

## Dragons, Tigers, and Taoism

by

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### Abstract

The asymmetry between the role of dragons and the role of tigers in Hmong folklore and ritual reflects the interweaving of traditional Hmong animist ideas with ideas from Chinese folk Taoism. Dragons are more Taoist and tigers are more animist.

**Keywords:** Hmong, Taoism, dragons, tigers

### 1. Introduction: A Puzzling Asymmetry

Tigers and dragons play a big role in Hmong folklore, in Hmong geomancy (choosing a propitious site for a grave or for a house), and in Hmong shamanic ceremonies, but there's a curious asymmetry. David Crockett Graham's collection of Hmong Po songs and stories has a section devoted to stories about the tiger spirits that abduct men's wives and transform them into tigresses and about their female counterparts, the despicable *Nam Puj Ntxoog*, who abduct women's husbands and transform them into tigers (Graham, 1954, pages 185-201), but there's no equivalent section devoted to dragons. Graham's dragon-stories are distributed among several different sections in the monograph, grouped together with stories that are not about dragons. (Graham, 1954, pages 11, 14-16, 166-167, 209-210, 220-221, and 226-228.)

The same is true for the Mong Volunteer Literacy collection of Green Mong stories. In Mong Volunteer Literacy's *Mong Folktales* series there is a volume of *Tiger Stories*, that is, stories about tigers and about *Pujntxoog* (X.P. Thoj and X.N. Xyooj, 1986a), but, again, there is no equivalent volume of stories about dragons. Two of Mong Volunteer Literacy's dragon-stories, "Yob the Orphan and the Dragon Lake Girl" and "Uncle Tuam and Little Sister Plis" are in *Stories About (Magical) Transformations*, grouped with stories that are not about dragons. A third, called "Geomancy", is in *Fun Stories*, again grouped with stories that are not about dragons, and a fourth, "Pure One Who Faces Heaven and Grandfather Nyooglaug's Youngest Daughter", appears in a different series, *Grandmother Bulbul Tells Stories*, yet again grouped

with stories that are not about dragons. (Thoj and Xyooj, 1986c, pages 44-52 and 90-100; Thoj and Xyooj, 1986d, pages 74-91; Thoj and Xyooj, 1984.)<sup>1</sup>

Why this asymmetry?

## 2. Methods and Materials

This paper is based primarily on texts and ethnographic descriptions for three closely related Hmong subgroups: the Hmong Po (Chuan Miao), who live in the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan border region in China, and the White Hmong and Green Mong, who live in Yunnan province in China, in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma, and in the diaspora in Australia, Europe, and North and South America. My main sources are:

- (1) David Crockett Graham for the Hmong Po (Graham, 1937a, 1937b, 1938, 1954),
- (2) Jean Mottin, Tougeu Leepalao, and the Association Communauté Hmong for the White Hmong (Mottin, 1982; Leepalao, no date; T.X. Hawj and Bertrais, 1986, 1987, 1988; N.Y. Yaj, 1992; N.Y. Yaj and Bertrais, 1986; V.T. Yaj, 1986, 1987), and
- (3) Nusit Chindarsi, Jacques Lemoine, and Mong Volunteer Literacy for the Green Mong (Chindarsi, 1978; Lemoine, 1972, 1983, 1987; Thoj and Xyooj, 1984, 1986a-d; Xyooj, 1985a, 1985b).<sup>2</sup>

## 3. Results: Dragons and Tigers in Hmong Folklore and Ritual

I showed in section 1 that Graham's collection of Hmong Po songs and stories and Mong Volunteer Literacy's collection of Green Mong folktales have a special section or a special volume for stories about tigers but not for stories about dragons. Dragons and tigers are alike in many ways. Both, for example, are described as *txaij nraug* 'beautifully patterned'. Both are invoked by shamans. In stories, both may marry human beings. Why, then, do two of our richest sources of information on Hmong oral literature treat them differently?

A clue comes from Jacques Lemoine's descriptions of the roles of dragons and tigers in Hmong geomancy (Lemoine, 1972, pages 99-100) and in Hmong shamanic ritual (Lemoine, 1987), both of which draw heavily, as Lemoine shows, on ideas and terminology from Taoism.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of Hmong dragon stories in addition to those listed above include White Hmong stories from Laos (Asian Pacific Family Outreach, no date; Johnson, 1985, pages 127-228; and T.X. Hawj and Bertrais, 1987, pages 39-47, and 1988, pages 167-175), White Hmong stories from Thailand (Mottin, no date, pages 273-281 and 355-381), a Green Hmong story from Yunnan province in China (N.Y. Yaj, 1992, pages 253-262), a story in the Hmu dialect from Guizhou province in China (Wang, 1985, pages 190-237), and a story in the Qo-Xiong dialect from Hunan province in China (Guizhou Minzu Chubanshe, 1958, pages 7-18).

