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**Hmong Music in Northern Vietnam:
Identity, Tradition and Modernity**

Lonán Ó Briain

May 2012

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Music**

University of Sheffield

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Abstract

Hmong Music in Northern Vietnam: Identity, Tradition and Modernity

Lonán Ó Briain

While previous studies of Hmong music in Vietnam have focused solely on traditional music, this thesis aims to counteract those limited representations through an examination of multiple forms of music used by the Vietnamese-Hmong. My research shows that in contemporary Vietnam, the lives and musical activities of the Hmong are constantly changing, and their musical traditions are thoroughly integrated with and impacted by modernity. Presentational performances and high fidelity recordings are becoming more prominent in this cultural sphere, increasing numbers are turning to predominantly foreign-produced Hmong popular music, and elements of Hmong traditional music have been appropriated and reinvented as part of Vietnam's national musical heritage and tourism industry. Depending on the context, these musics can be used to either support the political ideologies of the Party or enable individuals to resist them. Access to an unprecedented diversity of musical styles has also led to an enhanced reverence for traditional music. While older musicians bemoan the changes to traditional practices, younger ones ensure the sustainability of the tradition by manipulating it in response to fluctuating contexts.

Based on fifteen months of fieldwork with the Vietnamese-Hmong community, my descriptions and analyses of this musical culture illustrate how people use music to position themselves socially in contemporary Vietnam. This thesis demonstrates how identities and boundaries are negotiated through musical activities that principally serve to make Hmong notions about life articulate. Case studies of individuals and groups of musicians, contextualised by relevant social, political and economic data, illustrate the depth and breadth of Hmong musics in northern Vietnam. Part I of the thesis introduces the research and

outlines the history of the Vietnamese-Hmong, part II focuses on female and male traditional music and ritual practices, and part III examines how the Hmong are engaging with the diverse musical world in which they live.

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DVD Contents

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Notes on Language

Several written forms of the Hmong language are in use today. In 1956-57, Vietnamese linguists began developing a script that combined *quốc ngữ* (a writing system for the Vietnamese language) with some previously devised versions of the Hmong script (Enwall 1995:13). However, few Vietnamese-Hmong are proficient with this script and, even if one was to learn the script, few books are written which use it. At present, increasing numbers of Vietnamese-Hmong are developing fluency in the Hmong Romanised Popular Alphabet (Hmong RPA). Hmong RPA was developed by missionaries in consultation with Laotian-Hmong and is the most widely used writing system in the Hmong transnational community today. Christian missionaries first introduced this script to the Vietnamese-Hmong but now both animist and Christian Hmong are exposed to it through its use in karaoke subtitles. Even some Viet scholars have adopted this script in their writings on the Hmong in Vietnam (for example, Nguyễn and Nguyễn 2008). While a Viet-Hmong script was developed with the intention of being more accessible for those fluent in *quốc ngữ*, Hmong RPA is the most widely used by English-reading Hmong people. Therefore, in this thesis I have elected to use Hmong RPA.

The seven tones of the Hmong language are signified by consonants which are placed at the end of syllables in Hmong RPA spelling. The consonants and their associated tonal values are as follows:

b	high level
j	high falling
v	rising
g	breathy/mid-low
m	glottal constriction/low falling

- s low
- d similar to the m tone but seldom used

Words that finish with a vowel indicate a mid-level tone. Spelling of Hmong terms in this thesis were verified by Heimbach's dictionary (1979). A Viet-Hmong dictionary was used to verify that the terms were appropriate for the Vietnamese dialect of the Hmong language (see Thào, Phạm and Phạm 1999). I could not find an equivalent Hmong RPA spelling for the term *tsang shaov chuôg* (see section 4.2.1) so the Viet-Hmong spelling is used. Three Hmong language experts assisted with the transcription and translation of the song texts. According to these authorities, occasional words used by the singers were either no longer in use or simply incomprehensible. For this reason the provision of complete song texts was not always possible.

The Hmong do not have a word for the abstract concept of musical sound. Instead, they combine various words with the term for song (*nkauj*) or traditional song style (*kwv txhiaj*) to describe the function and types of the sounds (see further sections 2.1 and 3.1). The sound of music is best described by preceding either of these terms with *suab* (voice, sound of voice, tone, noise, sound [Heimbach 1979:300]). More specific terms for analysing musical sound such as rhythm, melody and harmony are not commonly used, although one online dictionary has developed a translation of these terms: *suab nrov xijyeem* (rhythm), *suab paj nruag* (melody) and *sib raug zoo* (harmony).¹ Since these terms were not in use by most Hmong who took part in the study, this thesis does not employ them in the musical analyses.

¹ www.freelang.net, accessed 19 July 2011.

The standard script for writing modern Vietnamese is called *quốc ngữ* (national script). This romanised script includes diacritics to indicate the different speech tones. Five of the tones are indicated with the following diacritic marks (using the vowel “a”):

á	high rising
ã	high broken
â	low rising
ạ	low broken
à	low falling

The sixth tone is a mid-level tone and is indicated by the absence of a diacritic. The alphabet has 29 letters including six characters which are not found in English: ã, â, đ, ô, ơ, and u. In this thesis most Vietnamese language terms can be distinguished from Hmong language terms through their use of diacritics.

For consistency, the names of Vietnamese people and places are written according to the conventions of *quốc ngữ* in monosyllabic form with diacritics except when referring to those names which are frequently found in English including: Vietnam (*Việt Nam*), Hanoi (*Hà Nội*), Ho Chi Minh City (*thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*), Sapa (*Sa Pa*), Viet (*Việt* or *Kinh*), Hmong (*H'Mông*, *Hmông* or *Mông*) and Yao (*Dao*). Vietnamese-Hmong names are written using the *quốc ngữ* script too because many participants were only aware of the Vietnamese spelling of their names since that was how it was written on their national identity cards. Although this reverses the order of the participants' names (for example, Giàng Thị Lang's name would be written as Lang Yeng in Hmong RPA and spoken in that order in the Hmong language), placing the family name first helps maintain a distinction between the Vietnamese-Hmong and Hmong in other countries. The birth years given for participants

refer to the lunar calendar: for example, Giàng Thị Mu (chapter 2) was born in the year of the tiger which ran from 26 January 1974 to 10 February 1975. Quotations from Vietnamese and French sources are translated by the author unless otherwise credited.

Introduction

On a cloudy morning in November 2007 I drove my 100cc bike to the ever-expanding outskirts of Hanoi to attend a concert at the Viện Nghiên Cứu Âm Nhạc (Vietnamese Institute for Musicology, henceforth Viện Âm Nhạc). The event was organised specifically for a group of American tourists to sample a taste of the diversity of musical cultures in Vietnam; I had been invited by the secretary of the Viện Âm Nhạc because she felt it would be useful for my research. Each item on the programme featured the traditional music of a specific ethnic group, and the concert concluded with an elaborately orchestrated tune on the core Viet traditional instruments. Among the various demonstrations, one particular item caught my attention most of all, this being a set of short melodies played on four different types of instrument, one of which was identified as *sáo mào* (Hmong reed flute).² I was fascinated by the *sáo mào* because it sounded like no other flute I had heard before. After the concert I contacted my *sáo trúc* (bamboo flute) teacher, Khương Văn Cường, and asked him to introduce the instrument to me. We went to one of the musical instrument shops near the Hanoi National Academy of Music (Học Viện Âm Nhạc Quốc Gia Việt Nam), chose a *sáo mào* from a bucket of flutes, and returned home to commence our lessons. No sooner had my foray into Hmong traditional music begun, however, than I hit a major obstacle: there seemed to be only one piece of music which my Viet instrumental music teachers played on this instrument, “Người Mào on Đảng” (“Hmong People Pay Deference to the [Communist] Party”). As this piece was often presented as the prime example of Hmong traditional instrumental music in Vietnam, I was astounded to learn that it was attributed to a Viet, not a Hmong, composer.

² Although the literal translation from Vietnamese is Hmong flute, technically this instrument is a free-reed pipe. The Hmong term is *raj nplaim* (bamboo pipe/flute with reed). In this thesis I have elected to call the instrument a Hmong reed flute because this combines the three relevant terms. See sections 3.1 and 7.2 for more extensive descriptions of this instrument.

I had first travelled to Vietnam from Ireland to learn more about how the Vietnamese were coming to terms with their colonial history. The aggressive nation-building project which followed independence from France in 1954 included the categorisation of the ethnic groups within the territories of Vietnam. In differentiating the peoples of Vietnam, the government deployed strategies of splitting and stereotyping the ethnic groups: “only a month after the French surrender, revolutionary scholars began a new offensive—an intellectual assault—against the most basic assumptions and conclusions of the colonial presence by sending forth a cascade of histories, a rush of ethnographic works, and waves of folkloric studies” (Pelley 1998:374). Where previously “Vietnamese history” tended to refer to the history of the Viet people only, these revisionist studies sought to incorporate fifty-three ethnic minority groups into the story. During this period of identity reformation, a group of culturally related people living in these territories whom the French had already designated as Hmong³ became formally classified as Vietnamese-Hmong (see further sections 1.2 and 1.3; Pelley 2002; Culas 2010).

Homi Bhabha considers identity formation as the splitting point between Self and Other (1994:63-4). He terms the concept and moment of enunciation of this splitting point as the Third Space which “carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (ibid.:56). Stuart Hall argues that the definition of this splitting point involves a form of stereotyping that “reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’.... It symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong” (1997:258-9). These practices often occur where gross inequalities of power exist. Following independence from the French in 1954, Viet musicians were encouraged to appropriate certain aspects of the various non-Viet musical traditions, specifically, those of the ethnic minorities (the Others) who happened to live within the boundaries of the nascent state, and reform them as part of a new national musical

³ In China, the Hmong are classified as a subgroup of the Miao ethnic group.

heritage. This ideological movement shaped the research produced by Vietnamese musicologists of the time. The traditional musical cultures of the ethnic minority groups were compartmentalised and differentiated from each other and from the music of the Viet majority. Hybrid music compositions were encouraged which combined elements of these musics of the Other with those of the Viet majority. During this period a handful of compositions for the *sáo mèo* became representative of the Vietnamese-Hmong. The most popular of these compositions during my fieldwork was “Người Mèo on Đảng” by NSND⁴ Lương Kim Vĩnh (see further chapter 7).

I was also motivated to pursue this research by more practical pursuits. As a migratory musician myself, performing and moving between multiple musical styles including Western art music, Irish traditional music, jazz and other forms of popular music, and living in the United Kingdom, where my ethnicity (“White Irish”) classified me as a minority, I hoped to learn more about how members of a minority group on the other side of the world were making music meaningful in their lives. I was interested in the range of repertoires which the Hmong were engaging with, and how they related these musics to their ethnic minority status. Unlike many ethnomusicologists who researched Hmong music before me (see literature review), I encountered the Hmong musically first and socially second. My attention was caught by the sound of one of their traditional instruments played by a Viet man and I wanted to learn more about the tradition. When I began my research I quickly came to realise that the way the Viện Âm Nhạc and the Bảo Tàng Dân Tộc Học Việt Nam (Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology) represented Hmong culture and society was misleading (see further Lidchi 1997). The supposedly archaic traditions on show at these institutions represented only one side of Hmong culture, a side which was presented as dating from time immemorial. Contrary to these accounts, Hmong musical life integrates traditional music

⁴ In this thesis the abbreviations NSUT and NSND stand for *Nghệ sĩ ưu tú* (Distinguished Artist) and *Nghệ sĩ nhân dân* (People’s Artist) respectively. These titles are honours that are conveyed by the state to important artists and musicians. The latter title is of a higher rank than the former.

alongside many other styles of musical activity in a vibrant and in many ways modern musical culture.

At present over one million Hmong people live in Vietnam, where they are classified as one of fifty-three officially recognised ethnic minority (*dân tộc thiểu số*) groups; the majority group is the Viet who comprise approximately eighty-six percent of the entire population of over ninety million people.⁵ There are also sizeable Hmong populations in China, Laos, Thailand and the United States, and their global population is estimated to be around five million people (see further Figure 1.5). Typically, the Hmong are divided into subgroups which are largely based on the traditional clothing style worn by Hmong women. These include: Black Hmong (*Hmoob Dub*), Flowery or Red Hmong (*Hmoob Quas Npab*), Green Hmong (*Hmoob Ntsuab*) and White Hmong (*Hmoob Dawb*). Geographically, the Hmong are predominantly located in the mountainous borderlands of northern Vietnam. They are also situated on the socioeconomic periphery of this rapidly industrialising country. In comparison with the rest of the Hmong transnational community and with Vietnam's other ethnic minority groups, the Vietnamese-Hmong are among the least integrated with the nation-state in which they reside. Nevertheless, they are not uniformly culturally distinct from those around them.

This thesis was initially conceived as a restudy of Hồng Thao's groundbreaking research on Hmong music in Vietnam (1995; 1997; 2003[1967]; 2004[1975]).⁶ Hồng's research is characteristic of contemporaneous Viet musicology as he focuses solely and implicitly on traditional musical practices in an attempt to define the musical differences between the Hmong and other ethnic groups in Vietnam. In contrast, this thesis has evolved

⁵ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>, accessed 10 September 2011.

⁶ Considering the immense challenges which Nazir Jairazbhoy noted (1991:221-2) when attempting an audiovisual restudy with Amy Catlin of his former colleague Arnold Bake's audiovisual research (1990), a comprehensive restudy of Hồng Thao's research, which did not include any audiovisual documentation for comparison and with whom I was not personally acquainted, seems unlikely to be a worthwhile exercise at present.

into a reaction to his work by attempting to present a more comprehensive account of Hmong musicking in Vietnam. When I began this research in 2008, Hồng's work was the only book-length scholarly publication on Vietnamese-Hmong music. In 2010, Dương Hồng Từ's book *Âm Nhạc Dân Gian Dân Tộc Mông ở Nghệ An* (Folk Music of the Hmong in Nghe An) was published. As with Hồng, Dương exclusively considers traditional music. Hồng's findings were primarily published in the Vietnamese language and have only been partially translated into English in the journal *Nhạc Việt* (Hồng 1995), and Dương's studies have yet to be translated into a language other than Vietnamese. Therefore, this thesis is the first book-length study of Vietnamese-Hmong music in the English language, and the first to consider the vast array of musics used by people who are formally classified as members of the Hmong ethnic group in Vietnam.

Research Questions

According to Rice (2007), the study of the relationship between music and identity emerged explicitly⁷ in the field of ethnomusicology around the 1980s and has since become one of the principal research themes of the discipline. With this in mind, Rice suggests a view of music and identity as a social theory which “‘illuminates’ some matters, while obscuring others” (2010:105). This thesis considers how and why certain musics are associated with the identity of the Hmong ethnic minority group and used by members of that group in northern Vietnam through an examination of the sociocultural contexts of the musical activities. Many other social identities which are musically articulated and manipulated in the daily lives of the Vietnamese-Hmong such as gender, age, religious affiliation and profession are considered too where they contribute to an understanding of the Hmong experience of their music. Primarily, though, the focus is on the implicit social, cultural, political and economic

⁷ I use this term to illustrate that many studies before the 1980s explored this theme implicitly (see, for example, Merriam 1967 and Nettl 1954).

motivations for specific musical manifestations of this ethnic identity in the context of contemporary Vietnam.

Kofi Agawu calls for the “*presumption of sameness*” (2003:171) in ethnomusicological studies to avoid the essentialist objectification of other cultures on which he says the discipline was founded. This thesis responds to Agawu by questioning the “disciplinary partitioning” (Foucault 1977:199) of the musical cultures of Vietnam’s ethnic minority groups, and arguing that the musical practices of the Hmong comprise a heterogeneous mix of musical styles which share similarities with those of many other musical cultures. This approach does not dispense with difference altogether. Rather, it encourages “conversations across differences” (Appiah 2006:146), which are vital in the cosmopolitan world in which we live today, by deconstructing the imagined boundaries of difference between the Hmong and Viet people.⁸

These boundaries of difference are political constructions which constitute part of the civilisational narratives that have been promulgated by emerging state cores in Southeast Asia to encourage incorporation into the state structures (Scott 2009). In the case of Vietnam, the culture of the Viet elite is positioned at the pinnacle of society and the lower classes and ethnic minorities should be striving toward this through their submission to the state. Scott argues that, historically, the lives of the highland populations of Southeast Asia have been shaped by techniques that enable them to avoid and resist these emerging states.

⁸ Appiah elaborates: “Conversations across boundaries of identity—whether national, religious, or something else—begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So I’m using the word ‘conversation’ not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and ideas of others.... Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another” (ibid.:85). Discussions on the impact or social significance of ethnomusicological research to the non-academic world has recently come to the fore in two of the major journals in the field: in *Ethnomusicology*, Lipsitz (2011) discusses the current social significance of ethnomusicology in the United States (this was a print edition of his Charles Seeger lecture at the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology the previous November); and in *Ethnomusicology Forum*, Cottrell (2011) introduces a series of articles on “impact” which emerged from the previous year’s one-day conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology. With many ethnomusicologists becoming increasingly concerned with the impact of our work, the initiation of conversations across boundaries is one way we can enhance the positive social significance of our research.

Consequently, their ways of living tend to run counter to the social Darwinist narratives of progress:

Their subsistence routines, their social organization, their physical dispersal, and many elements of their culture, far from being the archaic traits of a people left behind, are purposefully crafted both to thwart incorporation into nearby states and to minimize the likelihood that statelike concentrations of power will arise among them. (ibid.:8)

Jean Michaud and Sarah Turner have conducted more concentrated fieldwork on Hmong strategies of resistance in contemporary Vietnam. Turner (2012) argues that a consideration of actor-oriented agency among the Vietnamese-Hmong is vital to understanding their responsive strategies which, due to the perils of overt insubordination in the contemporary political climate, now predominantly comprise clandestine manoeuvres. Michaud proposes that when we consider agency as “the way by which subjects can face change and, within the range of their ability, determine a course of action, one consequence is that some of these actions can involve resisting change” (2011:3). If this is the case, then the Hmong strategies of resistance which he outlines can also be identified as a means of reclaiming agency. This thesis complements the work of these scholars by considering how Hmong musical activities reflect and influence their agency. Can certain musical activities be interpreted as forms of resistance? How does the persistence of an indigenous Hmong musical culture affect the influence of the state? How do new forms of Hmong popular music contribute to their subtle means of resistance? In my position as a researcher working with and a friend of a number of Hmong people in northern Vietnam, I have felt obliged to consider these issues throughout the preparation of this thesis (see, in particular, part III). Although this work is an academic pursuit, I hope that it will make a positive contribution to more applied work with the communities in question in the future.

This thesis takes the statement that “cultural purity is an oxymoron” (Appiah 2006:113) as its basis, and questions the cultural homogeneity of the Hmong and their musical activities by illustrating multiple perspectives on their diverse culture. Where do the various manifestations of their traditional music fit in with the rest of Hmong musical activities? As Hmong do not have their own nation-state in the modern sense of the word (see Anderson 1991), how does Hmong culture fit into the supercultures (Slobin 1993) of the nation-states in which they live? The focus on traditional music is particularly prevalent in Vietnamese scholarship on Hmong music. By considering the Vietnamese studies in the context of the aforementioned civilisational narratives, I argue that these politicised studies misrepresent Hmong musical life in Vietnam by omitting musics which the Hmong themselves use on a daily basis. This thesis challenges the political motivations for the juxtaposition of the traditional musics of the ethnic minorities against Viet traditional music in Vietnamese music scholarship.

In providing an overview of the musics used by the Vietnamese-Hmong people, some forms of music which are not necessarily considered “Hmong” or even “music” by all of the research participants are considered—this distinction also suggests another reason for their omission from Vietnamese musicological studies. For instance, the Hmong do not have a word for the concept of music. The term *kwv txhiaj* can be loosely translated as either traditional song style or traditional song, story or ballad—nowadays, the term *nkauj* is more commonly used in northern Vietnam when referring to particular songs; the sounds produced by shamans during ritual trances, and *qeej* (a large mouthorgan which has become iconic of Hmong identity worldwide) players during mortuary rituals are considered to be forms of communication but I choose to analyse them as humanly organised sounds, or music in a general sense, just as one might musically consider a *Quran* recitation; and popular musics in the Hmong language which are listened to by Hmong people throughout Vietnam are not

called *kvv txhiaj* because they are not in the traditional style and they are not considered “Hmong” by some people due to their obvious non-Hmong influences. Consequently, while local systems of classification are part of the thesis’ purview, their narrower field of explicit theoretical consciousness is overstepped to embrace the full practical consciousness of Hmong musical life that includes these and other musical forms.

Three concepts permeate this study: identity, tradition and modernity. Identity is considered as a social formation, tradition as just one aspect of contemporary Hmong music-making and modernity as a multifold indigenised reality. This thesis principally questions how the symbiotic relationships between these concepts are made manifest in the Hmong experience of their music in contemporary Vietnam.

Literature Review

In *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (2002), Patricia M. Pelley shows how Vietnamese historiography since 1954 has been shaped by the political ideology of the Party; Vietnamese musicological studies of Vietnam’s ethnic minority groups, though not directly cited by Pelley, have been similarly impacted by national political movements. Research on the musical cultures of the ethnic minority groups in Vietnam have tended to be approached with carefully defined (but inevitably permeable) musical and ethnic boundaries. By focusing on carefully delimited bodies of musical sound, scholars have implied the misleading assumption that ethnic boundaries are synonymous with their associated musical cultures.⁹ Another pattern in this scholarship is the tendency to write about the traditional music of an ethnic group without using the Vietnamese term for tradition (*truyền thống*) or

⁹ This inconsistency becomes most problematic when one steps back from studies of individual ethnic groups to consider the national musical traditions of Vietnam. On the incomplete “Musical Instruments” section of the Viện Âm Nhạc’s website, for example, the descriptions of the instruments (which are classified as idiophones, membranophones, aerophones or chordophones) include an attempt to associate each instrument with a specific ethnic group or set of groups. However, as section 3.1 of this thesis demonstrates in the case of the Hmong, the instruments played by members of each ethnic group tend to vary significantly by region (see http://www.vnmusicology-inst.vnn.vn/english/music_instrument/index.html, accessed 10 May 2009).

ancient/age-old (*cổ truyền*)¹⁰; in contrast, writings on the traditional music of the Viet people and of the national traditional music of Vietnam frequently employ one of these two terms to distinguish these musics from contemporary Vietnamese genres. Instead, scholars prefer to use the term *dân gian* (folk or popular) when writing about ethnic minority musics.¹¹ This implies that ethnic minority groups only have traditional or folk music and they do not listen to any other styles of music in their own language in daily life or that there are no other forms of music associated with their ethnic identity. During her research on Naxi music in China, Helen Rees observed that “there is a marked disparity between ethnic image within the wider dominant culture and actual local practice within the minority cultures themselves” (2000:22). In depicting the musical activities of the ethnic minority groups as though they are disconnected from the modern world, these Vietnamese scholars are creating the impression that the minority groups live in a cultural vacuum. The proliferation of this ethnic image within the wider dominant culture has provided Vietnamese nation-builders with justification for their subjugation of the minority groups.

Hồng Thao (1932-96), full name Phạm Hồng Thao, was one of the first graduates in composition at the Hanoi National Academy of Music in the late 1950s. Although he is primarily known for his work with the Viet genre of *quan họ* folk songs, he also conducted the most extensive research into Hmong traditional music in Vietnam to date.¹² Hồng’s most substantial contribution is his posthumously published book, *Âm Nhạc Dân Tộc H’mông* (Hmong Music in Vietnam) (1997). Nguyễn Thuyết Phong translated a reduced version of this book for publication in the journal *Nhạc Việt* (Hồng 1995). The Vietnamese version includes more extensive transcriptions and analyses as well as two further chapters: “Lyrics

¹⁰ There are occasional exceptions to this rule and they typically arise when scholars use the latter term, *cổ truyền*, to describe the music of the ethnic minorities in general (see, for example, Tô, ed. 2004:1010).

¹¹ Compare, for example, the titles of Dương (2010), Lê (2007) and Trần Quốc Việt (2010) on the traditional music of specific ethnic minority groups with Trần (2005) and Vĩnh (2011) on the national traditional music of Vietnam.

¹² In his book, Hồng includes a short section of transcriptions which he says were written after the August Revolution in 1945 but these are still in the *kvv txhiaj* style (1997:113-28) (see section 2.1).

of Hmong Songs” and “Summary and Conclusions.” Although never formally labelled an ethnomusicologist, Nguyễn notes a striking resemblance to David P. McAllester’s *Enemy Way Music* (1954) in Hồng’s respect for Hmong cultural values and extensive fieldwork among them (1995:6-7).¹³ In addition to his book, Hồng made two further written contributions to Vietnamese scholarship on Hmong music. The first is a short article which focuses on the *qeej* (2003[1967]). Then in 1975, when he had already begun his research on *quan họ*, Hồng published a much more comprehensive article entitled “Bước Đầu Tìm Hiểu Âm Nhạc Mèo” (“Initial Findings on Hmong Music”). He conducted the majority of his fieldwork on Hmong music in Hà Giang province, Vietnam, from 1959 to the early 1960s.

Dương Hồng Từ’s 2010 book on Hmong music in Nghệ An province follows in Hồng’s footsteps by treating Hmong musical traditions as a fixed body of culture. Part one describes various aspects of Hmong “folk” culture in the province and provides general background information on the Hmong. Part two begins with a brief description of the ritual contexts and twelve musical instruments which the Hmong play—one notable absence from this list of musical instruments is the two-stringed fiddle, which many Hmong in Lào Cai still play. This is followed by 257 pages of musical transcriptions of songs and instrumental pieces (the book has 365 pages altogether). Dương concludes with some general reflections on their music and includes a list of the main scales used by the Hmong. In addition to Dương and Hồng, Trần (2003[1969]), Trần (2003[1978]), Trịnh and Nguyễn (1978) and Lương 2003[1997] have published brief scholarly articles Vietnamese-Hmong traditional music.

Aside from these scholars, there were others who compiled collections of Vietnamese-Hmong traditional songs and instrumental music without including commentary. The earliest collection of Hmong folksongs in Vietnam which I have found is *Dân Ca Mèo* (1960). Of the 18 songs, nine were documented in Hà Giang province, six in Cao Bằng, two

¹³ Nguyễn’s specific reference to McAllester’s study is not explained.

in Hòa Bình and one in Tủa Chùa (part of present day Điện Biên province). In 1961, a collection of 19 White Hmong folksongs was published titled *Dân Ca Mông Trắng*. 11 of these were collected in Hà Giang and the remainder were collected in neighbouring Cao Bằng. Most of the songs in both collections were sung by women. Nguyễn Tài Tuệ is credited as the collector of the songs from Cao Bằng in the 1961 book but Hồng Thao, who stayed in Hà Giang conducting musicological research during this time, might have been one of the principal collectors too.¹⁴ Nguyễn Tài Tuệ was four years younger than Hồng and appears to have initially worked as an assistant for him. Nguyễn is credited in Hồng's last book (1997) as the transcriber (*ghi âm*) for a few of the musical transcriptions.

More recently, Hùng Đình Quý, former vice chairman of the people's committee in Đồng Văn district, Hà Giang, published three volumes of Hmong folksongs (2001; 2002; and 2003) and a book which comprises the transcription and translation of the words of an animist funeral ritual (2005). He divides the funeral into 56 parts, 39 of which are *qeej* pieces. Rather than musically transcribing these pieces he has transliterated them into the Hmong language by relating the pitches to tones of the Hmong language and then translated these texts into Vietnamese (see also Falk 2004a and 2004b). The poet Nguyễn Kiến Thọ provides a partial analysis of texts from these collections in his M.Phil. thesis, "Một Số Đặc Điểm Của Thơ Ca Dân Tộc Mông Thời Kỳ Hiện Đại (Từ 1945 Đến Nay)" ("Some Characteristics of Hmong Poetry in the Present [From 1945 to Now]") (2008).

Prior to the late 1970s, written accounts of the Hmong and their music in other countries were limited to accounts by missionaries, local government officials, colonial military officers and the occasional scholar. Some of these less-thorough but nonetheless

¹⁴ Both of the songbooks can be found in *Dân Ca Miền Núi* (1962). This collection comprises the main songbooks from the northern mountainous areas of the DRV which were compiled in the years 1960-2. Hồng was a major contributor to this collection. Two others who might have contributed to these Hmong songbooks are Doãn Thanh (see Doãn 1967) and Trịnh Lại (see Trịnh and Nguyễn 1978).

illuminating accounts are referred to in chapter 1. For the purpose of this literature review, we need only focus on the most notable of these.

In Southeast Asia, the missionary Fr. Jean Mottin worked with the Hmong in Burma from 1957 to 1966 and in Thailand until 1980 with occasional trips to Laos; aside from the *History of the Hmong* (1980b), he made a valuable contribution to Hmong folklore documentation and analysis with *55 chants d'amour Hmong Blanc* (1980a). A young Frenchman named Eric Mareschal worked closely with Mottin in the early 1970s to produce some highly influential research into the relationship between Hmong tonal language and musical pitch in traditional music (1976).¹⁵ These two scholars' findings are especially suitable for comparison with my research on Hmong traditional music in Vietnam due to the proximity of the communities in which the research was conducted.

Outside of Southeast Asia there were many attempts to document Hmong folklore in the early twentieth century including the lyrics of Hmong folksongs and chants. David Crockett Graham (1884-1961), an American anthropologist and zoologist who spent most of his life in Sichuan province, China, gathered extensive data on the Chuan Miao (Hmong); his most sizeable contribution in the realm of music is *Songs and Stories of the Ch'uan Miao*¹⁶ (1954) and his eighteen-minute silent film, *Ch'uan Miao Hill People of Western China, c. 1936* (c. 1936), which provides an valuable record of Hmong musical practices at that time.¹⁷ He also published extensively on the legends, vocabulary, customs and ceremonies of the Hmong in the *Journal of West China Border Research Society*. Concerning the legends he writes that “while some legends are only in prose form and are related as stories, most of them have been put into verse and are used as songs” (1938:9). Despite his many interests he was not a musicologist but he recognised that others might be interested in the music: “Believing that their music was very interesting and of high quality, I brought three of their

¹⁵ I am very grateful to Catherine Falk for loaning me a copy of this text.

¹⁶ The Ch'uan Miao are considered a subgroup of the Hmong in China (Tapp 2004:7).

¹⁷ See Video Track 1 for excerpts of this film which focus on musical activities.

best musicians to [Chengdu] where for several weeks Dr. Agnew and other musicians studied and transcribed their music” (1954:iii).

This led to Graham’s colleague, R. Gordon Agnew, publishing an article on the music of the Ch’uan Miao (1939); to my knowledge this is the earliest known published systematic study of Hmong music. Agnew divides their musical activities into eight categories: songs, *qeej*, mouth harp, drum, leaf, flute, jointed bugle and brass gong (ibid.:13). He notes that the latter three categories were of minor importance and associates drum playing solely with mortuary rituals. Agnew also notes that “group or communal singing was not commonly found” and there was “no evidence of antiphonal singing” (ibid.:18). The study is predominantly devoted to *qeej* playing and solo singing, and concludes with song transcriptions and a series of photographs of musical instruments.

Following the end of the Vietnam War¹⁸ there was a mass migration of Hmong refugees from Southeast Asia (see further section 1.5). This resulted in a remarkable surge in scholarly research on the Hmong¹⁹ which included the establishment of the *Hmong Studies Journal* in 1996.²⁰ Accordingly, music-related research saw a dramatic increase, primarily within the field of ethnomusicology by predominantly female scholars who became interested in these relatively recent arrivals in their countries.²¹

Perhaps the most widely cited of the post-1975 scholars is ethnomusicologist Amy Catlin, whose first encounters with the Hmong were in Providence, Rhode Island in 1978

¹⁸ This war is also known as the Second Indochina War and is occasionally referred to in Vietnam as the American War.

¹⁹ A brief quantitative analysis of the comprehensive Hmong Studies bibliography posted on <http://hmongstudies.org/HmongBibliographies.html>, accessed 9 September 2011, illustrates the extent of this. Between 1778 and 1979 approximately 311 items are listed but for the period 1980 to the present day I counted nearly 2000 items. Culas and Michaud suggest that there was an intensifying interest in the Hmong following the Second World War especially in Laos and Thailand (2004:62) although there is no perceptible change in the quantity of publications at that time which might indicate this.

²⁰ <http://www.hmongstudies.org/HmongStudiesJournal>, accessed 25 May 2009.

²¹ Between the years 1976-2001, almost all non-Hmong scholars who studied Hmong music to any notable degree appear to have been female. However, within the greater field of Hmong Studies there appears to have been at least as many male as female scholars active during this time. This is important to note because of the clear division in male and female roles in Hmong society which undoubtedly has repercussions for the researcher’s fieldwork and outcomes.

(Mulligan 1982). Catlin's data was collected during extensive fieldwork at Hmong New Year festivals in the United States with occasional trips to Southeast Asia, primarily Laos, and China. An analysis of the objectives behind her writings leads to a distinct bifurcation of her publications between those intended to educate the American public about the newly arrived refugees from Southeast Asia by translating their cultural practices in a straightforward manner (1987b; 1997b; Catlin and Beck 1981; Catlin and Uchida 1998) and scholarly works that provide detailed analyses of and insights into Hmong music (1982; 1985; 1987a; 1992; 1997a). Her most influential academic work is undoubtedly "Speech Surrogate Systems of the Hmong: From Singing Voices to Talking Reeds" (1982) which expands upon Mareschal's research into deciphering linguistic elements of instrumental melodies. Many of Catlin's publications also highlight the songs of Hmong women (1987a; 1987b; 1992), especially during the New Year courting games.

Catlin was soon followed by another female ethnomusicologist, Catherine Falk. Her interest was similarly sparked by the arrival of the Hmong in her homeland, Australia, where she subsequently conducted the majority of her fieldwork. A similar division could be made of Falk's publications into knowledge-transfer-type cultural translations (for example, 1993; 1994) and scholarly articles (for example, 1996a; 1996b; 2003; 2004a; 2004c). Falk tends to draw on a greater assemblage of literature than the others, probably due to the fact that more sources had become available by this stage, before concluding with her own contribution (for example, 2003/2004; 2004c). Her most notable work is undoubtedly in furthering our understanding of the role of the *qeej* in Hmong funeral rituals, and her transcription of a *qeej tu siav* (song of expiring life) melody into the Hmong and English languages (2004a; 2004b) which also draws on Mareschal's work.

A third scholar influenced by encounters with the Hmong in his homeland is Nicholas Poss, whose ongoing research has been focused on the Hmong in the United States since

2001. He is following in the footsteps of Catlin and Falk by focusing on the relationship between language and music, this time from the perspectives of psycholinguistics and cognitive ethnomusicology.²² He has been by far the most active in disseminating his findings on the Internet. For example, he is a regular contributor to his personal website²³ and blog,²⁴ as well as having published his M.A. thesis online.²⁵ Poss is currently in the process of researching and writing his Ph.D. thesis in ethnomusicology.

Gretel Schwörer-Kohl arrived at her research from a different angle to the aforementioned ethnomusicologists. Schwörer-Kohl is from Germany, a country that does not have a sizeable Hmong population,²⁶ and she was already conducting fieldwork in Thailand (1974-6) when she first encountered the Hmong (1984:610; 1997:317). Her writings have so far been largely neglected by English-speaking ethnomusicologists with only Catherine Falk industriously employing the skills of a relative to assist with the translation of Schwörer-Kohl (1984; Falk 2004a; 2004b).²⁷ Schwörer-Kohl's publications cover a variety of issues including death, symbolism and the *qeej* (1984, 1991), gender issues (1990a), musical terminology (1990b), music and animism (1992) and music and shamanism (1995). Her fieldwork was conducted exclusively in Laos and northern Thailand. She does not devote nearly as much effort to linguistic translations as others have done but the focus of her work is also solely on Hmong traditional music.

Gisa Jähnichen has conducted research on song typologies (2006) and on *qeej* playing in Laos (2008). Her studies include extensive musical analyses and she makes use of the recordings at the Archives of Traditional Music in Laos to complement her fieldwork

²² <http://www.poss.ws/research.html>, accessed 25 May 2009.

²³ <http://www.poss.ws/>, accessed 25 May 2009.

²⁴ <http://possws.blogspot.com/>, accessed 25 May 2009.

²⁵ <http://www.poss.ws/nfpossthesis.pdf>, accessed 25 May 2009.

²⁶ Reportedly, only five families settled in Germany during the post-war migrations (Yang 2003:1).

²⁷ Although Nicholas Poss includes Schwörer-Kohl's seven major scholarly works on Hmong music in the bibliography of his M.A. thesis (2005:173-4) they are not referred to in the text.

recordings. These studies are useful for comparison with the Vietnamese-Hmong traditional singing and playing practices which are covered in chapters 2 and 3.

A number of other authors have written specifically about the culture of the *qeej*. Gayle Morrison published an article on the *qeej* based on extensive interviews conducted in the United States (1998). American-Hmong scholar Yer J. Thao follows in the footsteps of the previously mentioned ethnomusicologists by focusing on folkloric elements of *qeej* music (2006); he argues that the American-Hmong community is threatening traditional practices by performing the *qeej* in secular contexts and that the literary basis of knowledge in the United States is diluting *qeej* oral culture practices. Finally, in China, Hu Jiaxun's study of Miao *lusheng* (Hmong *qeej*) speech has been translated by Cui Yanzhi (1999). While these scholars have tended to focus on folkloristic and linguistic aspects of the *qeej*, this thesis attempts to complement their work with culturally situated musicological analyses.

Previous studies on Hmong music have contributed substantial knowledge on secular and sacred traditional musical practices around the world, and provide a substantial body of knowledge on which this thesis attempts to build. From earlier studies, one can see the historical basis of Hmong music and make comparisons with contemporary practices in Vietnam that provide insights into the nature of musical change through time and place. More recent ethnomusicological studies have provided a wealth of data on the relationship between music and language with a particular emphasis on the hidden language of the *qeej*. Methods for transcribing Hmong language about music have also become increasingly standardised and variations between Vietnamese-Hmong and other Hmong communities' use of language to describe music are noted in this thesis. An overt emphasis in previous studies on Hmong traditional music and, specifically, on the *qeej* and its use during funeral rituals is justified in part by Falk: "the Hmong funeral remains as the single most outstanding affirmation of Hmongness wherever the Hmong people are found" (2003/2004:25). In response to the

current body of writings on Hmong music, and in particular on Vietnamese-Hmong music, however, this thesis treats Hmong ethnicity as a fluid and permeable identity and considers music performed by the Hmong that had its origins in other parts of Vietnam and abroad, and music which is classified as “Hmong” by some people even though it is composed, arranged and performed by Viet musicians.

Research Methodology

The first period of fieldwork in Vietnam for this research comprised a twelve-month stay in Hanoi (September 2007 to August 2008) while I was conducting research for my M.A. degree on traditional music in the city (Ó Briain 2008). In addition to my M.A. work, I took lessons on the *sáo mào*, developed proficiency in the Vietnamese language and accessed Vietnamese sources on Hmong music while I developed a Ph.D. proposal. During my Ph.D. studies I returned for thirteen months (September 2009 to September 2010) for an extended period of fieldwork in northern Vietnam. This trip was supplemented by two further one-month trips (January 2011 to February 2011 and October 2011 to November 2011).

Participant-observation was the primary research method for data collection during this fieldwork. At the outset, I attempted to conduct research in multiple locations in the kind of “itinerant ethnography” advocated by Hmong cultural studies professor Louisa Schein (2004:277).²⁸ My intention was to conduct research in three contrasting socio-geographic locations in an attempt to provide data from a broad “ethnographic sample” of the Hmong community (Murdock 1957). I drove over ten thousand kilometres by motorbike, visiting Hmong communities throughout northern Vietnam. These arduous trips were useful in providing varying perspectives on the musical culture but were not conducive to developing the long-term relationships which are necessary for a people-centred study. Furthermore, the

²⁸ Schein describes itinerant ethnography as “a fieldwork that takes place wherever informants are doing things even in periods of brief duration” (2004:277).

lengthy process of gaining permission from the authorities meant that I had to travel as a tourist rather than a researcher in certain areas. One consequence of this was that I could not spend much time in Hà Giang province, where Hông Thao conducted his research. The authorities would also not permit me to stay overnight in Hmong homes for more than a few days. As a result, most of the data used in this thesis was collected in the Sapa district of Lào Cai province where rented accommodation was widely available and where I could stay for extended periods of time.

Audio and audiovisual recordings, photographs and fieldnotes were the principal means of documentation employed while participating in musical activities, informal discussions and the occasional formal interview.²⁹ My use of audiovisual recording especially helped bridge the gap in understanding between researcher and researched, and consequently contributed to the complex process of gaining informed consent from participants. Although a filming ethnomusicologist can be and nearly always is misinterpreted to some degree, the participants' understanding of the potential output of these recordings gave them a clearer idea of how the information provided by them might be disseminated by the researcher. As well as contributing to their informed consent, this also often encouraged them to take care to provide more accurate information and resulted in more reliable data. I also used the camcorder as a means of demonstrating my trust for participants by allowing them to film me and to play with the device themselves when they wished to do so.

Most Hmong in Vietnam are bilingual in Hmong and Vietnamese. Men tend to have better Vietnamese than women because they are obliged to handle trade with the Viet and other ethnic groups in the locality. The Sapa district has recently become a tourist hotspot and many Hmong women there have developed proficiency in the English language through their

²⁹ Here I use the term "formal interview" to specifically refer to interviews with individuals with whom I had very limited personal interaction. As most of my interlocutors were friends and acquaintances, our discussions about Hmong music tended to be interspersed between conversations about our daily lives. Only on rare occasions did I find it necessary to formalise the interview process due to my unfamiliarity with the people in question.

trade of textiles and other handicrafts with foreign tourists and their work as tour guides. Having developed conversational fluency in the Vietnamese language I elected to conduct research primarily through Vietnamese. I developed basic skills in the Hmong language but, occasionally, I had to employ a Hmong interpreter to assist with initial introductions or to interview Hmong who did not speak English or Vietnamese. It was especially helpful to have female interpreters Giàng Thị Lang, Giàng Thị Chi and Hàng Thị Chau help when interviewing females and the male interpreter Giàng A Sài when interviewing males.

Fieldwork was supplemented by an examination of primary and secondary sources from archives, private collections and libraries in Vietnam, the United States, Ireland and England. Documents surveyed include letters, diaries, books and audiovisual recordings. Newspaper articles, radio and television broadcasts, commercial recordings and travel guides dealing with the subject provided further perspectives on Hmong music.

E-fieldwork was also conducted throughout the research period and enabled the continuation of fieldwork from locations outside of Vietnam. This included the examination of a wide range of uploads and postings to websites that cater specifically to the Hmong, other websites that discuss aspects of Hmong culture but which may not have been posted by Hmong and direct e-mail correspondence with members of the Hmong and Vietnamese communities.

One drawback of this methodology is that the thesis is heavily influenced by a small number of people in the Vietnamese-Hmong community. However, the reciprocal relationships I developed during fieldwork were both personally fulfilling and vital to the success of this study. Participation in daily life enabled me to develop an understanding of the music that was closely connected with Hmong culture which I have attempted to reproduce here.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into three parts which are labeled The Research Platform, Traditional Music in Rural Communities and Incorporation, Mediation and Appropriation of Hmong Music. Part I establishes a platform for the research by outlining my approach and presenting a brief muso-centric history of the Hmong in Vietnam. Part II examines the practice of performing traditional music in social contexts where few non-Hmong people are present. Part III focuses on how the musical activities change when the contexts shift to more cosmopolitan spaces.

Another way of understanding the layout of the thesis is by using three of the four fields of musical activity proposed by Thomas Turino in *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (2008). The first field, participatory performance, has little or no artist-audience divide, “one’s primary attention is on the activity, on *the doing*, and on the other participants” (ibid.:28) and “quality...is ultimately judged on the level of participation achieved” (ibid.:29). In presentational performances, the second field, “one group of people (the artists) provid[es] music for another (the audience) in which there is a pronounced artist-audience separation within face-to-face situations” (ibid.:51-2). In the third field, high fidelity recordings, “professionalism, specialization, and artistic control” (ibid.:77) are the most valued attributes. The fourth field, studio audio art, differs from high fidelity recordings through its engagement with studio technology and the perception that it could not be performed “live” (Turino 2000:49). Part II of the thesis deals principally with participatory performances while part III explores the emergence of new forms of presentational performances and high fidelity recordings.

Following Shelemay (1998), each chapter of the thesis is preceded by a prelude. These preludes set the stage for their associated chapters by introducing contextualised musical examples which raise issues that the chapters examine in greater depth. The preludes

compliment their associated chapters by illustrating the breadth of musics associated with the Hmong while the chapters examine the complexity of these styles in greater depth.

The ways in which history is perceived and constructed is vital to understanding the ever-evolving process of identity formation (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Shelemay 2006). Therefore, chapter 1 examines the history of the Hmong from various perspectives. Outsiders' accounts, including those by missionaries, colonial officers, scholars and Vietnamese, Chinese and other relevant dominating powers, are compared with data gathered during discussions with Hmong participants in this study to illustrate some of the multifarious approaches to understanding Hmong history in Vietnam. Where possible, the chapter makes reference to the ways Hmong musical activities have developed through time. This chapter shows how history has shaped the current Vietnamese-Hmong musical world.

Part II begins with a focus on individuals. In chapters 2 and 3, Timothy Rice's "Time, Place, and Metaphor" model (2003) is used to demonstrate how individuals contribute to and are affected by the Hmong traditional music community. Chapter 2 focuses on three Hmong women and the songs that each of them chose to sing for me, and chapter 3 considers the instrumental music performances of three Hmong men whom I befriended during my fieldwork. Although women in Hmong culture do occasionally play musical instruments, during my fieldwork they tended to be more comfortable singing. Similarly, while Hmong men do sing songs frequently, they tend to be happier playing musical instruments in public, especially those instruments which are taboo for women to play.³⁰ Chapter 2 demonstrates how the extemporised song form of *kvv txhiaj* is manipulated by singers as the time and place nodes shift; Rice's model is more implicit in chapter 3 where the focus is on illustrating individual perspectives on instrumental music through the use of musical metaphors.

³⁰ Mottin found that Hmong women also tended to dominate the world of singing in public in Laos and Thailand, and most of his book on singing is devoted to songs that were sung by women (1980a). In Bulgaria, Rice notes a similar division in gender roles with regard to traditional singing practices; he suggests that men usually only sing when drunk or pretending to be because they do not want to outwardly display any emotions (1994:124).

Chapter 4 also focuses on traditional music but differs from the previous two by focusing on social group maintenance and reformation through sacred musicking. The social concepts of habitus (Bourdieu 1977) and *communitas* (Turner 1969) frame the discussion on community music and ritual practices in Sủ Pán village, Sapa district, Lào Cai province. This chapter concludes part II by demonstrating how musical activities during rituals mediate animist Hmong interactions with the spirit world, and how ritual musics bring individuals together in ritual performance and form and transform social groups.

Part III begins with Chapter 5, “Incorporated Ethnicity: Music, Tourism and Cosmopolitanism in Sapa.” This chapter examines how the concept of *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) is being played out in the tourist hub of Sapa town. Formal and informal presentational performances are staged for tourists on a daily basis and Hmong traditional music is one of the main attractions of these shows. Two case studies serve to illustrate how the economics of the tourism industry are encouraging the development of a new form of professional musician. As Sapa has developed into the cosmopolitan centre of northwestern Vietnam, the chapter explores how Hmong musical practices are increasingly impacted by their daily interactions with people from around the world, and how the musical preferences of Hmong youth are changing as a result of the transforming social environment.

Vietnamese-Hmong engagement with the Hmong transnational musical community is the subject of chapter 6. The chapter begins with a consideration of how the concepts of homeland and diaspora relate to the Hmong, followed by two main sections entitled “The Imagined Musical Community” and “The ‘Real’ Musical Community”; as an imagined community (Anderson 1991), the Hmong transnational community is mediated through musical recordings even though few of the people ever meet each other in person, while the “real” community involves face-to-face interactions with Hmong from other countries. The first of these sections provides an overview of the means of distribution and consumption of

mediated musics in the Hmong language in Vietnam while the latter section considers a case where a Laotian-Hmong performing troupe came to Sapa town to perform with local Hmong. The chapter concludes by positing three ways that these transnational musical activities and new musical mediums are having an impact on the Vietnamese-Hmong community: as a source of identity affirmation, as an educational resource for learning the Hmong RPA, and as a learning tool for musicians.

Viet appropriations of elements of Hmong traditional music as part of the Vietnamese nation-building project are the focus of chapter 7. The Hmong reed flute and its music were transformed by Viet musicians into an icon of Hmong ethnic minority identity and a subsection of the national musical heritage. This final chapter examines how this musical instrument and its music have been reshaped as part of the ideological movement of national unification. The popularity of recordings on this instrument has resulted in an increase in presentational performance opportunities for a minority of Hmong and performances by Hmong musicians are musically compared and contrasted with recordings by their Viet compatriots on similar instruments. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the possible implications of this cross-fertilisation of musical styles including the potential for more balanced musical collaborations in the future.

The conclusion reflects on the main arguments of the thesis and considers its academic contribution to the study of music and identity, tradition and modernity, music and ritual, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, postcolonialism, transnationalism and the incorporation of ethnicity.

Throughout this thesis I have cautiously made comparisons with studies on music in other parts of the world so that similarities can be brought to the fore. The uniqueness of the musical practices which are discussed should also be apparent from their in-depth descriptions and analyses. While each chapter examines a specific aspect of Hmong musical

activity in Vietnam by adopting a theoretical approach which is most relevant to those contexts, the complete work aims to enhance our understanding of how people experience music and make it meaningful in their lives.

Prelude 1 Hmong Pay Deference to the Party

<i>Đây rừng núi lưng đèo người Mèo ca hát,</i>	On the forested mountain pass the Hmong sing,
<i>Sao còn sáng trên trời người Mèo ơn Đảng.</i>	Stars shine as the Hmong pay deference to the Party.
<i>Bao đời nay sống nghèo lam lũ,</i>	A life of decrepit poverty,
<i>Nay cuộc sống dân Mèo từ đây sáng rồi.</i>	This is the life the Hmong came from.
<i>Nhớ ơn Đảng đưa tới,</i>	Remember to pay deference to the Party,
<i>Ta từ nay ấm no,</i>	From now on we will prosper,
<i>Không bỏ giấy đốt nhà,</i>	Do not burn your houses,
<i>Mà lang thang nghèo suốt đời.</i>	Because then you'll wander all your life.
<i>Từ nay dân Mèo sống chung,</i>	From now on the Hmong live as equals,
<i>Bảng Mèo vui trong tiếng khèn,</i>	Hmong express happiness in the language of the <i>qeej</i> ,
<i>Người Mèo ơn Đảng suốt đời.</i>	Hmong pay deference to the Party always.

Thanh Phúc's lyrics to "Người Mèo ơn Đảng".

On 3 May 1961, a young Hmong woman named Sùng Thị Mai (see Figure 1.1) performed the song "Người Mèo ơn Đảng" ("Hmong People Pay Deference to the [Communist] Party") for President Hồ Chí Minh. The president was visiting Vietnam's northernmost province of Hà Giang, where the Hmong are one of the most populous ethnic groups, in order to prepare the population for an impending war. In the same month, US Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson visited the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and declared US support for President Ngô Đình Diệm. Hồ's words of encouragement, "Do it for the children!" were recalled by Sùng half a century later in a newspaper article:

Back then I was only 22 years old. I just wanted to show my thanks to the people of Hà Giang in general and the Hmong people in particular, to show gratitude to the Party, and to Uncle Ho, who had brought a new happiness to the lives of the people.³¹

³¹ <http://www.baohagiang.vn/comment.asp?id=9854&CatId=66>, accessed 27 August 2011.



Figure 1.1: Sùng Thị Mai performs at Hiền Lương bridge, Quảng Trị province in 1962.³²

In 1975, a new version of the song “Người Mèo on Đảng” was composed by the Viet musician Thanh Phúc. This version became the standard and was translated into multiple languages including Hmong. Many research participants reported learning this version in their earliest classes in primary school. The pop singers Thu Thủy and Hoàng Thùy Linh are the latest to have released renditions of “Người Mèo on Đảng”.³³ Thu Thủy’s recording in particular has received nationwide attention. It appeared on the 2001 compilation album *Chào Mừng Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam (Welcome Communist Party of Vietnam)*.

The importance that the Vietnamese government has placed on this song demonstrates one way music was used to incorporate the Hmong into the nation-state of Vietnam. This process of incorporation involved the negotiation of dual identities (they are from the Hmong ethnic group but are also classed as Vietnamese citizens) which shape the way the Hmong perceive themselves in this relatively young nation. The issue is compounded by the dual meaning of the Vietnamese term *dân tộc* (nationality or ethnicity) which is used to classify

³² Op. cit.

