

**Celebrating Hmong New Year Not for the New Year Celebration: A Case Study in Urban
Community in Chiang Mai City, Thailand¹**

by

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to give a critical examination of the contemporary Hmong New Year celebrations in Thailand particularly the New Year celebration hosted by Hmong entrepreneurs from January 15-17, 2016 at the Tribal Museum, Chiang Mai. The study is based on my interviews with Hmong entrepreneurs, written materials such as newspapers, data available on websites and my observations and participation in the New Year celebrations. The chapter aims at better understanding Hmong New Year celebrations held in Chiang Mai City since the 1990s. The focus is on the shift of the Hmong New Year celebration from rural areas to urban areas and how this cultural festival has been turned or used for different purposes by various Hmong networks over time. This New Year celebration in Chiang Mai City can be thought of an example of the present trend of holding New Year celebrations elsewhere. My argument is that even though the trend in New Year celebrations has been locally reshaped according to a national context, it is still a transnational practice shared by all Hmong in different nation states. In fact, it is through the New Year celebration that the diaspora Hmong maintain their sense of belonging to the same ‘national’ identity.

Keywords: Entrepreneur, Hmong people, Hmong New Year celebration

Introduction

Although the Hmong people still remember their date and time of New Year (*Xyoo Tshiab* in Hmong), they do not always celebrate their New Year according to the timeline given,

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rather they do so based on their preference. Generally speaking, the 1st day of the 1st lunar month is the beginning of Hmong New Year. There are mainly two sets of practices signifying the closure of the old year and the beginning of the New Year. The first are rituals performed within households for family members and relatives,² and the second is the public gathering called “*Noj Tsiab Peb Caug*” in Hmong, which usually takes place on the very first day of New Year and lasts for three days. This chapter concerns only the later.

Traditionally, the most highlighted feature of such public gatherings was *the* ball tossing game (“*Pov Pob*” in Hmong) between girls and boys. Girls were to make the balls and toss them with boys from different clans than their own. Ideally, this was not merely a game, but rather a courtship activity designed by Hmong ancestors for the young to get to know each other before eventually getting married. The wealthier Hmong often put on real silver jewelry and silver coins to stand out, while the poor did not have such wealth to flaunt. This display was why every mother always tried her best to prepare new Hmong clothes and accessories for her unmarried sons and daughters so they could wear them during the New Year. Young girls also attempted to make their own dresses, at least two or three dresses a year, to show their hard work and embroidery skills. Therefore, after the end of the New Year celebration, the process of choosing life partners among boys often began. The New Year period also marked the beginning of a new life among the young.

However, the significance of holding New Year celebrations lies well beyond such marriage and courtship purposes. As the pioneer Hmong scholar, Dr. Yang Dao (1992 in Kou

² The household rituals are *cheb nkhawb* (sweeping the house with fresh bamboo leaves in order to rid it of bad spirits); *hu plig* (calling souls), *Txi Xwm Kab* (sacrificing a chicken to the altar in order to restore household spirits); *laig dab* (offering food and seeking protection from ancestors), and *pe tsiab* (honoring and seeking blessings from leaders)

Yang n.d.), states, the New Year celebration is an annual reminder of Hmong cultural identity. It serves to strengthen social ties, allows new ones to be forged, provides widespread sharing of information about how best to survive and prosper in the mainstream, and even serves as a bridge between the past and the future. In other words, the Hmong New Year celebration is a signifier of Hmong nationality (Yang, 2011). Most importantly, I recently observed that the Hmong New Year celebration also serves as a form of business promotion during the present capitalist era; particularly during New Year celebrations held in large communities. This paper aims to provide support for such an argument by looking at Chiang Mai as a case study.

Chiang Mai has long been the hub of northern Thailand and the capital city of Chiang Mai Province. Hmong have been living in this city since 1970s. As Kunstadter and Lenninoton (1983) explained, there were numerous Hmong men and women informally trading their fresh produce and crafts at the Night Bazar in Chiang Mai during this time. However, the majority of Hmong still lived in rural areas, over forty villages in Chiang Mai Province itself.

