionaries did not come in contact with Hmong people until 1950. Father Yves Bertrais settled in the Hmong village of Roob Nyuj Qus (Banteng Mountain or Kiew Kajum), southwest of Luang Prabang, on April 17, 1950. Rather than presenting teachings about the power of God to the villagers, he began by focusing on the Hmong language and culture (Nyiaj Pov 1991). At the same time, Edward Roffe, a missionary of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), and Nai Kheng, a Khammu Bible student from Luang Prabang, first reached the Hmong people in Xieng Khoung in May 1950. The family of Ted and Ruth Andrianoff played the most significant role in the conversion of Hmong in this area. Their strategies to attract Hmong villagers included not only treating illnesses but also confronting local evil spirits, as seen in the following passage:

Ted knew that Moua Yia Thao owned the little house that had been rented to Nai Kheng and his young family. As the personal shaman of Touby Lyfong, the most powerful tribal chief of the Hmong, Moua Yia was the most influential shaman in Xieng Khoung Province, the most influential shaman in all of Laos and Thailand. His house had been available for rent at an affordable rate because it was said to be haunted. No one had been able to stay there, even for one night. Since they could find no other suitable accommodation for Nai Kheng's family, Ted and Nai Kheng had decided to rent this one. 'In a way, this is the perfect place,' they had agreed. 'It will show that our God is stronger than any evil spirits'.

(Andrianoff and Andrianoff 2000: 5–6).

The first Hmong shaman who became a Christian was Boua Ya Thao (*Mouas Yias Thoj*), also known as Pho Si (Andrianoff and Andrianoff 2000: 5; Thao 2000: 62; Vang 2000: 6). According to Vang, it is estimated that before the Pathet Laos seized power in 1975, there were about 14,000 Hmong Protestants. Despite the Lao government's rigorous opposition to the promotion of Christianity, by 1997 the number of Hmong Christians in Laos was estimated at 23,000 (Vang 1998: 68, 153). It should be noted that a vital legacy of Christianity in Laos was the introduction of a Hmong writing system, the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA). This Hmong orthography was created in 1953 in Luang Prabang by Father Yves Bertrais, fellow missionary-anthropologist Linwood Barney and linguistic anthropologist William A. Smalley. Although several other scripts were created,

the RPA script is the most widely used among the Hmong people in Southeast Asian and Western countries (*Nyiaj Pov* 1991).

Attempts by many Christian organizations to convert Hmong and other ethnic refugees from Laos while they were settled in temporary camps in Thailand ended in failure, since refugees need basic material services rather than belief. According to Long (1993: 38), ‘the Thai government expelled organizations that tried to convert refugees in the camps, but this protection was not strictly enforced and the offenders sometimes returned under other auspices’. However, many religious organizations played a strong role in providing basic needs and skills to refugees in the camps. Hmong refugees became involved with Christian agencies through the churches that sponsored them in settling in third countries in the West. Because of the dispersion of kin members during their resettlement in Western countries, many of the young refugees did not know how to perform their own traditional rituals. In the meantime, they were reluctant to refuse their hosts’ invitations to attend church and become Christians, and consequently, many of them were converted to Christianity (Chan 1994; Moua 1995; Trueba, Jacobs and Kirton 1990; Vang 1998).

In the United States, according to Vang, Hmong Christians are members of many organizations and denominations, including the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Methodist, Christian Reformed, Assemblies of God, various branches of the Lutheran Church, Church of Christ or Christian Church, Lao Evangelical Church and the Mennonites. Among these, the largest group is the Christian and Missionary Alliance, which claimed a membership of 25,806 in seventy-eight churches at the end of 1996 (Vang 1998: 161, 169). In 2003, the Hmong District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with eighty-one churches scattered throughout the United States and a total membership of 29,437 people (<http://www.hmongdistrict.org/AboutUs/OurStory.aspx>, 2020). Presently, in 2020, there are 117 Hmong churches under the Hmong District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (<https://www.cmalliance.org/locate/church?dc=73>, 2020). Hmong Christian pastors and converts in the United States have played significant roles in evangelizing the Hmong in Southeast Asian countries during the past few decades.

In Thailand, Protestant missionaries launched missionary efforts among the Hmong in the early 1950s. Don Rulison of the China Inland Mission (CIM) was assigned to work with the Hmong in Mae Hong Son province in 1951, after he had left China because of the takeover by the Communist Party. In Tak province, Otto and Adri Scheuzger first arrived at the Hmong village of Dlej Dlaag (Yellow Creek or Huai Lueng) on July 17, 1953. On November 1 of that year, four Hmong families converted to Christianity. In Phetchabun province, Ernest Heimbach and Don Rulison made a survey trip to Hmong villages in the Nam Khek watershed. The four families became Christian that year. In Mae Hong Son province, one family became Christian in 1962 (Vang 1998: 154–161).