<sup>2</sup> In White Hmong and Green Mong spelling consonant letters at the ends of syllables represent tones and double vowels are nasal, as in the name of the ethnic group, *Hmoob* (White Hmong) or *Moob* (Green Mong), pronounced Hmong or Mong with high level tone. Graham writes Hmong Po in phonetic transcription but for clarity and consistency, I have rewritten Hmong Po words in the same spelling as is used for White Hmong and Green Mong.

Graham also, in an article on the customs and beliefs of the Hmong Po, says that their ideas about dragons may have changed because of Chinese influence:

It is asserted that formerly the dragon was fierce and ate people, but that now he is regarded as harmless and benevolent. This change is probably due to Chinese influence.

(Graham, 1937a, page 62.)

The White Hmong and Green Mong refer to their traditional religion as animist. Xeev Nruag Xyooj's collection of Green Mong ritual texts and of legends explaining the origins of rituals has the title "Where Does the Mong Way of Household Spirits (*Dlaab Qhuas*) Come From?" (Xyooj, 1985b.) In the Showing the Way funeral ceremony, for example, a dead person leaving the house to set out on the journey to join the ancestors is confronted by the protective spirits (*dlaab*) of the bedroom door, of the ritual paper pasted to the wall opposite the main door, of the fireplace, of the main door, and of the foyer. Each spirit tries to prevent the dead person from leaving the house, and to each the dead person must say,

Ntxwj Nyoog's heart was not good.<sup>3</sup> He sent illnesses raining down upon the edge of my pillow. Nine shamanic rites were performed, and ten divinations, but I did not get well. The bedpost cracked. My silk and satin sash came apart and so I have come.

Ntxwj Nyoog's heart was not good. He sent illnesses raining down upon the edge of my bed. There were nine shamanic rites, and ten divinations, but I did not recover. The bedpost toppled. My silk and satin sash tore and so I have set out on my way.

(Xyooj, 1985b, pages 4-6, recorded from Num Tswb Xyooj.)

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<sup>3</sup> Ntxwj Nyoog, or Ntxwj, is a complex figure in White Hmong, Green Mong, and Hmong Po belief, with both positive and negative attributes. In the chapter on beliefs and worship in his book on Mong culture, Laaj Soobleej Hawj says:

Everyone follows what they think and suppose, but none of us can love and kneel and bow to Ntxwj Nyoog because we believe he is evil. (L.S. Hawj, 1990, page 80.)

In the Showing the Way funeral ceremony, it is Ntxwj Nyoog who sends illness and death into the world. But in some versions of Showing the Way, in some shamans' chants, and in some songs about forming the sky and the earth, Ntxwj Nyoog is the ruler of heaven, who instructs the first human parents how to have children and who drains away the waters of the flood that destroyed the world, and from behind whose stockade birds fetch the seeds of the first bamboos and trees. In a Hmong Po legend about the first shaman, Ntxwj sends both the demon that devours people and the shaman to battle the demon:

In most ancient times in heaven there was one demon named Qub Noj Neeb 'Round Thing Able to Eat People'. Below there was only one man who could control demons. His name was Yawg Twl 'An Old Man Efficient in Cutting Off Slices of Things'. This *tuan kung* [shaman] was sent down by Ntxwj especially to help people to live. This demon was appointed by Ntxwj especially to cause people to die. (Graham, 1954, pages 14-15.)

The chapter on religion in Tsab Chij's book, written in White Hmong, on the Hmong of the Wenshan Zhuang-Hmong Autonomous District in Yunnan is called "The Way of Worshipping Household Spirits (*Dab Qhuas*) and the Way of Worshipping Heaven", in other words animism and Christianity (Tsab, 1988, Chapter 10). An article on religion by a group of White Hmong from Laos has a similar title, "The Customs of Worshipping Spirits (*Dab*) and Worshipping Heaven", again meaning animism and Christianity (Hmoob Los Tsuas Teb, 1993).

