

## **YouTube and the Hmong *qeej***

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the iconic Hmong musical instrument, the *qeej*, and its presence in cyberspace on YouTube videos. Hmong in the west now engage in an implicit auto-ethnography using this technology presenting new constructions of themselves to themselves as well as to other, non-Hmong people. These constructions contribute to both literate and oral representations of pan-Hmong identity.

Ethnomusicological interpretations and analyses of musical traditions have, in the past, usually been embedded in notions of identity defined by a sense of place, space, and time, and of belonging to a specific sociomusical environment. For a diasporic, refugee group such as the Hmong, sense of place is retained in the memory of or nostalgia for a place whose imagined reality is preserved in stories and song texts. The fluid and changing experience of present spaces, places and scapes in which diasporic Hmong find themselves interlocks with an imagined past in China and Laos and a present in which westernised Hmong engage in tourism to China and Southeast Asia seeking their cultural and geographical roots. In the diaspora to western countries, the Hmong have exploited the potential of emerging technologies, from the telephone to audio and video cassettes, as tools that enable long-distance oral communication. Cyberspace has entered the Hmong communicative repertoire of mechanisms for maintaining “we Hmongness” in a global context and YouTube is a significant medium in the contemporary context.

**Keywords:** Hmong, qeej, diaspora, YouTube

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### **Introduction**

This paper has humble beginnings. A few years ago I was re-working a lecture for undergraduate students about the music of the Hmong. I wanted to show them some footage of the iconic Hmong musical instrument, the reed mouth organ *qeej*, played in the United States for entertainment at a New Year or other celebratory occasion. My own recordings are mainly of the *qeej* played on the solemn occasion of the Hmong funeral. I was already familiar with the wonderful material about *qeej*

playing available on the website of the Hmong Cultural Center<sup>1</sup> and of the video “Speaking Musically. An Introduction to Traditional Hmong Music” on the Hmong Music Research site of Nicholas Poss, so I thought I would take a brief glance at what YouTube had to offer. I knew from experience that students in my subject, *Musics of the World*, responded enthusiastically to the YouTube playlists that I assembled for other lectures as part of their online learning resources. I entered ‘qeej’ into the search engine and was rewarded with over 10,000 results. A more recent search on 17 June 2013 yielded 12,900 results. A cursory reading of some of the online comments made in response to the YouTube videos revealed a vigorous engagement with the qeej playing by the viewing audience, many of whom seemed to be both young and Hmong, according to their online names. Clearly, something important was going on here. YouTube certainly enhances our repertoire of resources in teaching, but I started to think about it as a location for ethnomusicological research and to wonder about the implications – both methodological and ethical – of engaging with YouTube as a fieldwork site.

This paper discusses how the Hmong in the west represent, and respond to representations of the qeej that have been posted on YouTube since at least 2007. I present a preliminary thematic analysis of responses to selected YouTube videos that feature the qeej and its ethnic counterpart used by the Hmong/Miao in China, the reed mouth organ called *lusheng*.

However, before turning to the YouTube videos of qeej and lusheng playing I consider briefly the current literature concerning the use of the Internet in ethnographic research. I then outline the lively and prolific use of media and Internet technology by diasporic Hmong. I situate the qeej and the lusheng in the large instrument family of reed mouth organs in China and Southeast Asia, with particular reference to their signifying role among upland ethnic minorities. Finally, I offer a preliminary analysis of the comments to twenty YouTube videos posted between 2007 and 2012.

The literature about Internet-based ethnographic research does not have a great deal to say either about using YouTube or about *musical* ethnography. Apart from its

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hmongcc.org/hcc-qeej-program.html>

usefulness as a vehicle for the storage and dissemination of research results, the Internet has been a site for research about virtual communities (for example (Rheingold 1993, Negroponte 1995). A number of scholars have written about doing virtual ethnography (for example Bakker 1999 and 2001, Hine 1998 and 1999, Jones 1997, Miller and Slater 2001, Wittel 2000), while Marcus (1995) discusses multi-sited ethnography. The use of the Internet for both inreach (geared towards an internal public) and outreach (geared towards an external public) purposes (Landzelius 2006: 7) by indigenous and often diasporically dispersed communities has been examined by various scholars (Landzelius 2006 and also, for example, Morton 1999 and Lozada 1998).

There are a few ethnomusicological studies that have made use of the interactive capacities of the Internet (email, blogs, live video links and other computer mediated communications) as a research methodology. Lysloff described his work on electronic composers and the “mod” scene (2003); Cooley, Meizel and Syed discussed their virtual fieldwork with surfing communities and their music in Hawaii and west coast US (2008). Wood (2008) examined a Jewish music mailing list. More recently, review essays have appeared in *The Yearbook for Traditional Music* including Suzel Ana Reily’s “Ethnomusicology and the Internet” (2003), Gidal’s “Youtube.com for Ethnomusicology” (2008) and Barbara Alge’s “Ethnomusicology and the Use(fullness) of the Internet.” (2011) Ethnomusicological research based on the internet and digital technology came into sharp focus at a conference, ‘Ethnomusicology in the Digital Age’ hosted jointly by the British Forum for Ethnomusicology and the International Council for Traditional Music in Belfast 4-7<sup>th</sup> April 2013 . Seven papers investigated YouTube representations of music cultures ranging from children’s clapping play (Bishop) to Lima’s fusion musicians (Montero Diaz) to networked religious communities (Ingalls).<sup>2</sup> YouTube has clearly entered the research domain. As one of the presenters, Vicente notes:

Scholars of music, especially in the fields of ethnomusicology and popular music studies, have started to incorporate YouTube comments and statistical information in their conference papers and academic publications, but the extent to which such data constitute accurate and even viable indicators of musical taste or musical culture has yet to be comprehensively addressed and

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<sup>2</sup> The abstracts are available at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/media/Media,379128,en.pdf>.

theorized ...[there are] methodological lacunae in digital/online musical ethnography. (2013)

In particular, the absence of face-to-face interactions in Internet-based research raises questions about new ethical issues, as various writers have noted (Kozinets 2010, Landzelius 2006:30, Reily 2003: 190). YouTube postings themselves can pose significant ethical issues including consent, payment of royalties and copyright infringement. (Gidal 2008) YouTube provides its users with a guide to copyright infringement and ownership<sup>3</sup> but this advice does not extend to the use of YouTube by a third or fourth party.

Kozinets devotes a chapter to conducting ethical ethnography on the Internet in his book *Netnography. Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (2010). His opinion that “analysis of archived messages does not officially constitute human subjects social research” (2010: 143) is relevant to using YouTube comments in research. He elaborates:

Analysing online community or culture communications or their archives is not human subjects research *if the researcher does not record the identity of the communicators and if the researcher can legally and easily gain access to these communications or archives*. Those are important conditions and, for instance, would indicate that content analysis and thematic analyses of online communications would, under some conditions, be exempt. (Kozinets 2010: 142, emphasis in the original)

The use of information about musical practices and preferences revealed by an examination of mediated music on YouTube should be regarded as a “narrow slice of reality,” and “fieldwork should happen where music happens” (Cooley, Meizel and Syed 2008:106). These authors as well as Wood (2008) describe the preferred model of using cyberspace self-representation by musical communities as an *additional* site for research rather than as a replacement for real time, face- to- face fieldwork. Similarly, Tapp notes the complexities of Internet research in general, which he says should be supplemented by “fieldwork of a fairly classic kind” (2008: 78). In her introduction to *Native on the Net*, a collection of ethnographic essays about the use of cyberspace by Indigenous and diaspora communities, Landzelius expresses the same caveat about online research: “it is worth keeping in mind that offline fieldwork informs interpretation [of virtual presence].” (2006:3)

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/yt/copyright/what-is-copyright.html>

I have not carried out real-time fieldwork about the qeej /lusheng with the Hmong in China, Southeast Asia or the United States, the provenances of the online videos discussed in this paper. Rather, my aim is to bring into focus this particular instance of Hmong use of cyberspace as a forum for sharing views about Hmong identity and knowledge about Hmong culture, history and cultural change.

The complexities of Internet research noted by Tapp, above, are also described by Landzelius (2006). She discusses a number of important issues to consider when Indigenous presence in cyberspace becomes part of the ethnographic field site. The need for new methodological and analytical tools is one challenge: the old binary logics of the researcher and the researched, locality and identity, subject and text, and centre and periphery are challenged even further and give way to new logics: online and offline, real life and virtual life; on screen and face-to-face (2006:31). The fluidity of the web both as culture and cultural artefact can add a layer of complexity in talking about identities that are “mobile, volatile, composite, (potentially) anonymous, experimental, archived.” (Landzelius 2006:30) Vicente, too, notes that using YouTube as a research site raises issues of “the user as informant [and] exposes underlying assumptions made with respect to culture and genre, and...the national, racial, and gender politics of commentators, especially those identified as ‘trolls’ or ‘haters.’” (Vicente 2013)

Similarly, Tapp warns that understanding and analysing Hmong Internet representations and their construction of a virtual reality poses the same questions as Internet representation in general in terms of “issues of representation, of identity, of political control and self expression, and autonomy.” (Tapp 2000:82) He also discusses the propagation by wealthy, westernised Hmong of an essentialised stereotype of Hmong transnational identity. (2000: 78)

The Internet is often discussed as a democratising and sovereign space: but against this must be balanced the fact of inequality of access to the Internet in many parts of the world. In the case of the Hmong/Miao online videos of the qeej and the lusheng, for example, there are no comments originating from an audience in China.