With regard to Hmong New Year celebrations in Chiang Mai, there are currently three levels of celebration. Starting from the first celebration held in each of these villages by villagers themselves, there are already over forty sites where New Year celebrations occur each year. The second level is held by four networks, adding four celebration sites. These networks are formed by these rural villages. They are geographically divided into four networks by these village leaders: the North, the Central, the South, and the twelve villages located nearby the city of Chiang Mai.³ The third is the one held in the urban space of Chiang Mai since 1999. It involves many Hmong organizations. This paper only looks at the New Year celebration hosted in the city by Hmong entrepreneurs on January 15-17, 2016 at the Tribal Museum or Ethnicity Learning

³ New Year celebration is the only one activity which these networks actively involved in.

Center. However, to better understand this trend of New Year celebration, knowledge of the previous Hmong New Year celebrations in Chiang Mai city prior 2015 is also reflected on.

Historical Development of Hmong New Year Celebration in the City of Chiang Mai

Though Hmong have been living in this city since the 1970s (Kunstadter & Kunstadter, 1983), bringing Hmong New Year celebrations from the rural area to the urban area of Chiang Mai only began when a group of Hmong American entrepreneurs introduced it to a Hmong leader, named Jongruk Yang, in Chiang Mai in 1995 (Prasit Leepreecha, 2018). However, the idea was not actually adopted until 1999 when the first Hmong Thai association called “*Samakhom Hmong*” in Thai⁴ initiated the idea of celebrating His Majesty the King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s Sixth-Cycle (72nd) birthday anniversary on the 5th of December.

In contrast to the main feature of the traditional Hmong New Year celebration in which the ball tossing game was strongly emphasized, the focus of this New Year gathering was to present Hmong people through a live *qeej* musical instrument performance with a birthday gift-silver *qeej*. Va Kue Yang (2018), a committee member of the association explained that the *qeej* was made of ten real silver bars and the reason a *qeej* was chosen as a birthday gift for the king was merely because the *qeej* best represents the Hmong people overall. The budget spent for this occasion was approximately 900,000 baht (US\$28,125). The funding came from donations made by three groups of people: Hmong people all over Thailand (400,000 baht), the Hmong in the United States of America (400,000 baht), and Thai lowlanders who used to be “comrades” with Hmong people under the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) during the Cold War era (almost 100,000 baht).

⁴ This association was legally established in 1995 by mainly two groups of people: Hmong scholars from all over Thailand working in Chiang Mai and Hmong village leaders mainly from Chiang Mai.

Crucially, this very first New Year celebration was primarily held to celebrate his Majesty the King's birthday anniversary rather than to celebrate the Hmong New Year in itself. The celebration did not only reflect the gratefulness of Hmong people toward the king, but was also a channel for redefining Hmong identity so that the Hmong were not simply stereotyped as a threat to national security, but were instead recognized as a "loyal Thai ethnic group", although the association called it a New Year celebration. It was said so in order to attract Hmong people to attend the event without having to be coerced into attending. I attended the event with my family and found it to be the most crowded site of Hmong people ever to gather in an urban space in Thailand.

After this very first New Year celebration, the association held its second in 2006 and continued annually until 2013. While the first focused on the king's birthday, the rest aimed at preserving the disappearing Hmong livelihood practices such hemp weaving, grain pounding, corn milling, carrying buckets of water by a stick, archery, sewing, *Kwj Txiab* singing contests, pageant contests, displaying a typical traditional Hmong house, etc. All these had become "traditions" when the people changed from a semi-subsistence economy to a cash crop economy. The New Year celebration site thus was a space of preserving the old livelihoods of the Hmong.

