

Informal Northern Thai Group Bulletin

February 5, 2013

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1. MINUTES of the 356th Meeting : January 15, 2013 : “Hmong Women, Gender, and Power : Post-refugee Conditions and the Politics of Transnational Belonging”. A talk by Chia Youyee VANG, Dept of History, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

1.1. PRESENT : Dianne Barber-Riley, Mark Barber-Riley, Hans Bänziger, Sängdao Bänziger, Lerna Basford, Daniel Bellamy, Mukda Bellamy, Bonnie Brereton, Simone Buys, Chanlaxay Lue (Juu Mua), Coline Christiaens, Tony Christiaens, Fran Collins, Mark Crittenden, Grant Crowskey, Peter Davey, Dorothy Engemann, Annelyse Etienne, Elaine Fraser, Louis Gabaude, Allie Greene-Winek, Steve Haight, Sjon Hauser, John Hother, Kay Kalavan, Ken Kampe, Luigi Marcon, Lary May, George Ole Olson, Jennifer Pierce, Geoffrey Pimlott, Lorri Pimlot, Brian Prior, Cinda Rankin, Ron Renard, Morgan Schains, Bob Stratton, Carol Stratton, Renee Vines, Victoria Vorreiter, Rebecca Weldon, Lucas Wolff. A total of 42 at least.

1.2. THE 356th Talk : “Hmong Women, Gender, and Power : Post-refugee Conditions and the Politics of Transnational Belonging” by Dr. Chia Youyee VANG.

I would like to thank Ms. Rebecca Weldon and Dr. Louis Gabaude for inviting me to give a talk when I

visited Chiang Mai for the first time in July 2012. I knew a little about Ms. Weldon's life story since her parents worked in Laos during the 1960s and early 1970s. Though we had never met, we did have something in common. I was born in Laos in 1971 so we were both in the same region years ago. I had read Tragedy in Paradise, the memoir of her father, Dr. Charles Weldon, about his work with the USAID village health program in Laos and the people with whom he worked, including some Hmong people I knew in the US.

Forty years ago, it would have been unimaginable for someone like me to be giving a talk such as this evening. The dreams and aspirations of leaders from great nations and the decisions that they made changed the course of history for millions of people around the world, in particular the several million people from the former Indochinese colonies like me who became refugees and settled in Western countries. The opportunities that have been available to people like me have resulted in my ability to live a life that is very different from the agrarian life into which I was born.

Since I committed myself to giving this talk months ago, I have given it a lot of thought. What key aspects of Hmong women's lives should I share with you? I chose this title, "Hmong Women, Gender and Power" partly because it is the title of a forthcoming volume I am co-editing with my colleagues, Dr. Faith Nibbs and Dr. Ma Vang, and partly because through my scholarly work I have traveled and interacted with Hmong women in many contexts throughout North and South America, Europe and Asia. This is my sixth visit to Southeast Asia (Laos, Vietnam, Thailand). Since I have also been to Japan three times to speak at conferences and symposiums, this is then my ninth trip to Asia. Because I was born in Laos and lived there until I was eight years old, I sometimes feel as though I am always thinking from abroad.

My talk this evening is two-fold. First, I will discuss why my co-editors and I decided to work on a volume on women, gender and power. Second, I will explore pre- and post-migration knowledge about Hmong people generally and women in particular. My hope for this talk is that you will gain some insights and/or answers to this very simple question : What are the ways in which the lives of Hmong women from Laos who became refugees following the Vietnam War have changed since migrating to United States?

What I will share with you this evening is a combination of scholarly explorations and observations as a Hmong American woman scholar interacting with Hmong and non-Hmong people in multiple contexts. One recurring experience across time and place is that in formal as well as informal settings in the US and in Asia, non-Hmong people have often been surprised when they learn of my ethnicity.

I share with you an example before beginning my formal talk. During a conversation with a young Vietnamese professional woman in Hanoi in 2007, I was asked why I was interested in meeting with Hmong people in Vietnam. When I told her that I was Hmong and that I would like to meet some of the Hmong hill tribes that she had mentioned to our group of American delegates from Wisconsin, not only was she surprised, but also I could tell she did not completely believe me. Her response was that I did not look like the Hmong women she knew. She did, however, arrange for a Black Hmong woman of the Hang clan to come and visit with me. She was a friend of this Hmong woman because the Hmong woman often came to Hanoi to perform her Hmongness for tourists by sewing paaj ntaub. When her friend arrived, I greeted her in the Hmong language. She was Green Hmong. While I speak Green and White Hmong dialects, I too am Green Hmong. We were strangers, but after two hours of learning about each other's lives in disparate places, she held my hand as though I was a younger sister. When it was time for her to leave in order to catch the last bus, the Vietnamese woman returned to say goodbye to her and to thank her for coming to meet with me. Immediately after the taxi door closed, the young professional turned to me and said, "Dr. Vang, now I believe you are Hmong because my friend is Hmong and you can talk to her in her language."

