

Hmong American Experience: The Definition of Success in America

Joseph A. Klinge

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Victor M. Macías-González, History

Abstract

This project surveys four approaches to Hmong history and analyzes how the latest approach, *Scholarship*, has been developed over the past two decades by Hmong American activists and scholars drawing on the model of U.S. Ethnic and Racial Studies.

Introduction

Hmong American experience expands the American definition of “success” through what is known as “autoethnographic” literature. Autoethnography combines “autobiography” and “ethnography.” However, it is necessary to clarify these terms before one can begin to understand Hmong American viewpoints. Autobiography generally refers to a Western idea where the individual is the main character. Likewise, ethnography suggests the study of a culture from the perspective of an “outsider,” the distinct character as a participant observer. These views tend to focus on experience of the individual, from a Western worldview. Essentially, this understanding is not relevant for Hmong experience because the understanding of self is as part of the people - the culture and their ancestors. Thus, autoethnography should be thought of as an “inside” view; in this case, a Hmong person who reflects on her or his own culture, not only as an individual, but through connection to the group and their history.

By giving voice to experience, this authentic view enriches Hmong American history; in doing so, it also draws attention to issues within American history as a whole, especially the understanding of self and society, individuality, and the role of family. Beyond this, autoethnography encourages acceptance and growth because it both supports and challenges long-held definitions of success within American society.

Method

Four approaches to Hmong history are analyzed in this study. For the purpose of comparison, the analysis categorizes types of historical narrative under the labels of *Western*, *Diaspora*, *Oral Tradition and the Introduction of Literacy*, and *Scholarship*. The Western approach emphasizes Hmong connections to China and Western religious and secular representatives beginning in the early twentieth-century. Diaspora highlights the post-1975 movements of Hmong into the West. Oral Tradition and the Introduction of Literacy is based on the interaction of Hmong with the West and it suggests a transition between oral and written history. Scholarship, the most recent approach, reflects a shift in which Hmong American scholars participate in the peoples’ history. In light of this information, the Scholarship approach is shown through four autoethnographical accounts.

Results: Historiography

Hmong American historiography has four major interpretations: Western, Diaspora, Oral Tradition and the Introduction of Literacy, and Scholarship. The initial focus of Hmong history stressed theories of origin from a Western perspective. The second and third views included the diasporic experience and the introduction of literacy to the traditionally oral Hmong. These three explanations stemmed from Western sources, and especially reproduced the viewpoints of missionaries, social workers, and government officials. Recent trends have shifted to give greater agency to Hmong *culture*, to include more input from Hmong scholars.¹ The fourth interpretation,

¹There are two dialects of the Hmong language, White Hmong and Green/Blue Mong. These are distinct dialects based on regional and cultural variations. Generally, each group prefers their own spelling and pronunciation; however, for clarity reasons, “Hmong culture” in this study refers to both Hmong and Mong cultures. Information from Yer Thao, *The Mong Oral Tradition* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2006), 1; and Xong Xiong, “What does it mean to be ‘educated’ from an oral culture: a study of traditional Hmong knowledge” (M.Ed. Thesis, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, September 9, 2009), 8.

Scholarship, is characterized by “autoethnography,” the authentic voices of Hmong American authors using the written word to reclaim history and the understanding of culture. Autoethnography is expressed in various literary genres including autobiography, memoir, theses, and creative writing.²

Early Western interpretations of Hmong history stressed ideas of Hmong identity having originated from common ethnic peoples indigenous to Asia. Many questionable theories argued for possible origins in Central Asia and Siberia; however, later, more reliable arguments connect Hmong roots to China with the term “Miao” found in ancient Chinese writings. Miao is interpreted as an encompassing, politically convenient term that pertains to several different “non-Chinese” ethnic groups, an arguably negative label in which Hmong groups are included. Today, China has by far the largest Hmong population in the world. However, in the nineteenth century, many migrated southward into the highlands of what are now Laos, Thailand, and northern areas of Vietnam, seeking to escape Han Chinese rule.³ There, Western missionaries and French colonial officials interacted with them, transliterating their name as “Hmong” in the Roman alphabet.⁴

With great attention on Southeast Asia during the Cold War, the Western approach often devotes significant attention to telling the story of Hmong migration to the United States and its link to the Vietnam War. More recent interpretations along this vein have incorporated the perspective of postcolonial studies to discuss not only a Hmong migration to the United States but also to a broader diasporic experience. Lately, other scholars argue that a worldwide diaspora developed resulting in new populations of Hmong in Australia, Germany, France, French Guiana, Argentina, Canada, and the United States. Population studies show the United States accepted a majority of these refugees, and this emigration was characterized by several phases or “waves” from 1975 to 2005. Today, the United States ranks fourth in Hmong population behind Vietnam, Laos, and China respectively.⁵

Another focus in Hmong American historiography relates to Hmong traditional preservation of history and the introduction of literacy. This approach begins with the idea that Hmong traditional societies were patriarchal kinship and clan structures which practiced spiritual rituals, used agriculture as an economic mainstay, and had specific gender roles. Important to this argument, Hmong retained their histories through oral tradition and, though some folktales claim the existence of an early Hmong alphabet, no evidence of written language has been found. From this interpretation, many Laotian Hmong were historically “illiterate” or “preliterate,” however this changed when Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries created the “Romanized Popular Alphabet” in the 1950s.⁶ Regardless, this historical interpretation contends that many Hmong refugees did not read or write in their own language, much less a host country’s language. Since Hmong American historiography until the last two decades was based on Western, non-Hmong sources, outsiders have largely interpreted Hmong history; and additionally, they have presented this history in linear fashion.⁷

Consequently, a current focus of Hmong American historiography shows the development of a significant shift due to the ethnic group’s “recent” acquisition of literacy, the resulting emerging body of Hmong scholarship, and the gradual inclusion of Hmong experience in Asian American studies programs. As the Vietnam War refugee diaspora resulted in new populations of Hmong throughout the world, Hmong students have been immersed in literacy development and, in turn, scholarship is increasing. Hmong voices now in the form of the written word are contributing to the interpretation of their cultures experience in history.⁸ From this exciting and most recent viewpoint, the study of Hmong American historiography can be understood in a new light. In addition, scholars

² Jeannie Chiu, “I salute the spirit of my communities: Autoethnographic Innovations in Hmong American Literature” *College Literature* 31, 3 (Summer 2004): 44-50.

