

Searching for the Hmong People's Ethnic Homeland and Multiple Dimensions of Transnational Longing: From the Viewpoint of the Hmong in Laos

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Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 10, 18 Pages

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Hmong people in the diaspora imagine each other and develop diverse and multidimensional types of longing in the absence of a “true” ethnic homeland. Even before the Hmong dispersed around the world after the Vietnam War, they never identified or agreed upon a “true” ethnic homeland. As a result, Hmong people have inevitably developed various other types of longing. The objects of these longings have been conceptually expanded to include a Hmong culture, a powerful leader, and a future time when Hmong will again be reunited. In this sense, I will examine the way Hmong people express their perspectives on their objects of longing in the absence of a “true” ethnic homeland by focusing on the viewpoints of some Hmong people residing in Laos. Based on my observations and analysis, I also propose to rethink the limitations of the dominant view about how Hmong imagine their ethnic homeland. Although current theoretical perspectives of transnationalism and “imagined community” have contributed to an understanding of the Hmong people’s imagination and their diasporic ethnic identity, those views cannot fully explain how Hmong people’s longing is not just associated with the lost homeland but can have multiple directions and meanings. These different types of longing expressed by the Hmong people suggest that diasporic communities can be maintained without a territorial ethnic homeland.

Introduction

My young friend, a Hmong living in Laos who used to tell me many funny stories, asked me a secret question one day, which made me speechless and forced me to re-examine both of our lives.

“Dao [my Thai/Laotian nickname], do you think Hmong people have a country? Where do you think Hmong people are from?”

(A conversation with a Hmong boy in Laos, February 13, 2006)

I have had to keep this question in my mind for a long time, not only because I was unable to give an answer but because I wondered what made him ask that kind of question in the first place. It seemed to me natural that he should assume his home country was Laos, but his question was not just about a nation of residence or formal citizenship. This seemingly simple question actually contains two very important lifelong issues for the Hmong people in regards to their “true” ethnic homeland. On the one hand, it is a question about a place of origin where their ethnic group, including Hmong ancestors, is originally from. On the other hand, it is also asking about a place of birth, another definition of homeland.¹ In this context, despite being born in Laos, my Hmong friend did not identify his ethnic homeland as Laos but was still continuously searching for a “true” homeland for the Hmong.

As I have always regarded my own homeland through the official nationality that appears in my passport, at first I could not grasp the true significance of the difference between myself and the Hmong people. By nationality, I am a Korean from Korea, but the Hmong are not people from a country called “Hmong.” To whatever extent I think consciously about my homeland, I know I have at least what I can call a “homeland” where I was born and can return to, while the

¹ Tsuda (2009: 5) explains the distinction between the natal homeland (place of birth) and the ancestral/ethnic homeland (place of ethnic origin) for people in the diaspora who have a remarkable geographic dispersion. This distinction exemplifies how people in the diaspora have a double concern between the two homelands and how they ultimately have to deal with the “politics of belonging” in both homelands (for further discussion on the latter, see Fujiwara 2008; Rosaldo 2003; Ong 1996).

Hmong people I met do not always identify their homeland as a place of origin, birth, or current residence. Based on my Hmong friend's question, I started asking myself. "Why do Hmong people ask about their homeland to a foreigner like myself?" My friend might have longed for a homeland, which the Hmong might have lost in the distant past. However, the real problem is actually not that the Hmong simply lost their homeland, but rather that they are not even sure where their homeland is. Therefore, the relationship between the Hmong people's homeland and their object of longing may not always correspond to one other. Instead, because of the absence of a substantial ethnic homeland, Hmong people have developed multidimensional and sometimes confusing longings which move in various directions. In this context, I ask, *what have Hmong people actually longed for because they were uncertain about their "true" ethnic homeland? What are the alternative objects of their longing caused by the absence of the ethnic homeland?*

Based on these questions, I first investigate the existing literature on transnationalism, diaspora, and the concept of "imagined community" that has explained people's diasporic ethnic identity. In particular, I examine the unique aspects of the Hmong diaspora that contribute to rethinking the uses of transnationalism and the concept of an "imagined and shared" ethnic identity which creates an ethnic consciousness of "one united Hmong." Secondly, I explore how Hmong people in the diaspora develop and suggest multiple meanings of longing in their actual lives by focusing on the perspectives of Hmong in Laos. By analyzing the alternative objects of longing of the Hmong, I emphasize that these different types of longing are important factors that keep the Hmong diaspora together in the absence of a clearly defined territorial homeland. This may be a unique characteristic of the Hmong diaspora.

