

Exploring Hmong Americans' Attitudes towards Hmong Traditional Full-Service Funerals: The Hmong Cultural Integration Project by Zha Blong Xiong, Malina Her, Mai Kao Xiong, Wa Houa Vue, Cher Teng Yang, Nao Houa Moua, Nao Khue Yang and Wangsue Lee, Hmong Studies Journal, 22(2020): 1-38.

**Exploring Hmong Americans' Attitudes towards Hmong Traditional Full-Service
Funerals: The Hmong Cultural Integration Project**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine what people in the Hmong community think of the length and cost of Hmong traditional full-serve funerals, as well as alcohol use to show gratitude to visitors who attend the funeral. The study is based on survey results from 904 Hmong community members and 23 bereaved Hmong family members in two surveys. The results of the surveys show that most traditional full-service Hmong funerals last three days; they usually start on Saturday and end on Monday. Individuals who were born outside of the US, older than 40 years old, women, and Hmong Christians were more likely to disapprove of multiple funeral service days, the cost of funerals, and alcohol use to show gratitude to visitors. On average, a Hmong funeral costs about \$31,843 USD. The paper concludes with suggestions for including specific members of the Hmong community to be part of future planning for a more affordable Hmong funeral.

Keywords: Hmong funerals, cost of funerals, alcohol usage in Hmong funerals, grief and dying

Introduction

Hmong Americans have been living in the United States (US) for more than four decades (Quincy, 1995; Yang, 2001). Minnesota is home to the second largest Hmong population in the United States and Hmong is the largest Asian American group in Minnesota; 90 percent are concentrated in the Twin Cities metro area (Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans, 2012). Like most immigrants coming to the US (Ho, 2009; Keefe, 1980), the Hmong culture has changed drastically due to acculturation². Some of the changes include how the Hmong language is used between Hmong younger and older generations (Burt & Ratliff, 2010), gender role expectations and attitudes toward education (Iannarelli, 2014; Timm, 1994), traditional Hmong weddings and the bride price (Vang, 2013), and the ways in which shamanic rituals are performed (Bliatout, 1993; Gerdner, 2012; Helsel, 2018). As part of this broader transformation, Hmong traditional full-service funerals, or funerals that “usually includes a viewing or visitation and formal funeral

² According to Berry (1997), acculturation refers to cultural changes resulting from the cultural contact between the immigrant and mainstream US cultures.

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service, use of a hearse to transport the body to the funeral site and cemetery, and burial”

(Federal Trade Commission, n.d.; hereafter refers to as funerals), are also undergoing transitions (Zhang, 2020). For instance, in the past, Hmong funerals could only be held in the bereaved family's home or in the home of a lineage family (Xiong, Deenanath, & Mao, 2013) for religious reasons; and the length of some funeral services was extended because family members or immediate relatives of the deceased had to travel miles on foot for days to join the funeral. As such, funerals could last up to a week or longer, especially for an elderly deceased person (Falk, 1992). Despite the length of the funeral, however, costs were kept to a minimum since there were no fees associated with the funeral service, casket, burial plot or the funeral home.

Life in the US is different, especially for the non-Christian Hmong community³. Due to the new expected norm and complications of holding funerals at home, most people prefer holding the funeral at a privately owned, for profit funeral home (Banks, 1998). As such, the tradition of holding funerals at home has shifted and a new norm has been established. As this new norm of holding Hmong funerals in private funeral homes gained popularity within the Hmong community, the demand for more flexible venues drove the development and expansion of Hmong owned funeral homes (NPR, 2008). Unique features of Hmong owned funeral homes include that they are open twenty-four hours a day, and food can be stored, prepared, and served on site. Since funeral rituals required several days to complete (Yang, 2011), Hmong funeral homes usually schedule multiple days for a funeral service. Given the flexible funeral home climate and schedule, some families choose to simplify funeral rituals, butcher fewer animals, and limit the duration of the funeral to a few days to save costs (Zhang, 2020). Other families

³ We focused on the non-Christian Hmong community in this study because the majority of the Hmong population (70%) still practices animism and ancestor worship (Pfeifer & Lee, 2005).

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expand the funeral service to include extravagant decorations, service, and rituals; they butcher multiple animals for rituals, and create a “VIP” table to host special guests, using alcoholic beverages to show gratitude.

Over the past few years, there has been a growing debate about traditional full-service funerals in the Hmong community and people began to raise concern over the funeral cost, the number of animals butchered, and the length of the funeral (Zhang, 2020). They were also concerned about how alcohol use for non-spiritual reasons in the funeral home. Prior to the study, several community members contacted the Hmong 18 Council of Minnesota (hereafter referred to as H18C), urging the Board of Directors of the organization to examine these issues. The H18C was founded in 1997 and operates as a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization whose mission is to enhance the Hmong community in traditional values, practices, conflict mediation, and leadership development to address social justice issues. The Board is comprised of 18 elected members who represent families of the 18 Hmong clan or last names in the community (Lee, 2020). All 18 members are men between 40 and 60 years old. Most of them are animists and still practice ancestor worship.

On October of 2017, the H18C Board of Directors received a small grant from the Saint Paul Neighborhood STAR Program⁴ to initiate the Hmong Cultural Integration Project⁵. The project was designed to assess concerns raised by the people in the Hmong community, bring various community stakeholders to discuss these issues at a public forum (i.e., conference: [18](#)

⁴ The Saint Paul Neighborhood STAR Program is designed to fund neighborhood-based projects with neighborhood representation to strengthen Saint Paul neighborhoods and address problems, needs and opportunities.