Each year the New Year celebration site moved from one place to another, depending on the rental cost of the site chosen, and the availability of different places. Schools, sports stadiums, and open grounds surrounding the city were selected to organize the New Year celebration. Singkhan Yang (2018) reported that the association had to raise funds for costs such as: rental space, stage construction, electricity, hiring a speaker system, hiring singers, preparing rewards for beauty pageants, buying presents for participants, etc. There were two sources of funds. The first one was from the collection of fees from participants (entry fee, car parking fee,

etc.) and from food and clothes seller rental stalls at the New Year site. The other source was from provincial government agencies: the Cultural Department, the Thai Tourism Authority, the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, and the Provincial Administrative Organization. The association had to cooperate with these agencies in launching exhibitions regarding the negative impacts of drugs, and to promote Hmong culture in order to attract tourists. Therefore, certain cultural practices and livelihoods practices, including exhibitions on drugs, commonly held at the New Year sites were a response toward the government's policies on drug prevention and tourism promotion rather than simply designed to preserve Hmong culture for Hmong people.

However, the association was not the only group to organize New Year celebrations in the city. The Hang Clan Association also started its own New Year celebration in 2009 and continued until 2013. Bua Lerh Hang (2018), the former president of the association, explained that the purpose of holding the first New Year celebration in 2009 was to celebrate their success in registering their clan as a legal association. According to him, the Hang clan was the first Hmong Thai clan to officially register as an association. The budget used for the first celebration in 2009 mainly came from the sale of Chinese dinner banquet tables to clan members all over Thailand. Although the Hang clan organized the event without external support, the association was successful in strengthening kinship relations among its clan members. During the following years, the association sought some funding support from the Social Development and Human Security Extension Office in Chiang Mai in order to partially support their celebration. This was especially the case for the 2013 New Year celebration.⁵

⁵ The fund from this organization was being made possible because there was a Hang clan member who worked for this organization.

In 2013, besides the two New Year celebration sites in Chiang Mai City organized by the Hmong Thai Association and the Hang Clan Association, there was another interesting event organized by a team of young Hmong who operated the *Tojsiab* website. The most attractive sections run by this Tojsiab team was not the ball tossing activity (the symbol of the Hmong New Year). The team rather focused on live concerts of Hmong rock bands, namely *Dog dig* and *Laib laus*. This made the New Year celebration not so different from a night pub. Unlike most New Year celebrations, this one relied entirely on its own budget gained from entry fees and rental space fees. Moreover, it was the only celebration that was organized inside of a sport complex to date, and thus looked somewhat similar to most Hmong New Year celebrations in the United States. Significantly, the Thai national flag and images of king and queen were absent at this event, which was quite unlike what typically occurs at Hmong celebrations in the rural areas of Thailand today, or the events organized by other organizations. Displaying these national symbols represents a paying of respect to the country. Even the language on the stage of the rock band event was written entirely in Hmong and stated nothing about the New Year but just included the word “HMOOB”, which is the way Hmong is written using the RPA Hmong language script. Under this word, there was another line written “NCO NTSOOV TIAS PEB YOG HMOOB” (Remember always we are Hmong). Through the use of the New Year celebration and the Hmong rock concerts, this Hmong team strategically used the occasion as a site for calling back their friends and those who had forgotten their ethnicity so that they would become aware of themselves as Hmong. Since this New Year gathering was targeted mainly at young people, many elderly Hmong who showed up at the event felt disappointed. Later, many of them attended the event hosted by the Hmong Thai Association, as it is the most well-known

Hmong event in Chiang Mai City among the elderly. However, this New Year event was not continued in the later years.

As the site of New Year celebrations were significant for building relations and connecting with Hmong people overseas and Thai authorities, the four Hmong local networks in the rural areas of Chiang Mai province started to hold their celebrations in the city of Chiang Mai. They each claimed that it was their role to organize the New Year celebration in the city, as they were the “real Hmong Chiang Mai” and should be the only such organization funded by provincial government agencies. This led to the decline of New Year celebrations hosted by other organizations. The four local networks collaborated with Hmong Christians and entrepreneurs in the city, thus together forming a committee for hosting the 2014 and 2015 New Year celebrations. Both were held at the Centre for Sufficiency Economy and were funded by the Chiang Mai Province Administrative Organization, though the 2015 event was more memorable than the 2014 event.

