

A Visit to the Hmong of Asia: Globalization and Ethnicity at the Dawn of the 21st Century

Photo Essay by Kou Yang



Visiting the urban Hmong in Bangkok. From right to left, Taub and Prayath Nanthansin, and their friend, Bhakchin Vachirathanakit. Prayath is a lecturer at Kasetsart University and his wife, Taub, is also college educated. Bhakchin is an Internet Technician. They represent the few Hmong who have the education and vocation to live a more comfortable urban life in Bangkok. It should be noted here that all of them have Thai names (see endnote # 8).



The photo above captures a scene in the town of Sayaboury, Laos where I grew up. Behind it is Pha Xang or Elephant Mountain and the Nam Houng River, the landmarks of the town. Inserted (at left) is a portrait of myself in the early 1970s, when I was a Buddhist Novice of Sisavang Vong Buddhist Monastery. Inserted (right) is one of thousands of rubber trees that dominate the landscapes of many rural roads in Sayaboury.



My old school: I was a member of the second cohort of this school, which was then called the College de Sayaboury. Above is a photo of myself and classmates in 1974. Below is a photo taken during the 2008 visit; it is now Lycee de Sayaboury.



Hmong at the Morning Market in Sayaboury



Some newly rich Hmong in Sayaboury with the author.



A Hmong child (above) is watching the Lord of the Rings



Many Hmong homes have the TV satellite dish that allows them to watch domestic as well as international television programs



Two welcome Home Baci Ceremonies offered to me by both my Lao and Hmong families. Left: my former Buddhist Teacher and his wife performing the welcoming home Lao Baci ceremony for me. He resigned from his monkhood after I left Laos in 1975; he married and has three girls. Since he has no son, and I was his most cherished disciple, he made me his older god-son and offered me a welcome

home ceremony. Right: my aunt and her family are performing the Hmong welcome home ceremony for me. These ceremonies represent my upbringing and multicultural background.



Most Hmong girls in Laos today do not wear Hmong clothing in their everyday lives, but continue to do the Pa Ndau or embroidery.



I entertain Hmong children in Ban Done That, Bokeo Province, Laos with a Hmong folktale story. Everyone I meet is both my student and teacher.



A Hmong girl in Ban Song Cha, Oudomxay, is watching the feeding of her family's pigs. Please note that she dresses in Lao clothing styles and holds a cell phone in her hands, listening to Hmong American pop music. This is indeed a traditional life with modern technology.



Globalization and high-tech have reached many aspects of Hmong life. In the photo above, an elderly Hmong woman is talking on the cell phone, probably to a relative out of town or in the US.



The influence of Hmong Americans on the Hmong youth of Laos is very obvious. In this photo, young Hmong in Ban Done That, Bokeo province, are examining DVDs of pop music and films made by Hmong Americans.



Many of the young Hmong have no idea where California is, but for them, wearing California is the latest fashion.



In this photo, no one wears Hmong costumes. They all come outside to see a girl being sent to the hospital because of an attempted suicide. This is how they dress in their every day life.



A scene of a Hmong ghetto in Luang Prabang, which is sandwiched between the Luang Prabang International Airport and the Souphanouvong University.



This is the old Normal School, my old school in Luang Prabang. Above is a photo taken during this trip and below is a photo taken in 1975, when I was a student of this school





I was born on one of these mountains



The remnant of the bygone era in Sala Phou Khoun: This jeep was used by the Pathet Lao during the transition of changing governments between 1974-75. The last battle between the forces of Military Region II under the command of former Major General Vang Pao and the Lao People's Army took place here in April in 1975.



A Hmong American visiting relatives in Phonsavanh, Xieng Khouang Province. On the right, a Hmong Lao is trying to change Kip, Lao currency, with US dollars from the Hmong American and his friend.



My tour of the Plain of Jars, treasures of the country of Laos. In this plain lie many hundreds of Jars of various sizes, built by the aborigines of Laos. My eyes are frozen on the bomb crater next to a group of priceless jars (inserted); many priceless jars may have already been destroyed. . History has left both treasures and destruction.