⁵ The Hmong Cultural Integration Project was designed to assess concerns raised in the community about traditional full-service funerals or funerals that include a visitation and a funeral ceremony and bring various stakeholders to discuss these concerns.

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[Council Conference on Hmong Funeral Issues 6-3-17 - YouTube](#)), and establish an independent, community-based taskforce to address the concerns.

Before assessing what people in the community think of these concerns, we conducted a thorough literature review to learn more about Hmong funerals, and attitudes and opinions about Hmong funerals in Hmong and other cultural communities. In general, most studies on Hmong funerals tend to focus on Hmong religion and/or Hmong cosmology (Bliatout, 1993; Her, 2018; Hones, 2001; Zhang, 2020), funeral rituals (Falk, 1992, 1996) and the funeral process (Davy, 1997) instead of on community members' opinions and attitudes toward the funeral. This gap in the literature is not unique to Hmong. Our review suggests that most available studies tend to focus on people's perceptions of funeral directors (McCarthy, 2016); grief experienced by the bereaved families (Adamson & Holloway, 2012; Hung, 2013; Zheng et al., 2016); financial planning for end-of-life care and death (Boucher et al., 2017; Downey et al., 2009; McManus & Schafer, 2014; Ohemeng & Tonah, 2017; Price et al., 2014); the rising cost of end of life and funeral related expenses that impacted family members due to AIDS and suicide related deaths (Chileshe & Bond, 2010; Fan & Zick, 2004; Ohemeng & Tonah, 2017; Vasiliadis et al., 2015); and the socio-cultural context of alcohol use (Fish et al., 2017; Lebreton et al., 2017; Moses et al., 2017) during cultural events such as funerals (Mabasa & Makhubele, 2019; Nugent, 2014).

Therefore, the purpose of this community assessment of the Hmong Cultural Integration Project was to substantiate the concerns (cost, length, and alcohol consumption) raised by members of the community and determine who was likely to raise these concerns in the Hmong community. We designed the study to engage different stakeholders in the community to figure

out how best to handle these concerns based on data generated from the following research questions:

1. How long does a traditional full-service Hmong funeral last and which community subgroups are more likely to approve and disapprove of the three to four funeral service days held in the Hmong community?
2. How much does a traditional full-service funeral cost and which community subgroups are more likely to think that the current cost of Hmong funerals is too high?
3. How prevalent is alcohol use at Hmong traditional full-service funerals, and who is more likely to complain about this practice?

Literature Review

Significance of Traditional Full-Service Hmong Funerals

The funeral is one of the most important rituals in the Hmong community, regardless of gender or religious background (Falk, 1992; Pfeifer & Lee, 2005; Yang, 2011). In general, Hmong, particularly the non-Christian community, believe in reincarnation of the soul and therefore, when death occurs, the soul needs to be guided back to reunite with its ancestors (Bliatout, 1993; Thao, 2006). As such, the first purpose of the funeral is driven by spiritual or religious beliefs (*dab qhuas*) that the soul of the deceased needs to be guided to take a long journey back to the ancestors' world (Her, 2005). Without a proper funeral, the deceased's soul is lost in the afterlife and trapped between the seen and unseen worlds without a home and a path to reincarnation (*dab tuag tshaib, tuag nqhis*).

The second purpose of the funeral is driven by culture. As such, the bereaved family is expected to bring the immediate families and relatives together (*kev neej kev tsav*) to mourn and

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support the bereaved family (*pab tsev xyom cuab*) and pay their last respect to the deceased (*tuaj nrog hlub*). These two simultaneous rituals often take days to complete, depending on the age of the deceased, marital status of the deceased's children, social status of the deceased's family, and specific spiritual beliefs. As a result, some funerals can take up to several days to complete, while others take less than two days. Traditionally, alcoholic beverages are used for religious purposes but they are not meant to host and entertain guests (or more precisely speaking, to show gratitude towards VIP guests).

Hmong Funeral Rituals

Most traditional full-service Hmong funerals are officiated by members of the bereaved family or lineage (*kwv tij*). Lineage (*kwv tij*) family, according to Xiong, Deenanath, and Mao (2013), refers to the immediate relatives of the nuclear family who share the same last name, practice similar spiritual rituals, and worship the same ancestors. As soon as a family member passes, a designated lineage family member contacts all of the male heads of households in the lineage to meet and plan for the funeral. At this meeting, a designated person (*thawj xyom cuab* or head of the bereaved family, a similar role as the *principle*; see Harrington & Krynski, 2002), who usually is knowledgeable about the funeral procedure is appointed to preside over the meeting. The meeting usually begins with asking the bereaved family about its financial capacity. Therefore, the quality of the funeral tends to depend on how much the bereaved family is able and willing to spend. For example, if the deceased person had lived a reputable life and the bereaved family is not willing to upgrade the funeral to an extravagant one, the lineage family (i.e., uncles) can put some pressure on the bereaved family (i.e., sons of the deceased) to comply. Once the quality of the funeral is determined, volunteers from the wider community,

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especially those who have specific cultural knowledge and skills (i.e., qeej player, showing the way reciter or *Qhuab Ke*, meal preparers), will be nominated, contacted, and appointed to carry out specific roles and responsibilities during the funeral (Davy, 1997; Falk, 1996).