³³ To listen to these recordings see <http://www.nhaccuatui.com/nghe?M=GM-nWhKL3n>, accessed 24 September 2011 and <http://www.nhaccuatui.com/nghe?M=fSZytG6LyF>, accessed 24 September 2011 respectively.

both identities. This chapter elaborates on this subject by exploring how the Hmong became Vietnamese, and how their musical activities have developed to express their dual ethnic and national identities.

Chapter 1 A History of the Hmong and their Music in Vietnam

This chapter introduces the historical background of the Hmong in Vietnam and highlights some current issues they face which affect their musical activities. The first section considers the origins and early history of the Hmong. This is followed by an outline of the events which led to the first major transnational migrations in the nineteenth century followed by the arrival of the French in northern Vietnam, supported by quotations from the time which refer to Hmong musical activities. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), henceforth DRV, gained independence from France in 1954; section 1.3 demonstrates how the Hmong were affected by the concerted process of nation-building which was formally initiated at this time and included the documentation and categorisation of Hmong music.³⁴ Although the Vietnam War concluded in 1975 with the unification of Vietnam (officially called the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; SRV), life in the early years of the SRV was challenging for the Hmong as they continued to struggle for peace and respect; section 1.4 highlights some of the social issues they faced during this time. The final section provides an overview of the transnational Hmong community and looks at how the Vietnamese-Hmong have been adapting to the market economy reforms of *đổi mới* (changing for the new) and coming to terms with life in the SRV.

1.1 Early History of the Hmong

The early history of the Hmong is notoriously uncertain; suggested places of origin have included Siberia and the Middle-East (Savina 1924:x; Quincy 1988:20-5) but most agree it was probably somewhere in China (Lee 2007:21). A recent study of the genetic variance of

³⁴ The declaration of the August Revolution (1945) signalled the beginning of this process but it was not until 1954, when the Vietnamese government was able to formally establish the official institutions, that it started to become a reality.

537 individuals in the Hmong-Mien or Miao-Yao language family in East Asia indicates that Hmong DNA is distinct from the other linguistic groups and contains a high ratio of northern East Asian lineages. This suggests intensive contact with the people of that area for a prolonged period of time (Wen et al. 2004:733). Without other data, such a limited sample size would be inconclusive but many oral and written sources also support this claim.

The Hmong have a rich culture of folklore (see, for example, Livo and Cha 1991) although, to my knowledge, there have been no comprehensive studies of Hmong origin tales in Vietnam. Of those I asked, all of my research participants considered their ethnic group origin to be somewhere in China. Most had been settled in their villages for several generations. Giàng Seo Gà, for example, said he was the sixth generation to live in his family home. However, none of these elders offered an origin tale in the manner of those recorded by scholars in other countries and all appeared uninterested in discussing the origins of the Hmong at any great length.³⁵

One origin legend that is referred to by the aforementioned genetic study as corroborating evidence of a northern East Asian origin (Wen et al. 2004:732) tells of a military leader of non-Han ethnic groups named Chi You (*xi vuu* in Vietnamese; *txiv yawg* in Hmong) who lived in the area now known as Guizhou province and fought a Yellow Dragon—possibly in reference to Huang-di, the Yellow Emperor, who supposedly ruled from 2497 BCE to 2398 BCE (Sima Qian 2007[c. 145-90 BCE]). Chi You was eventually defeated and his three sons led his people in three different directions to escape the Han. The eldest son Pang Ci brought his group, who are considered to be descendents of the Miao, to the south (Zhang Xiao 2003).

Written accounts of encounters with the Miao begin appearing in Chinese annals from as early as the second century BCE, primarily in reference to armed conflicts with obstinate

³⁵ This is not to say that Hmong origin tales do not exist in Vietnam. My focus was on discussing the music and I was only able to devote a limited amount of time to discussing these tales.

barbarians in the central plains of the Yellow River in southern China (Zhang Xiao 2003; Sima Qian 2007[c. 145-90 BCE]); two more recent confrontations with “Miao” people took place in fifteenth century Guizhou (Herman 2007:120-8) and in 1735-6 (Wiens 1954:190). One problem with these early accounts is that the Han Chinese tended to group a vast number of ethnic groups from southwestern China under the generic term “Miao” and only distinguished between *shu Miao* (“cooked Miao”) or *sheng Miao* (“raw Miao”) depending on their degree of sinicisation.³⁶ Culas and Michaud suggest that the use of this data is speculative without the aid of further historical, linguistic and ethnological evidence for classification (2004:63-5). But if we accept the term Miao and its variants³⁷ as labels for a conglomeration of ethnic groups that included a sizeable Hmong population, a largely one-sided historical record of the confrontations between the Han Chinese and a people who included the Hmong emerges.

This brief introduction to the early history of the Hmong is reflective of the scarcity of reliable data on the subject. What seems likely is that the Hmong people in Asia have lived in a relatively egalitarian society, practiced swidden agriculture and maintained an oral culture for quite some time. Apart from scant references to skirmishes with hill-dwelling peoples in Han Chinese annals, however, there are few surviving written accounts of interactions with a people resembling the Hmong until the eighteenth century.

1.2 The Beginnings of Transnationalism

Between the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries the considerable demographic growth of China led to increased interaction between the Han majority and peoples living around the periphery of their state, including the Hmong. Land disputes and the imposition of strict laws

³⁶ Nowadays the Mandarin term *Miáo Zú* refers more specifically to four linguistically and culturally related groups: Ghao Xong; Hmu, Gha Ne (Ka Nao); A Hmao; and Hmong (see further Chiao and Tapp 1989).

³⁷ Culas and Michaud report the existence of at least twelve typologies of the term Miao in the West and further variations in Chinese historical documents (2004:63-5).

and taxes by Han officials culminated in at least three major periods of unrest during the years 1735-6, 1795-1806 (Elleman 2001:7-8) and 1854-73 (Jenks 1994) which have become known as the Miao Rebellions—during the 1854-73 rebellions a reported 4.9 million people lost their lives.³⁸ Although small numbers of Hmong probably settled in modern-day northern Vietnam and Laos before these uprisings, the largest migrations of Hmong and other ethnic groups southward appears to have coincided with these rebellions in the early to mid-nineteenth century (Michaud 2000b:341; Culas and Michaud 2004).

When the Hmong first arrived in northern Vietnam, the Nguyễn dynasty was ruling from Huế in central Vietnam. The state was managed according to an adapted version of the Chinese provincial administrative system in which village chiefs (*hội đồng hào mục*) acted as intermediaries for the court by collecting taxes and imposing court orders (Woodside 1971:154-5). The Hmong settled in the highest and most inhospitable areas, possibly due to the fact that they were one of the last major ethnic groups to arrive in the region and this relatively infertile land could be occupied without much confrontation but also, as Scott (2009) suggests, as a strategic move aimed at avoiding or resisting state centres. The Hmong rarely strayed further than the peripheral regions of northern Vietnam, which were viewed as “un *no man’s land* aux limites imprécise” (Nguyễn 1989:67), and thus were largely ignored by the authorities.

The consolidation of imperial rule over French Indochina in the late nineteenth century irreversibly altered the political climate of mainland Southeast Asia by supplanting the Nguyễn dynasty with a more comprehensive, all-encompassing project of the nation-state:

In the modern conception, state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimetre of a legally demarcated territory. But in the older imagining, where states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another. (Anderson 1991:19)

³⁸ See Sutton (2006) for an examination of the escalating tensions that led to the outbreak of violence in 1795.

Presumably due to their aspirations for more wide-reaching domination, the French were curious about the people living on the periphery of their newly acquired Tonkin (officially, 1885-1954) whom they frequently referred to with the generic term *les montagnards* (the highlanders/mountain dwellers). An 1886 map of the region (Figure 1.2) clearly illustrates the undefined nature of the border region where a sizeable Hmong population lived—the green area labelled “Independent Tribes” would soon become French ruled territory, and subsequently part of the North of Vietnam.³⁹

³⁹ See Lentz (2011) for an analysis of how the northwest and particularly Lai Châu was incorporated into the state of Vietnam between 1948 and 1953.

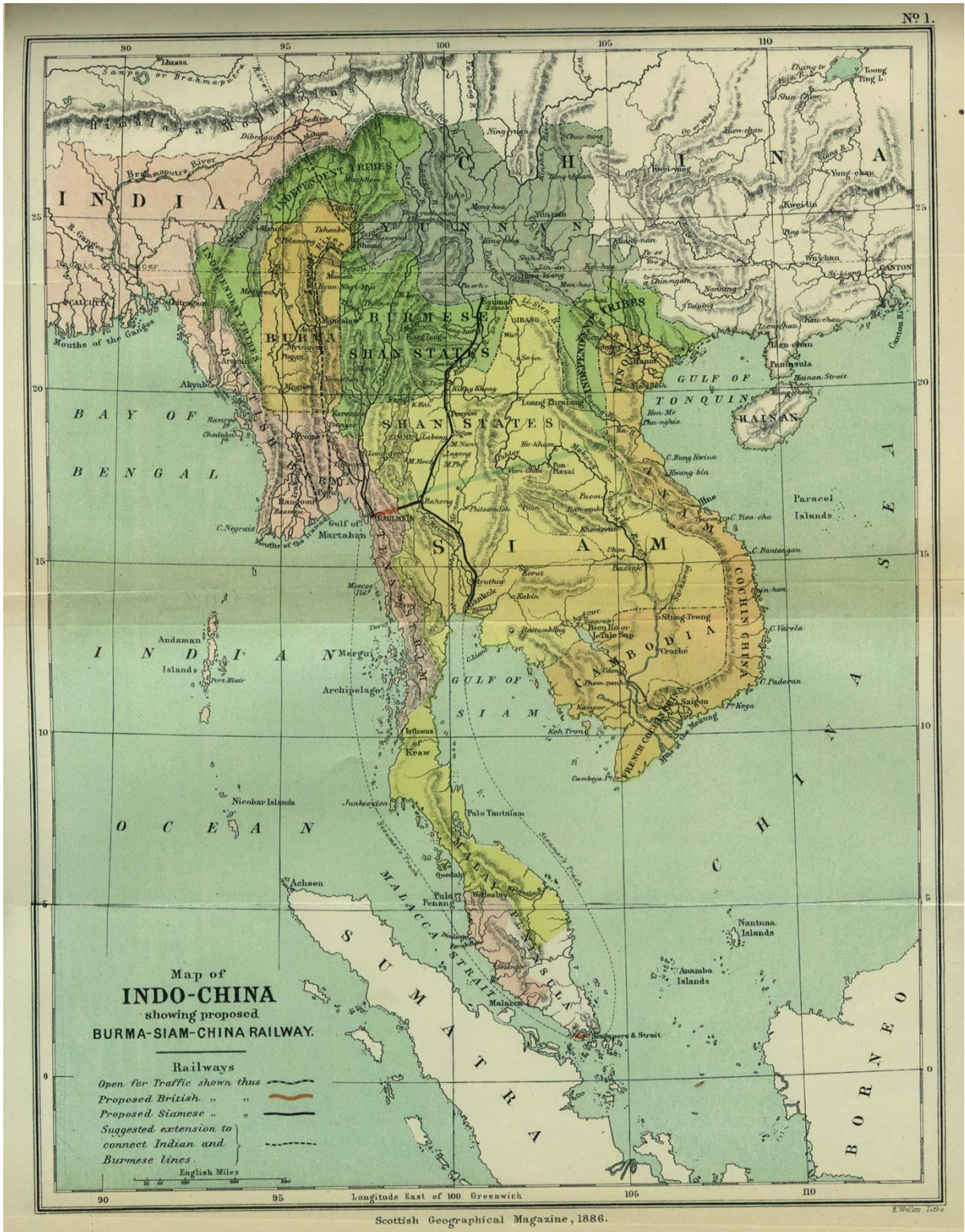


Figure 1.2: Scottish Geographical Society, 1886 Map of Indochina.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/indo_china_1886.jpg, accessed 14 October 2008.

Not all of the French were so indiscriminate about their classification of the ethnic groups in Indochina. Maurice Abadie, a French military officer based in the disputed territories, compiled his pre-First World War research into a book (2001[1924]) in which he clearly delineates the various ethnic groups—the precolonial distinction was simplified as civilised (*Việt*), savage (*mọi* or *mán*; this group would have included the Hmong) and people of foreign cultures (Pelley 2002:74). Abadie estimates that the Mèo (Hmong) numbered roughly 40,000 in Tonkin, primarily in the *Đông Vãn* (in Hà Giang province), *Pa Kha* (Bắc Hà, in Lào Cai province) and *Mường Khương* (also in Lào Cai province) regions (2001[1924]:195). He also provides some interesting insights into the personalities and characteristics of the Hmong: “The [Hmong] have a gay character, very independent, courageous, and open.... Normally very sober, the [Hmong] grab any occasion they can to get drunk and or to binge on food” (ibid.:197). Further to this, he claims to have discovered a curious physiological reason for the division of the ethnic minorities geographically by altitude: “It is impossible for [the Hmong] to acclimatise to low altitudes where they immediately fall ill and quickly die” (ibid.:197). More importantly, Abadie built on Bonifacy’s subdivision of the Hmong into four subgroups (1904) by describing six subgroups of the Hmong in Lào Cai province which are still used, albeit problematically, by scholars today (2001[1924]:150; see further section 1.5 and Culas 2010:30-1).⁴¹

The motivations of these colonial scholars in Vietnam were mixed as they combined their part-time studies with militaristic or entrepreneurial pursuits. Ultimately, the development of an understanding of their subjects’ cultures would enhance their ability to govern the region. In the preface to his book on the songs and popular traditions of Vietnam, for example, Gustave Dumoutier announces his intentions for the book to be used to further understanding of the psychological traits of Vietnamese people: “This book is not a literary

⁴¹ See Culas (2010) for an extensive account of ethnonyms of the Hmong and their subgroups during the period 1856-1924.

work, it is a psychological study. We do not intend to please by its originality, we would like it to be circulated as a document for use by the [Vietnamese] and French in order to further knowledge about the people and better guard the nation” (1890:v).⁴² Yet despite their political inclinations Michaud notes, “the writings of these officers are remarkably free from the excessive ethnocentrism and blatant racism that characterised Western *mission civilisatrice* at the time” (2000a:64).

During the First Indochina War (1946-54) the ethnic groups living in the borderlands were divided. Groups like the Thái people, who had developed a close relationship with the French and contributed to the exploitation of the upland minorities through their management of the profitable opium trade, sided with the French. Many of the oppressed “sous-minorités” (sub-minorities, which included the Hmong) sided with the *Việt Minh* because they believed they would be offered a better deal after independence was achieved (Michaud 2000b:345, 350-1). However, the situation was not entirely straightforward as few of the ethnic groups aligned on either side of the divisions in uniform groups; some Hmong also sided with the French, led by a French educated Hmong politician in Laos named Touby Lyfoung (Evans 2002:136-9; Lee 1986).

Another interesting source on the history of the Hmong between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries comes from the missionaries and scholars who lived with them and studied their culture.⁴³ The earliest surviving account of the Hmong from this perspective dates from 1778 by the Jesuit missionary Jean-Joseph Marie Amiot (1718-93) in which he discusses the reduction in population of the Miao in China. Amiot also wrote extensively

⁴² Dumoutier would go on to build and manage the hugely successful Sofitel Metropole Hotel in Hanoi. As Said writes, “knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control” (1978:36).

⁴³ One omnipresent feature of these early accounts is the reference to bandits and armed robbers who were a persistent menace to these missionaries (see further Hudspeth 1937:37, 71; Walravens 2006). Graham, for example, frequently travelled with a military guard and reported “numerous narrow escapes” (1954:iv) during his time in China.

about the music and dance of the Chinese (see Amiot 1779; Lenoir and Standaert 2005) but I have not found any mention of Hmong musical activities in these writings.

One of the most influential missionaries among the Hmong during this period was Samuel Pollard (1864-1915). Pollard invented a writing system for the Hua Miao (Flowery Hmong) which became known as the “Pollard script” (Diamond 1996:140) and set up a number of schools for them in western China (see further Diamond 1996; Hudspeth 1937:69-78). Following an encounter in Sheffield c.1909-10, he recruited the help of another missionary named William H. Hudspeth who eventually took over from Pollard following the latter’s death from typhoid. Hudspeth’s book on the work of the church with the Miao contains some interesting insights into their folklore and musical practices. In the following excerpt, he describes their use of the *ggeh* (*qeej*) in courting:

Everybody is fond of noise, dancing and music. The musical instrument par excellence is the *ggeh* which is played by the young men, who are popular and admired according to their ability to blow it. A *ggeh* is made of bamboo pipes, from four to six being let into a piece of hollowed wood, the handle of this forming the mouthpiece. The sound, which is something like that of bagpipes, is produced by brass reeds fixed into the tubes which are of different lengths. Tunes played on these instruments seem weird and monotonous to the Westerner but they play a dangerous part in the life of the young people. When, on moonlight nights, pipers come to the outskirts of a village the music is irresistible to the girls, who go out to the players, and after posture-like dancing and antiphonal singing spend the night in their company. It is not unheard of for a mother to encourage her own fourteen-year-old daughter to go out to these youths. Human nature can sink very low. (1937:12-3)

The emphasis of this observation on courting corresponds with other historical accounts of the *qeej* assessed by Falk (2004c). The ritual use of the *qeej* seems to have received less attention, although a silent film by Graham appears to depict the use of *qeej* and *txiv nruas* (a funeral drum) at a funeral ceremony (Video Track 1).



Figure 1.3: Hmong boy playing a *qeej*, taken c.1934-5 by Olov Robert Thure Janse, an archaeologist who worked in Tonkin.⁴⁴

The impact of these colonisers on Hmong music in Vietnam is difficult to assess. Jason Gibbs has written about the influence of “the West” on popular music in Vietnam before 1940 (2003/2004). He attributes the introduction and adaptation of foreign song forms to a combination of commercialism (i.e. the introduction of “sheet music, sound recordings, motion pictures and radio” [2003/2004:74] which took place in the 1920s and 30s in Vietnam), the “expanded expressive range” of the forms and the “high status and the modernity it suggested to a colonised people trying to escape a self-perceived backwardness” (ibid.:74). This music would have undoubtedly penetrated the radio waves in Hmong villages

⁴⁴ <http://sirismm.si.edu/naa/97/asia/04617700.jpg>, accessed 1 June 2009.

although its impact in these peripheral regions would have been less significant as it filtered out of the colonial hub of Hanoi, largely due to the lack of electricity in the mountainous regions.⁴⁵

To summarise this period, written accounts of the Hmong from the perspectives of European missionaries began to emerge in the late eighteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century some Hmong communities were displaced and migrated southwards. In the late nineteenth century the territories on which many of them had settled were demarcated by the French as part of northern Indochina. The French establishment of clearly defined borders divided the Hmong across national boundaries. Since then a uniquely Vietnamese-Hmong culture has developed which is influenced by national cultural movements and trends, including the systematic process of inventing a national heritage.

1.3 1954 to 1975 in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

The minorities are now our brothers, and if we want them to progress, want them to develop their culture, then we must wipe out prejudice between the nationalities; we must promote solidarity, and we must love one another like brothers under one roof. (HỒ Chí Minh 1955, quoted in McElwee 2004:189-90)

Hồ Chí Minh was distinctly aware of the importance of incorporating the ethnic minorities into the DRV. But not all of the Hmong would have been optimistic about their future in the DRV after independence was won from the French in 1954. For example, one research participant, who requested anonymity, admitted supplying the French with ammunition because he believed the French would ultimately provide his family with better living

⁴⁵ Although battery and clockwork radios were in use during my fieldwork, the number of battery radios in mountainous northern Vietnam during the early twentieth century is likely to have been rather limited due to poor transportation routes, while clockwork radios were not introduced until the 1990s.

conditions.⁴⁶ In 1955, Hồ Chí Minh sought to appease their concerns by granting the Hmong (Mèo) a shared autonomous region:

The aim of the founding of the Thai-Meo Autonomous Region is to enable the brother [ethnic groups] gradually to run all their own activities so as rapidly to develop their economy and culture and realize equality among [ethnic groups] in all respects. (1967:287)

In practice, however, this autonomous zone was intended as a temporary measure which would eventually be absorbed into the national framework. The 1959-60 constitution similarly attempts to pacify the ethnic minorities' discontent by declaring equal rights for all ethnic groups.⁴⁷ In reality, the authorities were unsure how to classify and control the ethnic groups (Keyes 2002:1163-4). The autonomous region was subsequently disbanded following the unification of Vietnam in 1975 (Pelley 2002:85), resulting in the enhancement of state authority over the Hmong in the region.

From 1954 onwards Vietnam was undergoing an important period of nation-building that included challenging the widely held belief by many Vietnamese that the term Vietnam referred to the land of the Viet people. Having achieved independence for a country that included many other peoples, a more inclusive understanding of Vietnamese national identity would have to be propagated. This process “was filled with debate and contestation that culminated, at least formally, in 1979 with an official inventory of the fifty-four ethnic groups in Vietnam” (Pelley 2002:9). The inventory was the culmination of almost three decades of scholarly research that aimed to scientifically categorise the people of Vietnam into ethnic

⁴⁶ Michaud provides a more comprehensive account of Hmong support for the French during the First Indochina War (2000a:66-70).

⁴⁷ See clause 3,

<http://vnthuquan.net/truyen/truyen.aspx?tid=2qtqv3m3237n1nqnqn4n31n343tq83a3q3m3237nvn&cochu=>, accessed 10 January 2009.

groups. As part of the new official inventory, the Mèo were officially renamed H'Mông (ibid.:90).

An emphasis on national unity meant that bringing the minorities in line with the interests of the state was of vital importance. Where in precolonial times the Hmong were largely ignored by the ruling authorities, now the Hmong were increasingly subjected to the laws of the DRV:

In the communist rhetoric, highlanders in Vietnam were considered to be at the lowest stage of economic development and in dire need of assistance, while the Kinh enlightened majority was entering socialism, the highest possible point. The least 'socialist man' could do for 'traditional man'—in the words of Vietnamese ethnologists—was to help him relinquish his simplicity and reach the superior levels of lowland civilization as quickly as possible. Vigorous plans for sedentarization, collectivization and industrialization were implemented against an ideological background prioritizing the undividable unity of country and nation with active promotion of Kinh culture. (Michaud 2009a:31-32)

In order to incorporate the cultures of the fifty-three ethnic minority groups into the national imaginary, certain carefully chosen elements of their cultures were combined with the culture of the Viet majority, including aspects of their musical traditions, to create a national cultural identity.

In reflecting on the importance of musical studies to the emergence and development of a national identity, Đào writes:

These works illustrate the national and scientific character of Vietnamese musicological research which stems first of all from the national reality. It has set for itself the task of grasping and penetrating the traditional Vietnamese musical spirit, and preserving its millenary values and its essentially popular manifestations in order eventually to renovate them. (1984:143)⁴⁸

⁴⁸ In his overview of this body of research, Đào cites Hồng's 1975 article in a list of noteworthy studies.

As far as Hmong music is concerned, this approach seems to have involved the transcription of Hmong folksongs and music followed by the use of certain characteristics of this music in the emerging genre of *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* (modern national music).

Aside from the collections of transcribed songs compiled during this time, Hồng Thao appears to have been the only one conducting comprehensive analytical research on Hmong music in Vietnam. Nevertheless, Hồng's research was largely a classificatory pursuit which aimed to illustrate what makes Hmong traditional music unique and distinct from the musics of Vietnam's other ethnic groups. He also sought to discover specific characteristics of the music which could be incorporated into *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại*, in a similar way to how Béla Bartók collected and analysed Balkan folk melodies. Although Hồng was not nearly as famous as Bartók for his musical compositions, his research findings served as a resource for others' compositions (see further chapter 7) including Nguyễn Tài Tuệ, who ended up receiving much greater recognition for the nationalist songs he composed shortly after their work together.⁴⁹

Hồng lists seventeen instruments that were used by the Hmong to play traditional music including several which no scholar of Hmong music outside of Vietnam has associated with this ethnic group. This observation suggests that the Hmong in Vietnam had, through cultural exchanges with other minorities and the Viet majority, begun to develop a musical culture that was unique to Vietnam by the time of Hồng's fieldwork. For example, many of the instruments he lists as "Hmong" were also in use by the Viet majority (see Figure 3.2). Although the Hmong may have brought these from China, a further indication of cross-

⁴⁹ As a suggestion of the continued popularity of Nguyễn's music, there is even a Vietnamese Wikipedia page dedicated to him which focuses on his most famous songs (http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nguy%E1%BB%85n_T%C3%A0i_Tu%E1%BB%87, accessed 15 September 2011).

fertilisation is suggested by the presence of instruments that are now regarded as belonging to other ethnic minority groups in Vietnam (see section 3.1).⁵⁰

Aside from musicological research, songs and instrumental music were written to promote solidarity between the ethnic groups. For example, the Viet composer Trịnh Lại wrote “Bản Mèo Đồi Mới” (“New Beginnings in a Hmong Village”). This song “sings of the new life of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam which opens out to culture and progress” (Đào 1984:128). The authorities also used songs to encourage certain forms of social behaviour. Sederisation of the shifting cultivators was one of the major tasks which the authorities hoped to achieve during this period (McElwee 2004:198-99) and this message is hidden in the seventh and eight lines of Thanh Phúc’s “Người Mèo on Đàng”: Do not burn your houses, because then you’ll wander all your life. This was a period of dramatic social change and identity reformation for the Hmong as they were gradually incorporated into the Vietnamese state.

1.4 Early Years in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1975 to the mid-1990s)

The Hmong people, like many others in Southeast Asia, were caught in the middle of the Vietnam War and forced to choose sides. This decision was rarely motivated by idealist causes such as the liberation of the South of Vietnam or the prevention of the spread of communism via Nixon’s “domino theory”. Rather, it was more frequently a pragmatic choice of supporting the side that would offer the better conditions and long-term options. No accurate figures are available to discern how many Hmong in Southeast Asia supported each side, but, many were recruited by the CIA for their “Secret War” in Laos,⁵¹ while many others backed the North Vietnamese Army.

⁵⁰ For a list and description of many of Vietnam’s musical instruments see http://www.vnmusicology-inst.vnn.vn/english/music_instrument/index.html, accessed 10 May 2009.

⁵¹ See Hamilton-Merritt (1999) for an extensive account of Hmong involvement in this.

Following the liberation of Saigon in 1975 and the unification of Vietnam, many of those who fought for the Americans either fled from Vietnam or were put in re-education camps. A short yet bloody Third Indochina War, also known as the Sino-Vietnamese War, in 1979 posed further challenges to the Hmong living in the northern borderland areas. The number killed is unknown but recent scholarship suggests it may have been in the tens of thousands (Zhang 2005). Furthermore, the Chinese army's "scorched-earth" policy while retreating across the border led to the destruction of farmland, villages and transportation routes in areas densely populated by Hmong people (Figure 1.4).



Figure 1.4: "Bridge to Nowhere" – Locals make their way across a makeshift raft bridge in Lạng Sơn Province following the collapse of a bridge in the background, c. 1979.⁵²

⁵² http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1879849_1846225,00.html, accessed 3 June 2009.

The combination of these atrocities along with the abolition of the Thái-Mèo Autonomous Region and the Vietnamese government's practice of moving Viet people into the upland areas so that they might play "an important role in the process of modernizing minority peoples in accordance with the Kinh way of life" (Nguyễn 2007:12) led to some Hmong moving further south to the central highlands region of Vietnam.

The Viet scholarly approach to the ethnic minorities at this time was motivated by explaining how and why their cultures needed to be modernised or nationalised. First published in 1986, this excerpt from the English translation of a book on Vietnam's ethnic minorities follows on from a section in which the authors have praised the authorities' development of public health services for the minority groups:

Today, if someone falls ill or if a woman is about to give birth, he or she is taken to the commune medical station or district hospital. No one thinks of calling on the local 'quack' and his exorcism practices, as in the past. The cultural heritage of each ethnic group is being revitalized. Attention [is] being given to the preservation of customs and traditions.... Many songs, popular tunes and traditional dances have been successfully brought to the stage at home and abroad. With the revitalization of traditional culture and the raising of general education standards among minority ethnic groups... [we are] encouraging rapprochement between groups thereby strengthening national unity. (Đặng, Chu and Luu 1993:13-4)

This attitude towards some ethnic groups' shamanistic practices demonstrates a lack of understanding of the cultural practices which the government claims to be "preserving." While attitudes to the minorities were by no means uniform, the process of "revitalisation" of Hmong culture tended to comprise appropriating, civilising and commodifying their cultural practices with the ultimate goal of adaptation, integration and submission to the powers of the socialist state (see further chapter 7).⁵³

⁵³ This is by no means unique to the Hmong or to Vietnam and has, for example, been observed by Steven Feld in relation to the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea: "This is a process of hegemonic folkloricization: dominating outside parties legitimate condensed, simplified, or commodified displays; invoke, promote and cherish them as official and authentic custom, while at the same time misunderstanding, ignoring, or suppressing the real creative forces and expressive meanings that animate them in the community" (1988:96). See chapter 7 for a

1.5 Life in and beyond Contemporary Vietnam

Today, approximately five million people on the planet identify as Hmong (see Figure 1.5). This ethnic group most likely originated in the Yunan basin in China, and there is now a population of approximately three million people designated as *Miáo Zú* in China. During the nineteenth century, mass migrations southward into Indochina dispersed the Hmong across the borderlands of the soon-to-be-established nation-states of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, thousands of Hmong were among the “boat people” who fled Southeast Asia as refugees in fear of persecution. Eventually the majority of these asylum seekers settled in the American states of California and Minnesota, with others scattered over the rest of the United States and Canada in addition to parts of South America, mainland Europe and Australia (Culas and Michaud 2004). The table below outlines the current approximate Hmong populations of these countries:

Nation-state	Population
China	3,100,000
Vietnam	1,068,189
Laos	460,000
United States	260,076
Thailand	124,000
France	15,000
Myanmar	2,000–3,000
Australia	2,000
French Guyana	1,500
Canada	800

more detailed analysis of how this process of enforced folkloricization has impacted Hmong traditional music in Vietnam.

Argentina	600
Germany	92

Figure 1.5: Nation-states with significant Hmong populations.⁵⁴

The advent of globalised communications has enhanced the potential for Hmong transnational networking. In the past, the Hmong were only distantly related through shared cultural traits, and contact with Hmong in other districts or provinces, let alone countries, would have been extremely rare. Although these connections are often via third-party media, the Vietnamese-Hmong are now becoming increasingly interconnected with other Hmong people around the world. Multiple power centres and peripheries are emerging within this transnational community and the Vietnamese-Hmong appear to be largely on the periphery of these despite having the second largest population.⁵⁵

In Vietnam, the Hmong population has maintained a remarkably steady growth rate since censuses have been recorded there (Figure 1.6). They currently comprise approximately one percent of the total population of the SRV, making them the eighth largest ethnic group in the country. They are typically divided into a number of subgroups by scholars (Cu and Hoàng 1994:22-25; Giàng and Lâm 1979:47-48), even though no term exists in the Hmong language for “subgroup”.⁵⁶ These subgroup classifications correspond to the clothing worn by the Hmong and imply that each subgroup shares cultural traits such as linguistic dialects, social habits and musical preferences. As communications and transportation links in the mountainous provinces improve, this overly simplistic method of subdivision is becoming increasingly less relevant. For instance, one Hmong teenager from Sapa, *Lỳ Thị Ha*, chose to

⁵⁴ Population figures were taken from Lee and Tapp (2010:1) and Lemoine (2005) with more recent census data added for Vietnam (http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=515&idmid=5&ItemID=10799, accessed 5 July 2011), and the United States (<http://www.hmongstudies.org/SoutheastAsianAmericans2010Census.html>), accessed 1 February 2012.

⁵⁵ See chapter 6 for an account of how this community is musically mediated.

⁵⁶ See Culas (2010:33-7) for an illustration of the challenges he faced when attempting to ask “Which subgroup are you from?” in the Hmong language.

wear clothes associated with the Flowery Hmong group regularly, even though her family and friends tended to wear clothes associated with the Black Hmong, because she received more positive attention when she dressed like that. She had purchased the clothes at Bắc Hà market, predominantly a Flowery Hmong market, when working there as a tour guide. The futility of the subcategories is also apparent in spoken and sung language. As evidenced by the proliferation of comments by Hmong people from other countries on YouTube videos featuring Vietnamese-Hmong, the Vietnamese inflection appears to be far more distinctive than any particular differences between subgroups within Vietnam. The distinction between the cultures of the subgroups is called into question further in chapters 2 and 3 when the musical activities of three women and three men living in relatively close proximity and all coming from the Black Hmong subgroup are compared and contrasted.

Geographical Area	Year of Census	Population
DRV	1960	105,521
DRV	1974	348,722
SRV	1979	411,074
SRV	1989	558,053
SRV	1999	787,604
SRV	2009	1,068,189

Figure 1.6: Population growth of the Hmong in Vietnam.⁵⁷

Today, the Hmong mostly reside in the mountainous northern provinces of Hà Giang, Yên Bái, Lào Cai, Lai Châu, Điện Biên, Sơn La, Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Nghệ An, Thanh Hóa, Hòa Bình and Bắc Thái (Figure 1.7). They mainly live in areas of high altitude from roughly 800 metres above sea-level upwards. Reportedly, their traditional slash-and-burn agricultural

⁵⁷ http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=515&idmid=5&ItemID=10799, accessed 5 July 2011.

techniques and high birth rates have led to serious food shortages, among other social difficulties (Vương Xuân Tinh 2002). Formal education in Vietnam is predominantly provided through the Vietnamese language and, consequently, the literacy levels of many of the ethnic minority groups, who are brought up speaking their own languages, are among the lowest in the country. As Michaud writes, “education, in principle a tool for emancipation, is geared toward... Vietnamization” of the minorities (2009a:41). Few students persist beyond the first few grades of primary school because the benefits of an academic education are not nearly as obvious to them as the necessity to maintain their crops. This is especially true for girls because after they are married they are typically expected to work as housewives.



Figure 1.7: Map of northern Vietnam, 2004.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Cut from http://coombs.anu.edu.au/~vern/ban_do/VNmap64.pdf, accessed 21 July 2011.

The Hmong are among the poorest of the ethnic groups in Vietnam.⁵⁹ The economic reforms of *đổi mới* initiated by the government in 1986 that revitalised the Vietnamese economy have had mixed effects on minorities living at the periphery of the country. Prior to these reforms, the Hmong were well-known for their opium production and the Chinese, Vietnamese and French colonial governments all took advantage of this. In 1992 the Vietnamese government banned opium production, thus taking away the Hmong's principal source of external income. In the long term this will undoubtedly be a positive development but replacing that crop with equally profitable alternatives has been a challenge: "It [takes] about twenty tons of cabbage to replace one kilogram of opium, exclusive of transportation costs" (Corlin 2004:317). This has resulted in a difficult period of transition that has been compounded by the fact that transportation routes in areas populated by the Hmong are among the least developed in Vietnam.

Nevertheless, the Hmong have managed to adapt to these reforms by developing alternative sources of income. Tugault-Lafleur and Turner (2011) have identified several diversification strategies of Hmong livelihoods in the Sapa district which emphasise the ability to adapt to the more flexible market economy system. For instance, cardamom production has increased significantly because it can be sold as a cash crop to Viet and Giáy people (see also Turner and Michaud 2009). Elsewhere, Turner and Michaud (2008) have suggested that Hmong communities have adapted to Vietnam's liberalisation by exploiting opportunities for transnational textile trade with Hmong living in the Global North (see further chapters 5 and 6).⁶⁰

⁵⁹ In general, the ethnic minorities in Vietnam are persistently identified as being among the poorest subsections of the Vietnamese population (see, for example, <http://centralcontent.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/human-rights-reports/accessible-hrd-report-2010>, accessed 13 May 2011 and <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/vietnam/report-2011>, accessed 13 May 2011). Perhaps as a means to defray criticism of its treatment of the minorities, Nông Đức Mạnh, from the Tày ethnic group was elected as General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam from 2001-2011. Historically, the Tày have been closely associated with the Viet and their culture (Pelley 2002:75-6, 92; Michaud 2009b:232).

⁶⁰ Instead of using the value-laden terms developed and developing countries, first, second and third worlds or East and West, this thesis uses the terms Global North and South because they are more explicitly defined.

Vietnam's booming tourism industry has also provided some Hmong with new potential means of subsistence. In certain areas, the Hmong are now profiting from offering guided tours of their local areas, accommodating tourists in "homestays" and producing and selling handicrafts. The Sapa district of Lào Cai province in particular has flourished since Vietnam became a major tourist destination in the late 1990s and the Hmong are fundamental to this development. On the website *TripAdvisor*, Cát Cát village is ranked as Sapa's top attraction and is advertised as "an age-old village of H'Mong ethnic group retaining unique customs and practices."⁶¹ Tours to other Hmong villages in the northern mountains are also becoming increasingly popular and locals are taking advantage of this demand as an alternative source of income (see Turner 2012). Hà Giang, one of the most remote provinces in Vietnam, is a particularly good example of this. Although tourists are required to pay for a special permit and be accompanied by a Viet tour guide at all times while travelling through the northern parts of the province, it has had steadily increasing numbers of tourists visiting.⁶²

Countries in the Global North have a very high Human Development Index (HDI) and most of them happen to be in the northern hemisphere. In comparison, China and all of the countries in Southeast Asia have a relatively low HDI and they, along with the countries of Africa, Central and South America and most of Central Asia and Eastern Europe, are classified as the Global South.

⁶¹ <http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attractions-g311304-Activities-Sapa.html>, accessed 20 May 2009. By September 2011 this village was relegated to second place on the list of top attractions in Sapa. Due to the limited number of contributed reviews, however, this list is easily manipulated by tour operators. The village was supplanted by "Trekking Sapa", a tourism company.

⁶² The province has only recently been featured by the Lonely Planet, which refers to it as "the final frontier in northern Vietnam" for foreign tourists (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/vietnam/northwest-vietnam/ha-giang-province>, accessed 25 September 2011). Since then it has been increasingly featured in guidebooks and has even had a feature in the New York Times (<http://travel.nytimes.com/2010/10/31/travel/31vietnam-ha-giang.html>, accessed 29 August 2011).

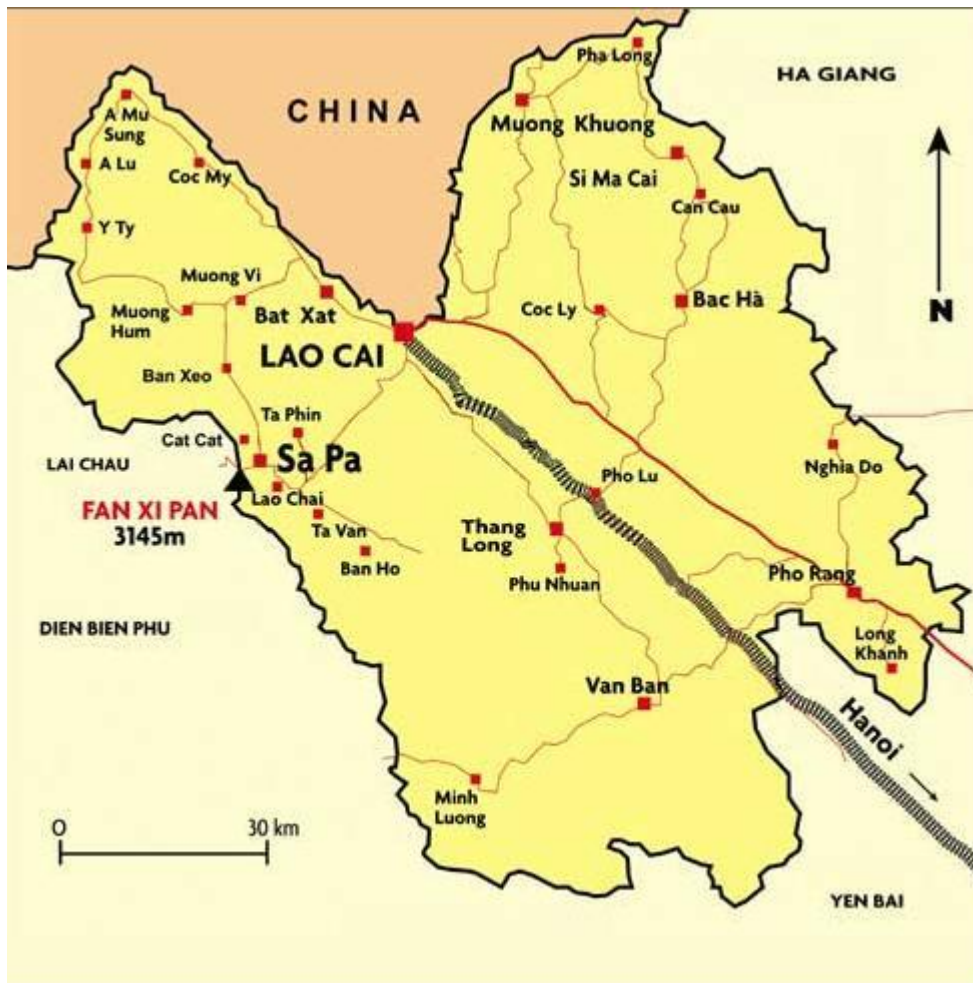


Figure 1.8: Map of Lào Cai province.⁶³

For the Hmong in contemporary Vietnam, this is a period of immense change as growing numbers are becoming literate and what was once solely an orally transmitted culture has begun to be transmitted through literature and electronic media. Technological advancements have led to the intensification of mediated interactions with the transnational community and, in popular tourism areas, the outlook of Hmong youth is becoming increasingly cosmopolitan as they socialise with foreigners on a daily basis (Dương 2008).⁶⁴ Yet despite these enhanced opportunities for the Hmong, they remain, along with many of the other ethnic minorities, at the bottom of Vietnam's socioeconomic ladder. Philip Taylor

⁶³ http://www.vietnamholidays.cc/Sapa_Vietnam_map.aspx, accessed 1 September 2011.

⁶⁴ The effects of the changing lifestyles of younger Hmong in Sapa on their musical tastes are explored in greater depth in chapter 5.

writes, “The prevailing image of ethnic minorities in Vietnam is carceral: they are subjugated, disciplined, and circumscribed.... They are comprehensively objectified, classified, and spoken for by others” (2008:5). While post-1954 Vietnamese scholarship has tended to depict Hmong culture as primitive and in need of reform—a manner which bears a striking resemblance to the *mission civilisatrice*—some foreign scholars have reacted with an anarchist approach which emphasises resistance to this (see Scott 2009; Turner and Michaud 2009). In reality, the Hmong maintain a degree of agency in contemporary Vietnam despite the outside restrictions imposed on them (see further chapter 6; Michaud 2011; Turner 2012).

1.6 Conclusions

By outlining some of the major historical, social and economic factors that have shaped Hmong musical practices in Vietnam, I have shown how Hmong traditional music has been essentialised by nation-builders, just as Hmong ethnic identity has been, by placing a disproportionate emphasis on difference. In reference to the music research of Agawu (1995 and 2003) and Scherzinger (2001) Stock observed, “to insist people are necessarily unlike is...to reduce their musicality to a shadow of its full self” (2008:191). Musical discourse of this order is reminiscent of colonial discourse: “The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha 1994:101). In contemporary Vietnam, traces of this discourse remain as depictions of the simple, traditional cultures of those on the periphery are juxtaposed with the rapidly industrialising centre. But one million Hmong are not isolated from changes taking place in the rest of the country; for example, many of them are engaging with the same popular musics which are available to the rest of Vietnam’s population. This situation calls for an alternative approach which focuses on the people making and listening to the music.

To conclude this chapter an excerpt from the lyrics of “Cuóp Vợ” (“Wife Stealing”), a song from the 2009 album *365000* by the young Hanoi-based Viet rock band Ngũ Cung, serves to summarise the distorted image of the Hmong in the eyes of the majority of Viet people today.⁶⁵ The lyrics illustrate how certain aspects of Hmong culture tend to be portrayed as backward (*lạc hậu*), low (*thấp*), or primitive (*nguyên thủy*) in the Vietnamese media by mythologising the Hmong practice of wife-stealing. Even though the term *Mèo* was officially replaced in 1979, Ngũ Cung still use this term in the chorus of their song; aside from being considered derogatory because it translates into Vietnamese as “cat”, it carries connotations of a barbaric and uncivilised people (Nguyễn 2007:17).⁶⁶ The Hmong propensity for drinking rice wine, noted in line five, is a stereotype that has been propagated by the media too, even though this practice is prevalent throughout Vietnam and is certainly not limited to the Hmong. The counterculture sounds of the rock band accompaniment further emphasise how Hmong values are positioned as antithetical to those of the dominant Viet culture.

Bản Mèo ánh trăng sáng,

*Tay dắt cương dắt con ngựa dưới sàn,
Chàng trai người H'Mông vắt em yêu ngang
lưng ngựa đò,
Ngựa mang thiên thần lên đỉnh núi.*

Người H'mông uống rượu ngô, ăn thắng cố,

Xòe váy hoa, chọi họa mi phóng,

Ngựa mang em yêu lên núi.

In a Hmong village the moonlight shines bright,

Horse hooves make tracks along the ground,
While a Hmong boy grips his lover tightly
on the horse's back,
The horse carries the angel up into the mountains.

The Hmong boy drinks corn liquor, and tries to find food,

The flowery dress is spread, as the fighting nightingale is thrown,

The horse carries her into the mountains.

Tục lệ trai người H'Mông,

Cuóp em yêu mang trên ngựa cưới vợ,

The practice of Hmong boys,

Of stealing a bride and taking her by horseback for marriage,

⁶⁵ One of the first performances of this song can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYuIqq0zjh4>, accessed 17 September 2011.

⁶⁶ This term remains in common use in the vernacular and some Hmong have responded to this by calling Viet people who use it *con khi* (monkey).

*Tình yêu say mê đó như cánh hoa đào hạnh
phúc,
Tình yêu lứa đôi trên đỉnh núi.*

Such passionate love is like the happiness of
a peach's petals,
This is the love of a couple at the top of the
mountains.

Chorus and first verse of “Cướp Vợ” by Ngũ Cung.

Prelude 2 Drinking Songs

At the end of the rice planting season in June 2010 I made a social visit to Giàng Thị Lang's home in Sừ Pán village, seventeen kilometres from Sapa town. Lang had been assisting me with introductions and interviews around the district for the previous seven months. Having observed my penchant for recording Hmong singers who were highly regarded in the local community, Lang was particularly excited to see me this time because she had made a recording of her neighbour, Giàng Thị Mu, singing, using the audio recorder on her mobile phone.

Shortly before my visit, Lang had helped Mu to plant rice in her fields. As was typical in the region, neighbours and friends often helped adjacent households to plant and harvest crops. The household whose fields were worked would then host a small party to express gratitude for the help at the end of the day; the helpers' labour would be reciprocated when their own fields were ready for attention. This practice enabled each household to complete the planting of their fields promptly, thereby ensuring all of their crops would mature at roughly the same time at the end of the season. During the party at Mu's house after their long day's work in the sun, Lang tired quickly and was eager to go home early to rest. Mu and her family urged Lang to stay a little longer. Knowing that Mu was a talented singer, Lang said she would only stay for another drink if Mu would sing for her. Mu obliged by singing a drinking song (*nkauj haus cawv*) which Lang recorded on her mobile phone (Audio Track 1).

As with many other daily activities, the Hmong sing songs about drinking rice wine together with family and friends. Singing these songs is analogous to making an offering or an outreach to initiate or maintain friendships: Giàng Thị Mu sang her drinking song for Lang to encourage her to stay at a party; the first song Giàng A Sàì (section 3.4) sang for me was a drinking song which we would sing again in public when he wanted other Hmong to know

that I was not a complete outsider to the community (Audio Track 2); and Giàng Seo Gà taught a drinking song to a group of teenage Hmong girls to perform for a visiting troupe of Laotian-Hmong (see section 6.2). As Gà's song below demonstrates, the lyrics of these songs typically revolve around a polite encouragement or invitation to the listeners to drink with the singer. These extemporised songs play an important part in developing and maintaining social relations.

*Yuav niab i ia,
Yuav haus cawv txug mej muag tej,

Npawg awj cawv nuav yog cawv fij zeej,
Yig nruab ze i ia.*

Hey there,
The rice wine is coming back to your turn to drink,
Now this wine is for you,
I invite you [to drink],

*Mev ntau los mej
Haus ib ntsis mev,
Xwb koj tau lawm leej lwg rwv mim
txuj kev i ia.
Mej tuaj
Los tau xeeb fim rov tau tuav npe i ia.*

Just a little bit,
You need to taste a little bit,
This wine is your destiny,
This is the way.
You come here,
And we are always thinking of you.

*Yuav niab i ia,
Yuav haus cawv txag mej muag tej,

Npawg awj cawv nuav yog cawv fij zeej,
Yig nruab zoo i ia.*

Hey there,
The rice wine is coming back to your turn to drink,
Now this wine is for you,
I invite you,

*Mev ntau los mej
Haus ib ntsis mev
Xwb koj tau lawm leej lwg rwv mej
txuj npoo i ia.
Mej tuaj
Los tau xeeb fim rov tau noog moo i ia.*

Just a little bit,
You need to taste a little bit,
This wine is your destiny,
Don't miss your turn,
You come here to visit,
Now we have this chance to drink and be friends.

*Yuav niab i ia.
Cawv nuav yog cawv fij zeej
Yig nqeeq cawv txheeb qhua i ia
Tsis tuaj los lub
Siab seev nteeg tuaj
Tag haus pas cawv rov qab tau kev tshua i ia.*

Hey there,
There is wine for you,
My heart makes me come here,
If I cannot come here my heart will make me,
When I have a drink and go away I always remember this friendship.

*Yuav niab i ia
Cawv nuav yog cawv fij zeej
Yig nqeeq cawv txheeb neeg i ia.
Tsis tuaj los lub*

Hey there,
There is wine for you,
This drink is for you,
If I cannot come here my heart will make

Siab seev tshua tuaj
Tag haus pas cawv rov qab tau kev nteeg
niab i ia. (All repeated)

me,
When I have a drink and go away I always
talk about this time.

Lyrics of Giàng Seo Gà's version of a *nkauj haus cawv*⁶⁷ as it was sung during a staged performance with a touring Laotian-Hmong group in Sapa, 1 September 2010 (Video Track 2; see further section 6.3).

During my fieldwork, I encountered plenty of men and women who sang songs to themselves while they went about their daily work and to others in social situations such as at Mu's post-work party. For the most part, however, I found that women preferred to sing rather than discuss or play instrumental music and men preferred to play and talk about playing rather than sing with me. In a less restricted way, this resembles the situation in Afghanistan where Veronica Doubleday writes that women's music was "completely inaccessible" (2006:10) to her husband due to strict social mores relating to interactions between women and men. While my interactions with Hmong women regarding instrumental music were restricted by local social mores, in contrast to the men, I found them much more enthusiastic to discuss and sing songs with me. Consequently, this chapter focuses on women's songs to balance with the men's instrumental music discussed in chapter 3.

This vignette is also intended to highlight that the Hmong musical traditions described and analysed in part II of the thesis exist in and are influenced by the increasingly globalised world in which the Vietnamese-Hmong live. Lang's use of her mobile phone to document Mu's song demonstrates how new means of transmission of the tradition are being adopted by Hmong musicians, singers and music enthusiasts. Where previously the cassette tape revolutionised Hmong music pedagogy by supplementing formal one-to-one lessons and learning by osmosis, now mobile phones with audio recording capabilities are assisting

⁶⁷ Giàng A Sài translated the title of this song style as *mòi rượu* (invitation to drink alcohol) in Vietnamese.

musicians and singers in their musical practice (see further chapter 6). Music enthusiasts are also using phones and other new technologies to share recordings; as was common practice in the community, Lang transferred her recording of Mu to my recording device by holding the two machines side-by-side and pressing play on hers and record on mine simultaneously. Although I have deferred more extensive consideration of the impact of the outside world on Hmong music in Vietnam until part III of the thesis, readers should bear in mind that the musical traditions examined in part II do not exist in isolation and are in many ways a product of cross-cultural interactions.

Chapter 2 Three Women and Their Songs

This chapter introduces three women and the songs that each of them sang for me in order to gain insights into how Hmong women experience music. Structured by Rice's "Time, Place and Metaphor" model (2003), the chapter examines how the meanings of the songs have changed for and been changed by these individuals at various times and places in their lives. This approach seeks to derive a set of overarching metaphors about the fundamental nature of music for these women. While the focus is on individuals in the community, each individual case is considered as "a thoroughly social self as it emerges from and reattaches itself to an emergent array of social units and communities" (Rice 2010:109 fn. 15). Ultimately, the aim is to enhance our understanding of traditional forms of musical activity in rural Hmong communities in Vietnam.