### *The Hmong and technology*

The Laotian Hmong in diaspora quickly recognised and adapted the fundamentally *oral* potential of technology in order to maintain and preserve the integrity of their oral heritage, their clan system and their language, to stay connected transnationally, and to disseminate knowledge about their culture both to themselves and to a broad audience of non-Hmong people in the west. For example, Tapp notes that as early as 1982,

a people with still a predominantly oral tradition communicate with relatives in other parts of the globe by cassette recorder and urgently desire telephones , so that lineage names can be entered in telephone directories and traditional lineage hospitality practiced on a global scale. (Tapp 1982: 125)

Cassette, CD and DVD recordings of the emotionally-laden secular sung poetry *kuv txhiaj* also circulate the globe, carrying messages of nostalgia for a lost past among older generations and messages of courtship among the younger generations.

According to Schein, the rate of production of commercial entertainment videos by the Hmong in the USA is unprecedented among any other immigrant group in that country. She notes that these tapes are “shot, edited, and marketed all by Hmong ...[and] take their place in the context of a huge Hmong media scene in which hundreds of newspapers, magazines, audio cassettes, CDs, music videos, and videotapes are produced and sold, all within the Hmong market. “ (Schein 2007: 233)

Gary Lee also notes the prolific output of multimedia productions by the Hmong in Laos, who

did not have any commercially produced media until after 1975... since then, they have produced many Hmong music cassettes, video documentaries, and movies in America, Laos and Thailand for the eager consumption of the older members of the Hmong diaspora... these moving video images and new singing voices constitute a form of cultural reinvention that connects the Hmong together as a global community, and brings them a new changing identity, a new level of transnational group consciousness both in the diaspora and in the homeland.” (Lee 2006)

The Hmong have so extensively embraced the power of the internet in its fundamentally oral capacities that one of the leaders of the Hmong in Australia, Dr Pao Saykao, has spoken of the creation of a Hmong Virtual Nation which “in the age of cyberspace, is no longer an impossible dream but a matter of time.” (Saykao 2002: 11)

The Hmong in the west were early adopters of the Internet. For example, the WWW Hmong Homepage<sup>4</sup> was established early in the 1990s and the Saint Paul, MN-based Hmong Cultural Center, founded in 1992, has a forceful and important web presence.<sup>5</sup> A crude Google search for “Hmong” yields 6,530,000 results. Hmong web presence includes Hmong radio, satellite TV, blogs, YouTube postings, and many web pages both for Hmong consumption and for educative purposes and consumption by non-Hmong, in what Tapp has described as acts of “performative self-advertising”:

American Hmong voices on the net speak of a people with a highly articulate, sophisticated sense of their own identity, together with a shrewd knowledge of how to convey it, and for this reason the relationship between past and present images of the Hmong and Hmong culture, as propagated by particular groups with particular interests in the production of specific images for {consumption by} specific audiences, should have particular interest for us. (Tapp 2000:83)

The Hmong have embraced cyberspace as a means of disseminating information about themselves, representing themselves to themselves and to others, and interrogating their past, present and future as an ethnic group that is diverse linguistically and culturally, and dispersed transnationally.

Cyber travel through YouTube has joined the repertoire of Hmong activities that include physical travel “back” to the homelands as tourists (see Tapp 2000 and 2001) as well as the consumption of films shot by Hmong in Thailand and Laos and marketed as part of a very large Hmong media scene in the United States. (Schein 2004,2007) These activities reconnect diasporic Hmong with a past time and space. As Schein comments, “In the last two decades, Hmong Americans at the farthest reach of the diaspora...have begun to engage in activities of reterritorialization as they recuperate pasts, roots, and homelands through concrete practices of trans-Pacific travel and business. Certain places...are becoming fixed, even frozen, in memory and cultural production as icons of pure Hmong origins. ”(Schein 2007: 226) As we will see below, the YouTube video clips of the qeej and its associated cultural activities fulfil similar functions.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hmongnet.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hmongcc.org/>

Hmong YouTube representations of and discussions about the use and roles of the qeej, used so forcefully by the Hmong in the west as a symbol of their cultural identity, are an appropriate lens through which to investigate how Hmong in the west are interpreting their changing contexts and identities.

### ***The qeej – an iconic instrument***

The Laotian Hmong qeej is a reed mouth organ with six long bamboo pipes inserted into a wooden wind chest that has a long tapered neck ending in a mouth hole. The pipes are usually around two metres in length and each has one free reed, except for the shortest and stoutest pipe, which may have three free reeds. The qeej produces a complex web of drones, melody, rhythm and polyphony. The Hmong do not regard it as a musical instrument. Rather it is a voice that speaks as a speech surrogate in the most private of domains: the Hmong funeral ceremony, where for three days and nights it instructs the soul of the deceased about Hmong history and cosmology and the journey of the soul to the home of the ancestors.<sup>6</sup> For many Hmong the sounds of the qeej are synonymous with death and funerals. These sounds are immensely powerful and dangerous, eliciting both fear and sadness. The qeej also has an important role in the public domain where it is traditionally heard on joyful secular occasions such as New Year celebrations. (See Falk 2004a)

In Laos traditionally only men play the qeej, and the instrument is not used in ensembles. Playing the qeej requires great physical stamina, a prodigious knowledge of Hmong sacred canon, and the technical and musical skills to convert the words of the canon into the qeej's "speech." In western musical terms, the ritual specialist qeej player is a virtuoso. Performance involves elaborate dance movements - spinning, jumping and somersaulting. At funerals the qeej player must constantly circle, turn and spin clockwise and counter clockwise around the funeral drum in order to confuse spirits that might prevent the soul of the deceased from setting out on the journey to the world of the ancestors. In secular contexts the qeej can take on the role of a "girl catcher ... where girls consider the players like 'rock stars' for their virtuosic displays (Catlin 1997a: 79 and 1997b). The instrument is undoubtedly of great antiquity, and

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the qeej and Hmong funerals see for example Bertrais 1986 and 1987; Catlin 1982 and 1997; Falk 2004a and 2004b; Lemoine 1972, 1979 and 1983; Mareschal 1976; O'Briain 2012; Schworer-Kohl 1981, 1982 and 1991; Symonds 1991; and Tapp 1989a, 1989b and 2008.



there is a lively historical and contemporary oral storehouse of stories about its origins and use (Falk 2003/4).

The diversity of the qeej's roles in traditional life and the effects of its sound are summarised by Xiong:

Contests are held to see which player can perform the greatest feats - turns, twists, spins, somersaults - while maintaining the clear texts and precise melodies of the *qeej*. These lucky *qeej* players may win a lady's heart because they know the right dances and the "sweet" words ("sweet" as in poetic and figurative language). Sometimes the sound can be comforting, strange, soothing, cold, depressing, sad or sorrowful. However, one does not need to know or even understand what the *qeej* is saying to like its music; depending on the situation, one can hear whatever he or she wishes to hear. ( Xiong, n.d.)

The qeej belongs to a large and widespread family of free-reed mouth organ type instruments found throughout China and Southeast Asia. This instrument type is particularly important in the musical lives of upland minority groups from Bangladesh to Sabah and Sarawak and from southwest China to Laos and Cambodia. It goes by various names – for example *naw* ( Lahu), *lachi* ( Akha), *fulu* (Lisu), *khen* (Kmhmu), (Uchida and Catlin: 2008: 304-310 ), *plung* (the Murung, in Bangladesh), *sompoton* (Sabah), <sup>7</sup> *keluri* (Sarawak), <sup>8</sup> and *hnyin* (Burma, where it is now obsolete). The pipes of all these instruments are usually arranged in a bundle formation, like the qeej, but the wind chest is made from a gourd rather than from wood. The Laotian *khaen* or *khene* is another version of the instrument type with a varying number of pipes in raft formation. It is most commonly used to accompany singing. Playing the khaen, says Douglas, along with eating sticky rice, is one of “ the strongest markers of a person's Laotian or Isan identity...it is the [Laotian] culture's most important instrument.” (Douglas 2010: 86) More elaborate forms of the reed mouth organ are integral to the courtly and classical musical traditions of China (*sheng*) and Japan (*shō*).