Prior to the official opening of the funeral (a few hours before the official opening), the bereaved family dresses the deceased (the corpse) and gets the corpse ready for the first ceremony (Show the Way or *Qhuab Ke*; Falk, 1996; Zhanag, 2020). The Show the Way recitation can last for 4-5 hours depending on the age of the deceased. After the completion of Show the Way recitation, an expert on Qeej or the bamboo mouth organ performs "The Song of Expiring Life (*Qeej Tu Siav*)" with a long poem to signify to the living and spirits that the deceased has passed away from the living world (Falk, 1996, p. 2). Together, these two ceremonies could consume the whole first day. The second day of the funeral is designed for the immediate family members of the deceased (siblings, daughters-in-law's relatives, and sons-in-law's relatives) to officially pay their respect and mourn with the bereaved family (the Hmong call it *Hnoob Qhua Txws*). Cows, pigs and chickens are butchered to be part of the visitation.

Family and friends of the immediate family members are also invited to be part of the visitation and mourning. Alcoholic beverages are used to give thanks and show respect to each other, and for some families a "VIP" table is set up inside the funeral home to host special guests with alcoholic beverages. Usually, the "VIP" table is available during the first and second days during the three-day funeral and people may drink continuously throughout the day to show gratitude and appreciation. Special guests often show their appreciation back by donating cash (*nyiaj tshav ntuj* or "sunshine" money) to help the bereaved family (Zhang, 2020). The third day of the funeral, usually ends on Monday and is designed for the bereaved and lineage families to

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prepare for the transportation of the body to the burial site for the final ceremony (Cher Teng Yang, Personal Communication).

Cost of Hmong Traditional Full-Service Funerals

The cost of Hmong traditional full-service funerals is a concern in the community (Zhang, 2020). According to Zhang, Hmong funerals cost an estimated \$40 - \$50,000 USD. For families who are members of the Temple of Hmongism, a non-profit organization devoted to simplifying funeral rituals, the cost of a funeral is about \$10 - \$15,000 USD. These estimates seem to be high when compared with the average cost of non-Hmong funerals in the US. For example, according to the National Funeral Directors Association, the average cost of a traditional funeral in the US is around \$7,640 USD. This usually includes the funeral home's basic fee, embalming and other preparations of the deceased's body, a hearse, a service car, and a metal casket, except for the vault and cemetery monument/marker costs (NFDA, 2019). Depending on the type of services offered, others have also found that funeral expenses can range from \$2,000 to \$7,000 USD (Fox et al., 2013; Mulder, 2020). Locally, the cost of non-Hmong funeral homes that are located within a 5-mile radius of the six Hmong owned funeral homes in Minnesota is \$5,477, with a range from \$4,295 to \$6,235 (Funeralocity.nd.). Despite the seeming difference between the cost of Hmong funerals and non-Hmong funerals, we know very little about how much bereaved Hmong families spend on their loved ones' funerals and what members of the Hmong community think of the cost of Hmong funerals in general.

Methods

Procedures

We designed the study based on the principles of the Citizen Health Care Model (CHM; Mendenhall & Doherty, 2006) to honor the spirit of the Hmong Cultural Integration Project, which is a community-driven project. CHM is a model that emphasizes the importance of civic engagement to revitalize neighborhoods and empower members of the community to solve their own problems. It assumes that the greatest untapped resource for solving community problems is the people who live in the community. Mendenhall and Doherty (2006) state, "If you begin with an established program, you will not end up with an initiative that is 'owned and operated' by citizens" (p. 254). Thus, CHM stresses the importance of including people in the engagement process as co-producers of solutions. Using CHM as a guide, the H18C convened a planning group to assist in the design of various surveys, recruitment of participants for the community assessment, and the planning of the conference to bring stakeholders together. The Planning Committee consisted of diverse individuals from various sectors of the community, including clan/lineage leaders, funeral experts, educators, business owners, healthcare practitioners, legal professionals, parents, men and women. To understand the extent of the concerns raised by the people in the community (the cost of funerals, length of funerals, and alcohol usage in funeral homes), three groups of people were recruited to participate in the community assessment.

The first group was the "general Hmong population⁶" in the community who have access to the internet, social media and can read and write in English. This group was targeted because they were more likely to be younger, more acculturated, and less active in funeral activities

⁶ We used this term loosely since the survey was sent out to anyone over the age of 18 years old in the community.

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compared to the older, less fluent in English subpopulation. The second group of people who could provide valuable information on Hmong funerals, especially the cost of funerals, were the bereaved family members, particularly those who had lost a loved one within the past twelve months. They were invited to participate in the community assessment because they had first-hand experience of the funeral process and might still have a record of their funeral expenses or a copy of the order of service (itemized charges disclosure form). Lastly, the third group was the Hmong funeral home directors who could provide accurate information (i.e., accounting records) about the cost and length of the funeral.

Since each targeted group is different, participants were recruited from different sources. For example, to reach a wider audience for the general population group, a link to an online survey, along with a brief introduction to the survey, was sent to various community leaders (e.g., clan, lineage, healthcare, educational, and religious leaders), social networking groups in the community (e.g., Hmong professional associations), and posted on social media. They were invited to participate in the online “public opinion survey” and/or share the link of the online survey to their social networks. Although data for the total numbers of invitations and shares were difficult to track, 98% of the participants took the survey between April 6, 2017 and June 9, 2017.