I observed that the New Year celebration in the city in 2015 was particularly special because of the modern management of the beauty pageant contest, the live concerts, the Hmong Chinese singing performance, the Hmong Christian dance performance, and most importantly, the largest Chinese banquet dinner I have ever seen. The Suab Hmong News⁶ broadcaster also arrived from his base in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the United States, in order to report on the event (Suab Hmong Archive Channel, 2015).

However, as the host committee failed to clarify and provide a proper financial report to the provincial funding organization, there were no funds provided in the following year. This

⁶ This broadcasting channel was founded in May 11, 2000 by Hmong in the United States.

provided an opportunity for the Hmong entrepreneurs, who have been organizing the Hmong New Year celebrations in Chiang Mai since 2016.

Hmong Entrepreneurs and Hmong New Year Celebration in Chiang Mai

As soon as the upland Hmong communities completed their village New Year celebrations, the celebration in Chiang Mai city would take place. The 2016 New Year celebration in the city was held from January 14 to 16 at the Tribal Museum or recently renamed as the Ethnicity Learning Centre in Chiang Mai. A change of hosts resulted in a change of New Year celebration features. Though the host of this New Year celebration claims that the celebration was hosted by “Hmong in the City of Chiang Mai”, I observed that the main people involved often called themselves “Hmong Thai Merchants.”⁷ Compared to other previous events, recent New Year celebrations were rather small in terms of location, budget and programs on stage.

Like other Hmong New Year celebrations, however, the hosts hired famous singers. For example, they invited Hmong singers from Laos to entertain the crowd during the day and night. A few Hmong from Laos and the United States also participated in the program on stage. Both Hmong and non-Hmong attended the celebration. Hmong girls and boys were not as fond of the ball tossing game as in the past. Instead, many girls used the stage as a platform to attract men with their pop culture-inspired dances. A few Hmong singers also advertised their first albums by singing songs from them on the stage. The majority of the girls and boys still dressed in Hmong traditional clothes, but they were not interested in participating in the ball tossing game. Instead they seemed to enjoy taking pictures, having food and drinks, and watching

⁷ These merchants set up their own association in 2015 with fourteen founders and roughly seventy members. Most of them are traders. (Hmong Thai Merchant Association, 2015)

performances on the stage. However, what interested me most was the presentation of the business exhibitions, booths of services/products and performance programs related to enterprises and companies. This New Year celebration was conducted without any government funding. Ki Lee (2016), the secretary of the association demonstrated that they had received funding from various sources, i.e. fees from food stalls and company booths, sales from Chinese banquet tables, and donations from team members. They invested 329,816 Thai baht (about US\$10,500) in the New Year celebration in 2016, and in return they unexpectedly earned a profit of 2,844 baht (US\$90).

To an extent, the New Year celebration has become a site for presenting Hmong entrepreneurs' businesses. At the event, I learned that many enterprises and companies are operated by Hmong entrepreneurs. The following are examples of the businesses of Hmong entrepreneurs presented at the New Year site.

Commoditizing Hmong Herbs and Treatments for Health Improvement

Methapan Yang is a medicinal doctor who processes and packages Hmong herbs. His work meets the demand of health markets in Thailand and also in Hmong American communities. His company was set up in 2012. Prior to the New Year celebration, I only knew him as a village headman, but as soon as I joined the event, I learned more about him as the owner of the Doi Pui Herbs Company Limited. His products have already been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of Thailand and he aims to supply them to people around the world, emphasizing Hmong knowledge of herbal medicine. As he said through the media,

As medicinal plants are very limited nowadays, we have to grow them to meet the needs of the people. We have our own farms growing these plants and a factory to process and package them. We call it herbal tea, which the MVI has approved for its

benefits already. This product is really from the wisdom of all the Hmong and we want to contribute to getting other people in the world to use our products and realize our wisdom (Methapan Yang, 2015).