My paper does not attempt to generalize about the entire Hmong people through the views expressed here or to give a “right” answer about the place of origin of Hmong people. Rather, I emphasize how difficult it is to generalize about Hmong people's ethnic identity when they have been living a long history of diasporic dispersion. I seek multiple possibilities to understand the meanings of homeland and different objects of longing by listening to individual voices. Although my main focus is to analyze expressed forms of imagination and longing related to the ethnic Hmong people in the U.S. from the viewpoint of the Hmong in Laos, it is important to note that the Hmong people's ideas for an ethnic homeland are not limited to the Hmong in the U.S. or Laos only. Looking at multiple regions is my long term research goal, but for now, I focus on the Hmong in Laos and the way they develop ethnic consciousness and imagine other Hmong people in the U.S. in their remarkable diasporic condition.

Theoretical Framework

According to diaspora studies, the classic meaning of diaspora is related to political persecution, war, and exile, which cause the initial separation of diasporic people from their ethnic homeland and their dispersal to multiple geographic regions around the world (Cohen 1997; Tölölyan 1996; Clifford 1994; Safran 1991). In this sense, the Hmong diaspora can certainly contribute to general diaspora studies and the related issues of nationalism and transnationalism. However, the Hmong diaspora also points to a deficiency in these theories because the Hmong lack a territorial nation-state of their own. Because of the absence of a “true” ethnic homeland, Hmong people's experiences raise a question about whether they really have one imagined ethnic identity based on longing for the ethnic homeland or whether it is our own imagination which portrays them as imagining their ethnic homeland in a unidirectional way. Indeed, it is not very clear what the Hmong's longing is directed towards.

The issue of the Hmong people's transnational longing for a Hmong community in diaspora will contribute to an understanding of transnationalism and diaspora theories and the concept of "imagined community." These unique characteristics of Hmong diaspora ultimately suggest that diasporic communities can be kept together without a territory-based homeland to which they can return. In other words, Hmong people demonstrate a special case where a homeland is not clear for diasporic peoples, unlike other cases of diasporic and transnational communities, which are deeply associated with a territorially-based ancestral homeland. However, the uncertainty among Hmong about their homeland has caused them to develop different types of longings which are not just limited to a mythical, lost, or unknown territorial homeland. Being transnational means an ambivalent situation for people in the diaspora, who dispersed to multiple regions but have been able to maintain a collective diasporic ethnic identity.² Transnational longing is now often understood in the scholarly literature as destabilizing the notion of a fixed homeland (Tsuda 2008: 313) because people become "unrooted" as they develop hybridized attachments to multiple identities, and cultures, as well as multiple ethnic identifications with both the host society and homeland (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Kearney 1995; Basch et. al. 1994).

However, this dominant view tends to assume that all transnational longing is always related to a territorial homeland. In contrast to transnationalism theory, which recognizes the existence and impact of nation-states even in the context of deterritorialized global phenomena, the real dilemma for the Hmong people's is that no one can actually define their ethnic "home" or "land." In other words, it has never been clear if Hmong people have anything to destabilize, reorient, or reattach themselves to despite their remarkably transnational lives. In this sense, the

² "Collective diasporic ethnic identity" in this context indicates that people in the diaspora feel that they are still emotionally and ethnically connected to each other despite the geographic disconnection.

Hmong people's transnational longing is unique because it is not always directed toward a territorial homeland, but has expanded in multidimensional ways.

In transnational and diasporic life, one way of thinking about the strong wish of the Hmong people for an ethnic homeland would be to focus on their collective identity as "one united Hmong." In other words, their strong wish for a homeland has caused them to pursue the desire for one unified collective Hmong ethnic identity that would unite the diaspora. Yet such a collective sense of ethnic identity is what used to contribute to the construction and maintenance of the nation-states (Boyarin 1994: viii). When nation-states impose a nationalist agenda on ethnic minorities, their propagandist goal is to invent and promote a collective identity as one united nation that subsumes the existence of different ethnic minorities (Jonsson 2005).³ In this regard, the Hmong's longing for an ethnic homeland does not really fit with the nation-state's objectives (because of their history without a nation-state of their own), but ironically, it is also similar to a nation-state's collective identity project at the same time.