Rice's model for subject-centred ethnographies is an ideational space that considers data on three dimensions: time, place and metaphor. Since "we and our subjects experience music socially in multiple locales" (Rice 2003:160), place is conceptualised as a sociogeographic dimension in his model. Suggested nodes for this "projection of the social in space" (ibid.:159) include, but are not limited to: individual, subcultural, local, regional, national, areal, diasporic, global and virtual (ibid.:161). Time is considered on two planes: chronologically and experientially or phenomenologically. Both of these planes must be considered when plotting the place nodes because they help define the sociogeographic context. The metaphors of Rice's model are concepts of what music is. Suggested metaphors include music as art, music as social behaviour, music as symbolic system or referential text and music as commodity (ibid.:166-67). These are intended as

fundamental claims to truth, guides to practical action and sources for understanding music's profound importance in human life. Rather than true or false, each claim... is merely limited, one of many possibilities. A given metaphor probably achieves some goals and makes some sense in certain situations but fails to account for the full range of

music's possibilities and significance. I further suggest that multiple musical metaphors probably guide action and thought in individual lives, in society and through time. Sometimes... they happily commingle; at others they may become alternative, competing strategies. (2001:22)

Some of the metaphors discussed in this chapter and the next were verbalised by the people themselves while others were interpreted by the author based on stories told by the singers relating to the music and the time and place nodes which they generated.

While I met, interviewed and recorded many Hmong women between 2009 and 2011 this chapter only considers a representative sample of these. After returning from the field the individual cases were selected based on a number of similarities and differences between them. To highlight some of the more significant of these traits: the similarities or sameness of gender, ethnicity, geographic location (in some part of the Sapa district) and traditional song style bind them; the differences of age (young adult, middle-aged adult and elderly adult), song text subject and status as amateur or professional⁶⁸ musicians serve to provide contrast. This balance between sameness and difference serves to highlight the diversity of traditional songs and singing practices within one Hmong community in Vietnam. The chapter contrasts with Hồng's and Dương's predominantly musicological approaches by attempting to situate three contrasting case studies in their cultural contexts rather than providing extensive song transcriptions and translations. The aim is to demonstrate the variety of contexts in which Hmong songs thrive and to find out what makes these musical activities meaningful.

2.1 On Song Categorisation

For the Vietnamese-Hmong I worked with, song titles appeared to be synonymous with song categories. Unlike traditional music in Britain and Ireland, the Vietnamese-Hmong do not

⁶⁸ The Vietnamese-Hmong community has very few professional singers. However, the third case study in this chapter demonstrates how one Hmong woman has been able, albeit sporadically, to supplement her income through singing and working as a cultural representative for the Hmong.

commonly associate elaborate titles with their songs. Most of the singers and instrumentalists I recorded would pause after I requested a title and then tell me that their song was called *nkauj plees* (love song), or, in Vietnamese, *bài tình yêu*. This response summarised the theme or category of the song but gave no specific details about content. While love is the most common theme of Hmong secular songs, many other types of song are used in daily life. Furthermore, the songs tend to have layered meanings that shift depending on the social context (see, for example, section 2.3). Attempts to strictly delineate categories for this oral artform are problematic due to the diversity of contexts in which members of the Vietnamese-Hmong ethnic group live and use music. When I pressed my interlocutors on the subject of song categories they would begin to list daily activities such as falling in love, planting crops, drinking rice wine and herding the water-buffalo. After a while they would inevitably break down in laughter and shake their heads, saying “many, very many”.⁶⁹

In the Hmong language, the classifier for song and singer is *nkauj* and the classifier for traditional song, ballad or song style is *kwv txhiaj*. The verb *hais* (to sing, serenade) is associated with both of these terms. Most Hmong oral lore in Vietnam is in the *kwv txhiaj* style because Hmong popular music is a recent phenomenon (see chapter 6) and songs in a style similar to Euro-American pop (*nkauj tshiab*) are less commonly sung at home. In addition, the *kwv txhiaj* style of singing forms the basis of all Hmong traditional music. Gisa Jähnichen, who has conducted musicological research on Hmong *kwv txhiaj* in Laos, observes:

Very interesting is the general characteristic of generating absolutely individual melodic lines. In each example and in all the other recordings there was no one song with a

⁶⁹ See Graham (1938:32) for ten categories of *kwv txhiaj* which he noted among the Ch’uan Miao in China, Mottin (1980a:3-4) for an outline of twelve he encountered in Laos and Thailand and Catlin (1981:8) for a list of seventeen which she noted among the American-Hmong. At the end of his list, Mottin indicates the limitations of his categories by writing “and many more...” (1980a:4). While the use of Vietnamese and English as the principal mediums for my investigation certainly impacted the findings, it seems telling that Mottin’s decades of research with the Hmong in Southeast Asia did not result in a comprehensive set of song categories.

repetition of a single melodic line. Avoiding repetitions is therefore a remarkable sign of Hmong song melodies. (2006:210)

Agnew also noted “a marked lack of precision in the rhythm, and this leads to considerable difficulty in the recording of the songs” (1939:19). The melodies of *kwv txhiaj* are shaped according to the word tones of the Hmong language. While improvised or extemporised wordplay is one of the fundamental traits of *kwv txhiaj* songs (see section 2.2), singers should adhere to the *txwm* (rhyming couplets) at the beginning of phrases (see sections 2.3 and 2.4). Adjacent phrases tend to be of unequal length because they depend on the wordplay of the singer (see, for example, Figure 2.2). The scales employed by singers, although typically pentatonic or tetratonic, also tend to vary in pitch by region because they are based on linguistic dialects. Some song categories or themes in this traditional style include *nkauj plees* (love songs), *nkauj tsis sib tau* (peace songs), *nkauj txij nkawm* (engagement or marriage songs), *nkauj ua ntsuag* (orphans’ songs) and *nkauj ua nyab* (daughter-in-laws’ songs).⁷⁰ This chapter presents examples of three of these types of song and demonstrates how they are used as song titles in a general sense.

2.2 The Nine-Year-Old Bride

In Vietnamese-Hmong culture, arranged marriages continue to be one of the most common forms of union, although many Hmong say this practice is now changing. Before the wedding day, the two families meet to agree on compensation in the form of money, farm animals, clothes and jewellery such as silver coins from French colonial times or handmade necklaces (*xauv*). Kinship relationships in Hmong society are based on patrilineal descent. After marriage the bride moves into the groom’s house and becomes part of his family. Her family by birth must be compensated adequately for their loss. The amount depends on the woman’s

⁷⁰ These categories can also be referred to with the classifier *kwv txhiaj*.

standing in the community; if she is young, healthy and likely to bear many children the price could be as much as twenty million VNĐ (approximately £585) plus extras including large farm animals but if she has been married previously or has some other social handicap the bride price could be as low as one million VNĐ (£29) with a few small farm animals. When a wife moves to her husband's house she has to take on many new responsibilities including household chores such as cooking for her new extended family, cleaning the house and embroidering and washing clothes. The stresses of this transition period can be compounded by her unfamiliarity with the other people in the house and their lack of sympathy for her. For these reasons, and in contrast to most wedding cultures in Euro-America, typically, a Vietnamese-Hmong bride will be very upset on her wedding day.

When I interviewed Sùng Thị Mu (Figure 2.1), an elderly woman from Séo Mí Tỉ village, she chose to sing two songs for me: a daughter-in-law's song (*nkauj ua nyab*), which she learned at the time of her marriage, and a funeral song (*nkauj tuag*), which she dedicated to her late husband. Mu was born in the year of the pig, probably 1923, thus making her one of the oldest consultants who took part in this study. Before Mu was married she used to play *nplooj* very well and even claimed that she could play *qeej*, an instrument that is now considered only for men (see chapter 3). Her marriage was arranged by her parents and she had never met her husband before the wedding day. After she married she was too busy with her work as a housewife and a daughter-in-law to make time for playing music. Occasionally she would play when alone but her husband discouraged her from doing so because he did not understand why a woman would want to play music as it only took away from the time she could be doing more practical housework. By the time her children had grown up she had forgotten how to play and decided to give away her instruments.



Figure 2.1: Sùng Thị Mu watches herself singing on camcorder with the author, 16 June 2010.

Photograph by Bernhard Huber.

After the early challenges of her marriage Mu clearly grew to love her husband dearly. Her husband was a shaman who passed away over thirty years ago. When recalling him in conversation she had to hold back the tears. They had eleven boys and two girls together. Mu estimated her extended family comprised as many as three hundred people, and others who knew her in the area supported this claim. Aside from her social position as a widowed grandmother of an extensive family, Mu was important to the local community as an expert in herbal medicine—the skill of being able to “divide the spirits of herbal medicine” (*faib dab tshuaj*; Lee and Tapp 2010:29) tends to be part of the shaman’s skill set but this is not always the case.

Despite the strong bond of love between Mu and her husband which developed after years of marriage, in the days leading up to her wedding, when she was only nine years old, Mu said she was extremely sad. In order to raise her spirits and help her overcome the challenges she would face when she first moved into her husband's home, her grandmother by birth taught her a song about marriage. Mu said this song made her feel strong when she sang it and she wished to sing it for me so that it might be preserved for her children and grandchildren to learn.

Tav ntuj tas tav laus nas es yos,

Now I am old and have lived a long life,

*Kuv leej txheeb nus ntshaw luag tus nyuj
pwm i rov kaus laus,*

Long ago when I was very young my brother
needed a buffalo,

*Muab kuv qua plhuav lawm tej teb i kab kis
zaub nas,*

So I was used as dowry and had to travel far
to a place I had never been before,

*Kuv leej nam leej txiv yuav ntshaw luag tus
nyuj pwm i rov nkhaus raws,*

I married and my brother received the
animal in payment, it was very hard for me,

*Muab kuv qua plhuav tej teb i kab kis taws
ntuj teb,*

I had to go so far into the mountains to
gather firewood in this new place,

*Kuv de zaub tsis muaj zaub daus kub khaws
taw tsis muaj es laus,*

Sometimes walking through the snow, with
it up to my knees,

*Kuv kuv tau daus xib daus npu yaj yaws txij
qhov raws,*

And I had to get food for the pig, even
though the ground was frosted over,

Nes leej nam nes yem yos,

It was really difficult for me,

*Kuv tsis tau kev tseb maj tag kuv tseb maj
tag txuj kev deb.*

I had to go far to plant hemp but the land
was not good and had many stones and
rocks.

*Hmoob txwg Vaj laus tau kuv lub kwm maj
tag kawm kuv lub kawm maj tag daus deb.*

My mother and father sent me to marry very
far away and I carried a heavy bag on my
back and cried with sadness.

Excerpt from the lyrics of Sùng Thị Mu's *nkauj ua nyab* (Video Track 3).

The lyrics of the version sung by Mu have clearly changed significantly from the version her grandmother taught her. While Mu described her grandmother's version as though it was a form of social education or therapy, the version she sang for me might be best described with the metaphor of music as memoir as she recounted the hardships she endured after her marriage. Unfortunately there is no recording of her grandmother's rendition to make more conclusive statements about the nature of musical change as it pertains to this song.

After playing my recording of this song for other Hmong I was told that it was a song of great antiquity. Few had ever heard it before and many believed that she was probably the last person alive who knew it. Mu used many archaic words, making this an especially challenging song to transcribe and translate. The melodic and lyrical structures also contrast with those of other *kwv txhiaj* examples in this thesis through its recitative-like form. The lowest note on the “j” tone is frequently sounded early in the phrase and the last note of each phrase is often not the lowest note.

Hàng Thị Chau, a research assistant who helped me interview Sùng Thị Mu and subsequently transcribe and translate this song, thought I should not include the recording in my thesis because the form of the song “does not make sense”. As is evident when comparing this song to the transcribed lyrics in section 2.4, the rhyming couplets (*txwm*) are far more consistent in the latter version. Chau, who has lived in Vietnam her entire life, is explicitly aware of how Hmong culture has been portrayed as lacking in sophistication in the national media. To her, the inclusion of this song would reinforce those opinions because the form is imperfect and cannot compete with the fixed texts of Vietnamese songs she hears on TV. Instead, Chau thought I should use songs which had a set form and structure and were sung by professional Hmong pop stars from other countries such as the recordings that were available on YouTube (see chapter 6). Her wish for Hmong music to be represented by

structurally sound songs suggests a change in aesthetic taste that relates to fixed versions of the text and also demonstrates her own emphasis on the song lyrics rather than the singer and the social context.

By shifting the focus to the singer instead of the song, however, in much the same way as Warner (1994) does for the tellers of folktales, we can understand how *kwv txhiaj* songs are manipulated through time and space in a similar way to other folklore. Now, the “imperfections” can be reinterpreted as participatory discrepancies (Keil 1987) which highlight the personality behind each specific rendition of the song. At this particular time and place, Sùng Thị Mu’s emphasis on recounting an episode from her life through song, thereby applying the metaphor of music as memoir, takes precedence over the desire to adhere closely to the traditional song form.

In his collection of fifty-five Hmong songs gathered in Laos and Thailand Jean Mottin includes five examples of *nkauj ua nyab* (1980a:44-61). As long as the practices of arranged marriages and marriage at a relatively young age continue, this song style will maintain its relevance to the community and therefore be sustained as a tradition as it is in contemporary Vietnam. But as these cultural practices become less commonplace, as has already happened with the Hmong living in the United States for example, this song style becomes obsolete and merely functions as an historical record of past traditions.

This case study has demonstrated how Sùng Thị Mu’s experience of music and of one particular song has changed through her life. From her description of the version taught to her by her grandmother and her framing of the recorded rendition (Video Track 3), the metaphors of music as social education or therapy could be interpreted for the former and music as memoir summarises the essence of the latter version. For Sùng Thị Mu, then, singing this song makes sense of her life cycle and in this way her musical activities can be understood as a fundamental aspect of her lived experience.

2.3 The Horticultural Lover

This case study presents a song which is paired with two types of cycles: the agricultural cycle and the life cycle. The lives of most Vietnamese-Hmong are shaped by the agricultural calendar. Swidden cultivation is and has been for a long time the primary means of subsistence.⁷¹ Rice, corn, hemp and other crops must be planted at the appropriate times of the season. Neighbouring households help each other when planting so that each terraced field is planted at the most fertile time. The importance of this communal work and of knowledge about these practices has resulted in many musical activities relating to this way of life. The primary medium for sustaining knowledge about these local practices continues to be through folklore, including songs.

In June 2010, Giàng Thị Chi and I travelled to Sủ Pán village to visit the singer Giàng Thị Mu (born 1974; see also prelude 2). Mu was a neighbour and friend of Chi's whom I had met previously. When we arrived at her house that day the entire family was out planting rice in their fields. The older boys were guiding a water buffalo with a plough through the rice-paddies while the younger children were playing around and passively observing and learning from their elders. Mu's husband was sprinkling feed in the fields that had been ploughed while Mu was following behind and planting the rice stalks. Chi and I offered to help Mu planting the stalks while Mu entertained us by singing a song about planting rice which Chi found humorous (see Figure 2.2 and Video Track 4). I recorded five separate stanzas while in the fields with Mu. As with Sùng Thị Mu, Giàng Thị Mu's performance was extemporised and included long breaks between each section while she coordinated the workers.

This performance exemplifies some of the fundamental characteristics of the *kwv txhiaj* song style. As is typical of the style, Mu begins with a sustained upper tonic (Figure 2.2). On this note she pronounces "tab" ("but") which does not contribute to the meaning of

⁷¹ See Vương (2004) for a consideration of the tensions this practice can cause between the Hmong and the Vietnamese authorities and Corlin (2004) for problems relating to Hmong land rights in Vietnam.

the remainder of the phrase but is vital to the *kvv txhiaj* style because it forms a *txwm* with the second line, as the third and fourth lines also do. The transcription also illustrates how the tones of the Hmong language shape but do not necessarily fix the melodic line. Note how the “j” (high falling) and “m” (glottal restriction/low falling) tones appear when the melody is descending and the “v” (rising) tone tends to appear when the melody is rising. The “b” (high) tone tends to occur on higher notes while the “g” (breathy/mid-low) tone tends to occur in the middle of the scale. The “s” (low) tone also tends to appear around the middle of the scale in the transcribed section. While this last tone might seem out of place since one would not normally describe the E or G as “low”, in this context the absence of a low A on any strong half-beat of the melody, aside from the last note of the phrases each time, demonstrates how this bottom note is rarely used while the line is moving. The tendency to avoid consecutive repetition of the same melody notes and the use of a tetratonic scale challenge the singer to match the linguistic tones with the pitch tones while also singing lyrics which are comprehensible to the listener and fit into the *txwm* rhyming couplet structure.

♩ = c. 132

(Tag es) Es ntuj tag ncuav muag leej,

Tag es cag meb naam.

Noog es yuav coj tej yawb liv es seev ncoj,

Nrug qais yeev yuav coj.

Figure 2.2: A transcription of the first four phrases of Giàng Thị Mu's *nkauj cog nplej*.⁷²

In an essay on the “mental world of the unenlightened during the Enlightenment” (1984:9), the cultural historian Richard Darnton argues that “the great collections of folktales made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries... provide a rare opportunity to make contact with the illiterate masses who have disappeared into the past without leaving a trace” (1984:17-18). The fixity of the written collections he analyses belies the diversity of versions that would likely have been found within any one community or even told by one individual, as demonstrated in the previous section. Nevertheless, in showing how the worldviews of the peasants who told these tales were embedded in the stories themselves, Darnton is able to reconstruct their world, albeit fragmentarily. This approach takes the metaphor of fairy tale as social behaviour for granted.

⁷² This transcription is approximately one semitone higher than the actual pitch which Mu sings at in order to avoid the use of excessive accidentals.

Where the metaphor of singing as social behaviour is most prevalent, Hmong songs can similarly be used as a means of understanding Hmong worldviews. The lyrics of the first two lines of Figure 2.2 translate as: “Oh my darling we are planting late in the season, however the seeds should grow strong.” On its most basic level, the text of this song transmits knowledge about the importance of planting at the right time so that the crops will yield a good harvest. Musically, on this level it could also be categorised as a work song, functioning “as an extension of our bodies doing things in the world around us” (Gioia 2006:38). The steady pulse of the song accompanies the actions of the planters as one by one, tens of thousands of rice shoots are carefully placed in the muddy water of the rice-paddies.

One limitation of Darnton’s textual analysis is its lack of contextual details relating to the performance of the fairy tales. This is where the metaphors are generated and manipulated strategically by the skilled performer. A closer analysis of Giàng Thị Mu’s performance reveals layers of linguistic meaning which suggest that she is applying multiple metaphors in the one performance. Through wordplay she uses agricultural production as a metaphor for sexual reproduction. For example, the word “coj” has multiple meanings in the Hmong language such as to deliver, plant or take, or to suggest a change or transition, while it also forms part of the compound word “coj khaub ncaws” (“to menstruate”). In her singing, Mu takes advantage of the ambiguity of this and other words to communicate multiple linguistic meanings; in particular, the fertile ground could be interpreted as a fertile womb and the seeds or grain could also be referring to a man’s semen. Hence, Chi’s laughter while Mu was singing.

This alternative demonstrates how Giàng Thị Mu has maximised the impact of her performance through her capacity to communicate on multiple plains. For the location dimension of his model, Rice suggests the following nodes: individual, subcultural, local, regional, national, areal, diasporic, global and virtual (2003:161). Primarily, these nodes

relate to how individuals experience music socially rather than simply delineating the geographic locale in which those experiences took place. An alternative set of nodes are suggested by Giàng Thị Mu's singing which highlight the social aspect of the location dimension: communication with her children, with her fellow adults and, more intimately, with her husband. These nodes illustrate how multiple overlapping metaphors are being deployed in the same performance. With her children, the song text communicates knowledge about planting. For them, the metaphors of singing as education, as knowledge transfer and as work come to the fore. Her performance functions largely as entertainment and as an accompaniment to work for the older children and adults present. The admiration shown for her by those listeners, as evidenced by their tacit observation and occasional laughter, also helps position Mu socially as a respected adult in the community. Finally, with her husband, the song could also be considered as flirtation or foreplay.⁷³

The impact of Giàng Thị Mu's performance could be measured by the degree of success in her communication of these metaphors (music as education, knowledge transfer, social behaviour, work, entertainment or foreplay) to their intended audience. The hierarchy of these metaphors must be in perpetual negotiation by the performer according to the shifting time and place nodes. Ultimately, the impact depends on how well the performer understands and responds to these changing nodes. These layered metaphors illustrate the limitations of applying definitive song categories to *kwv txhiaj*. While this song is ostensibly about planting, it might also be called a love song or a work song, among other themes, depending on the interpretation of the listener.

This case study has illustrated some of the basic characteristics of the *kwv txhiaj* style and demonstrated how layers of ambiguous meaning in the lyrics can permit the application

⁷³ This is by no means a comprehensive list and only represents those metaphors that were most evident during the performance I observed. Rice's metaphor of music as social behaviour appears to dominate this list. Considering my position as outside observer, Mu might also have preferred to think of her performance as a representation of her family and of her love for her husband.

of multiple musical metaphors in one seemingly uncomplicated performance of a song. Giàng Thị Mu's ability as a singer provides a certain degree of social status through her ability to garner the tacit positive attention of multiple social groups simultaneously. Her singing motivates those around her to assist with planting rice through her ability to communicate on various levels to a diverse group of family and friends. In doing so, she forms a working community through song.

2.4 The Cultural Ambassador

While the first two case studies presented more typical types of *kwv txhiaj*, this case study considers a song which is associated with a comparatively new type of activity for many Vietnamese-Hmong people, going to school. This case demonstrates how *kwv txhiaj* songs can adapt to new forms of behaviour and activities. Furthermore, it shows how the meaning of a song can change for the singer as her performance locale shifts from local to regional, national, global and virtual.

I was introduced to Thảo Thị Sung through her son, Giàng A Sài (section 3.4). Unusually for a Hmong man, Sài studied for a university degree in Hanoi. He was teaching the basics of Hmong traditional music to friends of mine at the National Academy of Music when I met him. When I first visited their house on the outskirts of Sapa town, Sung's husband Giàng Seo Gà did most of the talking. Despite developing a close friendship with her son and making regular visits to their house, this social dynamic continued throughout my fieldwork; as with many other Asian societies, patriarchy is the dominant social system for the Vietnamese-Hmong. In Sung's house this hierarchy was exaggerated by Gà's professional position as director of the Sapa Cultural Centre (*Phó Giám đốc Trung tâm Văn hoá Sa Pa*). Led by Gà, their family frequently took part in cultural performances locally in Sapa, occasionally in the major urban centres of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and once in southern

China.⁷⁴ When Sung was not working as a cultural ambassador, she sold textiles in the local market. For this work she had to be proficient in both the Vietnamese and Hmong languages. However, in a documentary film in which Sung sings two songs and introduces one (*Nghệ Nhân Giàng Seo Gà: Phim Thuộc Dự Án Lưu Giữ, Bảo Tồn, Âm Nhạc Dân Gian Của Gia Đình Nghệ Nhân Giàng Seo Gà, Dân Tộc Mông, Sa Pa, Lào Cai* [*The Artist Giang Seo Ga: A Film to Collect and Preserve the Folk Music of the Artist Giang Seo Ga and his Family, in Sa Pa, Lao Cai*] 2004), she speaks in Hmong and her husband translates into Vietnamese. A similar performance of the patriarchal social structure was enacted when I requested to meet Sung for a formal interview and to record her singing.

By January 2011 I had given up trying to get to know Sung informally because the ingrained social structure made this too challenging. My preference was to converse with her in her home but Sài told me I had to request a formal interview via her husband. Gà invited me to his office in the Cultural Centre to talk with her. Ironically, the building could not have been more culturally sterile. In his office, the walls were painted plain cream with nothing hanging on them except moisture-damaged paint. An old computer on a desk in the corner was wrapped in plastic to avoid a similar fate. I sat chatting with Sung in Vietnamese while we waited for Gà to join us. As soon as he sat down she stopped speaking directly to me. Instead, she responded to my questions in Hmong and Gà translated into Vietnamese. When I requested it, Sung chose to sing a song which Gà translated as *bài đi học* (going to school song). Her rendition (Audio Track 3) was tempered and lacking in enthusiasm compared to other singers I had heard: the tempo was slower, the volume was lower and the song was shorter than any other I recorded. As is evident from the lyrics of this song, the theme and content also contrasted with the majority of songs I had recorded. This made me consider why she had chosen this particular song.

⁷⁴ As I departed the field they were preparing for another international performance tour to Laos.

Yuav am ntuj, teb ncu nes kwv tij, kwv viv luag niam, has am.

Hey everybody, brothers and sisters, family and friends, listen to this.

Yuav ca teb, li hnov phau ntawv xwb leej, tsaab zov qha peb li leej, has am.

This thing, this special book, we have to protect it and keep it dry, it will help us.

Peb yuav tsaws daim kev ntawv xws leej, tsaab rov rom ntej, es peb li rov ua tau lawv lub zoo neej, has am, yuav ca ntaj, teb li hnov phau ntawv xws leej, tsaab rov qha peb li tseeb.

We must carry this special book by our side, study diligently and learn from it, and then we will have a better life.

Peb yuav raws nraim kev ntawv xws leej, tsaab rov tom qaab peb li txoj, tau hlawn peb tej, caag kuv txiv keeb.

We will follow the path of these words carefully, or we won't improve our situation, we will not burn our land in the old way.

Yuav ca ntaaj, neeg xeev kuas tsheej, mus tau sawv es,

Hey everybody, to have a better life, to improve our situation,

Peb yuav kawm tau taab meem, tsaab es xws ntawv e.

We have to study, keep this book close and safe, and we will have a better life.

Yuav ca ntaaj, neeg xeev kuas tsheej, mus tau nce es,

Hey everybody, to have a better life, to improve our situation,

Peb yuav kawm tau zoo leej, tsaab kwm ntawv npe nes kwv tij, kws li los nej, has am.

We have to study and be honest good people, keep this book close and safe, and we will have a better life.

The complete lyrics of Sung's *nkauj kawm ntawv*.

According to Gà, this was one of the first songs which Sung learned. During my fieldwork she was in her early fifties and all of her children had reached adulthood, so it was unlikely that she had taught this song to any of them recently. Sàì's wife had had their first baby a few months previously and this might have been on her mind. The location dimension, however, suggests a more dominant metaphor. The Cultural Centre was not only her husband's place of work but also the space where ethnographic data on Hmong cultural practices were collated, regulated, and re-presented nationally. Due to her work as a cultural ambassador for the Hmong,⁷⁵ Sung would have been aware that any recording might be disseminated in the regional, national, global and virtual spheres. In that space and time,

⁷⁵ This is an informal title which I have attributed to her, Gà and Sàì.

Sung's roles as representative of her husband and family and, perhaps more prominently, of the Hmong people came to the fore. This metaphor of music as group identity supplanted the metaphors of music as social behaviour or education which is implied by the song lyrics.

Sung's choice of this song is related to how the Hmong are represented in the national media (see further chapters 1 and 7). Ethnic minority children in Vietnam from low-income families (this includes most Hmong children) are exempt from paying fees and receive financial aid and free school supplies to encourage their attendance at school (Truong 2009:10). Despite this, the Hmong continue to have disproportionately low attendance numbers and this has become a point of contention between them and the Viet majority.⁷⁶ The benefits of school attendance to the agricultural lives which most Hmong live are not immediately apparent. Furthermore, teaching is predominantly done through the Vietnamese language; in 2008, for example, there were reportedly only two teachers of the Hmong language working in Lào Cai province (Truong 2009:13).⁷⁷ Sung's choice of this song, therefore, can be interpreted as reflecting her sensitivity to these issues and her desire to change the national image of the Hmong with her cultural representations.

On a local level, Sung is encouraging Hmong participation in formal education; on a regional and national level, Sung is using her position as a cultural representative to portray the Hmong as a studious people who are using the education subsidies provided by the state to ethnic minority groups in a positive way. Finally, on the global and virtual levels, which are introduced by the presence of the researcher and the recording device, Sung ensures that she sings a song which perfectly fits the couplet style of *txwm kwv txhiaj*. This suggests her addition of the metaphor of music as art. This case demonstrates how movement along the

⁷⁶ A number of Viet people complained to me that the Hmong were lazy and that if their own children were given the same scholarships they would be much more diligent in attending school.

⁷⁷ To contextualise this statement, there were 146,147 Hmong people living in Lào Cai province in 2009 (http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=515&idmid=5&ItemID=10799, accessed 5 July 2011).

location access of Rice's model can drastically alter the intentions of and the metaphors which are applied by a singer or musician.

2.5 Conclusions: Why Hmong Women Sing

The question implied in the title of Seeger's book *Why Suyá Sing* (1987) continues to guide much ethnomusicological research and Rice's model provides a structured approach to finding answers to this question. The answers proposed in the final chapter of *Why Suyá Sing* could be summarised with the metaphor of singing as social behaviour and this chapter has also demonstrated how *kvv txhiaj* is first and foremost embodied in the metaphor of singing as a form of social behaviour. In his focus on the Suyá ethnic group, however, Seeger underemphasises the role of singing in positioning individuals in (or outside of) other types of social groups. In contrast, this chapter has illustrated how Hmong singing serves to position individuals in relation to many other social groups as well as to the Hmong themselves.

The case studies in this chapter have outlined how singing is used as a medium for social behaviour, and how this practice helps the Hmong make sense of their social lives. To begin with, Sùng Thị Mu's performance suggested that the lyrics of Hmong songs in Vietnam might be best understood as fluctuating rather than fixed texts. Songs are manipulated by performers in reaction to their social circumstances. In this way "singing is a site for the renegotiation of identities" (Sugarman 1997:24). Analysing Giàng Thị Mu's performance with Rice's model demonstrated that the skill of a performer depends on their successful manipulation of musical metaphors according to the time and place nodes which the singer was attempting to communicate across. This study also illustrated the limitations of applying song categories to *kvv txhiaj*. Finally, Thảo Thị Sung's school song represented a new version of *kvv txhiaj* where the use of a prescribed text limited the role of improvisation in her performance. This song might be representative of a future path for Hmong singing in

Vietnam, whereby written or at least standardised texts might become the norm, as appears to be occurring with Hmong in other countries.

For the Vietnamese-Hmong, the practice of singing is not only an “emblem of social identity” (Feld 1984:405); in performance it articulates and has the capacity to manipulate social identities. This chapter has illustrated how various forms of identity including gender, marital status, level of education, ethnicity, and age are communicated through the *kwv txhiaj* style of singing. This vibrant cultural practice is used as a medium for social interaction in rural Hmong communities of northern Vietnam by communicating and constructing ideas about their social world. *Kwv txhiaj* maintains its relevance—and therefore continues to be a sustainable traditional musical practice—to the Vietnamese-Hmong people through its ability to help them make sense of their daily lives.

Prelude 3 From Vocal to Instrumental Music

The first musical instrument associated with the Vietnamese-Hmong on which I learned the basic techniques from Giàng A Sàì was the *nplooj* (leaf). The best *nplooj* are thin and have a smooth, shiny surface; Hông cites the jackfruit plant as a good source of *nplooj* in Vietnam (1997:129). To play *nplooj* one must fold the leaf over once without breaking it and place it between one's lips with the folded end inside the mouth. Most of the leaf rests on the upper lip while only a small portion rests on the lower lip. Two hands are needed to keep either end of the leaf tightly stretched so that when the player exhales at a fast pace (*tshaub*) the part of the leaf resting on the lower lip vibrates—some of the most talented of players can play without using their hands at all. The pitch can then be altered through a combination of changing the airspeed, tightening or loosening the leaf with one's fingers and manipulating the oral cavity through moving the position of the tongue (see Video Track 5).

The sound of the *nplooj* is much more resonant than its close neighbour in Hmong traditional instrumental music, the *ncas* (mouth harp; see section 3.1). In romantic depictions of Hmong musical culture, these instruments tend to be described as functioning together in informal courting rituals:

Amidst the mountains and rice fields the Hmong use fresh leaves to send messages, usually love messages. Such high frequencies travel more easily than the human voice over great distances. The lie of the land permitting, these messages will be decoded with ease several hundred metres away. When a girl loves a boy but her parents wish her to marry another, this oral literature is very metaphoric and beautiful, and also very poignant.... Of course inquisitive ears can intercept such messages. But that's not possible with the more intimate jew's harp [*ncas*].... The jew's harp is an instrument associated with intimacy. It serves as an artificial voice or voice mask for spoken communication between courting couples. (*The Art of Attraction: Vietnam Hmong* 2003)

Kersalé's film, *The Art of Attraction: Vietnam Hmong*,⁷⁸ makes Hmong music palatable for a World Music audience by essentialising Hmong musical traditions as expressions of a pure love.⁷⁹ Hồng also observed that the *nplooj* was often used to express love, although he considered it primarily a woman's instrument (1997:129). During my fieldwork, however, I found the *nplooj* was more often used for personal entertainment by both sexes when working in the fields or guiding water buffalo, and only secondarily to communicate directly with another person, let alone to seduce a member of the opposite sex (see also Dương 2010:48). When one considers that the *nplooj* melodies are based on the *kvv txhiaj* style, the multitude of potential categories and contexts of musical renditions on the *nplooj* (see, for example, section 2.1) demonstrate that referring to this instrument as primarily a mediator of amorous relations is a gross simplification of the tradition.

This brief introduction to the *nplooj* in Vietnamese-Hmong culture is appropriately positioned as a transition from a chapter on women's vocal music to one on the male-dominated sphere of traditional instrumental music because unlike the other musical instruments associated with the Vietnamese-Hmong, *nplooj* and *ncas* are frequently played by both men and women. Chapter 3 provides an overview of Hmong instrumental music in Vietnam with three case studies of musicians. I argue that Hmong instrumental music is based on the *kvv txhiaj* style; the *nplooj* and *ncas* are among the best at imitating the *kvv txhiaj* style because they permit the player to reproduce the melodic line including the *portamenti* slides which are characteristic of the genre. The chapter also shows how the

⁷⁸ Kersalé later rereleased this film with the French title *Hmong... Musique et Chants du Séduction* (2009).

⁷⁹ In criticising how the World Music industry manipulates various types of authenticity as a marketing tool, Taylor writes that "all these authenticities have at bottom an assumption about an essential(ised), real, actual, essence.... The problem is that there are multiple subject positions available to anyone and multiple interpretations and constructions of those positions.... But the west, while it views its citizens as occupying many different subject positions, allows 'natives' only one, and it is whatever one the west wants at any particular moment. So constructions of 'natives' by music fans at the metropolises constantly demand that these 'natives' be premodern, untainted, and thus musically the same as they ever were" (1997:21).

polyphonic sounds of the *qeej* purposefully conceal melodic motifs and phrases from the ears of the living during animist mortuary rituals.

Chapter 3 Three Men and Their Instruments

This chapter complements the previous one by presenting three case studies of male musicians. In an attempt to resolve the issue of permeable boundaries between musical traditions Aubert writes, “the artist is the living incarnation of tradition” (2007:19). This chapter takes that statement as its basis by focusing on people who were considered by members of the Hmong community in Sapa district, Lào Cai province as living incarnations of their traditional instrumental musical culture. The chapter begins by providing an overview of the traditional musical instruments which are commonly associated with the Hmong ethnic group in Vietnam. As with chapter 2, case studies of the musical lives of three individuals then illustrate contrasting perspectives on the tradition. These viewpoints raise issues relating to the construction of and language associated with the musical instruments. The first two studies include different examples of animist Hmong mortuary ritual music (section 3.2 and 3.3); these provide insights into Hmong conceptions of the spiritual world and raise questions about the typical subdivisions of the Hmong community by scholars. The third case study focuses on one musician’s approach to innovating in the tradition (section 3.4).

3.1 Traditional Musical Instruments of the Vietnamese-Hmong

Ascribing musical instruments to specific groups of people is a notoriously problematic exercise, particularly when the group is as large and diverse as the Hmong in Vietnam. Hông attempted this in his study and identified seventeen instruments which were played by the Hmong in Hà Giang (1997:129-56); Dưong cites twelve instruments for the Hmong in Nghệ An province (2010:48-77). Aside from a lack of consensus relating to these instruments within the Vietnamese-Hmong community, the problem arises that many of the instruments listed could also be attributed to other ethnic groups including the Viet majority and probably

originated in China (see Figure 3.1). What makes these musical instruments unique to the Hmong?

<i>Hmong</i>	<i>Vietnamese</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>English</i>
nruas	trống	dagu (大鼓)	drum
txiab neeb	chũm chọe	xiaobo (小钹)	small cymbals or rattles
nruas neeb	cồng	luo (锣)	gong
ncas	đàn môi ⁸⁰	kouxian (口弦)	mouth harp
nkauj nog ncas ⁸¹	đàn nhị	erhu (二胡)	two-stringed fiddle
raj pum liv ⁸²	sáo trúc	dizi (笛子)	bamboo flute
raj nplaim	sáo mèo	bawu (巴乌)	free-reed flute
plhe le/xyu ⁸³	kèn	suona (唢呐)	double-reed horn

Figure 3.1: Some traditional musical instruments of the Hmong which are also found in the core Viet and Chinese musical traditions.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ While the Vietnamese term *đàn môi* implies a mouth harp which is associated with the Hmong, this term is also used and associated with other ethnic groups in Vietnam.

⁸¹ This instrument is often referred to as *xim xaus* in the Hmong transnational community.

⁸² Although I encountered Hmong musicians who played this instrument, they were few and far between in Lào Cai, possibly because of its association with Viet traditional music.

⁸³ Hồng names this instrument *pí lè* (1997:137) and although the Hmong I studied with in Lào Cai did not play it, some members of that community also used this term when I described the instrument to them—Đương (2010) did not encounter this instrument among the Hmong in Nghệ An. Conversely, Thảo, Phan and Phan translated *kèn* as *haov* or *shu* (1999:214). An entry for *pí lè* in the Vietnamese language version of Wikipedia defines it as a Thái word for the instrument and states that the Chăm, Giáy, Tày and Yao ethnic minorities in Vietnam also play a version of this instrument (http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C3%AD_1%C3%A8, accessed 29 August 2011). *Xi-u* is the correct Hmong term according to the Viện Âm Nhạc online catalogue of traditional musical instruments (http://www.vnmusicology-inst.vnn.vn/english/music_instument/airophone_Pi_Le.html, accessed 29 August 2011). I have used the Hmong RPA spellings provided by Heimbach (1979:274) in Figure 3.2 which resemble both of these terms. Giảng Dũng Sài in Hà Giang province was well-known for being able to play two of these instruments simultaneously; see the track “Song Tàu Xi U” (“Duet on Double-Reed Horns”) on the compilation *Độc Tàu Hòa Tàu: Nhạc Cụ Dân Gian Việt Nam 2 (Solo and Ensemble Performances: Vietnamese Traditional Musical Instruments 2)* (1999).

⁸⁴ Not all of the instruments listed are necessarily attributed to the Viet majority. For instance, *sáo mèo* literally means Hmong flute in Vietnamese. Though Hmong by name, this instrument in particular has been incorporated into the Vietnamese national musical heritage movement as a token representation of diversity under one flag (see further chapter 7).

The Hornbostel-Sachs system (1961) suggests differentiating instruments by focusing on the ways the sounds are produced and the instruments are constructed. Applying this method to some of these instruments merely demonstrates how similar they are: number 321.321 (necked bowl lutes) covers the *nkauj nog ncas*, *đàn nhị* and *erhu*; number 421.121.12 (side-blown flute with finger holes) includes *raj pum lev*, *sáo trúc* and *dizi*; and number 422.112 (double-reed instrument with conical bore) includes *plhe le/xyu*, *kèn* and *suona*. Further rendering this system unusable in this case are the terms *raj nplaim* and *sáo mèo*. These terms both refer to the Hmong reed flute and share the same Hornbostel-Sachs number. But, as the analyses in chapter 7 demonstrates, the music played on these instruments and the musicians' conceptions of them can differ significantly.

When I asked Hmong musicians about the sharing of certain instruments with the Viet majority, it soon became clear that this was not something that was consciously considered on a regular basis. Most replied by saying that that was just the way it was. After rephrasing the question, some responded by making claims about differences in construction and appearance of the instruments. Giàng A Sàì compared the Vietnamese *đàn nhị* and Hmong *nkauj nog ncas*: although they were both two-stringed fiddles which were played in a similar manner, the *nhị* tended to have very elaborate engravings whereas Sàì's homemade *nkauj nog ncas* had no artwork on the body of the instrument whatsoever.⁸⁵ A second way that similarly constructed instruments could be distinguished was by function, and this information could even be contained in the name of the instrument: the gongs which the shaman used were called *nruas neeb*, or, spirit drum (*nruas* = drum, *neeb* = spirit) and the shaman's rattles were called *txiab neeb*.

For me, the clearest distinguishing factor between the Hmong and Viet musical instruments was the musical styles played on them. Hmong traditional musicians

⁸⁵ This distinction is brought into question by the following American-Hmong instrument maker's website which offers elaborately decorated two-stringed fiddles that can have the sound board wrapped in snakeskin (<http://www.hmongviolin.com/PurchaseViolins.html>, accessed 11 March 2011).

predominantly played melodies based on the *kwv txhiaj* style, which is closely related to the Hmong language, while Viet traditional musicians tended to play melodies which are related to the Vietnamese language; Viet musicians would rarely play in the *kwv txhiaj* style unless they were fluent in the Hmong language. In addition to their contrasting musical styles, the social mores relating to these practices differ in a multitude of ways for Hmong and Viet musicians. While specific aspects of these musical styles and their associated social mores can help differentiate the two groups from each other, they also demonstrate a similar basis to their respective musical traditions. Nevertheless, differentiating the musical instruments of these two cultures did not seem significant to my research participants because there was no question that they might be similar. What was more important to them was gaining an understanding the roles of each of the instruments within the tradition.

The Hmong language provides a method of musical instrument classification within the realm of Hmong traditional music which associates particular verbs with playing techniques—the Vietnamese language also does this but the verb *đọc tấu* (to perform a solo on) can be used as a generic term for all Viet instruments. The Hmong verb which is used most often is *tshov* (to blow or play a musical instrument with finger holes). This can be associated with any wind instrument with finger holes such as the *qeej*, *raj nplaim*, *raj pum liv* and *raj plhe le*, and is sometimes paired with the *ncas* and *nplooj*. A more appropriate term for playing the *ncas* and *nplooj* is *tshaub* (to blow or expel out a constant stream of air) because the playing techniques of these two instruments differ significantly from the others; this verb can also be associated with the *qeej*. One can either *tshaub*, *tshov* or *tawg qeej*. *Tawg* means to dance, turn or spin and is used to indicate that the player is in motion when performing. The term *ntaus* (to hit, strike or beat) is used for beating drums. Finally, the term *tshiav* (to chafe or rub) functions in a similar way to the Vietnamese term *kéo* (to pull, tug or strain) through its use to describe the playing technique of bowing the two-stringed fiddle.

Another way of distinguishing the musical instruments within the tradition became apparent during discussions about instrument classification: by envisaging the instruments on a spectrum from those which are closest to singing to those which are more distantly associated with it. This approach resembles Kartomi’s suggestion of “downward logical division” (1990:25-31), a method of categorisation that “moves mainly by single-character steps from a more abstract to a more specific level” (ibid.:25). If we apply this model to Hmong instruments and the music played on them a hierarchy emerges which illustrates the position of these instruments in this musical culture (Figure 3.2).

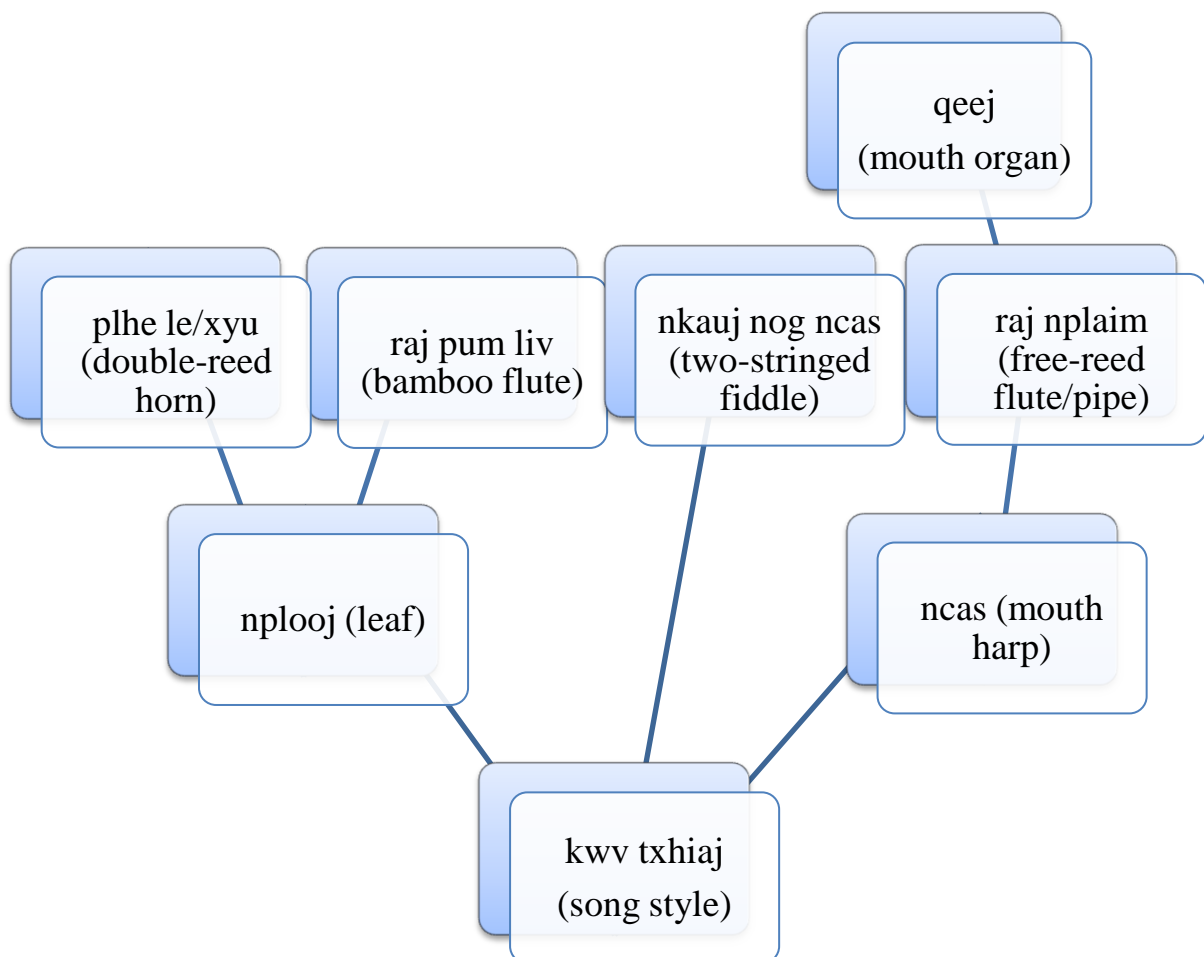


Figure 3.2: Partial outline of a conceptual diagram of Hmong traditional musical instruments based on Kartomi’s downward logical division.

Kwv txhiaj is at the base of this diagram because this song style forms the basis of traditional instrumental music. The *ncas* and *nplooj* are on the next level because they are one step removed from singing but differ from the more complexly constructed musical instruments. They are also separated from the next level because women are socially permitted to play them. The third level is defined by the ability of these instruments to play a monophonic melody line. Finally, the polyphonic *qeej* is on a level of its own because of the ability and tendency to play more abstract musical sounds on this instrument which initially sound unrelated to vocal melodies.⁸⁶ The *qeej* is linked with the *raj nplaim* and *ncas* because they use similar pieces of vibrating metal as reeds (see further section 3.1.1 and 3.2). Coincidentally, the physical sizes of the instruments on this diagram also tend to decrease on each subsequent descending level. This conceptual diagram does not comprise the entire gamut of Hmong traditional music because the musical activities of Hmong shamans are better understood as separate from these predominantly secular styles. The diagram is significant because it illustrates the connection between the *kwv txhiaj* singing style and other traditional musical activities, including playing and dancing *qeej*. This method of classification was the way I came to understand the different musical instruments of the Hmong but it was not verbalised by any of the research participants.

⁸⁶ See sections 3.2 and 3.3 for musical analyses which illustrate some of the hidden melodies in *qeej* music.

3.1.1 The Hmong Qeej



Figure 3.3: *Qeej* made by Sùng A Sinh with ornamental fabric added by Giàng A Sài.

The *qeej* is an interruptive aerophone with sets of free reeds, classified according to the Hornbostel-Sachs system as 412.132 along with the accordion and mouth organ. Although many similar instruments to the *qeej* can be found in Southeast Asia and China—the *qeej* is commonly referred to in China as *lusheng* (Jizeng 2001:451)—this instrument has become an icon of Hmong identity worldwide. For example, when the Smithsonian Folklife Festival wanted to feature a Hmong musician they invited the *qeej* player Boua Xou Mua (see liner notes to Mua 1996). Even when not being played, the physical form of the *qeej* functions as an identity marker. In Clint Eastwood’s blockbuster *Grand Torino* (2008), a *qeej* hangs on the wall of a Hmong family home to remind viewers of the occupants’ ethnic and cultural identity. Its importance in denoting Hmong identity is also evident in Vietnamese films. The 2000 film *Thung Lũng Hoàng Vắng* (*The Deserted Valley*) opens with a panorama of a

mountainous landscape. After waking, raising the Vietnamese flag in a rural Hmong village and ensuring all of the Hmong students are attending their Vietnamese language lessons, the Viet protagonist visits a local Hmong market where he passes by a young man playing *qeej* for a crowd of listeners. The musical sound is barely audible but the clip still manages to define the ethnic identity of the actors for an urban Vietnamese audience within the first few minutes of the film. Throughout the world, therefore, the *qeej* appears to be on par with Hmong textiles as a distinguishing icon of Hmong identity.

Most previous studies of *qeej* playing have focused on discussing or deciphering the lexical meanings of the music by relating them to the tones of the Hmong language. “If you want to know the true history and culture of the Hmong, then you should take it from the *qeej*” (Nhia Dang Kue quoted in Morrison 1998:16-7). However, this statement might not have been intended to be interpreted literally, particularly if “even the master players don’t always know the meaning of what the instrument speaks” (Morrison 1998:13). Catlin speculated that “the musical levels may represent archaic linguistic tones that have since been superseded” (1997b:79)—Ratliff’s recent study on the history of the Hmong language supports this claim (2010). In spite of this, Falk has gone through the funeral music with a *txiv qeej* and transliterated a text which represents one musician’s detailed explanation of its meaning (2004a and 2004b). She adds:

This encoded language... addresses an invisible audience of the dead soul, household spirits, ancestors, and the souls of sacrificed animals. Only this unseen audience possesses the protocols for unlocking the musical and linguistic code, thereby comprehending the meaning of the *qeej*’s sounds. (2004a:2)

An alternative reading is proposed by Hu Jiaxun who cites context as important to understanding: “tonal messages become assigned to the meaning—fused and consolidated gradually over the years” (1999:45). While the hidden language of the *qeej* is clearly vital to

the success of mortuary ritual performances in Vietnam (see further section 4.2.1), Hu Jiaxun's study raises the question of whether there are any extra-linguistic meanings in Vietnamese-Hmong performances on *qeej* being transmitted that make this music significant to those in the land of the living. This research attempts to redress the balance by shedding light on aspects of the music which have received less attention in the past but which the Hmong themselves hold in high regard.

The *qeej* is musically unique in Hmong culture most notably because of its polyphonic capabilities; all of the other melodic instruments which are commonly used by the Vietnamese-Hmong are monophonic. This distinction is highlighted by the lack of ensemble playing in Hmong traditional music: all traditional instrumental music is for solo melodic instruments, occasionally with the added accompaniment of untuned idiophones or membranophones depending on the context. *Qeej* music, however, is not an entirely separate form of musical activity. Rather, it could be situated at the opposite end to singing on a spectrum of Hmong traditional music. A closer analysis of two *qeej* performances can reveal why.

3.2 The Elderly Craftsman

By the time I first met him in 2010, Sùng A Sinh had retired from his proud position as a leader of the mortuary ritual music performances on *qeej* (*txiv qeej*) and one of the best *qeej* makers in the area. In a curious career move, he had gone from playing and making the instrument which was most closely associated with death to crafting symbols of love and life as a silversmith; the necklaces he made were given to babies or young children to ward away malevolent spirits (Symonds 2004:19-20) and his earrings and other jewellery could be given as dowry payments before marriage. His skill at crafting musical instruments was widely

known even though he no longer produced them and many locals in Sủ Pán still considered him the first person I should speak to about the *qeej*.