Apart from manufacturing the herbal tea products, he has also provided alternative health treatments by combining a variety of Hmong, Thai, Chinese and other techniques (Duengdee, 2013). Due to his success in helping people to recover from both mental and physical illnesses, he has been widely accepted as a “Hmong medicinal healing doctor.” He often appears on Thai media as a “specialist” and has been invited to teach in certain health institutions in Thailand.

During the 2016 New Year celebration, he was a moderator with me during the opening of the Hmong New Year celebration ceremony. There, he presented his tea products⁸ as Hmong New Year gifts to the four Thai official representatives. The audience and I also learned about his herbal tea products from this particular event before seeing him healing a patient the following day at the New Year. I was amazed to see his interesting techniques of healing. The uniqueness of his treatments made him well-known and popular with the Thai, who now refer to him as “Moh Thevada”, which means godly doctor.

Exhibiting Hemp, “The Spirit of Hmong”

Another interesting product promoted at the New Year site was hemp. Generally, hemp has been misunderstood to be the same as cannabis. Both were regarded in Thailand as narcotics and therefore planting, importing, exporting, selling, and processing were illegal according to the Narcotic Act B.E. 2522 (1979). This law led many Hmong women to be charged and arrested for their practice of planting hemp to make family clothing. Though hemp processing techniques are

⁸ The Provincial Governor of Chiang Mai Province who was the chair of the opening ceremony, the Muang District Chief, the Director of the Tribal Museum and a representative of the Military’s 3rd region.

inherited culturally in the Hmong way of life, today very few Hmong produce hemp because of the state's restrictions and because of the availability of hemp cloth in the market. According to the Hmong traders, hemp clothing material sold in Chiang Mai markets comes entirely from Laos.

However, realizing the significant benefits and demand for hemp in the global market, in 2013 the Thai government had a change of heart and developed a plan to promote hemp as a commercial crop. Fifteen districts in six Northern provinces were identified for a pilot project. This covered almost all Hmong villages in Thailand. This good news attracted not only Hmong farmers but also Hmong entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs under the leadership of Dr. Chanwit Yang and a Hmong-American coordinator established a company called "True Hmong Global Distribution Limited", aiming at supplying hemp materials for the global market. The company's website clearly states in English,

True Hmong Global Distribution Limited is a company striving to import-export products between suppliers and manufacturers that produce products from Hmong ethnics and others in both the agricultural and handicraft industry for domestic and international. The integration creates serious international standards and efficiency which will bring prosperity to the Hmong in developing focused imports - exports contributes to the prosperity and quality performance (True Hmong, 2015).

Moreover, a representative of a farm met the Prime Minister of Thailand and presented a shirt made of hemp to him after the government had issued such a plan.



Figure 1: Hmong woman offers a hemp shirt to General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the Prime Minister of Thailand, 2015 (Hemp True Hmong, 2015)

Chanwit Yang (2016), the President of the company, revealed his dream of having Hmong farmers grow the largest plantation of hemp in the world. As he put it:

In the future, our Hmong will be the number one ethnic group who produces the largest amount of hemp materials to the world markets. I also said this in a hemp conference a few years ago in America and everyone laughed at me and said it wouldn't be possible. But I am sure that it is possible because we have our colleagues in America who are responsible for marketing and our Hmong people are already familiar with hemp plantations.

He also stated:

Hemp farming would not only help the Hmong people's living conditions, but it also improves the environment as well, because hemp naturally does not need much water and chemical substances. Hemp is a cash crop that is friendly to not only producers, but also customers and nature.

At the moment, the company had already surveyed and selected a list of suitable areas and farmers to plant hemp for the company. Several meetings were held to create an understanding of production and distribution for the villagers. Moreover, a few Thai industrial companies have also approached this distributing company in order to promote their future cooperation. The shareholders of this company have been constantly traveling to seek out other neighboring countries' cooperation. These steps are what the company has been preparing to implement as soon as the government gives the green light to proceed.