Garland Bare’s family first settled in the Pua district of Nan province in 1953, after living two years in Chiang Kham district of Chiang Rai province (which

later became Phayao province). Because Hmong communities were scattered in the mountains, he decided to set up his family in the lowlands, close to the Pua district office and market, where the Hmong often came to buy things and to contact government officials. In 1959, he founded the Pua Christian Hostel for Hmong students attending primary school. Four years later Imogene Williams, who had been a nurse in a leprosy hospital in Chiang Kham, Phayao, was invited to take care of the hostel while Garland Bare's family left for the United States. Dr. Bare, whose medical training was in both Illinois and Chiang Mai, founded the Pua hospital in 1971, serving as director until 1974. The first Hmong student at the Pua Christian Hostel to become Christian was Qhuachoj Yaaj, in 1959. In 1964, a few villagers from Ban Kang Haw were baptized (Bare 2015: 37; interview with Williams, 2016).

Hmong churches in Thailand operated under the auspices of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), the Church of Christ in Thailand (Presbyterians), the Gospel Church of Thailand (C&MA), the Seventh Day Adventists, the Hope of Bangkok Church and the Pentecostal Church. The thirty-eight Hmong churches of OMF organized a national church called the 'Hmong Associated Churches of Thailand' in the early 1990s. It is estimated that in 1990 the total number of Hmong Christians, of all denominations, was 5,000, which equalled 5% of the total Hmong population (Vang 1998: 292). On September 11, 1992, Rev. Cha Yer Xiong and Rev. Nhia Ko Lor were sent by the Hmong District of the C&MA (of which the US National Office is in Colorado) to work in Thailand, based in Chiang Mai province. According to Vang (1998: 299), 'by the end of 1997, fourteen Hmong churches had been planted with an inclusive membership of 1,300 people'.

Meanwhile, Catholic missionary priests first reached the Hmong people in Thailand in the early 1970s. Father Jean Mottin of the Paris Foreign Mission launched his work with the Hmong in Khek Noi, Phetchabun province, in 1973. Father Harry Thiel, an American from Seattle, set up a Hmong centre in Chiang Mai, after spending several years studying the Hmong and Lao languages in Vientiane in the late 1960s. The centre primarily serves as a hostel, Bible school and religious service centre for Hmong Catholics and includes a publishing operation (Hmong Catholic Centre 1994). In the 1970s, Jean Mottin lived with the Hmong people in Khek Noi and published a few books concerning Hmong history and culture (Mottin 1979, 1980a, 1980b). In 1975, when the Communist Party took over Laos, and both Hmong refugees and Western missionaries fled to Thailand, Father Bertrais and his Hmong team played important roles in collecting material on Hmong traditional rituals and ceremonies (Yaj 1986). Although the publishing operation was originally based in French Guiana, and later joined a radio programme in the Philippines for a few years, it finally settled down in Lomsak district of Phetchabun province. At the present time, the Hmong Centre in Chiang Mai, the Zoo Tswv Zov Yaj office in Lomsak, and a recently established centre in Chomthong district of Chiang Mai province still serve the local Hmong Catholics.

The number of Hmong Christians and churches in Thailand has been gradually increasing, as the government allows Christian evangelism and conversion

among the Hmong and other minority groups. By contrast, there has been strict control of the movement of foreign Christian missionaries in Socialist countries such as China, Vietnam and Laos, which became Communist in 1949, the 1950s and 1975, respectively. Although government policies have opened these countries for business, tourism and academic exchange, Christianity is still being banned. However, there are various means that Hmong missionaries from the United States and Thailand use to convert the Hmong people in Laos, Vietnam and China (Leepreecha 2016). Moreover, there are large numbers of Hmong Christians in these countries, and in Burma, including both those who had been converted in the colonial period and recent converts.

Transnational Hmong Protestant evangelism

As mentioned earlier, the Hmong is a transnational ethnic group; consequently, Protestant evangelization, which is based in Thailand and the United States, has operated among Hmong people in various countries in southwestern China and upper Mainland Southeast Asia. As far as I have found, there are various mechanisms they utilize, in spite of attempts by the government in Socialist countries to control Christian evangelization. Hmong transnational Protestant evangelization in this region has been launched intensively since the 1980s, following the end of the Cold War. Unlike the slow flow of people, goods and information in the past, the transnational Protestant movement is forging ahead rapidly in the contemporary process of globalization. It is important to note that this transnational movement nowadays has become increasingly free because of local, regional and global levels of cooperation and agreement. Inda and Rosaldo (2002: 2) refer to this phenomenon as ‘global interconnectedness’. They explain that the world is now full of movement and mixture, contact and linkages, and persistent cultural interaction and exchange. Importantly, according to them, the rapid and vast flow of capital, people, commodities, images and ideologies around the world is becoming increasingly intertwined.