The *lusheng* is a free reed mouth organ very similar to the qeej. It is played by the group of ethnic minorities called the Miao in China, of whom about one third are Hmong (Tapp 2001:4) although the ethnonym “Miao” is often used as a synonym for “Hmong.” The *lusheng* is found mainly in Sichuan, Guangxi, Guizhou and Yunnan

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.asza.com/isumpo.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.asza.com/ikeluri.shtml>

provinces in southern China. Like the qeej, the lusheng has very long bamboo pipes held perpendicular to the body. The lusheng's pipes are often straight rather than curved and often have large bamboo amplifying tubes with red cloth decoration attached to the end. (Thrasher, in press). (FIGURES 1 and 2) Unlike the qeej, the lusheng is often played in very large ensembles rather than as a solo instrument.

The lusheng is emblematic of the ethnic minority groups collectively referred to as "Miao". Nowadays Miao Lusheng Festivals are a significant state-sponsored attraction for both domestic and foreign tourists and advertisements for tourists "push" these festivals. For example the China Tour Guide<sup>9</sup> advertises the "Lusheng Festival of the Miao people" in Zhouxi, Kaili City and the Gulong Village in Huangping County, Guizhou, held on days 16-20 of the first lunar month and "attracting 30,000 to 40,000 people." At this event,

hundreds of the lusheng (bamboo-pipe instruments) in dozens of groups are simultaneously played and the music is reverberating far and wide. Hundreds and thousands of the Miao girls wearing silver-decorated clothes and head ornaments are dancing together to the rhythms, forming one circle after another together on the lusheng playing ground, and appearing a silver swirling sea... The Festival is both an exhibition of prosperity and a competition of skill and wisdom. Those noble and dignified, well-behaved youngsters are praised and those clever and deft, beautifully-decorated girls are admired. Therefore, playing the Lusheng music and performing the Lusheng dance are an important part of many Miao festivals.

The "China Highlights" site<sup>10</sup> similarly advertises the Kaili festival, advising "If you plan to visit Guizhou in November, you also can experience the Lusheng Festival which is held around November in Huangping County (about 75 kilometers from Kaili City)" and noting further that

The music of the lusheng has over time been played for more than just the traditional courtship ceremony – the lusheng has developed into an all-purpose musical instrument in its own right, an instrument used to accompany all manner of dance, acrobatics, and even Wushu, a special aerobics-like Chinese form of physical workout. Because of its versatility, the lusheng is gradually being adopted by other Chinese minority cultures than the Miao, such as those of the Buyi, the Dong, the Shui, the Yao and the Yi, and it is perhaps only a matter of time before it makes its way into Western culture.

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<sup>9</sup>[http://www.chinatourguide.com/guizhou/Lusheng\\_Festival\\_of\\_the\\_Miao\\_People.html](http://www.chinatourguide.com/guizhou/Lusheng_Festival_of_the_Miao_People.html)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.chinahighlights.com/festivals/the-lusheng-festival.htm>

However, playing the lusheng in spectacular massed ensembles precedes contemporary tourism in China. The missionary George Edgar Betts provided the following account of a Black Miao lusheng festival in the late nineteenth century:

...there were thirty-six bands, six instruments to one band, and six sounds to one instrument. These instruments are named luh seng (six musical sounds) and constructed with bamboo pipes having brass reeds, emitting more noise than music. The largest- sized instrument is made of the trunk of a tree hollowed out, a bamboo pipe, 14 feet long...Thousands of people have arrived from all the countryside ...The bands of six instruments form in line, standing shoulder to shoulder, in the circle formed by the spectators; presently six or seven damsels enter the circle and step in unison with the musicians, in a circular movement...Heard from a distance the noise of these 36 bands (or 216 instruments), each playing its own tune, is not unpleasant to the ear, but in close proximity, where it is impossible to hear even one's own voice, the noise and confusion of sound has a decidedly depressing effect on one's nerves... (1899-1900,101-102)

A YouTube search using the words *Hmong lusheng* provides 1690 results;<sup>11</sup> *Miao lusheng* gives 2250 results.<sup>12</sup> Comments on the YouTube pages are in Hmong and English and arise from non-Chinese Hmong viewers who make observations such as “There are three things that ties us Hmong/Miao people together. The totem gathering at new years celebration, the big as silver nickles [sic] and the lusheng;” “I am proud to be hmong, lmao!;” and “This is traditional Hmong Lusheng dance. since the migration into Laos many of these tradition is lost because time was better used for farming to feed the family. The lusheng was a musical instrument, but today in the USA it is only used at funerals. Sometimes young men come to show at funerals and at New Year but the Lusheng isn't what it used to be.”

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[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=hmong+lusheng&oq=hmong+lusheng&gs\\_l=youtube.3...1074.2897.0.4492.8.8.0.0.0.0.286.1210.3j0j5.8.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.fQfl3fpOV4w](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=hmong+lusheng&oq=hmong+lusheng&gs_l=youtube.3...1074.2897.0.4492.8.8.0.0.0.0.286.1210.3j0j5.8.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.fQfl3fpOV4w). Accessed 4 November 2013. The information can be found in the top right hand corner of the page: “About 1690 results.”

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[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=miao+lusheng&oq=miao+lusheng&gs\\_l=youtube.3..35i39l2j0.67147.69554.0.70804.6.6.0.0.0.1.248.1084.1j1j4.6.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.zL978bEhv6s](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=miao+lusheng&oq=miao+lusheng&gs_l=youtube.3..35i39l2j0.67147.69554.0.70804.6.6.0.0.0.1.248.1084.1j1j4.6.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.zL978bEhv6s). Accessed 4 November 2013. The Internet interest in the lusheng appears to remain strong. I first conducted this particular search on 27 June 2013, when the results were 1290 for “Hmong lusheng” and 1430 for “Miao lusheng.”

Schein also notes the iconicity of the lusheng for the Miao:

Many Miao consider the bamboo reed pipe instrument ...to be the symbol of their people. Although it varies greatly in its form, size, and conventions for use, its symbolic importance was central. The *lusheng* carries an aura of venerability and sacredness, and its use was strictly regulated by customary law. In some places it was played only by men, and in others women played it as well. Its uses varied, from courtship to funerals, from festival celebrations to summoning soldiers to war. In many places its music was accompanied by specific forms of dance... Those initiated into the instrument's secrets were said to be able to understand a special language contained in its music. So potent was its cultural and communicative function that lusheng use was suppressed in many historic periods, including the Guomindang era and the Cultural Revolution..." (Schein 2000: 63)

Like the Laotian *khaen* and the Miao *lusheng*, the qeej has accrued highly symbolic capital among Hmong in diaspora. Depictions of the qeej signify "Hmong -ness." For instance, the qeej is the logo for the Hmong Cultural Center in St Paul and its newsletter is called "Qeej notes."<sup>13</sup> The instrument is depicted on T-shirts,<sup>14</sup> (FIGURE 3) in contemporary Hmong art,<sup>15</sup> (FIGURES 4 and 5) and in cartoons.<sup>16</sup> (FIGURE 6) A dance drama "Longing for Qeej" (FIGURE 7) created by Hmong choreographer Mai Vang in Minneapolis in 2011 celebrated the history and "mystery" of the qeej:

This authentic Dance Drama - Longing for Qeej - utilizes narration and multi-media, interweaving acrobatics and traditional Hmong Dances, to re-tell the mystery. The Choreographer Mai Vang adapts the tradition, incorporates with graceful dance movements and enhances with group formations to honor the Qeej. The dance troupe - MN Sunshine has long history of winning the 1st place titles at Hmong New Year Dance Competition. They are famous with their explosive physical capabilities along with beautiful costume, and refreshing Asian music.<sup>17</sup>

There are numerous web pages created by Hmong people in the USA about the qeej.<sup>18</sup> The qeej even has its own Facebook page.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.hmongnet.org/>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.zazzle.com.au/peb\\_hmong\\_tshirt\\_the\\_qeej\\_dark-235181844263683845](http://www.zazzle.com.au/peb_hmong_tshirt_the_qeej_dark-235181844263683845)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.seexeng.com/id78.html> and <http://www.seexeng.com/id78.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://hmongcatholique.forumdediscussions.com/t265-hais-pai-lug>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.fringefestival.org/2011/show/?id=1543>. Accessed 17 June 2013.

<sup>18</sup> See for example <http://www.eteksciki.info/videos/qeej>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Hmong-Qeej/115643428466728>

What is of interest here is that the mouth organ instrument type represented by the qeej, the lusheng – and indeed the khaen - carries iconic status and is one of the most important signifiers of ethnic identity. Douglas reports a similar situation for the *ozi* goblet drum traditions among ethnic minorities in eastern Burma (Myanmar) who live in the transitional zone between the Burman lowlands and the Shan highlands. Like the qeej and the lusheng, the *ozi* drum has many variations in its size, construction and musical roles (Douglas 2013: 193) among the lowland Bamar, the Shan and the minorities in between – the Danu, the Palaung, Taungyo and Pa-O and its sounds are emblematic of different ethnic groups:

The playing style...associated with each type of *ozi* are recognised locally as establishing a particular ethnic sound. The *ozi* also serves as an emblem of ethnic identity, frequently appearing in logos representing groups on flags, calendars, and posters. (Douglas 2013: 193)

He concludes that

The similarity of these *ozi* and gong traditions from an outside perspective is obvious, yet it is precisely their similarity of form that allows them to articulate their otherness on the stage of ethnic performance. ...The shared symbol type is found to assert difference in close proximity. (Douglas 2013: 204)

Douglas situates the *ozi* in its multiple variant forms in a politically charged context that involves the creation and assertion of ethnic identity by marginalised groups. The case of the Hmong qeej, similarly, can be interpreted through a consideration both of its (re)appropriation as a symbol of ethnicity by Hmong in the West, as evidenced by the reactions to the YouTube postings of qeej performances from China, mainland southeast Asia and the USA as well as the starring role of the Miao lusheng in tourist performances and on Chinese television.