Introduction

Since the end of the American war in Southeast Asia, approximately 150,000 Hmong from Laos have migrated to Western countries as refugees. The vast majority settled in the United States. By 2010, more than 260,000 people of Hmong ethnicity were living in the country. While the majority was concentrated in three states (California, Minnesota and Wisconsin), the 2010 US Census found Hmong living in nearly all fifty states. As Hmong studies scholars and others interested in the Hmong diaspora know, today one can also find smaller Hmong populations in France and French Guiana, Australia, Canada, and Germany. In

comparison to the more than one million in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand and the approximately four million in southern China, Hmong presence in Western countries is indeed relatively small. Although they are a small proportion of the US population, the exponential growth of the Hmong American community and their concentration in a few states make them stand out.

Key Questions

I pose several questions for you to keep in mind as I go through the presentation that will be helpful for our conversation afterward.

- What did we know about Hmong women before their migration to the Western countries?
- How were Hmong women's lives impacted by their refugee status?
- To what extent have Hmong women's lives changed in the diaspora, in particular in the United States?
- What transnational practices are occurring among Hmong women in the diaspora and those in Southeast Asia?

Why a volume on Hmong women?

Dominant masculinist narratives of contemporary Hmong history have privileged experiences of former soldiers and marginalized and/or erased Hmong women's experiences (Hamilton-Merritt 1993; Castle 1993; Chan 1994; Conboy and Morrison 1995; Warner 1998). What difference does it make when Hmong women's voices are incorporated into historical narratives? A few monographs have examined Hmong women's lives but they focus on the challenges refugee women have integrating into Western societies and/or the conditions in limited village contexts (Donnelly 1997; Rice 2000; Symonds 2003). While Hmong women continue to face difficulties, my co-editors and I were interested in examining the agency that they exercised throughout the migration and settlement process. We asked ourselves this question: If it is true that Hmong women have historically been victims of patriarchal Hmong culture, then how do we explain the transformations that have been taking place during the last four decades?

In fall 2011, we decided that we would work on a volume that critically unpacks the categories of Hmong women, gender and power. We issued a call for contributions and received a plethora of proposals on a variety of topics. Since we were not interested in a collection of personal narratives, we selected papers that engaged in critical and theoretical analyses. While grounded in the United States, the volume also includes women in Southeast Asia and contributors come from North America, Europe and Asia. Authors consist of female and male graduate students, junior and senior scholars, and Hmong and non-Hmong researchers. Our working title, *Claiming Place: Hmong Women, Gender and Power* includes five thematic sections: war and history; subjectivity and activism; family life; art, literature and media; and sexuality, gender and taboo. I look forward to sharing the published book with those interested in the near future.

Pre-migration knowledge about Hmong

In many ways, our volume challenges pre-migration knowledge produced about Hmong people and broadens post-migration characterizations of people of Hmong ethnicity. Some of the most common descriptions include "a people on the move"; primitive mountain dwellers, highlanders, hill tribe; Lao sung (Lao of the mountaintops) and unassimilable. It is generally agreed upon by early scholars and missionaries that the Hmong prefer to live by themselves and that they do not desire to integrate into the larger societies within which they exist. Hmong women are frequently described as powerless with little or no influence in the public sphere. Though they may contribute to the decision making of households, Hmong women historically did not exert any power in public.

Pre-migration experiences

The American War in Southeast Asia indeed brought about many changes in Hmong society. Displacement due to constant movement from one location to another for over a decade disrupted their agrarian, self-reliant way of life. A whole generation of Hmong people grew up during the 1960s and early 1970s not engaging in agricultural activities. Loss of husbands and sons increased women's responsibilities. While they carried out their roles as caregivers as they had done for generations, they also took on the tasks of the men and boys who were called to fight. Clearly, Hmong women struggled as other women during wartime.