The second survey was developed to examine the cost and length of Hmong funerals by recruiting individuals who had lost a loved one within the last twelve months (i.e., the “bereaved family survey”) at the time of the survey. Due to the lack of resources and time constraints, we asked each member of the Board of Directors (known as clan representative or *nres xeem*) to pass out a pen- and- pencil survey to clan and lineage leaders. They announced the survey to

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their families and asked eligible family members to participate. We could not calculate a response rate for this recruitment method.

The last survey gathered the cost of funerals from Hmong funeral home directors. The survey included 12 questions asking about specific service fees charged for a typical funeral, such as space, embalming, body preparation, police escort, etc. Although the president of the H18C attempted to contact six of the Hmong funerals in Minnesota, only one funeral home director responded to the invitation and completed the survey. As such, data from this single source were not included in this paper.

Participants

914 Hmong community members (373 females, 529 males, and 11 identified as “other”) participated in the online public opinion survey. We excluded ten surveys from the analysis because respondents did not meet the eligible age, and/or required demographic information was not reported. As a result, 904 participants (522 males, 369 females, and 11 others) were included in the sample. The majority (70%) of the participants were between the ages of 25 through 49 and most of them (70%) reported having at least some college experience or they had a college degree.⁷ Seventy percent of the participants self-identified as animists and attended Hmong funerals a few times a year (See Table 1 at end of paper).

Twenty-three bereaved family members (20 males, 3 females), ages ranged from 26 to 56 (mean = 41 years old), agreed to participate in the pen-and- pencil self-administered survey.

Most of the bereaved family members (91%) were born outside the US and 87% of them still

⁷ This sample was skewed toward individuals with higher education backgrounds compared to the Hmong population in the US (48%; Pew Research Center, 2015), since the survey specifically targeted those with access to social media and can read and write in English.

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practice ancestor worship. The majority of them identified themselves as either the sons (80%) or daughters (5%) of the deceased, especially someone who had passed away within the past twelve months. On the average, most deceased were considered middle-old (mean age = 78 years old; Lee et al., 2018) and their funerals tended to last for 3 days, beginning Saturday morning and ending on Monday.

Measures

Due to the lack of empirical studies on adults' opinions and attitudes about the cost and length of funerals and alcohol consumption during the funeral, all survey items were developed by the first, fourth, and fifth authors in collaboration with the H18C's Board of Directors and members of the Planning Committee. For example, the first, fourth, and fifth authors met to discuss areas of concerns raised by the community about Hmong funerals, the purpose of the three surveys, and the types of questions to be included in the surveys. The three authors drafted the questions for each survey and sent out the drafts to the H18C's Board of Directors and the Planning Committee to review, refine, and approve. This process took two months to be completed and approved by the H18C's Board.

The Public Opinion Survey. The public opinion survey included 11-items asking participants' opinions about the cost of funerals, length of funerals, alcohol consumption inside the funeral, and the number of animals used for the funeral rituals, along with 9-items on demographic information and frequency of funeral attendance. Sample questions included: "What do you think about the current cost of Hmong funerals?" "If you think the cost of Hmong funerals is too high, what is the ideal amount you would consider it to be affordable or just about right?" or "If you think the cost of Hmong funerals is too high, what changes would you like to

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see in order to reduce the cost?" Similarly, we also asked opinion questions such as: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way family members of the deceased use alcohol to host their "special" guests at the funeral home?" "If you check the 'Disapprove' box above, from a scale 1 to 10, how much do you disapprove of the way family members of the deceased use alcohol to host their 'special' guests at the funeral home?" Since we asked a mixture of categorical items and open-ended questions, running a test score reliability coefficient or a Cronbach's alpha for the survey was not appropriate. All survey items were written in English since not everyone can read in Hmong and the anonymous survey took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

The Bereaved Family Survey. The bereaved family survey included 10-items asking bereaved family members' experiences about the cost of funerals, length of funerals, alcohol consumption inside the funeral, and the number of animals used for the funeral rituals, along with 10-items on demographic information of the bereaved family member who took the survey and the deceased. Questions included both open-ended and forced choice options such as "How much did your family pay for the funeral home?" "How long did the funeral last?" "Did your family open the funeral home 24 hours (round the clock) during those days?" The pen- and-pencil survey was written in English and took between 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

Analysis

To answer the first part of the three research questions (i.e., how long does a traditional Hmong funeral last, how much does the funeral cost, and how prevalent is alcohol use at Hmong funerals?), several descriptive analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25. To answer the second part of the three research questions (i.e., which community subgroups are more likely to approve and disapprove of the three to four funeral service days held in the

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Hmong community?), various Pearson's chi-square tests and a regression model were computed using the R program version 4.0.1 "See things now" (R Core Team, 2020). Note that education levels (1 = high school diploma or lower, 2 = some college or a bachelor degree; 3 = a master's degree or higher) and age groups (1 = 39 or under, 2 = 40-64, and 3 = 65 or older) were recoded to run the Pearson's chi-square tests. Dichotomous variables were also recoded to dummy variables in order to run our last analysis where we tried to determine who was more likely to feel embarrassed when seeing people use alcohol in the funeral home.