But the Hmong have also adopted many ideas from Taoism.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the ceremony Calling Water to Exorcise Demons which Graham recorded from the Hmong Po shaman Hsiung Cheng-ts'ai, the shaman speaks in Chinese and uses the word *dào* 'the Way', 'the Tao' and evokes the Taoist concept of action in inaction ("seeing we do not see, hearing we do not hear"):

Water is the source of the heaven and the earth, the foundation of all living things, widely cultivating people's happiness, used by people in heaven and on earth, inside and outside. For tao "learning" you are revered and your body has marvelous light to protect our bodies so that seeing we do not see, hearing we do not hear, and you can protect us in heaven and on earth and nourish all our lives, and propagate it a thousand times.

Graham explains in a footnote:

This is the Chinese word *tao*, and the meaning is far more inclusive than the English term "learning". To the Ch'uan Miao [Hmong Po] interpreter it seemed that the word "learning" came very near to what *tao* means to the Ch'uan Miao. Of course it includes learning in occult affairs.

(Graham, 1937b, page 92, 1954, page 48.)

In another chant, the Hmong Po shaman Hsiung Cheng-ts'ai, speaking of the cloth bridge which the shaman erects to link the human world with the spirit world, says:

The difficult bridge and the horses are spoilt. I will protect the sick person. When the three *hun* and the seven *p'o* come upon the bridge, I will wear an iron hat on my head.

(Graham 1937b, pages 91-92, 1954, pages 47-48.)

*Hún* and *pò* are the Chinese names for two types of souls. A White Hmong ritual specialist, Yaj Txooj Txhim, in his version of the Showing the Way funeral chant, says that each person has

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, Taoism must be understood to mean Chinese folk Taoism (*Dàojiào*), which does not always cleanly differentiate among ideas from classical Taoism, ideas from Buddhism, and traditional Chinese animist beliefs.

three souls (*ntsuj*) and seven shadows (*duab*) (V.T. Yaj, 1986, page 44). The three *ntsuj* are the souls to whom the funeral chants are addressed: one remains by the grave, one journeys to heaven to obtain a document of reincarnation and then returns to earth to be reincarnated in a new body, and one journeys to heaven and remains there, in the city of the dead, with the souls of its ancestors. The seven *duab* die with the with the death of the body. These are the souls that are the principal concern of shamans, for it is when these souls leave the body that a person becomes ill and it is up to the shaman and his or her helpers to bring them back. But Hsiung Cheng-ts'ai puts both the *hún* and the *pò* on the shaman's bridge, perhaps reflecting a slightly different understanding of the difference between the two kinds of souls which the Hmong Po may have gotten from Chinese belief. Jean Cooper, in her book on Chinese alchemy, is not totally clear on the subject, but she seems to be saying that in Chinese belief both *hún* and *pò* leave the body during illness:

The idea of the soul developed in a unique way in China. The soul was made up of two essences, its positive and negative aspects, the mind-nature and the body-nature, the *yang* and the *yin*. The *yin* was the *p'ò* soul, heavier, earthly, which reverted to the earth at death, and the *yang* was the *hun* or lighter, heavenly soul, rising to the heavens, each returning to its natural element. Later these souls multiplied in number, there being three *hun* and seven *p'ò* souls, symbolizing the different attributes of the human being. The *hun* controlled the intelligence and the *p'ò* the emotions. Some of the souls can leave the body during illness during illness and should then be brought back again. In pathological states, the soul escapes from the body and a priest, shaman, or magician must be employed to bring it back; it can be captured and ensnared with nets or knots and then rebound to the body.

(Cooper, 1984, pages 75-76.)

Jacques Lemoine also found Taoist ideas in what he learned in his apprenticeship with the Green Mong shaman Tsu Yob. One of the most striking examples is the shaman's altar:

The great altar [of Hmong shamans] takes the form of a set of shelves, quite tall, with two shelves, and covered with a board on top. It is from this board that artfully cut up sheets of paper hang. This decoration acts as the edge of a canopy which shelters the stacked ranks of helper spirits. These are often represented by three, four, or five long series of silhouettes cut with a scissors from colored paper (most often blue, purple, and red) and glued, one on top of another, to the interior of the set of shelves, on a first layer of white paper. It will be noticed that I am often tempted to compare certain aspects of Hmong shamanism with certain details of the Taoism of the Yao [Mien], not only because of their ethno-linguistic connection, but also because these facts find an echo in the field of Yao religious ethnography. For example, the presence of these ranks of anonymous

spirits on the panel at the back of the shamanic altar among the Hmong evokes for me the group painting which, in Yao iconography, represent “the Ancestors”, not the biological ancestors, but the ancestors in religion [succession of masters and disciples]. This panel is, according to the Yao, an organizational chart of the Taoist pantheon in their administrative or legal functions. We find there as many as nine ranks of personages ... surrounded by civilian acolytes or by a military guard, made up of anonymous infantrymen or cavalrymen, the same as the *peeb zeej* [soldiers] and *peeb muas* [cavalrymen] of the Hmong shaman.

(Lemoine, 1987, pages 42-43.)

And, more recently, Kao-Ly Yang has described how the Hmong adopted Guanyin, the goddess of mercy, from Chinese folk religion, made her a goddess of fertility, and incorporated her into shamans’ ceremonies (Yang, 2008).<sup>5</sup>

Now let us look at some of the ways in which the combination of animist and Taoist ideas plays out in the representation of dragons and tigers in ritual and folklore. Let us begin however, by way of contrast, with some cases where dragon and tigers are paired symmetrically, where we do *not* find the differentiation between dragons and tigers which, I am suggesting, may be because dragons are more Taoist than tigers.

In Hmong funeral chants and folktales, “dragon and tiger mouths” and “dragon and tiger rocks” mean dangerous sharp rocks and crevices, or, more generally, any kind of great danger. In the Showing the Way funeral ceremony, the dead person is given knotted pieces of hemp to stuff in the mouths of the dragons and tigers so that he or she may proceed safely to join his or her ancestors (Graham, 1954, pages 54, 67, and 73; Lemoine, 1983, pages 34-35, 101-102, and 134; N.Y. Yaj and Bertrais, 1986, page 80; V.T. Yaj, 1986, pages 51, 80, and 92; V.T. Yaj, 1987, page 47; Z.N. Yaj and D.I. Yaj, 1973, pages 5-6, 42, 70, 92, and 97).

In a folktale, a man traveling to heaven to find his wife is given grapefruits to stuff in the mouths of the dragons and tigers (T.X. Hawj and Bertrais, 1986, page 73, story told by Yaj Vam Tuam).

In another folktale, Mojtiv Kuav, a kind of pockmarked spirit with a predilection for marrying human women, rescue a man’s wife from a tiger who is going to eat her. When the man comes to reclaim his wife, the Mojtiv Kuav protest:

We took our wife from the dragon-and-tiger mouth!

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<sup>5</sup> Guanyin is, strictly speaking, a Buddhist deity, not a Taoist one. However, Chinese folk religion does not always differentiate sharply between Taoist and Buddhist components.

(Thoj and Xyooj, 1986a, page 109, story told by Khu Ntxawg Hawj and Nom Tooj Vaaj.)

What the Mojtxiv Kuav say is half literal – they did indeed rescue her from a tiger – and half metaphorical: there were no dragons involved.

Interestingly, Chinese has the same metaphor: “the dragon’s lake and the tiger’s den” (*lóng tán hǔ xué*) means ‘places of extreme danger’ (Liang et al., 1960, entry No. 7325; Yi Lin Chubanshe, 1977, page 654), suggesting that even in Chinese culture dragons and tigers may sometimes be paired symmetrically.

Now let us look at some cases where dragons and tigers are different. Hmong shamans invoke both dragons and tigers. Hsiung Cheng-ts’ai, the Hmong Po shaman recorded by Graham, calls upon tigers in Arrangements to Exorcise Demons:

We call *tsuv txaij* (the striped tiger) to come to the front. We also call *txaij sib tsuv nraug* (a big lion) to come to the front. ... *Txaij sib tsuv nraug* came moving and ate the demons of sickness and the gasping demons. Then *tsuv nraug* ate the demon of chills (cold diseases) and demons of blood diseases. *Txaij sib tsuv nraug* also bit his teeth together firmly and ate the demon of coughs.

(Graham, 1937b, pages 73-74, 1954, page 38, paragraph G.)

One of the White Hmong shamans recorded by Jean Mottin calls upon tigers in Shamanic Ceremony for Raising the Soul:

Pair of Tiger Elders who dwell on the high hills and steep places  
Arise in front to eat illness and bite down on groaning  
Arise behind to eat illness and bite down on lethargy

(Mottin, 1982, page 246, verse 33, recorded from Yaj Khwb.)