To introduce the use of hemp by the company, Hmong undergraduate students were hired to set up a hemp exhibition at the New Year celebration site for the public to learn more about different products made from hemp materials apart from clothes. According to the exhibition, hemp was possibly the best plant material ever produced by humankind. Most importantly, the exhibition also emphasized that hemp was not related to drug substances; it had been grown and used by Hmong to make clothing for centuries. The exhibit also noted that hemp production originated from the knowledge of Hmong people or "the spirit of Hmong," as it was called by the company.

Beside this company, there is already an existing non-Hmong craft company called "DD Nature Craft", claiming that there are now thirty Hmong households in northern Thailand producing hemp cloths for the company to make a variety of craft products to supply global markets. Despite situating Hmong with hemp, the company associated its hemp products as "carriers of Thainess to foreign countries" (Komchadluek, 2015). Hemp itself thus has become a contested material in its origin of production. That is, why is the company intentionally emphasizing hemp as the spirit of Hmong and inserting the word "true" with the ethnic name "Hmong" to represent the company, even though the owners are not Hmong?

It should be noted that, although the state has declared its promotion plan, with certain communities growing hemp as part of a government promoted pilot project, up to this writing, the project has not yet been implemented. Therefore, the True Hmong Global Distribution Company has not invested in any hemp projects except branding its company through various social activities.

Financing to Improve Hmong People's Livelihoods

Before Pitak and Vang Xiong, a married couple, started their current family business in the city of Chiang Mai, like many Hmong people, they struggled for a better life by studying and engaging in agriculture. Pitak completed his bachelor's degree in education and was a schoolteacher at a Thai school in a Hmong community for a period of 25 years while his wife completed only grade four and worked alone at their vegetable fields. Both of them were part of the founders of the Hmong Thai Merchant Association and they also launched their business booth at the New Year site.

Realizing that economics are a key to further progress and success, Pitak and Vang started their monetary institution, providing loans for Hmong farmers who lack assets. Vang told me how her business is beneficial to Hmong people,

No matter how rich and modern we are living in a city now, they still treat us indifferently as people from the past and from the uplands. It is because of this that we wanted to establish a small-scale finance institution to improve our Hmong living. We provide loans and sell motorbikes and used cars. Ninety percent of our clients are Hmong who usually they don't have many assets. Normally without sufficient assets, other monetary institutions do not consider giving them loans, but we trust our Hmong people based on kinship ties. So, we can provide a loan to each

client not exceeding 200,000 baht. I view my business as a shared benefit between us and our clients. Some of them come to us with nothing, but we give them loans with trust and hope that they will come back with the return of not only interest but also investing with us by buying our trucks. Yet, many of them really come with extra money to invest with us. This is how we rely on each other.

I thus understood why they launched their business booth at the New Year site. The booth was decorated to attract Hmong people. It was placed in the middle of the New Year grounds with beautiful flowers and a big motorbike. The company hired a well-dressed master of ceremonies to speak in Hmong about the services of the company. Beside the booth, a beautifully decorated board prop with the name of the company “P. Theppitak Company” was written in the Thai language. People often came to take pictures at this scene.



Figure 2: Business prop as a scene for taking photographs at the New Year celebration in Chiang Mai in 2016 (photo taken from Yeeb Lee, 2016)

To promote the company further, Vang realized that Hmong girls did not often come with balls to toss, as used to be the case; she thus made a number of balls and stitched the company name on them. She told me a number of times to announce on the stage that whoever wanted them could get from her. However, the balls did not serve only the purpose of allowing for the tossing game to occur, but they could be used later to gain an interest discount on a loan from the company.

Other Hmong Entrepreneurs at the New Year Celebration in Chiang Mai

Apart from these obvious business sites at the New Year fair, there were also many well-known Hmong businessmen and women that did not have booths, but through their support and attendance at the New Year celebration were identified. These included Mr. Chaiwat Thao, the Manager of the Multi Engineering and Supply Company Ltd. His company provided services related to wiring and maintaining the electricity system at the New Year site without charge. He was also previously the President of the Thao Clan in Thailand.

