

**Commentary: Constructing Refugees in the Academic Discourse: The Hmong in
America**

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ABSTRACT

Produced in a historiographical spirit, this literature review traces trends in the depiction of Hmong Americans not in popular representations such as newspapers or public perception, but in the American academic discourse itself. By adopting a thematic approach, it evidences the curious chronological development of which aspects of Hmong studies were treated in which way from the 1980s until the present. To this extent, the paper argues that while the 1980s and 1990s saw a heavy emphasis on social scientific studies of Hmong family ties and clan structure which, while careful and mostly sensitive in their treatment, nevertheless on occasion construct the Hmong as either irreconcilably or undesirably different (sections I and II). It then proceeds to crystallise the significant treatment of education with respect to the Hmong, which, produced in particular in the late 1990s and early 2000s, presented powerful cases of forced assimilation through the lens of Hmong Americans themselves (section III). A brief fourth section focuses on the marginal role ascribed to economic problems encountered by the Hmong, treated as almost inevitable. Crucially, the fifth section proceeds to problematise more recent feminist critiques. The argument presented here is that their central drawback lies in the appropriation and overriding of Hmong voices for a particular project. This construction of Hmong voices, finally, is on the retreat in most recent studies which, centred on horticulture, music, rituals and medicine – to name but a few – attempt to elucidate the Hmong American experience through the lens of the protagonists themselves. This is an important step, and one which must be pursued further.

Keywords: Hmong Americans, Hmong Studies, Representations

Constructing Refugees in the Academic Discourse: The Hmong in America

The question of whether the Hmong have adapted successfully to life in the United States after the arrival of the first families in early 1976 is one that appears to be without clear answers.¹ Some, most notably Jeremy Hein, contend that the integration of the Hmong presents ‘one of the most positive interracial exchanges in US history’.² In a similar vein, McNall and his colleagues, as well as Kenji Ima and Ruben Rumbaut, expound upon the remarkable educational achievements of comparatively poor Hmong immigrants as opposed to their (Caucasian) American counterparts.³ On the other hand, the Hmong have experienced discrimination ever since their arrival – the ‘volunteerism and civic pride’ of the small towns in Wisconsin, Michigan and California, where the majority settled, notwithstanding.⁴ Whether in school, on public lands, in broad daylight or at night, the academic debate is filled with examples of the mistreatment of the Hmong.⁵

The focus of almost all of this research, however, has been on the public perception of the Hmong. Studies on the representation of the Hmong in the academic discourse are few and far between, and are concentrated on a more recent turn towards critiques aimed at feminist Western scholars, whose essentialising appropriation of the archetypal oppressed Hmong woman for the construction of a feminist narrative have come under fire in, for instance, Chia

¹ Jeremy Hein, *Ethnic Origins: The Adaptation of Cambodian and Hmong Refugees in Four American Cities* (New York, NY: Russel, 2006), 71; Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), 49.

² Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 100.

³ Miles McNall, Timothy Dunnigan and Jeylan T. Mortimer, ‘The Educational Achievement of the St. Paul Hmong’, *Anthropology and Educational Quarterly* 25 (March 1994): 44-65; Ruben G. Rumbaut and Kenji Ima, ‘The Adaptation of South East Asian Refugee Youth: A Comparative Study’, Final Report, Washington DC, US Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1988.

⁴ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 79-80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28; Jeremy Hein, ‘Interpersonal Discrimination against Hmong Americans: Parallels and Variations in Microlevel Racial Equality’, *The Sociological Quarterly* 41 (2000): 413-29; David N. Bengston et al., ‘Listening to Neglected Voices: Hmong and Public Lands in Minnesota and Wisconsin’, *Society and Natural Resources* 21 (2008): 876-90; John M. Duffy, *Writing from these Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).

Youyee Vang, Ma Vang and Faith Nibbs' edited volume *Claiming Place*.⁶ This lacunae in the research on Hmong refugees is what I seek to address in this paper. By proceeding thematically rather than on an author-by-author or purely chronological basis – although the themes will be dealt with not in order of significance, but in a loosely chronological fashion to facilitate a tracing of which aspects of the Hmong in America occupied the academic debate at which point in time – this will crystallise the wide range of academic discourses in which the Hmong have become enmeshed, without creating somewhat obstructive artificial boundaries between academic disciplines.

The six themes on which this paper will focus are, first, 'Clan and Family Ties'; second, 'Racism and Discrimination'; third, 'Education'; fourth, 'Women, Gender and Marriage'; fifth, 'Poverty'; and sixth, 'Rituals, Horticulture, and Medicine'. Naturally all of these are interwoven and inextricable from one another on a certain level, but for the sake of analytical clarity, it is helpful to treat them in this rather isolated fashion. Two of the themes, 'Education' and 'Women, Gender and Marriage', will be treated in more depth than the other four. This is the case because poverty, for instance, is almost invariably touched upon within a broader context in the academic debate and does not command outsized attention as a phenomenon in itself, and since the variety of themes in the final part serve an exploratory purpose on the scope of the treatment of the Hmong in a variety of fields, rather than an in-depth analytical one.

The issue that runs through all of these themes like a red thread is the central one of adaptation. However, since the principal topic of this paper is not the adaptation of Hmong to life in the US, but the academic discourse surrounding this phenomenon, I will only briefly adumbrate some of the plethora of assimilation and adaptation or integration theories that have been put forward in the debate. Hein's 'ethnic-origins hypothesis', Amos Rapoport's 'culture-

⁶ Chia Youyee Vang, Ma Vang and Faith Nibbs, eds., *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

core' model as used by Lynne Dearborn, and George Scott's adapted version of Milton Yinger's assimilation theory are pivotal in this regard.⁷ Hein, in his 2006 monograph *Ethnic Origins*, provides an astute historiography of social science theories regarding adaptation or integration, of which assimilation theory is only a part. His central argument is that all of the existing theories, from race and class to assimilation, 'modes of incorporation' and 'ethnic competition', miss the mark because of at least one omission: the role of a refugee or immigrant's cultural background, his or her 'ethnic origin'.⁸ Thus, he contends that even the more recent 'transnational' perspective is flawed because it does not adequately incorporate specific cultural traits which refugees carry over from their homes.⁹ This is evidently a valid concern, but it is important not to swing too far in that direction, since it is easy to fall into the trap of essentialising these traits in blocs, thereby constructing one's own oversimplified (and ultimately imperial, as will become evident below) narrative.

This concern also epitomises the problem at the heart of Rapoport's 'culture-core' model, which holds that there are certain traits in every culture or group which survive adaptation to a new environment.¹⁰ Other, peripheral traits that are not at the core of a person's being, however, do change. Both Rapoport and Hein's models, then, are in danger of succumbing to the problematic conception of ethnicity as latent, perennial and primordial – a conception which has been fiercely challenged ever since Clifford Geertz's infamous formulation of it in 1963.¹¹ Dearborn's analysis of Hmong culture, in consequence, leads her to the conclusion that its core features are '1) settlement, 2) family and kinship, and 3)

⁷ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*; Amos Rapoport, 'Development, Culture Change and Supportive Design', *Habitat International* 7 (1983): 249-68; Lynne M. Dearborn, 'Reconstituting Hmong Culture and Traditions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 19 (Spring 2008): 37-49 (39).