### **The qeej and YouTube**

YouTube videos of the qeej date at least from 2007. Considering that YouTube commenced in 2005 and was acquired by Google in 2006 (Gidal 2008:210), the Hmong in the United States adopted the potential of the technology very rapidly.

William Lee<sup>20</sup> has suggested that the video clips are posted for a number of reasons. After viewing the selected examples I discuss in this paper he wrote to me:

“ I do strongly believe these video clips are posted on YouTube for the following reasons:

To show and educate Hmong that the Hmong in China are practicing the same customs, and therefore it can be deduced that Hmong really are from China.

To compare Hmong in western countries to Hmong in SE Asia and China, and argue that Hmong in western countries are losing their traditions

To prove that no matter where one is in the world, Hmong rituals, customs and traditions are portable and can be practiced anywhere. Therefore Hmong can exist anywhere.

To educate the public and show Hmong culture, customs, and rituals.

To simply share an event with friends and family members.” (Email from William Lee, 8 April 2013)

A search of YouTube (17 June 2013) using the term *qeej* yielded 12,900 results.<sup>21</sup> The search words *Hmong qeej* gave 10,700 results,<sup>22</sup> *Hmoob qeej* 7,940 results<sup>23</sup> and *qeej tu siav* produced 232 results.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that Hmong popular music and the

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<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to William Lee for his generous assistance in providing translations of the YouTube comments written in White Hmong and for these observations about the clips in general. William Lee is the nephew of the Hmong Australian anthropologist, Gary Lee.

<sup>21</sup>

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=+qeej&oq=+qeej&gs\\_l=youtube.3..35i39l2j0l8.1132568.1133774.0.1134487.4.4.0.0.0.219.425.2j1j1.4.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.6vuZg6piAOY](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=+qeej&oq=+qeej&gs_l=youtube.3..35i39l2j0l8.1132568.1133774.0.1134487.4.4.0.0.0.219.425.2j1j1.4.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.6vuZg6piAOY)

<sup>22</sup>

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=hmong+qeej&oq=hmong+qeej&gs\\_l=youtube.3..0l8.59490.63367.0.63798.13.11.0.2.2.0.223.1703.3j0j7.10.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.E08NS4iHHyQ](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=hmong+qeej&oq=hmong+qeej&gs_l=youtube.3..0l8.59490.63367.0.63798.13.11.0.2.2.0.223.1703.3j0j7.10.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.E08NS4iHHyQ)

<sup>23</sup>

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=hmoob+qeej&oq=hmoob+qeej&gs\\_l=youtube.3..35i39j0i0i5.54115.58784.0.59230.16.16.0.0.0.1.267.2586.4j4j8.16.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.8mwFZh4pBhw](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=hmoob+qeej&oq=hmoob+qeej&gs_l=youtube.3..35i39j0i0i5.54115.58784.0.59230.16.16.0.0.0.1.267.2586.4j4j8.16.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.8mwFZh4pBhw)

<sup>24</sup>

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=+qeej+tu+siav&oq=+qeej+tu+siav&gs\\_l=youtube.3..35i39.68603.72259.0.72498.12.12.0.0.0.225.2107.2j2j8.12.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.hWC2cGfv\\_Pc](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=+qeej+tu+siav&oq=+qeej+tu+siav&gs_l=youtube.3..35i39.68603.72259.0.72498.12.12.0.0.0.225.2107.2j2j8.12.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.hWC2cGfv_Pc)

sung poetry *kwv txhiaj* have a much more abundant YouTube presence than the qeej.<sup>25</sup> YouTube provides some metadata in its documentation of online videos, offering its viewers information about who posted the clip, the date of uploading, the provenance and age of viewers, and numerous filters. For example, the search term *qeej* and the YouTube filter “view count” showed that the most frequently viewed video (at 20 June 2013) was an excerpt from a film *Kev Cai Hmoob Nraug Nas Lub Suab Qeej*<sup>26</sup> in which an exceedingly good looking young man plays the qeej in an idyllic landscape while an equally handsome young woman sits pensively in an elaborately decorated boudoir. (FIGURE 8 at the end of the paper) This short excerpt (3’15) concludes with a dialogue between the two protagonists in the same idyllic outdoor setting to the sound of a Chinese music soundtrack. I will use this video as an example of the data that can be extracted from YouTube sites.

This clip was first placed on YouTube on 13 December 2010 and had 97,210 views at 20 June 2013. This is an astonishing number of viewers when contextualised in terms of Hmong demographics: the Hmong population in the United States was estimated to be 260,076 in 2010;<sup>27</sup> population figures for Hmong (of all dialects) in Vietnam were approximately 1,068,189 in 2009 with 460,000 in Laos in 2005. It is not possible to determine how many of these viewers are repeat visitors. My own research activity accounts for at least ten visits to this page. My request for more information about this film to Mae Vue and Justin Saykao, the leaders of the Hmong Melbourne Youth Society, led to them posting some questions to their community online, leading to an unknown number of further visits.

YouTube statistical data for *Kev Cai Hmoob Nraug Nas Lub Suab Qeej* informs us that the “top locations” of the audience are Laos, Vietnam and the United States and that the “top demographics” are female 13-17 years, male 45-54 years and male 13-17 years. Of the 63 posted comments about this video, about one third are in (mostly White) Hmong, and the rest are in English (except for one in Spanish, and one half in Hmong and half in English). As these observations show, although Laos

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<sup>25</sup> *Hmong music* produced 5,560,000 results while *Hmong popular music* gave 19,500,000 results. *Kwv txhiaj* produced 10,200 YouTube results at 29 June 2013.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkqRauEs7uE>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.hmong.org/default.aspx>

and Vietnam are the countries of origin of most viewers, the responses are (probably) written predominantly by English-speakers who are (probably) resident in the United States. The posted names or pseudonyms of the commenters are largely Hmong clan names (Thao, Lee, Lis, Vang). In other YouTube videos comments are also occasionally in Green Hmong, Laotian or Thai.

Responses to this video fall into two main camps. A number of viewers speculate as to whether the young man is really playing the qeej (“tshuab qeej”) or merely acting:

- “does this foo really noe how to blow qeej. it wud b so gay if he dnt;” and
- “I don't think this guy can blow qeej.... Cuz im a qeej blower and by looking at his breathing ..... His breath didn't go according to the qeej sound..... it sound like the same qeej music when he did the movie nuj nplhaib thiab ntxawm ...”

Others ask either where they can buy this movie, or whether the whole film could be uploaded:

- “Someone NEEDS to upload this movie! lol PLEASE!!!!”; and
- “I love tis movie so much tat tis hmong movie is the only one tat i would only watch out of his other movies so can u plz tell me how where u got tis movie at online or can u upload the whole movie because wen i was still small i use to watch tis movie tis movie a lot and i would be very appreciative if u would upload it please.”

Typically the language of the responses is textese or SMS. This leads me to assume that most commenters are young Hmong men and women living in the United States, where English is now the first language for many American-born Hmong. Spelling, grammatical and typographical infelicities are not limited to English: William Lee commented on numerous incorrect or misspelled words in the Hmong responses as well. (Email 5 March 2013) <sup>28</sup>

This YouTube video of the qeej, like most YouTube postings, is of short duration. The recording quality in sound and vision ranges from excellent to awful:

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<sup>28</sup> Even the Spanish comment for this video (“nunca habia escuchado este instruemento, debo decir que me impreciona mucho como suena ,” translated as “I had never heard this instrument [before], I must say that I’m very impressed by its sound”) is “rather illiterate, with lots of spelling mistakes.” I am grateful to my friend and colleague, Argentinian Australian musicologist Dr Melanie Plesch, for this translation and observation (email 20 June 2013).



videos include professional and amateur shoots, and some are downloads taken from Chinese TV.

The second most frequently viewed video using the search term *qeej* comes from the United States. *Suab Qeej Hmoob 3*, “Voice of the Hmong Qeej”<sup>29</sup> is a 3’05 excerpt from Part 3 of a series of four full-length CDs and DVDs produced by Apple Video Production, a Hmong-owned and operated production house in Sacramento, California. Apple’s mission is “to provide high quality family entertainment that promotes the talents of Hmong people, while preserving the Hmong culture, traditions, and history through music and films.”<sup>30</sup> Apple Production describes the *Suab Qeej Hmong Series* as follows:

This is the Qeej audio CD and DVD that most Hmong are talking about and calling everyday asking for. *Suab Qeej Hmoob 4 DVD* will be available this July 14, 2012 and at SEA Games - Sacramento, CA.