Similarly, Appadurai (1990: 296) points out that globalization is the process of connecting five dimensions of global cultural flow. These dimensions include ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, financescapas and ideoscapas, which intensively link people in the world together. In terms of evangelization, there are various means that Hmong missionaries from the United States and Thailand use to convert the Hmong people in Laos, Vietnam and China (Leepreecha 2016: 99–123) on the basis of this new order of time and space. In the globalization context, which is filled with the flows of these ‘scapes’, the culture of local people cannot be viewed as entirely separate from global cultures. Such articulation of culture is essential in anthropological studies, especially the flow and articulation of culture among transnational ethnic members, such as the Hmong. There are at least four methods that Hmong Protestants in Thailand and the United States have used in evangelizing the Hmong in Laos, Vietnam and China – namely, short-wave radio programmes, telephones and online communication, cross-border mobility and interaction, and the *Yexus Fest* festival.

Shortwave radio: spreading the Good News and developments

According to Samuel Weber (2001: 4–5), there is a relationship between media and religion whereby the influence of religion tends to decline in proportion to the increased role played by media. This is because the influence of media is such that, when it increases, the private world of individuals increases. In any case, scholars who have studied media and religion in many countries have found that there is an important relationship between the two, especially with regard to religious propagation in this time of globalization. (Examples are given by Eisenlohr 2009; Kunreuther 2006; Spitulnik 2002.) It is also the same regarding the role of shortwave radio programmes broadcast to Hmong in Southeast Asia.

Christian radio broadcasts using the Hmong language have been produced by the Hmong Broadcasting Group, which airs programmes through the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC).² The development of Hmong language programmes that are broadcast by FEBC began in Loei province in 1975 after many Hmong had migrated to Thailand following the change of government in Laos. The recording of programmes was done in a van, after which the tapes were sent to the Philippines for broadcasting. Later, in 1979, a recording studio was established in California, USA, as the Reverend Vam Txoov Lis and his wife, who were working together to produce radio programmes, had settled there. The main objective of these radio programmes was to broadcast ‘the Good News’ both to refugees and also to Hmong living in remote areas of Asia so that they would become Christians. In 2002, the Reverend Vam Txoov Lis died suddenly. In addition to his own teaching, he had spent his life recording the teachings of Hmong Protestant ministers from the United States, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and China; consequently, his wife and the team had those messages broadcast for the next few years. From then until 2006, the Reverend Lis Foom (a pseudonym) in Thailand took over the role of overseeing the production of the programmes. He was able to do so because his voice sounded very much like the Reverend Vam Txoov, which attracted Hmong listeners from all over the world. At present, there is a production office in Chiang Mai (Interview with Lis Foom, 2012).

At a Christian evangelization centre in Chiang Mai city, I was welcomed and had a chance to interview Lis Foom. This centre is an office, a classroom for Bible study for youth from Socialist countries, and, importantly, a recording studio for FEBC in the Philippines. The intended audiences are the Hmong in Laos, Vietnam, China, Burma and Thailand. According to Reverend Lis Foom, programmes are aired from 6:00–6:30 and from 20:00–20:30 by the local time in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. The subject matter changes each day of the week: Mondays are for male heads of households, Tuesdays for female heads of households, Wednesdays for youth, Thursdays for leaders – both Christian and otherwise – and Fridays left open. Saturdays and Sundays are reserved for recordings by the widow of the late Vam Txoov. The subject matter broadcast on recorded tapes by other Hmong pastors from the United States covers different areas of teaching, with lessons from the Bible being the main approach.

Besides broadcasting ‘The Good News of Jesus Christ’ to Hmong listeners, whether Christians or non-Christians, the programme tries to reach Hmong in

different countries, wherever they have settled. In the past, the Vietnamese government misunderstood and thought that all Christian groups had to be the same and viewed the Hmong as disobedient to the government. However, according to the thinking of the Reverend Lis Foom (2012):

Christians include some phonies who propagate the faith in order to gain some short-term personal benefits from converting others. But for those of us who are true Christians, besides evangelizing the Good News of Christianity so that Hmong will become believers, we also help the government by stressing that Christians must be good citizens of their country, regardless of what country they are in.