³ Franklin Ng, “Towards a Second Generation Hmong History,” in *Adaptation, Acculturation, and Transnational Ties Among Asian Americans*, ed. Franklin Ng (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 99; and, Robert Entenmann, “The Myth of Sonom, the Hmong King,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 6 (2005): 5-6.

⁴ Gary Yia Lee, “Diaspora and the Predicament of Origins: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 8 (2008): 21.

⁵ Kou Yang, “Hmong American Contemporary Experience,” in *Emerging Voices: Experiences of Underrepresented Asian Americans*, ed. Huping Ling (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 236-241; and, Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), xxiv.

⁶ William Smalley, Chia Koua Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang, *Mother of Writing: the Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 151; and, Vang, 82.

⁷ Franklin Ng, “From Laos to America: The Hmong community in the United States,” in *Emerging Voices: Experiences of Underrepresented Asian Americans*, ed. Huping Ling (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 17-22.

⁸ Yang, 236.

from Asian American studies programs, which include the disciplines of history, anthropology, literature, religion, ethnography, gender, racial and ethnic studies, and others, have focused on this new phenomenon using an interdisciplinary approach.

Several scholars involved with this recent focus can shed light on the current views and characteristics of Hmong American historiography. For example, Franklin Ng and Kou Yang each produced articles that guide one through Hmong historiography. Ng, a California State University-Fresno Anthropology professor and coordinator of the Asian American Studies program, produced "Towards a Second Generation Hmong History" in a 1993 edition of *Amerasia Journal*.⁹ Ng's article showed which scholars were widely read within and outside of the discourse community, a summary of the state of Hmong scholarship, and which authors his Hmong American students cited in their research. Ng explained that Americans' knowledge of Hmong culture during the beginning of the diaspora was very limited. He argued that more interest in the culture naturally arose when refugees entered the United States in significant numbers. Ng showed popular sources to be W.E. Garrett in *National Geographic* in the 1970s and 80s, and monographs such as Keith Quincy's 1988 *Hmong: History of a People*.¹⁰

Ng's approach of using student papers to show certain tendencies was based on the fact that Fresno in 1993 was the "center of the Hmong community in the United States," and as a result, the professor had access to a large amount of documentation.¹¹ In addition, based on common themes found in paper assignments, Ng recognized that these students were "inventing a new version of Hmong history" as they grew to understand their emerging group and individual identity as Hmong and American. Based on this insight of noticing first-hand a new ethnic body of students emerge and contribute, Ng argued that he was witnessing the beginning of an important shift in Hmong American historiography.¹² Finally, Ng noted that his students regarded Quincy's account as the "most comprehensive historical account of the Hmong as a people." Regardless, important points of Ng's article that influenced later historiography was his direct criticism of Quincy's method, of which was published by a university press but did not use footnotes.¹³

In a different approach to examining historiography, Kou Yang, Professor of Asian American Studies at California State University-Stanislaus, argued in his 2010 article "Commentary: Challenges and Complexity in the Re-Construction of Hmong History" that many widely read scholarly publications concerning Hmong history promoted inaccurate information because they were based on problematic early texts.¹⁴ These included Keith Quincy's *Hmong: History of a People* (1988), Robert Jenks's *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou: The "Miao" Rebellion, 1854-1873* (1994), Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997), and Jane Hamilton-Merritt's *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, The Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (1993) as all having promoted unproven theories concerning Hmong origin and the existence of Hmong Kings in China.¹⁵ To support his case, Yang cited Franklin Ng and another important scholar, Robert Entenmann.

Entenmann, Professor of History and Asian Studies at St. Olaf College, argued that misleading information in Hmong histories resulted from trans-textual influence, an error passed on from one author to the next.¹⁶ In a 2005 article "The Myth of Sonom, the Hmong King," the author explained that many monographs in the 1990s, such as the popular work by Fadiman, relied heavily on Quincy and his sources, namely François-Marie Savina. Savina was a French Catholic missionary who produced the first European interpretation of Hmong culture, *Histoire des Miao* in 1924. Entenmann showed that Savina relied on information from Joseph-Marie Amiot, an eighteenth-century Jesuit who served the Qianlong emperor.¹⁷ Finally, Entenmann argued that Amiot appeared to be the root of inaccuracies based on the Jesuit's misunderstanding of the term "Miao," which he mistakenly used to connect diverse ethnic groups' histories. Amiot's interpretation is a good example of Western bias from the eighteenth-century being transferred, unchecked, into the twentieth-century. Consequently, as Hmong American historiography has evolved, unreliable sources have continued to influence historical interpretations. In the end, Entenmann offered his direction by arguing that Hmong historiography needs to "reconstruct" Hmong history from early Chinese

⁹ Chinese Historical Society of America, "History & Perspectives: Journal Committee Biographies," <http://www.chsa.org>; and, Ng (1998), 99.

¹⁰ Ng, 103.