⁸ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 13-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁰ Rapoport, 'Development, Culture Change and Supportive Design'.

¹¹ Clifford Geertz, 'The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civic Politics in the New States', in *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Geertz (New York, NY: Free Press, 1963), 105-57. The list of refutations and rejections of Geertzian primordialism is endless. For one astute example, see David Eller and Reed M. Coughlan, 'The Poverty of Primordialism: The Demystification of Ethnic Attachments', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16 (April 1993): 183-202.

religion'.¹² And even though a few paragraphs are offered in explanation of each trait, it seems as though the analytical value of this theory is lost in its arbitrariness and reductiveness. It also presumes that all Hmong are the same, that, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, 'to identify them is of course unnecessary: they are eternal essences of [Hmong], which it is in the *nature* of the East [Laos, in our case] to produce'.¹³ Scott's use of Yinger's theory is slightly less problematic because it proposes four successive stages without necessarily hard boundaries, thus facilitating a semblance of process tracing.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the difference to the previous two theories is also a substantial terminological one: 'assimilation' as opposed to 'adaptation' or 'integration'. While the latter two allow for the preservation of difference, the former presumes the steady erosion of all disparity, which is only obstructed by 'discriminatory practices of the dominant society'.¹⁵ This problematically presumes a teleology of adaptation – problematic in itself – which is also portrayed as desirable.

Having thus briefly laid out three examples of unsatisfactory theoretical explanations for the adaptation or assimilation of the Hmong, thereby further confounding the problem of determining the 'success' of their integration, there are three additional points to emphasise before delving into the argument. First, rather than entering the definitional debate circling the term refugee – a task outside the scope of this piece – this essay will work on the assumption that the Hmong are refugees, and not economic or voluntary migrants.¹⁶ Second, precisely

¹² Dearborn, 'Reconstituting Hmong Culture', 39.

¹³ Roland Barthes, 'The Lost Continent', in Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, NY: The Noonday Press, 1972), 94-6 (95).

¹⁴ Milton J. Yinger, 'Toward a Theory of Assimilation and Dissimilation', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 4 (1981): 249-64; George M. Scott, Jr., 'The Hmong Refugee Community in San Diego: Theoretical and Practical Implications of Its Continuing Ethnic Solidarity', *Anthropological Quarterly* 55 (July 1982): 146-60.

¹⁵ Scott, 'Hmong Refugee Community', 149.

¹⁶ This line is echoed by most writing on the topic. See, for instance, Dearborn, 'Reconstituting Hmong Culture', 38. McNall et al. disagree, arguing that although 'many Laotian Hmong found their continued residence in Southeast Asia untenable for both political and economic reasons [...] the fact that they themselves chose to migrate makes the circumstances of their migration more like that of immigrant than involuntary minorities'. See, McNall et al., 'Educational Achievement', 47. This is unsatisfactory: many Syrians 'choose' to flee as well, per this definition, but this does not mean they are no refugees. For a more complete grasp on this question, see Philipp Ther, *Die Außenseiter: Flucht, Flüchtlinge und Integration im modernen Europa* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017); and Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

because every other academic publication opens with a more or less detailed introduction to the Hmong and their culture, I will refrain from doing so.¹⁷ Rather, I hope to crystallise a picture of the Hmong as they are portrayed by the wider academic community, and in doing so invite the reader to consider whether this conforms to his or her own perception, or whether, as Roberta Julian puts it in a highly problematic piece (discussed under ‘Women, Gender and Marriage’), his or her ‘own stereotypes [become] readily apparent’.¹⁸

Finally, I should flesh out the paper’s methodology in some more detail. Rather than choosing the studies I focus on by any quantitative measures such as citations or database entries, I have elected to home in on a few crucial and – with considerable caveats, as discussed below – representative (as well as well-known within the academic debate on the Hmong) studies in each section, and focus on these in detail. It is evidently impossible to assess the full extent of writing on the Hmong within the brevity of a paper such as the present one, and I have had to make conscious choices to exclude a wealth of significant studies from our analysis. Engaging in-depth with a limited, subjectively-chosen number of studies has come at the cost of scratching the surface of a more impressive number. With respect to the themes chosen, finally, the six I engage with arose from what I believe readers are wont to come into contact most frequently and extensively when engaging with the rich world of Hmong studies; the writings I have selected with within those themes follow a similar logic.

¹⁷ For a detailed introduction to the Hmong, see Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 1-66. For a brief but satisfactory primer, see Hein, ‘Interpersonal Discrimination’, Appendix 1.

¹⁸ Roberta Julian, ‘‘I Love Driving!’’ Alternative Constructions of Hmong Femininity in the West’, *Race, Gender, Class* 5 (1998): 30-53.

I. ‘SOME OLD PEOPLE – I GUESS THEY’RE WISE OR SOMETHING’: CLAN AND FAMILY TIES¹⁹

As the subheading’s citation from a 1993 newspaper article in the *Eau Claire Leader-Telegraph* suggests, at least some Hmong born in the United States experience a radically altered sense of kinship connection than do their parents and grandparents. A segmented, patrilineal, endogamous family structure lies at the heart of Hmong social organisation.²⁰ In the literature, this was an early topic of concern, but one that was usually treated without the enforced narratives of feminism or teleological Westernisation into which the Hmong were written in later work. Nevertheless, when kinship ties or lineage systems are mentioned, this is almost invariably done in order to evidence first, the incommensurability of the US and Hmong systems – with the occasional implicit expectation that the Hmong change and conform – and second, as a link to another issue: that of the subordination or ‘secondary’ status of women, treated in more detail below.²¹

A significant piece in this context is Beth L. Goldstein’s analysis of a rape court case involving a 14-year old Hmong girl and her cousin’s 18-year old friend.²² Because the victim was underage, the ‘court automatically entered a charge of first degree sexual assault’, but the victim’s family preferred settling the issue with that of the perpetrator, as commanded by ‘Hmong tradition’.²³ This settlement would have encapsulated a restitution of the bride price which the victim’s family could have expected for their daughter. However, Goldstein does well here to emphasise the playing-off against one another of cultural codes and, as appears to

¹⁹ ‘Hmong Children Try To Fit into Both Worlds’, *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 12 December 1993.

²⁰ Timothy Dunnigan, ‘Segmentary Kinship in an Urban Landscape: The Hmong of St. Paul-Minneapolis’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 55 (July 1982): 126-34; Scott, ‘Hmong Refugee Community’, 151-2.

²¹ Dunnigan, ‘Segmentary Kinship’, 126.

²² Beth L. Goldstein, ‘Resolving Sexual Assault: Hmong and the American Legal System’, in *The Hmong in Transition*, eds., Glen L. Hendricks, Bruce T. Downing and Amos S. Deinard (Staten Island, NY: Centre for Migration Studies, 1986), 135-43.

