

Upon Meeting the Ancestors: the Hmong Funeral Ritual in Asia and Australia

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[1]

Perhaps because of the universality of death, subtleties of specific cultural configurations in deathways have sometimes been obscured in attempts to compare other perceived universals, such as demonstrations of grief, and the symbolism and socio-politics of deathways ([Metcalf and Huntington 1991](#)). On the one hand, archaeological reconstructions of death rites have given us insight into long term sequences of cultural change, while on the other, ethnographic research has provided accounts of living traditions, even if they capture those traditions at the particular moment of the social anthropologist's relatively brief encounter with another culture.

[2]

This paper will describe how the text affects its own telling at a specific moment in the death rites of the Hmong people, drawing chronologically on seven accounts dating from the 1890s to 1992 and ranging geographically from southern China to Thailand, Laos and Australia. To the Hmong -- traditionally a migratory people -- the long song of death is the most important ritual text. It is transmitted orally and does not exist in written form. Since oral literature is verbal and auditory by its very nature it is supposedly free to change with each telling and each teller. The factors of both a long history of dispersal by migration and an oral tradition could indicate, superficially, that substantial change would occur in the oral literature of the Hmong over time and place. In this paper, the evidence of translations of the death song shows, however, a remarkable stability in

these texts and from this it will be concluded that the very essence of Hmongness - of Hmong history, ethnicity and world view - is invested in the stability of the texts of the death narrative, which is in essence a reflexive metacommentary on Hmong society. Finally, some of the indicators for change in the funeral ritual of the Hmong following their diaspora to the West will be discussed.

[3]

The Hmong traditionally lived in isolated and dispersed mountainous regions of southern China, Thailand and Laos. Their migratory nature was both voluntary as a result of their practice of slash and burn agriculture and forced as a consequence of aggression from the dominant cultures within which they have always lived. As Geddes has noted:

the preservation by the Miao (Hmong) of their ethnic identity for such a long time despite their being split into many small groups surrounded by different alien peoples and scattered over a vast geographical area is an outstanding record paralleling in some ways that of the Jews but more remarkable because they lacked the unifying forces of literacy and a doctrinal religion and because the cultural features they preserved seem to be more numerous ([Geddes 1976:10](#)).

[4]

Death for the Hmong, as for most other non-Han tribal people in southern China, is thought of as a journey - perhaps the penultimate migration - to the sources of life and ultimate rebirth. In the death chant, which is performed as soon as possible after death, the soul of the deceased is given not only its material needs for the long journey, such as food, wine, clothing and money and instructions for the journey to the realm of the ancestors, but also an explanation of the creation of the world and its antithesis, the necessity of death. This recitation is called "Showing the Way" (*Qhuab Kev*). It is followed by a further lengthy set of instructions called "The Song of Expiring Life (*Qeej Tu Siav*)" played on the bamboo mouth organ. Both sections must be performed by a ritual expert. The long poem is considered by the Hmong to have such power that certain precautions must be

taken by the ritual practitioner, who interpolates his own presence into the text at the end of the recitation. At this moment he instructs the soul of the deceased to provide lies, riddles and enigmatic answers in reply to the ancestors' interrogation concerning how the soul was able to make this journey. In this way the soul of the ritual expert is protected from inadvertently accompanying the soul of the deceased into the world of the ancestors. Here, the chanter himself enters the liminal space between death and incorporation into the next world, but inserts his own presence into the narrative in order to withdraw himself from that liminal space.

[5]

There are at least eleven descriptions of the funeral ritual of the Hmong from different times and places ([Bertrais 1985](#); [Chindarsi 1976](#); [Clarke 1911](#); [de Beauclair 1960](#); [Graham 1954](#); [Lemoine 1972](#); [Mickey 1947](#); [Ruey 1962](#); [Schworer Kohl 1981](#); [Symonds 1991](#); [Tapp 1989](#)). Among these I have found six which provide either wholly or in part a translation of the text of the death poem. To this I add my own translation and a transcription of a recording made by a ritual practitioner in Melbourne in 1992.