As for the listeners, it would be valuable to carry out a survey of how many of the Hmong in Thailand, Burma, Laos, Vietnam and China can receive the station's signal and hear the programmes. The Reverend Lis Foom stated that the way to check on this is to travel to the Christian villages in those countries and ask the people what radio programmes they listen to. Alternatively, listeners in the various countries could write letters or make long-distance phone calls as well as communicate by email or Facebook to the station manager. This feedback on what programmes are aired would boost morale and also lead to programme adjustments. At present, besides listening to the programmes live, people can access the old programmes and listen to them from the website.

Recently, in late 2019, I had a chance not only to meet some young Hmong Christians in Hanoi but also to visit a Hmong village in Northern Vietnam where the entire village of more than 200 households had become Protestant Christians. According to one leader in the village, these Hmong people had never heard about Jesus Christ until Reverend Vam Txoov made shortwave radio broadcasts in the early 1980s. Because of poverty and the high cost of sacrifices in Hmong traditional rituals – for example, the killing of many cows at a funeral – people decided to become Christians in response to the guidance given in the broadcasts. Later, a young man in the village contacted Hmong pastors abroad and obtained Bibles written in Hmong RPA, which he gave to the villagers. In this way the villagers were gradually able to learn about Christianity. They also set up a house church in the village, as official churches are not permitted even nowadays. Since government officers put heavy pressure on them, young Hmong Protestants had sought help from national Christian institutions in Hanoi, led by Vietnamese Protestants, which seek to protect Hmong Protestants. The denominations among them include Evangelical, Church of Christ, and Christian and Missionary Alliance. According to a young Hmong Christian, the majority of Protestants in Vietnam are Hmong.

Communication by telephone and online

In comparison to a few decades ago, making long-distance telephone calls to other countries is now much more convenient and considerably less costly. This

is true in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and China. Virtually every Hmong village can now be reached by mobile telephone signals and the internet. Almost every Hmong individual in these countries has a mobile phone – something that has become a necessity for Hmong Christian leaders wishing to communicate with missionaries in other countries. Besides having a phone to make calls for ordinary business contacts, mobile phones are also used for direct evangelization. A Hmong pastor in Thailand explained this as follows:

Mobile phones are very useful in communicating internationally. Christian leaders in remote areas of Laos and Vietnam get together in groups of ten people and then phone me. They would like me to pray with them, as they are afraid after being threatened by a government official. Or they would like me to preach on an important topic in the Bible that they do not understand. Sometimes they even want me to preside over a baptism over the phone. The local leaders prepare the place and have the new convert and the necessary items on hand. When they have everything ready, they phone me. Then over the phone I say what is needed for the baptism. If I were to go in person, not only would the travel costs be very high, but the officials might not let a missionary from overseas like me reach the place anyway.

(Interview with 'Udomphon', 2013)

In an age of globalization, mobile phones have become a new, essential form of communications technology. Hmong missionaries from Thailand and the United States use mobile phones to communicate across borders in their daily lives, resolve issues that arise from being a Christian, deal with church administrative matters, pray for inspiration, provide Bible studies and perform religious services for Hmong Christians in Socialist countries where the government restricts foreign missionaries from travelling there to spread the Christian faith. I had the opportunity to meet Hmong Christians from Vietnam and China while they were travelling to the *Yexus Fest* in 2012 in Chiang Mai. One thing that stood out clearly regarding their relationship with other Hmong Christians was the exchange of telephone numbers and Facebook accounts. I asked whether the government officials harassed them over international phone calls with other Christians and, if so, to what extent. One replied, 'maybe they eavesdrop a bit, but since almost everybody in the village has their own mobile phone, the officials cannot be monitoring everything or listening every time that we call Hmong Christians overseas' (Interview with 'Tong Lu', 2012). Even though using mobile phones to talk to people overseas is rather expensive, given the economic situation of the Hmong in Laos, Vietnam and China, it is a very convenient and timely way to communicate overseas. This is particularly true for middle-aged Hmong who are not able to communicate across borders in any other way.

In addition to long-distance phone calls, members of the younger Hmong generation can use the internet as a means of online communication through email, Skype, Facebook and LINE with Christians in other countries. These forms of communication in the globalized era cross international borders – not only

physical geographical boundaries, but also the boundaries of rules and regulations set by governments in Socialist countries to restrict Christian evangelization. Sometimes the governments of Socialist countries forbid people in the country from accessing certain websites and check on the sites that users did access. However, governments cannot completely seal off online contact.