Sinh was born in the year of the dog and did not know for certain when this was. Although he ostentatiously claimed to be more than a hundred years old, I suspect he might have been born in 1934 or 1922. His father had taught him how to make *qeej* when Sinh was young. After he died, Sinh paid a local *txiv qeej* five pieces of silver⁸⁷ for lessons on how to play the mortuary ritual musics. This financial investment was repaid many times over thanks to his work as a *txiv qeej*. Perhaps in place of the children he and his wife never had, his role as a craftsman and *txiv qeej* in the village would have given him a respected social status. As Gisa Jähnichen has noted, “the invitation to play for a funeral in the village is comparable with the entrance into the semi-professional guild and a public distinction” (2008:187). Sinh estimated at the height of his output he would have produced twenty to twenty-five *qeej* per year as well as many *ncas* and *raj nplaim*.

By 2010 Sinh no longer had the energy to make instruments for a living and would only play a supporting role at funerals. It seems that demand had also dipped for his renowned instruments—Thào A Sáng (born 1984) and Thào A Páo (born 1982), two brothers from Tả Giàng Phìn village (approximately twenty-four kilometres northwest of Sapa town) claimed to be producing up to two hundred and fifty instruments per year between them and most players in the district said they had purchased their instruments from them. However, Sinh was still far more experienced than those two *qeej* makers and he had much knowledge to contribute relating to the *qeej*. The language he used to describe the *qeej*, from construction techniques to the names of the different pipes (and notes), reveals some important insights into the meanings of this sacred instrument and its music.

⁸⁷ The monetary value of silver coins is variable. An alternative way of understanding their value is through their exchange in marriage dowries. Typically, only a couple of silver coins will be offered in addition to some other pieces of jewellery, animals and money. Therefore, Sinh’s payment of five silver coins seems like a significant amount.

The *qeej* consists of six bamboo pipes called *ntiv*⁸⁸—the word *ntiv* also refers to a digit such as a finger or toe or something finger-like (Heimbach 1979:188)—which protrude from a hollowed out mahogany wind chamber (*taub qeej*) with a blowing tube (*ncauj qeej*). Five of the *ntiv* have one *nplaim* (metal reed) each and the smallest has two.⁸⁹ Sinh criticised some makers who tried to cut costs by omitting this vital second *nplaim* on the top *ntiv*. Thào A Sáng and Thào A Páo explained that the *nplaim* for the *qeej* they made for use in mortuary rituals was made from an expensive metallic compound of soft bronze, hard bronze and silver, whereas cheaper metal was used for *qeej* which were sold for secular use. The importance of this subtle difference was highlighted by the cost: 100,000VNĐ (approximately £2.90) for a secular *qeej* and 400,000VNĐ (approximately £11.60) for a sacred *qeej*. Instruments for secular contexts could also be decorated with textiles or pieces of silk which would be visually impressive when the player performs a spinning dance. Sinh did not produce instruments specifically for secular use so he did not make these distinctions.

⁸⁸ See Schwörer-Kohl (1990b) for an examination of how this concept relates to the *qeej* and Hmong musical form.

⁸⁹ When reading the musical transcriptions of *qeej* playing in this chapter one should bear in mind that the top note is always doubled. Hồng also noted a penchant for doubling the highest pipe in Hà Giang (1997:143). In northern Thailand, *ntiv luav* can have three reeds (Schwörer-Kohl 1990b:71-2).



Figure 3.4: Sinh measures the mahogany leadpipe of a *qeej*.

Tuning was done by ear but the leadpipe was measured with a metal rod (see Figure 3.4). Sinh associated the names of each of the notes with their perceived power starting with the loudest and highest pitch, *ntiv luav*. *Luav* translates as “donkey” and the double-reed and wide bore on this *ntiv* makes a loud high-pitched sound which could be associated with this animal. The names of the rest of the pipes also relate onomatopoeically to sounds in the agricultural environment in which this instrument is played. In the order which Sinh called

them out, the rest of the pipes are as follows: *ntiv tis* (feather), *ntiv nas npua* (pig-like rodent), *ntiv nib npua*,⁹⁰ *ntiv las* (to marinate; to castrate a male pig; to weed), *ntiv rwg* (the sound of a bird flying). Some of these terms resemble those cited by Morrison (1998) and Falk⁹¹ but while the naming system appears to have been standardised in Australia and the United States, names of the *ntiv* varied by location in Vietnam; Schwörer-Kohl provides the most comprehensive survey of these names, yet they still differ from those used by Sinh except for the principal pitch, *ntiv luav* (1990b:70-2). The pitches correspond to a one-octave pentatonic scale, which starts from the fourth degree of a major pentatonic scale. The notes in descending order are approximately as follows: E' (*ntiv luav*), C# (*ntiv tis*), B (*ntiv las*), A (*ntiv rwg*), F# (*ntiv nib npua*) and E (*ntiv nas npua*) (see Figure 3.5).

Associating these words with extramusical sounds provides some interesting results. Taking the harmonic series into account, the lower E is aurally most closely related to the upper E and they are both nominally the only two animals. The dominant (B) comes next in the aural hierarchy as it splits through the octaves while it also happens to be associated with an aggressive physical action in the Hmong language. The second highest note (C#) is significantly weaker than the highest due to its use of a single reed and its distance from the fundamental frequency on the harmonic series; this note seems appropriately termed the feather. The role of the A is more variable because it can be used melodically as a tonic or a subdominant; hence, this note is associated with the sound of a bird flying.⁹²

⁹⁰ I could not find a direct translation for this term in any dictionary.

⁹¹ <http://www.hmongnet.org/hmong-au/qeej.htm>, accessed 8 October 2008.

⁹² These extramusical associations were not described at length by Sinh. I have developed these connections through dictionary research and extensive musical analysis. Nevertheless, it appears that further research on the language used by Vietnamese-Hmong musicians in relation to the *qeej* and other traditional musical instruments would likely be a rich area for study, as Schwörer-Kohl has shown in northern Thailand, due to the proliferation of polysemous words in the Hmong language. The lack of consistency in musical terminology can provide insights into the ways individual musicians think about their musical instruments and the music they play on them.

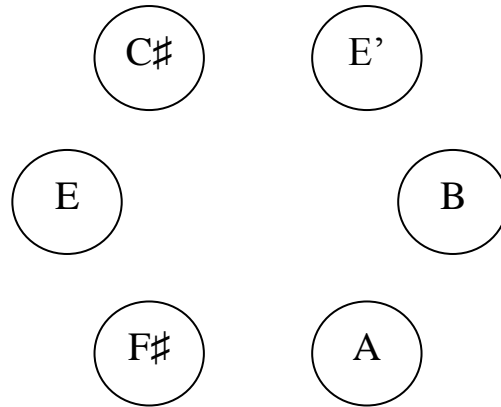


Figure 3.5: Order of the notes of the *qeej* from the player’s perspective (the player’s right thumb is positioned on the C# pipe and left thumb on the E’ pipe).⁹³

Qeej can sound on both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. This enables the player to play continuously without stopping for air. As a result, *qeej* music can sound rather monotonous on first hearing—this is also due to its limited range of notes and the frequency with which more than one of these are played simultaneously. When these features are combined with the slow spinning dance, a movement which creates a wave-like audio effect, and performed in an animist ritual context accompanied by a slow beating drum and with additional stimulants such as the aroma of incense, the consumption of alcohol and the buzz of social interactions, *qeej* musical sounds form one of the fundamental components of Hmong mortuary rituals. While previous studies have focused on linguistic elements of the music, repeated hearings reveal an underlying structure that can also be musically analysed. The different sections of the music are disguised with a series of improvisational techniques so that only those in the other world and the most skilled of *txiv qeej* can comprehend.

A closer analysis of Sinh’s performance of the funeral music piece *qeej tu siav* (song of expiring life) illustrates a musical form that has hitherto not been analysed in studies of

⁹³ These note names roughly correspond to the pitches of Sinh’s own *qeej* and the *qeej* he made for me (see Figure 3.3).

qeej music (Video Track 6). The music begins with sustained chords which give the effect of a wall of sound. With the exception of the middle parts, which occasionally move in parallel fourths (i.e. F# and B to E and A or vice versa), most of the changes do not occur concurrently. This results in a series of endless suspensions which makes it difficult to locate harmonic and melodic progressions. A triple metre is set up with short melodic motifs (Figure 3.6) but a continuous pulse is not firmly established until 1'40" when fragments of a melodic line in compound quadruple metre can be heard above the sustained notes. From 2'14" the intensity builds quickly: the top E is held and the bottom octave occasionally adds to the volume while the middle parts become increasingly active. At 2'30" the octaves are released and a melody becomes more obvious, but the sustained pitches and the lack of direction in the melody continue to conceal the musical direction. Eventually, at 2'48" a clearly defined melodic statement emerges for two bars (Figure 3.7). Almost as soon as the melody is sounded, though, the music retreats to the previous melody and then back into the obscurity of sustained chords.



Figure 3.6: Some of the short melodic motifs which Sinh played in the A section of his *qeej tu siav*.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ As Catherine Falk observed, recording *qeej* players in the funeral context is extremely challenging because background sounds and activities tend to drown out the sound of the *qeej* (2004a:4). To add to this, the funeral participants might be unused to a foreigner with a recording device. Their curiosity combined with lowered inhibitions due to the consumption of alcohol at funerals made it extremely challenging for me to record at these events. Consequently, the transcriptions of *qeej* playing here are taken from recordings at the musicians' homes outside of the mortuary ritual contexts.



Figure 3.7: The melody of the C section as played at 4'38".

As is widely agreed by scholars of Hmong music, the *qeej* funeral music is metaphoric for calling the soul from the deceased body and guiding it along the way to the other world. While Falk (2004a and 2004b) and Hùng (2005) have transcribed extensive texts for *qeej tu siav* which illuminate the path to the other world, the musical sound itself might also be interpreted as outlining this path. During Sinh's six-minute performance the music peaks with a two-bar melody (Figure 3.7) at four points, beginning at 2'48", 3'22", 4'38", and 5'10". Transition melodies come before and after each repetition of the peak phrase. The musically ambiguous opening returns between the second and third peaks and again at the conclusion. This form can be summarised as A-B-C-B-C-B-A-B-C-B-C-B-A. If we consider the deeply meaningful metaphors that are in place during this performance, one might interpret the sections as follows: A represents the ambiguous other world, B is the transition or bridge passage and C is the land of the living where singing and melodies are found. Another interpretation might be that the melody at Figure 3.7 is the path to the other world while the surrounding musical sounds are intended to disguise this from the funeral participants. However, I was unable to confirm whether either of these interpretations were shared by my Hmong interlocutors.

The primary means by which a *txiv qeej* masks the hidden melodies and motifs in the musical sound is by exploiting the playing techniques and sounds of the instrument. In being able to play without a break for air, the beginning and ending of melodies and motifs are not clearly marked by breaths. The ability to play multiple notes simultaneously and the inability to emphasise any one note above another while doing this mean that prioritising notes is

extremely difficult for listeners. *Txiv qeej* add to the confusion by sustaining notes even though their role in the melodies and motifs has passed. When the melody is in the upper three or four notes sometimes one or both of the bottom notes will be sustained, and when the lower parts are moving the top parts can be held. Furthermore, when the top E is not covered, the *qeej* emits a dud or fake note which adds to the ambiguity of the soundworld.

Ornamentation on the *qeej* is more limited than on other Hmong instruments because pitches cannot be bent. Instead, players take advantage of the polyphonic capabilities of the instrument by adding upper grace notes. In the third beat of bar 2 of Figure 3.7, the C# is held throughout while the semi-quaver E' embellishes the line.⁹⁵ Lower mordents are also added but the first note has to be released for the lower note to be recognised (see, for example, the anacrusis in Figure 3.7). The term "ornament" is somewhat misleading in this context because these shorter notes are vital to suggesting motifs, especially in the thicker textured sections. As with other Hmong wind instruments, the tongue is not used to articulate notes. Consequently, these grace notes also serve to emphasise the pulse and meter of the music. In addition, the changing direction of the breath has the effect of changing bowing direction on a stringed instrument by breaking the musical phrase. This is particularly marked on the *qeej* because the pitch differs slightly between sounds on the inhalation and the exhalation.

This analysis of Sinh's version of *qeej tu siav* has outlined the basic techniques and musical structures of *qeej* playing. This section has also illustrated some of the language associated with the *qeej* and shown how one person has made a living out of making musical instruments. A brief analysis of the musical form has suggested that further research on the relationship between the musical sound structure and its associated lexical meanings would enhance our knowledge of how the Hmong construct their conceptions of the passage of the soul during mortuary rituals.

⁹⁵ A similar form of ornamentation is used on *raj nplaim* but as the player cannot sustain more than one note simultaneously on the *raj nplaim* the main note is released briefly when the grace note is sounded.

3.3 The Established Master

As outlined in the introduction to the thesis, the Hmong are commonly divided into subgroups according to the colour and style of traditional clothes worn by the women. This simplistic division according to one cultural trait ignores a great deal of variety within and across these subgroups. These variations are particularly pronounced in the more intangible cultural traits such as language, folklore and music. An analysis and comparison of the *qeej tu siav* of another Black Hmong *txiv qeej* who lives in a nearby village to Sinh can illustrate why family and locality are more important than the subgroup classifications that are typically used in scholarly writings on the Vietnamese-Hmong. In addition, this case study considers the claim of the previous example that Hmong *qeej* music includes carefully structured melodic lines which can be partially identified by funeral participants, thereby making the musical sounds significant for them too, and which connect *qeej* music to the rest of Hmong traditional music.

First, a distinction must be made between clan lineage (*xeem*) and immediate family. Clan lineage presumes that cultural traditions will be passed down by patrilineal descent according to family name (for example Giàng, Thào, Sùng, Lỳ). While the immediate family has the greatest influence on a child, people outside of the family can also be employed to enhance their education. One of Sinh's favourite students from the past was a man named Giàng A Tho. Although they did not share the same clan lineage, they lived within walking distance of each other. Tho could have learned how to make *qeej* from another Giàng clan member outside of his immediate family but chose to study with Sinh. Neither felt it important to maintain the clan lineage and Sinh was happy to reveal his secrets for a price. This suggests that locality takes precedence over clan lineage with regard to *qeej* making skills, while immediate family education dominate both.

At the time of my fieldwork, Giàng A Minh (Figure 3.8) was the most respected *txiv qeej* in Tả Phìn village. Born in 1958, Minh had lived in the same house for his entire life. He was an only son so he decided he wanted to have a large family himself. Just as he had learned from his father as a teenager, Minh was teaching three of his eight boys how to play *qeej*. This passing of traditional practices from generation to generation within one family is one of the main ways Vietnamese-Hmong traditions are sustained. Supplementary to this is the practice of learning from other experts in the area, as the other two case studies in this chapter demonstrate. Although Minh lived in the same district as Sinh, their paths would not have crossed often because they were not related to each other and neither would have had a reason to undertake the arduous eighteen-kilometre trek across a mountain to get to the other's village.



Figure 3.8: Giàng A Minh poses with his wife outside their home in Tả Phìn.

As with most of the players in the area, Minh had purchased his *qeej* from the two brothers Sáng and Páo in Tả Giàng Phìn. His *qeej* was tuned to a similar pentatonic scale as Sinh's. The tuning was slightly lower than concert pitch whereas Sinh's was marginally higher. On the first day that I recorded him playing, Minh had a problem with one of his *nplaim*. Unable to fix it, he borrowed one of his sons' *qeej* to perform for me. The sound of the fake note, which is heard when *ntiv lauv* is not covered, was particularly loud on this instrument and it adds an extra audio cover to the already veiled textures (Video Track 7).

Considering the importance of the hidden poetic meanings of the *qeej tu siav*, it was surprising that Sinh and Minh's versions of this piece differed so significantly. One of the most obvious differences was the metre. Minh played in simple duple time while Sinh played in compound quadruple time. Sinh's compound quadruple metre was more challenging because it gave him less flexibility to improvise but his slower tempo of 58-63 bpm would have helped with this. Sinh's use of triple time might have contributed a dance-like aesthetic quality in the ritual context, although he did not explicitly articulate this to me. In contrast Minh's duple meter, played at 64-69 bpm, flows nicely at his quicker pace and might contribute a more trance-like feel similar to the persistent beating of the shaman's gong or the binary stepping motion and sounds of the gong and bell players in front of the altar (see section 4.1.1) through its invocation of a rhythmic pendulum.

Structurally, where Sinh's funeral music moved from an ambiguous section through a lengthy transition section to a short peak melody and back again, Minh's performance is more focused on a movement between two clear melodies (see Figures 3.9 and 3.10) with transition passages that combine elements of both. Minh does not play either melody without accompaniment, as Sinh does with the peak melody. Instead, both melodies are consistently concealed in a web of harmonic movement. In starting his first melody on the *ntiv lauv* (high

F) and repeatedly returning to this note, however, this melody stands out more than the second because of the doubled *nplaim*.

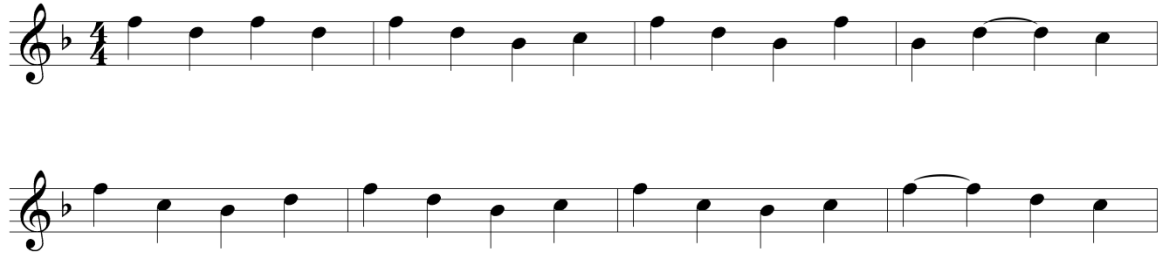


Figure 3.9: Excerpt from the first melody of Minh's *qeej tu siav* as played at 4'26".

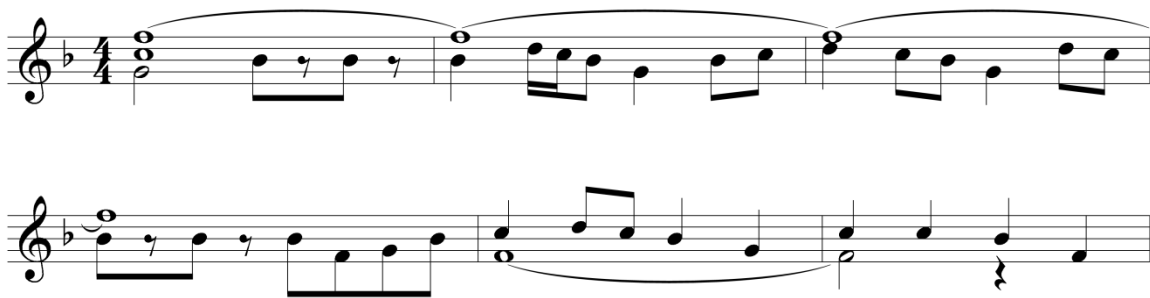


Figure 3.10: Excerpt from the second melody of Minh's *qeej tu siav* as played at 5'22".

On a couple of occasions Minh appeared to stumble in his performance and had to add an extra beat to resolve the musical phrase. He also occasionally extended the bar length from four beats to a vague ten beats before returning to the clearly marked four-beat bars. This technique produced the effect of a rhythmic tension and release which added to the musical interest of Minh's *qeej tu siav*. When performed at a funeral, these vague sections probably allow the musicians space to focus on the movement of their feet and distract other participants from the musical directions to the soul of the deceased.

The vastly differing styles of playing *qeej tu siav* between two Black Hmong *txiv qeej* suggests that familial and regional styles might have greater significance than any divisions

according to clothing style or clan lineage. Giàng A Trinh, an unrelated friend of Minh's who also lived in Tả Phìn played in a similar style to Minh (see prelude 5), thus further emphasising the relationship between musical style and geographic proximity; the pitch of his instrument was also quite similar, due to both of them having purchased their instruments from the same makers. As Hmong in the Global North are becoming increasingly integrated with their respective nation-states they are adopting more prescriptive learning tools for maintaining their traditional culture. This is reflected in the use of written scripts for learning *qeej tu siav*.⁹⁶ The Vietnamese-Hmong, in contrast, rely almost entirely on oral/aural transmission. These two case studies suggest much variation exists within the Vietnamese-Hmong *qeej* playing community and further studies can contribute to a better understanding of this diverse culture. These case studies also demonstrate how the *qeej* is musically related, in addition to through its use and physical construction, with the rest of Hmong traditional music by positioning it at one extreme on a scale of downward logical division of Hmong traditional music with *kwv txhiaj* at the opposite end (Figure 3.2).

3.4 The Young Innovator

The two previous case studies have focused on the physical construction and the music of the *qeej* at the expense of describing the accompanying dance. While Falk argues for the “inseparability of choreographed movement and playing the *qeej*” (2004c:127), most of the older performers I recorded chose to play while seated. In doing so they performed a hierarchy of musical sound over dance which I have adhered to in my analyses. This important distinction is marked in language too: one either blows *qeej* (*tshov* or *tshuab qeej*) or dances *qeej* (*taug qeej*).⁹⁷ During mortuary rituals the dance of a *qeej* player is limited to a slow circular stepping movement and sometimes includes moving under the drum which

⁹⁶ See, for example, http://www.hmongnet.org/music/_qts_for_web.pdf, accessed 19 August 2011.

⁹⁷ The Hmong translate these into Vietnamese as *thổi khèn* and *múa khèn* respectively.

hangs in the centre of the room from a thick bamboo pole (see Video Tracks 11 and 12). The function of this movement is the same as that of the music, to guide the soul of the deceased to the other world. After guiding the soul in one direction, the *txiv qeej* then retraces his steps so that his soul is not mistakenly brought to the other world too (see section 4.2.1).

Despite Sinh and other elder *txiv qeej* deploring a lack of young and talented *qeej* players in the community, there appear to be many enthusiastic young men playing *qeej* in Vietnam. The most noticeable difference between the younger and older performers is that the younger ones tend to emphasise dance movements whereas the older men give preference to the musical sound. Some younger players have compensated for their lack of musical skill by performing elaborate acrobatic dances which their elders are unable to replicate and which are never performed during mortuary rituals. These dances demonstrate great agility and strength which is one reason for the association of this instrument with courting. In Vietnam, *qeej* playing outside of the mortuary ritual context appears to take place at any type of social gathering.⁹⁸ Secular *qeej* performance is widely considered to be of a competitive nature and can be used in courting rituals. This music and dance also comprises a constitutive component of Hmong adult male identity.

The documentary produced by the Viện Âm Nhạc which was referred to in the previous chapter (*Nghệ Nhân Giàng Seo Gà* 2004) concludes with a demonstration of *taug qeej* (Figure 3.11). Curiously for a documentary compiled by a musicological association, the musical sound is largely indistinguishable as the players' overlapping sounds drown each other out. The most audible sound is a wave-like effect created by the players as they spin around in circles. Three of the seven players are all in their teens to early twenties and none of them would be qualified to play at mortuary rituals yet because *txiv qeej* are typically much older than that. These players perform more elaborate dance moves than the four elder

⁹⁸ In other parts of the world secular *qeej* playing is associated with the New Year celebrations—on 18 August 2011 a search for “*qeej* New Year” on YouTube produced 131 hits and most of these were based in the US—and with wedding ceremonies (Thao 2006).

players in the background. The seven are watched by an audience predominantly comprised of Hmong women. The choice of these players, the choreography and the staging demonstrate how the Hmong, in collaboration with the Viện Âm Nhạc documentary producers, prefer to present their most sacred musical instrument to the outside world. The Hmong (at least, those who contributed to the production decisions for this film) show how proud they are of the division of social roles according to sex and age. The choice of a staged secular context is also significant because it suggests that these Hmong prefer to present the entertainment side of *qeej* playing to the outside world while they keep the more sensitive sacred music for themselves.



Figure 3.11: A screenshot from the Viện Âm Nhạc documentary which shows a group of Hmong men dancing *qeej*.

Falk divides the role of the *qeej* into private and public lives, where private is for a Hmong-specific audience, predominantly during mortuary rituals, and public is for everyone: “the *qeej* is used in its public role as a decoy, a ‘double-agent,’ diverting the gaze of others from its fundamentally secret life in funeral ritual” (2004c:125). Considering how misunderstood their culture tends to be in the Vietnamese media, it makes sense that they would want to hide their more sensitive and sacred cultural heritage from the general public. Another interpretation could be to view the public role of the *qeej* as a way of making *qeej* performances more accessible to Hmong and non-Hmong who might be less interested in the sacred side. Adopting Rice’s approach, the division could also be summarised metaphorically: in its private life *qeej* performance is ritual and in its public life *qeej* performance is entertainment, or ethnic and/or sexual identity.

Thao considers the public life of the *qeej* to be a modern formation which threatens the traditional private life of the *qeej* (2006:252). As demonstrated in the previous case studies, even certain elements of the *qeej* ritual music are purposely concealed from those in the land of the living, including the Hmong. Rather than being used as a “decoy” in its public life, the emphasis is shifted from shrouded musical and linguistic meanings to entertaining choreography because this is more accessible to Hmong and non-Hmong audiences. For the players themselves, the dances are more enjoyable because they are of a less serious nature. This encourages them to practice and play more. Far from being a threat to the private life of the *qeej* in Vietnam, the diversity of contexts in which the *qeej* is performed appears to ensure its long-term sustainability in Vietnamese-Hmong culture.

Giàng A Sài, born in 1983, was one of the young acrobats who performed on the *Viện Âm Nhạc* documentary. Sài was the second son of Giàng Seo Gà and Thảo Thị Sung (section 2.4) and was being groomed by his father as a cultural representative of the Hmong in Vietnam. Sài’s position in the Hmong social world is interesting because his case suggests a

double consciousness (Du Bois 1897; Gilroy 1993) whereby he struggles with the hybrid nature of his Vietnamese and Hmong identities. Like his father, Sàì was employed at the Sapa Cultural Centre where he was charged with the stewardship of state-organised cultural events in the locality. These events coincide with national celebrations and serve to reinforce the national consciousness among the ethnic minorities (see, for example, section 6.3). While his work for the Cultural Centre has the effect of delegitimising his “Hmongness” by accentuating his association with the Vietnamese state, Sàì uses traditional music as one way of reasserting his ethnic identity, albeit within the confines of state-sanctioned performances.

In 2011, seven years after the documentary was produced, Sàì admitted to me that he was still learning *qeej* and had not yet qualified as a *txiv qeej*. During my fieldwork he was taking private lessons from two renowned *txiv qeej* in the Sapa district. Sàì was also a capable *nkauj nog ncas* and *raj nplaim* player (see Video Tracks 8 and 7 respectively). He performed both instruments on the Viện Âm Nhạc documentary and had since been invited to perform in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. During our many meetings Sàì preferred to talk about these instruments rather than *qeej* because he did not consider himself qualified enough to discuss the work of a *txiv qeej*; typically, he would defer to his father on questions concerning the *qeej*.

In 2004 Sàì played a simple love song on the *nkauj nog ncas* fiddle (see Figure 3.12). The melody is in the traditional *kwv txhiaj* style. Based on a tetratonic scale with a limited range (an octave), Sàì uses minimal ornamentation throughout in comparison to his later performances. The most defining trait of this *nkauj plees* is in the irregular phrase lengths, which demonstrates the relationship between this instrumental performance and the songs discussed in chapter 2. Although the editor cut the beginning of the recording, Sàì would probably have begun this rendition by sustaining the top note, as he does in the *raj nplaim* excerpt. Alternative note heads are used to indicate that the slide from the C has not stopped

on a definite pitch. Another stylistic note is that in the paired semiquavers from G to A the G tends to be the shorter of the two notes each time.

Sài introduces his performance in Vietnamese by first saying that without his father he would never have learned how to play music—this filial piety was ever-present during my fieldwork as Sài would have to ask his father’s permission to make any trips with me. He describes the *nkauj nog ncas* as being “used as a medium for conversation between two people, used to find a girlfriend, or used when going to a girlfriend’s house... to call her, and when she hears the sound of my *nkauj nog ncas* then we can chat”. Similarly, the *raj nplaim* is introduced as a way of expressing affection (*tình cảm*). The individualistic sound of one’s playing—*tiếng sáo* translates literally as “the language/voice of the flute”—remains identifiable even after being apart from a loved one for a long time. Here, Sài is describing the musical sound as a personal identification mark. It functions as a surrogate voice for communicating sensitive information which he would prefer not to speak; if his advances are not reciprocated he can avoid embarrassment by claiming that the coded messages were misinterpreted. In this way playing the *nkauj nog ncas* fiddle is used as a medium for social behaviour.

In 2010 Sài performed at a major event in the Sapa town square at which local Hmong and a troupe of Laotian-Hmong alternated performances of Hmong songs, dances and instrumental music (see section 6.3; Video Track 8). In the programme, Sài’s piece was labelled *tam tấu* (trio) because he was playing three instruments simultaneously: *nkauj nog ncas*, *nplooj* and a homemade foot drum (*nraus*). On rare occasions the more talented performers play *nkauj nog ncas* and *nplooj* simultaneously. Sài had already mastered this skill and demonstrated his wish to enhance the tradition further with the addition of a foot drum which is not normally considered part of Hmong traditional music.

This performance is interesting to compare with his recording six years previously because it shows how Sàì has modified the traditional *kwv txhiaj* form. On the 2004 recording, the solo *nkauj nog ncas* is in one key with a steady tempo throughout except for pauses at the ends of phrases, as is typical of songs in the *kwv txhiaj* style. His trio performance, in contrast, is divided into four sections which are marked by tempo, pitch and ensemble changes. First, a unison rendition of the melody is played on both melodic instruments accompanied by a steady drum beat of approximately 132 bpm. Then the pitch is adjusted twice during a *nplooj* solo and the tempo reaches 153 bpm. The third section is for solo *nkauj nog ncas*. Here the tempo slows to 118 bpm and the pitch is lowered by a semitone. Sàì's orchestration causes problems as he struggles to balance the intonation while at the same time coordinating the foot-drum with the other parts. Not until the fourth section, with the tempo at 162 bpm, does Sàì appear to be in control of the ensemble. Adding a metronomic drum beat to the melody sounds awkward too because the pauses at the end of each phrase are typically held for slightly longer than the regular pulse. Nevertheless the audience, comprising Hmong, Viet and foreign tourists, all seemed to react favourably to the novelty of Sàì's performance experiment.



Figure 3.12: An excerpt from Sàì's 2004 recording on *nkauj nog ncas*.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ The pitch of this transcription is a semitone higher than the pitch of the recording.

Giàng A Sàì's focus on the less complex instruments was typical for a young aspiring musician who would hope to qualify as a *txiv qeej* in the future. Through the process of learning these monophonic instruments, a player familiarises him- or herself with the melodic patterns which are fundamental to Hmong traditional music. For the few women who play them—I encountered no women in Vietnam who played any instrument aside from *nplooj* and *ncas*—these instruments serve to compliment their knowledge of *kwv txhiaj*; for the men, they can serve as a replacement for singing and often function as a preliminary step towards becoming a *txiv qeej*. Sàì's reluctance to discuss the *qeej* also demonstrated a filial piety that is at the heart of Hmong musical life. Even if he could learn *qeej tu siav* it seems unlikely that Sàì would be socially permitted to qualify as a *txiv qeej* until he reaches a more mature age.

But these monophonic instruments are not just used as stepping stones to becoming a *txiv qeej*. Sàì represents a new generation of Hmong traditional musicians who are seeking to develop a career based on presentational performances of these musics. Through his attempts to initiate new trends Sàì has demonstrated a willingness to develop the tradition that should contribute to its sustainability. In addition, on many occasions he told me about his wish to set up a music club in Sapa that would bring all of the best players and teachers in the region together. This would help sustain the tradition by responding to the demands of the changing cultural and socioeconomic environment. By taking advantage of the opportunities for presentational performances of Hmong traditional music, the metaphors of music as entertainment, music as identity, and perhaps even music as art are beginning to emerge for some of the younger players in the tradition.

3.5 Why Hmong Men Play

For Hmong men, as for the women in the previous chapter, music is primarily a way of performing or behaving socially. Women do not tend to play instruments because that is the

domain of masculinity and men do not tend to sing as often and freely as women do because that is considered feminine. The association of masculinity with certain musical instruments is accentuated by the phallic shape of the most taboo instrument for women to play, the *qeej*. In expressing themselves musically on instruments that are one step removed from the physical self, Hmong men are able to displace the attention of listeners directly from the player to the musical instrument. This removed expression is no less significant than singing. But it allows the player more freedom to express himself emotionally in a way that appears detached from the self and therefore less likely to cause personal embarrassment. As Sài pointed out, the instruments act as surrogate voices for the men. The unique sound of each player is recognisable to loved ones and thus becomes part of that person's social identity.

The performance of musical instruments also provides men with a platform for displaying their refined techniques; this might be compared to the way women show off their skills as embroiderers during the New Year (see section 4.2) in addition to their own singing skills. The instruments require much talent and dedication of the players to master them and the recognition of these skills by the community provides the player with social status: Sinh had no children but was able to be recognised as an important figure in the community through his work as an instrument maker and *txiv qeej*; Minh had no siblings so he decided to have a large family and educated many of his sons in *qeej* performance; and Sài was able to compensate for his work for the Vietnamese authorities by musically performing and therefore accentuating his Hmong ethnic identity.

In addition to the metaphors of music as social identity, music as a means of achieving or a mark of social position and music as means of subsistence, the analyses of Sinh and Minh's playing have demonstrated how music is also a form of knowledge transmission, especially with regard to animist ritual practices and conceptions of the other world. While Sài explained his performance on the *Viện Âm Nhạc* documentary as a means

of communicating with a lover, section 3.4 has suggested that music for him could also be understood variously as social behaviour, entertainment, art and as a means of expressing ones ethnic or sexual identity.

Each of the case studies in this chapter represents just one set of perspectives on Hmong instrumental music in Vietnam. The first two cases demonstrated how *qeej* music might be linked with other forms of Hmong instrumental music through an analysis of the musical sound. Then, Sài's case highlighted some of the changing contexts in which younger players are now performing music. Using the terminology of Rice's musical metaphors, these three cases have demonstrated that there is much more to Hmong traditional instrumental music than simply funeral music and music as a means of communicating between lovers.

Prelude 4 Inviting the Ancestors to Feast

On a misty morning in early February 2010, I travelled to Hàu Thảo village to celebrate the Lunar New Year (*xyoo tshiab*) in Giàng Seo Gà and Thảo Thị Sung's house. Their celebration was being held a week early because the family had a cultural performance scheduled in Hồ Chí Minh City during the New Year festivities. One of the first to arrive, I was just in time for the ritual pig killing. After the New Year pig (*npua tsiab*) had been butchered and then boiled, barbequed and sautéed depending on the part of the animal, a small table was set up in the main room of the house. Two bowls were placed on the table, one with rice and the other with pork, accompanied by a cup of rice wine. Giàng Seo Gà then sat down at the table and began to perform a ritual chant of inviting the ancestors to feast (Video Track 9).¹⁰⁰



Figure 4.1: Giàng Seo Gà invites his ancestors to eat and drink before the New Year feast at the family home in Hàu Thảo village, 9 February 2010.

¹⁰⁰ This ritual can also be referred to as *laig dab* although my interlocutors in Vietnam preferred to reserve that term for the offering made at funerals (Lee and Tapp 2010:180-1; see also section 4.2.1).

This ritual precedes the main meal on major feast days throughout the year. Its function is to invite the ancestors of the family to the table to join in the merriment and festivities. The ritual is usually performed by the head of the household (typically, the oldest man); in a shaman's house, it can be performed by the shaman, whether male or female. Before the singing commences bowls of rice and pork¹⁰¹ and a cup of rice wine are placed on the table in front of the chanter. During breaks between verses the chanter offers this food and drink to the ancestors by placing the food in a heap on the table and pouring the rice wine across the ground. These actions are a symbolic offering to the souls of the ancestors, who are responsible for looking after those in the house. The words of the chant are unique to each house because they are recited to named ancestors of the family as an invitation to come and feast at the table. The main times of the lunar calendar on which this ritual is performed include the Lunar New Year and the first days of harvesting and eating new rice (*noj nplej tshiab*). It is also performed during major non-calendrical rituals such as weddings and funerals depending on household preferences.

In paying respect to the ancestors, the performer is subtly reinforcing Hmong traditional social organisation by demonstrating filial piety to previous generations. In most homes the ritual rarely lasts more than a few minutes but I recorded one version that went on for forty-five minutes. In its cultural context, the ritual always precedes a feast of some sort; in the culturally removed context of this thesis, a description of this practice is used as a prelude to a chapter on animist rituals and ritual musics to demonstrate the importance of the spirits to animist Hmong households.

¹⁰¹ Each time I was present during one of these rituals pig meat was used. Reportedly, Hmong in other countries also use chicken meat (see Lee and Tapp 2010:180).

Chapter 4 Ritual Music, Animism and Shamanism

This chapter shifts the focus from the perspectives of individuals in the Vietnamese-Hmong community to describing and analysing how social groups are brought together during animist rituals. Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1977), this chapter attempts to uncover the unconscious social structures which shape and are shaped by participants' musical practices during ritual performances in order to better understand the power of musicking together. Habitus are shared histories of dispositions that "enable practices to be objectively harmonized without any intentional calculation or conscious reference to a norm" (ibid.:80). These systems of homogenising dispositions permit liminal periods of *communitas* during rituals which impact the sacred and secular social structures (Turner 1969:94-7). Chapters 2 and 3 outlined a number of individual perspectives on traditional musical practices whereas this chapter attempts to show how communities are maintained through musical activities during sacred rituals.

Since the 1980s, as many as one third of the Hmong in Vietnam have converted to Evangelical Protestantism (Ngô 2010:233); a number of Vietnamese-Hmong have also converted to Catholicism. While I found Christian hymns in the Hmong language of interest and certainly worthy of more comprehensive study, I elected to primarily focus on the music associated with animism because many of the Hmong I interacted with tended to come from an animist background and the remaining shamans and animist Hmong were concerned about the sustainability of these practices. The personal relationships I developed permitted me greater access to animist ritual music than to Christian musicking and I was invited to record and take part in the New Year rituals of one shaman, which she said had been previously conducted behind closed doors. In addition, animist practices are considered to be of great antiquity while Christianity is a relatively recent phenomenon among the Vietnamese-

Hmong. Since this part of the thesis is focused on Hmong traditional musical practices, the newness of Christian Hmong musicking is postponed until Part III (see section 6.4).

During the year, shamans regularly conduct rituals that involve much musical activity, such as the *ua neeb kho* (shamanistic healing ritual). Also, the heads of households frequently invite their ancestors to the table through chant before a celebratory feast (see prelude 4). However, two of the most notable rituals for the Vietnamese-Hmong are those associated with the Lunar New Year and with funerals. The New Year rituals comprise the majority of the Hmong shaman's repertoire of sounds while the rituals associated with death and the afterlife involve all adult participants in a variety of musical activities. This chapter examines both practices in an attempt to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between music and ritual in the lives of the Vietnamese-Hmong. First, a case study of the New Year rituals conducted by one shaman demonstrates how this annual celebration renews social ties between family and close friends. Then, a second case study demonstrates how communal ritual mourning, which is mediated by ritualised musical activities, enables the group to formally acknowledge the death and reorganise the social hierarchy in response to the loss of a group member. Both studies consider how ritual music and dance performances function as participatory practices which form and inform the group.

4.1 The New Year Rituals

Hmong and Viet people have many New Year customs in common. Both groups spend a great deal of time preparing for the celebrations, making or buying new clothes, cleaning the house and stocking up on food and drink. The first day of the Vietnamese New Year (*Tết nguyên đán*) is spent at home worshipping the ancestral spirits (*cúng gia tiên*), the second day is for celebrating with friends and neighbours and the third day is spent outside celebrating

with the rest of the villagers or people in the local area. This custom is encapsulated neatly in the popular Vietnamese parable:

*Mông một chơi nhà,
Mông hai chơi ngõ,
Mông ba chơi đình.*

On the first day play in the house,
On the second day play in the alley,
On the third day play in the community centre.¹⁰²

As with the Hmong, this is not a prescriptive calendar of events but merely a rough guide to the proceedings. While these and other shared New Year customs are important to note, the specific processes and beliefs related to them can differ considerably. For example, another trait common to both the Viet and the Hmong is the practice of burning paper. For the Viet, the paper items which they burn are being sent directly to their ancestors, so they purchase elaborate paper models that they believe their ancestors will need such as clothes, food, women and even iPhones! For the Hmong, the paper itself is visually less ornate but the related practices and beliefs are just as complex.

Vietnamese-Hmong New Year coincides with the Vietnamese New Year, usually falling sometime between late January and mid-February on the Gregorian calendar. In northern Vietnam this time of year tends to mark the end of winter and the beginning of spring. This transition was particularly striking to me during the final phase of my fieldwork in early 2011. After months of record low temperatures, which caused the premature death of many water buffalo in the area, and dense cloud cover that limited visibility to only a few metres at its worst, the clouds finally cleared on the second day of the New Year to reveal a brilliant sunshine that would remain until I departed Sapa a week later. This seasonal change and its effect on agricultural practices is the most obvious reason for the Hmong to place such

¹⁰² *Đình làng*, shortened to *đình* in this *câu ca dao* (parable), translates as “communal house in the village” (www.vdict.com, accessed 20 September 2011). *Đình làng* in Vietnamese towns and villages are places of communal worship and social gathering points for the people. For the purposes of Euro-American readers “community centre” is probably a more equivalent term.

an emphasis on their New Year celebrations. Nevertheless, the continuation of the celebration of Hmong cultural practices associated with the New Year when extracted from the agricultural context in the US, albeit in modified format, is evidence that nature is not the only reason for celebration. This is also a time when people come together to cultivate social ties; family and friendship ties are reaffirmed through communal celebration, and social connections, including courtship interests, can be developed.¹⁰³

In the valley below Sapa town the anticipation and excitement ahead of the New Year celebrations is palpable. Women stay at home, busily embroidering clothes for their family members to wear during the celebrations and tidying the house in anticipation of visitors. After the first day of the New Year, a day of rest when the whole family stays at home, the paths and roads are covered with young boys and girls who are out showing off their new clothes and enticing the opposite sex. In Vietnamese-Hmong culture, the skill of embroidering clothes is a highly attractive asset for women to have and this time of year enables them to publicly display their best efforts. Within a few months it will be marriage season so the boys and girls who are of age have to look their best in the hope that they will find a match.

While the women are at home working, the men have to go out and gather a healthy stock of firewood, food and drink for the house in advance of the celebrations. This can take weeks of preparation. Acquiring food and drink during the celebratory period is extremely difficult because most local shops close and deliveries are not made until a few days into the New Year. Goods can sell for up to three times their normal price before the New Year due to high demand and an annual practice of raising the price at this time of year in Vietnam. However, gathering wood can be the most arduous task for the men because some have to trek miles into the forest to cut the wood. Then they have to carry it back, basket by basket,

¹⁰³ Yang (1992) has also emphasised the social importance of the New Year celebration for the Hmong.

and ensure that there is plenty for the entire holiday period. The fires in the house tend to burn throughout the day during winter so much wood is needed at this time.

During the last few weeks of the old year, a new sound is introduced to the rural soundscape where the Vietnamese-Hmong reside. Normally, one only hears the sounds of the natural environment, a meandering river, a light breeze or rainfall and farm animals such as pigs, water buffalo, dogs, chickens and other birds; these are occasionally supplemented by manmade sounds such as the drip of the water supply, the crackle of burning wood on a fire, or the buzz of a small 100cc motorbike passing by in the distance. Since the late 1990s, when the electrification of these rural areas began, a new array of manmade sounds has been added which include televisions, mobile phones and electric sewing machines. In general, none of these sounds travel great distances, with the possible exception of motorised vehicles. When new or irregular sounds are introduced to the environment people notice and can be emotionally affected depending on the associated meanings. Two humanly produced sounds resonate throughout the valley and form part of the habitus of the New Year rituals and celebrations by acting as indexical signs (Turino 1999:234) for them:¹⁰⁴ the beating of the *nruas neeb* gongs (see section 4.1.1)¹⁰⁵ and the cries of squealing pigs which echo throughout the valley in the days leading up to the New Year.¹⁰⁶

The pigs seem to have a remarkable instinct for the threat they are under and begin squealing at a painfully loud volume as soon as they sense this danger. New Year pigs (*npua tsiab*) are customarily sacrificed by the Hmong, offered to the ancestral spirits for New Year and then served as the main dishes during the feast. It can take three or four young men to corner a pig, depending on its size. Since the pig must be sacrificed in front of the household

¹⁰⁴ Feld has elaborated on this idea: “the environment is like a tuning fork, providing well-known signals that mark and coordinate daily life” (1984:394).

¹⁰⁵ Schwörer-Kohl notes that the best-quality bronze gongs have “a good sound, that can be heard from a far distance” (1995:243).

¹⁰⁶ The funeral drum is also of a loud enough volume to act as an indexical sign of the funeral ritual for those in the vicinity who are familiar with this practice (see section 4.2.1).

altar (*thaj neeb*) on a bench facing the main door, and the blood has to be carefully gathered in a basin to make a traditional dish of raw pig's blood, the intense squealing can go on for up to half an hour as the men wrestle the animal to the ground and tie its feet and mouth. Meanwhile, the women prepare the two fires for cooking and occasionally take breaks to laugh at their struggling husbands. As soon as the pig is dead its carcass is carried into the kitchen, shaved and butchered with no parts being wasted.

While I did not find these sacrifices particularly enjoyable, the energy and excitement of those involved was infectious. Within a couple of hours my thoughts of becoming a vegetarian were inevitably dispelled as the house filled with the aroma of various types of boiled, barbequed and sautéed pig meat. After experiencing the sound of squealing pigs which filled the valley in early 2010 and 2011 I began to associate this sound with the building anticipation ahead of the party. For the Hmong, this aural shift in the soundscape is similar to the sound of church bells ringing in some European towns.¹⁰⁷ Both of these humanly produced sounds (the pig would not be squealing were it not for the human threat posed) are iconic of a particular time of the day, week or year, of impending rituals and often of post-ritual social gatherings. This sound is integral to the soundscape and habitus of the New Year and acts as a signifier for the entire event.

Much has been written on the courting songs that are sung outside Vietnam during the Hmong New Year ball-games called *pov pob* (see Catlin [1992] for American-Hmong; Jähnichen [2006] for Laotian-Hmong; and Lee and Tapp [2010:175-77] for the transnational Hmong community). During my fieldwork I did not encounter an instance of this practice as it has been described in the literature.¹⁰⁸ The games I encountered were more commonly

¹⁰⁷ Steven Feld has recently proposed the term “acoustemology” for this form of aural analysis. During his keynote speech at the BFE Annual Conference in 2010, Feld began to address how sounding bells have an effect upon the rural soundscape (see further 1990 and <http://www.acousticecology.org/writings/echomuseecology.html>, accessed 11 March 2011).

¹⁰⁸ The only versions of this game I encountered were staged for the enjoyment of an audience and these did not involve any courting or extensive singing (see section 6.3). However, I saw video documentation of this practice

accompanied by contemporary Vietnamese dance and pop music recordings and frequent repetitions of the Abba hit “Happy New Year.” However, I did manage to have a unique experience of spending an extended period of time with a shaman and her family as they changed the paper on their altar for the New Year. This important ceremony has received limited attention in scholarly publications. Thus, I will attempt to give a detailed analysis of proceedings and the role of music in them here.

4.1.1 Changing the Paper Altar and Soul Calling

Animist Hmong typically maintain a small altar (*thaj neeb*) on the back wall of the main room of their house; Christian Hmong in Vietnam have modified this practice by placing a cross or multiple crosses and prayers or other religious texts on this wall instead. The altar is dedicated to the spirits who protect the household (*dab xwm kab*; Tapp 1989:63; Vương 2005:95). In Vietnam, the altar tends to comprise a carefully constructed paper background, an oil candle, an incense bowl and other offerings such as rice wine and food. In the house of a shaman, a much larger and more elaborate spirit worship altar is erected next to the household altar (see Figure 4.2). Every year these altars must be renewed in a ritual practice that involves changing all of the coloured paper which hangs from the bamboo frames of the altar (Video Track 10).

Giàng Thị Say, the first shaman who invited me to record this ceremony, informed me that in the past the ceremony was a private affair and no visitors were permitted in the house while it was taking place. Due to cultural changes that are taking place in the valley, she wanted to ensure that the tradition was documented for future generations of Hmong. In telling me this I suspect that she was not only referring to the encroaching tourist trade and its effects on Hmong culture but also to the spread of Evangelical Christianity among Hmong in

at the Viện Âm Nhạc and the VICAS in other areas of Vietnam, though it was unclear whether both sets of footage had been staged at the request of the researchers or not.

the region which she frequently referred to in other conversations (see further section 6.4). Most of my firsthand experience of these ceremonies is due to the generosity of Say and her family. The following description and analysis is primarily based on the way she conducted proceedings during the New Year in 2010 and 2011.

Say's version of the ceremony can be divided into two main parts. The first part takes place shortly before the New Year, usually sometime between the twenty-eighth and thirtieth days of the twelfth lunar month, and involves taking the old paper down and pasting up the new altar. Following this process, the New Year parties begin. People visit friends and family to feast on pig meat, rice and rice wine. During these few days dancing takes place in the shaman's house, in front of the altar to worship the spirits. On the first day of the New Year no work is done and people stay at home. This day of rest often ends up including the second day due to the quantity of rice wine that is typically consumed. A few days into the New Year, roughly between the second and fifth days of the first lunar month, the second part of the ceremony is held. This part focuses on making predictions for the New Year and burning the old paper. After the ceremony concludes the parties continue. They gradually begin to wind down as the drinking stamina of the participants wanes and work calls.

The paper in question on both the household and shaman's altars typically comprises a small silver, gold or yellow square in the centre of a red rectangular piece of paper which is in turn framed by a larger white paper background. Some households choose to omit the red paper or just stagger the different combinations of paper (Figure 4.2). Similar papers are hung above doorways and crossbeams elsewhere in the house in honour of specific spirit deities and these also have to be renewed every year. In addition to the paper rectangles, the shaman's altar has a detailed pastoral landscape depicted from cut-out pieces of paper. According to my informants, the specific features of this scene come to the shaman in a dream from which it must be recreated. Nevertheless, I found there was much similarity

between the altars of the different shamans I visited. All were made from paper and depicted animals that were typical of the region including ducks, chickens, roosters, fish, water buffalos, horses and birds. Multiple suns were positioned above the animals. Say told me that this represented the transition of the day from dawn to dusk, with the central sun symbolising midday. The sun on the extreme right was the morning sun and the sun on the extreme left was the evening sun—these points corresponded with the actual movement of the sun (I was facing northwards when I took the photograph in Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2: Giàng Thị Say communicates with the spirits after changing the spirit altar (centre) and the household altar (top right) at her home in Sừ Pán, 17 February 2010.

In Thailand, Symonds (2004:14-16) found that a bowl of water and symbolic pieces of string were run from the altar to the central post of the house and from the central post to the main doorway. Tapp, writing about the Hmong in China, adds that the altar

is believed to represent Siv Yis' grotto near the top of a supernatural mountain, above a pool near which grows the flower of immortality. This pool is represented by a bowl of water placed upon the altar. From the altar run several cotton threads which are attached to the central housepost and it is along these threads that the *neeb* travel when they visit the altar of the shaman, or when at the New Year they return to their home with Siv Yis for a few days of rest. (1989:63)

In Vietnam, I did not come across this stringed pathway, the symbolic bowl of water, or even the *ntaj neeb* (shaman's sword) which has been widely reported for the Hmong in other countries. Nevertheless, Tapp's description of the meaning of the rural scene and both Tapp's and Symonds's descriptions of the movement of the spirits and the shaman appear to be consistent with the beliefs of the Hmong I worked with.