²³ *Ibid.*, 137-8, 141-2.

be the case in most of the early literature on clan and kinship structure, does not write her into a pre-set value-laden discourse.²⁴ Thus, the perpetrator's family contended that because the police (ie 'American' culture) had been involved, they were no longer bound to follow Hmong tradition. When the victim's family deemed this to be a breach of Hmong culture, in turn, they involved the American court system in retaliation.²⁵ Goldstein summarises the difficulties as follows: assault is viewed from 'an individualistic perspective' in the United States, while in Hmong culture the girl is a symbol of her 'family position and honour'.²⁶

It is important not to read essentialisation into all statements about the Hmong. Although Goldstein makes some sweeping claims, it is clear that she is projecting from a concrete example, and while this may be considered unrepresentative evidence by some more empirically-minded scholars, the strength of her case is the blurring of and playing-off against one another of different legal traditions and cultural norms. Within the framework of this argument, it serves as an example of the early, culturally-sensitive approaches that characterise the study of clan structures and kinship ties.

Another example of this trend in the discourse was put forward by Timothy Dunnigan as early as 1982. In his examination of the 'segmentary kinship' structure of the Hmong in St. Paul-Minneapolis, Dunnigan goes against the assertions of earlier scholarship on the topic – not produced in a Hmong context – which held this form of social organisation to be incompatible with modern capitalist society.²⁷ Dunnigan, via the example of the Hmong, evidences that this is not necessarily the case. Thus, the division, in descending order, into

²⁴ For another excellent and sympathetic example, see John Finck, 'Clan Leadership in the Hmong Community of Providence, Rhode Island', in *The Hmong in the West: Observations and Reports*, ed. Bruce T. Downing and Douglas P. Olney (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, 1982), 21-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 141-2.

²⁷ Dunnigan, 'Segmentary Kinship'; Eugene Litwak, 'Technological Innovation and Ideal Forms of Family Structure in an Industrial Democratic Society', in *Families East and West: Socialisation and Kinship Ties*, eds., Reuben Hill and René König (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1970), 348-96.

‘Clan’, ‘Lineage’, ‘Sub-lineage’, ‘Family’, ‘Family Association’, ‘Affinal Network’ and ‘Voluntary Association’ allows for a greater flexibility than is commonly imagined.²⁸ The large, ‘pyramidal social structures’ that emerge from this complex web of multi-layered affiliations provide valuable support in times of distress, and are one of the reasons for why, as Dearborn has neatly put forward in pictorial form, large groups of Hmong settle in the same neighbourhood, ideally door-to-door.²⁹ Although Dunnigan’s focus, as becomes evident towards the end of the piece, is still one of eventual ‘satisfactory adjustment’, this is a softer terminology than that of ‘adaptation’, let alone ‘assimilation’ (although inserting ‘satisfactory’ is unnecessary). Moreover, his exhortation that ‘outside observers must not presume that [in reinstating some of the forms of social organisation found in Laos] the Hmong are engaged in a self-defeating process of enclavement’, appears to have been ignored by a vast majority of his successors writing in all disciplines.³⁰ Before turning to the core topics of education, and women, gender and marriage, I will now briefly analyse the role of racism and discrimination in the academic debate surrounding the Hmong.

II. ‘AMERICANS SHOULD KNOW THAT WE ARE HUMANS TOO’: RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION³¹

Ineluctably, there have been a number of direct studies on the discrimination suffered by Hmong refugees in the United States, while the theme also crops up in other areas, most notably that of education.³² Produced somewhat after the interest in kinship ties themselves

²⁸ Dunnigan, ‘Segmentary Kinship’, 127-31.

²⁹ Ibid., 127; Dearborn, ‘Reconstituting Hmong Culture’, 43.

³⁰ Dunnigan, ‘Segmentary Kinship’, 132. This will become evident in the section of women, gender and marriage in particular.

³¹ Cited in Hein, ‘Interpersonal Discrimination’, 423.

³² See, for instance, Michael Go, Timothy Dunnigan and Kathryn McGraw-Schuchman, ‘Bias in Counselling Hmong Clients with Limited English Proficiency’, in *The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination: Ethnicity and Multiracial Identity*, ed. Jean Lau Chin, vol. 2, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 109-36, for the medical profession; on education, see Stacey J. Lee, *Up Against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth* (New York, NY: Teacher’s College Press, 2005); Stacey J. Lee, ‘Additional Complexities: Social Class,

waned, studies on racism were generally written in a sociological framework, the most significant examples being those put forward by Hein.³³ However, a study by David Bengston et al. pertaining directly to racism and discriminatory practices aimed at the Hmong more recently appeared in the journal *Society and Natural Resources*, evidencing the ever broader areas of academic research into which the Hmong have penetrated (this trend will crystallise in particular in the final part).³⁴

Despite Hein's contention that the integration of the Hmong presents 'one of the most positive interracial exchanges in US history', Hein's, and Bengston et al's, studies evidence the prevalence of discrimination suffered by the Hmong. Thus, what Hein somewhat oddly terms 'one outspoken white man', notes that 'if they [the Hmong] want to be accepted, they have to start living like Americans and stop living off other people in society'.³⁵ The survey results Hein reproduces in the same monograph paint La Crosse and Wausau, two small towns in Wisconsin, in which 43 and 47 percent of the population 'opposed or strongly opposed the arrival of more Hmong refugees'. Bearing in mind that over the course of two decades, from about 1980 to 2000, the makeup of the population of these towns changed from virtually 100 percent white to about 95 percent white and five percent South Asian, this sense of 'intrusion' is perhaps an understandable, though evidently morally objectionable, one.³⁶ Interestingly, Hein does not place the blame for these attitudes solely on nativist Americans, but also notes that Hmong culture makes their adaptation to American life more difficult, since their 'diaspor[ic]' nature commonly implies a strong sense of 'in-group' versus 'out-group'.³⁷ The

Ethnicity, Generation, and Gender in Asian American Student Experiences', *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 9 (2006): 17-28; C. A. DePouw, 'Negotiating Race, Navigating School: Situating Hmong American University Students Experiences', PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2006; and Lila Jacobs, 'Assessment Concerns: A Study of Cultural Differences, Teacher Concepts, and Inappropriate Labeling', *Teacher Education and Special Education* 14 (1991): 43-8.

³³ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*; Hein, 'Interpersonal Discrimination'.

³⁴ Bengston et al., 'Neglected Voices'.

³⁵ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 79, 83-4; Hein, 'Interpersonal Discrimination', 416.