Websites are an avenue for communicating efficiently with Hmong Christians in Thailand and the United States. At present, if we search for 'Hmong Christian' on a search engine, such as Google, we will find a very long list of websites. There are sites in English and in Hmong using the Roman alphabet. The information found on the websites covers a wide spectrum, including material on organizations, articles on Christian teachings or commentary on passages in the Bible, audio files with religious content, hymns and worship music. There is also data on past and forthcoming activities of Christian organizations and contact emails, Facebook accounts or telephone numbers through which more information can be obtained. Although Socialist governments like those of Vietnam and China limit access to Christian and political websites outside the country, villagers have their own ways of accessing and communicating with Christians abroad.

As Facebook, in this age of globalization, is a way for everyone to share information on daily life, missionaries and Hmong who are spreading the Christian faith in Thailand or the United States all have their own Facebook accounts too. The most important types of information that each of them shares on Facebook tend to be photos of their activities: these might include worshipping in church, working in the community, baptisms of new Christians in the village, making visits to teach Christianity in neighbouring countries, or events on important days in the Christian calendar. It can be seen also that when they post pictures on Facebook, their friends write comments in praise (or sometimes make jealous remarks) but they are all seeing what the others are doing. Sometimes the friends ask for more information about certain activities. Regarding language and script, the American Hmong pastors write in English and in Hmong RPA (Romanized), while the pastors from Thailand use Hmong and Thai. Among transnational Hmong Protestants, Hmong RPA is common, even though the Hmong in China have their own Romanized script.

Among Hmong Christians in Laos, Vietnam and China, it is the younger generation in Vietnam that is using Facebook the most. About ten years ago I first began hearing from Hmong students in Thailand that they were in touch with young people in Vietnam via Facebook. I began to investigate this phenomenon two years ago. The material that they share on Facebook includes photographs of themselves engaging in different activities in their daily lives as well as pictures and lessons on Christianity. Important too are pictures and news of Hmong Christian events in their own countries and ways that officials have treated them. They feel it is necessary to spread information about these events in the public sphere so that more people will know about what has happened. On Facebook are also shared the reactions of Hmong Christians in Thailand and the United States. Sometimes they are curious about some things and want further information while at other times they offer advice or moral support. Usually they say, 'Thank you, Lord, for preventing these events from getting worse than they are' or 'Please pray for God to help us'.

For Hmong Protestants in China, especially among those Hmong in Yunnan province who can more easily communicate with Hmong abroad, the WeChat application is more popular than Facebook, since the latter has been officially blocked by the Chinese government. (However, some Facebook users in China have found their own way to access Facebook.) Hmong Protestants living outside of China also use WeChat to communicate with friends in China. Because of government restrictions, they prefer to talk via Facebook and WeChat, rather than sending messages.

Cross-border mobility and interaction

In situations where borders have been opened for trading and tourism, Hmong Christians have found various ways to make use of them for religious purposes. One way is to cross borders by travelling as a tourist, in so far as Hmong Protestant pastors from Thailand and the United States travel to Laos, Vietnam and China on tourist visas. They are met at their destinations by other Hmong Christians who facilitate their visits in each area. While meeting in public areas they are informally able to discuss religious issues and to teach about the Bible as well as relate their experiences of being a Christian church leader in a local area. These approaches are necessary because the governments of those countries forbid foreign missionaries from preaching formally in public, especially at a Sunday church service or at any other organized church meeting. After visiting and providing some general advice, the Hmong missionaries make arrangements to meet instead in a hotel room, where they can train local Hmong youth leaders. The urban hotels are located away from the community and also away from where local government officials in the village are located.

The second way for Hmong Protestants in Thailand and the United States to evangelize is to travel to those countries under the auspices of a foundation or association registered in Thailand or elsewhere as Christian organizations. These foundations act half of the time like non-governmental development organizations and half of the time like evangelical organizations. When crossing borders and operating in countries like Burma, Laos, Vietnam and China, they stress the developmental side of their work, even though this might also give some opportunities for evangelism. Activities are carried out basically in public buildings, with the distribution of material aid and services to poor and remote ethnic communities, supplemented by preaching and evangelism, in the course of such activities building relationships particularly with younger members of the village. By doing development work along with evangelism in these Socialist countries they are able to reach poor communities.