[6]

The earliest example of both original text and translation comes from an English missionary, Samuel Clarke, who worked for 15 years with the non-Han tribes in Kweichow and published his monograph *Among the Tribes in South-West China* in 1911. Most of his attention is given to a group he identifies as "Black Miao". (Miao is the Chinese term for the Hmong and regarded by them as derogatory. Differences in dress and dialect give rise to various different groups of Hmong such as the White Hmong, the Green or Blue, the Black, the Cowrie Shell and so on.) Clarke shrewdly and modestly made the following remarks which are as relevant to research into the Hmong nowadays as they were in the late 19th century:

It must be remembered that some of these Miao tribes have been widely separated in time and space, so that what may truly be said of some of them may not be true

of all. And here it may as well be admitted that we who have been so much among them have yet a good deal to learn, and possibly something of what has been learned has not been properly understood ([Clarke 1911:61](#)).

[7]

Clarke describes two sections of the ceremony, one at the point of death, the *Qhuab Kev*, and one prior to burial, the "Song of Expiring Life" (*Qeej Tu Siav*), just as it is performed in Australia today. At the end of the *Qhuab Kev*, the soul of the deceased receives the following instructions. Markings in bold type in all of the following extracts indicate similarities between the texts:

if someone finely dressed comes to show you the way, it is **someone come to deceive you**, and not one of your ancestors. If a person wearing **coarse clothes** comes to lead you, follow him, he is one of your forefathers. If someone with a bad heart asks, '**Who brought you here?**' you must say 'One tall and stout'. If they ask you, '**Can you find him?**' you must say. '**You cannot overtake him, his eyes are as big as a cup and his ears as big as a fan**'. ([Clarke 1911:77](#))

[8]

The next example comes from David Graham who in 1954 published *Songs and Stories of the Ch'uan Miao* based on his work with the Ch'uan Miao in Kweichow which commenced in 1921. He provides the original text and a translation of what he calls the "Opening the Way for the Soul to Travel to Paradise". The last stanza is as follows:

Your parents-in-law (ancestors) will ask, 'Who brought you here?' You must not say that I brought you here. You must say that you came alone. I will take you to the grave to be buried peacefully. **You wear bamboo or hemp shoes. I will wear shoes made of vines (wicker).** I will escort you to your grave, and you must stay there forever. **You must send me back to life.** ([Graham 1954:54](#)).

[9]

Next, in 1970 Jacques Lemoine recorded the Green Hmong *Kr'ua Ke*, or "Showing the Way" in northern Laos. It was published as an example of ethnopoetry in both original and translation from French to English in 1983 and remains the longest and most flowery translated version of the poem to the present day. Once again, the soul of the deceased is instructed in the second to last stanza of the recitation to respond to the ancestors' queries about its travelling companion with riddles :

Sho,hey! **Your Ancestors will say: "Who showed you the way here?**

You will answer: **'It was a fellow**

With a face as big as a fan and eyes like saucers,
Feet like ox's hooves and taking up as much room as an ox when he lies down'.

Your Ancestors will say next: **"How**

Can we follow his tracks? If we call him, will he hear?

Will we be able to catch him up on horseback?' 'You must say: 'He can hear no call.

He lead me here this year. And left again last year.
He can hear no call'.

Your Ancestors will say: **'Well can't we follow his tracks?'** 'You must

answer: **'No one can follow his tracks,**

The weather was dry when he came, when he left, it was raining

And his tracks were all washed away'.

You must say: 'When he came, the reeds parted like swords

The leaves of the grass parted like spearheads

Now he's gone, the reeds are stock still, the grass blocks the way, unmoving.

Partridges and pheasants scratched the ground, leaves cover the path.

No one can find his tracks, no one

Can catch him up on horseback.

Partridges and pheasants pecking at the leaves must have covered his tracks'.

You will say : **'He sent me this year, he left again last year.**

He can hear no call'.

You will say that when you came you had shoes and you

crossed a bridge,
He had no shoes, he came by the mountain road
And left again over the slippery rocks.
You will say you can see if the water is clear, but
not if the water is muddy ([Lemoine 1983:38-39](#)).