In 2011 Say and her husband, Vàng A Chủng, decided that the twenty-ninth day of the twelfth month would be the best time for them to change the altar. In advance of this, much time was spent cutting out the shapes of all the animals to paste onto the new altar. On the morning of the twenty-ninth day Say conducted a short ceremony to inform the spirits of the change. The old altar was then torn down and the new one carefully pasted up using a sticky compound of ground rice flour and boiling water. Their eldest son had learned this skill from his father and he helped out too. Much care was taken to ensure that the animals were symmetrically positioned with an equal number of each type on either side and with all of them facing the central sun. The different styles of rectangular paper were staggered, with no two adjacent pieces of the same style. Ideally, the shaman communicates with the spirits in a ritual trance as soon as the altar is completed. However, in 2011 the altar took longer to

finish than usual and everyone was tired so the remainder of the ceremony was postponed until the next morning.

After breakfast the next day, the last day of the old year, a bowl of ash was positioned underneath the altar and incense sticks were lit and placed on the altar. Say began the ritual by beating the *nruas neeb* (spirit drum), one of two gongs that are used only for shamanistic rituals to call the spirits.¹⁰⁹ While beating the *nruas neeb* she sang a long single tone with flutter-tongued sound “brrr...” before embarking on a ritual chant.¹¹⁰ Next she took the *kuam* divination horns¹¹¹ and a piece of incense from the altar. She circled around the horns with the incense while calling on the spirits in a chant and then threw the horns to the ground to find out if they heard her. This process was repeated until a satisfactory response was received. Next, she got down on one knee in the middle of the room facing the altar. She held a chicken under her arm and chanted to inform the spirits of the impending sacrifice.

After she had finished this opening ritual, her assistants prepared two chickens for sacrifice. For this they used a white chicken for the left side of the altar (when facing the altar) and a black (Silkie) chicken for the right side. Before their sacrifice the feet of the chickens were washed and then dried over the fire. One by one, the chickens were brought forward to the altar and their throats were slit by one of the assistants while another gathered the blood in a small bowl. After the chicken stopped moving, Say ripped small bunches of feathers from it, dipped them in the bloody throat of the animal and then stuck them to the altar in strategic locations; in another house I visited they did this while the chickens were still alive. Following this step, the chickens were taken away to be completely defeathered

¹⁰⁹ Huang and Sumrongthong, who conducted their research in Thailand, write that the *nruas neeb* amplifies the shaman’s power by representing “spiritual strength through its penetrating, reverberating sound. It also serves to protect the shaman from evil spirits, like a shield” (2004:40).

¹¹⁰ The only other written account of this introduction I have encountered notates the opening sound as repeated falling glissandi as opposed to a monotone (Schwörer-Kohl 1995:251). Schwörer-Kohl notes that this sound is iconic of a rider encouraging her horse at the start of a journey (1995:247 fn.2).

¹¹¹ *Kuam* in Vietnam are most often made from the ends of water buffalo horns.

and boiled while the shaman heated her paper mask over the fire in preparation for the next step.

The *rooj neeb* (shaman's bench)—also referred to as *nees* (horse) as a way of verbalising the journey which the shaman undertakes when in a trance (Tapp 1989:73-4)—was positioned in front of the altar. A small pile of paper was placed in the middle of the room and Say took the *kuam* and *nruas neeb* over to it to announce that the paper would be burned as an offering; later, when she was in a trance, one of her assistants would set fire to this paper for her. When this process was complete, Say returned to the altar and carefully placed the *kuam* on either side of the *rooj neeb*. She took the bowl of chicken blood and began to sing in front of the altar. Every so often she sipped the fresh chicken blood from the bowl, stamped her foot and sprayed it from her mouth in a spitting motion while wailing “shrrr-she-ugh” repeatedly. Then, after a brief period of beating the *nruas neeb* and singing, she was ready to go into a ritual trance and start communication with the guardian spirits in the other world (*ua neeb*).

Say sat on the *rooj neeb* with the *txwb neeb* (spirit bells) in her lap—these are oversized rings that have been hollowed out and filled with small metal pieces that make a bell-like sound when rattled. For about fifteen minutes she beat the *nruas neeb* in a constant pulse, bounced her feet up and down as if riding a horse (this causes the *txwb neeb* to sound) and sang, all simultaneously. Then she placed the *nruas neeb* on the ground, pulled the paper mask down over her face and went into a trance, as she had done the day before, for over an hour. This comprised bouncing her feet up and down, shaking the spirit bells and singing continuously (*hais ua neeb*; see Video Track 10, 1'30" – 2'52"). The ritual concluded in reverse order to the way it began. When Say came out of the trance she lifted her mask, threw the *kuam* again, struck the gong while chanting, and then burned her mask under the altar.

As soon as the first shamanistic ceremony at the new altar had concluded, the dancing began. This ritual dance took place in front of the altar in the main room of the house and in Say's house it was danced by four men in fully fitted traditional dress.¹¹² The men wore black hats and *xauv* (elaborate silver necklaces) to ensure that the spirits of the men stayed safely in their bodies. They danced in a line, moving forward and backward together. The two on the outside played *nruas neeb* and the two on the inside wore the *txwb neeb* on their middle fingers. These hand-bells sound in time with the bouncing movement of their bodies. Frequently the four went out of sync but the *txwb neeb* players always followed the *nruas neeb* player nearest them, resulting in musical pairs. The dancers moved back and forth facing the altar and facing each sidewall of the house. An older person who was not dancing directed the ensemble to make sure that all of the spaces were sufficiently danced. When they finished the dancers bowed down on their knees and touch their head to the floor in each direction that they had danced. This practice was repeated over the next few days until just after the old paper altar was burned (see Video Track 10, 5'05" – 9'16").¹¹³

One shamanistic instrument which was not used during this ceremony and should be mentioned is the *txiab neeb*, a ring-shaped instrument with metal coins attached which rattle when the handle is shaken (in Figure 4.2 the *txiab neeb* is positioned just below the central sun on the shaman's altar). Hông also encountered this instrument during his research and called it *vòng lắc* in the Vietnamese language ("rattle ring"; 1997:155-6); in contrast, Dương

¹¹² One difference between Vietnamese-Hmong and Hmong in many other countries is that the Vietnamese-Hmong men and women tend to wear items of "traditional" clothing throughout the year whereas Hmong in other countries, especially in Euro-America, only wear them during the New Year ceremonies, if at all. In the United States, Yang (2007) demonstrates how one of the defining traits of this festival is that women can dress up in traditional dress while the men show off their finest suits. In Say's house, the men wear a combination of Hmong and other dress during their daily lives. For this and other important ceremonies, however, they wear a complete outfit of Hmong traditional dress.

¹¹³ Say burned the old paper altar on the fourth day of the first lunar month in 2010 and the third day in 2011. These two years were significant for her because they marked her fifth and sixth years as a shaman. For the first five years after becoming a shaman, one has to conduct an apprenticeship with an established shaman. Each year up until 2010, Say was guided by the elder shaman, Sùng Thị Mee (in China, Tapp refers to this role as *xib hwm* [1989:72]). The day before she burned the paper in 2011, Say and Chùng visited Mee's house and gave her gifts of food and drink to reciprocate for and acknowledge the completion of her training. After this she no longer required Mee's guidance.

did not use a Vietnamese language term for the *txiab neeb* and instead used the term *vòng lắc* to refer to the *txwb neeb* (2010:76-7). This instrument appears to be used throughout the Hmong transnational community by shamans during healing rituals as a “lasso or casting net” for catching spirits (Lemoine 1987:52; Schwörer-Kohl 1995:246). During the New Year ceremony in Say’s house, however, *txiab neeb* was a purely symbolic object and was left sitting on the altar the entire time. I suspect the conscious omission of it from the New Year ceremony was symbolic of a household in harmony. Due to its association with healing rituals, its sound is iconic of unhappy spirits and general disorder, which would be inappropriate for the New Year.¹¹⁴

While communicating with the spirits, the shaman chants and sings in a mixture of languages from the region interspersed with non-lexical vocables. Hmong observers told me that although they recognised the occasional Yao word, no one could understand the full meaning of the text except the shaman herself. This veiled language plays an important role in Hmong shamanistic rituals. Only the shaman is able to communicate directly with the spirits and this interaction is a largely private affair. Say, for example, did not relay what the spirits told her to anyone except pieces of information to her husband.¹¹⁵ The language used symbolises the shaman’s movement during rituals, travelling from the land of the living to the spirit world and back again.

Some scholars have suggested that the veiled language used by the Hmong shamans they studied with was a combination of only two languages, Hmong and an ancient form of Chinese (Tapp 2000; Huang and Sumrongthong 2004). Tapp wonders “whether control of ‘Chinese’ spirits by the Hmong shaman represents the permeation of Hmong shamanistic practices by Sinitic values and ethics, or an attempt to internalise or subvert the power and might of a sovereign state by a minority group” (2000:90). One problem with this

¹¹⁴ For similar reasons, the *qeej* is not played during the New Year period in Sủ Pán unless there is a funeral.

¹¹⁵ I did not ask Say to reveal the details of what the spirits had told her to me because I felt that it was not essential for my research and that to do so would be overstepping my social position as an invited guest.

interpretation is that while the Hmong are unquestionably a minority in Vietnam, in the areas in which they reside they tend to be the majority, particularly where my research was focused. In Say's locality, the Yao¹¹⁶ are the minority and the Hmong are the majority ethnic group. For her, this kaleidoscopic language probably has more to do with the way it suggests her omniscience through being able to speak the languages of all peoples (in her area) than with an attempt to subvert the powers of the state. In straddling multiple cultural domains, Say communicates with the spirits of all people rather than solely Hmong or any other ethnicised spirits.

In this description "chant" is used in contradistinction to "sing" because in the ritual context there was a very clear difference between the two terms. Here the term "chant" refers to non-melodic rhythmically driven vocal expressions which are used only when the shaman is not in a trance. In contrast, the shaman sings with a very obvious melodic line when she is *ua neeb* and occasionally at other points in the ritual. Singing is an enhanced form of vocal expression that requires more energy than chanting. For this reason, singing might be considered more appropriate for intensive forms of communication such as when travelling to the other world and communicating with the spirits.

The rhythmic drive throughout the ritual performance of both these vocal styles was the most prominent feature to my ear due to its persistence. All the way through there was a constant and steady pulse which was maintained by the syllables of the vocal line. This was exaggerated by the sounds of the percussion instruments which stick to a metronomic beat when played; limited rhythmic variation occurs within each section. The pulse is introduced at the beginning of the ritual with the slow beating of the *nruas neeb*. During the trance, the intensity of the ritual is heightened by maintaining a steady pulse of around 175 bpm for over an hour. Again, at the end, the slow *nruas neeb* serves to neatly conclude the proceedings.

¹¹⁶ The Yao are the other main ethnic group in the vicinity. In Vietnamese they are known as Dao, which is pronounced phonetically in the northern Vietnamese dialect as "Zao."

This structure helps outline the different parts of the ritual for the shaman's assistants when she is performing these rituals.

A temporary alteration in the social order takes place when Say begins her work as a shaman. In daily life, her husband is the undisputed head of the household. This is especially true for Chún who is not only the oldest man in the house but is also employed by the state as deputy regional director of their commune, making him a man of considerable power in his locality too. However, when Say is doing her work as a shaman, Chún and his eldest son are demoted to the level of assistants. They must follow her direction to ensure that the spirits remain content. If we consider this as a series of levels of communication the shift in the social hierarchy becomes more apparent. When the shaman goes into a trance she is at the primary level of communication with the other world. On a secondary level, the assistants respond to the shaman's needs and bow before her as they go about their work. A tertiary level can be identified for those who are present but not employed as assistants. These people are usually occupied with incidental chores while they passively observe the proceedings.¹¹⁷ This shift in the social order during sacred rituals formalises the process and enhances the impact of rituals on the social group.

In *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999) Roy Rappaport, building on Turner (1969) and others, argues that the efficacy of rituals is grounded in principles of communication which enable these processes to shape the social world:

In attending to ritual's form we must not lose sight of the fundamental nature of what it is that ritual does as a logically necessary outcome of its form. In enunciating, accepting and making conventions moral, ritual contains within itself not simply a symbolic representation of social contract, but tacit social contract itself. As such, ritual, which

¹¹⁷ This temporary change in the social hierarchy is empowering for Say and this might be one reason why many of the Hmong shamans I encountered in Vietnam tended to be women, although it is unlikely to be the main reason why people become shamans. My limited questioning on this subject suggests that the primary reason that people are called to be shamans is in response to a traumatic life event. Most had either struggled with alcohol or opium addiction or had suffered from serious illness prior to being called to shamanism.

also establishes, guards, and bridges boundaries between public systems and private processes, is *the* basic social act. (ibid.:138)

Say's explanation of the purpose of the paper changing rituals emphasised the interaction between her and the spirit world and the implications of those interactions for her family during the coming year. By bringing people together in the family home for annual performances that celebrate the ancestral and guardian spirits, the rituals can also be interpreted as celebrating and reaffirming the physical structure of Say's house as the principal family dwelling each New Year. From this perspective the primary underlying function of the New Year rituals is to renew and reinforce the family as a social unit.

During the 2011 celebrations I was invited to take part as a *txwb neeb* performer and this gave me a more emic perspective on the ritual. The role of this dance in appeasing the spirits was already clear to me. Less obvious when standing on the outside, observing and recording, was the role of this dance performance in the maintenance of social relationships. The rice wine we had all consumed contributed in no small manner to the bonhomie of the occasion. But it was the monotonous repetition of the movement and sounds in sync with the other participants that contributed to the feeling of transcending the self to become united with the group, with the household, and, perhaps for the Hmong participants, with the ancestors too.¹¹⁸

In addition to the public acceptance of the ritual order, which Rappaport identifies as one of the fundamental offices of ritual (1999:119), knowledge and learning are vital to maintaining a shared sense of *communitas*. This became most apparent to me when Say and Chóng chastised their youngest son, Pau, for not being able to assist Say during the paper

¹¹⁸ This observation is reminiscent of Turino's description of participatory performances: "...participatory music making leads to a special kind of concentration on the other people one is interacting with through sound and motion and on the activity in itself and for itself. This heightened concentration on the other participants is one reason that participatory music-dance is such a strong force for social bonding. It also leads to diminished self-consciousness, because (ideally) everyone present is similarly engaged" (2008:29).

changing rituals. Pau's parents were uncomfortable that he was on the periphery of the group through his unfamiliarity with the proceedings. His social status was challenged by his inability or lack of motivation to learn the behavioural norms associated with these rituals which his older brother had already done. Pau was unable to contribute to the proceedings due to his insufficient knowledge of and apparent indifference towards the ritual practices and therefore he threatened the cohesiveness of the social group.

Judith Becker (2004) provides another way of interpreting this annual ritual which builds on the concepts of *habitus* and *communitas* and the importance of knowledge and learning. She employs two terms to describe the experience of trancing and its associated music as the meeting point of history and biology: structural coupling (2004:119-22) and rhythmic entrainment (2004:127-29). Structural coupling refers to a process which "encompasses single cell organisms up to human social groups to help imagine what happens when groups of like-minded people are involved in recurrent situations of shared music and trancing" (2004:119). Rhythmic entrainment "occurs when two or more seemingly independent processes mutually influence each other to converge in a common pattern" (2004:127). During her trance, Say is not isolated or separated from the group; she is bringing family and close friends together in a ritualised performance.¹¹⁹ The musical sounds of her trancing structurally couple and rhythmically entrain these people spiritually with their shared histories and physically with the tempo of the other participants.

Another issue which this case study raises relates to cultural purity and hybridity. While these New Year rituals are considered part of the main animist Hmong cultural traditions in the area, certain elements can be identified as having been appropriated from neighbouring culture groups. For example, Tapp argues that despite the many unique features of Hmong cosmological beliefs, they are probably derived from the Chinese model

¹¹⁹ Clayton, Sager and Will (2005) have also noted the importance of the concept of entrainment for ethnomusicological studies.

(2001:13). Some of Schwörer-Kohl's research participants informed her that the use of pairs of *tswb neeb* by the shaman was due to seeking a balance between *yin* and *yang* (1995:244). The use of pairs of *nruas neeb* and *kuam*, and of two types of chickens by Say, further supports this theory. This illustrates that even those cultural practices which might be considered as purely traditional in the present day often began as hybrid combinations in the past.

This section has presented an analysis of the soundscape invoked by the shaman during the New Year paper changing ceremony. In addition to this ceremony, Say also called the ancestors to feast before the New Year meal (see prelude 4). By bringing the entire family together in annual performances that celebrate the ancestral and guardian spirits of the other world, these rituals and their associated music and dance activities serve to reinforce the family as social unit and reaffirm the physical structure of Say's house as the principal family dwelling each New Year. As with the vocal and instrumental musical traditions discussed in the previous chapters, the exact processes vary from shaman to shaman, area to area and country to country. Some authors have viewed these discrepancies as errors or oversights on the part of other researchers. Due to the lack of an established hierarchy in Hmong culture outside of the family or the teacher-student relationships, no single orthodox method is followed for conducting this and other shamanistic rituals. This description and analysis was not intended to encourage the development of such a prescriptive text. Rather, I focused on how one shaman conducted the proceedings in order to demonstrate the panoply of musical sounds associated with Hmong shamanism in one region and the ways that those sounds impact the Hmong social world.

4.2 Death and the Afterlife

Animist Hmong understand life, death and the afterlife as a cyclical journey traversed by souls. After death, the soul of the deceased is led from the land of the living to the other world using a ritual chant known as *qhuab ke*, showing or opening the way.¹²⁰ When the soul goes to the other world, it will eventually be reincarnated at some time in the distant future. This cyclical process has received scholarly attention in Symonds's *Gender and the Cycle of Life: Calling in the Soul in a Hmong Village* (2004) and Postert's "Rituellen Handeln Verstehen: Soziale Morphologie und Ritueller Zyklus der Person bei den Hmong in Laos und Thailand" ("Understanding Ritual Activity: Social Morphology and Ritual Cycle of the Person for the Hmong in Laos and Thailand") (2003). This section focuses on the parts of this process during which the most musical activity takes place: the mortuary rituals.

Animist Hmong funerals and their associated musical practices have received an extensive amount of scholarly attention thus far. In Vietnam, Giàng Seo Gà (2004) has written a very detailed, case-specific and somewhat prescriptive book on animist Hmong mortuary music and chants in Lào Cai, Hùng has transcribed a complete text of the mortuary chants and *qeej* music in Hà Giang into the Hmong and Vietnamese languages (2005) and Vương includes a translated text (into Vietnamese) of a *qhuab ke* funeral chant which was recorded in Lai Châu in 1986 in the appendix of his book (2005:83-94). This scholarly focus on mortuary rituals seemed disproportionate to me before I began my fieldwork. However, the challenges I met when attending and asking for permission to record these events made the significance of these sacred rituals more apparent.

At one funeral, the elderly widow of the deceased refused me permission to record outright but permitted me to stay and take part in the grieving process. She was concerned that my recording equipment would disrupt the passage of her late husband's soul to the other

¹²⁰ Tapp refers to these two worlds as *yaj ceeb* and *yeej ceeb* respectively (1989:59). These terms were not used by the shamans I worked with.

world. On another occasion, after receiving permission from the appropriate people (in this case the sons of the deceased), I was ejected from the funeral by an overzealous and inebriated government official who was also the grandson of the deceased.¹²¹ Prior to that moment I had detected some animosity towards my presence from a minority of the older people at the funeral. Since I was given permission by members of the household I was told to ignore these people and continue recording. After the intervention I realised that I was causing too much disruption and decided to leave, even though the sons chastised the grandson and implored me to stay. These two experiences made the importance of this ritual to the Hmong explicitly clear to me. This section briefly outlines animist Hmong beliefs about death and the afterlife in Vietnam.

When a person dies the body is kept in a wooden coffin in the main room of the house for roughly three to five days while the main part of the funeral ceremony takes place. As with all subsequent stages, the duration and size of the ceremony depends on the age and social status of the individual. The older the person, the more elaborate the ceremony; if it is for a young child, only a brief ceremony is necessary with minimal animal sacrifices. Men typically have bigger funerals than women, due to their dominant social position—the size of a funeral can be judged by its duration, the number and types of animals sacrificed, the number of guests present and the value of the gifts given by them.

Two types of gifts are given: gifts for the living and gifts for the soul of deceased. The gifts for the living typically comprise money,¹²² food and drink for the household. The offerings for the deceased are intended to accompany their soul on the journey to the other world; In Lào Cai, these usually consisted of a small chicken and some hand-embroidered textiles. On the last evening of the funeral in the house of the deceased, the coffin is opened

¹²¹ I discussed this experience at greater length in a conference paper on the ethics of filming in the field at the Annual Conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology (Ó Briain 2011).

¹²² Tapp suggests that the custom of giving money, which he only encountered in China, is a custom that Chinese-Hmong have borrowed from the Han Chinese (2001:169).

to put this second set of gifts in before burial the next morning. At one funeral I attended the members of the household were keeping a written record of all of the gifts received. They told me that this was so that when the time came for them to attend a funeral in one of their guests' houses, they would remember exactly how much and what was contributed by that household.¹²³ This reciprocal process at the funeral has significance beyond material gifts. When I asked one friend what she would do if she was busy with work and unable to attend a funeral in her local area she responded, "If we don't go to other people's funerals then no one will come to ours!" This statement suggests that a successful ceremony, which requires a sufficient number of guests with their gifts, is symbolic of the safe passage of the soul to the other world. Everyone has to sacrifice their individual pursuits to take part in the communal mourning.

4.2.1 Ritual Music for the Deceased

In her transliteration of the *qeej tu siav* funeral music, Falk (2004a and 2004b) chose to conduct her research in a controlled environment outside of the funeral context due in part to excessive "ambient noise" (2004a:4) and the movement of the player during the performance. In order to understand the function and social significance of the musical activities which animist Hmong in Vietnam associate with death, the roles of the different rituals which mark this point in the life cycle must be understood. Therefore in contrast with Falk, this section presents a description of these musical activities in context. A funeral I attended in Sủ Pán village in late January 2011 illustrates many of the general characteristics of Vietnamese-Hmong funerals and the following thick description is based on that event.

The most important vocal ritual of animist Hmong funerals is the *qhuab ke* (showing or guiding the way chant). This chant is performed as soon as possible after death because it

¹²³ Sahlins terms this form of relationship balanced or symmetrical reciprocity (1972).

opens the way to the other world for the soul of the deceased. The *qhuab ke* “not only refutes the finality of an individual’s death but suggests that life is not merely a fleeting period of meaningless contingency but part of an ongoing eternal process” (Symonds 2004:4). The *qhuab ke* is performed by the *caub tsav*, a master of the spirit rights who tends to be an elder male from the same clan as the deceased. This person is in charge of directing the mortuary rituals. The chant serves to bridge the gap between life and death in the minds of the funeral participants by helping them comprehend the journey of the soul and come to terms with death. It begins with the following lines:

Hey you, the one who is really dead or maybe just pretending to be dead,
If you are really dead prick up your ears and open your eyes,
I will sing this song of a journey back to your roots so listen carefully. (Hùng 2005:141)

During the first few days of the funeral after the *qhuab ke* has been performed, groups of distinct clusters of musical ensembles sporadically perform in spontaneous episodes in the main room of the house. These ensembles are driven by fluctuating energy levels in the context of the extended communal grieving process. At certain unscheduled points during the day the ensembles can be heard performing concurrently. The resulting dissonant clamour of sound and energy, compounded with the sound of multiple conversations, is characteristic of these mortuary ritual gatherings. While some of the groups tend to have leaders, the combinations of these performances are not carefully coordinated and have no set beginning or ending. Nevertheless, the atmosphere created by this orchestrated cacophony seems more than circumstantial.

As I approached the house where the funeral was taking place in Sủ Pán, the slow and steady thud of the *txiv nruas* (funeral drum) resonated throughout the valley, signalling to all in the locality that this ceremony was taking place (Video Track 11). A man stood just inside

the main door to greet the guests as they arrived; as usual this person was a skilled singer with a strong voice and a good memory. He was holding a long bamboo pole upright, sticking out of a basket full of rice wine and other gifts. As the guests filtered in he engaged each of them individually in song. After his song concluded the listener invited the singer to drink a cup of rice wine and then the singer reciprocated by pouring a cup for the other person and encouraging them to sing a response. In Viet-Hmong spelling, this singing tradition is referred to as *tsang shaov chuôg*.¹²⁴ When the man at the basket tired, someone else took over and it continued like that all day. In the main room there were other pairs of singers engaged in a similar practice without the basket. During all of the funerals I attended this activity at the door was dominated by men but some older women occasionally took part in the pairs which formed away from the basket at the door.¹²⁵

At this particular funeral, the man at the door also had a large buffalo horn strapped over his shoulder that was being used as a drinks receptacle. Hông wrote that this horn was used as a musical instrument in Hà Giang and even transcribed the pitch of one of the horns he encountered as G above middle C (1997:129-30).¹²⁶ As a trumpet player, and having seen how prized the larger buffalo horns are by the Hmong, it would be easy for me to imagine how the horn could be blown in a musical way. However in Lào Cai, these horns are now only used as drinks receptacles on special occasions. In particular, during a wedding ceremony the bride and groom both have to drink from this receptacle; this act symbolises their union in marriage. If they are wealthy enough to acquire their own horn, they will often

¹²⁴ I could not find an equivalent Hmong RPA spelling for this term.

¹²⁵ Instinctively, I interpreted the lack of female involvement in this and other parts of the funeral as an unfair sexual division that disempowered the women. However, when I asked my female Hmong friends about it I was told that the men were “working”. From their perspective—at least, as far as they were willing to communicate it to me—the men were performing a duty while the women were helping by making sure the men had everything they needed to do so. It was not sexism; it was social responsibility.

¹²⁶ This instrument was referred to by Hông as *cu tr* and translated by Nguyễn as water buffalo horn (1995:46). A similar instrument also appears in Graham’s film from c. 1936 in China (Video Track 1) and an audio recording of that instrument was later made by Graham’s daughter, Margaret Graham, also in China (<http://siris-archives.si.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?&profile=all&source=~!siarchives&uri=full=3100001~!703~!0#focus>, accessed 1 June 2009).

keep it on the wall of their house as a memorial. The Hmong in Lào Cai did not recall the horn ever being blown in the manner described by Hồng, and Dương (2010) did not encounter this instrument among the Hmong in Nghệ An.

After passing the singer at the entrance of the house in Sủ Pán, guests gave their gifts to the head of the household and then walked over to the coffin to begin a multipart wailing song called *nyiav* (lament). *Nyiav* at a funeral is simply an outpouring of grief. Any number of men and women can take part, though usually only recent arrivals at the funeral will do so. This intensely emotional outcry requires little practice because no audible lyrics are sung. It comprises brief ascending followed by long descending glissandi and is compounded by the crying of the singers between phrases. Each singer starts in his or her own time, resulting in staggered layers of wailing that build upon each other. Similarly, each singer finishes when her or his grief has been adequately expressed. As the sound subsides, one by one the singers wipe the tears from their eyes and turn around with smiles on their faces, ready to begin the party. *Nyiav* is the most communal form of musical mourning which takes place during the funeral because no one voice stands out. The combination of these indistinguishable wails provides the musical context for even the most shy of participants to vocally express their grief.

In addition to these wailing cries, some people at the funeral in Sủ Pán chose to sing more personal songs over the coffin. Although Lee and Tapp, who have not conducted extensive research in Vietnam, write that “this practice has virtually disappeared today” (2010:70 fn. 25), it was prevalent at all of the funerals I attended. In contrast with the singing at the door, those who took part in this form of singing were almost exclusively women. This singing was in a much more personal style than the aforementioned wailing *nyiav* with lengthy verses that were sung directly to the soul of the deceased. Sometimes the singers began these solo songs while the wailing *nyiav* was still taking place and continued long after

it had abated. However, this type of singing took place at various times during the day, not just after arriving at the house, and it appeared to be sung by anyone who knew the deceased well. Frequently, singers of this song struggled to hold back the tears while singing. After each section some singers poured rice wine over the coffin as an offering to the deceased. When they finished their songs, the singers then wiped down the cover of the coffin (*txiv txiag*), turned around and joined in the party. As with the wailing *nyiav*, this style focuses on emotional expression and release. Although many of my interlocutors referred to these songs as *nyiav*, the term *nkauj tuag* (funeral, death or poison song), used by Mareschal (1976:108) and Lee and Tapp (2010:70 fn. 25), appears to be more appropriate for this activity. Either way, these songs differ from the wailing *nyiav* by being more intimate in nature through their solo form and personalised lyrics.

At the end of the coffin a small altar was erected to the deceased. The *laig dab*, a ritual feeding of the soul of the deceased, took place there. Rice, meat and rice wine were symbolically offered there during breaks in the chant. At the next major celebration in the house, the deceased would be added to the roll call of ancestors who are invited to feast at the table by the head of the household (see prelude 4). Therefore, while the content of these chants focused on nourishing the deceased's soul for the journey ahead, they also verbally acknowledged the position the deceased person on the path to the other world in the minds of the living.

The final type of musical activity which took place at the funeral in Sủ Pán is the one which has so far received the most attention from music scholars: *qeej tuag* (*qeej* and drum funeral music). This is one of the main musical activities of animist Hmong funerals and it is performed during each day of the ceremony. Each section of the performance has a specific function but the *qeej tu siav* (song of expiring life), a musical version of the *qhuav ke*, is the

first and most important piece. The opening phrases of *qeej tu siav* iconically symbolise the following poetic text:¹²⁷

Hey you, the one who is really dead or maybe just pretending to be dead,
If you are really dead prick up your ears and open your eyes,
I will blow thirty-three pieces on the *qeej*,
To show only you the dark path to the other world. (Hùng 2005:21 and 153)

The performance at the funeral in Sừ Pán was led by the *txiv qeej* (see chapter 3), accompanied by the *txiv nruas* (funeral drum). In order to maintain the *qeej tuag* persistently through each day of mourning, the lead *qeej* player took frequent breaks and other men took turns to help out. The official function of this music and its associated movement is to guide the soul of the deceased to the other world. As mentioned earlier, this music also alerts those in the locality that these rituals are taking place. In addition, these musical practices are so deeply associated with death that they serve the living participants too by making it clear that the social group has lost one member.

Some of these musical activities continued throughout each night without a break until the coffin was buried, though individual participants took leave for short recess periods in neighbouring houses. As is typical of animist Hmong mortuary rituals in Vietnam, the *txiv qeej* and *caub tsav* demonstrated remarkable resilience by staying awake and continuing to perform for days on end. The main focus through the night was on singing and chanting. Especially important at this point was the chanting of the *caub tsav*. Adult men who were closest to the deceased stayed up all night to support the *caub tsav* in his ritual performance. At sunrise every morning, the *txiv qeej* resumed playing with the *txiv nruas* and the other musical activities gradually started up again as more visitors arrived.

¹²⁷ The exact wording of this text and the number of pieces which the *txiv qeej* plays vary significantly.

Besides funerals, two further activities form an inherent part of animist Hmong mortuary rituals in Vietnam. On the thirteenth day after death¹²⁸ the final part of the main funeral takes place, the *hu plig*. This more intimate event is primarily for family and close friends to say a final farewell to the soul of the deceased. A third ceremony called *ua plig* (release the spirit) is held months or years after the person has passed away (see Figure 4.3).¹²⁹ As with the main funeral, its size depends on the social position of the deceased. *Ua plig* is similar in content to the funeral rites but much smaller in scale (Video Track 12). It tends to last only a few days. Instead of the coffin, an altar to the deceased is constructed and worshiped during both of these rituals.

¹²⁸ Animist Hmong rituals in Vietnam are closely linked with the twelve animals of the zodiac. This ritual takes place on the thirteenth day because that corresponds with the same zodiac day on which the person passed away.

¹²⁹ Outside of Vietnam this ritual can be referred to as *tso plig*. Symonds writes that the ideal situation for her research participants in Thailand was to conclude the *xi plig* (*hu plig*) and *tso plig* (*ua plig*) rituals on the same day, the thirteenth day after death. When they were unable to have these two ceremonies together because of the expense, “the soul is considered to be dangerously proximate and uncontrollable” (2004:112).



Figure 4.3: *Ua plig* ceremony for the father of Giàng Seo Gà, held seven years after his death in Hàu Thào village, 16 January 2011.

What is remarkable about these rituals is the intense energy that sustains the group day and night without sleep for the first few days after death and again through the night at the *ua plig*. Steven Friedson encountered a similar vitality during Ewe funeral rituals in southern Ghana which he attributed to the *agbadza* drumming:

Agbadza does something more than expend energy—whether it releases grief, joy, or endorphins—it makes it. Like a cold fusion machine, that so far unattainable dream of technology, more energy comes out than is put in. That is one of the reasons why people can go on for days at a funeral, or an old man can throw away his cane and dance throughout the night.... Beyond exhaustion, before physical limitations, when there is nothing left, music is there to give something more. (2009:117)

While the intensity of the music contributes to the endurance of the Hmong ritual participants in Vietnam too, other aspects of the rituals cannot be downplayed. For example, without oral stimulants such as tobacco, meat, rice wine and, more recently, *nước uống tăng lực* (the Vietnamese equivalent of Red Bull), I suspect the energy levels would be significantly diminished. Nevertheless, musical activities do appear to act in the manner of a “cold fusion machine” during these rituals as the energy generated from musicking together sustains the ritual practitioners through multiple sleepless nights. At 5.00am on the final day before burial when the participants are waning after days of too much rice wine and too little sleep, the efforts of one singer can keep everyone going. The passing of songs and chants from singer to singer and the face-to-face interaction between the participants carries them through to sunrise, breakfast, and the resumption of the more lively musical and social activities.

During these mortuary rituals we encounter the musical orchestration of the group: “You cannot argue with a song sung in soaring phrases, with drum rhythms you are feeling in your bones, surrounded by friends and family who are all, like you, structurally coupled, rhythmically entrained” (Becker 2004:129). Although all participants at funerals may not believe in the passage of the soul of the deceased which is directed by specific ritual music authorities, the vast quantities of alcohol consumed combined with the layers of musical sounds and conversation all at very close quarters engender a liminal sense of *communitas*. Through their attendance at these rituals, participants formally acknowledge the passing of the deceased together. The social order is renegotiated as individuals take on new roles in the group to account for the loss of one social actor. This reorganisation depends on the status of the deceased person; the older the person the more significant the shift that takes place. One of the first ways these new positions are made articulate is through the medium of music during the mortuary rituals because someone has to take the role previously occupied by the deceased person and so on. Therefore, while the musical practices described here explicitly

serve to mediate Hmong interactions with the spirit world, they also serve to restructure their social world by simultaneously reaffirming social ties and reorganising them in response to the loss.

4.3 Conclusions

This chapter examined certain musical activities that are integral to animist Hmong rituals in northern Vietnam. The focus was on how groups of individuals are brought together through communal ritual practices. Music is one of the primary mediums through which a sense of *communitas* is engendered during these sacred rituals. Through their comprehension of the meanings and implications of these ritual musics, participants formally acknowledge the transitory period and the significance of the rituals. In this way, the chapter has shown how these musics serve as a means of structuring and restructuring both the spiritual and the social worlds of the animist Hmong in Vietnam.

The concept of a shared tradition depends on some form of shared historical memory. Bourdieu's *habitus*, or, "history turned into nature" (1977:78), provides a model for understanding the individual's "submission to the collective rhythms" (*ibid.*:163) of the group. This was made clear during the men's dance in front of the altar during the New Year, when the synchronisation of the group, which is vital to the successful performance of the ritual, was achieved through shared musical activities that are accepted as being historically associated with the group. Similarly, the clusters of overlapping musical activities at the funeral combined in a cacophony of sound during which the individuals present acquiesced to the group in their collective mourning and social reorganisation. Participation in these sacred musical activities, then, is a form of release from individual subjectivity through a self-defining public submission to the group.

In addition to shaping the social world of the animist Hmong, this chapter, in conjunction with chapter 3, argues that these ritual musics serve to structure Hmong conceptions of the spirit world. In his writings on acoustic ecology, Titon argues that “sound sacralises space through co-presence. That is, one senses the presence of something greater than oneself through sound.”¹³⁰ The sounds described in this chapter, from the squealing pigs and funeral drums which announce the ceremonies to the entire community to the more intimate muttering of the shaman’s chant and the song over the coffin to the deceased, sacralise space through their indexical association with specific ritual practices. The “something greater” of animist Hmong ritual music is more than a combination of traditional musical and spiritual practices; the direct interaction with the spirit world where the souls of the ancestors reside brings history into the present during these rituals. Through their conflation of past and present in formalised processes, these musics are elevated above more commonplace musical activities to a sacred realm. The rituals and their associated musical practices are vital to the animist Hmong community because they mark significant life transitions, and they nurture relationships which contribute the sustainability of the social group.

¹³⁰ <http://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com/2011/04/sound-sacralizes-space.html>, accessed 15 August 2011.

Prelude 5 The Victoria Hotel Show

Minority Dance Performance: H'mong and Tày Minority people perform Traditional Dances every Saturday night at Ta Van Restaurant from 8.00pm until 9.00pm. They will charm and entertain you through several traditional dances.¹³¹

As the advertisement above illustrates, the music and dance show at the Victoria Sapa Resort and Spa brings Hmong and Tày music and dance to the hotel's clientele so that guests need not exert themselves by trekking to the villages. As with all of the tourist shows in and around Sapa, the Victoria show epitomises the identity of the venue at which it takes place. The show is staged in Ta Van restaurant, the main dining area of the hotel and one of the most expensive eateries in Sapa town. The restaurant and hotel are considered to be among the most refined in the region. The hotel advertises itself as "the only luxury hotel in North-Western Vietnam".¹³² But these music and dance performances are not advertised widely outside of the hotel in the manner that some other hotels promote their shows¹³³ as the hotel seeks to maintain its exclusivity. The sense of neocolonial refinement and class is evident from the moment one enters the hotel: the principal language is that of northern Vietnam's most recent colonisers, the French; ethnic minority ornaments are displayed throughout the hotel like artifacts from past colonial conquests; and an elderly Hmong woman is paid to sit in the lobby of the hotel at an oversized sewing machine and embroider traditional garments. As with the music and dance show, her performance brings ethnic minority culture to the clientele in the comfort of a five-star hotel setting.

The musician in charge of the Victoria show is a Hmong man named Giàng A Trinh (born 1978) from Tả Phìn village. Having played in formal cultural tourism shows for over a

¹³¹ <http://www.victoriahotels-asia.com/eng/hotels-in-vietnam/sapa-resort-spa/dining>, accessed 31 August 2011.

¹³² <http://www.victoriahotels-asia.com/eng/hotels-in-vietnam/sapa-resort-spa/overview>, accessed 31 August 2011.

¹³³ For close to a year between mid-2009 and mid-2010 the Royal Hotel had a large banner erected on the edge of the main square in Sapa town advertising their weekly ethnic minority music and dance show. However, during this entire time I was unable to attend a single performance that actually took place at this hotel because they had disbanded the group due to low tourist numbers.

decade, Trinh is one of the most experienced performers in this media currently working in the region. From 2000 to 2003 he performed at the Bamboo Hotel. He then moved to the Hàm Rồng mountain show for three years where he met his wife, who is from the Tày ethnic group. During this time he also spent a year working at the Royal Hotel. In July 2010 he told me that he had directed the Victoria show for approximately four or five years.

In his locality, Trinh is a less highly regarded *qeej* player than Giàng A Minh (section 3.3). Another notable musician in the area told me of Trinh's skill at dancing the *qeej* but criticised his *raj nplaim* and *nplooj* playing abilities. However, the unfamiliarity of the music to foreign audiences meant that only the simplest demonstration of each of these instruments was necessary. Rather than requiring the deep cultural knowledge of a *txiv qeej*, the ideal performer for tourists must be versatile and entertaining for a diverse audience. During the Victoria show Trinh plays *raj nplaim*, *nplooj*, *nkauj laus ncas* and *qeej*. In conforming to a semblance of antiquity and refinement, the music during the show has less synthesised accompaniment than any of the other tourist shows in the region. Trinh saves most of his energy for the *qeej* performance. During these demonstrations he combines playing the *qeej* with elaborate dance movements much to the delight of the spectators. At one show I attended, he struggled to make a sound on the *nplooj*, and the *raj nplaim* demonstration was performed without much movement or energy, but the audience still appeared to respond positively to the novelty of these instruments. While Minh was more in demand as a *txiv qeej*, Trinh's experience in playing for tourists meant that he was able to develop a career in presenting ethnic minority music to an outside audience.

According to Trinh, the entire group is paid three million VNĐ (£87) per month. In addition to serving as group director, Trinh teaches the dances to the other group members and decides on the programme. He always employs a female singer to balance the male-dominated instrumental music performances. Despite the show being advertised and

performed by Hmong and Tày people, the group comprises solely Hmong members. Nevertheless, a quick change of clothes between items on the programme enables the group members to temporarily shed their Hmong identities and become Tày for one of the dances.

This brief description of the most elite music and dance show for tourists in Sapa has demonstrated how performers cater to audience needs and desires by emphasising a presentational context which meets audience expectations. The styles of performance raise a number of questions about how the music is modified for these new contexts. In what ways has Hmong culture been packaged to suit the needs of predominantly non-Hmong tourists? In what contexts do these performances typically take place? How do these performances relate to traditional practices? What effects are these performances having on traditional musical practices? What are the primary motivations of the performing musicians? How do other Hmong view these shows? Chapter 5 attempts to find more comprehensive answers to these questions through two contrasting case studies.

Chapter 5 Incorporated Ethnicity: Music, Tourism and Cosmopolitanism in Sapa

This chapter examines how Hmong music and dance practices are contributing to the flourishing tourism industry in Sapa town and its surrounding villages. While intangible cultural heritage and modernisation tend to be seen as mutually exclusive and incompatible concepts in the industrialising world (Timothy and Nyaupane 2009:248-49), the case studies in this chapter demonstrate how they are combined in musical performances for tourists. The Hmong have been the most populous ethnic group in Sapa since before the French arrived. As part of the most recent revitalisation of the tourism industry there, which began in the early 1990s, certain aspects of their culture have been framed as one of the prime attractions of the region. This chapter demonstrates how these changes have led to the production of presentational performances of Hmong music and dance in order to maximise the value of this music as a cultural commodity. Using the concept of incorporated ethnicity as a theoretical basis (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), I examine how the rampant commodification of identity is reshaping conceptions of Hmong ethnicity and Hmong music in Sapa. The chapter also builds on the work of Michaud and Turner (2006) who have made comparisons between French colonial Sapa and contemporary tourist-hub Sapa.

In this chapter, musical performances for tourists in Sapa are divided into two groups: shows which are formally arranged with musical directors, salaried musicians, a set programme and a performance theatre; and more informal musical performances which take place at the discretion of the musicians and whose performances resemble those of buskers in Euro-American culture. Two contrasting case studies serve to illustrate the differences between these firmly established musical practices. The most frequent of Sapa's formally organised shows for tourists is the Cát Cát village show. This show takes place on the outskirts of Sapa town and is organised by local government officials in the guise of cultural

heritage preservation. In addition, a number of regular but less formal musical performances take place in and around Sapa town. The performers range from individual *nplooj* or *ncas* players to informal troupes of young *qeej* players. The best known of these performances is the so-called “Love Market”, which takes place in the main square of Sapa town at the weekend. Before introducing the case studies, a better understanding of the historical transformation of Sapa town and its surrounding area into the tourist hub of northwestern Vietnam is necessary.

5.1 The Transformation of Sapa

The first inhabitants of the mountainous area now known as the Sapa district of Lào Cai province are thought to have been Yao and Hmong settlers in the early nineteenth century (Michaud 1999:2-5), possibly followed soon after by lesser numbers of Giáy and Tày people. By the late nineteenth century the French had firmly established themselves as rulers of Indochina. They strategically established military stations along the northern border of present-day Vietnam to defend their recently acquired territory from the Chinese and to maintain order among the unruly ethnic minorities living in the region. One of these outposts was Sapa town, then known as Chapa.

According to Catholic parishioners currently working in Sapa, a Catholic parish was established in 1902 followed by a military barracks in 1903 (see also Phạm 2003:114-19). Michaud and Turner argue that the centenary celebration year of 2003 is misleading because no permanent settlements had been established by 1903 (2006:785-6). Michaud notes that the first French military construction project was not begun until 1913 (1999:9). Although he does not give a date for the beginning of missionary pursuits in area, he writes that the first mission was established in Lào Cai city in 1898, which would correspond with the 1902

establishment of a parish in Sapa.¹³⁴ Either way, early French involvement in Sapa was predominantly driven by militaristic and religious interests.

Due to its temperate climate in contrast to the rest of Indochina, idyllic landscapes and relative ease of access from Hanoi by train, Sapa was soon transformed into a popular holiday destination. Over two hundred French-style villas were built, initially for colonial officers and then later for civilian French and a small minority of wealthy Viet tourists (Michaud 1999). During the First Indochina War most of these villas were destroyed and in the following years the town was left in ruins. The land collectivisation movement of the 1960s contributed to the gradual redevelopment of the area (Hardy 2002; Michaud and Turner 2006). Nevertheless it was not until the early 1990s, when Vietnam opened its borders to foreign tourists, that the dramatic rejuvenation of Sapa town began.

Since then the town has been transformed into what the Lonely Planet calls “*the* destination of northwest Vietnam, [a] gateway to another world of mysterious minority cultures and luscious landscapes”.¹³⁵ Michaud and Turner note a fifty percent increase in tourists visiting Sapa each year between 1994 and 2004 (2006). Locals reported that the surge in foreign visitors to the region led to an even greater increase in interest from Vietnamese nationals in travelling to explore (*thăm dò*) and discover (*khám phá*) the cultural heritage of the minorities.

Today, Sapa can be identified as the site of a new phenomenon concerning the commodification of identity which Comaroff and Comaroff term “Ethnicity, Inc.” (2009). This concept comprises two parts, “the process of cultural commodification, and the incorporation of identity in which it is imbricated” (ibid.:20). Although the successful commodification of cultural difference “is most likely among populations defined unambiguously as cultural minorities, old or new, disadvantaged or otherwise” (ibid.:146),

¹³⁴ Michaud’s account (1999 and 2001) of French colonial involvement in Sapa is the most comprehensive in the French and English languages to date.

¹³⁵ <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/vietnam/northwest-vietnam/sapa>, accessed 20 September 2011.

Comaroff and Comaroff write, “vendors of ethnic authenticity, however bound they may be to the market, are *not* an alienated proletariat, in thrall to the fetish of their own estranged essence. Nor have they simply become fetishes themselves” (24-5). The successful “maturation” (ibid.:141) of the incorporation of identity and the commodification of culture into Ethnicity, Inc. in Sapa town and the surrounding areas has been contributed to by many parties, including the Hmong themselves, to the point that their ethnic identity has become an iconic symbol of a new industry in the region. This chapter examines how Hmong music and dance shows have contributed to the emergence of this phenomenon in the “ethno-theme park” (ibid.:11) that is contemporary Sapa.

5.2 Formal Shows for Tourists

On a short visit to Sapa town, a tourist can attend as many as five or six formally organised and staged ethnic minority music and dance shows. Although closely related in style and programmatic content, these shows can be subdivided into two broad categories: those that are organised by local government officials at tourist sites of interest (public) and those that are staged at hotels in Sapa town (private).¹³⁶ In general, public shows take place on a daily basis, often multiple times per day, while private shows tend to be held only once per week if at all. Many of the private shows are discontinued during the low season whereas the government-run shows tend to run throughout the year. The public shows tend to be explicitly justified by their contribution to the preservation of the ethnic minorities’ cultural heritage while the private shows are purely for the audience’s enjoyment. This section gives a brief overview of the main public and private shows which were held in Sapa town between 2009 and 2011 in order to better understand the formal incorporation of Hmong musical

¹³⁶ Another style of private formal ethno-cultural show can be identified in the Sapa district, outside of Sapa town: those which take place at homestays in the valley below the town. These occur sporadically because they must be prearranged at the demand of tourists who are staying in the homestays. Since many of the players and performance styles are shared with the other types of show which take place in closer proximity to Sapa town I have decided to omit them from this discussion.

identity by local “ethno-prenuers” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:51). A case study analysis of the Cát Cát village show then serves to demonstrate how cultural preservation and economic development can conflict in government-run tourist shows.

During my fieldwork there were two regular shows organised by government officials at tourist sites of interest: one beside the waterfall at Cát Cát village and the other on top of Hàm Rồng mountain. The Sapa Cultural Center was responsible for the organisation and direction of these shows and Giàng Seo Gà contributed by selecting and training the performers. As a result of the centralised planning, the programmes and general organisation of the two shows closely resembled one another. One of the few noticeable musical differences was in the musical instrument demonstrations, because these depended on the abilities of the performers working at each venue. For example at Hàm Rồng mountain there was an especially talented flute player from the Viet majority named Phạm Đức Quý who gave a demonstration of Kim Vĩnh’s famous composition on *sáo mèo* (see section 7.) whereas at Cát Cát village there was no flute player at all.

A third formal show organised by the Sapa Cultural Centre opened in the summer months of 2010 on the grounds of the tourist information office. This took place at a newly opened nightclub called The Light Club.¹³⁷ The performers were the same group as those who took part in the Cát Cát village show. They were able to take part in this show in addition to their commitment to Cát Cát because it took place only on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. The programme was identical to that of the Cát Cát show, making it easy for performers to work at both venues. There was no entrance fee at The Light Club. Instead audience members were encouraged to buy drinks and food at twice or three times the standard tourist price in the town. Tables and chairs were set up in way that generated an atmosphere reminiscent of a European jazz club, aside from the addition of strobe lighting.

¹³⁷ According to an older map of the area this venue was previously titled “Ethnic Minority Music and Dance Performance.”

The only obvious musical difference between the Cát Cát show and The Light Club was the powerful sound system in The Light Club; during the show this was set at painfully loud levels, much to the dismay of the foreign tourists who were seated by the front of the stage.

In contrast to the hordes of national and international tourists who trekked to Hầm Rồng mountain and Cát Cát village and those who were attracted to The Light Club by the blaring music, the hotel shows tended to have less diverse audiences which were primarily comprised of the hotel clientele who either had a specific interest in the show or just happened to be at the venue when it was taking place. This was largely due to the ways each hotel catered to a particular type of guest. During 2009-10 there were at least four regular hotel shows held. These included the Victoria Hotel (see Prelude 5), the Bamboo Hotel, the Green Bamboo Hotel and the Royal Hotel. Although most of these hotels had permanently erected signs advertising their shows, the only one which ran throughout the year was held at the Victoria. Since these were privately funded ethno-industries, the hotels were unwilling to pay for shows during the low season when they were less likely to profit from hosting these events.

5.2.1 The Cát Cát Village Show (18 December 2009)

On a cold and wet morning in December 2009 I set out on a short walk from Sapa town for Cát Cát village. I had read about this “age-old village” on *TripAdvisor*¹³⁸ and wished to experience it myself. The economics which drive ethnic minority identification in Vietnam became instantly recognisable. On the edge of Sapa town I had to purchase a 30,000VNĐ (approximately 87 pence) ticket from a Viet woman in a booth, supposedly for the maintenance of the local area, which I presented to a Viet man in another booth a mile further down the road in order to enter the village. From there onwards the path descended hundreds

¹³⁸ http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g311304-d1070180-Reviews-Cat_Cat_Village-Sapa_Lao_Cai_Province.html, accessed 15 December 2010.

of concrete steps—these had been specially constructed to ease tourist access to the area—all the way to the waterfall. Along the way I could visit local Hmong houses adjacent to the path. These operated as micro-ethnic industries where tourists could purchase a variety of ethnic minority souvenirs and learn about the unique cultural practices of the Black Hmong people. In somewhat ironic fashion, a sign on the path warned that one should respect their culture by not giving money to the local children (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1: A warning sign for tourists on the Cát Cát village path.¹³⁹

As I got closer to the waterfall, the sounds of the public address system blaring ethno-pop could be heard in the distance. Before crossing the wooden suspension bridge to the performance venue I noticed a sign which told of the significance of the performing troupe (Figure 5.2). The preservation of local culture is “an urgent responsibility for all those who love Vietnamese culture”, it read. “This performance plays an important role in preserving [*bảo tồn*] and developing [*phát triển*] the national culture.” Here Hmong culture shifts from a regional culture to part of the national culture (*văn hóa Việt*).

¹³⁹ Only the second line of the Vietnamese text is translated into English. The full translation reads: “Respect the culture of the area. Do not give money to the children.”



Figure 5.2: An informative sign for tourists outside the performance venue in Cát Cát village.