The third way is to arrange travel for Hmong Christian youth from these three Socialist countries to participate in training programmes in Thailand. This travel is usually arranged by the religious organizations alongside the development work that they carry out. The training curriculum for the course in Thailand includes lectures, visits to development projects, visits to local churches and Bible study, besides opportunities to meet well-known clergymen. For Christian organizations that carry out only evangelization, young Hmong Christians are selected from

the Socialist countries to study the Bible in Thailand for one or two years or else, in some cases, young people will be trained in leadership and also take short Bible study courses. Recently, a regional Hmong Christian Bible school was set up in a province of northeastern Thailand, encouraging the enrolment of young Hmong Protestants from Laos, Vietnam and China. When these young people return to their country or community, they are assisted in developing their leadership potential. The goal is for them to become key people in important networks that share information and may also facilitate the travel and evangelical work of Hmong pastors from Thailand and the United States.

The fourth and final way to evangelize is by organizing meetings at the border. Currently trade promotion policies have made it easier to cross the Thai-Lao border, providing the opportunity to visit relatives, or to go for work or other reasons. Some places are permanent border crossings, such as Chiang Khong district in Chiang Rai province. There are also border towns with periodic markets, such as at Ban Huak in Phayao province or Huai Kone in Nan province. Christian evangelists from Thailand travel to these places for meetings and Bible studies with Hmong coming from Laos to do business. In addition, dates are set for groups of local Christian Hmong leaders in Laos to take short courses in leadership and Bible teaching at these border crossings. Another way to arrange meetings is to organize general get-togethers lasting three to five days at Christian training centres or at local schools in Nong Khai or Udon Thani provinces, or in border districts of Chiang Rai province. Some of these meetings are open to all Hmong Christians. Others are set up for certain groups, such as separate camps for youth, or groups for women, men, leaders and others. There are several Hmong Protestant groups that organize these meetings, including those in the Church of Christ in Thailand, the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand, C&MA and so on.

One such meeting for Hmong Christians on the border in Nong Khai province in 2013 was organized by a Hmong Christian group based in Chiang Mai, with the title 'Forum for Boosting Spirits and Building Relations' (*Rooj Txhawb Siab Cog Phoojywg*). Advance publicity was made on a website, on shortwave radio and through local church networks in Thailand and Laos. Pre-registration was also arranged to provide the organizers with information on how to prepare the meeting venue, lodging, food and expenses. The event was held from February 15 to 17 and around 150 people attended. About half of the participants were Hmong Christians from various provinces of Thailand and the other half were Hmong Christians who had crossed the border from Laos. Most of the latter were from Vientiane city, Vientiane province and places nearby. The main speaker at the event was a Hmong clergyman from the United States who was based in Chiang Mai. Another speaker was a Hmong radio announcer on a shortwave radio station. It was not unusual to see on the registration table VCDs of sermons by these two individuals. Small shortwave radio receivers were for sale at an inexpensive price. The reason for holding the meeting in Nong Khai was explained as follows:

In order to provide an opportunity for Hmong Christians from both countries to come together, to meet each other and to learn about the Lord together, to give moral support to one another, and to proclaim the word of Jesus Christ

to a wider audience of Hmong, Nong Khai province was selected because it is a central meeting point for Hmong Christians from Thailand and also from Laos. Another reason is that it is impossible to hold such a meeting in Laos. The only way to have a large number of Lao participants was to hold the meeting on the Thai side. The participants from Laos had to leave the country legally using passports and border passes like those used by travellers in general. Besides this meeting, in the coming year our organization will be holding many other meetings for our partner group of Hmong Christians from Laos together with Hmong Christians from Thailand.

(Interview with 'Nu Long', 2013)

These examples demonstrate how travel by these individuals leads to the sharing of Christian beliefs and information. The opening of each of the Socialist countries to travel to Thailand and other countries in the 1990s was the main breakthrough.

The Jesus Fest: international Hmong Christian festival

In the middle of June 2012 it was announced that a Jesus Festival (*Yexus Fest*) would be held from June 22 to 24, 2012 at the Convention Hall of Chiang Mai University.³ Before the first day of the Fest, I had the chance to observe the arrival of the Hmong Christians at Chiang Mai province's 700 Year Stadium, which was the site of the registration and lodging for the participants. What was exciting for me, besides meeting Hmong Protestants from many different provinces of Thailand, was to meet Protestant Hmong Christians who had come from the United States, China, Vietnam and Laos to participate in the Jesus Fest. For the Hmong from Laos, two large buses from Udon Thani were chartered to take them to Chiang Mai while some took the regular bus to Chiang Mai. A Hmong woman from Laos told me the following:

We crossed the border at the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge to Nong Khai province on the Thai side where the immigration officials had no suspicions. However on the Lao side, we were asked why so many Hmong were travelling to Thailand.⁴ However, they did not stop us from going because everyone had legally valid international passports and we were all following the regulations of each of the two countries for crossing the border.