Again the teller of the death poem insists that his own soul must be permitted to return to the world of the living, through the deception of the ancestors with obfuscations, riddles and enigmas.

[10]

Nusit Chindarsi worked with the Australian anthropologist William Geddes amongst the Green Hmong (*Hmong Njua*) in the mountains of Chiangmai, Thailand between 1964 and 1967. Upon the completion of his work with Geddes, Chindarsi continued to work independently, producing *The Religion of the Hmong Njua* in 1976. He provides both a description of the funeral ceremony and a translation of parts of the text including the following:

If your (new) parents ask you who brought you there, tell them that a man from the other world brought you, but **because he has big hands and big feet he cannot cross the river**; he sank down and **cannot be found again, so you are alone.** ([Chindarsi 976:148](#))

[11]

In 1981 Gretel Schworer Kohl recorded a Green Hmong version of the *Qeej Tu Siav*, the second section of the ceremony, in Pa Klang village in the province of Nan, Thailand. The performer was Vang Chao Sae Xiong, a 50 year old man who had fled from Laos in 1980. In this section of the ritual the instructions are not chanted but rather are encoded in the pitches of the 6 pipes of the Hmong bamboo mouth organ, the *qeej*. Schworer Kohl describes the last part of this section as follows:

The mouthorgan player gives the dead soul this last advice: '**If your grandmother and grandfather should ask you who accompanied you here**, so that they **not recognise me and call me to them as well**, please answer them with the following lie''I have no idea who

my strange travelling companion was. **He had great round ears like a rice winnower and eyes as huge as tea bowls. He came with the clouds and disappeared with them'**. ([Schworer Kohl 1981:610](#); transl. from the German by Susan Falk).

[12]

The anthropologist Patricia Symonds undertook research in a White Hmong village in northern Thailand in 1987-88. Her PhD thesis of 1991, *Cosmology and the Cycle of Life:Hmong Views of Birth, Death and Gender* provides a full description of the funeral ceremony of an old man as well as the original text and translation of the death poem. Once again, the last stanzas of the poem show by-now familiar themes:

Your grandparents will ask: **'Who brought you here?'**
 You will reply that he is someone you do not know
His ears are as big as the fan and his eyes are as big as the cup

Your grandparents will ask: **'Could we find his trail and go after him?'**

You will say that **there is no way to find the trail** and go after him

Because he came this year and he already left last year

When he came he came inland when he returned he returned by water

Your grandparents will ask: **'Can we ride a horse or cow to go after him? '**

You must answer that you **cannot follow him**

You should not follow him because you might fall into a trap

You must say this so that you can have your way to meet your grandparents...

Then you will let one spirit go back to the land of the living ([Symonds 1991:308](#))

[13]

Finally, I recorded Mr Seng Thao's versions of both the *Qhuab Kev* and the *Qeej Tu Siav* in Melbourne in 1992. Seng Thao is White Hmong, as are nearly all Australian Hmong. He came to Australia in 1991 having fled from Laos to Ban Vinai refugee

camp in Thailand in 1979 at the age of 19. At the end of the first section the following instructions to the soul of the deceased are provided by the ritual expert.

Now, I have accompanied you to your grandparents' place and if they ask you: '**Who brought you here?**' you must reply: '**Someone brought me here last night but had already left last year. Or somebody brought me here the other day, but had already left the year before last**'.

Your grandparents will continue to ask: '**Can we catch up with him and call him back?**' You must reply: '**Do not go after him and follow his track.** He has sharp swords and fierce spears which he may use to kill us or may set a **trap** for us'.

And the last stanza addresses the lord of the living, Saub:

You hold my hands and I carry your bags and **we follow each other back to earth** (repeated) (translation by Vangmar Virathone and Catherine Falk).^{[1](#)}

[14]

I believe that these examples show a remarkable consistency of textual content over a relatively broad spectrum of time and place, even allowing for the vagaries of seven different documentations and translations of the text by seven different non-Hmong observers at different times in the thinking of ethnography. If other moments in the long journey to the realm of the ancestors in the seven texts cited are examined a similar congruity of text content is found.