Results

Length of Traditional Full-Service Funerals

To answer our first research question (how long does a traditional Hmong funeral last?), a descriptive analysis of the bereaved family survey found that 65% of the participants reported that they held a three-day funeral for their loved ones compared to 17% who reported holding a two-day funeral. We also found another 17% who said they either held their funerals fewer than two days or more than three days. To find out who was more likely to report that the current cost of Hmong funerals are too high, a Pearson's chi-square test was performed to determine whether differences were found between US-born vs. foreign-born, men vs. women, young vs. old, high school graduates vs. college graduates, animists vs. Christians, and Minnesota residents vs. non-Minnesota residents. Our results (see Table 2 at end of paper) showed that participants who were born outside of the US (67.1% vs. 57.7%), women (67.7% vs. 61.8%), and self-identified Hmong Christians (70.8% vs. 61.1%) were more likely to disapprove of the three to four funeral service days held in the Hmong community.

Cost of Hmong Traditional Full-Service Funerals

To understand the cost of holding a funeral in the Hmong community in Minnesota, data from the bereaved family members revealed that bereaved families paid an average of \$16,115 (lowest = \$12,000 to highest = \$23,000) for the funeral home's basic services fee and other related services and/or merchandise (i.e., bathing/handling, dressing/cosmology, transfer corpse to funeral home, service vehicle, casket, burial vault, and death certificate). In addition to these funeral home fees⁸, bereaved families also reported significant expenses on religious-related and/or decorative items, such as joss paper, incense, and remembrance (mean = \$5,596, lowest = \$400 to highest = \$15,000); traditional hospitality items, such as food, fruits, snacks, coffee, and nonalcoholic beverages (mean = \$7,307, lowest = \$1,950 to highest = \$15,000); and alcoholic beverages, such as beer and alcohol (mean = \$2,825, lowest = 0 to highest = \$6,700). After summing the funeral home fees, hospitality, and decoration expenses, an average 2-4 days traditional full-service funeral costs a bereaved family about \$31,843 USD (SD = \$3,480.39), ranged from \$14,359 to \$59,700⁹.

To find out who was more likely to report that the current cost of Hmong funerals are too high, a Pearson's chi-square test was performed to test the differences between US-born vs. foreign-born, men vs. women, young vs. old, high school graduates vs. college graduates, animists vs. Christians, and Minnesota residents vs. non-Minnesota residents. Our results (view Table 3 at end of paper) showed that participants who were born outside the US (82.3% vs.

⁸ Note that these fees are associated with the funeral home, but the funeral home does not have any control over the optional services or merchandise (i.e., casket, burial vault).

⁹ This figure does not include the expenses during the pre-funeral gatherings (*zov hmo*) and the cost of the chickens, pigs, and cows the immediate families (brother or sister, daughter-in-law, son-in-law, and other children or nephews) brought over to honor the deceased and/or support the deceased's family.

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69.8%), older than 40 years old (81.4% vs. 43.2%), and have converted to Christianity (85.3% vs. 77.7%) are significantly more likely to agree that the current cost of Hmong funerals are too high.

Using Alcoholic Beverages to Show Gratitude towards “Special” Guests or Visitors

Using alcoholic beverages to show gratitude towards visitors, especially visitors who hold certain positions in the community (i.e., clan leaders, lineage leaders, doctors, lawyers, etc.), is a culturally adaptive practice, since alcohol usage for non-religious reasons was rarely used in the past. Therefore, our interest was to find out how common the practice was among bereaved families who had lost a loved one within the past twelve months. Data from the bereaved family survey showed that 15 out of 23 (or 65%) families reported that they set up a “VIP” table to host their special guests during the funeral for their loved ones. Of the 15 bereaved families who set up the VIP table, 73% of the deceased (11 out of 15) were 80 years old or younger. Conversely, 86% of the bereaved families (6 out of 7) who reported that they did not set up a VIP table also reported that their loved ones were older than 80 years old. Even though we suspected that gender, especially the gender of the deceased, might have played a role in this, our analysis found no gender differences.

Since this was one of the concerns raised by a few people in the community to the Hmong 18 Council of Minnesota (H1C), we tried to understand who was more likely to disapprove the use of alcohol to show gratitude towards special guests at the funeral. Specifically, we asked participants to respond to this question with a yes or no response. “Do you approve or disapprove of the way family members of the deceased use alcohol to host their ‘special’ guests at the funeral home?” Our results (view Table 4 at end of paper) showed that

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participants who were born outside of the US (63.6% vs. 54.7%), women (68.3% vs. 55.9%), those older than 40 years old, and those who self-identified as Christians (72.9% vs. 57.8%) were significantly more likely to disapprove of the practice.

To determine the levels of participants' disapproval of alcohol consumption in the funeral home, we recoded the nominal variables (i.e., country of birth, gender, age groups, religious affiliation, and education) into dummy variables to account for this question: "Think back to your most recent Hmong funeral experience as you answer this question. How embarrassed would you say you felt when you saw people using alcohol openly to host "special" guests at the funeral home?" Responses for this question ranged from 1 = *not at all embarrassed* to 4 = *very embarrassed*. Our regression results ($F(21, 807) = 3.92$, $p\text{-value} = <.001$) showed that participants who were born outside of the US ($R^2 = 0.21$) and had a bachelors degree ($R^2 = 0.40$) or lower ($R^2 = 0.44$ and $R^2 = 0.57$ for high school diploma and less than high school education, respectively) were significantly more likely to report that they felt embarrassed when they saw people using alcohol openly to host "special" guests at the funeral home (see Table 5 at end of paper). Together, these variables accounted for 9% of the variance.