This event was well publicized among Hmong Christian networks from overseas to Laos and to the local churches. Names of those who would attend were listed and plans were laid. Most important was obtaining passports and this was done months in advance.

(Interview with 'Nang Yeng', 2012)

This event was attended by over 2,000 Hmong Protestants from Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and China. Key leaders of Hmong Christians in Thailand were responsible for the procedures involved in obtaining the venue and official permissions, while Hmong from the United States took care of financial support, international publicity and arranging for the light and sound systems. The three-day programme

was comprised of singing worship songs, praying, preaching and testimonies on the stage to show the power of the Lord at work in the lives of some of the participants. White and Blue Hmong were the working languages of the event.

I also observed that for the three days of the event the participants used the time during the breaks to get to know each other, especially the Hmong Christians who came from Laos, Vietnam and China, so that they would feel welcome and at ease with one another. A Hmong Christian from Yunnan province said,

There are five of us Hmong from China. This is the first time we have had a chance to meet so many Hmong Christians – from nine countries around the world. Not only are they Hmong but, more importantly for us, they are Hmong Christians.

(Interview with ‘Pao Lo’, 2012)

Close and warm relationships could be seen from the atmosphere on the last day of the event when many participants could not hold back their tears; the farewells took over an hour. The success in bringing together so many Hmong Christians from so many countries encouraged the organizers to arrange for another Jesus Fest from July 17 to 20 2014. For this event,

the main objective will be to provide an opportunity for Hmong Christians from many countries in Asia to get to know each other better. Since paying the travel costs for the Hmong from the West is not a problem, they are eager to participate in the event in Asia.

(Interview with Reverend ‘Sanay’, 2012)⁵

After the second Jesus Fest was over, I had the chance to interview Hmong Christians who had come from Vietnam and China. All of them agreed that coming to this event in Thailand was the first such opportunity in their lives. They said that if it were not for God and the initiative taken jointly by Hmong Christians in Thailand and in the United States, they would not have been able to come. One Hmong Christian from Vietnam said the following:

We Hmong from Vietnam are very backward. The way of life is one of lower standards of livelihood, dress and education than the Hmong living in Thailand, including those who are Hmong Christians. We are not able to keep up with the Hmong Christians in Thailand and in the West. This is because we have just become Christians in the recent past. Especially in the north of Vietnam, government officials place many restrictions on practicing Christianity. But in this event we have received much encouragement from the Hmong pastors in Thailand and America who have visited us in the past and also from meeting so many Hmong from countries all over the world. This has opened our eyes and our ears and encouraged us to be hopeful that in the future we can raise our level of development in the same way as that of the Hmong in Thailand and in the West.

(Interview with ‘Nai Chanam’, 2014)

The success of two *Yexus Fest* events in Chiang Mai city, which drew many Hmong Protestants from Thailand and Socialist countries, motivated key Hmong Protestant leaders in the United States to plan a third one July 20–23 2017, at Chiang Mai's 700 Year Sport Complex. Around 3,000 Hmong Protestants from nine countries attended this event. Based on my observations, there were more Hmong Protestants from China, Vietnam and Laos as compared to the two previous events. The fourth *Yexus Fest*, which was expected to be bigger than the three previous events, was planned to be held at the Chiang Mai International Exhibition and Convention Centre from June 18 to 21, 2020. This new venue is the largest public hall in Chiang Mai city. According to advertisements, it was expected to draw more than 5,000 Hmong Protestants from ten countries around the world ([youtube.com/watch?v=OS4CAHxoDp4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OS4CAHxoDp4), 2019). The event, in addition to building good relationships with Thai government officials, was also planned as a way of reaching out to Hmong leaders in Thailand who still follow Hmong beliefs, which are considered 'backward' in the eyes of Hmong Christians. Campaigns for fundraising among Hmong Protestants in the United States were made, in order to support Hmong from Burma, China, Vietnam and Laos who have financial problems to attend the event. Unfortunately, because of the outbreak of Covid-19, the committee decided to cancel the event.

Conclusion

Christianity, as a world religion perceived as being from 'Western' countries, became more widespread in upper Mainland Southeast Asia countries during colonial times, and in the late nineteenth century was brought to the Hmong people of Southwest China and Indo-China. A number of Hmong people in China, Vietnam and Laos were converted to Christianity during the colonial period. Nevertheless, the turning point occurred after those countries became Communist, followed by the Cold War conflict. At that time foreign missionaries who worked with Hmong and other ethnic groups were driven out of those countries, while a number of Hmong converts were left behind. After Laos became a Communist country in 1975, some Hmong Protestants from Laos became refugees in Thailand and received help in settling in third countries in the West, especially in the United States. Because of religious freedom in Western countries and Thailand, Hmong missionaries in Western countries now cooperate with Hmong pastors in Thailand in attempting to convert the Hmong in upper Mainland Southeast Asia via different mechanisms. Cooperation and networks between Hmong Protestants in Socialist countries and abroad were strengthened after the end of the Cold War, when the borders of those countries were opened, allowing a greater flow of people, goods, media, technology and ideas. The four principal methods used by Hmong missionaries from the United States and Thailand in their outreach and evangelism among the Hmong in Southwest China and other countries of upper Mainland Southeast Asia include shortwave radio programmes, telephone and online communication, cross-border mobility and interaction, and the *Yexus Fest* festival.