¹¹ Ng, 99.

¹² Ng, 111.

¹³ Ng, 103.

¹⁴ CSU Stanislaus, "Dr. Kou Yang," <http://www.csustan.edu>; and, Kou Yang, "Commentary: Challenges and Complexity in the Re-Construction of Hmong History," *Hmong Studies Journal* 10 (December 2009): 11-12.

¹⁵ Yang, 8-9.

¹⁶ St. Olaf College, "History," <http://www.stolaf.edu>.

¹⁷ Entenmann, 5.

writings by scholars who understand Mandarin and the significance of loose terms such as “Miao” used in Chinese accounts.¹⁸

In light of historiography, many interdisciplinary studies have appeared in the research of Hmong American history. For example, John M. Duffy, an English professor at Notre Dame, specializes in literacy and rhetoric.¹⁹ In his award-winning work, *Writing from These Roots*, Duffy argued that past historiography has presented Hmong culture as a “preliterate” group; a loose term that in effect typecasts traditional culture as a cause of ignorance to the benefits of literacy. The author contended that Hmong historical relationships - not ignorant cultural characteristics - have greatly shaped Hmong literacy. Hmong ethnic groups’ experience in history shows that they were surrounded by literacy, and in some cases exposed to it, yet only on the rhetorical terms of the dominant majority.²⁰ Consequently, the people were subject to persuasive cultural ideas, different and in some cases conflicting with their own. Regardless of this, Hmong groups throughout history, including Hmong Americans, have forged informal or “unapproved” ethnic identities despite the rhetorical implications of government, educational, and religious institutions.²¹ Duffy used many sources for his argument including personal interviews with Hmong individuals from Wausau, Wisconsin.

Another example of interdisciplinary contributions to Hmong American historiography is Jeannie Chiu. An English Professor from Pace University, Chiu argued for the use of “autoethnography” in all studies of the Hmong American experience. In a 2004 *College Literature* article, “I Salute the Spirit of My Communities: Autoethnographic Innovations in Hmong American Literature,” Chiu explained that many studies on Hmong Americans have used ethnography, the study of culture that relies on a “participant observer” living within the subject community.²² Essentially, this is a spectator who desires to learn about a culture different from their own. Some widely cited examples of ethnography in historiography include Nancy Donnelly’s 1997 study of a Hmong community in Seattle, *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*; and Jo Ann Koltyk’s 1998 work, *New Pioneers in the Heartland: Hmong Life in Wisconsin*.²³ While these particular sources are valuable, ethnographic views in general are subject to the influence of observer assumption and bias. Chiu cites anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay to explain that ethnography observes and studies culture from the view of an “outsider,” while autoethnography is a study from the view of an “insider,” as a “form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context.”²⁴

Autoethnography is a shift and benefit to historiography because it “introduces the cultural informant’s own voice rewriting and reclaiming authority from the genre of anthropological participant observer ethnography.”²⁵ Essentially, early Hmong American historiography has been outside of Hmong control, and thus, Hmong history has been interpreted through foreign voices. Regardless of this, autoethnography, which uses Hmong voices to express Hmong experience, gives an authentic aspect to history as a whole and balances historiography as a result. In this sense, Hmong American historiography certainly shows a shift and direction toward crediting Hmong peoples’ personal experiences. Chiu cites several autoethnographic sources including the 2002 Hmong writers’ anthology *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, the 1994 oral story-autobiographical account *Trials Through the Mist*, and the 1996 autobiography for a juvenile audience, *Dia’s Story Cloth*.²⁶ Other examples of autoethnography include Kao Kalia Yang’s 2008 memoir, *The Latecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*; and Chia Youyee Vang’s 2010 history, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*.²⁷

¹⁸ Entenmann, 12.

¹⁹ University of Notre Dame “Department of English,” <http://english.nd.edu>.

²⁰ John Duffy, *Writing from These Roots* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), introduction.

²¹ Duffy, 123.

²² Chiu, 44.

²³ Chiu, 65-7.

²⁴ Deborah Reed-Danahay, cited in Chiu, 49.

²⁵ Chiu, 44.

²⁶ Chiu, 65-7.

²⁷ Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008); and, Sue Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2004); and, Vincent Her and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, “Hmong Voices and Memories: An Exploration of Identity, Culture, and History through Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 13, 1 (February 2010): 35-58; and, Chia Youyee Vang.

Results: Autoethnography

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, thousands of Hmong have settled in the United States and become American citizens. For many Hmong Americans, establishing an identity that reflects values from both cultures is difficult because the mainstream society is very different in comparison to traditional Hmong culture. Moreover, trying to satisfy each culture's expectations and gain acceptance as both Hmong and American can be a complicated and frustrating experience. The idea of success from different views is an important example of this complexity. On one hand, mainstream society is greatly influenced by the "American myth" which promotes individualism and economic achievement as the necessary means for success. In contrast, success in Hmong culture is a history of survival based on a cooperative, group effort to preserve traditional values. Hmong American authors show the influence of both cultures, and as a result, their experience creates a unique identity that ultimately reveals a new, more meaningful definition of success in America.

In mainstream American society, success has been defined in many ways throughout the Nation's history. A long-standing popular idea is the "self-made man" or the person who "pulled himself up by his bootstraps." Generally, this is a linear understanding of experience that portrays a successful person as someone who established him or herself financially as an individual, like the lone entrepreneur who started out with nothing, but moved forward and braved the frontier to establish a profitable business. Historians have labeled this idea as an "American myth" and it is closely associated with the popular "American Dream" idea.²⁸ In either expression, success is related to accomplishing or "becoming" something as an individual, a new, independent identity that leaves the old "self" behind. In other words, individual achievement equals success, and the ultimate American identity is the financially independent individual.