This will be a great gift for your parents and grandparents!

In this DVD and CD combo Boua Long Vue plays the traditional Hmong Qeej instrument in several locations across the United States including footage from Arizona, Utah, and the rocky mountains in Colorado. Featured in one of the tracks is “Qeej Ya” as requested from several Hmong elders.

Included Tracks:

- 1) Qeej Ntsuag Txij Nkawm
- 2) Qeej Ntsuag Twm Zeej
- 3) Qeej Hu Neeb
- 4) Qeej Pauj Hauvqhwa

In Series 3, the master qeej player Boua Long Vue “visits past Hmong villages in Northern Thailand and the Hmong Refugee Camps.”<sup>31</sup> This clip was uploaded on 23 December 2009 and has had an audience of 76,152 (at 20 June 2013). The “top locations” of the audience were Laos, the United States and Vietnam, and the “top demographics” were female 13-17 years, male 45-54 years and male 55-64 years. There are 71 comments, of which only 9 are in Hmong. The rest are in English and are again written by responders with predominantly Hmong names.

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFNBnDqaru4>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.applevideo.us/>. Accessed 20 June 2013.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFNBnDqaru4>

*Suab Qeej Hmoob 3* excited particular interest because the words that the qeej “speaks” are provided in subtitles. (FIGURE 9 at the end of the paper) There were many appreciative comments:

- “This is what we need. Videos of qeej that has subtitles of what they're blowing,”
- “wow! i can actually follow his qeej lyrics. great job. thanks for sharing!!”
- his is a good video because you know exactly what he is blowing. Even people who know qeej like me can't understand, every qeej player plays a little different. There are points that we can understand but word for word is impossible. The flute [sic] he is using sounds extremely good as well, very low pitch sound. Keep up the good work.
- “It is always awesome to have subtitle for those who don't understand what they are saying but for those who understand and blow Qeej. I refer [sic] them saying and explaining it to other people who are paying attention” (this from a viewer with a non-Hmong name or pseudonym).

The other You Tube examples of the qeej discussed in this paper are as follows. All of the figures may be found at the end of the paper.

Q1. “Hmong Qeej from Yunnan Province.”<sup>32</sup> (FIGURE 10)

Q2. “Qeej zaj.” (Thailand)<sup>33</sup> (FIGURE 11)

Q3. “Qeej hmoob, Hmong history.”<sup>34</sup> (Thailand) (FIGURE 12)

Q4. “Qeej, Chue Fue Thao.” (USA)<sup>35</sup> (FIGURE 13)

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEiNIYDptlc>

Posted description: “Hmong Qeej Played by Chong Toua Yang Hmong-Chinese Cultural Expert Long Song Tchu, Yunnan Province, China Recorded by Chai Vang Jan. 2012.” Posted 21 April 2012. Duration 19’12. 1090 views and 4 comments at 9 July 2012.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oA77tjNjl10>

Posted description: “Qeej.” Posted 22 June 2008. Duration 3’20. 29,108 views and 36 responses at 9 July 2012. This video is still popular: at 14 June 2013 there were 31,698 views and 55 comments. Top demographics were Laos, US and Vietnam and top demographics: Female 13-17, male 45-54, Male 35-44. This video was the ninth most frequently viewed when using the search word *qeej*.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQe6hz00-8g> Posted description: “Suab Qeej Hmoob, Ntiv qeej xub rug, qeej taug nyuj neev, Hmoob keeb kwm, Hmong Thai history, documentary [clib] by William Geddes, Australia, University of Sidney [sic].” Posted 30 January 2012. Duration 2’18. 2,205 views and 0 responses at 9 July 2012.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OctKj7Dauvk> Posted description: “ Just a sample of myself blow qeej for everyone. and people please this is not a place for

Q5. "Amazing Hmong Qeej Dance." ("Hmong Lusheng Dance from China")<sup>36</sup> (FIGURE 14)

Q6. "Crafting tradition building the qeej instrument." (USA)<sup>37</sup> (FIGURE 15)

Q7. "An amazing Hmong qeej player." (USA)<sup>38</sup> (FIGURE 16)

Q8. "Qeej master production."<sup>39</sup> (FIGURE 17)

Q9. "Qeej Nruas Hmoob Txuj Ci." (Side-comb Miao performing lusheng (qeej) dance.) (China)<sup>40</sup> (FIGURE 18)

Q10. "Suab Qeej Hmoob 2 - Boua Long Vue." (Thailand, USA)<sup>41</sup> (FIGURE 19)

Q11. "Hmong qeej jumping." (USA)<sup>42</sup> (FIGURE 20)

Q12. "Sting Yang Talent at the Mr HSP Pageant Part 2." (USA)<sup>43</sup> (FIGURE 21)

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criticism so please keep your comment to yourself but if there any complement im open heart to hear them. and any advice will help also to:D. " Posted 28 September 2011. Duration 4'22. 6.642 views and 29 comments at 12 June 2013.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUMBKndZIX4&feature=related> Posted description: "Tub Ntxhais Hmoob Seev Txuj Ci Qeej . Hmong Lusheng Dance from China." Posted 11 September 2011. Duration 2'49". 10,115 views and 43 responses at 9 July 2012.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cOwwu3Crv8&feature=related> Posted description: none. Posted 15 June 2011. Duration 14'39. 1105 views and 7 responses at 9 July 2012.

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLyOYFci23M> Posted description: ""Recorded on November 09, 2008 using a Flip Video camcorder." Posted 9 November 2008. Duration 2'53. 12,286 views and 30 responses at 9 July 2012.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zb1N29K-oiA> Posted description: none. Posted 6 April 2009 Duration 7'07. 31,376 views and 33 responses at 9 July 2012.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOzklsmzm6w&feature=share> Posted description: "Side-comb Miao performing lusheng (qeej) dance." Posted 12 February 2008. Duration 8'34. 11,964 views and 45 responses at 9 July 2012.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vi8HZXCdqPw> Posted description: "This DVD displays Boua Long Vue playing the Hmong cultural instrument, the "Qeej". He takes you to villages and scenes where Hmong villages and refugee camps used to be. This DVD is now available from Apple Video Production." Posted 24 December 2009. Duration 2'11. 16.106 views and 21 responses at 9 July 2012.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rfBSX3wIU> Posted description: "It was at church chestnut!!!...and they were good...goodjob SHTC." Posted 21 October 2011. Duration 2'02. 203 views and 1 response at 9 July 2012.

Q13. “Qaib Dib Dance at Boom Bap village.” (USA) <sup>44</sup> (FIGURE 22)

Q14. “Hmong Ntiv Qeej.” (USA) <sup>45</sup> (FIGURE 23)

F1. “HMONG THAI FUNERAL @ TAK.” (Thailand) <sup>46</sup> (FIGURE 24)

F2. “Hmong Funeral: Bee Yang Interprets Zaj Tshoob and Txiv Xaiv.” (USA) <sup>47</sup> (FIGURE 25)

F3. “Funeral qeej – Joupao Xiong.” (USA) <sup>48</sup> (FIGURE 26)

F4. “Hmoob Qeej Ntsuag.” (China) <sup>49</sup> (FIGURE 27)

F5. “FSOC REPORTS-HMONG FUNERAL KAILI CITY GUANGZHOU PROVINCE CHINA-1.” (China) <sup>50</sup> (FIGURE 28)

F6. “Qeej Tso Plig by Nais Koos Xeev Ntxawg Xyooj.” (USA) <sup>51</sup> (FIGURE 29)

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KL0LXD4lO1U> Posted description: “This is part two of the Mr. HSP, Sting Yang, talent. The qeej couldn't be heard because it didn't have the mics on it but please enjoy the dancing.” Posted 27 November 2011. Duration 2'45. 2,315 views and 13 responses.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nNy0x4JobE> Posted description: “JUST WATCH AND ENJOY TENG, MEXAI, TXU, ARANTOU, JOHNNY, KOOBMEEJ.” Posted 26 August 2009. Duration 6'28. 4692 views and 30 responses at 9 July 2012.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyihEeWwUx0> Posted description: “Tsis zoo los lam mloog. Ua tsaug. Thanks.” Posted 5 December 2009. Duration 5'46. 27,935 views and 103 comments at June 20, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4-Q8yVieeA> Posted description: “@ Baan Chedi-Khoe, Maesod, Tak, Thailand.” Posted 26 October 2011. Duration 8'09. 1132 views and 13 responses at 30 March 2013.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63Yl0tvjezY> Posted description: “Bee Yang discuss the difference between Zaj Tshoob and Txiv Xaiv.” Posted 23 September 2008. Duration 6'40. 15,298 views and 26 responses at 10 August 2012.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bz9q4k40bUQ> Posted description: “Jou Pao Xiong - Tshuv qeej tw luav nyob rua Merced, CA.” Posted 11 November 2009. Duration 1'43. 8621 views and 18 comments at 10 August 2012.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGg93i22AEU> Posted description: “This video clip is good proof that despite hundreds of years and thousands of miles of separation, our (Hmong people) funeral practices (kev pam tuag) remains unchanged.” Posted 15 October 2007. Duration 3'35. 22,573 views and 44 responses at 10 August 2012.