Discussion

The purpose of the paper was to substantiate the concerns raised by members of the Hmong community to the H18C and understand who was more likely to hold certain sentiments toward these concerns. The following discussion addresses the three major concerns raised: (a) traditional full-service Hmong funerals are too long; (b) traditional Hmong funerals cost too much; and (c) alcohol should not be used in the funeral home to show gratitude towards special guests.

Traditional Full-Service Hmong Funerals Are Too Long

One of the complaints is that traditional Hmong full-service funerals are too long and too complicated (Zhang, 2020). Our data suggest that the majority of the pre-COVID-19 funerals (65%) were held for three-days, usually starting on Saturday and ending on Monday, with only a few (17%) extending beyond three-days. Individuals who reported that the funeral is too long tend to be foreign-born, women, and Hmong Christians. We believe first-hand experience plays an important role in determining foreign-born participants' perception of the funeral. For example, we found that foreign-born individuals were more likely to participate in the day-to-day funerals (i.e., 20.2% attended funerals once every two weeks or once a week) compared to those who were born in the US (5.5%, $p < .000$)¹⁰. This suggests that experiencing first-hand accounts of the bereaved families' exhaustion and fatigue from three, non-stop days might have explained their disapproval. On the other hand, we think lack of exposure and cultural bias might have played a role in the responses for women and Hmong Christians. For example, our analysis show that they tend to attend Hmong funerals less frequently, as measured by attending funerals once a month or more, (17.6% women and 23.6% Hmong Christians) compared to men (40.9%, $p < .000$) and non-Christian Hmong (36.2%, $p < .000$). Historically, women and Hmong Christians have played a minimal role in traditional, animist religious activities, including the funeral. For example, women have historically been excluded from serving as the funeral director (*cuab tsav*), the head of the bereaved family (*thawj xyom cuab*), the "show the way" reciter (*qhuab ke*), or the head qeej player (*txiv qeej*). The only two roles they can participate in are the *niam ua mov*, or literally translated to mean the "the rice head cook," and the *ntxhais zov qhauv* or the

¹⁰ This is a separate analysis run specifically to help explain this finding. Thus, statistical results are not include in the results.

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corpse watcher. Similarly, Hmong Christians are rarely involved in any leadership roles in family religious events, including the funeral, once converted. Indeed, once converted, they tend to remove themselves from their lineage families and devote themselves to other members of the same church (Yang, 2020). Given this history, we suspect that women and Hmong Christians might be more likely to see Hmong traditional funerals as impractical and need to be changed or integrated into the “American” society.

Traditional Full-Service Hmong Funerals Cost Too Much

The complaint about the length of funerals has been in the Hmong community for a while (Siong, 2018; Zhang, 2020), yet there have been limited investigations to provide actual data from bereaved families. We found that a bereaved family is expected to spend about \$16,115 USD for services provided by a Hmong funeral home (i.e., facility, bathing/handling, dressing/cosmology, and transportation) and by other third party vendors (i.e., to purchase the casket and burial vault). Coupled with these expenses, an average bereaved family is also expected to spend about \$15,728 USD for religious-related items (joss papers, incenses, clothes), hospitality expenses (food, snacks, drinks), and decorations (remembrance, flowers, chair covers). On average, a traditional full-service funeral costs a bereaved family about \$31,843 USD (SD = \$3,480.39), or anywhere from \$14,359 to \$59,700 USD in Minnesota.¹¹ Although it is difficult to compare the cost of Hmong funerals to the average cost of non-Hmong funerals in the US (Federal Trade Commission, n.d.; Fox et al., 2013; Mulder, 2020; NFDA, 2019), \$31,843 USD is high, especially in the context of current Hmong families' financial situation. According to the 2010 US Census Bureau (Council for Asian Pacific Minnesotans, 2012), Hmong

¹¹ Please note that this estimate is calculated before the COVID-19 hit the community in March of 2020.

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household median income in Minnesota is \$42,942, and 32% of the Hmong in Minnesota are still living below the federal poverty line. Therefore, to spend 74% of a family annual household income on a funeral is likely to be unsustainable, especially for those who do not have a life insurance policy for their loved one. As Woodthorpe (2017) eloquently stated, “the funeral is more than a ritualized or participatory event to be managed; it is an economic issue [requiring] purchasing decision” (p. 138). As such, it is important for families to know the cost and plan wisely and early.

Alcohol Should Not Be Used in the Funeral Home

The third area of concern raised by members of the Hmong community in Minnesota to the H18C was the use of alcoholic beverages, namely beer and liquor, to show gratitude to visitors who hold status positions in the community. On average, a “VIP” table or a special designated table is set up inside the funeral home, either in the back or to the side of the main area where the casket is located. As guests or elders, all men, enter the funeral home, they are invited to join the “VIP” table. Then a representative of the bereaved family offers a bottle of liquor (i.e., red label) or a one-liter bottle of beer as a gesture of appreciation for their attendance and support. To show gratitude to the bereaved family representative, guests reciprocate with cash donations (ranging from \$40 to \$100) to assist the bereaved family and open their bottle of liquor or beer to socialize with everyone at the table. Sometimes, the noise level gets quite loud after a prolonged drinking, and this commotion can make people inside the funeral home feel uncomfortable. However, this is shared anecdotally; we know very little about the extent of this practice and whether this is a concern that extends beyond the people who contacted the H18C.