³⁷ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 61.

fact that Hein supports his argument with a linguistic analysis of Hmong words for ‘outsider’, ‘person from another clan’ or ‘Chinese’, enfeebles this contention. In this instance, supplementing the merely diasporic nature of the Hmong with Hein’s own ‘ethnic origins’ thesis would have yielded a more complete analysis: these terms were not born in exile, but in Southern China.³⁸

The contrast between the ‘civic pride’ and religious (missionary) zeal that nurtured an early sense of ‘hospitality’, and the ‘small-town [...] hatred’ of these towns and cities in which the Hmong settled remain an unresolved issue in Hein. It is also difficult to quantify contentions of racism in a meaningful sense, although Hein’s interviews go a long way to resolving the problem of unmoored numbers.³⁹

Bengston et al’s carefully-worded piece also avoids sweeping generalisations and, based on a number of interviews, paints a convincing picture of the cultural tensions that lead to racism and discrimination. Thus, for a people whose livelihood depended on subsistence hunting and farming in the highlands – above 3,000 feet – of Laos, the concept of American private property is evidently an unfamiliar one.⁴⁰ In the United States this can quickly have disastrous consequences, as the Chai Soua Vang incident, in which Vang, a Hmong hunter, shot eight and killed six Americans by whom he felt threatened after accidentally entering private property, evidences.⁴¹ Bengston et al’s interviews depict well the desire some Hmong

³⁸ On the linguistic features of Hmong, see in particular the work of Thomas Amis Lyman. In particular, Lyman, ‘The Mong (Green Miao) and Their Language: A Brief Compendium’, *The Journal of the Siam Society* 78 (1990): 63-5; Lyman, ‘A Note on the Ethno-Semantics of Proverb Usage in Mong Njua (Green Mong)’, in *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tapp et al. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press, 2004), 167-78. For a compendium of work on the Hmong language, see Mark E. Pfeifer, ‘The Hmong Language’, *Hmong Studies Journal*. Online at: <<https://www.hmongstudiesjournal.org/the-hmong-language.html>> [accessed 22 November 2018].

³⁹ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 79.

⁴⁰ Lisa L. Capps, ‘Change and Continuity in the Medical Culture of the Hmong in Kansas City’, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 8 (June 1994): 161-77. For a more detailed explanation, see Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 1-67; Keith Quincy, *Hmong: History of a People* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997).

⁴¹ William Wilcoxon, ‘Wisconsin Authorities Reveal Details of Hmong Hunter’s Death’, *MPR News*, 17 January 2007, online at: <<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2007/01/16/huntercharged>> [accessed 22 November 2018].

refugees feel to learn more about their rights and obligations, to avoid such tragedies in the future and halt the cycle of ever-increasing ethnic tension they lead to.⁴²

The above studies epitomise the academic discourse regarding racism and discrimination directed against the Hmong. Usually sociological in nature, they avoid sweeping generalisations and presumptuous narratives. They highlight the tension between the Hmong and American cultures, and evidence the desire of the Hmong to avoid such clashes in the future. As one Hmong woman put it:

We know that there are hot peppers in their [Americans'] hearts, so when they meet conflict, they need to be more calm and speak calmly. If they get too hot, the pepper is going to take over . . . They need to remember why Hmong are here. We Hmong have peppers in our hearts too because of Americans; that is why we are here. So when we have done something wrong, that they be more forgiving . . . When tempers rise things happen.⁴³

This provides a fitting segue to the following section on education, as discrimination in schools and church classes presents a more insidious face than the blatant, open racism displayed in stores, on public lands or on the street.

⁴² Bengston et al., 'Neglected Voices', 883-7.

⁴³ Cited in *ibid.*, 888.

III. ‘HAVE YOU EVER DREAMED AN AMERICAN DREAM?’: THE HMONG AND AMERICAN EDUCATION⁴⁴

One of the most heavily studied themes with respect to the Hmong is that of education.⁴⁵ Interestingly, there exists no consensus on whether the Hmong are ‘successful’ at school, or whether they fare poorly compared to their American classmates. Two significant studies which appeared within three years of one another crystallise these disparate conclusions. The earlier was conducted by McNall and his colleagues in 1994 and focusses on ‘educational achievement’, while the later 1997 piece penned by MayKao Yangblongsua Hang homes in on female truancy. Helpfully, both focus on the St. Paul school district.⁴⁶ The central conclusion of the earlier piece is that ‘despite their depressed economic conditions they experience at home, Hmong adolescents in our study report higher academic aspirations, greater effort, and greater achievement than their non-Hmong peers’.⁴⁷ To this extent, their ‘significantly higher grade-point averages’ are due not only to ‘greater investment of time in homework’, but also to strict family pressure.⁴⁸ Despite the mostly uneducated, low-income background of the Hmong pupils’ parents – in 1988 ‘87 percent [N=76] reported incomes below [USD] 15 thousand’⁴⁹ – Hmong parents held noticeably higher aspirations for their children, on average expecting a four-year college degree as well as a master’s degree, whereas American parents expected a four-year college degree only.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Cited in Duffy, *Writing from These Roots*, 144.

⁴⁵ It is evidently impossible to provide an exhaustive list at this stage. See footnote 32 for a limited number of studies connected specifically to discrimination. See also, for instance, Joan Timm, ‘Hmong Values and American Education’, *Forward: Wisconsin Journal for Supervision and Curriculum Development* 16 (1992): 1-11; Christopher Vang, ‘Hmong-American Students Still Face Multiple Challenges in Public Schools’, *Multicultural Education* 13 (2005): 27-42. See also the very recent *Hmong Studies Journal*’s special issue on ‘Hmong American Education’: *Hmong Studies Journal* 19, vol. 1 (2018).

⁴⁶ McNall et al., ‘Educational Achievement’; MayKao Yangblongsua Hang, ‘Growing Up Hmong American: Truancy Policy and Girls’, *Hmong Studies Journal* 1 (Spring 1997): 1-54.

⁴⁷ McNall et al., ‘Educational Achievement’, 52.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

The explanation for this success offered by McNall et al., however, is at times tenuous, and based on a precarious application of the ‘involuntary’ versus ‘voluntary immigrant’ distinction hinted at above. First, the claim that Hmong parents wish their children to excel at school because proficiency in English and French in Laos meant greater opportunities for well-paying jobs with the respective militaries runs somewhat counter to the low schooling of the parents themselves, whose age would not have precluded the acquisition of higher levels of education in Laos. Instead, both children and parents were either employed agriculturally or militarily.⁵¹ Moreover, the authors’ application of the involuntary versus voluntary distinction – one simplified contention of which is that voluntary migrants do considerably better than those who enter involuntarily⁵² – is flawed, since the Hmong were indubitably refugees, not voluntary migrants: by 1973, 17,000 Hmong soldiers and 50,000 Hmong civilians had been killed; other estimates put the death toll anywhere between 10 and 30 percent of the Hmong population of Laos.⁵³ Other explanations, outside the scope of this essay, will have to be found, in particular given that Hang’s conclusion run counter to those of McNall et al. Thus, Hang’s analysis of truancy among Hmong girls reveals that they are particularly prone to this type of misdemeanour, something also surveyed in McNall et al’s study – with the opposite conclusion.⁵⁴

For Hang, the explanation for the prominence of truancy among Hmong girls in particular lies at the confluence of parental pressure, social and economic difficulties, a misguided truancy policy, and a failure on the part of schools to adequately recognise and prevent this type of behaviour.⁵⁵ An empathetic portrait of Hmong life in a mid-western city, Hang, through a series of interviews, astutely draws out the crossroads at which these girls find

⁵¹ Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 1-31; Hein, ‘Interpersonal Discrimination’, Appendix 1.