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4k1NgoxVuxM> Posted description: none. Posted 9 June 2008. Duration 9'35". 6832 views, all comments disabled at 10 August 2012.

The videos show the qeej in a variety of situations in both secular and funeral contexts.<sup>52</sup> Examples from the United States include instances of a male kinsman playing the qeej in the kitchen or lounge room. In others, young men demonstrate their progress in learning to play the instrument at Hmong community events, in their homes or in Hmong talent competitions (Q4, Q6, Q11, Q12). A band of young qeej-playing men gained popularity for their athletic dancing rather than the quality of their playing (Q 13). This group is one of the only examples from the United States in which the qeej is played in ensemble rather than as the traditional solo instrument. There is one posting that provides very thorough instructions about how to build a qeej (Q6). Some videos show specific qeej playing techniques (Q14). Another provides an excerpt of qeej playing in Thailand from Geddes' 1968 ethnographic film "Migrants of the Mountains" and includes the qeej's words in subtitles (Q3). The qeej is seen fulfilling its solemn and important funeral duties in F1-F6. The Miao/Hmong lusheng appears in spectacular choreographed ensembles aired on CCTV (Chinese television)(Q5, Q9).

The audience's responses to these videos are summarised below. Viewers who post comments tend to follow a number of trends. For example, they admire the ability of the qeej players and sometimes remark on specific aspects of performance practice technique. They say that they would like to learn to play the qeej and some want to know if they can purchase the instrument that they see on the video. Girls express admiration for young male players. Some videos from China and Thailand lead to discussion about whether women are allowed to play the qeej. There are concerns about whether listening to the qeej at home is forbidden or dangerous. For some, the qeej belongs to an older generation; others call for a modernisation of the repertoire and dance movements relevant to contemporary life in the United States.

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wA8JfVRlxo0> Posted description: "We put this video up in memory of Nais Koos Xeev Ntxawg Xyooj and Nchaiv Phaj Hawj. Xyuas xau rua huv nteeg plig. Ob tug yog tuabneeg muaj zoo txuj ci nyob tawm huv lub nroog Moos Pheeb, tebchaws Nplog tuaj. Peb suavdlawg saib ua koob moov tsaam 100 xyoo tom ntej nuav moog tes peb cov txuj ci poob taag lawm. This took place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1992. Recorded by Lang Her. Edited by Austin Chimeng Her." Posted 19 December 2012. Duration 2'51. 521 views and 2 responses at 26 March 2013.

<sup>52</sup> The funeral of General Vang Pao in San Francisco in January 2011 generated 2520 YouTube entries, many of which contain some qeej playing.

The videos from China lead many viewers to conclude that the Hmong really are from China because the Hmong there practise similar rituals. The qeej reminds viewers of their Hmong identity and there are frequent calls for Hmong in the west to keep their traditions strong and to preserve Hmong customs, alongside comments that speculate about the loss of tradition and the erosion of cultural values.

The viewers' comments below are reproduced verbatim.

Viewers express a desire to learn to play the qeej and some want to buy the instrument (Q1,Q6 and Q10):

- “good gob i like it i hope i can learn to do that when i grow older.” (Q3)
- “This is very educational. Hopefully there are more vids like this for us to learn from.” (F2)
- “dam im going to go to fresno state just for this lol i needa learn these hmong cultural stuff. “ (F2)
- “can someone tell me how can I learn from this guy...or at least give me his contact number.” (F2)
- “dam im going to go to fresno state just for this lol i needa learn these hmong cultural stuff. “ (F2)
- “hey man can you or your teacher teach us ntiv?” (Q14)
- “I like the qeej but Idk how to blow qeej green. I blow white. “ (Q4)
- “good gob i like it i hope i can learn to do that when i grow older. “ (Q4)
- “Hey brother I also blow qeej too. I really wants to learn how do you hlw qeej. People say to me that you suppose to use your tongue and throat, but some how I'm not able to accomplish that. Any help please or make a tutorial on hlw qeej. “ (Q14)
- “how can we do that....and if i learn from you...how much is it gonna cost.” ( Q14)

Other viewers admire the efforts of qeej players:

- “Good job brother.” (Q3)
- “I don't play qeej but this dude is one of the top qeej artists i've heard.” (Q2)
- “He's the best... ” ( Q2)
- “Damn, this guy is pretty good! I wonder who is better, he or my master??? ” (Q2)
- “mammm,i keep on listening to this qeejzaj this guy is so smooth the way he moves is cool he the man. “ (Q2)
- “this brother is the best QEEJ PLYER!!!i wish i know how to play! tus tub no tshuab tau zoo tiag tiag li lawm kho siab kawg!! [This son can play really really well honestly so touching!!!] keep up the HMONG spirit!! i love my HMONG people i meant all over this world,my HMONG is the best people,txuj ci loj heev li lawm!!!kuv yog [great talent!!!!i am ] HMONG AMERICAN,nyob [I live in] minnesota!!! (Q2)
- “WOW! Looks very professional...good job. “ (Q7)

- “This is AWESOME!” ( Q8)
- “this is harder than it looks..good job.” (Q11)
- “Damn you guys are tight! qeej breakdancers!” (Q13)
- “You guys did good. That was great. I hope you guys will inspire more young Hmong teens to learn qeej by making qeej fun. Keep it up.” (Q13)

Women also admire qeej players:

- “You're amazing!!! I LOVE hmong men who can do this! Keep it up hun! ;)” (Q3)
- “omg!!!! I love it! you should be my boyfriend! lol jk. but keep it up. i love love loveee our hmong men who knows how to tshuaj qeej. keep it up! keep it going. gotta keep our roots :)” (Q4)
- “He's a hOttie! and so good at dancing eheh....i fell in love with him on the first sight!” (Q12)

Some videos arouse responses about the qualities of good qeej playing (or otherwise):

- “Definitely one of the best I've heard: Breath, Movement, Beat, and note picking.” (Q2)
- “Good performance. His rythm was good and his qeej was crystal clear. When playing a qeej, you are never suppose to have gaps and your breathing has to be leveled at all times. A lot of people these days got the breakdance moves down, but they have gaps, ups and downs in their volume. It's suppose to sound exactly the same regardless of what you do. You may do breakdance moves, but your breath also has to always be even at all times so that the sound of your qeej don't change as you move.” (Q7)
- “it sounds like a bunch of farts all at once ...i like that.” (Q7)
- “Worst qeej sounds ever, but the actions were good.” ( Q13)

A lively discussion about whether girls should be allowed to play the qeej, especially for funeral rituals, followed some of the clips:

- “I thought females aint supposed to blow on it?” (Q8)
- “I think that the hmong men think that the women might play better than them. That's why the men don't let the women play. Personally, as a hmong, if my wife wanted to learn the Qeej, I would support her through and through.” (Q8)
- “Yeah.. in the old times girls are as good as any man. But now we mostly seen that Hmong Chinese girl knows more about qeej then the other. Yet today were seeing that girls from around the world are trying to bring it back. ” (Q5)
- “that is true becuz the hmong girls in the US are mainly being drawn to japan and korea they leaving hmong ways for their ways they dye their hair they dont follow hmong ways they follow other ways out fo hmong culture even the guys do aswell.” (Q5)
- I saw women play Qeej on youtube in China for showing, haven't see them play for the death. Do they also play for the death? I believe the reason why

Hmong Laos and US or Thai don't let thier daugther play is ..Qeej is mainly for the death...And to play qeej is not easy why waste so much time for nothings. I saw two girls play qeej in MN, but to me why waste so much time to learn qeej when they could use for study other things that will help them in thier future life.” (Q8)

- “Would you want GIRLS, WOMEN Tshuab qeej rau koj niam los yog koj txiv lub ntees thaum nkawd hnuv? For something like a SHOW maybe, But ua dab ua qhua NO tsis yog peb cov txawj qeej ntshai, Poj niam ib txwm coj tsis tau los ua dab ua qhua.” [“Would you want GIRLS, WOMEN Play qeej for your mother or father’s funeral during their day? For something like a SHOW maybe. But for customs and rituals this is not what us qeej players are afraid of. Women always cannot bring/invite/come to do ceremonies and rituals.”] (Q8)

Qeej playing is thought by some to belong to the older generation (“OG”):

- “I think this movement is great. If u can do this at funeral homes allot of people will praise u on your technique. Especially the OG's who are there watching. “ (Q7)
- “HAHAHH OG Qeej Movement STYLE hahaah. “ (Q7)
- “whats so bad about OG qeej movement. My grandma said that this movement makes the player look more experienced..” (Q7)
- “He's ok for us younger gens but the og's will like his style!!!! ” (Q7)

YouTube’s ”top demographics” data (if reliable) shows that viewers of these videos are not drawn entirely from the younger Hmong generation. “Male 45-54” and “male 55-64” viewers often appear in this data. Maybe these older participants are viewing but not posting comments for, as noted above, the language used in the responses would seem to belong to a younger generation. Further, more finely-grained research could investigate the use of technology such as YouTube to facilitate dialogue between generations of Hmong. <sup>53</sup>The advertisement for the Suab Qeej Hmong Series does make a point of saying that “This will be a great gift for your parents and grandparents!”