Our assessment found that the majority of the bereaved families in our study (65%) used this alcohol-giving ritual to show appreciation to their guests. However, please note that this proportion is only based on a convenience sample with just 23 bereaved families. Thus, it is still difficult to determine how widespread the practice is in the Hmong community. Nevertheless, our survey results showed that the foreign-born, women, older people (40 years old or above), and Hmong Christians were more likely to complain about this practice. This is expected, since research shows that first-generation immigrants, older, and religious individuals are more conservative and less tolerant towards change, especially change that goes against traditions (Aroian et al., 2003; Khalid & Frieze, 2004). Similarly, research also points out that women and Hmong Christians are more likely to be acculturated or removed from traditional, animist religious activities, and, more importantly, less likely to be invited to participate in traditional men's affairs, including the VIP table (Irby & Pon, 1988; Yang, 1997). Therefore, it is expected that they would have a stronger sentiment towards this new practice. Despite their disapproval level, however, only those who were born outside of the US and those with less than a college education were more likely to feel embarrassed by this practice. First, we believe conservative orientation plays a significant role in their antipathy towards the social drinking (Aroian et al., 2003; Khalid & Frieze, 2004). For example, we found that people with less education (high school diploma or lower) and older (40 years old or older) are more likely to attend funeral homes than those with advanced degrees (i.e., with a master's degree or higher) and younger (or people under the age of 40 years old; 25% vs. 8.1% and 52.4% vs. 7.0%, respectively). As such, we believe this suggests that their antipathy towards alcohol use in the funeral home reflects their deep commitment to preserving traditions of the Hmong culture. Second, it is also

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possible that older and less educated individuals are more likely to conform to an idealized “American” funeral, perhaps based on what is shown in the media, due to their lack of exposure to other real-life cultural communities’ funerals (Bird, 2019; Pang & Lam, 2002).

In conclusion, we have found that the cost of Hmong traditional full-service funerals in our sample is significantly high, especially for families who are still struggling to make ends meet. We also found that participants who were born outside of the US, older than 40 years old, women, and Hmong Christians are more likely to complain about the length of Hmong funerals and the VIP table where alcohol is used to show gratitude to guests with status positions. Although we made some speculations about the reasons behind our participants’ responses, more qualitative research is needed to learn more about peoples’ lived experiences and perspectives. Similarly, we also think it is critical for the H18C, especially the Hmong Cultural Integration Project, to engage these groups of individuals from the Hmong community to be part of their ongoing dialogue and planning.

Limitations and Implications

Although this is the first study of its kind in the country to understand what people in the community think of current Hmong funerals, especially those held in Minnesota, there are several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, the public opinion survey included only a select, convenient sample, especially those who have access to social media and can read and write in English. Therefore, this sample does not represent the full range of voices of the Hmong population in Minnesota and generalizing the results of this study to Hmong living in Minnesota is not advisable. Second, the sample for the bereaved family survey is very small (n=23). Thus, the length and cost of funerals reported by these families only reflects these

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families' experiences and accounts; they may not represent the range of actual length and cost of funerals in the Minnesota Hmong community. In order to verify these findings, future studies need to recruit a larger sample of bereaved families and review official records from Hmong funeral home directors in Minnesota. Although we made several attempts to collect these official data, time and resource constraints limited our ability to obtain them to substantiate our findings. Lastly, the scope of the two surveys, to some extent, is limited since they were intended to examine what people think about the length of the funerals, cost of the funerals, and alcohol use in the funeral only. Although these areas of Hmong funerals are important to examine since the H18C has received complaints from the community over the past several years, they are not the only areas of concern. We need more exploratory, qualitative studies to dig deeper into these areas, as well as explore other areas of concern in the Hmong community before launching a large-scale quantitative survey.

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Tables

Table 1. Participants from the Community Survey's Characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency (n=904)	Percentage
Age		
Under 25	67	7.4%
25 – 39	401	44.4%
40 – 49	229	25.3%
50 – 64	157	17.4%
65 and over	50	5.5%
Gender		
Male	522	57.7%
Female	369	40.8%
Other	11	1.2%
Place of Birth		
US-born	283	31.3%
Foreign-born	615	68.0%

Exploring Hmong Americans' Attitudes towards Hmong Traditional Full-Service Funerals: The Hmong Cultural Integration Project by Zha Blong Xiong, Malina Her, Mai Kao Xiong, Wa Houa Vue, Cher Teng Yang, Nao Houa Moua, Nao Khue Yang and Wangsue Lee, Hmong Studies Journal, 22(2020): 1-38.

Education

Less than HS	99	11.0%
HS diploma or GED	152	16.8%
Some college/AA degree	229	25.3%
Bachelor's degree	256	28.3%
Master's degree or higher	150	16.6%

Religion

Animism/Ancestor worship	633	70.0%
Christianity	170	18.8%
Other	92	10.2%

Funeral attendance

Never	64	7.1%
A few times a year	539	59.6%
Once a month	139	15.4%
Once every two weeks	93	10.3%
Once a week	47	5.2%

Table 2. Do you approve or disapprove of the three to four funeral service days held in the Hmong community (begins on Friday or Saturday and ends on Monday)?