⁵² See John U. Ogbu and Margaret A. Gibson, eds., *Minority Status and Schooling: A Comparative Study of Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities* (New York, NY: Garland, 1991).

⁵³ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 71; Bengston et al., ‘Neglected Voices’, 877.

⁵⁴ McNall et al., ‘Educational Achievement’, 53-4; Hang, ‘Growing Up Hmong American’, 16-7.

⁵⁵ Hang, ‘Growing Up Hmong American’, 22, 26, 30-2, 37-8.

themselves: caught between the ‘unattainable role of the ‘good Hmong girl’’ on the one hand, and the ‘freedom’ these Hmong girls perceive other American teenagers to be experiencing on the other.⁵⁶ To this extent, truancy becomes a form of escapism, the only period in which these girls are not confronted with either domestic tasks or the insouciance of other students. In entering this seemingly liberated space, however, the girls fall ‘into the waiting arms of the law’, and it is from these reported encounters that Hang draws her data.⁵⁷ The Truancy Intervention Programme (TIP), begun in September 1995, processed 1,042 referrals between its beginning and March 1996, of which 27% were Hmong (the Hmong student population of the St. Paul school district comprises 18.5% of the total). Of the Hmong who progressed to the final stage of the three-part TIP (Referrals, Student Attendance Review Team, and ultimately Court), 70% were girls.⁵⁸ Thus, for the reasons given above, Hmong girls do indeed appear to be more ‘chronic’ truants than boys, and the slightly skewed percentage of referrals with respect to the total Hmong student population render Hang’s findings credible. This aspect of the question of whether the Hmong do better in the American educational system than their Caucasian American counterparts, then, currently lies unresolved.

More recently, John Duffy’s 2007 monograph *Writing from these Roots* has portrayed the difficulties of Hmong adaptation to American life not only from the vantage of a confluence of oppositional cultural push and pull factors, but from one of institutional narratives. Thus, he counters the presentation of the Hmong as ‘stone age’ people by asserting that although they were preliterate in a literalist interpretation, the ‘universe of signs, symbols, and graphical representations of spoken language’ were not as foreign to them as is commonly assumed.⁵⁹ On this point, however, Duffy overstates his case. Presenting a handful of counter examples of Hmong who learned to read and write in refugee camps in Thailand, or who held government

⁵⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 16-7.

⁵⁹ Duffy, *Writing from these Roots*, 125-6.

positions before seeking refuge does not refute the simple, unessentialised truth that illiteracy was an overwhelming fact of life for most Hmong.⁶⁰ For while Duffy's interpretation of literacy is certainly a valid one, the functional definition of literacy upon which all other research depends, and which lies at the heart of the American educational system into which Hmong refugees entered, does not conform to his usage of the term.

But this is not the outstanding contribution of Duffy's research, which is found much more in his portrayal of the indoctrination of the Hmong with 'the aims and ideologies of the sponsoring institutions', in particular churches and schools.⁶¹ Thus, newcomers were simply carted off to Sunday sermons and, once sufficiently proficient in English, placed in Bible study groups, while the citation in the subheading presents a clear picture of the 'thresher of American schools', which functioned as "'major agents of assimilation and builders of national unity'".⁶² This constructed perception of the Hmong as 'stone age' people rendered them controllable *tabula rasae*, thus leaving them open to an insidious form of colonialism which will crystallise more clearly in the fifth part of this paper. In the realm of education too, however, it is nonetheless significant to note that Duffy lays bare that in the case of the Hmong, 'the colonial state could manipulate and invent [...] tradition at will' for the sake of control, as Nicholas Dirks has written in a different context.⁶³

This type of experience evidently existed side-by-side with more blatant racism, as Hein and others have reported, and stereotypes such as the eating of dogs are particularly revealing of the narrative crafted for the Hmong.⁶⁴ Duffy does well to lay bare these mechanisms. As is

⁶⁰ Ibid., 125-8.

⁶¹ Ibid., 126.

⁶² Ibid., 138; Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, cited in *ibid.*, 138.

⁶³ Nicholas B. Dirks, 'The Invention of Caste: Civil Society in Colonial India', *Social Analysis* 25 (September 1989): 42-52 (50). Indeed, the analysis of this type of colonialism, with transferable lessons, has been perfected in the history of colonial India. See in particular, Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795-1895* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994). For the purpose of this paper, Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) is particularly relevant.

⁶⁴ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 85; Duffy, *Writing from these Roots*, 139; Hang, 'Growing Up Hmong American', 26.

the case with Hang and with McNall et al., his portrayal of the Hmong is empathetic and sensitive. The academic debate surrounding the education of Hmong Americans is thus a significant one, and one in which, while there appear to be few agreements on empirical facts, the Hmong are presented as vacillating between two worlds, caught up in conflicting institutions, cultures and minds. And as Duffy's work cautions, it would be a grave mistake for American organisations, institutions and individuals to exploit this precarious position by constructing their own narratives regarding what renders the Hmong 'Hmong'. In the following part, this study will very briefly elucidate the role of poverty in the academic debate.

IV: THE HMONG AND POVERTY

In contrast to the academic discourse on the Hmong and education, there are few studies concerned directly with the poverty (or lack thereof) of the Hmong.⁶⁵ Rather, their frequently unfortunate economic situation is something that needs to be briefly explained, before being connected to the wider issues under discussion in any given study. Thus, in Hein's 2006 monograph, the median household income of the Hmong – \$14,300 compared to approximately \$30,000 in the 1990 census – is cited primarily in order to ascertain that 'Cambodians and the Hmong [...] assumed the lowest position in the American class hierarchy' – a facile and somewhat unjustified claim, if judged against the uptick in Hmong employment in the 1990s, and if one accepts, for instance, McNall's claim of Hmong educational achievements.⁶⁶ In

⁶⁵ There exists, however, a 1991 policy paper related directly to the economic situation of the Hmong. One of its most significant findings is the discrepancy in economic 'integration' or adaptation between the first wave of 'about 9,000' Hmong who arrived between 1975 and 1978, and the 43,000 who 'followed between 1979 and 1981'. The former were the educated elite, some of whom had worked closely with US and French administrators; the latter came from lower strata in society. See Simon Fass, 'The Hmong in Wisconsin: On the Road to Self-Sufficiency', Wisconsin Policy Research Institute Report, April 1991, online at: <<https://www.badgerinstitute.org/BI-Files/Special-Reports/Reports-Documents/Vol4No2.pdf>> [accessed 23 November 2018].

⁶⁶ Their liminal position as neither 'illegal immigrants' nor 'legal immigrants who arrive through family sponsors or because they have professional skills' also contributes to their place in Hein's hierarchy. Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 37-8. Duffy, *Writing from these Roots*, 147. McNall, 'Educational Achievement'.