However, the impact of opportunities that emerged during wartime cannot be overlooked. Some Hmong women attended school and others became village teachers, nurses, radio announcers, and entrepreneurs. Though limited to a small segment of the female population, paid work created distinct socioeconomic differences. These wartime transformations have not received much scholarly attention until recently.

I share two quotes from oral history interviews I conducted to illustrate the intimate ways in which Hmong women remember their lives during the war years. They are from my chapter in the volume that examines women's wartime sacrifices :

“In the military, many times I worked for 24 hours. Many times starving, no food, drink. Many times, scary, by nighttime... Many times I've been sick. Nobody take care of me. Nobody give me medicine. Nobody come to say how are you. I was just there with my uncle. I missed my mother a lot. But I had no choice because I had no father to support my family. I had to work. I had three young siblings. Many times people might look down on me because I was the only woman walking with the soldiers. Sometimes they might think about maybe I was there to 'feed the soldier'. After two years they had three more girls come to help me. Sometimes there are many injured soldiers and some die. Sometimes we work for two weeks, 24 hours a day. We moved from place to place. It was dangerous.” (Lang Chanthalangsy, Illinois, USA)

“[My mother] had heard about the boarding school [in Vientiane], so she went and registered us. I and two older siblings were registered. The older ones in high school were already in the city. For the longest time, I was really mad at her for sending us away. I kept thinking that she didn't love us. No matter how much I cried and held on to her each time I saw her, she would push me toward the nuns before she left. Once in a while she came to visit. When she visited, she would take us shopping. I remember one time she bought me a pair of shoes. I remember exactly the spot she held on the shoes. After she left, I would hold on to the same spot every night when I went to bed. It made me feel a little better because I knew she had touched that spot. I mean, that's how bad it was. And, I'm sure it was hard for her, but she didn't show.” (Gaoly Yang, Minnesota, USA)

Refugee conditions' impact on Hmong women

As those of you who either worked with Hmong refugees and/or studied them know, becoming refugees further changed Hmong people's way of life. Refugee status facilitated the development of dependency on myriad resources, most of which were humanitarian aid. Before official United Nations sponsored camps closed in the mid 1990s, many camp residents relied on financial support from relatives who had settled in Western countries. Although gender changes are enormous, new forms of gendered economic empowerment emerged in the camps (Long, 1992). Hmong women utilized their embroidery skills to create story cloths and other designs for Western consumption. Since the Hmong in the diaspora rarely produced Hmong clothes, camp residents also created clothing and other cultural items to be sold to them. The income earned was used to supplement the meager humanitarian support. There is no doubt that much struggle dominated camp life. However, Hmong women's actions suggest that they learned two primary lessons. First, displacement and suffering were an integral part of life. Second, difficulties should be used as motivation to improve living conditions.

Transformations in the diaspora

Those who embraced the latter have been instrumental in creating meaningful change in the diaspora. Hmong women have challenged cultural norms by pursuing higher education and delaying marriage; even if married, pursuing education and career; having fewer children; moving away from immediate and extended families; becoming breadwinners; marrying outside of their Hmong ethnic group; and by becoming politicians, lawyers, doctors, professors, engineers, education leaders, journalists, artists, writers, CEOs, entrepreneurs, and bankers. Exemplars of leadership among Hmong American women in mainstream U.S. society include : Misty Her, assistant superintendent with the Fresno Unified School District (CA); May Kao Hang, CEO of Wilder Foundation (MN); Mee Moua, former MN state senator, current executive director of Asian American Justice Center; Doualy Saykaothao, journalist with National Public Radio; Phoua Xiong, MD (MN); Mao J. Vang, Director of Assessment and Evaluation, Sacramento Unified School District (CA); Mo Chang, Principal of Community of Excellence Charter School (MN); Kaying Xiong-Vue,

Elementary school principal (WI); Kazoua Kong- Thao, St. Paul Public School board member and Minneapolis Public Schools' Equity and Diversity Director; and Kaying Hang, Associate director, Grantmakers Concerned for Immigrants and Refugees (CA).

Women have also played instrumental roles as artists, writers and scholars. Mai Neng Moua, editor of *Bamboo Among the Oaks : Contemporary Writings by Hmong Americans* (2002), is considered the leader of the Hmong literary movement. Younger women creative writers have also put forth groundbreaking publications, including May Lee-Yang and Saymoukda Vongsay, editors of *Hmong Women Write Now : An Anthology of Creative Writing and Visual Artwork by Hmong Women and Girls* (2011) and Kao Kalia Yang, author of *The Latehomecomer : A Hmong Family Memoir* (2008). The most prominent Hmong American woman scholar is anthropologist Dia Cha, whose works continue to be used in classrooms across the country : *Hmong American Concepts of Health, Healing and Conventional Medicine* (2003) and *Folk Stories of the Hmong Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam* (with Norma J. Livo) (1991). My two monographs add to scholarly contributions on Hmong migration and community building in the diaspora : *Hmong America : Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* (2010) and *Hmong in Minnesota* (2008).