Regardless of whether this line of thought was accurate or not, for certain, the myth was exemplified by individuals such as Andrew Carnegie, the famous American business tycoon and philanthropist. In his 1889 essay, *The Gospel of Wealth*, Carnegie stated that success or the "highest result of human experience" was in great part based on individualism and the accumulation of wealth.²⁹ Certainly, Carnegie was influential because he embodied this idea of success; after all, he was one of the wealthiest men in the United States and he supported humanity with his earnings. From a historian's point of view, Scott Sandage recognized this American belief in his award winning 2005 book, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*. Sandage argued that history has focused on the financial winner and not so much on the financial loser. In this interpretation, the "winners and losers" idea refers to individuals, and the standard of their success is measured by personal finances. Furthermore, American ideology is an "achieved identity; obligatory striving is its method and failure and success are its outcomes."³⁰ In all, Sandage links success with individual achievement, as it is the basis of the ideal American personality.

In contrast to this idea, group identity is the basis of Hmong values and, in turn, individuals understand life as an experience of the culture. Relative to this, many Hmong Americans naturally value traditional identity because it recognizes and preserves a strong inherent connection to an ancient way of being. Ultimately, this identity is a living, collective bond between the past and present – a circular or spatial understanding – which is revealed through cultural characteristics and through interactions with other cultures. Cultural characteristics, such as philosophy, social structure, oral tradition, and ritual all contribute to tie the culture together, to continuously connect the individuals with the group. For instance, Hmong philosophy is based on an ancient worldview that understood life as a cyclic connection between the spirit world, the people, and their ancestors.³¹ This was an understanding of history which involved the present; it placed the past in existence with the present, and it valued all aspects of experience, regardless of time. Hmong social structure in Asia was based on clan relationships; together, these large "families" identified as one people. Within this communal arrangement, rigid gender roles defined the individual's place within the group and created a patriarchal hierarchy that highly valued respect for elders and reverence of ancestors. In the same sense, oral tradition was a living memory of past experiences; it was a direct connection to group history reflected through the language. Folk stories and legends were shared between individuals, and this was a collective memory which preserved the community link to the past. Rituals associated

²⁸ Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 277; and Irvin Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 9.

²⁹ Andrew Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* (New York: The Century Company, 1901), 7.

³⁰ Sandage, 265.

³¹ Vincent Her, "Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights," *Hmong Studies Journal* 6 (2005): 5, 6.

with New Year, wedding, birth, and death also renewed the relationship between contemporary groups and their ancestors. Together, these cultural characteristics helped preserve Hmong identity by maintaining the continual, ever-present connection with their ancient way of being.

The value of group identity is also shown through Hmong relationships with other cultures. In many cases, dominant societies were aggressive toward Hmong culture. Nevertheless, Hmong survived because they adapted to threatening situations; the culture evolved without losing the group link to traditional identity. For example, while in China, Hmong clans were persecuted and attacked for insisting on expressing their autonomous identity, but many maintained the connection to tradition by migrating to Laos. Similarly, during the Vietnam War era, Hmong were punished by the communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese for supporting the U.S. military, but they endured by escaping to a safe country across the Mekong River.³² In Thailand, Hmong were classified as political refugees and corralled into camps with few resources. Despite these challenging conditions, they focused on keeping the culture alive by staying together and supporting each other. In all three situations, the people insisted on preserving the connection to traditions that gave meaning to their way of life; that connection is the foundation of Hmong identity.

This experience of movement continued from the refugee camps of Thailand to the United States where, once again, Hmong people find more circumstances that challenge traditional identity. In this setting, Hmong clans from Laos settled in various communities and a great number of individuals are now American citizens. Many of these Hmong Americans came to this country unfamiliar with Western ideals, yet as individuals, they have worked hard to learn English and other skills to earn college degrees, start careers, and navigate efficiently as part of the larger society. Nevertheless, based on ideas from Hmong Americans, bicultural life in America can be a challenge because of differences between traditional Hmong and contemporary American cultures.

In terms of the idea of success, the American myth is so much a part of the fabric of American culture that it is weaved into the rhetoric of education, government, and religious institutions. This message of individualism is exclusive in the sense that it not only encourages becoming something more than what one inherently is through individual achievement, it also implies that other ideas of success are inferior. An example of this limiting mindset is shown by the historian Irvin Wyllie: The myth implies “the secret of success...had to be found in the man rather than in the society, and in cultivated rather than inherited qualities...not a difference in natural endowment, but a difference in willpower, perseverance, ambition, and industry.”³³ Ultimately, this dominant ideology encourages Hmong Americans to develop the “self” in order to achieve - without regard for the values of group culture.

Consequently, the mainstream’s emphasis on individualism creates conflict with Hmong Americans because cultural tradition is a great part of their identity and strength. On one hand, Hmong American accomplishments support the myth idea because it is a fact that success in education and the economic world is the direct result of individual initiative and plain hard work. On the other hand, the “I” is not the main character in the traditional Hmong understanding of life. Nevertheless, Hmong American experience shows influence from these two strong, yet different cultures. This means despite what the myth of success proclaims, they do not ignore group culture; and vice versa, they do not disregard the necessity of individual achievement despite traditional group values. In this sense, Hmong Americans show a new understanding of success because their experience gives them an objective, yet subjective viewpoint of each culture: They can view each culture from a distance, from the view of the other; and they can sympathize with each culture because they are attached and experienced with both.