For others, the relevance of the traditions of qeej playing in the west would be enhanced by modifications, especially to the entertainment repertoire, and there is concern about the loss of culture:

- “If only the Hmong Qeej get modified. The sounds of the qeej are too low to hear. I understand that some Qeej should be kept the way they are because of funeral and religious rites, but some Qeej should be modified for entertainment purposes. Would be nice to have drum dances, qeej dances, footwork dances, kicking Hmong dances..... we have so much to show, but not enough resources. (Q5)
- “All these young people hating on traditional moves like his, no wonder our culture is dying out. “ (7)

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<sup>53</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this area of future enquiry.



- “ is Hmong culture dying off because of change or is Hmong as a people dying off because of our inability to change? “(7)
- “wow!!!! hmong Lao, Thailand, USA lost that amazing culture after left China's 300 years ago.”(Q8)

Some viewers make kinship, teacher or other network connections:

- “He is one of my cousin. He is now older but still Hella pro at Qeej.” (F3)
- “.... he also Tshuv qeej... he was in cali before he moved to mass then to oklahoma... gotta ask him if he knew joupao since my hubby is a xiong too... for all i know they might be related...” (F3)
- “Heard he's from Fresno. Taught or if still teaching at California State University, Fresno...I don't know.” (F2)
- “Yes, he is an instructor @ Fresno State and a faculty for the Social Work department. “ (F2)
- “hello. my dad and my mom wanted to know who's the person that is playing this awesome music of qeej? my dad stubble upon your videos and wanted to know who and where the person is located. usually my dad is the best and he's widely known and he wanted to know who you are. he says that it's rare and in a long time to actually meet someone who can blow the qeej properly and nicely. my dad is a respected elderly qeej player for a long time and wanted to say "good job" on this piece of masterwork.” (Q14)

Hearing the qeej can arouse strong emotions such as sadness:

- “Wow wen i listen to its heart breaking...i dont even understand it but it sounds really sad...” (Q2)

The responses in Hmong frequently note that viewers found qeej playing to be “ kho siab heev” – “very touching, very moving” – especially in examples from Thailand (Q2) and China (Q10). For some, the sound of the qeej elicits nostalgia for a past time and place:

- “reminded me so much of our old past...made me miss my country...made me miss Hmong.” (Q10)
- “the sound of the qeej makes me feel like I am in another world.” (Q10)
- “Very well performed, bro, I can feel it touches, vibrates , and guided my heart and soul to another world with the sound of you qeej...” ( Q14)

The distinctive sound of the instrument is also a reminder of death and funerals. The qeej’s instructions to the soul of the deceased are so powerful that they can inadvertently send living souls on the voyage of death if they are performed and heard in a private dwelling. The audience often expresses concern about whether it is dangerous to watch the funeral videos. William Lee explained that he needed to wait until he could work in his university office before he could view a selection of funeral videos I had sent him because “[I] did not want to view the videos in my house. Yes! As silly as it may seem, I still believe in the superstition that watching Hmong

funerals in the family home will invite death!” (Email 8 April 2013) Other viewers find the sound of the instrument frightening or wonder whether watching these clips—even the secular music such as *qeej zaj* - is allowed at home:

- “every time I hear qeej it gives me chills of scary chills maybe I haven't hear the nice ones I always hear at funeral only.” (Q10).
- “i want to listen but my hubby says you cant listen to this in your home.... “ (F3)
- “Sorry... not my kind of music or sound...this music instrument remind death. me no like....lol.” (Q10)
- “Is this safe to listen at home?” (Q2)
- ”Yes it is safe to listen at home. this song is to blow for fun.” (Q2)
- “Think as long as they aren’t funeral music. (Q2)”
- “You know your not suppose to video tape hmong funerals you might see the dead person in the video other than that very good video on our culture I'm pretty sure in 20 years Hmong americans will not be doing this no more.: (F1).
- “Hey ur realli good...But u know that his song that ur saying rite now cant sing inside ur house! But yah u have a very nice voice ..!! keep it up..!! “ (Q4)
- “ Haha. These type of qeej your able to sing it inside the house. Just not the main qeej one only.” (Q4)

The videos from Chinese television in which young troupes of Hmong/Miao play the qeej/lusheng in large ensembles staged in spectacularly choreographed events – in which they are probably not actually playing the qeej - elicit many, often heated, responses. Are these people really Hmong? Who are the “real” Hmong? What has happened to our culture over time and place? On the one hand, some conclude that the Hmong in the west really are from China because the Hmong in China practise the same rituals as “we” do; on the other hand, some argue that there has been a significant loss of cultural tradition in the long journey of the Hmong both through time and space from China to Southeast Asia and to the west.

- “Sometimes we (hmong) have to ask ourself if we really hmong ourself too because we have been through so many places across china to southeast asia and who knows we might mixed with some other asian too. So yeah they are really Hmong people from other group.” (Q5)
- “Rare they Hmong? If they are Hmong then iam proud to be Hmong but if they are not hmong then i fell sad.” (Q5)
- “in the intro she said that they are Miao... Miao are Hmong!!.... if you dont know you need to go learn some hmong history from ur grandparents... .” (Q5)
- “Yes they are. Just look at their qeej, it's pretty much the same as ours; a long mouthpiece with black stripes and 6 bamboo pipes. The only difference is that their qeej is smaller and has a higher pitch. You don't see the similarities in the

dance moves either? Look at 1:17 and 1:33, don't the qeej players in the U.S. do that too?." (Q5)

- "Yes, they are Hmong. Due to geography, Hmong people mixed a lot with other ethnic groups. Just look at the Hmong from Laos and Thailand, some of them look nothing like Hmong. Anyways, how do Hmong people look like? I don't know. Qeej dance always have footwork to it. This is real Hmong dancing. :-) Thank you for watching. (Q5)
- "wow!!!! hmong Lao, Thailand, USA lost that amazing culture after left China's 300 years ago." (Q5)
- "actually, those who left china 300 yrs ago were the ones that still retained most of our culture and the sacred qeej. if anything it's our chinese hmong in china who has lost our culture by mixing with others and misuse the qeej instrument for entertainment purposes. why, u may ask? they change their culture and mix with other ethnicity for fear of being persecuted by the chinese. ur wrong, it's us who're still true hmong. Not them." (Q5)
- "no, at home, they keep their instrument sacred.... then they also have those that are performed for tourists (to make a living). why not show TXUJ CI? i'm glad the Hmong from China are showing their arts instead of hiding them." (Q5)
- "FANTASTIC!!! This is an amazing clip!! Strings the cords to the hearts of the Hmong/Miao culture." (Q9)
- "yess this is the only hmong best qeej show ever,true hmong must be like this,don't steal other ppl culture like some lost hmong mekas claim lao n thai molam to be hmong culture,It's so irretate me,I'm proud of these brothers and sisters.beautiful show,they're trully represent hmong.made by hmong used by hmong is the qeej,a piece of hmong history remains alive,It's the qeej,lu shen." (Q9)
- "I wonder how we lost our drum dances when we fled to Southeast Asia from China. Wish we would still have drums for our festivals here in the USA..only time we see drums is during funerals. I would like to go all over SE Asia and South China once and see our Hmong/Miao there." (Q9)
- "This is one of the best Hmong Chinese stage show every. It's a shame no one here in the US can perform like this. We adopted too much hip hop, Indian, Lao, and Thai dances into our culture that kids nowadays think it's part of our culture." (Q9)
- "Well we have to reconsider that maybe the Hmong in China had adopted a little bit of Chinese culture too... n yes... we adopted too many cultures. We have no choice, but to adapted because we are always moving around and the world is changing fast." (Q9)
- "omg when he blows he the qeej he does it just like how i've seen our hmong people done it in the u.s omg .. so cool thank you so much for sharing." (Q9)

Responses to a video of a Hmong funeral, probably in Yunnan, express similar opinions:

- "This video clip is good proof that despite hundreds of years and thousands of miles of separation, our (Hmong people) funeral practices (kev pam tuag) remains unchanged."(F4)