But Hmong shamans call upon dragons much more frequently:

Preparing Water:

We are preparing a bowl of water which is not ordinary water. It is water from the great ocean of the dragon king.

(Hsiung Cheng-ts’ai: Graham, 1937b, page 79, 1954, page 41.)

To Remove Bones or Metal Objects That Have Been Swallowed:

I ask my teacher for a bowl of water. The teacher has nine dragons in the bowl. The water of the throat of nine dragons (is in the bowl). When gold, silver, copper, iron, or pewter touches this water, it is turned to dirt.

(Hsiung Cheng-ts'ai: Graham, 1937b, page 94, 1954, page 49.)

Shamanic Ceremony for Diagnosis:

Call Siv Yis's pair of Variegated Dragons to arise and break up the hills

Pair of Multicolored Dragons to arise and break up the mountains

(Yaj Ntxoov Xyooj: Mottin, 1982, page 192, verse 44)

Shamanic Ceremony for Raising the Soul:

Variegated Dragon, Powerful Servant, with nine lashes of the tail rise to the sky

Round up every phalanx of shamanic spirits

(Yaj Khwb: Mottin, 1982, page 240, verse 25)

and so on.

Dragons may be more prominent in Hmong shamanic ceremonies than tigers for two reasons, both of which have parallels in Taoism and Chinese symbolism. First, dragons are more august and regal than tigers. Dragons are symbols of beauty and virtue and imperial status.

Second, dragons are water spirits. They are the guardians of the dragon water (*dej zaj*) or water of the Southern Sea (*hiav laj hiav siv*) that shamans use to heal their patients (Mottin, 1982, pages 102-103).

For the Chinese as well, dragons are regal water spirits. In Chinese, "dragon hall" (*lóng tǐng*) means 'imperial court', "dragon robe" (*lóng páo*) means 'imperial robe', and "dragon king" (*lóng wáng*) means 'the sea god' (Liang et al., 1960, entry No. 7325).

Here is another example. Dragons play a fundamental role in Hmong geomancy, finding a propitious site for a grave or for a house. The Hmong speak of finding a place with good *looj mem*, from Chinese *lóng mài* 'dragon veins', an expression used in Chinese to describe a winding mountain range (Liang et al., 1960, entry No. 7325). As Yves Bertrais points out in the entry for *looj mem* in his Hmong-French dictionary,

The elders look for a place with good dragon veins. If the elders get dragon veins that are not good, the descendants will not be intelligent and will not be wealthy.

(Bertrais, 1964, s.v. LOOJ, third entry.)

In a folktale, “The Dragon Who Collected Tax and Grandfather Pov Txoov”, a poor young man, tending cattle for the Chinese, sees the Chinese opening dragon veins:

When the Chinese arrived, they gasped loudly three times. The Chinese then whipped the side of the hill three times, and shouted [in Chinese]: “Sky open, earth open, dragon veins open.” Lo and behold, the dragon veins opened, and one could see a Royal Prince crouched at a writing desk. Servants were lighting scented candles and bowing to the Prince with all their might. Cattle, buffaloes, horses, chickens, and pigs were running noisily about.

The Chinese then gasped three times, whipped three times down the valley, three times on the side of the hill, and three times up the hill, and said [in Chinese]: “Sky close, earth close, dragon veins close.” Lo and behold, the dragon veins closed again.

(T.X. Hawj and Bertrais, 1987, page 40, story told by Foom Yaj.)

But it is not only dragons. Tigers are just as important. Jean Mottin says that a winding mountain range, shaped like a dragon’s spine, is an auspicious site for a grave, and a jagged mountain range, shaped like a tiger’s fangs, is inauspicious:

If the mountains situated either to the left or to the right of the tomb have the characteristics of mountains having the majesty of the dragon, and see their slopes stretching themselves and starting a circle on the side of the tomb like a ring formed by this monster, then either boys or girls will become people of value, intelligent and respectable, perhaps even chiefs, whereas, if the mountains have the characteristics of mountains having the majesty of the tiger, and see their slopes stretching themselves and forming a ring on the side of the tomb like the paws of this ferocious animal, then either boys or girls will not succeed in life, will be neither intelligent, nor respectable, nor rich, but only sworn to misery. In the first case, the children are as if protected by the dragon; in the second, on the contrary, they have fallen into the paws of the tiger.