Duffy's *Writing from these Roots*, Hmong poverty is explained, as is almost invariably the case, via a discussion of the 'recession of the early 1980s', which forced Hmong with, on average, and eighth-grade education, to compete for employment opportunities with newly unemployed Americans.⁶⁷ A lack of English and disorientation in their new environment rendered this task an arduous one.

Hang, in her study on truancy discussed above, discerns poverty as one of the reasons for the teenage Hmong girls' seeming penchant for this form of behaviour, since 'increases in concentrated poverty because of urban labour market changes have clearly affected the physical environment and urban stressors'. Thus, she notes how one of her interviewees 'had experienced three deaths of close friends in the past year'.⁶⁸ Poverty thus leads into unwelcome environments, which in turn place an inordinate amount of additional mental strain on Hmong students, and presents one causal factor in the chain that leads to Hmong girls' truancy. That this factor is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain this phenomenon, however, becomes evident when once more contrasting Hang's conclusions to those of McNall et al., whose argument runs counter to most other scholarship on the topic, and holds that *despite* their relative poverty, Hmong teenagers outperform white American students on all fronts, including delinquencies such as truancy.⁶⁹ As has become evident over the course of this paper, however, it appears impossible to generalise the situation of the Hmong in America, something also remarked upon by Chan.⁷⁰

With this in mind, I will now turn to an assessment of the role of women, gender and marriage in the academic discourse concerning the Hmong. In contrast to the even-minded and mostly unprepossessing debates regarding the Hmong that have been discussed in the themes

⁶⁷ Hein, *Ethnic Origins*, 37-8; Duffy, *Writing from these Roots*, 147.

⁶⁸ Hang, 'Growing Up Hmong American', 34-5, 37.

⁶⁹ McNall et al., 'Educational Achievement', 50-2.

⁷⁰ Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 50.

thus far, there are significant issues in the representation of the Hmong in the literature on this topic.

V. WOMEN, GENDER AND MARRIAGE: RECENT DEBATES AND INVENTING TRADITION

A significant recent turn in the academic debate has been one towards feminist readings of Hmong social structures, norms and culture, as well as towards the broader role of women, gender and sexuality.⁷¹ Indeed, given that the Hmong social system is a patrilineal, endogamous one in which the practices of levirate (by which a widow must marry her deceased husband's brother) and polygyny are the norm, and in which most major decisions are taken by groups (not individuals) of men, this is not surprising.⁷² What is more surprising is that the feminist appropriations of Hmong womanhood have caused a backlash in the Hmong academic community, leading to a heated debate concerning the representation and significance of women, gender and marriage in societies such as that of the Hmong. The sites of the most fruitful debates on this theme have been two problematic texts by Nancy Donnelly and Roberta Julian.⁷³ Not only are the titles of both studies self-aggrandising and facetious, respectively, but the very opening of Julian's piece immediately presents a problematic picture of her view of the Hmong women she feels the need to 'save':

⁷¹ See, for instance, Vang, Vang and Nibbs, *Claiming Place*; Kong Pheng Pha, Louisa Schein and Pao Lee Vue, 'Hmong Sexual Diversity: Beginning the Conversation', *Hmong Studies Journal* 16 (2015): 1-18; Pa Der Vang and Pa Her, 'Teenage Marriage among Hmong American Women', *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment* 24 (2014): 138-55; Nao Xiong and Ger Xiong, 'Til Divorce Do Us Part: Divorce, Sex, and State of Residence among Hmong Americans', *Hmong Studies Journal* 13 (2010): 1-12. Nancy D. Donnelly, *Changing Lives of Refugee Women* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997).

⁷² William H. Meredith and John P. Rowe, 'Changes in Refugee Marital Attitudes in America', in Hendricks et al., *The Hmong in Transition*, 121-31; Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 53.

⁷³ Donnelly, *Changing Lives*; Julian, "'I Love Driving!'".

How unprepared I was for the sight of the conference participants at breakfast and the first plenary session! They were almost all Hmong! More importantly the conference was organized and managed by a group of Hmong women who presented a very visible and highly competent profile throughout the three-day conference.⁷⁴

For a scholar wishing to free Hmong women from the shackles of male dominance, it rings odd to appear surprised at their competence – had this conference been organised by a Caucasian American or European academic, her organisational skills would certainly not have deserved mention. What becomes more problematic over the course of Julian’s piece, however, is the construction of Hmong women through Western eyes in which she reifies and in a sense codifies Hmong refugee culture almost exclusively on the basis of Donnelly’s equally problematic monograph, while claiming that it is her position as a ‘sociologist and feminist’ which have ‘enabled her’ to ‘contribute some valuable insights’ into Hmong identity construction.⁷⁵

The picture she paints is one in which women are dominated and dejected. Citing Donnelly, she for instance notes that ‘ultimately each woman worked under the command of the men of her own household – under the husband if married, under her father and brothers if unmarried, under her son if aged. A woman’s primary loyalty was to her father, husband, or brother as the embodiment of the family’.⁷⁶ By conducting a series of interviews with US-born Hmong women who have been emancipated from their perceived oppression, she constructs a unidirectional and simplistic trajectory from ‘bad’ traditional and oppressed, to ‘good’ ‘open’ and Western. However, this lens of analysis is inherently based on the presumption of modern

⁷⁴ Julian, “‘I Love Driving!’”, 30.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷⁶ Donnelly cited in *ibid.*, 36. See also 37-8, 40-1, 47.

Western liberal democracy's immanent superiority over other cultures which, in an almost Hegelian teleology, posits the necessary improvement from one stage to the other.⁷⁷ This same point has been made forcefully by Leena Her and, with somewhat disparate nuances, by Bic Ngo.⁷⁸

The final form of Hmong women, according to the Western feminist narrative, is that of the 'educated and acculturated Hmong woman who refuses to abide by Hmong patriarchal social order. In the ethnographic archives, they are Hmong women who have adopted Western notions of gender equality and modernity'.⁷⁹ If Her invokes Chandra Mohanty's concept of 'discursive colonialism', whereby the erasure of 'heterogeneities' facilitates an essentialised, 'composite' idea of, in this case, women, I suggest the significance of reading Bernard Cohn's seminal work on the creation and domination of knowledge as similarly powerful in this context.⁸⁰ Thus, Cohn's 'modalities' of knowledge and colonialism offer a helpful lens through which to view the efforts of Donnelly and Julian: Donnelly's work in Seattle, for instance, constitutes a consummate example of the application of the 'surveillance' modality in combination with the 'museological' variant. In observing and interviewing these Hmong refugees, she artificially classified them, and constructed a set past, which, in turn, dictates an equally pre-determined trajectory of emancipation and improvement via the convergence with Western standards.⁸¹ Evidently the aim of these two scholars is not the oppression of Hmong women, but in dissecting their texts it becomes evident that Hmong women are made means to

⁷⁷ One is reminded of Francis Fukuyama's famous and inadvertent caricature of his own tradition of thought. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1992).