[15]

Variants in the rendition of the text are to be expected as some aspects of the ceremony are conducted differently according to the deceased's clan, age, gender and manner of death and according to the length of training, the teacher of the death poem and the geographical proximity to the homeland of the ancestors in southern China. The examples cited range over a variety of dialects - Green, White and Black Hmong and Ch'uan Miao - as well as over time and place. However, the substance of all the texts is very similar. In addition, this

particular moment of the text - when the chanter inserts his own presence into the narrative in order to take leave of the soul of the deceased - occurs at the end of the recitation in all seven texts. They all evince one of the important cultural and moral values which underlies other forms of Hmong communication, be they folktales or extemporised singing competitions during courtship - that is, that one must look beneath the surface to find the true meaning. Outward appearances are deceptive.

[16]

The relative stability of the texts of the funeral ritual needs to be seen in the context of Hmong myths and legends which define Hmong ethnicity in terms of an absence of material and conceptual properties which they have observed in the dominant majority cultures by which they have always been surrounded. These include a long history of being without both a state or territory and a ruler or head of state and an absence of writing or literacy, which has dominated much Hmong thinking and about which there is a the following story:

once upon a time all knowledge was written in books. However, on a journey, the books were inadvertently steamed in with the rice, which was then eaten by the cattle. This is how the Hmong lost their writing (pc from Pao Saykao, Melbourne, 1990).

[17]

The corollary to these perceived lacunae includes a rich oral tradition of legends, stories, mythology, ritual texts and extemporised sung poetry. The Hmong do not have a word for imusici; rather, they distinguish between a constant, preserved repertoire of sung poetry for funerals, marriage negotiations and shamanic rites and a fluid, changing repertoire for expressions of strong emotion in extemporised song. Both of these repertoires are regarded as communication rather than music. A Hmong story underscores this perception:

In the beginning, the Hmong people on the earth were never sick and they never died. But then people found out about things that are wrong. After that they could

get sick and die. At that time, they had nothing that they could use to help them in their lives. So two brothers went to Suab to learn those things from him. They planned to go back home after they had learned everything. Suab gave them four boxes. The first contained words for fun, the words a boy and a girl in love could say to each other (kwv txhiaj). The second contained the words needed to put two people together in marriage (zaj tshoob). The third contained the words for the dead (txiv xaiv). The fourth contained the magic words that would help people (khawv koob). Suab told the two brothers to keep the boxes closed on their journey back home. After you get home, he said, you will know which people are good and careful and have good memories. You can open the boxes and teach the contents to them. But when the two brothers returned home, their neighbours ran toward them to see what they had brought. They wanted to know what was in the boxes, so they took one box and opened it. This was the box of words for fun. All the people heard what was inside; the words ran away everywhere. That's why now women and men, boys and girls, everyone can easily know these words. They are for fun. But the wedding, funeral and magic words are still kept in boxes to this day and taught to people who need to learn them. These are the words that take care of the people (Khoua Ker Xiong, as told to [McNamer 1986: 83](#)).

[18]

So the death songs, along with the marriage negotiation and shamanic texts, belong to a category of correctness and stability which accompanies important moments of transition in human life. These texts have been obtained from a suprahuman source and, although transmitted orally, are expected to persist unaltered through time and place serving, perhaps, to secure transitory and hazardous human life in an unchanging and unifying tradition ([McNamer 1986](#)).

[19]

The language of the death songs is not only replete with flowery metaphor and analogies but also contains abundant references to the material culture and the agricultural

rhythms of life of the Hmong in their traditional geographical setting: that is, the high mountain ridges of mainland southeast Asia. References abound in the texts to specific flora and fauna, to specific relationships to and between topographical features - the rivers, the streams, valleys and mountain passes, to agricultural implements and tools and methods of food preparation, to heroes and heroines of legend and myth located in their specific geographical settings, and to specific aspects of domestic architecture. The principal actors in the song of creation and death are themselves the deified dead and the living gods. The interpretation and comprehension of such ecologically and culturally specific text is difficult for young Hmong people who live in the West and have little if any memory of life conditions in their original homeland, the homeland of the ancestors.