(Mottin, no date, page 132.)

Mottin gives both a Sino-Hmong name and a vernacular Hmong name for each type of mountain:

Winding, like the spine of a dragon:

- (1) *looj huv*, from Chinese *lóng xué*, literally ‘dragon’s den’, a term used also in Chinese geomancy to refer to an ideal site for a grave (Liang et al., 1960, entry No. 7325).

- (2) *zaj hwv chim* ‘dragon’s power’, ‘dragon’s majesty’, using the vernacular Hmong word *zaj* ‘dragon’.

Jagged, like the fangs of a tiger:

- (1) *pem huv*, from Chinese *Bái Hǔ* ‘White Tiger’, in Taoism, the revered deity of the West, collective name for the seven western constellations (Yi Lin Chubanshe, 1977, page 18; Liang et al., 1960, entry No. 3692).  
(2) *Tsov hwj chim* ‘tiger’s power’, ‘tiger’s majesty’, using the vernacular Hmong word *tsov* ‘tiger’

The Sino-Hmong names given by Mottin are asymmetrical, ‘dragon’s den’ versus ‘White Tiger’, the deity of West, but the symmetrical Chinese pair *Qīng Lóng* ‘Green Dragon’, revered deity of the East, paired with *Bái Hǔ* ‘White Tiger’, revered deity of the West, was recorded by Jacques Lemoine. After describing, in Hmong, the shapes and configurations of mountains that offer an auspicious or inauspicious site for a house, Lemoine’s informant summarized what he had just said with a pair of rhyming couplets in Chinese:

If the Green Dragon embraces the White Tiger,  
The generations will all be provided for.  
If the White Tiger embraces the Green Dragon,  
The generations will all be poor.

(Lemoine, 1972, pages 99-100.)

Tougeu Leepalo, in his book *Hmong History, the beginning of the world*, tells how a Chinese man gave instructions for finding a propitious mountain for a gravesite, likening the mountains not only to dragons but also to elephants, horses, oxen, pigs, and chickens. For dragons, he uses both the Sino-Hmong expression *looj mem* ‘dragon veins’ and the vernacular Hmong word *zaj* ‘dragon’:

..., the Chinese man explained to them, “When you go to look, if the mountain is like an elephant, the dragon veins [*looj mem*] are in the trunk. If the mountain is like a dragon [*zaj*], the dragon veins are below the tail. If the mountain is like a horse, the dragon veins are in the waist. If it is like an ox, the dragon veins are in the two horns on the head. If it is like a pig, the dragon veins are at the tip of the nose. If it is like a chicken, the dragon veins are in the feet and the beak.” When he finished teaching them, the Chinese man returned home. (That is why we vow to still speak Chinese following after the Chinese man’s words of instruction.) The sons then went to look and saw a mountain exactly like a dragon. They then returned home and carried their father to bury him as the Chinese man had taught them. When they finished burying their father, they returned home, and along the way it was very hot, so they stopped to rest by a cliff where there was a parrot,

which flew down and cried out: “Truly truly, earnestly earnesty, now the great sage’s kinsmen will arise to become emperors for thousands and tens of thousands of years!” (Leepalao, no date, page 32-33.)

Leepalao says explicitly that the Hmong learned geomancy from the Chinese. Like Mottin and like Lemoine’s informant, Leepalao says that a dragon-shaped mountain is propitious, but unlike Mottin and unlike Lemoine’s informant, Leepalao makes no mention of a tiger. Instead he lists an elephant, a horse, an ox, a pig, and a chicken, animals which I have not seen in other accounts of geomancy, but such thematic variation, what in Jazz is called *riffing*, is extremely typical of Hmong writers and Hmong storytellers.

Leepalao then introduces a parrot (*leeb nkaub*) and a great sage (*tuam tsheej xeeb*), which takes us into the heart of Hmong shamanism and into the midst of the complexities of Hmong use of Chinese words and expressions.

Professor Parrot (*Tsheej Xeeb Leej Nkaub*) is the most important of the shaman’s helper spirits, constantly at the shaman’s side giving guidance and instruction (Mottin, 1982, page 145; Lemoine, 1987, pages 25-26). *Leeb nkaub* or *leej nkaub* is the ordinary Hmong word for ‘parrot’ but it may be a naturalized loan word from Chinese, perhaps from Chinese *líng* ‘supernatural marvelous’, ‘quick, clever, ingenious’ and *gē* ‘parrot’.