Before the discourses of diaspora received much attention, scholars had already examined the ways that the Hmong people imagine each other through the invention of a common language Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) (Leepreecha 2008: 99), *paj ntaub* which means the story cloth embroidery (Cha 2005; Peterson 1988), and home videos (Koltyk 1993) focused upon Hmong culture, songs, and storytelling which are common in many Hmong households. As the Hmong people live dispersed and transnational lives, current studies have also investigated how global forces including the media and the Internet encourage Hmong people to develop their ethnic consciousness and a sense of a shared identity (e.g. McCaskill 2008). Some scholars who focus on this argue that the Hmong people in diaspora have developed a gendered ethnic identity

³ The homogenization and representation as a single and unified ethnicity of nation-states and the relationship with ethnic minorities have been studied by many other scholars (see also Jonsson 2004; Jonsson and Taylor 2002; Myers 2001; Biolsi 1995; Turner 1991; Clifford 1988).

and the image of a feminized ethnic homeland through the male gaze of the videos directed by Hmong Americans back in Thailand or Laos (Lee 2006; Mankekar and Schein 2004; Schein 2004, 1999).⁴

These different approaches to understanding how Hmong people have developed an imagination for their ethnic homeland are similar to Benedict Anderson's (1991) definition of a nation as an "imagined community." In Anderson's view, a nation is not an actual entity but is constructed by people's imagined relationships through different media, such as language and printed materials, since not all people experience actual face-to-face interactions with each other. Although this view assumes that everyone participates in the imagined connection to each other and is attached to a nation-state, the Hmong's strong desire for one unified Hmong people across borders also seems to create an imagined community. However, their imagined community is not based on a territorially-bounded nation, but has been transformed into multidimensional desires and longings for a Hmong culture, a Hmong leader, and the future unification of the Hmong people, all of which are not clearly defined. Nonetheless, such alternative forms of longing may help Hmong dispersed in various countries maintain their ethnic consciousness and help keep the diaspora together even in the absence of a true ethnic homeland.

Methods

This paper is based on my experiences with Hmong persons in Laos when I lived with a Hmong community for thirteen months in 2003-2004 (six months) and 2005-2006 (seven months). At this time, I worked as a NGO volunteer assisting a community development project related to the education and culture of three different ethnic groups. I then engaged in a series of

⁴ The analysis of developing a gendered ethnic identity and feminizing the ethnic homeland among ethnic groups in transnational circumstances has been a rich area of research among many scholars. A similar analysis related to the issue of a gendered ethnic homeland and identity is found in different articles about other ethnic groups as well as in Hmong videos (see Lee 2007; Julian 2004; Lieu 2000).

follow-up conversations by telephone and e-mail correspondence from the U.S. with various Hmong residing in Laos. Since 2008, I have also conducted nine weeks of pilot studies in a Hmong community in California.

My findings are based on qualitative methods, including participant observation and interview analysis. I conducted interviews and surveys with different individuals during my volunteer work in Laos. However, the particular topic of my study was actually initiated by an unexpected question asked by a Hmong person at the end of my stay in Laos, which had nothing to do with my initial research plan, method design, or structured interviews. In the field, my own research interests in development, poverty, and health issues simply were not relevant to Hmong people's actual life concerns as they related to the absence of an ethnic homeland and the development of transnational longings. However, I did follow up on the original responses I received in Laos in subsequent phone conversations and e-mail correspondence. Although my work may seem to lack a concrete research structure, I would like to emphasize that some of the most important and insightful research occurs when researchers are flexible about what they expect to hear from those they study and are willing to listen to their ordinary voices. As noted earlier, the goal of this paper is not to generalize about Hmong people's perspectives, but to explore some of the complexities related to the ethnic homeland and various types of longing. This can be accomplished utilizing information from a limited number of respondents. It is my intention to conduct future studies based on longitudinal ethnographic field research with sufficient methodological rigor.

Multiple Objects of Longing in the Search for an Ethnic Homeland

I still remember my daily encounters with the Hmong people in Laos. Wherever I went, I consistently received similar questions from Hmong about Hmong people in general. Once I

came to know more people, they asked me whether I knew any Hmong people in my own country, whether I heard anything about the Hmong in the Sahara desert and what they were doing there. Some people also asked me how they could contact their old friends they lost a long time ago. In such cases, I wanted to tell them that I did not have any more answers to their questions than they did. Sometimes they just told stories about how someone's daughter's cousin was living somewhere in America. Indeed, these questions and stories were different but also similar, and specific but also general at the same time. But somehow, all of them were connected to one issue: the maintenance of a Hmong ethnic consciousness in the absence of a substantial and agreed future destination or home.

To illustrate different and alternative types of diasporic longing that go beyond the simple desire for an ethnic homeland, I will present highlights from the conversations I had with the Hmong in Laos. The perspectives of Hmong in Laos suggest multiple ways of understanding the meanings of homeland for diasporic peoples who do not possess a solid nation-state based on a territory. In the absence of an ethnic homeland, Hmong people have developed different meanings and implications of nostalgic longing as they engage in the continuing process of searching for a homeland.