At the base of the waterfall I encountered yet another ticket booth. Tickets for the performance were 30,000VNĐ in addition to the money already spent on entering the village. A tip-box was situated in front of the stage in case patrons wanted to make any further financial contributions. Performances took place on every day of the week and at any time of the day before the village closed to the public at sunset, provided a sufficient number of paying audience members were in attendance. While waiting for the performance to begin, the audience could purchase food, drinks or ethnic minority souvenirs at inflated prices from the stalls that were erected around the entrance to the venue.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ This was similar to the way performances were organised on top of Hàm Rồng mountain except that in that case the performers did not appear to wait on-site throughout the day. When I was there in January 2010, I purchased some items from one of the stalls while waiting for a performance to take place. As soon as a sufficiently large crowd was in attendance a woman working in the coffee shop at the venue phoned the

Upon entering the venue, I was confronted by a stage that resembled one used in a Euro-American school musical (Figure 5.3). In the foreground imitation trees hung from the ceiling and green plants were positioned at the front of the stage to create an effect of dense foliage. The wall at the back was painted with a rural mountainous landscape. A rock stump or cave was painted at the center of this scenic setting that included a small entrance from which all of the performers would emerge and to which they would retreat at the end. In case there was any doubt about it, the audience-performer divide was further emphasised by a stone wall which had been painted across the front of the stage.



Figure 5.3: Performers wear Yao garments for one piece.

performers. After a short while, they arrived from the bottom of the mountain, got dressed and then began their performance.

The performance opened with a prerecorded vocal introduction in Vietnamese and English. The stage lights were turned up and the first piece began. A well-rehearsed umbrella dance by seven girls to prerecorded music of flute accompanied by synthesised Vietnamese traditional musical instruments segued into a faster-paced dance with the addition of a boy dancing with, but not playing, a Hmong *qeej*. All of the performers wore Hmong traditional garments. The remainder of the programme consisted of dances interspersed with two live musical demonstrations: one on *nplooj* (leaf; Video Track 5) and the other on *qeej*. For one of the dances the performers changed into Yao garments, carried bells and were accompanied by prerecorded worship singing in the Yao language (see Figure 5.3). The show concluded with a *múa sạp* (bamboo dance) accompanied by the song “Inh Lả Ôi” on prerecorded synthesiser; this dance and the accompanying song are usually attributed to the Thái ethnic group in Vietnam (Trần 1989:336).

The ways Hmong culture is being manipulated and formally represented here for tourists deserve closer attention. Hmong musical instrument demonstrations, which were regarded as the most “authentic” parts of the show by audience members I interviewed, were the shortest items on the programme. Hmong traditional music does not always conform to the musical expectations of foreign listeners. In a shrewd programming move, these pieces are kept to a minimum in favor of less aurally challenging and more visually accessible dances. This demonstrates the musical coordinator’s awareness and consideration of the audience’s interests. Crucially, however, these programmatic choices are made at the expense of cultural practices which the group claims to be preserving.

Hmong traditional instrumental music is based on the vocal art form of *kwv txhiaj* and, ultimately, the Hmong language (see chapter 3). With regard to the Cát Cát programme, this is especially true of the *nplooj* piece which comes from a traditional form of communication that is still commonly used in Vietnamese-Hmong communities today. In

context, two players can play with the tonal inflections of the Hmong language by conversing together in musical dialogue on *nplooj*. The instrument can also be used by individuals for personal entertainment while going about his or her daily routines. Since audience members rarely have any knowledge of the Hmong language, comprehension of the meanings behind this *nplooj* playing is beyond them. The player is forced to reinterpret the practice in order to entertain an audience who are more interested in the novelty of a “tribal” person manipulating sounds on a leaf. In her recontextualisation and redefinition of this traditional practice, which the audience members are supposedly paying to preserve, the Hmong-language meaning of *nplooj* playing becomes irrelevant. What is preserved, then, is not the traditional practice of communicating by *nplooj*, but only the decontextualised technique of making a sound on a leaf.¹⁴¹

The *qeej* demonstration is marginally closer to the secular style of *qeej* playing and dancing currently found in Hmong communities throughout Vietnam. Women rarely play *qeej* and the Cát Cát performers follow this trend by having two young men give the demonstration. The instrument’s strong association with masculinity means that secular *qeej* performance is often associated with courting practices; in sacred contexts the *qeej* is most closely associated with animist funeral ceremonies (see chapters 3 and 4). *Qeej* music can sound monotonous to an unaccustomed ear. During the Cát Cát show the performers compensate for the inaccessibility of the musical sound by shifting the emphasis to a carefully coordinated dance. While this elaborate duet is visually entertaining, the synchronisation of the dancers’ acrobatic movements is removed from traditional secular contexts because there, the players would be competing for attention rather than performing

¹⁴¹ If the majority of the financial capital from these performances was contributing to maintenance of the local communities and their traditions, it might be argued that the musical traditions are also being preserved. However, judging by the role of the local government authorities in these events, who primarily come from the Viet majority, and the increasingly commercialised enterprise that Cát Cát village has evolved into, it appears that this is not the case.

in unison. Once again, this demonstrates how the Cát Cát group have extracted elements of traditional practices and re-presented them for an outside audience.

Since the show includes examples of Yao traditional garments, Yao and Thái dances, and Yao and Viet musics, the group's identity as a Hmong performing group (*đội văn nghệ bản Mông*) is called into question. In fact, the performers come from a variety of ethnic groups. In September 2010 the thirteen members of the group included Hmong, Mường, Tày and Viet people. Surprisingly, since they are one of the more populous ethnic groups in the area, there were no Yao members at this time. Furthermore, a Mường boy from the group named Luc informed me that the *qeej* instruments used during the performances were made by a Yao man in Tả Phìn village, not a Hmong man as would normally be expected; I was unable to confirm the veracity of this claim. Regardless, this demonstrates the fluidity of identity in daily life, and some of the ways social identities can be manipulated to serve economic interests.

The music and dance forms in this performance have been extracted from their participatory origins, reformed, and combined into a presentational performance for an audience that for the most part is unfamiliar with the culture's origins. In emphasising this presentational style, each piece on the programme ends with the performers' bows accompanied by the audience's applause. The group's familiarity with contemporary Euro-American performance conventions is further evidenced by the inclusion of items that permit audience participation: following the leaf demonstration, audience members are given a brief lesson on the basic technique of leaf playing; and, as has become almost standard practice for ethnic minority shows in northern Vietnam,¹⁴² the programme concludes with the Thái ethnic group's bamboo dance which permits audience members to break the audience-performer divide by getting on stage and joining in.

¹⁴² I have attended tourist performances that have included this dance at the end of the programme in Hà Giang, Hanoi, Lào Cai and Sơn La.

Audience feedback provides another set of perspectives on the show, although at times opinions were difficult to gauge because they were predominantly based on short interviews following the performance.¹⁴³ The *nplooj* demonstration and the dances were frequently cited as the most enjoyable aspects of the show. Carol from the United States said that these features in particular met her expectations: “I really liked the girl that was singing with the reed [*nplooj*]. I thought that was perfect. Likewise, the last dance which utilised the natural environment to create something.” In general, she “liked the simplicity” of the show because “that’s what their culture is.” By way of contrast, Brenda, originally from Jordan, recognised that she was attributing her own meaning to the performance and could not fully comprehend the intended meaning of the performers: “I wish it was in English because I couldn’t understand.... I created the story for myself. It would have been nice to know what their perception is.” Overall, the feedback tended to be very positive with many people appearing reluctant to provide any negative criticism. The show was satisfying to audience members because “it was very traditional” and met with their expectations of encountering a people who lived simple lives almost as if they were from a previous time in history.

While traces of Hmong traditional musical practices remain, this event is so removed from its origins that it must now be considered a new product or phenomenon of the postmodern world. The show is a hybridised fusion of selected ethnic minority and Viet majority musics staged as a presentational performance. Most of the audience is convinced that this is traditional music which has been only slightly modified for the performance platform. The performers are there because they are paid to be; they work six and a half days per week with a half-day on Wednesdays. For this work they each receive a salary of approximately 1.5 to 2 million VND (£43.50 to £58) per month depending on the experience

¹⁴³ Tourists tend not to spend more than two or three nights in Sapa. Consequently, I have supplemented these interviews with informal conversations with tourists I met elsewhere who had attended this show earlier during their stay in Vietnam. The quotations used here come from conversations directly following the performances I attended.

and role of the performer, in addition to any tips (interview with group members, September 2010).

Besides the obvious financial benefits for the local authorities this show, and others like it, could be viewed from a socio-cultural perspective as an important site of cosmopolitan encounters. The performance frame is familiar enough for the audience to understand its role while the content of the performance challenges them to varying degrees. Similarly, the performers are performing musics and uncomplicated dances that are familiar to them while also gaining experience in contemporary performance practices. Both audience members and performers are stepping into unknown territory with sets of familiar safeguards. In this way, culturally and socially, the audience and performers are meeting each other half-way.

In her seminal book on travel writing as encoded imperial relations, Mary Louise Pratt coined the term “contact zone”, which

invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect.... A ‘contact’ perspective emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and ‘travelees’, not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (2008:8)

This term can be applied to these ethnic minority cultural performances for tourists where the audience and performers meet. While both parties are attempting to interact on a level of mutual understanding, Pratt’s definition emphasises the inequalities at play which cannot be overlooked. The tourists’ demand and economic support for these shows is the driving force behind them, programming is set according to their interests rather than for the maintenance of traditional practices, and the show is structured according to audience expectations rather than those of the performers.

This cosmopolitan meeting point has ramifications for the maintenance of traditional musical practices in the region. In the short term, the financial support provided by tourists is providing viable, although not necessarily sustainable, employment for young musicians and dancers. Musically, as the performance has to cater to the audience's expectations the performers have less flexibility to modify the programme according to their own desires. The linguistic basis of instrumental music is discarded in favour of an emphasis on accessibility, novelty and entertainment. The result is a new cultural form which is driven by social and economic changes which are affecting the entire country. The long-term implications of this new performance platform might include a greater degree of professionalisation of Hmong traditional music in Vietnam. This small group of performers is already developing two contrasting styles of playing: one based on the *kwv txhiaj* style for those familiar with the Hmong language and another without any direct linguistic associations. If their practice reflects a greater trend throughout Vietnam, this splitting may result in the increasing disassociation of Hmong instrumental music from vocal music.

5.3 Informal Shows for Tourists

Informal music performances range from individual Hmong musicians playing on the side of the street to troupes of young men playing *qeej* with women dancing beside them dressed in traditional clothing and accessorised with icons of Hmong femininity, umbrellas. The standard and styles of playing are equally variable. Some choose to play *kwv txhiaj* melodies while others do not care or know how to do so. As with the formal performances, it makes little difference because the predominantly non-Hmong-speaking audience cannot understand the lexical meanings of the melodies. Thus, the "contact zone" of the performance is controlled by the audience's expectations.

These performances differ from the formal performances in the way they are organised. The informal shows have no formal management structure in place, no fixed venue and no set starting time. They do not claim to be preserving cultural heritage through their work; the primary motivation of these performers is monetary. This section analyses an informal music performance which has been named, promoted and re-imagined by the tourism industry as the Love Market to illustrate how informal performances for tourists transform traditional participatory performances into a presentational context.

5.3.1 *The Love Market (9 January 2010)*

Saturday was the big market day in Sapa during my fieldwork.¹⁴⁴ This was the only day when all of the stalls in the main square were open. Hmong and Yao from the surrounding villages came to town for their weekly shopping in the market near the square (see Figure 5.4). When they were not off trekking with tourists, young Hmong girls socialised in the main square and around the town, taking advantage of the free time to hone their embroidery skills. Vietnamese and foreign tourists indulged in a little consumerism as they purchased souvenirs including ethnic minority clothes, embroidery, jewellery and mostly unplayable musical instruments¹⁴⁵ which were only suitable as decorative items.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ A smaller number of stalls tended to be open in the main square on Fridays and Sundays and occasionally on other days of the week during the high season.

¹⁴⁵ One Viet musical instrument dealer whose stall was strategically positioned at the steps up to the square (see rear-centre of Figure 5.3) sold oversized Yao drums and Hmong *qeej*. His *pièce de résistance* was a *qeej* which was about four times the average size with the longest pipe measuring approximately seven feet.

¹⁴⁶ See Phillips and Steiner (1999) for a selection of essays on art as tourist memorabilia.



Figure 5.4: The main square of Sapa town in January 2010.¹⁴⁷

On one evening in early January 2010, as the sun lowered behind the mountains, small clusters of young Hmong men in traditional dress with *qeej* on their backs began to gather at the top of the square in front of the Catholic Church. Every so often, one blew a few chords on his instrument to get the attention of passing tourists. A group of Vietnamese men on their way from dinner approached to ask for a demonstration (Video Track 13). One Viet tourist asked if the boys planned to meet any girls tonight and was delighted to receive confirmation of this with a nod. Quickly the tourists lost interest, handed over some spare change and moved on; the boys stopped playing and waited for the next money-paying request. As more tourists filtered back into town following their day of trekking, the

¹⁴⁷ Shortly after this photograph was taken the Hoàng Liên Hotel was demolished. As of February 2011 a new hotel was under construction.

frequency of performances picked up. After sunset, there were about fifteen to twenty *qeej* players split into three or four groups around the periphery of the main square, all playing to groups of culture-hungry tourists.

Seeing that there were sizeable numbers of tourists out shopping, one of the clusters moved onto the concrete circle at the centre of the square, where they were soon followed by most of the other players. They spent the rest of the evening there playing and dancing *qeej*. A couple of Hmong girls wearing traditional dress and carrying umbrellas performed duets with the boys by dancing and mock-flirting with them to the delight of their audience. As the evening wore on, the tourists got drunker and the requests became more forceful. Inevitably, one of the Viet tourists decided to prise an instrument from a performer's hands and imitated his playing and dancing, which other members of his party found hilarious. The Hmong boys did not see the joke but passed round a water bottle among themselves filled with "happy water" (rice wine), which undoubtedly helped them tolerate the belligerent travelers a little more. They continued to dance and play until their paying audience retreated to their hotels around midnight.

Something similar to this happens every Saturday in the main square and to a lesser degree on Friday and Sunday evenings. The event has been named the Love Market by travel guides and websites. These sources tend to provide one of two descriptions of the Love Market. The first is that this event is for young hill-tribe people to meet, serenade each other and fall in love: "The dancing and singing continue into the early hours, often persuading men and women into each other's arms. That first magical night, some are lucky enough to leave the market with their new partners and walk hand in hand through the forest".¹⁴⁸ The second description is that it used to be a place for falling in love, but since the town has become so overrun with tourists, the hill-tribes have moved the authentic market to more

¹⁴⁸ <http://www.treksapavietnam.com/ak28/Sapa-travel-guide/Useful-information/Love-market-Sapa.html>, accessed 20 May 2011.

remote locations and the current event in Sapa is simply a representation of what used to take place in the town; these other locations are invariably specified by the websites, along with the additional cost of a tour there. Older Hmong in Sapa view the Love Market differently to these descriptions in both its past and present formations.

Oral accounts suggest that the focal point of early Yao and Hmong communities was a marketplace on the plateau where Sapa town is currently located. Inhabitants from the surrounding villages would travel to Sapa every weekend for a major event. This event was not known as the “Love Market”; it was more akin to a town fair.¹⁴⁹ As this was long before the time of motorbikes and the paths would have been challenging to navigate, the journey to Sapa could take hours. Tents were set up near the fair as temporary accommodation. People would arrive on Saturday evening, party throughout the night and then travel home on Sunday. Among the main activities at the fair were trading, story-telling, embroidering, courting, drinking, dancing and musicking.¹⁵⁰ Singers and instrumental musicians would exchange repertoires and sometimes compete for the attention of others. Exogamous clan relations suggest that this event would have been an important social meeting point for potential suitors but this was never considered the focal point of the fair.¹⁵¹

Nowadays, money is the prime motivating factor and performances are arranged in such a way as to maximise income by catering to tourists’ desires: each performance rarely lasts more than a minute or two so that the performers can collect money from the audience before they lose interest and move on; when *qeej* players are asked if they are seeking a lover

¹⁴⁹ At the time of the fair there was no town square; this was built as part of the rejuvenation of Sapa as a tourist destination.

¹⁵⁰ Phạm Duy has also noted the practice of playing *qeej* at markets in Sapa in the early twentieth century: “The Mèo in Chapa are experts in blowing the *khen*. During prewar times they performed on the *khen* during market meetings to accompany antiphonal songs, or they blew and danced” (1975:7).

¹⁵¹ These oral accounts of how the fair used to be correspond closely with the accounts gathered by DeGregorio, Phạm and Yasui (1997:19-21). The only difference is their informants claimed that the older version of the event was dominated by the Yao people. However, it seems unlikely that this would have been the case because the Yao are now, and probably would have also been then, in the minority. This discrepancy could be due to the different sources of the accounts: I primarily discussed it with Hmong people while they appear to have discussed it with Yao people for the most part.

they will usually say yes, even if they are not, to maintain the myth that the evening is about love, hence demonstrating their participation in the commodification of Hmong culture; traditional garments are an obligatory part of the performance whereas in times past these clothes would probably have been worn whether taking part in the music or not; and the musical instruments used are limited to those which provide the most novelty value, especially the *qeej*.

In fact, the *qeej* is practically inseparable from the Love Market. The mere sight and sounds of this instrument are so exotic to foreign tourists that, combined with the visual icons of identity already mentioned, its performance satisfies the tourists' "fetishization of the Other" (Hall 1997:287) despite the quality of the music. One benefit of this emphasis on the *qeej* is that it encourages young Hmong men to take up the instrument. Yet they do so for different reasons than those before them. Now, the men know they can make money from simply dressing in traditional dress, blowing the instrument and dancing around in front of tourists. This is not respected by the young women because their fathers know how to play properly and would never play for money in such a manner. Due to their unwillingness to play at the Love Market unless they receive monetary compensation and their general lack of ability to play traditional repertoire on the instrument, one Hmong girl astutely described this practice to me (in English) as "Love Money, not Love Market!"

Turino's categories for distinguishing between types of musical performance (2008) suggest at least two alternative readings of this event. At first glance, the Hmong boys' *qeej* playing and dancing at the current Love Market fits most neatly into the category of presentational performances where "one group (the artists) provid[es] music for another (the audience) in which there is a pronounced artist-audience separation within face-to-face situations" (51-2)—the separation of space is emphasised when the *qeej* players perform on the concrete circle in the centre of the square to an audience standing around the edge of the

circle. The musicking at the town fair of times past, on the other hand, might have been considered a participatory performance with little or no artist-audience divide, where “one’s primary attention is on the activity, on *the doing*, and on the other participants” (ibid.:28) and where “quality...is ultimately judged on the level of participation achieved” (ibid.:29).

An alternative reading of the Love Market can be deduced from the Hmong musicians’ perspective which reverses these categories and complicates the situation. Although money is the primary motivating factor for these performing musicians at the Love Market in its current form, if we consider the experience from the perspective of a teenage Hmong boy the social aspect becomes more apparent and the event can be reconsidered as a participatory performance. The boys come from the surrounding villages every weekend and spend five or six hours together in the square, occasionally taking breaks to wander around the town and chat with friends; they tend not to speak (or need to speak) any foreign languages so they have little or no spoken interaction with foreign tourists. The group is musically accessible to any Hmong boy who can borrow a *qeej* because no fixed repertoire exists which members are expected to learn before taking part, virtuosity and soloing are not prized and the “cloaking function” (ibid.:46) of the blended sounds make the musical environment less intimidating for beginners. Conversely at the town fair, competition between performers might have bred a degree of virtuosity, certainly more than is currently on display at the Love Market, which would have resulted in something more akin to a presentational performance.

To summarise this with regard to the current Love Market format: from the Hmong *qeej* players’ perspective, they are involved in a participatory performance among themselves while also consciously being involved in a presentational performance, in collaboration with tour guides and the media who promote their work, of the Love Market myth for a foreign audience. Simultaneously, the tourists believe they are observing a form of participatory

performance when they are actually observing a presentational performance of a myth which they are funding and which is being maintained for them. So, in the increasingly cosmopolitan context of Sapa town a shift has taken place from participatory to presentational performance; in Zimbabwe, Turino notes a shift of this kind which accompanied the rise of an African cosmopolitan cultural formation (2008:122-54). This shift has left a void that has been filled by a new form of participatory performance which is more relevant to the current social context.

Even if the Love Market were to be considered a traditional meeting point for Hmong, every week a crucial element is missing: the girls. While occasionally a couple of girls might dance with the boys, rarely more than three or four will take part. Typically on a busy Saturday night there will be about fifteen to twenty boys performing. After they have returned from trekking or have finished selling textiles or other souvenirs to tourists, most of the girls walk or take a *xe ôm* (motorbike taxi) back to their villages. Those who stay in town tend to have rented accommodation where they stay year-round. Even though they are staying in close proximity to the Love Market they have little interest in getting involved in the spectacle that is taking place in the main square. Instead they hang out in places like the Hmong Sisters Bar where they can chat with other Hmong girls and tourists, play pool and listen to new and exciting popular music from abroad (see Figure 5.5).

“Just Dance”	<i>Lady GaGa</i>
“Candy Shop”	<i>50 Cent</i>
“Gansta’s Paradise”	<i>Coolio feat. L.V.</i>
“Calabria 2007”	<i>Enur feat. Natasja and MIMS</i>
“Walk it Out”	<i>DJ Unk</i>
“The Ballad of Chasey Lain”	<i>The Bloodhound Gang</i>
“In the Ayer”	<i>Flo Rida</i>
“Sex Bomb”	<i>Tom Jones</i>
“Let’s Get it Started”	<i>Black Eyed Peas</i>

Figure 5.5: A sample list of tunes played at Hmong Sisters Bar in February 2010.

Despite being one of the more popular bars with foreign tourists, on Saturday nights between December 2009 and July 2010 the Hmong Sisters Bar typically had more than half of its clientele comprising single Hmong girls in their late teens to early twenties—Hmong girls are not to be seen in bars like this once they are married. In many cases, their interactions with foreigners develop into friendships that are maintained by contact through mobile phones, email or social networking sites like Facebook. Far more amorous encounters are initiated at this meeting point than in the town square where the Hmong boys are performing.

All of this only serves to further enhance these girls' "global imagination" (Erlmann 1999). A number of scholars have developed the idea of the "imagination": Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991) examined how nationalism binds people together in an imagined way even though they will probably never have direct contact with most of the other members of their nation; in *Modernity at Large* (1996) Arjun Appadurai then explored the combined effects of electronic media and mass migration on the imagination in the contemporary world; and Erlmann, in *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination* (1999), outlined the emergence of what he refers to as a "global imagination" among South African musicians that coincided with specific international tours and encounters from the 1890s onwards. Erlmann defines this term as an "articulation of interests, languages, styles, and images" (ibid.:3) which "denotes the means by which people shift the contexts of their knowledge and endow phenomena with significance beyond their immediate realm of personal experience" (ibid.:4). Such a global or cosmopolitan imagination can be observed among Hmong youth in the Sapa area. This is particularly the case for girls: as a result of their daily interactions and work with foreigners, they frequently discuss and associate with a life beyond the boundaries of places they have actually physically been to.

This cosmopolitan outlook has had a notable impact on the girls' knowledge about music. An informal conversation with two fifteen-year-old Hmong girls which took place on the periphery of the square during the Saturday night Love Market clearly illustrates this (Video Track 14). One of the girls was playing Westlife, a boy-band from Dublin that had recently become popular in Vietnam, on her phone while we chatted. She proceeded to educate me about the members of the band and their families while I struggled to name a single member of the group. This was the music she wanted to talk about, not *qeej* playing at the Love Market. Her perspective is shared by many young Hmong in Sapa who are interacting with people from wealthier parts of the world on a daily basis.

The Love Market has also become associated with sex tourism. The narrative promulgated by the tourism industry can create expectations among certain types of tourist that sex is freely available at the Love Market and, perhaps, in the vicinity of the town in general (see also Michaud and Turner 2006:795-6). This sets the event apart from other tourist shows in and around Sapa through its accentuation of the unequal power relations which are already engendered by the tourism industry in Vietnam.

Another aspect of this dynamic is evident in the unusual audience-performer divide: while the boundary between audience and performer is clearly defined at the Cát Cát village show and is only crossed when the performers invite audience members to participate, such divisions are less distinct at the Love Market. The ambiguous division there is most frequently crossed by Viet tourists who do not wait for an invitation, much to the discomfort of some foreign visitors. A closer analysis of the performance space provides an explanation for this. Although the Hmong musicians might appear in control through their occupation of the focal point of the square while two Viet flautists play and sell flutes to tourists around the periphery, on the ground beneath them is the star-like symbol found engraved on the head of the Đông Sơn drums (see Figure 5.4). These prehistoric drums are iconic of the Đông Sơn

period (700-100 B.C.), which many Viet scholars consider to be the foundational period of their culture (Nguyễn 1998:446; Pelley 2002:156). As part of the town's renovation, this concrete symbol was added to the main square. The local authorities' demarcation of the performance space illustrates that despite the presence of multiple ethnic groups and international visitors, the physical, and by extension the social, space is Viet and Vietnamese first and foremost.

The Hmong in Sapa make a crucial distinction between the Love Market, which is for tourists, and traditional musical practices, which are for the Hmong. As with the more formal Cát Cát village show, these staged performances are not considered an important part of the main tradition by its practitioners, and the performers are not as highly valued locally as *txiv qeej* are. As a result, the long-term effects of these shows on the core tradition are difficult to gauge. Many young Hmong men in the Sapa district are drawn to the *qeej* now because they view it as a feasible way to make money from tourists, and they appear to enjoy the social excursion. Elders are concerned that the standard of playing is suffering as a result and they fear for the sustainability of traditional musical practices. As long as paying tourists are in town, though, the Love Market will continue to draw young players to the *qeej*.

5.4 Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how new presentational performances of Hmong music have emerged in Sapa town as it has become the focal point of tourism-driven cosmopolitan encounters in northwestern Vietnam. These “staged authenticities” (MacCannell 1973) combine aspects of Hmong traditional music with the presentational frame expected by those engaging in “musical appreciation as cultural tourism”.¹⁵² When listeners come from more ethnically diverse backgrounds performers have to change their music in ways that balance

¹⁵² <http://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com/2010/11/music-appreciation-cultural-tourism-and.html>, accessed 31 August 2011.

novel and familiar elements, though the emphasis is on presenting forms of difference which are palatable to audience members. These musical commodities are “vulnerable to the vagaries of commerce, which demands that the alienation of heritage ride the delicate balance between exoticism and banalization—an equation that often requires ‘natives’ to perform themselves in such a way as to make their indigeneity legible to the consumer of otherness” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:142). Although the Hmong are complicit in this financial exchange, the performers are meeting their mostly non-Hmong audience on the audience’s terms through their adjustment of traditional practices. This engenders a form of neoimperialist power relations where those with the money dictate the musical content, albeit indirectly.

Pratt’s concept of a “contact zone” is useful in describing the site of postcolonial interactions between the performers and tourists, but neglects to address the pivotal role played by the state, as represented here by the Vietnamese tourism industry. Vietnam’s neocolonial¹⁵³ dependence on the Global North was confirmed with the advent of the *đổi mới* economic changes in 1986. This relationship has evolved to the point where the state of Vietnam has adopted the strategies of their former colonisers in at least two ways: by representing the colonised (in this case, the Hmong) as tribal, exotic or oriental in order to justify their subjugation, and by manipulating this re-presentation for financial gain; this is done directly with the Cát Cát show through ticket sales and indirectly with the Love Market through the money extracted from tourists who have visited Sapa to attend this show. Although the Vietnamese state remains confined in a neocolonial condition of dependence on the capitalist economic imperialism of their former colonisers and other nations in the Global

¹⁵³ Kwame Nkrumah proposed the term neo-colonialism to describe the postcolonial situation of many ex-colonies: “The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy, is directed from outside” (1965:ix). The hyphen has since been omitted by other authors (see Young 2001:44-56).

North, the way the examples in this chapter depict their response suggests that they are only exacerbating the postcolonial condition for their population.

This manipulation and re-presentation of indigenous Hmong culture for economic and political reasons resembles the case of the Hmong community in northern Thailand, as Evrard and Leepreecha observe:

Local cultures and their symbols (places, objects, peoples) become objects of desire and marketing for tourists as part of a process of control and pacification of social relations. In other words, they are subject to commoditization and fetishism (rather than *aestheticization*) either because they are no longer perceived as a threat to the nation-state, or because there is a need to soften and domesticate their difference. (2009:305; emphasis in original)

The main difference between the cases of the Hmong in Thailand and in Vietnam is that the Vietnamese-Hmong, in general, are less trusted and integrated with the nation-state than most Thai-Hmong communities. Consequently, the process of internal colonialism which Evrard and Leepreecha refer to in Thailand is exacerbated in the context of Vietnam.

Turino's categories have been useful for analysing the effects of the emergence of a musical ethno-industry in Sapa and for highlighting how the Hmong themselves have contributed to it. The changes could also be viewed as a shift from social musicking to occupational musicking. Either way, this has led to an increased emphasis on cultural icons which the paying audience members (i.e. the tourists) expect to observe at the expense of those which are more aesthetically attractive to the Hmong themselves. The performers in these shows are portraying "traditions of a lost era" (Kennedy and Williams 2001:158) which, in fact, were never in existence before the tourists began to visit.

But the reality is that even the marginalised minorities of Vietnam are becoming increasingly cosmopolitan. From an awareness of the difference between musicking for locals and musicking for outsiders a discourse has emerged on the protection and maintenance of

tradition to counter the tide of globalisation which many Hmong believe threatens to engulf these practices. Although these new cultural influences are proving irresistible for many younger Hmong, there appears to be an emerging respect for traditional practices that has been engendered by these cosmopolitan encounters.

In an article which proposes an ecological approach to musical sustainability, Titon writes, “diversity underlies the philosophy of musical conservation with the view that all musics contribute, actually and potentially, to the adaptational capabilities of humankind” (2009:121). While some consider performances such as those held at Cát Cát and the Love Market to be a challenge to Hmong traditional musical practices, others are taking advantage of their presentational format to develop careers based on the performance of modified versions of Hmong traditional music. If diversity really is vital to the sustainability of Hmong musical traditions, these new forms of musical activity combined with the increasingly cosmopolitan outlook of some Hmong in the area should make a positive contribution to the core traditions.

Prelude 6 Happy to be Born Hmong

*Zoo, zoo peb lub siab,
Zoo peb lub siab,
Yug los ua Hmoob.*

We, we are so happy,
We are so happy,
To be born Hmong.

*Peb Hmoob txawm nyob pem roob,
Los yeej tseem zoo tshaj tsis tswm noob,
Yuav tau tshaj tsis tswm noob,
Muab xav kom thoob.*

Even though we Hmong stay in the mountains,
Here we are not afraid to go hungry,
Or afraid of things outside,
We have to think clearly.

*Tsis tag yug ua Mab Suav,
Thiaj mam xav ua,
Ib Haiv neeg zoo,
Mpaj nroos los mus txhawb,
Haiv Hmoob kom muaj lub koob,
Ces yeej yuav nto moo.*

There is no need to be another type of people,
We will continue to be,
A nice group of people,
Who help each other,
And we Hmong also have our culture,
Which must always be protected.

*Peb Hmoob txawm nyob pem roob,
Los yeej tseem zoo tshaj tsis tswm noob,
Yuav tau muab xav kom thoob,
Hmoob los yog neeg tib yam,
Yuav nyob sab ntuj twg,
Los Hmoob twb muaj txhua yam,
Hais lus Hmoob sib tham,
Peb sib hlub sib pab xwb ces zoo.*

Even though we Hmong stay in the mountains,
We thrive without a leader,
We think carefully,
All Hmong are the same,
Wherever the place,
The Hmong are still happy,
Speaking the Hmong language to communicate,
To help and love each other is the way.

Excerpt from the lyrics of Vixian Moua's song "Zoo Siab Yug Los Ua Hmoob" ("Happy to be Born Hmong") (n.d.).

On 1 September 2009, I attended an annual Hmong festival in Mộc Châu town, Sơn La province. The festival, advertised by tour operators as the annual "Moc Chau Love Market",¹⁵⁴ constituted one day of the week-long celebrations which lead up to Vietnam's National Day (*ngày quốc khánh*) on 2 September. At the festival I purchased a copy of a Hmong popular music VCD by the Californian-based Hmong singer Vixian Moua. The lyrics of the first song on this VCD, "Zoo Siab Yug Los Ua Hmoob" ("Happy to be Born Hmong"), resonated with the theme of the day, which was aimed at bringing the Hmong community

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, <http://aprotours.com/am144/Apro-tour/Customized-tours/MOC-CHAU-LOVE-MARKET-.html>, accessed 1 September 2011 and http://www.heritagesvietnam.com/index.php?menu=menu_hangmuc&HangMucID=&type=Tour&top=16&child=21&page=page_tour&TourID=23, accessed 1 September 2011.

together for a celebration of their ethnic identity and indeed with the entire festival, which celebrated the national identity of the people.

This coincidence—the people selling the VCDs were a Viet couple who did not speak Hmong and would probably not have been aware of the meaning of the lyrics—resembles the way Hmong throughout Vietnam attribute their own meanings to Hmong popular music which has been produced by Hmong in other countries. The lyrics are generic enough to be listened to and understood by Hmong in most parts of the world. Only the penultimate line, “Hais lus Hmoob sib tham”, is directed specifically at the American-Hmong community who are struggling to maintain their language.

How do these mediated musics contribute to an imagined bond between the Vietnamese-Hmong and the Hmong transnational community? What happens when members of these imagined communities actually meet and perform music together? What effects do these musical interactions have on Vietnamese-Hmong culture? Chapter 6 seeks to understand how these musical activities position the Vietnamese-Hmong in the Hmong transnational community.

Chapter 6 Mediated Messages: Music and the Hmong

Transnational Community

From the perspectives of the Vietnamese-Hmong, this chapter examines how various forms of musical activity mediate interactions with the Hmong transnational community. At present, music produced in the diaspora is distributed and consumed through a variety of recently introduced media technologies in Vietnam. The ways that these musics mediate an imagined idea of a transnational Hmong community are compared and contrasted with less common face-to-face musical interactions between Vietnamese-Hmong and Hmong from other countries. This chapter makes a contribution to the literature on music in and of diasporic communities by exploring how the Vietnamese-Hmong negotiate their complex relationships with the Hmong transnational community through music.¹⁵⁵

Section 1 considers the Vietnamese-Hmong position in the complex homeland-diaspora network. The ways that mediated musics contribute to an “imaginary reunification” (Hall 1990:222) are dealt with in section 2; this section concludes with a consideration of how the methods of distribution are limiting Vietnamese-Hmong interactions with the greater Hmong community. This is followed in section 3 by a Geertzian thick description of a rare musical encounter between Hmong musicians based in Sapa and a Laotian-Hmong performing group, where this imagined community is made “real” through face-to-face encounters. Section 4 suggests how the Vietnamese-Hmong community is being affected by these musical encounters. Overall, this chapter attempts to discover how the Vietnamese-

¹⁵⁵ Since the 1990s a wealth of research has been carried out on music in and of diasporic communities. The first notable collection of essays on this subject was compiled by Mark Slobin in the journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* (1994). More recently, Tina Ramnarine guest edited a volume of *Ethnomusicology Forum* with the title “Musical Performance in the Diaspora” (2007). Hae-kyung Um’s edited volume *Diasporas and Interculturalism in Asian Performing Arts: Translating traditions* (2005) focuses specifically on the performing arts of the Asian diaspora. Two other notable publications on the music of the Asian diaspora are Wong’s *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (2004) and Zheng’s *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America* (2010), which are predominantly focused on the Asian-American community. Zheng’s study begins to explore the emergence of a transnational Asian identity through music, primarily from a Chinese perspective.

Hmong situate themselves and understand their position in the greater Hmong transnational community through music, and demonstrates how music mediates transnational notions of a Hmong community.

6.1 Locating the Homeland and Diaspora Communities

Delineating the homeland and diaspora for any community can be a misleading exercise due to the ambiguity of these terms when put into practice. In summarising his own study on Klezmer musicians, who travelled a circuitous route through history from Europe to North America in exile and then back again to Europe as a musical import, Mark Slobin writes that eventually, “The music itself becomes a kind of homeland to the musicians’ compounded sense of diaspora” (2003:290). Through musicking together, those diasporic musicians are reconstructing their homeland, so for them, the notion of homeland is exactly that, a notion, not an actual physical space. Similarly, Brubaker has called for reassessing diaspora as “a category of practice, project, claim and stance rather than as a bounded group” (2005:13). This chapter treats both terms, homeland and diaspora, as stances or claims (ibid.:12) which can be expressed through musical performance.

As can be inferred from their tumultuous history and multiple phases of migration (see chapter 1), the Hmong are no exception to this elusiveness of categorisation as “homeland” or “diaspora” communities. Their lack of a territory over which they can definitively claim sovereignty (i.e. a nation-state) confounds this issue further. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines “nation” as “A large aggregate of communities and individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture, history, or occupation of the same territory, so as to form a distinct people.”¹⁵⁶ Four of the five factors listed here, common descent, language, culture and history, can be loosely identified as

¹⁵⁶ www.oed.com, accessed 16 October 2010.

uniting elements for the global Hmong community. Thus, this chapter deals with a transnational ethnic nation or minority nation (see Keating and McGarry 2001).

In attempting to make sense of this geographically scattered minority nation Louisa Schein writes:

Unlike the migration of Hmong across the borders between the Asian states of China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar, the Hmong migration to the West is much more structured by a 'diasporic' logic, one in which there is a unidirectional movement away from home and a concomitant production of memories of and longings for a homeland. For the Hmong, the moment of refugee dispersal was also the moment of being severed from what had been the characteristic subsistence agricultural productive life and of insertion into massive wage economies and social welfare systems through which migrants became much more enmeshed with host states and local economies. It was also a movement experienced as acutely involuntary, accompanied by painful losses of loved ones, of community, and of lifestyle. It has generated a sense of homeland that is distinct from that which prevailed within Asia. (2004a:273)

The above excerpt eloquently summarises the current socioeconomic differences between Hmong in the Global North and those in Southeast Asia and China. Schein suggests that the Hmong in the Global North can be considered a diasporic community due to the manner in which their way of life has diverged from that of the home community whereas Asian Hmong generally regard themselves as situated in their homeland.¹⁵⁷ This perspective closely resembles the reality I encountered during my fieldwork. In Vietnam, most Hmong I interacted with had been settled for generations. Although many were aware that their ancestors probably migrated from China, they were in no doubt that Vietnam was their homeland and had been for over a century. In contrast, my American-Hmong interlocutors

¹⁵⁷ From this point of separation onwards, the two groups develop in their own independent ways with varying degrees of contact. Peter Manuel emphasizes the uniqueness of the resulting diasporic culture in the preface to his book on East Indian music in the West Indies: "Diasporic communities...have come to be recognized as constituting not mere transplanted fragments of homeland societies, but distinctive entities often with original and dynamic art forms" (2000:xiv). Implicit here is the suggestion that diasporic cultures diverge from their source to such a degree that they should be studied as a singular entity first, not as an afterthought. In order to conduct a comprehensive study of the two-way passage of musics between homeland and diaspora, a researcher would have to conduct a comparative ethnography that is both multi-sited and multi-focal. Although not dealing with a diasporic community in the transnational sense, Turino's tri-focal study of Peruvian folk music in *Moving Away from Silence* (1993) is an example of an ethnomusicological study of this kind.

tended to refer to Laos as their homeland and occasionally cited China as their place of origin.

While Schein's division of the transnational Hmong community is a useful starting point, these communities can be further subdivided according to the nation-state in which they are located (i.e. American-Hmong, Chinese-Hmong, Thai-Hmong, etc.) because national identity can and often does supersede ethnic identity for many of these people. Furthermore, the Vietnamese-Hmong have a unique relationship with the Hmong diaspora due to their recent history: the majority of Hmong in the diaspora initially became refugees because they were fighting against the communist forces of North Vietnam, and some of these people are probably still reluctant to travel to Vietnam as a result of this history. Thus, this chapter focuses on the underrepresented perspectives of the Vietnamese-Hmong in the greater Hmong transnational community. The chapter demonstrates how music mediates their unique position in this community, and how their consumption of Hmong diasporic music positions the Vietnamese-Hmong in the middle of a tug-of-war between the ideologies of the Vietnamese nation-state and the Hmong transnational community.

6.2 The Imagined Musical Community

Gage Averill used a case study of the musical practices of Haitian immigrants in the United States to argue that “music is an important component of the connective tissue of the Haitian transnation” (2006[1994]:272). This section considers how mediated musics with lyrics in the Hmong language function as part of the connective tissue which binds the Vietnamese-Hmong with the Hmong transnational community. These mediated musics enable Vietnamese-Hmong people to transcend the constraints of living as a marginalised minority in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam by engaging with the Hmong transnational community,

while the means of distribution of these musics also limit their interactions with and agency within the greater Hmong community.

In over thirty years of research, predominantly with the American-Hmong community, Louisa Schein has developed an extensive body of scholarship on how media practices “have become pivotal in securing, and even generating, Hmong transnationality” (2002:229). Also, the Thai-Hmong scholar Prasit Leepreecha has written about how Hmong language audiovisual media are replacing what he sees as the diminishing role of orally transmitted myths, legends and songs in maintaining Hmong ethnic identity (2008). This section builds on their work by examining the means of distribution and consumption of Hmong language music-based media in Vietnam.

6.2.1 Music Copyright and Censorship in Vietnam

Copyright and censorship are the government’s primary means of control over the media in Vietnam. Over the past decade Vietnam has made a number of significant advances towards the enforcement of intellectual property rights. Chapter V, article 60 of the 1992 national constitution as amended in 2001 reads:

Citizens have the right to undertake scientific and technical research and discovery, invention, innovations, technical improvements, rationalisation of production, and to engage in literary, artistic creation and criticism and other cultural activities. Copy right [*sic*] and the right to industrial ownership [are] protected by the State.¹⁵⁸

In 2002, the Vietnam Centre for Protection of Music Copyright (VCPMC; Trung Tâm Bảo Vệ Quyền Tác Giả Âm Nhạc Việt Nam) was established¹⁵⁹ in order to “protect musicians from copyright infringements”, and the 2009 annual report indicated that they had collected a total of 23.33 billion VNĐ (£694,000) in royalties for musicians during the year, a fifty-four

¹⁵⁸ [http://www.vietnamlaws.com/freelaws/Constitution92\(aa01\).pdf](http://www.vietnamlaws.com/freelaws/Constitution92(aa01).pdf), accessed 28 August 2011.

¹⁵⁹ http://www.culturalprofiles.net/viet_nam/Units/2433.html, accessed 4 September 2011.

percent increase on the previous year.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, the government began participation in the International Intellectual Property Alliance (IIPA) conventions with their accession to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works in 2004 and to the Geneva Convention for the Protection of Producers of Phonograms against Unauthorised Duplication of Phonogram in 2005.¹⁶¹

Despite these developments Vietnam has yet to accede to the Universal Copyright Convention or the World Intellectual Property Organisation's Copyright Treaty. Vietnam remains on the IIPA's Watch List, having received a damning country report, primarily for weakening criminal penalties for copyright infringement in January 2010.¹⁶² In his recent book on popular music in Vietnam Dale Olsen writes that "pirating or illegal copying, manufacturing, and selling of audio and video materials at extremely low prices began in 1991 with Chinese copies of mostly American and other European-derived pop music" (2008:232). While this might have been the case with CDs, illicit copies of popular music on cassette tapes were widely available from at least the early 1980s (see section 6.2.2).

Censorship, by contrast, is one of the principal means by which the Vietnamese government maintains control over its media, including mediated musics. This practice is of much greater significance to the maintenance of an authoritarian regime than collecting royalties for local or foreign-based musicians, and might be a contributing factor to the lack of data on the subject. Vietnam's latest ranking of 165th on the World Press Freedom Index¹⁶³ indicates that it continues to have one of the most stringent media censorship policies on the globe; since both the media and music industries are censored by the Ministry for Culture,

¹⁶⁰ <http://vcpmc.org/vcpmc/images/files/1270012356.pdf>, accessed 10 August 2011.

¹⁶¹ <http://www.vietnamembassy-usa.org/news/story.php?d=20050505144005>, accessed 4 September 2011. A 2010 news report on copyright in Vietnam indicates that the Recording Industry Association of Vietnam was forced to suspend production due to a one hundred percent increase in royalty fees for performers (<http://www.thanhniennews.com/2010/Pages/20110516183336.aspx>, accessed 10 August 2011).

¹⁶² <http://www.iipa.com/rbc/2010/2010SPEC301VIETNAM.pdf>, accessed 20 September 2010.

¹⁶³ http://www.rsf.org/IMG/CLASSEMENT_2011/GB/C_GENERAL_GB.pdf, accessed 26 October 2010.

Sports and Tourism (Bộ Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch), presumably similarly authoritarian restrictions are in place with regard to music.¹⁶⁴

These combined policies have two important consequences for the Hmong: their culture tends to be depicted as archaic in the Vietnamese media, which are more interested in propagating the image of a harmoniously unified nation-state, and an abundance of foreign-produced pirated versions of Hmong musics are easily able to slip through Vietnam's ineffective copyright net. The vast majority of professional musicians in the country receive a flat rate payment for recordings and, consequently, many happily distribute illicit copies of their own recordings. As one travels from urban to rural areas where the Hmong reside the situation becomes even more pronounced. No reliable quantitative studies of this illegal trade have been conducted, for obvious logistical and safety reasons, so I have had to rely on my own empirical research. At all of the local markets I visited around northern Vietnam, I found it impossible to purchase a single legitimate edition of a music recording. Yet I could easily find stalls selling hundreds of copied VCDs or mobile phone shops that would upload an entire SD memory card of music for a minimal fee.

6.2.2 A New World Information Order

For the Hmong in Vietnam, most media technologies came and continue to come from across the Chinese border; few Hmong popular music recordings are produced in Vietnam. This situation bears some resemblance to the Peruvian domination of the Bolivian pirate music industry, as recently described by Henry Stobart, who reports “the almost complete collapse of [Bolivia's] large-scale and long-established national record industry and exodus of the transnational labels due to the effects of piracy” (2010:30). In the early 1980s Wallis and

¹⁶⁴ NSND Lê Ngọc Cường, director of the Performing Arts Department of the Ministry for Culture, Sport and Tourism, stated that censorship of music was still prevalent in Vietnam: “Banned musics are those violating and going against the policies and laws of the State.” He explained that this process was necessary to protect the people of Vietnam: “It is the same in any country that the pieces of music to be popularized should have the values to educate the people and enhance the aesthetic tastes of the public” (Interview, 27 April 2008).

Malm also noted that rampant cassette piracy in Tunisia effectively prevented the rise of any significant indigenous recording industry (1984:84). A similarly high degree of music piracy coupled with the long-standing trade embargo meant that there was never a significant presence of multinational labels in Vietnam. Moreover, the national labels have had little interest in promoting the music of the poorer ethnic minorities. The only recordings of Vietnamese-Hmong music to be found were made by musicologists or others interested in traditional songs or instrumental music. Only a couple of the VCDs surveyed were filmed in Vietnam; these had very low production quality compared to the rest and were predominantly focused on traditional music. The production of popular or contemporary styles of Hmong music is not encouraged or promoted: Dale Olsen's recent overview of popular music in Vietnam (2008) makes no reference to Hmong pop singers and I encountered none during my own fieldwork.

According to research participants living near the border with China, cassette tape players began to appear in the local markets from the 1980s onwards (see Figure 6.1). Those without electricity in their homes used smaller battery-powered handheld machines when they could afford them. Music on tapes sold in the markets included Hmong songs and instrumental music as well as Chinese and Vietnamese musics. The tapes were primarily blanks that had had the latest hits copied onto them. All of the cassettes I heard during my fieldwork had very poor sound quality, possibly due to deterioration after being copied multiple times, low quality playback equipment, and the harsh environmental factors that tapes were subjected to over the years.



Figure 6.1: Giàng A Minh's mains-powered cassette tape player with AM/FM radio in Tả Phìn village, 18 June 2010.

Regardless, the introduction of this technology signalled the beginning of a new phase in the musical lives of the Vietnamese-Hmong. As Peter Manuel writes in his important study on cassette culture in North India, “The emergence of cassette culture... must be seen in the context of a new world information order with new potentialities for decentralisation, diversification, autonomy, dissent, and freedom” (1993:2-3).¹⁶⁵ The remainder of this section considers how subsequent technological innovations, specifically video compact discs (VCDs), mobile phones equipped with Mp3 playback facility and the internet, have enhanced

¹⁶⁵ In the early days of this new world information order some Hmong also began to have access to radio and television broadcasts. Nowadays, the national broadcasting companies provide a limited amount of programming in the Hmong language (see further Nguyễn Thị Thu Thủy 2008). For the most part, these programmes do not focus on the transnational Hmong community and hence are not discussed further in this chapter, with the exception of the Christian radio broadcasts in the Hmong language (see section 6.4).

the potential of this new world information order and are leading to the recentralisation and reunification of a heterogeneous Hmong community.

6.2.3 Video Compact Discs (VCDs)

The Video Compact Disc (VCD) is a relatively inexpensive audiovisual playback technology that was launched by JVC, Philips, Sony and other international electronics companies in the early 1990s.¹⁶⁶ VCDs are Recorded Compact Discs (CD-Rs) with video files imprinted on them, so they have the same storage capabilities as music CDs (typically up to 700 MB). When copying a DVD sized file (up to 4.7 GB for a single-sided disc) to a VCD the files must be compressed to a minimum of one seventh the original size. This means that VCDs have a much lower playback quality than DVDs. CD-Rs also have a shorter life-expectancy than commercially produced CDs or DVDs because the discs are more delicate and prone to scratches and they are made using dye which degrades rapidly.

VCD technology received limited circulation in the Global North. This was largely due to the already widespread popularity of VHS technology during the 1990s, which has a similar standard of playback, and the subsequent emergence of DVD technology, which has the potential for far superior quality playback. In the Global South the low cost of reproduction, the challenges of enforcing copyright restrictions and the limited circulation of VHS technology meant that VCD technology rapidly spread throughout the region, and it has now become one of the dominant technologies for music video and movie playback. This has been a major point of concern for the multinational entertainment industry, which continues to pressure countries such as China and Vietnam into enforcing stricter punishments for piracy (see further Pang 2004 and 2006; Hu 2005; Thomas and Servaes 2006).

¹⁶⁶ https://www.ip.philips.com/view_attachment/2450/sl00812.pdf, accessed 12 October 2010.

Hmong in Lào Cai province reported that electricity was routed to their homes approximately ten to fifteen years ago. Since then many of the wealthier Hmong have invested in television sets and VCD players. In these areas the majority of television programming is state-run and in the Vietnamese language. A supplementary fee can be paid to receive foreign language stations, primarily in English, French or German, but few Hmong are interested in these. Instead, they purchase pirated Hmong language VCDs from their local markets. This technology now comprises their principal means of access to electronically mediated Hmong language music and movies.

Even in the most remote of village markets one can find vendors selling illicitly copied VCDs, usually for 10,000VNĐ (32 pence) per disc. Although many of the vendors I encountered were from the Viet majority, they still maintained a healthy supply of Hmong language discs where they were in demand. The percentage of VCDs in the Hmong language varied greatly and depended on the location and type of market. In Hanoi and other areas with few Hmong it was extremely rare to come across Hmong language discs whereas in areas with significant Hmong populations there would often be an entire stall or two devoted to Hmong language VCDs. For instance, at the weekly Mùòng Hum market in Lào Cai, a market dominated by the Hmong, there were two Hmong traders who sold only Hmong language discs in addition to the Viet music shop that was open throughout the week in the town and which sold only Viet discs. In contrast, at the daily market in Tân Uyên town (Lai Châu), an area with sizeable Hmong, Thái and Viet populations, there was a Thái man selling Hmong and Thái VCDs only—Tân Uyên also has a number of established Viet music shops.

Presentation of the commodified musical recording plays a significant role in defining the product itself and this is particularly noteworthy for the VCDs sold in the markets. The VCDs are stored in soft plastic covers, either with a colourful inlay, an image printed on the disc, or with no inlay or image at all. While observing local Hmong choosing the discs they

were going to buy it became clear that discs without inlays or images were not in high demand. Only after exhausting their search through the brightly coloured covers would the clientele reluctantly consider the plain discs. When I offered to loan some of my own collection of Hmong VCDs to my Hmong friends, they all wanted the colourful discs too and I was left with a handful of discs with no covers. The obvious assumption here is that the book is being judged by its cover; a dull blank VCD with no inlay might suggest that the content is similarly bland and lacking in entertainment value. Another reason for this distinction might be because the inlays on Hmong VCDs are written in the Hmong language whereas the ones without inlays have Vietnamese language headings printed on them (Figure 6.2). Probably of more significance, though, is the general graphic design on the covers (Figures 6.4-6.6) and the discs (Figure 6.3). This is especially true for the Hmong in Vietnam because they have such a high rate of illiteracy.