The work of Mai Neng Moua, Mymee Her, Xong Xiong, and Bee Cha provide Hmong experience and perspective through autoethnographic literature including the genres of memoir, thesis, and experiential essay. While four people cannot speak for all Hmong Americans, their personal views are valuable because they show that the concurrent experience of Hmong and American cultures creates a unique identity. This knowledge not only challenges Hmong American readers to act, it encourages the mainstream audience to regard experience as a mutual reality; one which can lead to the discovery of a more accurate understanding of success in America.

Mai Neng Moua adds new meaning to success through her dedication to establish Hmong identity in the United States. Moua was born in Laos in 1974. This was a tumultuous period of the Vietnam conflict and her father was killed when she was only three years old. As a result, she and her family escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand. In 1981 they emigrated to the United States, settling in St. Paul, Minnesota. Eventually, Moua attended St. Olaf College and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree. In 1994, she used this individual success to help create one of the first literary opportunities for Hmong American writers, the journal *Paj Ntaub Voice*. Building on her work with the periodical, Moua published the first anthology of Hmong American writers, *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong-Americans*, in 2002. In addition to these accomplishments, Moua earned a Master

³² Ng, 17.

³³ Wyllie, 170.

of Arts from the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and she continues to contribute essays and poetry to other writing venues.³⁴

Moua's accomplishments certainly show she is a successful individual; but instead of utilizing her skills for personal gain, she became a cultural activist and called for Hmong Americans to reclaim history and preserve their heritage through personal, literal expression. Part of this desire was driven by the realization that mainstream society needed to become more familiar with Hmong culture and values. Moua knew this from her undergraduate research of Hmong history because she could not find literature written by Hmong people. As a result of this, Moua was concerned that the voice of her people, the lack of it in public print, was a weakness in the context of American culture. In *Bamboo Among the Oaks* she stated:

...it is essential for the Hmong...to write our stories in our own voices and to create our own images of ourselves. When we do not, others write our stories for us, and we are in danger of accepting the images others have painted of us.³⁵

Certainly, Moua addressed an important need of her group by creating a means to promote Hmong culture. Since Western sources dominated Hmong historiography up to the turn of the twenty-first century, the rich value of Hmong American experience from an authentic point of view was not available to the public. In addition, this lack of public awareness can also be attributed to the Government's "Secret War" policy which concealed information about the contributions of Hmong people to the U.S. Military in Laos. Consequently, when Hmong began arriving as refugees, a majority of Americans did not know about the culture or why they were coming to live in the United States. Finally, after more than twenty years of Hmong migration, in 1997 the U.S. formally recognized the thousands of Hmong soldiers who served in the Vietnam War.³⁶

Additionally, Hmong are recent immigrants and also have traditionally been an oral culture; consequently, they were not familiar with the Western convention of literature or the way in which U.S. literary critics incorporated minority voices into the canon. This aspect changed as the younger generations became proficient learners in American schools. Regardless of education, in the "Silence" issue of *Paj Ntaub Voice*, Moua explained that Hmong are generally a private people "who are not use to expressing (and exposing) themselves in written form" and in public.³⁷ Moreover, confidentiality was historically a survival technique that had been used as a means to preserve the group in oppressive situations. In any case, the silence trait may have complicated the initial relationship with the American mainstream, but it also affected the preservation of Hmong history because Hmong elders retain and pass on the knowledge of oral tradition. As many elders do not speak or write English, Moua realized another purpose for Hmong American literature:

This is a critical time for the Hmong, not only from the perspective of young writers developing their skills but also from the viewpoint of those who look to our elders - the key to our history and culture - who are starting to pass away...If nothing is done to capture the *dag neeg*, the life stories and rituals of the Hmong, they will be lost to future generations forever.³⁸

From this perspective, Moua set goals that show a new understanding of success in the United States: For Hmong American writers to "reflect the artistic soul of the Hmong community" not only through their individual life stories, but also through poetry, and even fiction. Additionally, she felt that writers needed to record and convey elders' knowledge to maintain the circular connection to the philosophy, history, and rituals that is Hmong heritage. Through her personal regard for Hmong tradition, she shows success as a blessing for future generations.³⁹ Ultimately, Moua's contributions of *Paj Ntaub Voice* and *Bamboo Among the Oaks* have helped open doors for Hmong American writers which, in turn, have benefitted America with an awareness of Hmong history and tradition. In all, these literary opportunities are part of the process of institutionalizing Hmong literary expression and they are legitimizing Hmong authors by giving them access to publish and distribute their scholarship in peer-reviewed journals. As such, Moua's contribution to Hmong Studies is the creation of a scholarly infrastructure through which Hmong scholars can participate in a broader discursive community.

From another viewpoint, Mymee Her also shows how the Hmong American experience adds to the idea of success in America. On the individual level, Her attended college and eventually earned a doctorate, becoming the

³⁴ University of Minnesota, Voices from the Gaps, "Mai Neng Moua," <http://voices.cla.umn.edu>.

³⁵ Mai Neng Moua, ed., *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 7.

³⁶ Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), xxi.

³⁷ Moua, "'Silence' in the Hmoob Community," *Paj Ntaub Voice* (Winter 2001), 4.

³⁸ Moua, 8.

³⁹ Moua, 8.

first Hmong clinical psychologist.⁴⁰ In terms of literature, Her's contribution is in the form of a keynote address she gave in 1998 at the Hmong National Development Conference in Denver. In *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land*, author Sue Murphy Mote quotes Her at length. Like Mai Neng Moua, Her stressed the value of Hmong history and the realization of Hmong connection.