- “Thanks for showing this... Our ancestors came from China. And it's interesting to see how the funeral tradition hasn't changed.” (F4)
- “I think so, no matter how long that we had sepatarate but we always have same fenural practices. Thanks for share.” (F4)
- “i came upon this susprising video clip, I like the video, i agree with the [previous commenter] funeral practice is very similar, make the story short : we are one root.” (F4)
- “Pom qhov video no ua rau kuv tig lub siab rov los muab peb hmong nyob USA cov dab qhuas saib li nyiaj thiab kub. Cov kwvtij nrhiav txoj qhov twg ntshu yuav tsis muaj tej kev cai zoo li no lawm. Peb Hmoob nyob USA yuav tsum tig rov los sib hlub.” [“See this video here made me turn my heart back to look at Hmong living in USA’s customs and rituals like silver and gold. Relatives look anywhere will not have these customs and rituals anymore. Us Hmong living in the USA have to turn to love eachother.”] (F4)
- “hmoob kev cai dab qhuas ces zoo ib yam xwb. tsis hais nyob lub teb chaws twg li. nov thiaj yog Hmoob. lislihuam.” [Hmong customs and rituals are all the same. Doesn’t matter which country. Here is really Hmong.”] (F4)

I have assumed that most of the responders to these videos are second or third generation Hmong in the United States. William Lee has commented “their roots stop in Laos” (p.c.). It is now nearly 40 years since the Hmong fled Laos after the fall of Saigon in 1975. American-born Hmong do not have first-hand experience of Hmong history or culture in Asia. It seems that young Hmong encounters via YouTube with their ethnic counterparts, the Hmong/Miao in China affirm a commonality or at least a point of comparison. Schein notes a similar effect among Hmong who watch video films of their coethnics in other parts of the world and “Come to think of themselves as ever more unified across distances not only of space but also of dialect, costume style, form of livelihood, and other diacritics of cultural identity.” (Schein 2004:438) But this is not a two-way process. Google and YouTube were blocked in China in 2009. Hmong/Miao in China do not have authorized access to the cultural production of their ethnic counterparts in other parts of the world. Indeed, YouTube offers no information at all about the provenance of viewers for F4 and Q9 and statistics have been disabled for Q5. Schein continues:

There is great emotional investment in these newly forged unities [of coethnics] but they are unities which are produced only in defiance of the global asymmetries that structure the Hmong diaspora. Dealings with the Hmong in the West and the Hmong in Asia are highly conditioned by the fact that it is the most far-flung migrants that have the resources and opportunities to travel to and embark on business ventures in order to extract profits from their homelands.” (2004: 438)

Nevertheless, for some viewers of the YouTube videos of the qeej, Hmong identity is affirmed globally and there is a strong desire to maintain it:

- “keep up the HMONG spirit!! i love my HMONG people i meant all over this world,my HMONG is the best people.”(Q2)
- “qeej is our hmong culture and our past ancestor make history with this instrument so have pride and please do learn them.”(Q7)
- “good job bro good to see youngster still keep the culture a live.”(Q3)  
“Wow Nice! people who dislike this are stupid please keep our culture strong 5000 years has past and our culture still very stay strong don't loos our culture Thanx for uploading this video it very nice to see hmong guys like this know how to play the Qeej instrument” (Q3)
- “MAN YOU ARE ONE TALENTED BROTHER!! WE GOTTA LOT TO LEARN FROM YOU BRO!!! KEEP UP THE TRADITION!!! WE NEED TO FOLLOW IN YOUR FOOT STEP AND KEEP OUR AWESOME TRADITIONAL MUSIC FLOWING FOR GENERATIONS TO COME!!  
“(Q3)
- “is Hmong culture dying off because of change or is Hmong as a people dying off because of our inability to change?” ( Q7)

## Conclusion

Online videos of the qeej in its various roles and from diverse countries clearly have a highly engaged and responsive audience. The comments tell us much about how young Hmong in the West are thinking about their culture, its origins and its future. Both the videos and the responses provide a rich site for research data and confirm that “as video becomes ubiquitous online and Google strengthens its global reach, the question for scholars is not whether to use YouTube, but how best to use it.” (Gidal 2008:212). Although I have used the examples in this paper to demonstrate some sociocultural dimensions of the reception of the qeej videos by young westernized Hmong, an investigation of the repertoires and performance practice techniques of the qeej on YouTube would be an equally productive activity.

It is interesting to reflect that in spite of its significant exposure on the Internet the qeej has not followed the trajectory of its fellow aerophones, the Japanese bamboo flute *shakuhachi* and the Indigenous Australian *didjeridu*, on the voyage into the realms of the “world music” scene. There is not one example that I could find of a non-Hmong person – male or female -playing the qeej among the YouTube postings; or indeed in any other form of cybernetic presence of the instrument. Yet the qeej has all the attributes that are so attractive to Western ears and sensibilities about “the Other”: it has a unique and “different” timbre or tone colour; its musical complexity is

intriguing and challenging; its use involves “break dance” moves of a particularly masculine and charismatic nature; and it is associated implicitly with the spirituality and therapeutic aspects that are so appealing to the New Age. The qeej could, but has not yet, become spatially and temporally mobile in the process of commodification represented by the “world music” phenomenon.

Nor have the qeej’s complex musical structures been borrowed acousmatically or schizophonically as a source of timbral or compositional inspiration for western composers; and its sounds have not (yet) been borrowed or sampled by the creators of ambient ethno-techno fusion music. The qeej appears to remain firmly in Hmong control.

In their comments on the YouTube videos, young Hmong in the West show pride in and curiosity about this instrument, even though for second and third generation Hmong it is sometimes seen as symbolic of the older generation. They are intrigued by their vicarious travels to the Hmong/Miao world in China and the ways in which their coethnics in China use the qeej. They acknowledge and recognize the qeej as a tangible, audible marker of Hmong identity, and they are full of praise for young Hmong men in the west who are attempting to master the instrument. Technology has enabled the Hmong in the west to become travellers both in time and space, making virtual visits to the real-time cultures of their ancestors in China and mainland Southeast Asia. Investigations involving just one of the capacities of the Internet, YouTube videos, contribute a new and valuable voice to ethnomusicological research.

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## FIGURES

FIGURE 1

A Lusheng Fair in Guizhou

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gyti9oMm\\_wc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gyti9oMm_wc)

(Published April 10, 2013)



FIGURE 2

“Lusheng demo Chinese minority instrument”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2D5BqlKTMw>

Uploaded 14 August 2008

“Miao Lusheng demo by Mr. Guan Lao-cang 滚老床, a lusheng player in Rongxui 融水 in Guangxi, Southwestern China. The lusheng he is using is made with bamboo found in Rongxui.”



FIGURE 3

[http://www.zazzle.com.au/peb\\_hmong\\_tshirt\\_the\\_qeej\\_dark-235181844263683845](http://www.zazzle.com.au/peb_hmong_tshirt_the_qeej_dark-235181844263683845) . Accessed 15 June 2013.





FIGURE 4

<http://www.seexeng.com/id78.html>

Accessed 20 June 2013.



FIGURE 5

<http://www.seexeng.com/id78.html>

Accessed 20 June 2013.





FIGURE 6

<http://hmongcatholique.forumdediscussions.com/t265-hais-paj-lug>

Accessed 24 June 2013.



FIGURE 7

“Longing for Qeej “ Dance drama.

<http://www.fringe festival.org/2011/show/?id=1543>

Accessed 25 June 2013.



FIGURE 8

“Kev Cai Hmoob Nraug Nas Lub Suab Qeej”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkqRauEs7uE>

Accessed 3 June 2013.



FIGURE 9

“Suab Hmoob Qeej 3”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFNBnDqaru4>

Accessed 31 May 2013.



FIGURE 10

“Hmong Qeej from Yunnan Province.”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEiNIYDptlc>

Accessed 1 May 2013.





FIGURE 11

“Qeej zaj.”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oA77tjNjI10>

Accessed 12 September 2012.



FIGURE 12

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FIGURE 13

“Qeej, Chue Fue Thao.”

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FIGURE 14

“Hmong Lusheng Dance from China.”

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FIGURE 15

“Crafting tradition building the qeej instrument.”

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FIGURE 16

“An amazing Hmong qeej player.”

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FIGURE 17

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FIGURE 18

“Side-comb Miao performing lusheng (qeej).”

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FIGURE 19

Suab Qeej Hmoob 2 - Boua Long Vue."

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FIGURE 20

“Hmong qeej jumping.”

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FIGURE 21

“Sting Yang Talent at the Mr HSP Pageant Part 2.”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KL0LXD4lO1U>

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FIGURE 22

“Qaib Dib Dance at Boom Bap village.”

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FIGURE 23

“Hmong Ntiv Qeej.”

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FIGURE 24

"HMONG THAI FUNERAL @ TAK." (Thailand)

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FIGURE 25

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FIGURE 26

"Funeral qeej – Joupao Xiong

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FIGURE 27

“Hmoob Qeej Ntsuag.”

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FIGURE 28

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FIGURE 29

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