In general, there appear to be two distinct categories of inlay cover. By far the more common type was a simple colour copy of the original DVD or VHS cover (Figures 6.4 and 6.5), which usually indicates that it has been copied from a recording produced in the US. In the case of a compilation or a downloaded music video, a screenshot from the video footage suffices as a makeshift cover (Figure 6.6). The print is nearly always in full colour but, as can be seen from these images, the quality of the print is frequently as bad as the quality of the footage on the VCD. Discs with no inlays have brief descriptions in Vietnamese, usually nothing more than “Hmong music and dance” with a reference number. These discs can have any of the above styles of music as well as Chinese movies dubbed over with Hmong musical accompaniment, so even if the Hmong were able to read the text on these discs, they would probably be better off choosing the discs with colour inlays copied from the original DVD because they are more likely to have good production quality.

Styles of clothing, the singers' posture and the background scenes are also indicative of content. In Figure 6.3 the women are dressed in traditional clothing including ornate hats that are not commonly found among the Vietnamese-Hmong. The mountain scenes add a further element of authenticity by indicating that these videos were probably filmed in Asia. In Figures 6.4 and 6.5 the artists are wearing a combination of contemporary and traditional dress. On these VCDs the music and accompanying visuals include a similar combination of traditional and contemporary elements. Figure 6.6, in contrast, depicts a group of Vietnamese-Hmong, possibly in Son La province; this is suggested by their style of dress, which is typically worn in Son La, and because they are posing with the kind of umbrella that can be found throughout Vietnam.¹⁶⁷ This VCD is of a much lower production quality than the others. One further presentational feature which some consumers recognise is the number on these discs (Figures 6.3-6.5). This indicates that they are copied from karaoke collections. These features are not set rules and merely act as a guide to interpreting the VCDs' presentation.

¹⁶⁷ On the video itself, a Vietnamese flag can be seen raised on top of a local government building in the background of one of the frames.



Figure 6.2: VCDs with no printed image or inlay.



Figure 6.3: VCDs with printed image but no inlay.



Figure 6.4: VCDs with colour inlays (1).



Figure 6.5: VCDs with colour inlays (2).



Figure 6.6: VCD with screenshot inlay from Vietnam.

One way of summarising the styles of music on offer would be to divide the recordings into those produced for the American-Hmong market and those produced for the rest. The American-Hmong market is the undisputed heart of the industry: this is where the vast majority of the producers come from and where the recordings can be sold for up to \$30 per unit (Schein 2002). Another way of thinking about the industry could be to conceptualise the recordings, musicians and consumers as positioned along a series of spectrums with contrasting characteristics such as traditional and contemporary music and dance styles, electronic and acoustic sounds or economically rich and poor. On many of these spectrums the Vietnamese-Hmong recorded music would be located at the opposite extreme to the American-Hmong, with Hmong music from other countries located at various points in-between.

Having reviewed thirty-one randomly chosen VCDs purchased at markets in Son La, Lai Châu, Lào Cai and Hà Giang provinces, I have selected two contrasting examples which synecdochically represent two ends of a spectrum of musical styles from a vast array of musical recordings. The first is a song by the California-based singer Vixian Moua entitled “Zoo Siab Yug Los Ua Hmoob” (“Happy to be born Hmong”; prelude 6) from her karaoke DVD *Nco Ntsoov Tias Pob Yob Hmoob (Always Remember We Are Hmong)* (see lower-left cover in Figure 6.5); the second example is a compilation of two excerpts from a VCD produced by a Hmong man in Son La province (Figure 6.6).

Vixian Moua’s song was described to me by one American-Hmong man as almost like “a Hmong national anthem” (Moua Thao, personal communication, 2010). This theme is made explicitly clear in the lyrics of the chorus which emphasise the singer and her accompanying dancers’ happiness at being born Hmong:

*Zoo, zoo peb lub siab,
Zoo peb lub siab,
Yug los ua Hmoob.*

We, we are so happy,
We are so happy,
To be born Hmong.

The singing style is similar to that of Euro-American pop songs aside from the lyrics being in the Hmong language. The song is structured in standard verse-chorus form. The lyrics of the chorus are uncomplicated and repetitive. This makes the song more accessible to Hmong living in the diaspora who might not use the Hmong language as frequently as those based in Asia. The accompaniment is predominantly synthesised aside from the electric guitar riffs. The synthesised sounds include heavy bass beats, high brass and other effects that “fill-out” the soundscape.

The accompanying karaoke music video appears to have been filmed in a public park in the United States. The dancers are all women. They alternate between traditional and

contemporary dress in each scene. None of the women are wearing the traditional earrings that Hmong in Vietnam wear—small straight earrings for unmarried women and large circular earrings for married women. The dancing style is more overtly sexual than would be commonly found in Asian Hmong communities. Techniques including body rolls and “booty drops” make this video more akin to Euro-American pop music videos. Other examples of music videos that were packaged for the American market but which I purchased on VCDs in Vietnam included FBI anti-piracy warnings, American-based phone numbers (without international dialling codes) for placing further orders and the use of the English language in the “previews” section.

Only two of the thirty-one VCDs I purchased were actually produced in Vietnam and the second example is one of these. This film has the lowest production quality of all the VCDs surveyed. Aside from having extremely low audiovisual quality, the only credits displayed read “Hmong New Year Celebrations 2007 [produced by] Giàng A Ký” in plain text at the end. The film explores the traditional musical practices of a Hmong village during the New Year. All of the participants are dressed uniformly in Green Hmong traditional dress. In the opening scene a young man plays a song on a leaf while in the second scene a woman sings a love song in the *kvv txhiaj* style while playing the traditional courting game of tossing the ball (*pov pob*). Unlike the American-Hmong, these singers do not need to sing about ethnic unity because they are already living in a relatively homogenous ethnic community. The dance movements are extremely reserved in comparison to Vixian Moua’s music video. Although all of the activities portrayed are probably staged for the benefit of the filmmaker, the style of singing, playing and presentation places it a world away from Vixian Moua’s recording.

If these two VCDs were positioned on any of the suggested spectrums with nodes running from traditional to contemporary music and dance styles, electronic to acoustic

sounds or economically rich to poor, they would be placed at opposite ends. This comparison of the production and content differences of these two recordings is reflective of the Vietnamese-Hmong position in relation to Hmong in the Global North. Although they share the same ethnic sphere, culturally, technologically and economically they are living in very different contexts (see further section 6.2.6).

This summary of the Hmong music VCD industry in Vietnam has demonstrated how VCD technology has made a new and unparalleled diversity of musical styles available to the Vietnamese-Hmong people. As with the original DVD or VHS recordings, “image management is a huge corollary exercise” (Schein 2002:236); this section considered how various types of VCD cover impact consumer choice. The extraordinary array and quantity of music videos being sold at local Hmong markets in northern Vietnam demonstrates the popularity of this media among the Vietnamese-Hmong. In the future it is probable that this will lead to an improvement in the quality and quantity of indigenous Hmong music video production.

6.2.4 *Mobile Phones and Mp3 Technology*

As with VCD technology, the majority of mobile phones in Vietnam originally came from China. This industry has witnessed an even greater upsurge than VCDs in recent years. Between 2007 and 2008, mobile cellular subscriptions increased from 28 to 80 per 100 inhabitants in the entire country.¹⁶⁸ Most of these phones come with a micro-SD card onto which the dealer will upload a selection of music for 10,000VNĐ, the same price as a VCD. This rapid spread of mobile phones equipped with Mp3 technology was obvious during my fieldwork. On more than one occasion I was asked by the man of the house to adjust the settings on his new (and first ever) mobile phone so that his ringtone would be his current

¹⁶⁸ http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/idi/2010/Material/MIS_2010_without%20annex%204-e.pdf, accessed 12 October 2010.

favourite Hmong pop music hit. At another point, a friend of mine made some traditional Hmong garments as a gift for me to wear to Hmong ceremonies and festivities. Her sister very directly suggested that I should buy her a mobile phone to reciprocate her generosity. When I presented her with a phone that was not equipped with Mp3 technology the disappointment was palpable.



Figure 6.7: A mobile phone shop in Sapa town which advertises *tải nhạc* (downloaded music).

In areas where the Hmong live, mobile phone dealers tend to maintain a stock of illegally downloaded Hmong music for these consumers (see Figure 6.7). One dealer kindly showed me how to download music tracks from YouTube using a simple programme, in case I was not satisfied with the 7GB of Hmong songs he had just given me for 32 pence. These

dealers and the majority of their customers tend to be from the Viet majority, so, as with the VCD vendors in the markets, they usually have a much greater proportion of Vietnamese popular music. Their stock of Vietnamese music predictably favours the latest and most popular singers but the Hmong collections can vary wildly due to the vendors' lack of familiarity with the artists and genres. In fact, many of the vendors did not speak any Hmong and could explain very little about what was on the disks or Mp3s they were selling aside from being able to tell me that they were in the Hmong language.

Consumer choice is limited even further because no images are provided to indicate what might be on the Mp3 files. Even if the consumers can read, the titles of the tracks rarely give much information about the content. One Hmong friend, Dao, said that she did not want to change her music because she got such a good collection when she bought the phone that she was afraid that the next time she bought music it would not be as good. Since they are up- and downloaded hastily, the titles are merely added to distinguish them from other tracks. For example, when listening to music with friends and noting their favoured tracks my list of song titles began to look like the following:

“777”
“AVSEQ09(1)”
“monghay9”
“vdxceds”
“ss”
“thangsp”
“jhjgjkhhbkuk”

For some of the songs, these improvised titles had become the recognisable to my Hmong friends; they could not pronounce the words but, after repeated listening they were sometimes aware of which set of letters corresponded to their most liked or disliked tracks. As noted

previously, the vendors tend to have rather limited knowledge of Hmong music and are unable to explain what the tracks are. So the consumers are left with only two choices.

The first is which dealer to purchase from. The dealers are located in town centres or markets; in Sapa, there were only two phone shops that my friends frequented on a regular basis (see Figure 6.7). These were situated only a few doors apart yet different friends had contrasting feelings about which of the shops they would frequent. For some the decision was based on the character and general behaviour of the shopkeeper; when I visited one of the two shops with a female Hmong friend, for example, the shopkeeper ignored our presence while he openly perused the latest Asian pornographic sites he had just been sent by text message. For others the decision was related to the quality of music they have previously purchased from the dealer. A comparison of the two shops' music collections revealed that one shop only had 1.5GB compared to the other's 9GB of files stored in the folder labelled *nhac Mong* (*nhạc Mông*; Hmong music).

The second choice relates to religion. In Sapa when an animist Hmong person goes to purchase music in one of these shops, their only request tends to be "*em không muốn nhạc tôn giáo*" ("I don't want religious music"). The remaining animists in Lào Cai are made noticeably uncomfortable by the sound of Christian Hmong songs, probably because they are afraid of being converted themselves. The majority of Hmong in the United States are now Christian, and since this is where the majority of the music discussed in this section is produced, many of the recordings that reach Vietnam have Christian themes. Thus vendors in this area were forced to categorise their music accordingly. The only distinction between the Christian songs and the secular songs that could be explained to me was the inclusion of Hmong words such as *tswv yexus* (Lord Jesus) and *kev ntseeg* (believer) in Christian songs. On the other hand secular love songs carried no perceived threat to either of the Hmong groups.

Mobile phones equipped with mp3 technology have at least two advantages over VCDs: the listening experience is portable and some models can be used to record audio. Frequently while on long treks friends would take out their phone and play music to entertain us. This would usually result in a sing-a-long by one or more of the group, usually by only those closest to the phone because the speaker tended not be very powerful. The micro-SD cards rarely had more than about fifty tracks on them so the few songs that were popular were played over and over again. Another limiting factor relating to the variety of music is that not everyone is lucky enough to own a mobile phone, let alone one with audio playback facility. Certain singers, primarily female, and a couple of instrumental tracks with synthesised accompaniment became instantly recognisable to me due to this practice of repeatedly listening to a small variety of tracks. This further emphasises the limited degree of choice available to Hmong music consumers and listeners in Vietnam.

The ability of mobile phones to record audio is significant. Previously, Hmong would use cassette players to record local singers and instrumental musicians of note; this was widely done for personal interest rather than for resale. The supplanting of cassette technology with VCDs added visuals to the experience but, crucially, limited the possibilities for documenting local musicians; one would need a camcorder and VCD burner if they wanted to make recordings of local musicians on VCDs. For this reason, and as noted in the previous section, the majority of VCDs now come from abroad or at least outside of the Vietnamese-Hmong community. Mobile phones with audio recording capabilities are an emerging technology in Hmong areas in Vietnam. Nevertheless this facility has been quickly put into use by locals to document locals. This technology also enables Hmong to pass recordings of music from phone to phone, with a noticeable deterioration in quality (see further section 6.4).

This description of Hmong access to music via mobile phones equipped with Mp3 technology has illustrated the limited degree of choice Vietnamese-Hmong consumers have with this medium. Despite these constraints, the Hmong are still offered more options than had previously been available to them. The speed at which new musical recordings from abroad can reach the Hmong in Vietnam via this medium is transforming the Vietnamese-Hmong world of music. In addition, some listeners have started to use headphones to block out the sounds of those around them and focus the listening experience, thus removing certain communal aspects of listening to music. This new means of access to music was introduced much more recently than VCDs but it will likely have a similarly significant an impact on the local culture in the longer term.

6.2.5 *The Internet*

A third medium of note which the Vietnamese-Hmong are beginning to use to access Hmong music from other countries is the Internet. This medium is particularly important because of the greater degree, or at least potential degree, of choice it offers its users, but as it currently remains beyond the means of many Hmong in Vietnam, a brief overview will suffice. In Sapa, where the Internet is available in local cafes and hotels, many younger Hmong sit at computer screens watching music videos and films in the Hmong language or accessing email or social networking sites. The two most popular sites during my fieldwork were YouTube (frequently pronounced as “You-Tube-ee”) and Yahoo email and messenger. Facebook was also extremely popular—the Hmong used it to keep in contact with foreign tourists who had visited and then posted photos from their trips online—but it has been officially blocked by the government since late 2009; nevertheless, in a move that demonstrates their strong desire to be connected to the information technology world, some Hmong have found ways to subvert this firewall. This section considers how YouTube is

becoming yet another predominantly one-way link to the Hmong transnational music industry for the Vietnamese-Hmong, and briefly discusses another site that has so far received less attention by the Vietnamese-Hmong but which is central to the Hmong transnational music industry: MySpace.

The Instant Search function on YouTube, which predicts the search while the user types, means that users rarely have to write more than the first few letters for their desired target to come up on a list of entries. Also the “Did you mean:” spelling assistance makes the website easier to navigate. Although illiteracy rates are high, all young Hmong I spoke with who used the Internet were at least able to type *hmoob* in the search bar of YouTube. This would enable them browse through thousands of Hmong language songs and movies. A lesser number were able to spell the names of their favourite singers or songs such as “Tus Kuv Hlub Tshaj” sung by Bao Her from Minnesota, “Hlub Koj Tshaj” sung by Huab Sib Lauj and Hawj Vaj, two children from Laos, and “Tis Muaj Tus Hlub” sung by Darla Yang from Wisconsin. The savviest of Hmong Internet users in Sapa would access the singers’ biographies on other websites to learn details a typical popular music fan might want to know about their idols.¹⁶⁹

MySpace is another website that is extremely popular with Hmong music enthusiasts in the United States but it was not commonly used by my Vietnamese-Hmong interlocutors. This website is more challenging to negotiate for non-native English speakers. Users must be able to type the name of the desired artist into the search bar to begin their search. As audio recordings are more commonly posted than video this site is also visually less stimulating for users. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the number of views listed on the most popular Hmong artists’ pages on MySpace (see below), this is clearly an important website for the

¹⁶⁹ Personal details about Hmong musicians were less widely available than those of major Euro-American pop stars so my interlocutors tended to have more knowledge about the latter group (see Video Track 14).

global Hmong music industry. Note that the latest sensations are all women and all based in the United States:

Paj Suab Yaj	331,128 views	http://www.myspace.com/pajsuabyaj ¹⁷⁰
Pagnia Xiong	215,738 views	http://www.myspace.com/pagniaxiong ¹⁷¹
Maiv Xyooj	184,521 views	http://www.myspace.com/maivxyoojmusic ¹⁷²

Despite their unquestionable popularity among the greater Hmong community, I was only able to find one karaoke music video VCD by Paj Suab Yaj and none by the other two singers. This appears to be indicative of a division between the Vietnamese-Hmong consumers and the foreign-based producers of this music. The musicians and producers are not receiving feedback because their recordings are being sold illicitly through intermediaries.

The view counts listed above are somewhat deceptive because, as of 22 October 2010, the artist with the third-highest number of views, Maiv Xyooj, has at least eight different MySpace pages. Maiv Xyooj's view count is taken from the page that has received the most hits. In accordance with the importance of image and presentational style of the VCDs, each of her pages has a unique presentational theme which targets a specific subsection of her fan base. Maiv Xyooj's image might be best understood through her pose and style of clothing in the photographs. These range from her standing proudly while wearing a densely ornamented and colorful traditional dress and hat to her sitting in a submissive pose while scantily clad in a more modern, almost lingerie-like outfit.¹⁷³ This practice of multiple public images was also observed by Averill among Haitian musicians in the US, who "attempted to maximize

¹⁷⁰ Accessed 22 October 2010.

¹⁷¹ Accessed 22 October 2010.

¹⁷² Accessed 22 October 2010.

¹⁷³ Maiv Xyooj's pages recently received an overhaul that coincided with the more general upgrade of MySpace's format in November 2010. This included the privatization of her page with the more revealing photographs.

market success by responding to multiple audiences (or potential audiences)” (2006[1994]:268).

Availability of Internet permits the Vietnamese-Hmong to enhance their involvement in the greater world of Hmong popular music via the World Wide Web. At the moment only a minority of the Hmong in Vietnam has regular access to the Internet but their numbers are steadily increasing. In the future, this medium could prove to be the most significant for the Vietnamese-Hmong because it has the potential to allow instant contact with Hmong people around the world. At present, though, this potential is far from being achieved, and even those who have access to the Internet are limited in their use of it by linguistic barriers and government firewalls.

6.2.6 Limitations of the Industry in Vietnam

Vietnamese-Hmong engagement with the Hmong transnational music industry is restricted by their means of access to the music. During over two years of fieldwork in Vietnam, I found it impossible to purchase a legitimate recording of Hmong popular music. By making only illicit copies of the music available, the vendors are failing to maintain an important economic link with the producers (Figure 6.8).

Hmong Transnational Music Industry

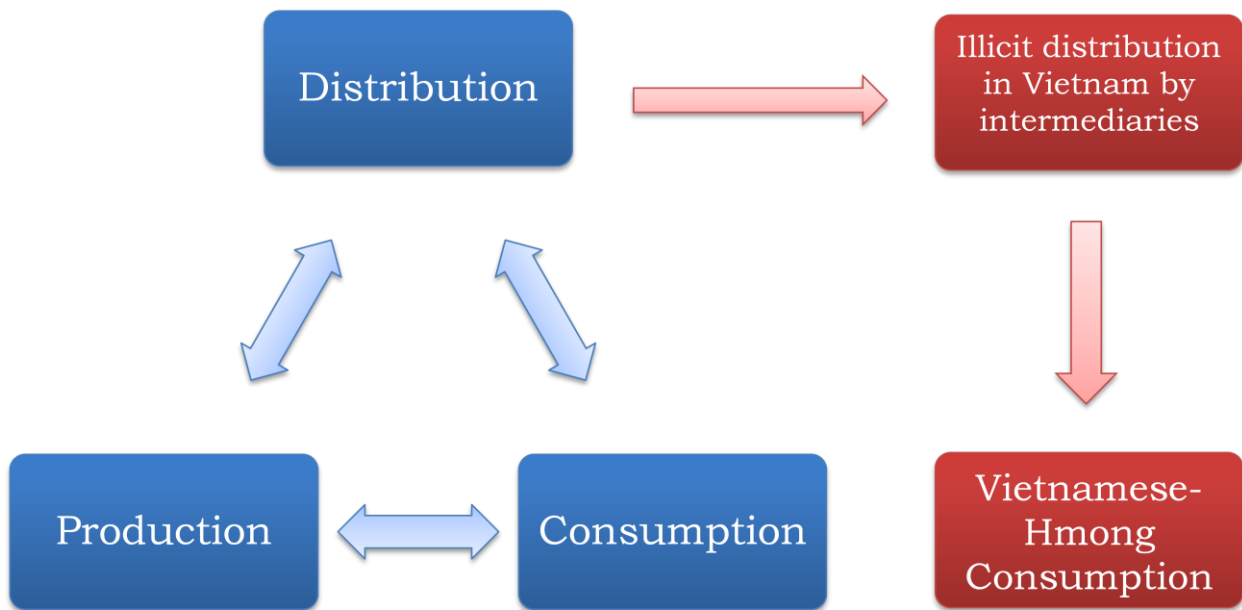


Figure 6.8: The circulation of recordings in the Hmong transnational music industry.

While predominantly non-Hmong vendors are serving the Vietnamese-Hmong by subverting the copyright laws of the state and providing music from Hmong in other countries that is otherwise inaccessible to them, their lack of knowledge about and contact with the greater Hmong community means that a socioeconomic link between the local and global Hmong communities is stunted. Further muting the potential input of Vietnamese-Hmong is their limited access to the Internet, an increasingly important medium for the global Hmong community. This one-way trade route leaves these consumers with little or no influence on the greater market. They do not have a voice to call for change and impact the production of future recordings.

Their position as peripheral actors in the imagined Hmong community bears a striking resemblance to their position in the Vietnamese state (see chapters 1 and 7). One of the impediments to Vietnamese national consciousness for the Hmong is that the national media

are almost entirely in the Vietnamese language. Furthermore, Hmong musics, especially Hmong popular musics, have received limited attention in the Vietnamese media. Thus, the impact of Hmong musics from abroad is far greater than it might otherwise be.¹⁷⁴ In many cases this has led to the Vietnamese-Hmong people's imagined connection with the global Hmong community becoming stronger than their Vietnamese national consciousness. This is one reason why their ethnic identity continues to take precedence over their national identity.

Despite the optimism of Manuel's new world information order, of which Averill says music may be "the transnational medium par excellence" (2006[1994]:271), for the Vietnamese-Hmong, the technological developments have first and foremost led to a reorganisation and exacerbation of the effects of hegemonic powers. Schein observes, "There is great emotional investment in these newly forged unities, but they are unities which are produced only in defiance of the global asymmetries that structure the Hmong diaspora" (2004b:438). In this transnational community the Vietnamese-Hmong continue to be culturally rich but economically poor. Nevertheless, Vietnam is a country in the process of a dramatic social transformation and the Hmong are not unaffected by this. While they continue to negotiate multiple identities in their rapidly changing lives, this music at the very least serves to resituate them in and make sense of their increasingly cosmopolitan reality.

¹⁷⁴ In his book *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning*, Flores terms the returning diasporic cultural influences into Puerto Rico "cultural counterstreams" (2009:51-3). Useful and widely applicable as this term is to contexts around the world, the situation he describes differs in a significant way from the present case. While the Vietnamese-Hmong are increasingly influenced by diasporic musics, there is very little movement, either cultural or physical, in the opposite direction. Therefore to term this a counterstream would be a misnomer because there is no stream to be countered in the first place.

6.3 The “Real” Musical Community

Face-to-face encounters with Hmong people from other countries have become more commonplace since the mid-1990s when Vietnam opened its borders to foreign tourists.¹⁷⁵ As Sapa town is a major tourist destination, especially for those interested in meeting the Hmong, I was fortunate to witness two significant encounters with foreign Hmong people there. During the first encounter, between a busload of Chinese-Hmong and local Hmong people, songs and stories were heartily shared and compared. But, musically, the second encounter was more noteworthy because the primary reason for the visit was for a collaborative music and dance performance between local Hmong and a touring group of Laotian-Hmong musicians—as with the first encounter, the performance was followed by the informal sharing of songs and stories. Therefore, the analysis here will focus on this second meeting. The following expanded description from my fieldnotes¹⁷⁶ functions as a Geertzian “metasocial commentary” (1973:448) on this event. It serves to demonstrate another link the Vietnamese-Hmong have with the greater Hmong community which is experienced through musical activity. This link differs from the connection which is maintained through mediated musics (section 6.2) because this is the site where imagined communities become real encounters through lived experience.

The date is 1 September 2010, one day before Vietnam’s National Day.¹⁷⁷ By lunchtime the main square has already been cleared of traders, as is typical practice during major state-organised events in Sapa. I bump into May and Lee who are on their way back to Lao Chải village under orders from Giàng Seo Gà—Gà is the group director and one of

¹⁷⁵ While Tapp has written about American-Hmong people returning to China (2002), little has been written on Hmong people returning to Vietnam.

¹⁷⁶ These expanded notes were written shortly after the event while I was still in the “field”. Rather than illustrating my “out of the field” voice with alternative typeface and brackets in the description (Barz 1997:46), I have postponed these comments until after the notes.

¹⁷⁷ It was unclear whether this show was strategically organised to coincide with the annual Hmong Festival in Mộc Châu or not (see prelude 6).

the primary organisers of the event—to collect their finest traditional clothes for the show. Lee asks if I will be filming tonight and shyly pretends that she will refuse to perform if I film—later she will undoubtedly request copies of all my photos from the event! The nervous excitement of the neophyte performers is palpable but others who have not been asked to sing feign indifference....

6.30pm: I am sitting in the Cultural Centre drinking tea with Sàì waiting for the girls to arrive for their final run-through before the show. Unsurprisingly, they are late. When they eventually turn up, they are all wearing more eye and face make-up than I have ever seen them wear. Now, about twenty of us are squashed into a room meant for no more than ten. Sàì sits at the end of the table and starts off the first rendition “...hai, ba.” [“...two, three.”]. His use of the Vietnamese language as opposed to Hmong to count-in the singers seems odd because everyone present, except me, is Hmong. Perhaps this fits with his role as leader and adds a disciplinary aspect to the rehearsal. This could also be due to the rehearsal taking place in the building where he works and would normally speak Vietnamese. It takes a while for everyone to settle on the same pitch and rhythm but once they do the song sounds great. When they finish a discussion ensues, in Hmong, about pronunciation and lyrics. Chau (24), one of the older girls, is the most vocal while the younger ones listen to their elders. They are much quicker at getting the pitch and tempo together the second time. Afterwards Gà takes them downstairs to practice the choreography in the foyer....

The choreography appears uncomplicated, but this is a new style of performance for the girls and it takes them a while to grasp the movements. They are standing in a reversed V-formation with five on either side and three at the apex (see Figure 6.9). Halfway through the song the three girls in the centre walk out to the front row of the audience and invite them to drink rice wine and the remaining ten form a straight line. The most challenging part for the ten is swaying from side to side while they sing. Since the natural

breathed phrase breaks tend to be slightly longer than the regular pulse in traditional songs it seems unnatural to add this movement because it means that the breath has to be the same duration as the pulse for it to work. Consequently, the girls find it impossible to coordinate this precisely. Matters are made worse by a foreign English teacher who interrupts the rehearsal with his own uninvited advice. He seems to think that his upbringing in England has made him more qualified than the local Hmong to direct this portion of the performance. Gà seems unimpressed....

8.00pm: The formal show begins on schedule with the emcee introducing each of the features in Vietnamese and English only. As the evening progresses a healthy crowd of about four to five hundred people gather in the square for the spectacle. These are mostly Vietnamese tourists with the addition of a few curious foreigners and local Hmong traders. The performances alternate between Laotian and local Hmong features. The local performances are a combination of the Cát Cát performers' typical tourist demonstrations (see chapter 5), solo instrumental demonstrations by Gà and Sàì, and the girls singing their one carefully rehearsed song (Video Track 2). The Laotian-Hmong, on the other hand, alternate between group dancing and solo songs, both with pre-recorded and mostly synthesised accompaniment. All of their songs are lip-synced and the solo instrumental performances are pre-recorded. The only exception to this format is a lengthy feature by the Laotian-Hmong group which imitates the traditional New Year ball throwing game. The show ends with a rendition of "Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh!" sung in Vietnamese by the emcee and a handful of Vietnamese government officials. Meanwhile the Laotian- and Vietnamese-Hmong performers stand silently behind them looking a little bemused.

After the show the audience quickly disperses and the performers gather on-stage for commemorative photos. This results in much animated discussion and comparison of songs, stories and clothing. Sàì tells the main performers that I can sing in the Hmong

language and he encourages me to provide a demonstration. One of the Laotian men is surrounded by the local girls as he skillfully sings Hmong pop songs for and with them—later I learn this was Tsom Xyooj and two of the female Laotian singers were Duab Ci Thoj and Huab Ci Yoj; all three were famous pop stars at the time and were known to the Sapa Hmong group via their VCDs and YouTube videos. After the event many of the more energetic members of the group retreat to the Laotian-Hmong group’s hotel where there is a “sing-song” that goes on until 1.00am.

(expanded fieldnotes, 1 September 2010)



Figure 6.9: Giàng Seo Gà directs a rehearsal of the girls’ feature in the foyer of the Cultural Centre, 1 September 2010.

This description of the event raises a number of questions relating to musical performance and the Hmong transnational community. Was this a performance of staged unity between two distantly related groups or did they really consider themselves united?

Does this performance really serve the needs of the Hmong in Vietnam or is it a staged spectacle by the Party to appease an unruly minority group? To what extent does this performance demonstrate the influence of Vietnamese culture on Hmong culture in Vietnam? Could this performance be considered a necessary demonstration for outsiders in order to enable a more natural sing-song back at the hotel? Why did Sài choose to count-in in the Vietnamese language when this was the first-language of none of the people in the room? Why did Gà think it was necessary to add choreography to the girls' performance?¹⁷⁸ How was this related to the annual festival taking place on the same day in Mộc Châu (see prelude 6)?

In attempting to answer these questions, an analysis of the above musical encounter could emphasise either the similarities or the differences between the two Hmong groups. One could argue that the performance was either a stand of unity between the Hmong *or* an example of the fragmented nature of the Hmong transnational community. Martin Stokes writes, "Music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them" (1994:5). During the show and in discussion with participants and audience members afterwards, it became clear that the Laotian- and Vietnamese-Hmong recognised certain aspects of culture which they shared while they also were aware of the boundaries which separated them.

This musical collaboration served as a unifying moment between two normally separate communities. When performing and subsequently socialising together they were able to briefly supersede the social, economic and geographic boundaries which otherwise impeded these encounters. At that moment, the site of the interactions became an ephemeral

¹⁷⁸ Following their performance, the girls were delighted to hear from Gà that he would try to arrange further performances with more elaborate dances.

homeland which consolidated the two groups as their differences acquiesced in favour of trading perspectives on their shared culture.

Although this community was experienced through music and dance, the boundaries which separated them were also marked through performance. A notable Vietnamese-Hmong musician told me after the event that the Laotian-Hmong have “no idea how to dance the *qeej*”. Similarly, the Laotian-Hmong must have thought that some of the Vietnamese-Hmong had no idea how to perform in Turino’s presentational sense, judging by their obvious inexperience at using microphones to enhance the sound and their uniform dress code; this contrasted with the Laotian-Hmong singers’ lip-syncing and unique outfits for each member of the group. Ironically, however, it was with the concluding rendition of the “Việt Nam, Hồ Chí Minh!” anthem that both the shared identities and the boundaries which separated them became most transparent. While the Vietnamese government officials sang to the glory of their nation the Hmong stood side-by-side in the background united together in silence.

6.4 Implications for the Vietnamese-Hmong

This chapter has outlined how the Vietnamese-Hmong interact with the Hmong transnational community through mediated and live musical performances. Before concluding the chapter, three ways that this musical community is affecting the Vietnamese-Hmong will be considered: Hmong identity (re)production through these musics, the use of music as an educational resource and the influence of some of these musics on the spiritual life of the Vietnamese-Hmong. These implications are primarily related to mediated musics because recordings can be listened to on a daily basis whereas there are much fewer opportunities for face-to-face interactions with Hmong people from other countries. But when Vietnamese-Hmong interact socially with members of the Hmong transnational community, as they did

during the visit of the Laotian-Hmong group (section 6.3), their mediated relationships are reinforced.

One way these musics impact Hmong culture in Vietnam is through their reinforcement of cultural traits that are familiar to them such as singing and instrumental playing styles, language, social behaviours and dress. Listening to and singing along with the recordings and performing with and for visiting Hmong serves as a process of identity (re)production. Through their learned musicking together the Vietnamese-Hmong are participating in communities of practice (Wenger 1998). With the visit of the Laotian-Hmong group many subcommunities were experienced through the performance (for example, female, male, Vietnamese, Laotian, instrumental musicians, singers and dancers), but knowledge of the music associated with Hmong ethnic identity was the fundamental condition for membership. Engaging with these musics reaffirms the idea of a Hmong transnational community for the participants. This empowers the Hmong by permitting them to experience their ethnic identity across national boundaries, and provides an alternative to their Vietnamese national consciousness.

A second way the Vietnamese-Hmong are affected by these musics is through their educational impact. The transnational music industry provides at least two educational benefits for the Vietnamese-Hmong that have consequences for their traditional musical practices and their daily life in general. Some music recordings can be and are being used to supplement traditional music learning practices. Secondly, and to a much greater extent, karaoke texts and websites written using the Hmong RPA are serving as an educational resource by helping Hmong people learn to read and write using their native language. Music recordings in particular are used in these ways both consciously by practicing musicians and, largely unconsciously, by karaoke consumers.

Education in Vietnam is predominantly in the Vietnamese language. In areas populated by Hmong people some primary school classes are taught in the Hmong language. However, teachers are nearly always from the Viet majority and have limited knowledge of the language. Hmong students tend not to value these classes because the students are already more proficient than their teachers in speaking Hmong and they do not always see a benefit in learning to read or write. Furthermore, the script being taught in the schools is unique to Vietnam (see Notes on Language). One exception to this is among the Christian Hmong community where literacy is valued and the scriptures are written using the Hmong RPA.

Some Hmong are beginning to learn how to read using the Hmong RPA through viewing VCDs and accessing Hmong music on the Internet. The majority of Hmong music VCDs and music videos on YouTube include karaoke texts which use the Hmong RPA. The titles of songs and films on YouTube and the majority of the accompanying discussion posts below these videos also use the Hmong RPA. This script runs counter to the Vietnamese government wishes for Vietnamese-Hmong people to adopt the script that was developed using similar characters to the Vietnamese language (see Enwall 1995) which would conveniently confine cross-border interactions via the Internet. Instead, the Vietnamese-Hmong are increasingly developing fluency in the Hmong RPA and, as a result, they are able to interact with the Hmong transnational community more easily.

The new world information order that began in Hmong communities of northern Vietnam with the introduction of radios and cassettes and has since been augmented with VCDs, Mp3 technology and, less notably, the Internet has continued to enable the dissemination of recordings of local singers and instrumental musicians. While radio and VCD technologies are less democratic in that one must have supplemental technologies to produce recordings, cassette players and mobile phones with Mp3 technology require minimal technical ability and no extra equipment to make homemade recordings. The

potentialities of this technology became clear to me when Lang played her recording of Giàng Thị Mu for me and then insisted that I hold my Edirol audio recording machine up to her mobile phone so that I could copy her recording (Audio Track 1). Later I heard her listening back to the recording while singing along with lyrics she had already learned from it. Others also played recordings of instrumental musicians for me that they had made for personal entertainment or to supplement their own instrumental music practice. After my experience with Lang, I noticed many young Hmong often shared recordings by holding their mobile phones side-by-side and recording the audio from one another's phone speakers. Previously, this was also common practice with cassette players. Recording is especially conducive to the *ncas* due to its limited volume. As the volume can be increased mechanically, many more people can listen to one recording simultaneously than is possible in a live unamplified performance.

In traversing national boundaries these local recordings have the potential to become global phenomena. At present this is predominantly a one-way movement of recordings from abroad into Vietnam. This situation resembles that of another diasporic music industry: that of Irish-Americans in the early twentieth century. In reference to this emerging industry Scott Spencer writes that the “early recordings allowed those on the periphery of Irish music to act as vital cultural agents and engage with developments in the larger tradition through mediated oral dissemination” (2010:438). Although these cases differ in many ways, Spencer's historically based case study can give us an idea as to the future direction of the Hmong music industry and the Hmong community in general. Currently, Hmong singers and instrumentalists in Vietnam are supplementing traditional learning practices (i.e. learning by oral transmission) with the use of foreign and locally produced recordings. This new and important phase in the musical life of the Hmong in Vietnam began with cassette technology and is now flourishing with the more recent introduction of VCD and Mp3 technologies. The

Hmong now have access to an unparalleled diversity of musical styles and this is generally viewed as a positive development in the community.

While the educational benefits of the new world information order referred to here are undeniable, the movement of these diasporic musics into Vietnam is also having a dramatic effect on the spiritual life of growing numbers of Vietnamese-Hmong. In a recent article entitled “Protestant Conversion among the Hmong in Northern Vietnam”, Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm reports that as many as a third of the Hmong population of Vietnam have converted to Evangelical Protestantism since the mid-1980s. She attributes this to the Philippines-based Far East Broadcasting Company (F.E.B.C.), a transnational Christian radio station which broadcasts in over one hundred and thirty languages, including Hmong (2010:333)¹⁷⁹; some of the cassette tape players in use by the Hmong had built-in AM/FM radios which would have enabled them to listen to these broadcasts (see Figure 6.2). In the early days of their broadcasts a radio preacher named Dua Her used to sing Christian songs in the traditional style of *kwv txhiaj* but since then most broadcasters at the station and, in Ngô’s encounters, the Christian Hmong community in general have rejected this form (Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm, personal communication, 2010). Although Christian Hmong I encountered during my fieldwork had rejected certain traditions such as the use of the *qeej* at funeral ceremonies (see chapter 3), in practice, many remained familiar with the *kwv txhiaj* singing style and were happy to sing in this style for me.

This transnational religious affiliation has the potential to cause more trouble than the mere rejuvenation of an ethnic affiliation suggests. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott includes a chapter on the incendiary influence of prophets and prophecies on rebellions in Zomia, and cites millenarianism as “the most comprehensive and ambitious form of escape social structure” (2009:322). In early May 2011, unconfirmed reports suggest that dozens and

¹⁷⁹ See further <http://www.febc.org/>, accessed 22 September 2011.

perhaps even hundreds of Hmong may have been killed when a large gathering of Christian Hmong in Điện Biên province was forcefully dispersed by the Vietnamese army.¹⁸⁰ Reports linked the gathering with the California-based preacher Harold Camping's prediction that the world would end on 21 May 2011.¹⁸¹ The new media technologies examined in this chapter contributed to the rapid and far-reaching circulation of Camping's prophecy. These media are providing new opportunities and choices to the Hmong in Vietnam but, as this case demonstrates, they will not always lead to positive outcomes. This example also illustrates how overt insubordination in the contemporary political climate is becoming an increasingly futile and dangerous exercise for the inhabitants of Zomia.

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how music is part of the social fabric of the Hmong transnational community, and how musical activities play a role in maintaining an imagined idea of the Hmong transnational community for the Vietnamese-Hmong people. I have shown how the various forms of new music technologies introduced over the past two decades are influencing Hmong cultural practices. In particular, they are contributing to Hmong education in the use of the Hmong RPA and influencing their religious beliefs. Through their consumption of Hmong language musics the Vietnamese-Hmong are creating a new "zone of cultural refusal" (Scott 2009:20) which impacts their degree of integration with the state of Vietnam. In addition, the trade of recordings in the Hmong language offers an alternative means of subsistence, a strategy of resistance, and by extension a greater degree of agency (see further Michaud 2011). As we enter a phase of globalisation where national

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<http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE7450Q120110506?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>, accessed 10 August 2011, and <http://www.americamagazine.org/content/signs.cfm?signID=715>, accessed 10 August 2011.

¹⁸¹ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/harold-camping-linked-to-hmong-christians-massacre-in-vietnam-52351/>, accessed 19 January 2012.

boundaries may lessen in significance, the social and cultural impacts of Hmong transnational musicking, both in-person and via mediated recordings, are bound to intensify.

Prelude 7 Hmong Pay Deference to the Party

Thanh Phúc's song "Người Mèo on Đảng" prefaced chapter 1 on the history of the Hmong in Vietnam. Here, another piece with the same title serves as a prelude to the final chapter. This more recent piece was composed and performed by NSND Lương Kim Vĩnh, better known as Kim Vĩnh, on *sáo mèo* (a version of the *raj nplaim* which has been modified by Viet instrument makers to suit their needs [see section 7.2]), and accompanied by an ensemble of synthesised instruments which resemble the core Viet traditional instruments.¹⁸²

The ubiquity of this recording in present-day northern Vietnam during my fieldwork cannot be over-emphasised: the authorities used it as an accompaniment to daily government propaganda broadcasts in mountainous areas; it was played on repeat when arriving into the station on the train from Hanoi to Lào Cai city; Voice of Vietnam radio used it in their online language programme to set the scene for an ethnic minority market in the mountains;¹⁸³ a fashion show in Hanoi used the upper part on repeat to accompany the models' catwalks; in Sapa, restaurants, bars, cafes, hotels and an art gallery which featured ethnic minority art used it as ambient background music; on first meeting, many of the people I interviewed asked if I was aware of this recording and cited it as the standard-bearer; Viet and Hmong people saved the recording on their phones as an Mp3 and some even set it as a ringtone, though many were unaware of its origin because the recording tended to have a modified title (see section 6.2.6); even Giàng A Sải (section 3.4) played this recording for me when we first met and I told him about my research on Hmong music.

In addition to the multitude of places at which this recording can be heard, many flute players in Vietnam have incorporated the music or variations of it into their repertoire. At music performances for tourists in northern Vietnam this piece was commonly played on solo

¹⁸² See <http://www.nhaccuatui.com/nghe?M=a7Ry6cTeSD>, accessed 17 September 2011, for a mislabelled copy of this recording. "Người Mèo on Đảng" is the title which Kim Vĩnh used when he taught this piece to me.

¹⁸³ <http://vov.vn/Media/Play.aspx?itemid=2229>, accessed 1 September 2011.

sáo mào as a token example of ethnic minority music (see chapter 5). Professional *sáo trúc* (bamboo flute) performers tended to carry *sáo mào* with them for this very purpose. The unusual timbre of the instrument contributes an element of exoticism to these performances at which the *sáo mào* is commonly introduced as a minority or tribal music from the mountains and marketed as a tourist commodity. Its limited range means that melodic variation is difficult. Only a handful of compositions have been written for the *sáo mào* and Kim Vĩnh's composition is by far the most popular of these.

This recording of “Người Mèo on Đẳng” is so widely disseminated in Vietnam today that it has become an audio icon for the Hmong ethnic group, even though it was composed and performed by a Viet man on a flute modified by Viet musical instrument makers. In certain contexts, the recording and instrument are also more broadly used to conjure the soundscape of the mountains and all of Vietnam's ethnic minorities. How have these meanings and places become associated with this music and the timbre of this musical instrument? Why was the flute specifically chosen to take on this role? What makes Kim Vĩnh's composition so popular among Viet and Hmong people alike? What are the implications of this new musical style and modified musical instrument for Hmong traditional music? These are the main questions dealt with in chapter 7.

Chapter 7 Appropriated Traditions: Viet Versions of Hmong Traditional Music

Where the previous chapter demonstrated how music is part of the social fabric of the Hmong transnational community, this chapter examines how Hmong traditional music has been appropriated by Viet musicians and incorporated into the nation-building project of the SRV. Using the *sáo mềo*¹⁸⁴ and its music as an example, this chapter argues that Viet professional musicians have borrowed elements of the ethnic minorities' musical traditions in order to develop a national musical heritage. Musical styles and instruments are systematically appropriated by artists of the state, fused with other relevant traditions and reinvented as national treasures. This music then serves as audio propaganda that affirms the authoritarian rule to which the citizens of Vietnam are subjected.

The chapter begins with an introduction to state policy relating to the music of the ethnic minority groups, including how the Party has established institutions and honoured artists who contribute to Vietnam's nation-building project through their hybrid compositions and performances that combine elements of the various musical cultures of Vietnam. A comparison of two types of Hmong flute then demonstrates how the traditional *raj nplaim* has been modified to suit the nation's reinvented musical heritage. Transcriptions and analyses of recordings by two of the most prominent *sáo mềo* players in Vietnam during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries demonstrate how the fusion of Hmong and Viet musical styles have evolved into a new form of national music that contributes to the unity of the nation. A comparison of this music with Hmong traditional flute playing then illustrates how the appropriation of musical style is not simply unidirectional. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the implications of this appropriated and reinvented musical style for

¹⁸⁴ Throughout the chapter I employ the term *raj nplaim* when referring to the Hmong reed flute and *sáo mềo* when referring to Viet versions of this flute. See section 7.2 for a distinction between the two instruments.

the Hmong people and their music, including the increase in demand for presentational performances of Hmong *raj nplaim* music and the potential for more balanced musical collaborations in the future.

7.1 Musicking for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Understanding the broader political context from which the *sáo mèo* and musical compositions featuring this instrument emerged is essential to comprehending the significance of the music in Vietnam today. Hồ Chí Minh (see Figure 7.1) was acutely aware of the power of music as a means of uniting the people: an army band was established during the August Revolution in 1945 which accompanied soldiers on the battlefield against the French (Đào 1984:141). After gaining independence in 1954, a number of state-run institutions for the arts were established in a process of cultural decolonisation that was devoted to “reauthenticating the nation” (Pelley 2002:13). Then, after the first national congress following the unification of Vietnam, the Party released the following public statement that restated their commitment to supporting cultural and artistic works which contributed to the development of the nation:

In the North we have laid the foundations for a socialist culture and art of a rich national character.... In the newly liberated South, the evils of the neo-colonialist culture are being wiped out, which will pave the way for the revolutionary culture to penetrate social life. The cultural and moral face of our people has changed. However, shortcomings remain. The cultural and artistic work still falls behind the revolutionary tasks and the demands of life. It is particularly necessary to create artistic works worthy of the national victory, having an ideological content and an artistic standard able to promote the blossoming of socialist consciousness and socialist life.... This work must be associated still more closely with the revolutionary tasks and the life of the nation. (Communist Party of Vietnam 1977:30, quoted in Đào 1984:149)

This summarises how art and music were viewed as functional mediums which could legitimate the conflation of Party ideologies with the state of Vietnam. During this cultural

and ideological revolution, many forms of musical activity were banned because they were deemed to have a negative impact on society. In a critique of this policy Lê notes that “most traditional festivals, celebrations, cultural activities and spiritual practices” (1998:96) were prohibited.



Figure 7.1: President Hồ Chí Minh conducts in 1960.¹⁸⁵

Elsewhere Lê argues that the desire to modernise Vietnamese traditional music

led musicians in Vietnamese musical institutions to adopt the Westernized model for their efforts to preserve and develop traditional music. The acceptance and

¹⁸⁵ <http://cadn.com.vn/News/Ho-So-Tai-Lieu/2010/8/19/47137.ca>, accessed 28 August 2011.

popularization of this new style of music has made it an integral part of the Vietnamese urban contemporary cultural identity. (1992:48)

In conjunction with the establishment of music institutions and the gradual professionalisation of traditional music in Vietnam, many of the core traditional musical instruments were redeveloped, or, “improved” (*cải tiến*; see Lê 1998 and Arana 1999) as part of this movement. One vital aspect of this was the standardisation of intonation so that traditional instruments could be combined in large-scale ensembles and play elaborately scored orchestral works which fused traits of Vietnamese traditional music with Western art music. Some instruments of the ethnic minorities were appropriated as part of this movement too, including the Hmong reed flute (see section 7.2). The genre of music which emerged from this practice of modernisation has become known as *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* (modern national music).¹⁸⁶

The “musical incorporation of multiple ethnicities into a single national imaginary” (Scruggs 1999:318) was of vital importance to the successful invention of a national musical heritage in Vietnam, and *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* was the principal genre through which this was to be achieved. Although the Party claimed to treat all peoples equally, the Viet people assumed the position of their former colonisers (the French) as the normative group and, therefore, were excluded from the equation (Pelley 2002:75-6). This approach is evident in many of the musical compositions of *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* which incorporate elements of traditional music from the ethnic minorities. In his study of Vietnamese mediumship music, *chầu văn*, Norton notes that the music, “subsumes the diversity of ethnic minority musics within the frame of a Viet musical system” (2009:126). This chapter illustrates how similar

¹⁸⁶ Arana proposes an alternative translation of the term *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* as “neotraditional national music” or “neotraditional music” where the music is consciously considered to be an improved version of traditional practices but which maintains an “aesthetic of tradition” (1999:22 fn. 6).

power dynamics are at play as Viet musicians incorporate elements of Hmong traditional music into their compositions.

In order to encourage musicians to make contributions to the cultural life of the newly independent state, the government established a set of honorific titles for certain artists of note. Kim Vĩnh was one of the early recipients of the title NSUT (Distinguished Artist) and then later NSND (People's Artist), the highest honour conveyed by the state to artists and musicians, for his contribution to the arts.¹⁸⁷ He was given these honours because he was largely responsible for the popularisation of the *sáo mèo* throughout Vietnam and abroad due to his compositions for and performances on this instrument. Kim Vĩnh made a significant contribution to the SRV nation-building project by fusing the Hmong minority and Viet majority musics in a series of recordings that musically represented a harmonious relationship which the Vietnamese government wished to encourage socially.¹⁸⁸

Another artist who was awarded the title NSUT and who has performed on *sáo mèo* is Triệu Tiên Vương, one of the main flute teachers at the Hanoi National Academy of Music. Vương is best known for his teaching, performing and publications on *sáo trúc* (for example, 2003). The *sáo mèo* is a peripheral instrument for him. Nevertheless, one of his recordings on this instrument builds on Kim Vĩnh's work by incorporating Viet traditional musical instruments into the accompanying ensemble. Following a more detailed comparison of the *raj nplaim* and the *sáo mèo*, these two performers' playing styles will be compared.

7.2 The Hmong Reed Flute

*Người yêu đang say trong giấc ngủ,
Sáo bạn tình ai thổi réo rất vắng ngoài.
Giấc mơ say người trong chợt tỉnh,
Sáo bạn tình ai thổi vắng bên tai.*

His lover is in a deep sleep,
The sound of his flute rings like gold outside.
The dreaming lover suddenly wakes,
To the sound of his flute close by.

¹⁸⁷ <http://vnexpress.net/gl/van-hoa/2001/09/3b9b4d22/>, accessed 12 September 2011.

¹⁸⁸ It is with great sadness that I note the passing of NSND Lương Kim Vĩnh at the age of 75 on 22 September 2011.

This proverb comes from one of the earliest scholarly accounts of the Hmong reed flute in Vietnam (Trần 2003[1978]:331) and demonstrates how Viet musicologists have tended to romanticise the music of the ethnic minorities. Trần is attempting to highlight the main role of the instrument in Hmong culture as he understands it, as a means for boys to call girls. According to him, the *sáo mèo* is played by almost every young Hmong man. Aside from its use in flirtatious social interactions, it can be played by men for entertainment while out working or walking through the forest: “On a moonlit evening, after a day’s work, high up in the mountains the sound of the *sáo mèo* is heard in the small villages on quiet paths” (ibid.:330). Trần considers the playing technique of wrapping the lips around the mouthpiece as somewhat crude (*thô*) but still considers it a very rich and expressive instrument. Since the late 1960s the *sáo mèo* had been taken up by professional concert musicians such as Đinh Thìn¹⁸⁹ and Kim Vĩnh. Trần does not differentiate between the flute used in concert performances and the one used in Hmong villages even though the newer concert instrument had already been in use by 1978; he might not have been aware of the differences between the two.¹⁹⁰

Almost twenty years later, the musician, composer and scholar Kim Vĩnh (2003[1997]) describes how a new type of Hmong reed flute has developed which differs from the traditional flute described by Hồng (1997:134-37 and 2004[1975]:858). Kim Vĩnh does not state when the new version of the flute emerged but it seems to have been developed as part of the professionalisation of traditional music in Vietnam described in the previous

¹⁸⁹ Đinh Thìn was primarily known as a *sáo trúc* player. Arana writes that his piece “Hẹn hò” (“Go on a Date”) was one of the most popular for the *sáo mèo* during her fieldwork in the mid-1990s (1999:78 fn.29). A recording of this piece with the translated title “Rendez – Vous” appears on the compilation album *Độc Tấu Nhạc Cụ Dân Tộc Việt Nam (Solo Performances on Vietnamese Musical Instruments)* (n.d.). Tiên Vương (section 7.3.2) plays the *sáo mèo* part and he is accompanied by an ensemble of Viet traditional musical instruments. See <http://www.nhaccuatui.com/nghe?L=qPLuVF55r3XN>, accessed 9 February 2012, for streamed copy of the recording.