Another factor that has uplifted Hmong women is the establishment of women's empowerment organizations that not only provide support of basic needs, but also build capacity and raise consciousness. They provide space for women and girls to safely discuss challenges and explore opportunities to overcome barriers. Issues they address range from education to teen marriages to domestic violence. Examples include Hnub Tshiab : *Hmong Women Achieving Together* (MN); *Association of Hmong Women in Minnesota*; *Hmong Women's Heritage Association* (CA); and *Hmong American Women's Association* (WI).

Perhaps some of the most visible gender changes are in sports. Hmong communities throughout the United States often hold sports festivals and tournaments that are geared almost exclusively toward the Hmong American community. While volleyball was the only sport women could play in the 1980s through early 1990s, soccer became an option for them beginning in the mid to late 1990s. Within the last five years, flag football has overtaken soccer and volleyball as the most popular sport among Hmong American girls and young women.

Emerging Transnational Practices

Hmong American women have begun to engage in transnational practices that differ from that of women in the immigrant/refugee generation. Whereas capital accumulated in host societies enabled refugee women to support relatives in the homeland, education and economic power have allowed many women to live independent lives. Some are working overseas with for-profit and non-profit charity organizations. Others are contributing informally to women's empowerment projects in Southeast Asia. Still others, primarily older divorcees and/or widows, return to Laos and Thailand to seek younger spouses. While Hmong American men have commonly engaged in such activities for decades, this is a new phenomenon among Hmong American women. The extent to which this phenomenon will continue remains to be seen. However, its development suggests that Hmong women have developed complex identities that differ significantly from their pre-migration experiences.

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- Creative Writing Visual Artwork by Hmong Women and Girls*. St. Paul : Hmong Arts Connection, where May Lee-Yang is executive director, and Hnub Tshiab : Hmong Women Achieving Together.
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1.3. Presentation of a Basic List of Sources on the Hmong in three academic libraries in Chiang Mai (Separate document : “Hmong” in Chiang Mai libraries – A basic search).

Chiang Mai residents who want to expand their knowledge and look for tools about most of the topics presented in our INTG talks can now enjoy academic resources on three sites :

- 1) **Chiang Mai University** offers not only a Central library but as many libraries as Faculties and Institutes.
- 2) **Payap University** offers also a main library with unique holdings on Archives for the Protestant missions in the North, Linguistics and Christian theology.
- 3) The **École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO)** or **The French School of Asian Studies** has now a new library with not only sources in French on Indochina and Asia but also with many holdings in English and Thai on Anthropology, Archaeology, History and Buddhism. However, their electronic catalog is not yet complete.

On the occasion of Dr. Chia's talk, I have tried to make basic searches for sources on the Hmong available on these sites, adding what remains in my personal library, the result of which you will find in a separate PDF document sent in a Zip file which should open automatically : « **Hmong** » in **Chiang Mai Academic Libraries – A Basic Search**. The various sites hold actually more than is offered here. If interested, please do detailed searches on the net or ask for help from the librarians.

This is the first and perhaps the last time I build and share such a list for the INTG. Positive as well as negative returns will be appreciated at <gabaudel@yahoo.com>.

L.G.

2. NEXT INTG MEETING : 357th Meeting : February 12, 2013, 7:30 p.m. : “Tai Supernaturalism : Recent Research”. A Talk by Susan CONWAY, Research Associate, Center of Southeast Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Many people think of Tai supernaturalism and black magic in terms of knowledge transmitted orally. This is far from the case. Manuscripts full of prescriptions for banishing evil or actually creating it, have passed from one generation of experts to the next, often through the same family. This lecture examines written and illustrated material of this type as it appears in nineteenth century manuscripts and gives examples of how the prescriptions were administered.

Dr. Susan Conway is currently Research Associate at the Center of South East Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her books and papers cover the culture, arts and crafts of Southeast Asia, specialising in Thailand and the Shan States of Burma (Myanmar). She has conducted field work for thirty years, organising conferences and exhibitions in Southeast Asia, Europe and the USA. Her current research is on Tai Supernaturalism, the material culture of Magic. Her new book on the subject will be published in 2013.