At the Denver conference, Her showed a new dimension to the idea of success in America through her life story. She shared memories of Laos, stating that she had experienced terrors of war as a small child. This was a personal experience that guided her individual path in life; one that not only brought her to America, but also added greatly in her determination to achieve academic success. Regardless of individual accomplishments, she designed her goals in relation to her cultural group:

I had been determined to prove that no one could ever hurt me again...I was going to be somebody...building a life where we would be respected, and a life where no one would dare to walk all over us.⁴¹

For Her, success in America is related to her identity as Hmong. In this statement she shows her desire to become successful as an individual, by "being somebody." This satisfies the individuality aspect of the myth, but notice she acknowledges "we" and "us," the group - her ethnic culture. Her lived the struggle that Hmong people endured as refugees; in turn, commitment to the group led her to choose a career in psychology to help those living in exile deal with stressful health issues that are a result of war and displacement.

Her also clarified that the Hmong idea of individualism is not similar to the American idea. She stated that the "American Dream" – the myth of success – "implies being able to fully participate in the economy of the United States: Being able to work, provide for one's family, and sustaining some financial independence."⁴² Effectively, this definition shows individualism as a sovereign act, one without concern for group connection or history; however, Hmong individuals understand life in another way:

"We see ourselves not as individuals who are different, with distinct abilities and traits, but as being alike. We are connected to one another through various levels of the Hmong family."⁴³

The various levels of the "Hmong family," once again, are an example of group association. The philosophy of connection, the social structure of clans, oral tradition, rituals, and history of the group all connect with Hmong reality, with Hmong identity, and with what success means in relation to the Hmong collective experience. Through her personal experience, Her added a new understanding to the American meaning of success, that of the individual who places the identity of the culture on equal ground with the identity of self.

Similar to Moua and Her, Xiong Xiong shows a new meaning of success in contrast to the American myth. At the age of nine, Xiong and her family left a Thai refugee camp to migrate to the United States in 1987. Eventually, Xiong earned a Master's Degree in Education from the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse and subsequently, in 2009, she became executive director of the La Crosse Hmong Mutual Assistance Association - the first woman director of a HMAA in the State of Wisconsin.⁴⁴

In her Master's Thesis, Xiong includes personal experience to explain and compare indigenous group knowledge within a Western individualized society. Xiong states with regret that the emphasis to realize success as an individual in the United States is so strong that she lost part of the connection with her cultural group identity as a result:

This study was done for my own curiosity as well the need to relearn from the missing years of my life. Those years were spent in a Western educational setting reading, writing, memorizing and internalizing all the tools that were given to me to be a productive citizen. I did not realize until much later that there were huge pieces of my culture that I was missing, for I was so focused on so many things "American."⁴⁵

Learning to be a "productive citizen" supports the myth idea that success is measured by individual achievement in the market economy. This is the source of the "winner or loser" mentality. Consequently, the individual's primary identity as an agent in the economy also means that American institutions did not encourage Hmong to retain their cultural values; in fact, it implied that group tradition was not important to the economy of the United States and therefore, Hmong cultural experience did not matter. Despite this obstacle, Xiong realized the importance of preserving Hmong knowledge for the future:

⁴⁰ Mymee Her, cited in Sue Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2004), 40,177.

⁴¹ Her, cited in Mote, 180.

⁴² Sue Murphy Mote, mail correspondence with author, October 25, 2011.

⁴³ Mote.

⁴⁴ "La Crosse Hmong organization names new executive director," *La Crosse Tribune*, September 4, 2010.

⁴⁵ Xiong Xiong, "What does it mean to be 'educated' from an oral culture: a study of traditional Hmong knowledge" (M.Ed. Thesis, University of Wisconsin- La Crosse, September 9, 2009), 4.

I hope that this study will peak the interest of (H)mong youth here in the United States. There is no doubt that steps need to be taken towards the preservation of their language and culture. These youth are essential to the continued survival of their own languages and rich oral traditions. Yet, there is minimal awareness amongst them of the importance of oral traditions to their identity.⁴⁶

In light of this statement, Hmong American experience in the United States can include cultural loss due to societal pressures that stem from ideas such as the myth of success. By raising awareness of this characteristic, Xiong redefines the meaning of success to reflect more than individualism alone: She shows the importance of recognizing the experience of her cultural group through the preservation of oral history and language.

Together, Mai Neng Moua, Mymee Her, and Xong Xiong relate through their individual experiences to why it is important to preserve the connection to Hmong tradition. Each of these people shows success as giving back to the group: Moua helped establish a literary venue for Hmong Americans; Her became a health advocate in her community and speaks at events to establish Hmong culture in the United States; Xiong used her thesis to promote Hmong culture and she currently serves the Hmong community in the La Crosse area. Each of these success stories does support the American myth by showing the positive benefits of individualism; but ultimately, this definition is revised, extended, and improved through the inclusion of cultural tradition and the group experience of connection.

Like the previous authors, Bee Cha worked hard to develop his individual skills through education. In 2000, Cha earned a Master of Architecture degree from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri and currently works as a design architect in the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul area.⁴⁷ Cha contributed to *Bamboo Among the Oaks* with "Being Hmong is Not Enough," a personal essay which focuses on bicultural experience and the resulting "dilemma" of life as both Hmong and American.⁴⁸ While the previous examples all have a strong focus on preservation of culture, Cha promotes the idea that Hmong culture in the United States can at the same time benefit from individualism and still maintain traditional identity.