⁷⁸ Leena N. Her, 'Rewriting Hmong Women in Western Texts', in *Claiming Place*, 3-27; Bic Ngo, 'Contesting 'Culture': The Perspectives of Hmong American Female Students on Early Marriage', *Anthropological and Education Quarterly* 33 (June 2002): 163-88.

⁷⁹ Her, 'Rewriting Hmong Women', 9-10.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 4; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse', *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61-8; Cohn, *Colonialism*, 4-16.

⁸¹ Cohn, *Colonialism*, 4-10.

the end of advancing a particular Western feminist discourse, rather than being a group of scholarly interest in itself.

As Her notes, there are indeed different roles for men and women in Hmong society, but from a Hmong conception these are not based on unjust hierarchical impositions by a patriarchy, but on the serving of different community needs.⁸² Curiously, Donnelly herself notes this contention by ‘a number of Hmong’, who ‘have maintained to me that although men and women do indeed occupy different spheres and pursue different activities, both male and female spheres are essential: Neither can do without the other, and therefore they are at bottom equivalent’.⁸³ Nevertheless, she insists that this is not what Hmong women want. What Hmong women *must* want, according to Donnelly and Julian’s narrative, is to become ever more Western.

Ngo’s assessment of the marriage attitude of Hmong Americans also makes a strong case in this context. Thus, she crystallises the extent to which Hmong girls do not marry early out of a sense of ‘tradition’, or because of parental pressure, but in the face of it. The only way out of the type of situation also described by Hang above, is to marry, in some cases even earlier in the US than is usual in Laos: as young as 11.⁸⁴ Only this breaks the twin pressures of being a ‘free’ American teenager, while simultaneously adhering to the overweening pressure of being a ‘good Hmong girl’.⁸⁵ When it comes to ‘marriage attitudes’, finally, it should also be noted that women in a survey conducted by William Meredith and John Rowe responded more ‘traditionally’ than did men.⁸⁶ Thus, a greater percentage of women than men held that men should make the decisions in a household.⁸⁷ Although a small survey (N=134) such as this

⁸² Her, ‘Rewriting Hmong Women’, 13.

⁸³ Donnelly cited in *ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁴ Ngo, ‘Contesting “Culture”’, 163, 167, 170. This is also recognised by Julian: Julian, ‘“I Love Driving!”’, 43.

⁸⁵ Hang, ‘Growing Up Hmong American’, 30-1.

⁸⁶ Meredith and Rowe, ‘Changes in Refugee Marriage Attitudes’, 126.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

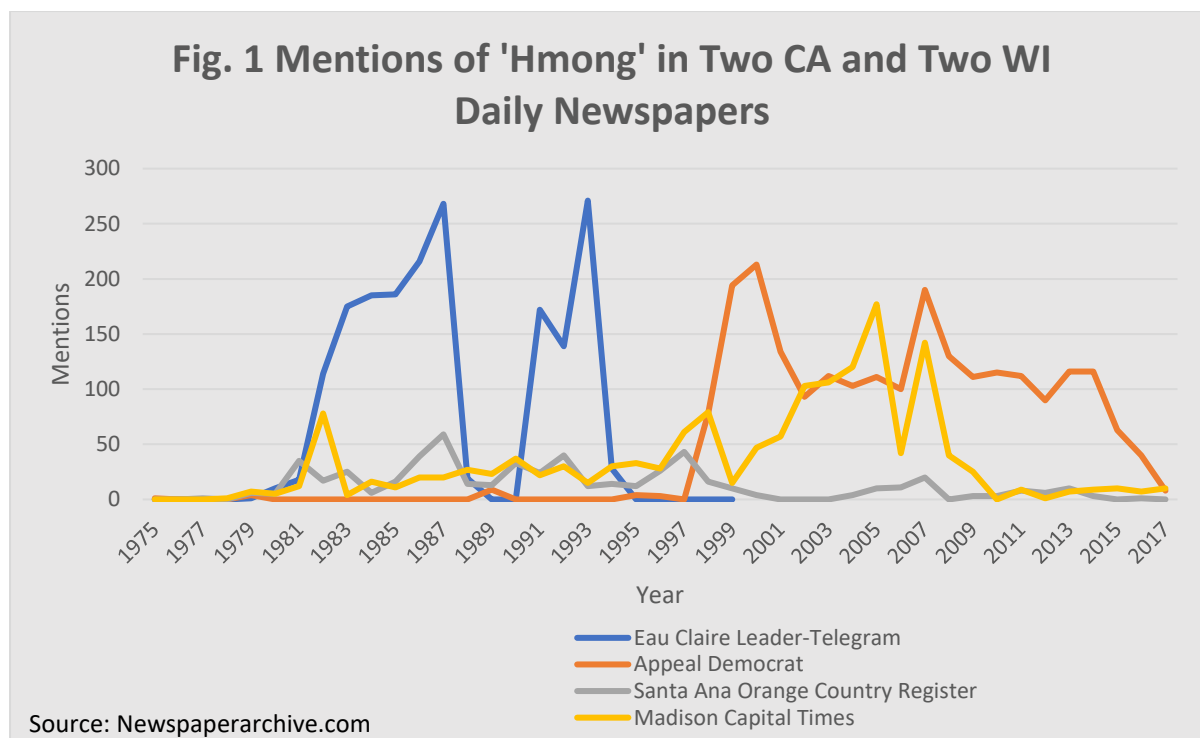
should not be imbued with too much heft, it nonetheless forces scholars such as Donnelly and Julian to revisit their attitudes toward Hmong womanhood. Their reification of traditional patriarchal society in Laos and its oppressiveness is viewed as a graver issue by them than it is by many of the Hmong women they interviewed.⁸⁸

This section has thus laid bare the problematic nature of the feminist construction of Hmong society of the academic discourse of the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as analysing the recent backlash against it. Rather than viewing Hmong women through a single, Western lens, it is significant to understand whether this sense of oppression, injustice and dominance is perceived similarly in the societies under observation to the way it is by the scholars observing the phenomena. In the final part of this study, I will present a more exploratory survey of other academic discourses into which the study of the Hmong has entered.

VI. THE HMONG IN THE WIDER ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: RITUALS, HORTICULTURE, MEDICINE

In contrast to newspaper reporting on the Hmong, the frequency of which depends to a greater degree on localised incidents and is subject to rapid shifts of focus, the study of various aspects connected to this particular ethnic group in academia has seen a relatively steady quantitative increase since 1975 (depicted in Figures 1 and 2).

⁸⁸ Donnelly cited in Her, 'Rewriting Hmong Women', 13.