The first grave on the left is that of Nhiavue Lobliayao, the second to the left, Lo Bliayao. Behind are the remnants of Lo Bliayao's home, the only bricked and concreted Hmong home in his time, so the Hmong called it Tsev Pob Zeb. Lo Bliayao, a paramount leader of the Hmong, died in 1932.



Left to right: The graves of Ya Thotou, Paseuth Fong Ya, and their Advisor, Viet Xuan Hung. All of them were buried in Nong Het, Laos.



The tomb of Faydang Lobliyao in Nong Het



Left: Attending a feast of the Yathotou family in Muong Kham, the Rice Basket of Xieng Khouang province.

Below: The sign of the village of Phakhae, the former territory of Ly Foung. Touby Lyfoung's official birthplace. The first Hmong village school was built near this village.





Top left: Hmong shopkeepers in Phonhsavanh, Xieng Khouang Province. Right: Western Union advertisement – showing the influence of Hmong Americans sending money to relatives in Laos.

Above is a scene of the Mekong River, from the Thai side, North of Vientiane. Many thousand Hmong refugees swam across this mighty river; while many safely reached refugee camps in Thailand, others drowned and died.



Above is a photo of a young Hmong bride and Lao groom being blessed by the bride's father, the Hon. Yathao Sailue, member of the Council of the Lao Front for National Reconstruction. Both the bride and the groom are from elite families in Vientiane. Left is H.E. Pani Yathotou, member of the Politburo of the Lao Revolutionary Party and Vice President of the National Assembly of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. She is the first woman in Laos to have ever served in the Politburo and as Vice President of the National Assembly.



The above and below photos are examples of Sapa, Vietnam, the picturesque Hmong terrace rice paddy fields and villages that attract thousands of foreign visitors to these areas yearly.



In this photo, Hmong women are trying to sell their Pa N dau and gift items to tourists in Sapa. These interactions lead to the acquisition of English among many young Hmong



Above is a scene of young Hmong in Sapa browsing through the internet, mostly to Hmong American websites. Below is a group of Hmong tourist guides examining their newest toys - cell phones.



Above is a scene of a Hmong market place in Can Cau, Lao Cia, Vietnam. Below is a scene of Hmong men who come to the marketplace to socialize and drink. People come to the market by foot, bicycle, motorcycle or horseback.



Above is a photo of an educated couple in Lao Cai. The husband is a teacher his wife is a student training to be a teacher. They represent some of the very few who have made it to the vocational school in Vietnam.



Above is a Hmong village in Kai Yuan, Yunnan, China. Below is a photo of two Hmong teenagers, who have only a 9th grade of education. Smoking appears to be very popular among Hmong youth in Yunnan, where the economy is heavily based upon tobacco production.





Above is a photo of the urban Hmong in Mengzi , China, and their daily life. These two gentlemen run a car wash shop. Below is a photo of my visit to the Hmong in Sichuan Province, China. Inserted is a portrait of a Hmong girl in Sichuan.





A group of Hmong elders in Sichuan welcome me with a Qeej performance. Inserted is a photo of a Hmong girl in Gaopuo with her Qeej. The shape and form of the Qeej also are indicators of language: the similarity of the Qeej shows the similarity of the language dialect. Note that this girl also calls herself Hmong.



Above are the remnants of Ban Vinai Hmong refugee camp in Thailand. Inserted is a photo of statuettes built by Hmong Chao Fa from 1975 to 1990.



Above is a desecrated Hmong grave in Tham Krabok, Thailand. Below is the marker of a Hmong grave that has been desecrated.



As of this writing, about 10 Hmong families remain in Tham Krabok. This girl's family is one of them. Below are the remains of the old refugee camp in Tham Krabok.



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Above, a Hmong assembly worker in her studio that she shares with three other girls. There is no cooking stove and furniture. Inserted (bottom left) is a scene of three Hmong assembly workers outside of their studio. Below is a sculpture of Hmong Qeej Masters in Pingpian Miao Autonomous County, Hong He Prefecture, Yunnan Province, P.R. China.