As examples of Hmong American literature have shown, life for Hmong in the United States can certainly be a struggle when trying to promote and preserve cultural identity. Cha sees this situation from another angle; however, one in which he is frustrated by the position of being both Hmong and American. In fact, Cha refers to this bicultural experience as a "shambled confusion."⁴⁹ His essay reveals an internal battle between the two strong influences; one in which he fights to bring some balance and understanding to his life. On one side, Cha recognizes the benefits of individualism in the United States. Through his experience as an American, he believes people can have unlimited potential through skills learned in education. This belief in individual success is shown through his positive attitude toward career prospects after graduating college: "With my talents, experience, and confidence, even God could not dispute my qualifications."⁵⁰ In this sense, Cha accepted the myth idea of success, he earned a college degree, and he wanted to use his individual talent to gain economic independence and live the "American Dream."

Regardless of possibilities, the other side to Cha's dilemma is his cultural identity as Hmong. From this perspective, Cha expresses frustration because as a graduate student the prospect of working overseas at a prestigious architectural firm encouraged him, yet he felt pressured by his elders to stay close to his family. This sense of obligation was driven by a "tremendous fear of being banished" if he strayed from established cultural traditions.⁵¹ These feelings show that the type of success found in the American lifestyle can be a threat to tradition because "mounting pressures of individual rights and unrestricted freedoms..." have the power to change cultural views and, consequently, ignore the Hmong value of connection.⁵² Certainly, Cha agrees with this aspect of life in the United States as he states, "Tragically, living in America has unquestionably exacerbated our greed for materialistic wealth and unnecessary social status."⁵³ In this sense, individualism can lead to self-centeredness and lack of interest in cultural identity. Nevertheless, the situation is exasperating because his experience as an individual is positive, he is a 'successful' person, yet his experience of group tradition is one of restriction:

⁴⁶ Xiong, 3.

⁴⁷ LinkedIn, "Bee Cha, Design Leader," <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/bee-cha/10/b09/769>.

⁴⁸ Bee Cha, "Being Hmong Is Not Enough," in *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans*, ed., Mai Neng Moua (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 23.

⁴⁹ Cha, 27.

⁵⁰ Cha, 23.

⁵¹ Cha, 25.

⁵² Cha, 27.

⁵³ Cha, 29.

To be Hmong means our education must take a back seat to our Tradition. It means our culture will not permit new knowledge to adulterate its old Customs. To be Hmong means it is more important to have a face than an ego....It means that the American dream can be a Hmong's worst nightmare.⁵⁴

In spite of this critical outlook, Cha does not turn his back on tradition. In fact, he supports it by recognizing the group's historical characteristic of survival. Cha points out that Hmong culture survived in Asia because it adjusted to threatening situations, and "despite enormous barriers" he believes Hmong culture does and will continue to flourish in the United States.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Cha still confronts tradition by showing that it can be restrictive to the point of detriment: "I fear perhaps even more than I believe that we are so overwhelmed with who we are that we forget to realize where we are and what we could become." In this sense, Cha shows that some Hmong Americans struggle with traditional culture when it does not accept or encourage positive aspects of individualism:

...because of cultural and /or personal needs that must first be obliged, all (especially the first) bicultural generations are deterred from indulging in a complete and autonomous exploration of their free will. Through time, this restraint becomes conditionally understood that *what we are* (i.e., our will to succeed) cannot free us from *who we are* (the obligations of being Hmong).⁵⁶

In essence, Cha's contribution to Hmong American literature questions the validity of a definition of success formed from only one point of view. Taken a step further, this shows that tradition can be just as exclusive as the myth focus on individualism tends to be. Despite this, Cha's message reveals subtle, underlying positives through his experience. While he clearly displays antagonistic influence from opposing philosophies, his sharing reveals that a balanced relationship can develop from seemingly opposite sides. From one perspective, individualism could help Hmong culture regardless of whether or not it follows the customary guidelines of life. Cha certainly wants the culture to persist, yet at the same time, he wants tradition to adapt and evolve as a result of the freedoms found in this new historical context. As a result, Cha believes he can support Hmong culture with his personal skills, as an American and as a Hmong individual who exemplifies the benefits of discipline, perseverance, and initiative.

From another, less obvious perspective, American culture can benefit from group oriented philosophies because these add meaning and value to the understanding of success. For example, Cha's willingness to share his life experience illustrates his concern for Hmong culture in the United States. Even though Cha shows his audience that tradition can impose limitations on individuals - who ultimately could help promote and establish Hmong culture in the United States - he also brings attention to the shortcomings of individualism and the need to recognize all experiences in defining success in America.

Conclusions

While Bee Cha, Xong Xiong, Mymee Her, and Mai Neng Moua share unique viewpoints of life in the United States, they all give new meaning to the understanding of success in America. From experience, each understands the importance of establishing him or herself as an individual in the American economy. In this sense, they each essentially support the American myth of success. Nevertheless, these Hmong Americans also share their cultural experience, their ties to Hmong tradition which values the group and the connection to history over all else. From this view, they show the importance of honoring the group in defining what success means. Ultimately, this unique experience of two different cultures creates an objective and subjective viewpoint at the same time. This understanding of life leads to a more accurate meaning of success in America: One that recognizes both the individual within the group and the group within the individual; one that respects the experience of all people and cultures involved.

In regards to the study of history, these four authors fit into Hmong historiography as contributors to Hmong American autoethnographic literature. Essentially, this historiography involves four major interpretations of Hmong experience: Western, Diaspora, Oral Tradition and the Introduction of Literacy, and Scholarship. The initial focus on this culture stemmed from an eighteenth-century Western perspective, an outsider study of Hmong as the "other." The second and third interpretations were also examinations of this nature, and this view extends to the present. Essentially, these first three approaches are incomplete representations of experience; however, due to a recent, continual increase in Hmong American scholarship, the fourth interpretation of this history, Scholarship, is a view from a Hmong perspective, which adds more meaning to the historiography as a whole. In light of this, Hmong Americans are taking ownership of their identity by promoting their cultural history and their experience as

⁵⁴ Cha, 27.