Traditional Hmong beliefs include reverence for their ancestors and local spirits. Although Hmong people share animist beliefs, each clan and lineage group has its own unique ritual practices, which since the colonial period Western missionaries have regarded as demonic and ‘primitive’. Up to the present, the ‘re-colonialization’ by Hmong Protestant pastors, including converts, has on the one hand eradicated the diverse religious practices of converted clan and lineage groups and on the other hand has imposed a hierarchy upon religious beliefs (Christianity vis-à-vis traditional Hmong beliefs) in transnational Hmong society. In addition, some competition and tensions have arisen between different Hmong Protestant denominations, at both national and international levels, with charges of ‘sheep stealing’ in some Hmong villages, or in regions inhabited by Hmong, having become a major issue causing confusion among Hmong converts. Recently, some Hmong Protestants in Thailand have come out with a more neutral and non-judgemental approach for dealing with other religious groups, but such new ideas are likely to face obstacles to their acceptance by many of the Hmong Protestant pastors.

Importantly, although Protestants and Socialist governments in Asia share a similar ideology of ‘civilizing’ the ‘uncivilized’ Hmong ethnic group, in practical terms both regimes have encountered conflict in Hmong society. On the one hand, Socialist governments strictly control Protestant movement from Western countries, especially among Hmong and other ethnic minorities, owing to concerns about national security, as they are still haunted by the legacy of the colonial regime and Cold War conflict. On the other hand, some Hmong Protestants in Socialist countries still mingle their Protestant faith with a Messianic movement, on account of which at times (from 2011 until recently) they have continued to encounter trouble from the state government, especially in Vietnam, which is suspicious of their motives (see <https://www.foxnews.com/world/vietnam-sentences-4-hmong-men-to-prison-for-attempting-to-overthrow-government>, 2012 and <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-security-trials/vietnam-jails-two-hmong-men-for-life-on-charge-of-trying-to-overthrow-state-idUSKBN2152OB>, 2020). It is inevitable that such conflicts stem in part from the transnational nature of Hmong Protestantism, especially with various Hmong Protestant denominations from the United States. Moreover, even Hmong Protestant converts in the United States, such as Va Meng Va of Hmong United for Justice (www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiZeqUVs-Qc, 2020), have criticized pastors of various Hmong Protestant groups from abroad who are alleged to have caused conflicts and problems for the Hmong in Socialist countries. The result is a set of challenges regarding the social meaning of such phenomena – challenges faced not only by the governments of Socialist states and by Hmong Protestant leaders but also by scholars of religious and ethnic studies.

Notes

- 1 In this paper, I include southwestern China alongside Mainland Southeast Asia, since the Hmong people are scattered in mountainous communities throughout this vast area. Part of the information in this article was gathered from research projects supported by the Regional Center for Sustainable Development (RCSA) of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University and by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF), for whose support I wish to express my gratitude. I would also like to thank David Lewis

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- 2 This shortwave radio station broadcasts in White Hmong (*Hmoob Dawb*), Green Hmong (*Moob Ntsuab*) and Black Hmong (*Moob Dub*). In addition to the Hmong Broadcasting Group, Hmong language programmes are also aired by the Hmong Catholic Group under the name *Zoo Zov Yaj*, which are recorded in Phetchabun province and broadcasted from the Philippines.
- 3 The *Yexus Fest* or Jesus Fest was organized to enable Hmong Protestant Christians to come together to worship. The first one was held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. From there it spread to other states in the USA. In 2012, the first *Yexus Fest* was held in Thailand.
- 4 Both the Thai and the Lao officials most likely remembered the migration of Hmong refugees to Thailand and the associated problems that arose in Huai Nam Khao village of Phetchabun province. In the end of 2009, more than 4,300 Hmong from Laos were sent back to Laos in an operation organized by both the Lao and the Thai governments. (For additional information see Niphat Thonglek 2011: 152).
- 5 For more information, see <http://yexusfest.com>.

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