[20]

Mature members of the Hmong community in Australia are now reacting to the perceived inappropriateness in Australia of much of the metaphor in the texts by simply abandoning it. ² While this facilitates the telescoping of the traditional three day funeral ritual into a mere 1 or 2 days, it also indicates a radical change to a tradition which seems to have survived thus far relatively unscathed over thousands of years and thousands of kilometres. A deracination of the cultural ecology which is inherent to and reflected in the ritual texts of the Hmong now threatens the integrity of rendition of those texts in a manner which war, flight, yellow rain and extended periods of temporary asylum or 'pseudo migration' in refugee camps could not. The shift from the rice bowl to McDonalds, from sung songs of courtship to the telephone, from thatched bamboo huts to highrise housing commission flats, from the rhythms of agricultural life to the arrhythmia of the pluralistic urban maze seems to be the final and only vicissitude in a long history of vicissitudes which is capable of fundamentally altering the songs of Hmong deathways:

the Hmong made one airplane flight from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century. Within the space of seventy-two hours these mountain people were taken from bamboo-thatched huts in refugee camps along the

Mekong river and put into two and three bedroom apartments in Philadelphia, Minneapolis and other major American cities. They were unaware of how to deal with the simplest of tasks for Americans: turning on and off lights, using the refrigerator, stove or oven, paying bills. ([Sherman 1985:13](#))

Endnotes

[Return to text.](#)

^1^ The complete stanza of the Qhuab Kev as performed by Seng Thao is:

Oh the dead, now you are dressed well and have reached the frontiers of the realm of Ntxwj Nyoog. You will climb up into Ntxwj Nyoog's territory, full of bamboo trees, and soon you will be one of Ntxwj Nyoog's sons.

Oh the dead, now you are well dressed and you have reached the frontiers of the realm of Ntxwj Nyoog. You will climb up into Ntxwj Nyoog's territory, full of striped bamboo trees, and soon you will be one of Ntxwj Nyoog's sons.

Oh the dead, now you are dressed well and you have reached the frontiers of Ntxwj Nyoog's territory. You will climb up into Ntxwj Nyoog's territory, full of his daughters, and soon you will be one of Ntxwj Nyoog's sons.

Oh the dead, you are well dressed and you will soon be on your way to your grandparents' world. A spirit rooster will crow and your rooster will not reply. This is not your grandparents' place. People will try to deceive you and lead you to the edge of the mountains and the cliffs to try to make you fall into the wrong place.

If your rooster crows and the spirit rooster replies then this is your grandparents' place. You can perch on the edge of their coffins.

If the spirit rooster crows and your rooster replies, then this is your grandparents' place. You can perch on the edge

of their graves.

You have now arrived at your grandparents' place. Those with smiling faces and fair features who are waiting for you on the road are not your grandparents.

Your grandparents are those with darker features who come to wait for you on the road. You can perch on their hemp skirts.

Now, I have accompanied you to your grandparents' place and if they ask you: 'Who brought you here?' you must reply: 'Someone brought me here last night but had already left last year. Or someone brought me here the other day, but had already left the year before last'.

Your grandparents will continue to ask: 'Can we catch up with him and call him back?' You must reply: 'Do not go after him and follow his track. He has sharp swords and fierce spears which he may use to kill us or may set a trap for us'.

[Return to text.](#)

^2^ For further discussion of the Hmong in Australia, see Falk 1993, 1994a and 1994b.

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One of her current research work is on the Hmong funeral rite, *quab ke* and *quej tu siav*. A full recorded version of the two texts has been completed with the musical recording of the *quej tu siav* with a complete English translation. She has published many articles on the Hmong (in ***Tirra Lirra*** and various Newspapers) including ["The Hmong in Australia"](#) ; ["Hmong Funeral in Australia"](#) and [Music of the Hmong](#) .

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