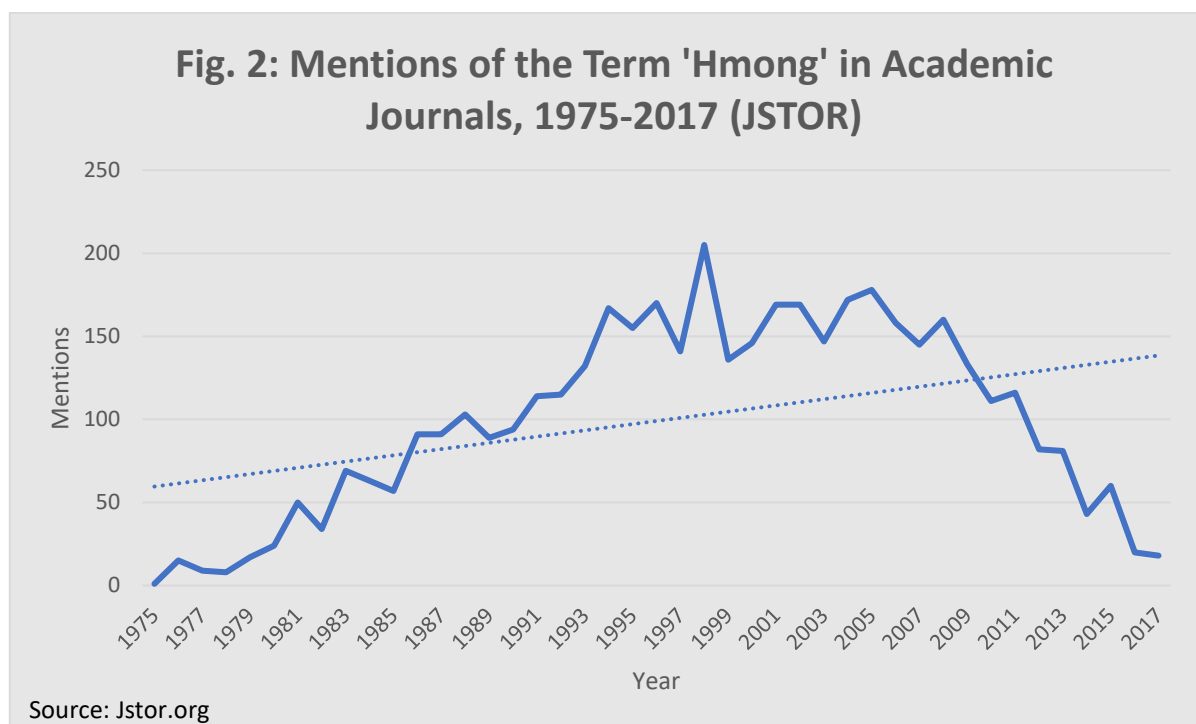


Qualitatively, too, there has been a pronounced change in the direction of research, corresponding, with a slight delay, to the progressing cultural and postmaterialist turns.⁸⁹ Thus, while earlier studies focused on clan and kinship structures through a more ‘empirical’ positivistic lens, the fifth section on feminist readings of Hmong womanhood epitomises the current state of research on the Hmong in the humanities and social sciences.⁹⁰ There has, for instance, emerged a particular focus on Hmong rituals and musical instruments for the sake of gaining a deeper understanding of these aspects of Hmong life for their own sake, rather than in the quest for a grand scientific explanation of Hmong social structures.⁹¹ But the Hmong

⁸⁹ On the cultural turn and postmaterialism in a humanistic and social scientific vein, see Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (New York, NY: Verso, 1998); Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Ronald Inglehart, *Modernisation and Postmodernisation: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁹⁰ A prime example of this trend is Dunnigan, ‘Segmentary Kinship’.

⁹¹ Catherine Falk, ‘“If You Have Good Knowledge, Close It Well Tigh”’: Concealed and Framed Meaning in the Funeral Music of the Hmong *qeej*’, *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 12 (2003): 1-33; Catherine Falk, ‘The Dragon Taught Us: Hmong Stories about the Origin of the Free Reed Pipes *qeej*’, *Asian Music* 35 (Autumn 2003): 17-56; Hao Huang and Bussakorn Sumrongthong, ‘Speaking with Spirits: The Hmong Ntoo Xeeb New Year Ceremony’, *Asian Folklore Studies* 63 (2004): 31-55; Erik Cohen, ‘The Hmong Cross: A Cosmic Symbol in Hmong (Meo) Textile Designs’, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 14 (Autumn, 1987): 27-45.



have also attracted the interest of medical practitioners, who report higher rates of certain forms of cancer (stomach, liver, pancreas) and considerably lower ones for those produced by industrial or post-industrial societies with higher rates of smoking and alcohol consumption (lung).⁹² Horticulture, too, has been an increasing area of interest. Jan Corlett, Ellen Dean and Louis Givretti's study of Hmong gardens in California's Central Valley shows how these are used to 'reconstruct' a sense of home and familiarity for elderly Hmong suffering from loneliness in particular.

⁹² Paul K. Mills and Richard Yang, 'Cancer Incidence in the Hmong of Central California, United States, 1987-94', *Cancer Causes and Control* 8 (September 1997): 705-12; for a more anthropological approach to the study of Hmong medical culture, see Lisa L. Capps, 'Change and Continuity in the Medical Culture of the Hmong in Kansas City', *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 8 (June 1994): 161-77.

Evidently the list of subjects or disciplines in which the Hmong have now been studied is much greater than this small survey admits of. Nevertheless, these are some of the newer and more promising avenues of research. Those studies concerned with understanding Hmong culture for its own sake, on its own terms and through its own lens are particularly significant if the emerging trend of constructing a fixed, immutable image of, for instance, Hmong women for the purpose of rendering these a means to the end of certain Western discourses is to be effectively countered. By gaining a deeper understanding of the Hmong, the researcher, in any field, is thus not merely expanding his or her cultural and intellectual horizon but is also forced to question his or her own methods and preconceptions. The concern is not simply with learning about a different culture, but with learning more about oneself as well.

CONCLUSION

It has been the aim of this paper to crystallise the picture the academic discourse paints of the Hmong through a thematic, loosely chronological study of the most prominently analysed topics surrounding this particular group. Dissecting first the presentation of clan and kinship structures, before turning to an elucidation of the racism and discrimination suffered by the Hmong, it has become evident that these earlier studies, proceeding in a more empirical, social scientific vein than later work on the Hmong, usually present a mostly sensitive and sensible approach. Despite the inadequacy of many of the integration, adaptation and assimilation theories surveyed at the beginning of the piece, these themes were dealt with not in order to construct a particular narrative of the Hmong, as has been the case with respect to women, gender and marriage, but in order to evidence two things: first, the stark discrepancies between ‘Western’ and ‘Hmong’ cultures, not always with the aim of forcing the Hmong into American ways; and second, the struggle first and second generation Hmong Americans face by being torn between these two distinct sets of values. This tension becomes particularly

evident in the academic discourse on education. Poverty, interestingly, has not been dealt with directly in a consistent manner but is generally taken for granted, serving to explain other factors, such as social dislocation in school, and being explained by a combination of Hmong traits such as large families, illiteracy and linguistic barriers on the one hand, and the failures or obstructions of US policy and institutions on the other. In the final section, I pointed towards new developments in the study of the Hmong, the merits of the humanistic and social scientific instances of which lie in their attempts at presenting the Hmong from a Hmong perspective, through a Hmong lens and in a Hmong vocabulary – pivotal steps in countering ‘discursive colonialism’ and the construction of knowledge as a tool of power.

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