	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion	Chi-square tests
US-born (n=286)	26.9%	57.7%	15.4%	$\chi^2 (2, N = 906) = 10.70,$ p < .005
Foreign-born (n=620)	17.7%	67.1%	15.2%	
Men (n=523)	22.4%	61.8%	15.9%	$\chi^2 (4, N = 906) = 12.52,$ p < .014
Women (n=372)	18.8%	67.7%	13.4%	
Under 40 (n=474)	21.9%	62.7%	15.4%	$\chi^2 (4, N = 908) = 3.54,$ p < .470
40-64 (n=388)	18.3%	67.3%	14.4%	
65 and over (n=46)	26.1%	56.5%	17.4%	
HS or lower (n=256)	23.4%	60.2%	16.4%	$\chi^2 (4, N = 890) = 5.52,$ p < .238
Some college or bachelor's degree (n=484)	19.4%	65.3%	15.3%	
Master's or doctorate degree (n=150)	16.7%	71.3%	12.0%	
Animism/Anccestor Worship (n=638)	22.9%	61.1%	16.0%	$\chi^2 (4, N = 902) = 19.18,$ p < .001
Christianity (n=168)	19.0%	70.8%	10.1%	
Minnesota residents (n=729)	21.8%	63.2%	15.0%	$\chi^2 (2, N = 931) = 2.43,$ p < .297
Non-Minnesota residents (n=202)	17.3%	64.9%	17.8%	

Table 3. What do you think about the current cost of Hmong funerals?

	Too high	A little high	Just about right	Chi-square tests
US-born (n=285)	69.8%	15.4%	7.0%	χ^2 (3, N = 907) = 22.60, p < .000
Foreign-born (n=622)	82.3%	7.4%	4.5%	
Men (n=528)	77.3%	9.8%	6.8%	χ^2 (6, N = 910) = 8.66, p < .194
Women (n=371)	81.4%	10.2%	4.0%	
Under 40 (n=74)	43.2%	28.4%	13.5%	χ^2 (6, N = 909) = 65.75, p < .000
40-64 (n=631)	81.1%	9.2%	4.6%	
65 and over (206)	85.4%	5.8%	5.3%	
High school or lower (n=257)	80.2%	10.1%	3.5%	χ^2 (6, N = 893) = 4.06, p < .668
Some college or bachelor's degree (n=486)	78.8%	9.9%	6.4%	
Master's or doctorate degree (n=150)	82.0%	8.7%	4.0%	
Animism/Ancessor Worship (n=638)	77.7%	11.1%	6.4%	χ^2 (6, N = 904) = 12.49, p < .05
Christianity (n=170)	85.3%	5.3%	4.7%	
Minnesota residents (n=741)	77.7%	11.2%	5.9%	χ^2 (3, N = 947) = 5.58, p < .134
Non-Minnesota residents (n=206)	82.5%	6.8%	4.6%	

Table 4. Do you approve or disapprove of the way family members of the deceased use alcohol to host their “special” guests at the funeral home?

	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion	Chi-square tests
US-born (n=285)	20.0%	54.7%	25.3%	$\chi^2 (2, N = 906) = 13.61,$ $p < .001$
Foreign-born (n=621)	21.3%	63.6%	15.1%	
Men (n=524)	26.5%	55.9%	17.5%	$\chi^2 (4, N = 907) = 28.91,$ $p < .000$
Women (n=372)	13.4%	68.3%	18.3%	
Under 40 (n=74)	23.0%	45.9%	31.1%	$\chi^2 (4, N = 907) = 23.81,$ $p < .000$
40-64 (n=629)	19.6%	60.4%	20.0%	
65 and over (n=206)	24.8%	66.5%	8.7%	
HS or lower (n=257)	22.2%	60.3%	17.5%	$\chi^2 (4, N = 891) = 1.03,$ $p < .906$
Some college or bachelor's degree (n=484)	19.6%	61.6%	18.8%	
Master's or doctorate degree (n=150)	18.7%	62.0%	19.3%	
Animism/Ancessor Worship (n=638)	23.7%	57.8%	18.5%	$\chi^2 (3, N = 903) = 16.22,$ $p < .003$
Christianity (n=170)	11.8%	72.9%	15.8%	
Minnesota residents (n=733)	21.3%	59.9%	18.8%	$\chi^2 (2, N = 937) = .77, p < .679$
Non-Minnesota residents (n=204)	19.1%	63.2%	17.6%	

Table 5. *Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors for research question 4A (n = 828)*

	Outcome variable: Felt embarrassed	
	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standard error
1. Male	.13	.31
2. Other for gender	.62~	.32
3. US born	.21*	.09
4. Age 17-24	-.02	.24
5. Age 25-39	-.08	.20
6. Age 40-49	-.05	.20
7. Age 50-64	-.20	.19
8. Animism/Anccestor worship	.06	.12
9. Christianity	-.14	.13
10. Less than a high school	-.96**	.24
11. High school diploma	-.57*	.22
12. Some college	-.44*	.21
13. Bachelor's (4-year) degree	-.40~	.21
14. Master's degree	-.23	.22
15. Funeral: Never attended	-.04	.21
16. Funeral: A few times a year	.17	.17
17. Funeral: Once a month	.02	.17
18. Funeral: Once every two weeks	.20	.19
19. Funeral: Unknown	.34	.30
20. Minnesota residence	.02	.08
21. Constant	1.92**	.34
R^2	.09	
F-statistic	3.92	
df model	21	
df error	807	
p-value	.0000000207	

Note. Constant coefficient refers to the predicted mean of the outcome for participants that are female, not born in the US, other religion, doctorate degree, once a week funeral attendance, not MN residence.

* p -value < .05

** p -value < .01

~ p -value slightly above .05