Even though various Hmong initiated the discussion of an ethnic homeland and longing, I often felt that the topic was keenly associated with their history of persistent dispersal, persecution, and related controversies. As a result, when I was living with the Hmong in Laos, I always hesitated to ask them directly about such issues. Therefore, the topic was not simple or naturally "fascinating" to me as a researcher but instead, I felt I had to be careful and was sometimes unsure about the point of departure. Despite this difficulty, though, I had to start from

somewhere and my first question to my friend Moua⁵ was about how the Hmong people he talked to perceive their family, relatives, or just the Hmong people in general in the U.S. He stated:

My parents and uncles said that it is our concern but we never studied Hmong Americans. That's what made my parents and the old people surprised. Actually, we feel *both sad and happy* about them [Hmong Americans]. We are happy that they still keep our culture. But at the same time, we are sad. We are happy that they have better knowledge about things, culture, and so on. But we are sad that they forgot our *real* knowledge and *real* culture. You asked me before about the Hmong New Year ceremony. It is of course important for the Hmong because it is a way to respect our ancestors and invite their spirits to our homes. But Hmong in America, they do not celebrate New Year like us. They are separated. Some Hmong celebrate it in the north or south in different ways. Others are not interested at all [emphasis added].

Since elder Hmong people expressed both “happy and sad” feelings about the Hmong in the U.S., the reasons for such ambivalent feelings were actually based on beliefs about what being a “real” Hmong means. From their perspective, although the Hmong Americans have “better knowledge” and probably have advanced materialistic culture, their “real” Hmong culture has been impoverished by their new life in the U.S. This ambivalent view demonstrates that Hmong's longings for other Hmong dispersed in the U.S. as well as other countries is not just for an ethnic homeland but for a “real” Hmong culture, although it is never defined clearly. Nonetheless, the elder Hmong in Laos regret the loss of “real” Hmong culture among those in the U.S. and feel it is something they have really missed. Therefore, although the Hmong in the U.S. might be more “modernized” than those in Laos, they are not necessarily an alternative or ultimate object of the Hmong's longing.

Moua also expressed reasons given by elder Hmong people for what motivated the Hmong to disperse as diasporic peoples and subsequently prevented them from being together. He continued:

⁵ Pseudonym.

In the past, Hmong people did not love each other. They hated each other. If there was a clever man, people from other family groups tried to kill him, because everyone wanted to be a leader. Today, Hmong cannot live together because we do not have one king or one land. We could not have one united country for all Hmong because of those problems in the past. That's why we should have one powerful leader.

In fact, the past history of conflict among the Hmong people caused some Hmong to conceive of a homeland as a powerful leader instead of as a territory. However, their strong belief in a "powerful leader" also reminds me of what a Hmong scholar has said about how the Hmong attempt to promote nationalism and pride (Lee 2006: 4) in a manner similar to how nation-states have advocated for their citizens. After a series of conversations, one thing became clearer for me. I was often unsure of how to define a clear and ultimate object of the Hmong people's longings. But I realize that my concern was naïve because it is impossible to expect that everyone, including Hmong, would have such specific answers from the beginning. Indeed, for some Hmong in Laos, the objects of their longing have been multiple rather than single. They have longed for a king, a powerful leader, a Hmong culture, or in fact, all of these.

Although what Moua told me widened my understanding of what I should look for in order to understand how the Hmong wish for their ethnic homeland in more diverse ways, not just for a territorial homeland, I felt regret that my questions raised issues that may not have been pleasant for my interview subjects. After all, my questions would repeatedly remind them that they cannot identify a single nation-state or territory and claim it as the ethnic homeland of the Hmong. Despite this concern, I continued by asking another question, hoping that my Hmong research informants would agree with my perspective that living without a Hmong territorial homeland would not always be unfortunate or miserable. Based on my own assumption that the Hmong people might have always longed for other Hmong in the diaspora, I asked him again how his parents and elder relatives expressed their feelings about this:

Sangmi: Do you think they [the elder Hmong people] miss something or someone in America? What do they...miss?