Mau Fua, the Manager of Mau Fua Fashion Tech Company Ltd., was responsible for the program regarding Hmong fashion on the stage. She is a fashion designer of Hmong modern costumes. Besides the New Year gathering, she has had her own Hmong clothing market fair held annually in the city of Chiang Mai. The market fair usually takes place a month before the New Year celebration. She has hired singers to perform at the fair in order to attract customers. Just before the 2019 Hmong New Year festival, she organized four market fairs in different Hmong communities to promote and sell products.

The famous Hmong American filmmaker, Jimmy Vang, who made the film “Hmong Blood for Freedom” (2012)⁹ as well as many other Hmong language films (Baird, 2014; Baird,

⁹ This was the first Hmong film released in the Thai theater.

2019a), also attended. He asked the staff if he could spend a few minutes to review his latest film and promoted his famous actor, Yujin Thao, to the public. He was welcomed and the actor was also encouraged to sing a song before they departed.

Pajkub Vang, the owner of Hmong Sister Shop, arrived with her sister and friends in her fashionable Hmong dress ducts; they were the stars of the crowd. Many attendees took pictures with them. This led me to learn more about Pajkub and her Sister Shop, which also became well-known to the Thai officials present at the New Year. I learned that previously she was the designer of the silver earrings for Miss Chiang Mai at the Miss Thailand Universe contest in 2016. Moreover, her products are not only ordered by Hmong in Thailand, but also by overseas Hmong, mainly those in the United States. Her creativeness and ability could be further viewed as a part of redefining Hmong identity in the present global era of transcultural and transnational connections.

Furthermore, I learned about other Hmong businesses during a dinner organized at the New Year site. Individuals were encouraged to buy Chinese banquet table seats in a set for 3,000- baht (US\$95) each. Before any performances began on the stage, there was an introduction of each table. The names of buyers with well-known positions were announced by the moderator on stage and everyone was encouraged to clap and drink their glasses of whisky to welcome, cheer, and recognize the buyer's existence. I observed that most buyers were businessmen and women, and a few were university professors. There, Niah Jue (Nyiaj Tswb), the owner of the Yeamjue Wattanakit enterprise,¹⁰ was assigned to lead the Chinese table banquet dinner according to the Hmong way of drinking whisky. This was not the first year which he had been involved in the New Year celebration in the city of Chiang Mai. Two events

¹⁰ He was one of the inventors of Hmong embroidery patterns by sewing machine,

previously, he was also part of the hosting team and surprised the participants when he advertised his business on the New Year stage.

Moreover, unlike the dinner party, an elderly beauty pageant contest was another way to present and promote Hmong businesses. The participants were all over the age of forty. Their beauty and talent were the focus rather than their sponsors. Each lady put a banner around her body with company names written on the banners. The sponsors included Sumet Silver Wear, Lacheu Silver Wear, Nawachat Silver Wear, Aden Strawberry, Doipui Herbs, Nitithan Law Firm, etc. All were Hmong businesses.



Figure 3: The elderly beauty pageant as representative of business sectors on the stage
(photo taken by author, 2016)

I would like to note here again that the New Year celebration is not the only site where Hmong entrepreneurs presented themselves, their companies or their products or services. They have also focus on other events, particularly disasters and accidents as they donate funds to the affected victims. It is through these channels that the entrepreneurs are building their images and connections with non-Hmong people in Thailand. They even recently set up a media TV channel

called “True Hmong TV” for marketing purposes. According to a Hmong American Kong Peng Vang, the international marketing director of the True Hmong Global distribution company, the True Hmong TV is an effective space for advertising and promoting everything about Hmong. He said, “True Hmong TV is telecasted from Thailand. It will be the channel in which you will see everything invented by Hmong ranging from shoes, clothes, medicine, and all sorts of other things made by Hmong people” (Doipui Herbs, 2015). Seeing these entrepreneurs and company names, including their products and services displayed at the New Year celebration site, serves to shape an understanding of Hmong identity in the present as being linked to urbanization, education, wealth, and entrepreneurial skills, which differs a great deal from mainstream discourse about Hmong as being an uneducated hilltribe that are poor, involved in drug trafficking, and a threat to national security (see, also, Baird 2019b).