¹⁹⁰ Throughout, Trần uses the derogatory term *Mèo* (cat) for the Hmong and *sáo mèo* for the Hmong flute. Up until the early 1980s, Vietnamese scholars tended to use the term *Mèo* instead of *H’mông* for the Hmong people. *Mèo* is no longer used in printed documents but the name of the flute has tended to remain as *sáo mèo* in the vernacular.

section. The instrument is categorised as *cây sáo H'mông hiện đại* (Hmong contemporary flute), more commonly known as *sáo mèo*. By 1997 there were two types of *sáo mèo*: *sáo đơn* (single flute) and *sáo đôi* (double flute). The *sáo đôi* had a second pipe attached which was half the length and diameter of the first. This meant that the range could be extended by an octave upwards. When I met Kim Vĩnh on 9 November 2009 he proudly displayed a newer version of the flute which he called *sáo ghép* (compound flute; see Figure 7.2). This flute is more versatile than the *sáo đơn* because it has a third pipe added which resembles a swanee or slide whistle. In 2007-08 musicians in Hanoi regularly played *sáo ghép* in stage performances for tourists in Hanoi. By that time they tended to refer to this flute simply as *sáo mèo*.



Figure 7.2: Kim Vĩnh plays *sáo ghép*. His awards and photos of him on international tours hang on the wall in the background.

In his description of the *raj nplaim*, which he calls *cây sáo H'mông dân gian* (Hmong folk or traditional flute), Kim Vĩnh admits that many different types exist and attempts to illustrate its typical form and use in Vietnam. As with Trần, Kim Vĩnh uses a parable to summarise the main function of this instrument:

<i>Trai H'mông không biết thổi sáo khó lấy vợ.</i>	A Hmong boy who does not know how to play flute will have trouble finding a wife.
<i>Con gái H'mông không biết gảy đàn môi khó lấy chồng.</i>	A Hmong girl who does not know how to play <i>ncas</i> will have trouble finding a husband. (2003[1997]:659) ¹⁹¹

This limited understanding of Hmong musical traditions is symptomatic of the motivations of these Vietnamese researchers. Trần, Hồng, Kim Vĩnh and others who have written scholarship in Vietnamese on ethnic minority musics are predominantly approaching their studies with a view to using the results in their own compositions and performances. The importance of ethnic minority musics to them lies in the ways it can be differentiated from and juxtaposed against the Viet majority traditional musics. Many of these researchers even publish their transcriptions in songbooks, sometimes with phonetic transliterations of the text and translations in Vietnamese.¹⁹² The diversity of uses of music in Hmong culture is less important to them than how the Hmong instruments can be incorporated into the Vietnamese nation-building project, such as by adding them to orchestras of Vietnamese traditional musical instruments. The political side to these musicologists' work is particularly evident in Trần's article. He repeatedly uses the term *đồng bào* (our fellow countrymen) instead of the more typical *người* (people), *dân tộc* (ethnicity or nationality) or *dân tộc thiểu số* (ethnic

¹⁹¹ In an interview Kim Vĩnh said, "All Hmong music is for when one is madly in love (*si tình*) with another" but then went on to describe shamanistic chanting as part of the corpus of Hmong musical activities (interview, 7 November 2009). He makes no mention of this music in his scholarly writings. It is possible that the music research institutions in Vietnam purposely did not document animist musical practices for political reasons or that they simply did not consider these as part of the repertoire of Hmong traditional music.

¹⁹² An early example of the nationalist songbook is *Dân ca Việt Nam* which includes four Hmong songs (1976:66-72). The Hmong song collections discussed in the literature review are also part of this trend.

minority group). Furthermore, he concludes by extolling the positive contribution that the *sáo mềo* will make to the new period (*giai đoạn mới*) in Vietnam's development: "In its recent appearance in the performing arts, the *sáo mềo* already has established a firm foothold. Certainly, it will make a positive contribution to the healthy cultural life of our people in this new period" (331).

Linguistically, the difference between the two instruments described by Kim Vĩnh is vague. In Vietnamese, either instrument could be called *sáo mềo* or *sáo H'Mông*—Kim Vĩnh's titles seem more appropriate but I did not hear them used in the vernacular—and in Hmong, *raj nplaim* suitably describes both. The two instruments have the same Hornbostel-Sachs classification: 422.31 single pipe with free reed; Kim Vĩnh's double pipe *sáo đôi* would be classified as number 422.32. A more useful classificatory approach would be to divide them according to the way that their music is transmitted: the music played on *raj nplaim* is typically orally transmitted whereas the music played on *sáo mềo* is normally transmitted through scores of written music by art music composers. Some Hmong *raj nplaim* players I met distinguished between the instruments in this way, while others focused on the physical form of the instruments.

A more detailed comparison of the physical form of the *sáo mềo* and *raj nplaim* can demonstrate the advantages of the former instrument to contemporary art music composers and performers.¹⁹³ The *sáo mềo* is tuned to equal temperament and has the benefit of an extra note at the bottom of the scale, a perfect fourth below the tonic. The *raj nplaim* in Lào Cai tended to have seven holes, six on the front and a thumb hole on the back; Dương writes that *raj nplaim* in Nghệ An had only five holes on the front and none on the back (2010:56). Rather than tuning their flutes according to a fixed scale, the *raj nplaim* makers tend to have

¹⁹³ Arana points to two changes which the Viet musicians made: the pitches are modified and the reed is made from metal instead of bamboo (1999:61). In fact, I encountered no Hmong who used bamboo as a reed and there was no evidence that this material was used for reeds in the past. It seems unlikely that a strip of bamboo could function as an alternative to the metal reeds because the moisture from the player's breath would soften the bamboo and make it impossible to play.

their own unique ways of spacing the holes which adjusts the pitches accordingly. After noticing this method of hole-spacing I documented three ways that the holes were spaced (Figure 7.3), all of which were based on instrument construction and appearance rather than the actual resulting pitches: on flute (a), the six holes are equally spaced¹⁹⁴; on flute (b), the upper three holes (i.e. the ones closest to the reed) and the lower three holes are equally spaced with the lower holes set wider apart; and on flute (c), the spacing between the holes gradually increased as one looks from left to right. The bore on the *sáo mềo* tends to be wider than that of the *raj nplaim*. This gives the instrument a greater volume of sound which is important to composers who want to write for large ensembles. The *raj nplaim*, by contrast, would normally be played solo and does not need to compete with other instruments. While Hmong musicians tend to make their own instruments and source materials locally (see Figure 7.4), professional musicians in Hanoi are able to source higher quality materials from around the country. This gives their instruments a more resonant tone which is better suited to presentational performances.

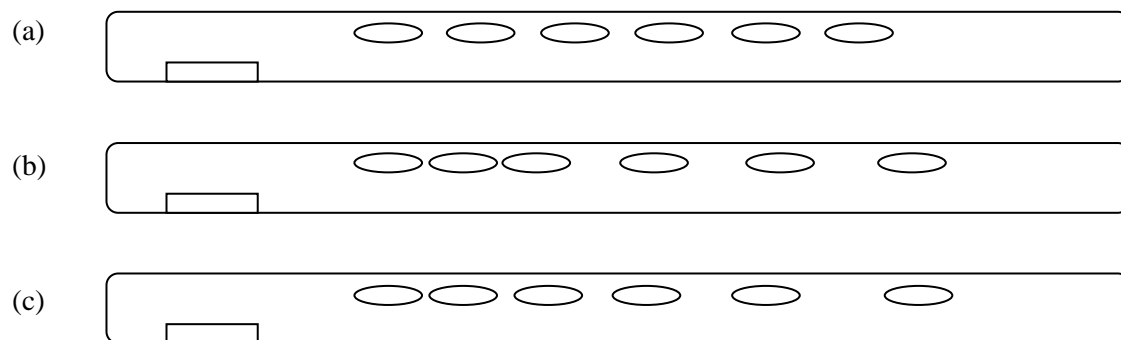


Figure 7.3: Three ways that the finger holes on the front of the *raj nplaim* were spaced.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Dương cites this method as the only form of spacing which he encountered in Nghệ An province (2010:56).

¹⁹⁵ This is by no means a comprehensive overview of hole-spacing on *raj nplaim* and merely serves to illustrate how instrument construction and form dictates the instrument tuning rather than vice-versa.

Another way to distinguish the instruments based on physical form is that there tends to be much greater variety in the style of *raj nplaim* than of *sáo mềo*. In Hmong communities, *raj nplaim* can vary in length from approximately 30cm to 80cm (Hồng 1997:134), and some of these are almost identical to the Viet version of this instrument.¹⁹⁶ One possible reason for this is that most Hmong tend to make their own *raj nplaim* (see Figure 7.4) or purchase them locally. By contrast the *sáo mềo* is now mass-produced. While professional flute players are often able to construct their own, musical instrument shops sell the standardised version and imports from China are common.¹⁹⁷ The *sáo mềo* is a *raj nplaim* that has been tamed and tailored to the high art expectations of the presentational performance audience.



Figure 7.4: Giàng A Sàì's toolkit for making and maintaining his own *raj nplaim*.

¹⁹⁶ See section 7.4 for an analysis of Giàng A Sàì performing on one of these instruments.

¹⁹⁷ While the fixed form of this instrument might have initially come from China, it is now firmly accepted as part of the Vietnamese national musical tradition.

7.3 Viet-Hmong Musical Fusion

Having already established how the *sáo mèo* and *raj nplaim* differ in physical construction and form, I now consider how they are musically distinguished. This section demonstrates how stylistic elements of Hmong traditional music have been combined with Viet traditional music to form a new national musical fusion which is distinct from traditional *raj nplaim* music. Two recordings are used to illustrate the emergence and development of this musical style. “Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo”, composed and recorded by Kim Vĩnh with symphony orchestra accompaniment, is compared and contrasted with Tiến Vương’s “Xuân Về Bản Mèo” for *sáo mèo* accompanied by an orchestra of Viet traditional musical instruments. Kim’s pioneering research on Hmong traditional music is evident in his composition whereas Vương’s virtuosic performance demonstrates how the music has evolved from its fusion origins into an accepted subsection of the national genre of *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại*. The choices made during these creative processes form the basis of a discussion on how the power dynamics of these musical performances are reflected in daily life.

7.3.1 “Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo”

Kim Vĩnh’s most famous early composition, written in the 1970s, is “Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo” (“Full Moon in the Hmong Village”). He wrote at least two versions of this piece: one for solo *sáo mèo*¹⁹⁸ and another for *sáo mèo* accompanied by a small symphony orchestra.¹⁹⁹ This section focuses on a recording of the latter version which features Kim Vĩnh on the solo part. According to NSND Trần Quý, this was one of the most significant pieces of the first period (1958-1980) of compositions for traditional instruments and orchestra.²⁰⁰ During this

¹⁹⁸ For a recording of this version played by the composer’s son NSUT Lương Hùng Việt see *Music from Vietnam, Volume 3: Ethnic Minorities* (1995).

¹⁹⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMKYnblZOuU>, accessed 17 September 2011.

²⁰⁰ Trần divides the history of the compositions for Vietnamese traditional instruments and orchestra into three periods: 1958-80, 1980-89 and 1989 to the present (http://vnmusicology-inst.vnn.vn/thongtin/Bai_TranQuy_02_10.htm, accessed 8 June 2011).

first period the National Academies of Music in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City had only recently opened, and many prospective orchestral musicians still travelled to the U.S.S.R. for formal training. The symphony orchestra would have been considered the uncontested pinnacle of art music in Vietnam and therefore the best option for an accompanying ensemble because Vietnamese traditional music was only in the early stages of professionalisation.

The form of this piece is progressive, with new melodic material being presented in each section. The tempo increases at the beginning of each new section too. After a melodic introduction on oboe accompanied by strings, the *sáo mèo* enters with a lengthy *ad libitum* melody which sounds improvised. *Pizzicato* strings then re-establish the pulse under the solo instrument as the melody settles into a steady tempo. The introductory phrase then returns as a bridge passage to a more clearly defined melody (Figure 7.5). The first six bars of the melody are in compound duple time while the metre varies in the second six bars.²⁰¹ The tempo varies between 52 and 56 bpm. On the repetition the soloist drops out on the second six bars which are played by the strings. After another bridge passage, the next section comprises a more extensive melody of eight bars in compound quadruple time at approximately 72-78 bpm (Figure 7.6). The last bar of this melody is repeated with an exaggerated *ritardando* before the slow *ad libitum sáo mèo* melody returns, this time embellished by the oboe. A simple quadruple metre at a tempo of 140 bpm is then established by staccato *sáo mèo* answered by strings and percussion. This progresses into fast trills on different notes of the *sáo mèo* which build excitement before the oboe enters with another new melody at this brisk tempo. The *sáo mèo* takes over and plays a variation on this melody (Figure 7.7) four times. The piece concludes with a reprise of the *ad libitum sáo mèo* melody accompanied by the oboe.

²⁰¹ This transcription is interpreted directly from the recording and Kim Vĩnh's sheet music may have differed slightly in the specific beat groupings.



Figure 7.5: An excerpt from the first melody of “Đêm Trăng Bán Mèo” as played by Kim Vĩnh.²⁰²



Figure 7.6: An excerpt from the second melody of “Đêm Trăng Bán Mèo” as played by Kim Vĩnh.

²⁰² In this chapter all transcriptions of the *sáo mèo* recordings are notated an octave higher than they actually sound to avoid excessive use of ledger lines.



Figure 7.7: An excerpt of the third melody of “Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo” as played by Kim Vĩnh.²⁰³

In preparation for this composition Kim Vĩnh studied Hmong secular traditional music, and certain elements of this music are evident in the recording. The entire composition is based on a pentatonic scale (B, C#, E, F# and G#) which uses the same notes as the Viet *bắc* mode (Trần 1962:216-22). The first entry of the *sáo mèo* begins with a sustained upper tonic and the phrase ends on the lower tonic in similar fashion to the way many Hmong singers begin and end traditional songs (see chapter 2). The falling minor third slide from E to C# is repeated throughout and consistent with Hmong traditional instrumental music (see chapter 3). The oboe is particularly apt as a secondary solo instrument because its timbre is similar to the Hmong *plhe le/xyu* due to its double-reed. Kim Vĩnh indicated an awareness of this instrument in Hmong culture; this suggests that he made a conscious decision regarding his use of the oboe here.

In any musical fusion sacrifices have to be made and elements of each musical style must be omitted in order to combine the styles. As was demonstrated in chapters 2 and 3, the Hmong language forms the basis for Hmong instrumental music; *kwv txhiaj* phrases are structured according to the linguistic messages they are communicating, and for this reason each subsequent phrase is rarely the same length as the preceding one. “Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo” omits this fundamental characteristic in favour of bringing the music to a non-Hmong speaking audience. Kim Vĩnh has taken a participatory music from its context, fused it with other musical styles and placed it in a presentational context, where the performer-audience divide is pronounced and the social aspect of Hmong musicking is entirely absent. Instead,

²⁰³ The solo version of “Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo” does not include this third melody.

the emphasis shifts to the timbre of the *sáo mèo* and the harmonic and melodic musical development of Western art music which has been adapted by Vietnamese composers and combined with features of indigenous musical traditions, particularly those of the Viet majority (see further Arana 1999).

In 2004 the Vietnamese Institute for Musicology produced a music video to accompany the recording which visually depicts the relationship between the Viet and Hmong people.²⁰⁴ It depicts Kim Vĩnh playing flute in the mountains of Lài Cai. Hmong girls and boys smile as they stroll through the fields listening to the music. Panorama shots show the spectacular beauty of the landscape while close-ups remind viewers of the simplicity of Hmong life by focusing in on a bamboo fence and roofing. No icons of modernity are shown as electricity poles, motorbikes and mobile phones are hidden from view. The video concludes with Kim Vĩnh surrounded by an audience of Hmong men and women listening in deferential silence (Figure 7.8). When he finishes playing they enthusiastically applaud his performance.

Kim Vĩnh's outfit emphasises the politics behind this music video. It resembles Hmong traditional clothing in form: black overalls, flared at the lower seams of the arms and legs, are covered on top with the colours of the subgroup of the wearer. The colours chosen, yellow and red, are particularly poignant in their association with the national flag which, by extension, serves as a metonymy for the state. The clothes serve as an icon for a pan-ethnic minority costume. This colour coded propaganda is commonplace in Vietnam (see, for example, Figure 7.9) and many other countries. Kim Vĩnh is acting as the state representative who shows how the Hmong and Viet people can live together harmoniously, under conditions dictated by the state.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMKYnblZOuU>, accessed 17 September 2011.

²⁰⁵ Another point about clothing here is that although the Hmong typically wear some form of footwear in daily life, none of the people shown in this video appear to have any footwear. This could be interpreted as depicting



Figure 7.8: Kim Vinh (centre) plays flute for a group of Hmong people.

This staged scene is iconic of many of the contexts in which “Người Mèo on Đảng” is heard on a daily basis (see prelude 7) through its depiction of the Hmong expressing their deference and allegiance to the Communist Party of Vietnam and, by extension, the Vietnamese state as they are represented in the video by Kim Vinh’s musical performance.

a more primitive way of life or as attempting to illustrate a homely environment (Vietnamese people tend to take their shoes off when indoors).



Figure 7.9: Propaganda poster targeting ethnic minority groups which reads “Do not grow opium”.

7.3.2 “Xuân Về Bản Mèo”

While Kim Vĩnh is friendly with a number of Hmong and his recordings have been influential in the Hmong community, the next recording is by a musician who has no notable association with the Hmong community and has had limited influence on their musical practices. In 1997, Tiến Vương recorded “Xuân Về Bản Mèo” (“Spring Back in the Hmong Village”). Although the melodic line is remarkably similar to that of “Người Mèo on Đàng”, Vương does not attribute the composition to Kim Vĩnh, and this has led to some confusion over who the original composer was.²⁰⁶ By the 1990s, the music academies in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City had significantly raised the technical capabilities of traditional musicians. As a result, Vương was able to enhance the impact of “Xuân Về Bản Mèo” by accompanying the *sáo mèo* with an elaborate orchestra of Vietnamese traditional instruments. Where Kim Vĩnh’s recording demonstrated Vietnam’s ability to match Western symphony orchestra standards in the 1960s and 70s, Vương was able to match the ideology of the 1990s by demonstrating that Vietnamese traditional instruments were just as capable of playing elaborately orchestrated and technically challenging works.

The form of “Xuân Về Bản Mèo” could be interpreted as AABBA’, a variation on ternary form. An eight bar introduction on the accompanying instruments establishes a tempo of 55-59 bpm. This is followed by an *ad libitum* solo on the *sáo mèo* which imitates the Viet tradition of *rao* (“announcement”), a metrically free opening which is played at the beginning of many instrumental music pieces (Nguyễn 1998:454). Section A (Figure 7.10) begins at bar 20 with a three-bar introduction before the first rendition of the *sáo mèo* melody in tempo. This section is repeated from bar 46. The B section (bars 71-127) is significantly quicker at

²⁰⁶ In other arrangements of “Xuân về Bản Mèo” which I encountered (for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwV_YY9A__8, accessed 1 June 2011) Tiến Vương is often listed as the composer (*người sáng tác*) as opposed to arranger (*người soạn lại*) even though he admitted to not having written any compositions for *sáo mèo* (interview, 22 September 2009). It is possible that his students at the National Academy of Music in Hanoi are unaware of Kim Vĩnh’s work and have misattributed the composition by accident.

160-164 bpm. The long notes from the second-time bar onwards provide a transition for the accompanying instruments to revert to the slower tempo. The recapitulation of the A section (bars 128-160) is marginally faster than the opening at 60-62 bpm; hence, the tempo is marked as *largetto* in the transcription. Overall, the ternary form contributes a stronger sense of direction than the progressive form of “Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo”; the transitions adhere to Vietnamese art music listeners’ expectations by creating clear musical divisions between sections, and the recapitulation at the end gives a sense of finality.²⁰⁷

Vuong, himself a conservatory-trained musician, did not study Hmong traditional music to the extent that Kim Vĩnh did. Rather, his strength lies in his flute playing abilities. The *sáo mèo* is a novelty instrument for him.²⁰⁸ The instrument which he spends most of his time playing and teaching and on which he has written a masters thesis is the *sáo trúc* (bamboo flute), one of the core Viet traditional instruments. Vuong’s superior technical ability is evident when comparing “Xuân Về Bản Mèo” to Kim Vĩnh’s recording of “Người Mèo on Đăng”. The tuning is the first noticeable difference. Kim Vĩnh’s flute is significantly sharper than the synthesised accompaniment whereas Vuong’s pitch is much closer to the accompanying instruments. While the top note is still a little sharp, Vuong disguises this inconsistency by adding vibrato and bending the note downwards. He uses tonguing much more frequently than Kim Vĩnh; this makes the playing sound cleaner but is not something which Hmong *raj nplaim* players tend to do often. Vuong’s slides, vibrato and quick finger movements are more precise and in time. These refined playing techniques, combined with the ternary form of the composition, result in a more satisfying experience for a Viet art music audience through Vuong’s close adherence to the style of *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại*.

²⁰⁷ Arana cites ternary form as one of the three main Western forms adopted by Vietnamese composers of *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại*—the other two are sonata form and theme and variations (1999:50).

²⁰⁸ In an interview with Vuong, he emphasised the peripheral nature of the *sáo mèo* in Vietnamese music and encouraged me to learn more about the *sáo trúc* instead.

Lê notes a similar preference for ternary form among composers of new music for the *đàn tranh* zither. He suggests this was because the composers wanted to imbue their compositions with song-like characteristics—the original basis for much Viet traditional instrumental music too—by using the same structural form (1991:84-5). As chapter 3 demonstrates, *raj nplaim* and other Hmong traditional instrumental music is largely based on *kvv txhiaj* songs, which do not typically employ ternary form. Having been extracted from this context in Kim Vĩnh’s early compositions, *sáo mèò* music now appears to be developing a new association with Viet songs through the use of ternary form in “Xuân Về Bản Mèo”.

Vương’s superior technical ability belies a lack of knowledge about Hmong traditional music which is unlikely to have been noticed by most of his listeners. Indeed, it is doubtful that he even cared about performing in a manner that could be related to the styles of Hmong *raj nplaim* players. For him, the more elaborate the ornamentation the better. He uses a wide fast finger vibrato on the upper notes and a softer breath-controlled vibrato on the bottom G because all the holes are covered and finger vibrato is not possible. His use of vibrato on the F is consistently faster than the vibrato on other notes. As this is a new style of music, no set rules have been established for its performance. Therefore, the player’s finger may simply have been physically faster on this note. The tremolo ornaments occur most frequently between G and Bb. This resembles the Viet technique of a wide and fast vibrato on the leading note (*xê*) of the scale. These elaborate ornamentation techniques are evidence of Vương’s conservatoire training and are not typical of Hmong traditional music.

$\text{♩} = 55 - 59$
dàn bầu *dàn nhị*

9 *ad lib.*

17 *a tempo tutti*

23

28

35

41 *dàn nhị*

49

Detailed description: This is a musical score for guitar and erhu. It consists of eight staves of music. The first staff is marked with a tempo of 55-59 bpm and includes the instrument names 'dàn bầu' and 'dàn nhị'. The second staff begins with a measure number of 9 and the instruction 'ad lib.'. The third staff starts at measure 17 with 'a tempo tutti'. The fourth staff is at measure 23, the fifth at 28, the sixth at 35, the seventh at 41 (marked 'dàn nhị'), and the eighth at 49. The music is written in a 3/4 time signature with a key signature of two flats. It features various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests, with some measures containing complex rhythmic figures.

54

58

63

68

molto rit. $\text{♩} = 160 - 164$

dàn nhị

76

82

89

96

103

111

119 *molto rit.* *dàn tranh*

♩ = 60 - 62

130

137

144

151 *molto rit.*

157 *a tempo* *dàn dây*

Figure 7.10: A descriptive transcription of the *sáo mèo* part for “Xuân Về Bản Mèo” as played by Tién Vương.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ The sheet music for this piece is commonly written starting on A because accidentals or a key signature would not be necessary using that scale. However, in attempting to illustrate the difference in pitch between Kim Vĩnh’s and Tién Vương’s flutes I have elected to keep this transcription at the pitch of the recording. In this transcription the ornaments are dictated for the first time of the *allegro* section only. Grace notes are sometimes played as tremolos (for example, bar 12), and do not always start on the main note (for example, the tremolo ornament in bar 142 begins on the G). This recording appeared on the album *Sáo - Nhị - Bầu (Flute - Fiddle -*

Harmonic movement is limited to minor tonic, major subdominant and minor dominant chords throughout, which are dictated by the melodic movement. These changes are outlined by the bass which is probably played on a modified *đàn đay* lute with electric pickup, an instrument which has become popular in these types of ensemble works. When the solo line holds a long F, the bass also moves to F. Otherwise, the harmony primarily remains rooted on the tonic chord with occasional movement to dominant. The opening eight bars of the bass line (see Figure 7.11) illustrate how the player decorates the tonic chord by slowly moving between the triad notes while also articulating the downbeat for the rest of the ensemble. The other accompanying instruments fill out the chord notes, especially the stringed instruments such as the *đàn tranh*, and occasionally imitate the solo line. The introductory melody begins on *đàn bầu*, a monochord instrument which is often represented as entirely unique to the Viet people. The *đàn nhị* (two-stringed fiddle) takes the role of the oboe in Kim Vĩnh’s “Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo” by imitating and decorating the soloist’s melody and occasionally playing in unison with the *sáo mèo*.

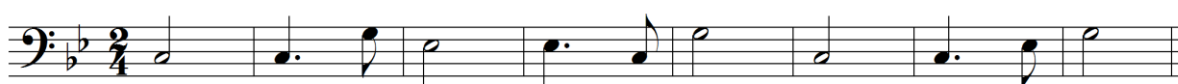


Figure 7.11: The first eight bars of the bass line as played on *đàn đay*.

As with Kim Vĩnh’s performance, this recording can be interpreted as a performance of the power dynamics at play in Vietnamese social life of the time. Vietnam had just reopened its borders to foreigners and many areas where the Hmong reside were still out-of-bounds for those visitors. When performed in Hanoi this piece was presented as a proxy for Hmong traditional music, and for meeting the actual people from whom the music was

Monochord (1997). See <http://www.nhaccuatui.com/nghe?L=qPLuVF55r3XN>, accessed 9 February 2012, for a recording of this track.

supposedly derived. In fact, this analysis has shown that the recording is more akin to Viet rather than Hmong traditional music. This style of *sáo mèo* playing contains only distant remnants of Hmong traditional music. The accompanying instruments are all from the core Viet tradition—the cues added to the transcription (Figure 7.10) include the names of some of these instruments—and even the soloist is a Viet man. Vương’s role as an educator appears to be contributing to the distancing of this music from its fusion origins towards becoming a musical style in its own right and being incorporated into the national musical heritage of Vietnam. *Sáo mèo* music has evolved into its own unique style with a core repertoire which is performed by virtuosic *sáo trúc* players such as Vương and his students.

This section has demonstrated how *sáo mèo* music initially began as a musical fusion thanks to Kim Vĩnh and others’ research and subsequent compositional blending of Hmong and Viet musical styles, and how more recently it has become firmly established as part of the national music genre known as *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* (modern national music).

7.4 Comparison with Hmong Players

Has this new musical style had any impact upon Hmong *raj nplaim* music? The influence of these Viet recordings on Hmong music is difficult to gauge on a large scale. However, a detailed analysis of recordings of individual players can suggest to what degree the Viet players are influencing Hmong musicians, if at all. A comparison with two of the Hmong musicians introduced in chapter 3 suggests that reappropriation or reverse influence is taking place to varying degrees. Although Sùng A Sinh might have heard the *sáo mèo* recordings on excursions to the market, at other people’s homes or as background accompaniment to the government’s propaganda broadcasts, he did not possess the means to play back audio recordings and had no surviving siblings or children who might have played the recordings for him. In contrast, Giàng A Sài was featured as an audience member on the music video to

“Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo”, he had a copy of “Người Mèo on Đẳng” on his mobile phone and he had a *sáo mèo* that was given to him by a Viet musician in Hanoi. These two musicians’ contrasting degrees of access to *sáo mèo* music are reflected in the way each of them played, and are representative of two distinct Hmong perspectives on the music.

Sinh briefly demonstrated the *raj nplaim* he had made for me by playing an excerpt from a *nkauj plees* (Video Track 15; Figure 7.12). The notes of his *raj nplaim* were not tuned to tempered pitch. Instead, the tuning system appeared to be based on the way the instrument was constructed: all six finger-holes on the front of the instrument were evenly spaced.²¹⁰ This resulted in a suspended pentatonic scale with wider intervals towards the top of the scale than relative pitch. The form of the song he played was typical of the *kwv txhiaj* style described in chapters 2 and 3 with uneven phrase lengths and all phrases ending on the lower tonic. Each phrase was played legato throughout and the steady pulse was marked on repeated notes with grace notes. The ornamentation lacked any obvious influence from the *sáo mèo* recordings and he did not use any vibrato throughout the performance.



Figure 7.12: A descriptive transcription of an excerpt of Sinh’s playing on *raj nplaim*.

On 6 November 2010, Sài was invited to represent the Hmong in a collaborative programme of Vietnamese and Swedish traditional musics at the Hanoi Opera House. The programme featured traditional music from Sweden, the Viet majority and a variety of ethnic

²¹⁰ See instrument (c) in Figure 7.3.

minority groups in Vietnam. The concert concluded with encores performed by the Viet and Swedish ensembles together while the ethnic minority performers stood behind them and applauded in support (see Figure 7.13). Sài initially hoped to perform demonstrations of *nplooj*, *raj nplaim* and *qeej* but due to time constraints he had to limit his feature to the *raj nplaim* only. His performance is interesting because although he is acting as a representative of Hmong traditional music, the ways that he has transformed *raj nplaim* playing from a participatory performance to a presentational performance seem to suggest a borrowing of certain elements of the *sáo mèo* recordings (Video Track 16).



Figure 7.13: Ethnic minority musicians pose behind the Viet and Swedish musicians who are playing fusion encores. Sài is centre-right, to the left of guitar player Esbjörn Hazelius.

Introducing the instrument as *sáo H'mông* (Hmong flute), Sài chose to play a tempered-pitch Hmong flute which is more similar to the flutes played by Kim Vĩnh and Tiến Vương than Sinh's six-hole *raj nplaim*. The wider bore produces a less nasal sound than

Sinh's instrument. The seventh hole at the bottom extends the range by a perfect fourth and allows Sài to change key. In physical form, the instrument might be best described as *cây sáo H'mông hiện đại* (contemporary Hmong flute) (Lương 2003[1997]) or, as it is more often called, *sáo mèo*. But, if the player's intentions (primarily, to perform his ethnic identity) and the style of music performed on the instrument (Hmong traditional) are considered as the primary means of classification, Sài's flute should be called *raj nplaim*. This case highlights the permeability of the boundary between Hmong and Viet musical traditions and musical instruments. Where normally Sài and his father would play on a smaller-bore six-holed instrument, his awareness of the presentational performance context led him to choose an instrument that would allow more flexibility melodically and tonally.

In further recognition of the performance context, Sài uses the same structure as Kim Vĩnh's "Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo" to emphasise melody and form over language. The piece is structured as a suite of songs. He begins with an *ad libitum* cadential style melody, and then progresses from a moderately-paced melody in the *kwv txhiaj* style (114-116 bpm) to a slightly faster one in the same style (118-120 bpm). The main notes of these melodies form a tetratonic scale of G (see Figure 7.14); this resembles his 2004 recording on *ncas*. The performance concludes with a *vivace* coda (158-162 bpm) on the same pentatonic scale as Kim Vĩnh's recording, which Vietnamese musicologists might classify as the Viet *bắc* mode, although Sài's tonic note is tuned closer to C. Despite the lack of modulation in Kim Vĩnh's "Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo", the two performances are similar in that the dominant is heard more frequently than the tonic in the first two melodies, and the tonic is more prominent in the third melody. The range of each of the songs in Sài's performance remains within an octave but they are separated by brief *ad libitum* transitions which explore the entire melodic range of the instrument. Sài uses a fast vibrato similar to that of Kim Vĩnh on the long notes. Single or double grace notes mark most of the melody notes; this is similar to Sinh's style and

contrasts with Tiến Vương’s elaborate combination of ornamentation and tonguing. Overall, Sài brings Hmong music to a wider audience by making calculated concessions with the traditional style and borrowing some of compositional techniques Kim Vĩnh used in “Đêm Trăng Bản Mèo”.



Figure 7.14: A descriptive transcription of an excerpt from the second melody of Sài’s performance at the Opera House.

In comparing these two Hmong players’ performances with the *sáo mèo* recordings it seems that this particular cultural movement is not unidirectional; following the success of Kim Vĩnh’s musical fusion, which combined elements of Viet and Hmong musics, there appears to have been a degree of cultural movement in the opposite direction. In his performance at the Opera House, Sài modified the traditional *kwv txhiaj* style to make it more accessible to a non-Hmong-speaking audience. He learned the piece from his father who had a mutually influential, though not necessarily equally balanced, relationship with Kim Vĩnh. Sài’s performance is also indicative of his own increasingly contested sense of double-consciousness which has come to the fore in his work at the local cultural centre. Should Hmong musicians such as Sài continue to perform and interact with Viet musicians, similar techniques might be adopted by Hmong musicians in Vietnam to a much greater degree. From that, a more carefully balanced Vietnamese-Hmong musical fusion might emerge. For the time being, however, Sinh’s performance suggests that the reverse influence of Viet musicians on Hmong musical culture remains limited.

7.5 Conclusions: Music, Power and the Politics of Representation

The musical fusions described in this chapter are not equally balanced collaborations; they are staged representations of an ethnic minority group's traditional music which are primarily performed by members of the Viet majority accompanied by ensembles of non-Hmong musical instruments. By appropriating and reinventing the *raj nplaim* as *sáo mèò*, Viet musicians are diluting the Hmongness of the music, leaving only traces of a rich and diverse musical culture which this thesis has begun to explore, for presentation in the national and global spheres as part of the national heritage of Vietnam, and they have been formally honoured by the state for this. Even the titles of the recordings are predominantly in the Vietnamese language; they are occasionally translated into English but rarely into Hmong. This practice of misrepresenting a hybrid musical style as coming from the Hmong ethnic group corresponds with the assimilationist policies of the Party (see Pelley 2002:92).

Kim Vĩnh has taken the standardisation of the physical form of the Hmong reed flute a step further by standardising the music played on the instrument. This sound has evolved into an aural sign that orientalises or stereotypes the Hmong minority. In Hanoi, the instrument has even been used in rituals as an icon of female minority spirits (Norton 2009:123), indicating that the timbre of the *sáo mèò* is no longer associated with just one ethnic group but with multiple officially recognised ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. Erlmann refers to this type of appropriated music as a “social hieroglyph”: “They pretend to restore in a token act of equal exchange to the original a racial authenticity that they denied to it by counterfeiting it in the first place” (1999:264). This music reinforces the social hegemony through its juxtaposition of a simple Hmong minority instrument against an elaborate orchestra of Viet traditional instruments in “Xuân Về Bản Mèo” and therefore limits Hmong agency in the national context.

If, culturally, the Vietnamese nation-state benefits from representing itself as diverse and accepting of difference, and economically and socially, the Viet musicians claim the majority of the benefits, what do the Hmong get out of this? This genre and, in particular, Kim Vĩnh's "Người Mèo ơn Đảng", has raised awareness of Hmong culture in the mainstream media and provided rare opportunities for musicians such as Sài to develop a part-time performing career based on a modified form of the tradition. Many Hmong listeners have reappropriated "Người Mèo ơn Đảng" as their own ethnic identity marker which represents a modern musical tradition, and those who are aware of the Viet origins of the recording tend to accept it as part of their hybrid national-ethnic (Vietnamese-Hmong) identity.

While this chapter has focused its critique on the political ideology of the Party, the personal motivations of Kim Vĩnh and Tiến Vương have received less attention. For example, Kim Vĩnh's long-term residency in Lào Cai city and good relations with many Hmong, including Giàng Seo Gà, could also have been highlighted as an explanation for his identification with and drawing of attention to Hmong traditional music. But this chapter has not intended to be critical of any particular individuals. Rather, I have attempted to illuminate the discourses that are promoted by certain institutions or, "mechanisms of power" (Foucault 1980:39), relating to the Hmong and their music.

In her exploration of the reimagining of Vietnam's national past, Hồ Tài writes, "If a community creates and sustains memory, the reverse is also true: memory creates and sustains the community" (2001:227). This chapter responds to her call to expand the geography of memory (ibid.:229) by demonstrating how Kim Vĩnh has brought elements of Hmong traditional music, and the memories which are fundamental to sustaining that tradition, into the national imagination. His music has helped create a national community with shared musical memories. As was demonstrated in section 7.1, the Party explicitly

aimed to eradicate all vestiges of neocolonial cultural influences. However, in attempting to do this they have responded with their own homegrown version of “internal cultural colonialism” (Stokes 1994:14) that only repeats the prejudices of their colonizers which they sought to challenge.

By definition, Kim Vĩnh’s recordings are a form of hybridised tradition in the style of *nhạc dân tộc hiện đại*. This style of music performs the power structures of daily life in Vietnam by fetishising (Hall 1997:266-69) or disciplining the music of the ethnic minorities. These styles are then juxtaposed against the high art style of the Viet majority. The resulting music resembles Bentham’s panopticon, as revisited by Foucault (1977:195-228), where the bourgeoisie Viet rulers control the “unequal gaze” upon the ethnic minorities. But this panoptic view is imperfect because the viewer cannot be made invisible; inevitably, the human interactions lead to cross-cultural fertilisations which cannot necessarily be controlled or ordered. The opportunities which have been afforded to some Hmong musicians as a result of the popularity of these recordings demonstrate that there may be beneficial aspects of this new musical style for the Hmong too. Perhaps this will lead to more balanced musical fusions in the future which treat all participants and their musical traditions equally.

Conclusion Reflections and Implications

Shortly before leaving Sapa for the last time during my fieldwork I sat down with Sàì to reflect on this research. He understood the general purpose of the thesis as a comparative venture; the thesis would be used as a means to better understand the differences and similarities between Hmong subgroups and between the Hmong and other music-making communities around the world. Sàì had reservations about my inclusion of styles of music which were not considered traditional because he did not see them as historically linked with the Hmong. But in general he expressed his satisfaction that the time and energy he had expended on helping me learn about Hmong music would lead to the production of an important historical document which would affirm the significance of his culture. After complimenting my work Sàì articulated an important point. He pointed to the table in front of him and asked me to imagine it as the entire corpus of Hmong musical activities. Then he outlined a tiny segment at the corner of the table and compared it to the knowledge which I would compile in my thesis. With this gesture, Sàì was articulating the contribution of this study while also emphasising that it was only the beginning.

This thesis is the first book-length study of Vietnamese-Hmong music in English and one of the first studies of the music of any of Vietnam's ethnic minority groups by a foreign (non-Vietnamese) scholar. Where previous ethnomusicological studies on music in Vietnam have tended to focus on the music of the Viet majority, and the few previous studies on Vietnamese-Hmong music have focused solely on traditional music, this study fills a knowledge gap by demonstrating how Hmong traditional music is a modern formation which is part of the diverse musical world in which the Hmong currently live.

While other studies of Vietnamese-Hmong music have tended to treat carefully delimited bodies of musical sound as the primary object of analysis, this thesis has focused on the people taking part in the musical activities and has attempted to bring their experiences of

the music to the fore. The personal relationships I developed in these communities not only facilitated the research but also shaped my perspectives on and interpretations of their musical activities. Through participant-observation, the approach to data collection was focused though limited in sample size. Therefore, further study of this musical community will inevitably serve to complement and perhaps challenge the research findings. More comprehensive research on Christian Hmong music in particular would supplement the current work. Studies of other ethnic minority groups in Vietnam and other (post-)socialist states would also contribute to a better understanding of these subject positions.

This thesis contributes to the study of music and identity through its persistent examination of the articulation and manipulation of multiple social identities through musical activity. In contrast with the Hmong in many other nation-states, and some of Vietnam's other ethnic minority groups, this study suggests that the Vietnamese-Hmong prefer to emphasise their ethnic identity over their national identity. They are less integrated into the nation-state than many of these other groups (compared with the Tày minority in Vietnam or the Hmong in Thailand, for example), and music is one of the main mediums through which they construct and communicate these positions.

Bhabha's concept of the Third Space emphasised the untranslatable divide between two cultural worlds. By applying this concept to Vietnamese-Hmong musical activities, I have shown how they can be understood as fundamentally hybrid cultural formations which share attributes with the supercultures on either side of the hyphen; the musical activities associated with the Vietnamese-Hmong are both unique to the Vietnamese nation-state and closely related to the Hmong transnational community. Although the Vietnamese-Hmong are situated on the peripheries of these two larger communities, their lives and musical activities are not isolated from them. In Vietnam, their music has been affected by changes on a national level and through daily interactions with people from other ethnic groups in their

social world; with the Hmong transnational community, they share certain cultural traits with and are influenced by musical innovations originating from Hmong in other countries even though their individual approaches to and understandings of these musics might differ in important ways.

The impact of globalised communications and travel has introduced an unprecedented diversity of musical styles into this community. I have demonstrated how the Hmong are responding to the “Frankenstein-like” (Stokes 2007:5) apparatuses of musical globalisation with acts of individual agency. The recent proliferation of new musical recordings being made available in northern Vietnam has included a vast number of recordings in the Hmong language. Through the sale of these recordings, Hmong vendors are diversifying their means of subsistence and enhancing their ability to subvert incorporation into the state system; through their consumption of these musics, the Hmong are reinforcing their sense of ethnic identity by self-educating themselves in the internationally accepted written script of their language which has been withheld from them in formal education, Hmong RPA. This alternative means of education is providing the Hmong with agency by enhancing their ability to resist state indoctrination via the predominantly Viet-centric education system.

The introduction of these new musical styles has raised the issue of the sustainability of traditional musical practices among some Hmong musicians. While older musicians have probably always lamented the lack of young and talented musicians with similar outlooks to themselves, the “old way” no longer appears viable in areas where the sociomusical environment has irreversibly transformed. Some players are responding to these changes by experimenting with new approaches to learning and teaching. Turino’s four fields of musical activity provided a way to illustrate how the Hmong are developing new platforms for traditional musical activities in response to these changes. These analyses have demonstrated that some of the new practices are more sustainable than others; while performances managed

and financially supported by the tourism industry can provide short-term employment for musicians, more practical Hmong-directed local initiatives which require less external support and permit a greater degree of innovation are more likely to persist over time. For instance, in response to his interactions with Viet students at the Hanoi National Academy of Music, Sàì has been attempting to set up a music academy in Sapa. The aim of the academy would be to make traditional music more accessible to Hmong youth by formalising the education process. Another local initiative, led by Gà, is an attempt to rejuvenate the social side of the Love Market by encouraging groups of Hmong music enthusiasts to meet, play and drink together on Saturday evenings in Sapa. The one requirement of his initiative is that the musicians refuse to accept money from or perform for tourists. All of these activities contribute to the diversity of the musical environment and therefore ensure the long-term sustainability of Hmong musical traditions in Vietnam.

Rice's "Time, Place, and Metaphor" model was helpful in describing and analysing the motivations and intentions of the musicians at various times and places in their lives. The principal metaphor for the case studies of traditional participatory musical activities tended to be music as social behaviour. In order to clarify the distinction between differing contexts of the activities more detailed, case-specific metaphors had to be generated including music as education, entertainment, foreplay, knowledge transfer, love, individual and group identity, memoir, therapy, work and as a means of achieving or a mark of social position. All of these metaphors serve to articulate beliefs about the fundamental nature of music in the lives of the Vietnamese-Hmong. Use of this model also enables cross-cultural comparisons with other ethnic groups in Vietnam and throughout the rest of the world by bringing their similarities to the fore without dispensing with their differences entirely (Agawu 2003).

This thesis contributes to the study of music, nationalism and postcolonialism by demonstrating how Hmong traditional music has been incorporated into the national musical

imaginary of the Vietnamese nation-state in addition to its association with the minority nation of the Hmong ethnic group. The Vietnamese state responded to its postcolonial condition by institutionally promoting musics which were perceived to make contributions to decolonisation and national solidarity. This research contributes a musical perspective to the academic critique of the portrayal and treatment of minority groups in postcolonial nation-states by demonstrating how certain musical representations of the Hmong which are promoted by the state are politically motivated. They are controlled by the ruling classes and serve, principally, as a mouthpiece for the political ideologies of the Party. Nevertheless, these fusion musics have presented an opportunity for some Hmong musicians to be accepted on the national platform and enhance the possibility for more balanced collaborations in the future.

Recent research on the Hmong in China and Southeast Asia has encouraged a cross-border or inter-ethnic approach (see Scott 2009; Michaud 2010; Tapp 2010). Although I have focused on the music of the Vietnamese-Hmong ethnic group, a cross-border or inter-ethnic study of music in this region would complement the current study by offering another perspective on and further insights into the Vietnamese-Hmong musical community. Similarly, research on the ways other individuals and subcultural communities in Vietnam are engaging with the increasingly cosmopolitan array of musics now available to them might reveal more about the musical choices individuals are making in response to their increasingly globalised world.

The music used by members of the Vietnamese-Hmong ethnic group comprises a diverse assemblage of styles and genres. The multiple manifestations of their musics are consistently being reworked in response to shifting social contexts in contemporary Vietnam. While some of these musics are considered part of their traditional heritage through a perceived historical association with their ancestors, all of these musics are imbued with

significance through their association with a multitude of social identities in daily life. Principally, though, these ephemeral musical gestures serve to make Vietnamese-Hmong notions about life articulate.

Appendix A Glossary of Hmong Language Terms

<i>caub tsav</i>	master of the spirit rights who leads the mortuary rituals
<i>dab xwm kab</i>	household spirits
<i>faib dab tshuaj</i>	divide the spirits of herbal medicine
<i>Hmoob</i>	Hmong
<i>hu plig</i>	last part of the main funeral ceremony which takes place on the thirteenth day after death; outside of Vietnam this ritual can be referred to as <i>xi plig</i> and <i>hu plig</i> can refer more generally to calling the souls of the family back into the house
<i>kev ntseeg</i>	believer in Christianity
<i>kvv txhiaj</i>	traditional song, story or ballad; traditional song style
<i>laig dab</i>	ritual of feeding the soul of the deceased at mortuary rituals; this term has also been associated with feeding the ancestors in general before a feast (Lee and Tapp 2010:180-1)
<i>lus taum</i>	narrative or moralising songs, usually sung by older people
<i>ncas</i>	mouth harp
<i>ncauj qeej</i>	blowing tube of the <i>qeej</i>
<i>nkauj</i>	song; singer
<i>nkauj haus cawv</i>	drinking song
<i>nkauj kawm ntawv</i>	school song
<i>nkauj nog ncas</i>	two-stringed fiddle (also known as <i>xim xaus</i>)
<i>nkauj plees</i>	love songs
<i>nkauj tsis sib tau</i>	peace songs
<i>nkauj tuag</i>	funeral, death or poison song
<i>nkauj txij nkawm</i>	engagement or marriage songs

<i>nkauj ua ntsuag</i>	orphans' songs
<i>nkauj ua nyab</i>	daughter-in-laws' songs
<i>noj nplej tshiab</i>	first days of harvesting and eating new rice
<i>nplaim</i>	metal reed which is used on <i>qeej</i> and <i>raj nplaim</i> ; similar to the <i>ncas</i>
<i>nplooj</i>	leaf
<i>npua tsiab</i>	pig which is eaten at the New Year feast
<i>nruas</i>	drum
<i>nruas neeb</i>	shaman's gong
<i>ntaj neeb</i>	shaman's sword
<i>ntiv qeej</i>	pipes/notes of the <i>qeej</i>
<i>nyiav</i>	lament
<i>plhe le/xyu</i>	double-reed horn
<i>pov pob</i>	New Year ball-games which can include singing
<i>qeej</i>	large mouth organ
<i>qeej tu siav</i>	song of expiring life
<i>qeej tuag</i>	<i>qeej</i> and drum funeral music
<i>qhuab ke</i>	showing or guiding the way funeral chant
<i>raj nplaim</i>	bamboo pipe/flute with reed
<i>raj pum liv</i>	bamboo flute
<i>rooj neeb</i>	shaman's bench
<i>suab</i>	voice, sound of voice, tone, noise, sound
<i>taub qeej</i>	wind chamber of the <i>qeej</i>
<i>tawg</i>	to dance, turn or spin; can be used to indicate that the player is in motion when performing

<i>thaj neeb</i>	household altar
<i>tsang shaov chuôg</i> ²¹¹	trading songs at animist Hmong funerals
<i>tshaub</i>	to blow or expel a constant stream of air
<i>tshiav</i>	to chafe or rub; to bow
<i>tshov</i>	to blow or play a musical instrument with finger holes
<i>tswv yexus</i>	Lord Jesus
<i>txiab neeb</i>	cymbals; a ring-shaped instrument with metal coins attached which rattle when shaken
<i>txiv neeb</i>	shaman
<i>txiv nruas</i>	funeral drum
<i>txiv qeej</i>	master <i>qeej</i> player; one who is qualified to lead the funeral music performance
<i>txiv txiag</i>	coffin
<i>txwb neeb</i>	spirit bells used by the shaman
<i>txwm</i>	rhyming couplet
<i>txwm kuam</i>	pair of divination horns
<i>ua neeb</i>	to go into a trance
<i>ua neeb kho</i>	shamanistic healing ritual
<i>ua plig</i>	final releasing of the spirit ceremony which is held months or years after the person has passed away; outside of Vietnam this ritual can be referred to as <i>tso plig</i>
<i>xib hwm</i>	an elder shaman who is qualified to train other shamans
<i>xyoo tshiab</i>	Lunar New Year
<i>yaj ceeb</i>	land of the living

²¹¹ This is a Viet-Hmong spelling.

yeej ceeb

spirit world

Appendix B Glossary of Vietnamese Language Terms

<i>âm nhạc</i>	music
<i>bài đi học</i>	school song
<i>bảo tồn</i>	to preserve
<i>cổ truyền</i>	ancient; age-old
<i>con khỉ</i>	monkey
<i>con mèo</i>	cat
<i>cúng gia tiên</i>	ancestral spirits
<i>đàn bầu</i>	monochord
<i>đàn đáy</i>	lute
<i>dân gian</i>	folk; popular
<i>đàn nhị</i>	two-stringed fiddle
<i>dân tộc</i>	nationality or ethnicity
<i>dân tộc thiểu số</i>	ethnic minority group
<i>đàn tranh</i>	zither
<i>đình làng</i>	communal house
<i>đọc tấu</i>	to perform a solo on
<i>đổi mới</i>	changing for the new; renovation period
<i>Đông Sơn period</i>	roughly 700-100 BCE, a time which many Viet scholars consider the foundational period of their culture
<i>Hmông; H'Mông; Mông</i>	Hmong
<i>hội đồng hào mục</i>	village chiefs during Chinese rule
<i>kéo</i>	to pull, tug or strain; to bow a stringed instrument
<i>khám phá</i>	to discover; to find out
<i>Kinh</i>	the majority ethnic group in Vietnam
<i>Mèo</i>	see <i>Hmông</i>
<i>mọi; mán</i>	savage

<i>múa sạp</i>	bamboo dance
<i>ngày quốc khánh Việt Nam</i>	2 September, the National Day of Vietnam
<i>Nghệ sĩ nhân dân</i>	People's Artist
<i>Nghệ sĩ ưu tú</i>	Excellent Artist
<i>người</i>	person; people
<i>người ghi âm</i>	a person who records or transcribes
<i>nhạc dân tộc hiện đại</i>	modern national music
<i>phát triển</i>	to develop
<i>quan họ</i>	folk song tradition associated with the Viet majority which supposedly originated in Bắc Ninh province
<i>quốc ngữ</i>	Romanised script used for writing the Vietnamese language
<i>sáo đơn</i>	single flute
<i>sáo đôi</i>	double flute
<i>sáo ghép</i>	compound flute
<i>sáo H'mông</i>	Hmong reed flute
<i>sáo mèo</i>	see <i>sáo H'mông</i>
<i>sáo trúc</i>	bamboo flute
<i>tam tấu</i>	trio
<i>tải nhạc</i>	downloaded music
<i>Tết nguyên đán</i>	Vietnamese Lunar New Year
<i>thăm dò</i>	to explore; to try to know
<i>truyền thống</i>	traditional
<i>văn hóa Việt</i>	Vietnamese national culture
<i>Việt</i>	see <i>Kinh</i> ; civilised
<i>Việt Minh</i>	a national independence coalition formed in 1941

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