*Tsheej xeeb* ‘professor’ and *tuam tsheej xeeb* ‘great sage’, on the other hand, are Sino-Hmong. *Tuam*, which occurs in several different Hmong expressions, is simply the Hmong pronunciation of Chinese *dà* ‘big, great’. The etymology of *tsheej xeeb* is uncertain. One possibility that fits the sound and the meaning is *chéngxiān* ‘to be heir to ancient sages’.

In delving into sages and parrots, I may seem to have gotten away from the topic of this paper, but I contend that I have not. The passages quoted from Mottin, Lemoine, and Leepalao all demonstrate, in different ways and to different degrees, the interplay of Hmong and Chinese ideas and the expression of this interplay in vernacular Hmong versus Sino-Hmong vocabulary.

In Hmong geomancy, dragons and tigers are called by both their Hmong names and their Chinese names, and are opposed, dragons being propitious and tigers harmful.

In Hmong shamanic ceremonies, dragons and tigers are usually called by their Hmong names and are both beneficent, both called upon by the shaman to help battle demons and recover straying souls.

In Hmong funeral chants and folktales dragons and tigers are called by their Hmong names and are potentially dangerous. The Hmong expressions “dragon and tiger mouths” and “dragon and

tiger rocks” have the same meaning – ‘place of great danger’ – as the Chinese expression “the dragon’s lake and the tiger’s den”, but the Hmong say it in Hmong; they do not, in this case, use the Chinese words for ‘dragon’ and ‘tiger’.

Now I want to say more about another difference between dragons and tigers that I mentioned when I asked why shamans invoke dragons more often than they invoke tigers. Dragons are more powerful than tigers. In the Hmong Po story “How the Tiger Got His Stripes” or “The Cause of Black on Tigers”, the echo challenges the tiger, the thunder, and a dragon to a contest of ability on a high mountain. The echo goes down to the foot of the mountain and uses a torch to set the mountain on fire. The thunder can evaporate and the dragon can fly but the tiger can do neither. He cannot escape the flames and is burned. (Graham 1938, page 22, 1954, page 223.)

In a White Hmong version of the story from Laos, “Saub and the Fire”, Saub, described as very smart and knowing all things, challenges his housemates Thunder, Dragon, Wild Pig, Bear, and Tiger to a contest. Each in turn tells Saub that he must have his own house to live in because his roars frighten the others. Finally, Saub says, “It’s my turn; I can frighten you,” and sets the house on fire. Thunder escapes by flying into the sky. Dragon escapes by digging a deep hole in the ground. But Wild Pig, Tiger, and Bear have no such powers. Wild pig is singed and his hair becomes yellow. Tiger is burned and his fur becomes striped. Bear is burned and his fur turns black. (Johnson, 1981.)

Some readers may protest that “How the Tiger Got His Stripes” and “Saub and the Fire” are Just-So stories and not to be taken seriously, but I would like to suggest that, although the stories are told in a light-hearted way, they may encode deep ideas about the difference between dragons and tigers, and that some of those ideas may reflect the special place of dragons in Taoism and Chinese folk religion.

#### **4. Discussion: Dragons, Tigers, and Taoism**

I suggested in the last section that the differences between tigers and dragons – the fact that Graham and Mong Volunteer Literacy have a section or a book devoted to tigers but not one devoted to dragons, the fact that shamans call upon dragons more often than they call upon tigers, the fact that dragons have powers that tigers don’t have – may have to do with tigers being more animist and dragons being more Taoist.

The greater power and majesty of dragons is in accord with their august nature in Taoism and Chinese symbolism. As I mentioned earlier, in Chinese “dragon” means ‘imperial’. “Dragon hall” (*lóng tǐng*) means ‘imperial court’. “Dragon robe” (*lóng páo*) means ‘imperial robe’. (Liang et al., 1960, entry No. 7325.)

In Chinese culture, the dragon and the phoenix represent beauty and virtue. “Dragon and phoenix” (*lóng fēng*) means ‘fine offspring, excellent children’, ‘a man of wisdom’, ‘a noble look’, and also ‘a man and a woman’, the dragon symbolizing the man and the phoenix the woman. *Lóng fēng bǐng* ‘dragon phoenix cake’ is the cake which the bridegroom’s family presents to the bride’s family at a traditional Chinese wedding. *Lóng fēng tiě* ‘dragon phoenix cards’ are betrothal cards. *Lóng fēng xiāng pèi* ‘the union of a dragon and a phoenix’ is a congratulatory phrase on the occasion of a wedding. (Liang et al., 1960, entry No. 7325.)