Moua: I think they miss them a lot...the Hmong in the U.S. They are seriously concerned, too. My parents, uncles, and old people, they are now over sixty. They do worry if they pass away, how can their *sons* and *daughters* live together without a land? [emphasis added]

Given that Moua's parents and older Hmong relatives in Laos do not have their sons and daughters in the U.S., it is important to note that the elder Hmong's concerns about "being together" is not only based on their own family or relative members in the U.S. Indeed, their shared perspectives indicate that it is possible for Hmong people to imagine a collective diasporic ethnic identity regardless of kin affiliation across place and time. Their longing is actually for "all" Hmong in general and for their "daughters and sons," all of whom identify as "Hmong." I realized that this collective diasporic ethnic identity is a recurring theme that has always co-existed with the other types of longing mentioned above, namely for a leader, a king, and for Hmong culture. Therefore, I can neither disregard a strong sense of collective ethnic consciousness nor can I undermine other interpretations of longing in Hmong people's expressions. It is a complicated and ongoing question to understand whom my Hmong research informants in Laos have imagined as constituting the Hmong diaspora and why they feel have missed each other for their entire lives.

When my conversation was nearing an end, my friend asked me a question which indicated that the Hmong longing for an "authentic" Hmong culture or a leader was indeed ultimately related to the longing for a future time when all Hmong scattered throughout the diaspora would again be reunited together:

I am not sure if it is right to ask, but I think I have to. Many Hmong people here would like to ask this question to your professor [in graduate school]. Will the time when all Hmong people live together finally come?

Although Hmong people in Laos have come to develop multiple objects of longing in regards to the Hmong in the U.S., their desire to be together in the future has not disappeared. However, because the Hmong, unlike other diasporic peoples, do not have a territorial homeland to which they can return, such longings for a future when all Hmong will again be united must by necessity remain vague and uncertain. Indeed, people's longings are often for something that has been lost and probably can never be recovered again. Nonetheless, many Hmong will not give up their dreams of being together in the future even though they know that this is highly unlikely.

Conclusion

Regarding the limitations of the theoretical explanations I have examined in this paper, it is important to remember that the different longings of diasporic peoples are not simply limited to a yearning for the ethnic homeland. Diasporic peoples such as the Hmong who do not have a clearly defined territorial homeland may develop other types of longing, such as for an authentic culture, a leader, other members of the diaspora, or a future when they will be together again. Such longings do not consistently conform to any general perspective, but can be read in multiple ways. Although diasporas are usually understood to be unified around a collective longing for a homeland, it is important to realize that these other types of longing may also facilitate the development of a collective ethnic consciousness that helps keep diasporic peoples together.

This is, of course, not to deny that Hmong also long for an ethnic homeland. The ways Hmong people imagine an ethnic homeland are explained by the scholarly literature and expressed by Hmong people differently and in a complicated manner. From the perspectives of current studies on the Hmong diaspora, it might be suggested that future ethnographic research should be conducted in Laos and some areas in Thailand where Hmong formerly in refugee

camps now reside, as well as in the U.S. It is true that research into these questions will certainly need to assess Hmong people's perceptions and imagination for an ethnic homeland in different and additional countries. However, before I start a project of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), it is important to be reminded that tracing Hmong people's transnational longings for each other is not limited to one or another geographically separate region. There must be multiple ways of looking at different peoples and places and to actually observing the Hmong people's mutual imaginings of other Hmong scattered in the diaspora and their notions of homeland.

For my future research, I will explore the processes and meanings of Hmong people's imaginations by focusing on individual differences and experiences. I will do this without the impetuous hope for "agency" that a globalized world provides to me, and without too much despair about how a globalized world might disable my ability to see the inequalities, differences, and changes in people's lives.⁶ As this paper examined Hmong people's multiple and diverging objects of longing instead of a unified longings for a territorial ethnic homeland, in future research, I would like to examine how the imagined ethnic homeland and ethnic identities may also be differentiated by age, gender, and class as well as by generation and individual experiences and how those factors create diversity in the Hmong diaspora. The point of departure will be the unique perspective of the Hmong people about their multiple types of longing while continuing their search for a supposedly unknown ethnic homeland.

⁶ This idea might sound naïve for some anthropologists who believe that ethnographies can capture both voices (places) and other voices (other places) by its "ventriloquism" strategy (Appadurai, 1988: 20).⁶ Nonetheless, I do not want to be unduly influenced by the visions of global ethnographies that celebrate collective imaginations regardless of individual differences in experiencing and imagining ethnic homelands.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the reviewers at the *Hmong Studies Journal* and to faculty at Arizona State University, Dr. Takeyuki Tsuda, Dr. Madelaine Adelman, Dr. Hjorleifur Jonsson, and Dr. James Eder for their helpful comments and intellectual support. I also deeply appreciate my Hmong friends in Laos and the US as well as colleagues at school

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