Conclusion

As the meaning of city or *muang* in Thai has often been associated with modernity and civilization, having presented the so called “hill tribe” identity in the city probably means shifting one’s hill people identity to being an urban people or civilized people. That is why even though the Hmong have joined many New Year celebrations in the rural areas already, they still want to participate in those held in the city. Those who do not attend New Year celebrations in the city are thus often viewed “the old fashion men.”

In Thailand, Hmong began to hold New Year celebrations outside of their upland communities in late 1990s. The chapter has reflected on how the New Year celebration in the city of Chiang Mai has been used for different purposes, depending on who the organizers were and who had enough capital to invest in or hold the New Year celebration. We have already seen that the Hmong New Year celebration in the city of Chiang Mai was first conducted to celebrate

the King's birthday and later on it was gradually altered to be a site for preserving disappearing Hmong livelihood practices by the Hmong Thai Association. Once the Hmong Hang Clan succeeded in registering and being the first Hmong Thai Clan Association to organize the Hmong New Year in Chiang Mai city, the New Year celebration site was held to celebrate that success. For the young Tojsiab group, besides encouraging the youth to remember their own Hmong roots, they also attempted to promote their own website for their business purposes. The same was true for those local Hmong networks in the rural areas. They attempted to hold the New Year celebration in order to widen their relationship with the Hmong in cities, overseas Hmong, and provincial authorities. So did the entrepreneurs also selectively use the name "Hmong in the City" to represent their presence in urban spaces and even hid their business backgrounds while promoting their business sectors' products and services to the participants which were in fact their clients. This seems to be a trend that is commonly practiced among many urban Hmong communities including in the United States. For example, Kou Yang (2007) found, in 2006, that New Year events in the United States were also dominated by commercial enterprises linked to the market economy.

No matter how the New Year has been commercially influenced, it still represents a list of identities differentiated from mainstream Thai perspectives. As Hmong are often regarded as hill tribes, poor, uneducated, and a threat to national security, the appearance of Hmong people from all over at the New Year celebration in Chiang Mai city has presented the Hmong as good citizens, educated, wealthy with legal occupations, and civilized and modern as they live in cities and all over the globe—a transnational ethnic group. My argument is that even though the trend of New Year celebrations has been locally reshaped according to the national context, it is still a transnational practice shared by all Hmong in different nation states. In fact, it is through the

New Year celebration that the diaspora Hmong maintain their sense of belonging to the same ‘national’ identity. It is also a transcultural event, since it is not only geared to Hmong people, but also to ethnic Thai and other persons as well.

It is obvious throughout this chapter that the Hmong New Year celebration is not merely a site of cultural maintenance. Therefore, it is a challenge to both New Year organizers and scholars. New Year organizers should be aware of this and organize Hmong New Year celebrations with care since the New Year celebration represents a shared heritage for all Hmong people. As for scholars, the New Year celebration should not be understood as simply “traditional” any longer. The contemporary New Year requires additional conceptualization to understand the evolving dynamics of this key annual cultural event among the Hmong people.

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Interviews

Bua Lerh, a pastor at a church in Chiang Mai. He was a former president of the Hang Clan Association from 2013 to 2016, interviewed on 10th July 2018.

Chanwit Yang, the president of the True Hmong Global Distribution Company Limited, interviewed at the Inter Mountain Peoples' Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT) on 9 March 2016.

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Ki Lee, the secretary of the Hmong Thai merchant Association, interviewed in July 2016.

Prasit Leepreecha, a lecturer at Chiang Mai University, Thailand, interviewed on 8th June 2017.

Vangchao Vang, the founder of the Hmong Thai Merchant Association, gave a speech at the Thanking party for members who volunteered at New Year celebration on 31st January 2016.