For the Chinese, the symbolism of dragon and phoenix is ancient and potent. In *Illustrated Myths & Legends of China*, Huang Dehai, Xiang Jing, and Zhang Dinghao write:

In Chinese tradition dragon and phoenix represent good fortune and heart’s desire. Used together they often indicate festive jubilation. A colored glaze narrow necked vase excavated from the Beishouling Yangshao Culture site at Baoji in Shaanxi Province bears a dragon phoenix pattern. This cultural treasure demonstrates that the origins of both dragon and phoenix lie in the New Stone Age of seven to eight thousand years ago, and that the two are synchronous.

Born of the of the distant past and bearers of rich cultural phenomena, the dragon and phoenix are the seal, insignia, symbol and emblem of the Chinese race. The dragon possesses the magical characteristics of enjoying water, love of flying, familiarity with the heavens, mutability, mystery, presaging the auspicious, foretelling disaster and displaying power. The phoenix enjoys the magical characteristics of love of fire, association with the sun, the maintenance of virtue, foretelling the auspicious, majesty, valuing purity, displaying beauty and as a metaphor for passion.

(Huang, Xiang, and Zhang, 2018, page 75.)

Some of this potency is carried over into Hmong culture. In Hmong a very handsome young man may be described as *zoo zoo npaum nraug Zaj* ‘as handsome as a Dragon youth’ (T.X. Hawj and Bertrais, 1986, page 93). In a Green Mong story a handsome young man and his beautiful young wife are described as having long eyelashes *zoo le ob tug namtxiv zaaj* ‘like a dragon couple’ (Xyooj, 1985a, page 12; story told by Ntxhoo Xub Yaaj).

But, as Lemoine observed in his description of the shaman’s altar quoted above, Hmong expressions of Chinese ideas are sometimes subtle and indirect. The Hmong expressions *nraug Zaj* ‘Dragon youth’ and *namtxiv zaaj* ‘dragon couple’ use the native Hmong word for ‘dragon’, *zaj* or *zaaj*. They do not use the Sino-Hmong word *looj*.

I will conclude with one final contrast between tigers and dragons, one that illustrates the complex interplay of Chinese ideas and traditional Hmong animist ideas in the Hmong

understanding of the two beings. Tigers have a deep connection with death. They abduct human beings, causing them to die and change into tigers. There may not be any parallel for dragons. When a tiger marries a human being, the human being is transformed into a tiger, but when a dragon marries a human being, it is the other way around: it is the dragon who takes human form.

Hmong has a two-way opposition between

- (1) spirits (White Hmong *dab*, Green Mong and Hmong Po *dlaab*), including protective household spirits, potentially harmful wild spirits, and ghosts of dead people, and
- (2) living human beings,

whereas Chinese has a three-way opposition among

- (1) *shén* ‘deities’, most nearly equivalent to Hmong household spirits,
- (2) *guǐ*, potential harmful spirits and ghosts of dead people, and
- (3) living human beings.

However, the Hmong have also adopted the Chinese two-way opposition between

- (1) the Yin World (White Hmong and Green Mong *yeeb ceeb*, Chinese *yīn jiān*), the realm of spirits and the dead, and
- (2) the Yang World (White Hmong *yaj ceeb*, Green Mong *yaaj ceeb*, Chinese *yáng jiān*), the realm of living human beings.

In Taoism tigers are yin and dragons are yang. James Robson, in his book *Daoism*, reproduces a nineteenth century Chinese woodblock showing a young woman riding on the back of a dragon and a young man riding on the back of a tiger. Both the dragon and the tiger are spewing streams of liquid from their mouths into a large crucible in the foreground:

This woodblock illustration, entitled *Illustration of Marriage of the Dragon and Tiger*, depicts a girl (*yin*) riding a dragon (*yang*) and a boy (*yang*) riding a tiger (*yin*). The power of the conjoined yin and yang, a reference to the sexual nature of this image, is secreted into the alchemical crucible.

(Robson, 2015, page 623.)

The special connection of tigers with death may reflect a blending of the animist binary opposition between spirit and human and the Taoist binary opposition between yin and yang.

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