Her full CV is at <http://www.susanconway.com/full-CV>

3. INTG MAILING PROBLEMS

Here are three lists of e-mail addresses with a problem. Please read them carefully and if you know the reason why one address is not valid, please inform the INTG secretary at <gabaudel@yahoo.com>

3.1. The following addresses **have been phased out** of the INTG mailing list because they do not work for various reasons :

<alsauterey.fspmekong@irasec.com> : Unknown User
<bangbox@worldonline.dk> : User unknown
<brac@vjf.cnrs.fr> User unknown
<celinacee@live.fr> : mailbox unavailable
<john@severencom.ru> : mailbox unavailable
<jsburdett@hotmail.com> : mailbox unavailable
<kate_callahan@hotmail.com> : mailbox unavailable
<mael.raynaud@gmail.com> : No Such User Here
<martinThai@hotmail.com> : mailbox unavailable
<merzac@bethel.edu> : No Such User Here
<pia@ezystock.com> : No Such User Here
<sarapee_chiangmai@hotmail.com> : mailbox unavailable
<shiyao@caip.rutgers.edu> : Recipient address rejected : User unknown

3.2. The following addresses **will be phased out** if their boxes keep being full for a long period :

<buntalik@loxinfo.co.th>
<pfmc@gol.com>
<satomasa@loxinfo.co.th>

3.3. The following addresses **will be phased out** if their boxes keep being blocked for a long period :

<masuhara@laotel.com> was blocked by our Spam & Virus Firewall.

4. FUTURE INTG MEETINGS (7:30 p.m. at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai)

357th Meeting : 12 February 2013 : “Tai Supernaturalism : Recent Research”. A Talk by Susan Conway, Research Associate, Center of Southeast Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

358th Meeting : 12 March 2013 : “Mystery and Diversity at the Plain of Jars, Laos”. A Talk by Lia Genovese, PhD Candidate in the History of Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

359th Meeting : 9 April 2013 : “Tai Khuen culture, Burmanization and the 600th Anniversary of Songkran in Keng Tung”. A Talk by Klemens Karlsson, Head of the Department of Publication Infrastructure at KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm Sweden.

5. ANNOUNCEMENT FOR A SERIES OF LECTURES ON BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITIES

The Fifteenth **Sinclair Thompson Lecture Series** will be held on 20, 21, 22 February 2013 at 7 :00 p.m. at the Sirindhorn Learning Resource Center (Main Library Auditorium), Payap University, Mae Khao Campus, Chiang Mai.

Lectures are Free and Open to the Public (Thai and English translation provided).

Lecture Schedule :

- 20 February, 7:00 p.m. : “Buddhist Spiritual Practices” by The Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni & Response by The Reverend Marjorie Thompson
- 21 February 7:00 p.m. : “Christian Spiritual Practices” by The Reverend Marjorie Thompson & Response by The Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni.
- 22 February 7:00 p.m. “The Role of Women in Buddhism and Christianity” by Rev. Marjorie Thompson and Ven. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni.

Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, a former teacher at McMaster University (Canada) and Thammasat University (Bangkok, Thailand), was the first Thai woman accepted as a bhikkhuni by a Sri Lankan community in 2003.

The Reverend **Marjorie J. Thompson**, born in Chiang Mai as the daughter of The Rev. W.J. Sinclair Thompson who served for 15 years as a Fraternal Worker in Thailand, and in whose memory these lectures were established some 50 years ago.

6. INTG CONTACTS : Convenor - Secretary - Website

- 1) **Convenor : Rebecca Weldon** : e-mail : < rebecca.weldon@gmail.com >. Mobile : **087 193 67 67**.
- 2) **Secretary : Louis Gabaude** : e-mail : < gabaudel@yahoo.com >. Mobile : **087 188 50 99**.
- 3) **INTG Website** : <http://www.intgcm.thehostserver.com>

**Thank you for printing the following pages
and posting it/them on any board you can**

Informal Northern Thai Group (INTG)
28 years of Talks!

Thai
Supernaturalism:
Recent
Research

A Talk by **Susan Conway**

Tuesday 12 February 2013 : 19:30

At the **ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE – Chiang Mai**

138, Charoen Prathet Road, Opposite Wat Chaimongkhon & EFEO

Informal Northern Thai Group (INTG)

28 years of Talks!

**Mystery
and Diversity
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