⁵⁵ Cha, 26.

⁵⁶ Cha, 24.

Hmong and American. In doing so, they bring awareness to the importance of recognizing both group and individual experiences in defining American values.

In terms of autoethnography in the study of Hmong history, Hmong American authors share personal aspects of bicultural life through different forms of literature. While these individuals experience life as part of Hmong culture, they also are Americans within mainstream society. Challenges from this situation stem from differences between these two cultures. Once again in terms of the definition of success, American standards favor the individual while Hmong tradition values group culture. With the addition of autoethnography, however, a more accurate interpretation of Hmong experience is available to the public which, in itself, is an opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding from valuable viewpoints.

Regardless of these aspects, examining the idea of success from different cultures leads to other value issues. For example, Hmong perspectives on spirituality certainly could shed light on religious experience in the United States. Research about how Hmong were understood in terms of their beliefs when they began migrating to this country along with ideas on how traditional beliefs and Christianity can be compatible without loss of meaning could help address differences between the two cultures. An additional issue could be immigration to the United States. In light of this, research on how policy is constructed and what American values influence those ideas would be interesting. Finally, additional study involving autoethnography will encourage more Hmong Americans and other ethnic peoples to express their views and, in turn, this can help in constructing definitions of success and other values through the necessary inclusion of all experiences involved.

Limitations

Questions surveyed include:

- 1) How do Hmong American historical accounts reflect greater cultural authenticity.
- 2) Hmong American authors favor autoethnographical accounts.
- 3) How do Hmong ideas about autobiography differ from standard Western Canonical forms.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Victor M. Macías-González, for his direction and support throughout my History 490 capstone project experience; Dr. Virginia Crank for the Writing Center and my peer tutors Leigh Huck and Eric King; Dr. Deborah Buffton for encouraging me to elaborate on my 250 Asian History research paper; Xong Xiong for the opportunity to intern at the La Crosse Hmong Mutual Assistance Association and Dr. Charles Lee for advising me in my internship; Dr. Marti M. Lybeck for encouraging me to “take chances and explore” with my writing; Dr. James Longhurst for helping me understand historiography; Dr. Jess Hollenback for sharing his knowledge of ethics and values; and to my family for always supporting me as an individual within a loving group...

Bibliography

Books and Published Sources

- Carnegie, Andrew. *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays*. New York: The Century Company, 1901.
- Cha, Bee. “Being Hmong Is Not Enough,” 22-33. In *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans*, ed., Mai Neng Moua. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002.
- Duffy, John. *Writing from These Roots*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007.
- Mote, Sue Murphy. *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2004.
- Moua, Mai Neng. “Introduction,” 3-15. In *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans*, ed. Mai Neng Moua. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002.
- Ng, Franklin. “Towards a Second Generation Hmong History,” 99-118. In *Adaptation, Acculturation, and Transnational Ties Among Asian Americans*, ed. Franklin Ng. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998.
- “From Laos to America: The Hmong Community in the United States,” 17-33. In *Emerging Voices: Experiences of Underrepresented Asian Americans*, ed. Huping Ling. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008.
- Sandage, Scott. *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

- Smalley, Chia Koua Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang, *Mother of Writing: the Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Thao, Yer. *The Mong Oral Tradition*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2006.
- Vang, Chia Youyee. *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- Wyllie, Irvin. *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954.
- Xiong, Xong. "What does it mean to be "educated" from an oral culture: a study of traditional Hmong knowledge." M.Ed. Thesis, University of Wisconsin- La Crosse, September 9, 2009.
- Yang, Kao Kalia. *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008.
- Yang, Kou. "Hmong American Contemporary Experience," 236-253. In *Emerging Voices: Experiences of Underrepresented Asian Americans*, ed. Huping Ling. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008.

Journal Articles

- Chiu, Jeannie. "I salute the spirit of my communities: Autoethnographic Innovations in Hmong American Literature." *College Literature* 31.3 (Summer 2004): 43-69.
- Entenmann, Robert. "The Myth of Sonom, the Hmong King." *Hmong Studies Journal* 6 (2005): 1-14.
- Her, Vincent. "Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights." *Hmong Studies Journal* 6 (2005): 1-25.
- Her, Vincent and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, "Hmong Voices and Memories: An Exploration of Identity, Culture, and History through Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 13, 1 (February 2010): 35-58.
- "La Crosse Hmong organization names new executive director," *La Crosse Tribune*, September 4, 2010.
- Lee, Gary Yia. "Diaspora and the Predicament of Origins: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity." *Hmong Studies Journal* 8 (2008): 1-25.
- Moua, Mai Neng. "'Silence' in the Hmoob Community," *Paj Ntaub Voice* (Winter 2001): 4.
- Yang, Kou. "Commentary: Challenges and Complexity in the Re-Construction of Hmong History." *Hmong Studies Journal* 10 (December 2009): 1-17.

Websites

- Chinese historical society of America, "History & Perspectives: Journal Committee Biographies," <http://www.chsa.org>
- CSU Stanislaus, "Dr. Kou Yang," <http://www.csustan.edu> .
- Linkedin, "Bee Cha, Design Leader," <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/bee-cha/10/b09/769> .
- St. Olaf College, "History: Robert Entenmann." <http://www.stolaf.edu/depts/history/faculty/entenmann.html> .
- University of Minnesota, "Voices from the Gaps: Mai Neng Moua," http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/moua_mai_neng.php .
- University of Notre Dame "Department of English: John Duffy" <http://english.nd.edu/faculty/profiles/duffy/> .