

Reflective Masculinity Performances in the film *Nuj Nphlaib thiab Ntxawm*: Hmong  
American Men Reclaiming Masculinity through Women's Bodies

By  
Cathy X. Xiong  
Dept. of Ethnic Studies, University of Colorado at Boulder

Defended April 4, 2013

Thesis Advisor:  
Dr. Brian Locke, Dept. of Ethnic Studies

Defense Committee:  
Dr. Seema Sohi, Dept. of Ethnic Studies  
Dr. Bianca Williams, Dept. of Ethnic Studies  
Dr. Glenda Russell, Counseling and Psychological Services

## Honors Thesis Proposal Approval

### Signature Page

Proposed Title of Thesis: Reflective Masculinity Performances in the film *Nuj Nphlaib thiab Ntxawm*: Hmong American Men Reclaiming Masculinity through Women's Bodies

Honors Candidate Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Print name: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Signature of Committee Members:

Chair of Supervisory Committee: \_\_\_\_\_

Print name: \_\_\_\_\_

Second Committee Reader: \_\_\_\_\_

Print name: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Committee Reader: \_\_\_\_\_

Print name: \_\_\_\_\_

Director of Honors Committee: \_\_\_\_\_

Print name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

## Abstract

As a new field of research, Hmong studies requires additional investigation in almost every topic imaginable—diaspora politics, refugee mental health, women’s empowerment and more—but little scholarship undertakes the task of examining Hmong masculinity. Patriarchy, especially, requires additional attention as the governing system that influences how men perform their masculinity. This study examines Hmong masculinity performance through the popular grassroots film *Nuj Nphlaib thiab Ntxawm* (Nu Plaib and Yer). In this paper I will argue that Hmong masculinity is in a moment of crisis; one of the ways Hmong American men of the 1.5 generation validate their masculinity against a White heterosexual hegemonic masculinity is by dominating the bodies of women from the homeland. In order to establish Hmong masculinity in crisis, I will discuss the displacement of traditional Hmong patriarchy within the Western masculinity schema. I will also analyze how the film constructs Hmong hegemonic masculinity and how the character Nu Plaib reclaims his masculinity. Lastly, I will demonstrate how Nu Plaib’s possession of the female body is essential to Hmong American men’s re-establishment of their own sense of masculinity.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1: Hmong Men Adaptation in America.....	13
Chapter 2: Gender Performance in the Film.....	35
Conclusion.....	49
Bibliography.....	53

### **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank Dr. Brian Locke for his continuous support; Dr. Glenda Russell for her unwavering dedication and mentorship; Dr. Bianca Williams for her helpful readings and much-needed structure; her peers for sharing their sufferings and triumphs; and her sisters Lisa, Linda, and Nina Xiong for their patience and words.

## **Reflective Masculinity Performances in the film *Nuj Nphlaib thiab Ntxawm:* Hmong American Men Reclaiming Masculinity through Women's Bodies**

### **Introduction**

#### *Personal motivations*

It comes back to me in snippets of sounds and touch. Untying my shoelaces in our stuffy living room, and then jerking my head up at the words, “Castor committed suicide.”

I don’t even remember who said it, or whether it was in English or Hmong. Just those three small words.

Afterwards I babysat my younger cousins at my uncle’s house while everyone else stayed with Castor’s family, who only lived fifteen minutes from our house. At his funeral, I remember wrapping my arms around my aunt’s shoulders as she sobbed, telling me she had fixed his glasses. He had taken my uncle’s hunting rifle to his forehead and pulled the trigger.

Then eight months later, my sister picked me up from school and on our way to Castor’s house, she told me that something had happened. My uncle had shot my aunt with a gun, set fire to the house, then committed suicide. We stopped to look at their home. It had been fenced so we could only see charred wood from afar. I felt empty. I didn’t know how to react.

Even now, I still don’t know what to do or how to think about it.

That was five years ago, and from that time when my cousin and uncle committed suicide until now, I have watched in frustration and confusion as another uncle went through two failed marriages, both with women from the “homeland.” The homeland in this case means China, Laos, or Thailand. And I’ve watched my two oldest

brothers also travel to the homeland and marry girls more than ten years younger than themselves.

I am witness to the pain and trauma of all these events. I feel uneasy about the path the men in my family seem to be taking. Where does this pain stem from? Why have these suicides happened? Why do they feel the need to travel to Laos to marry a young wife? I feel that the only way for me to heal and reconcile these events is to attempt to understand Hmong American men's experiences. The impact ripples beyond families to entire communities which are closely knit through kinship ties. And such trauma is not limited to my own family. Many Hmong American men of the 1.5 generation—born in the homeland and immigrated to America in their early childhood—are traveling to Laos, China, and Thailand. They exploit their newfound status as American citizens. And there have been other reports of teen suicides and murder-suicides in different Hmong communities in America but most of the research on these issues neglects men's pivotal roles within the family structure.

The focus of my thesis has changed multiple times since I initially wrote a thesis proposal. At the outset I sought to understand the silence on sexuality within the Hmong community and specifically to understand the taboo on non-heterosexualities. After reading Louisa Schein's research on eroticized female bodies in the homeland, I wanted to research Hmong diaspora and Hmong people's nostalgia for a homeland. As I continued searching for texts addressing these issues, however, I realized that there was a profound lack of research on Hmong masculinities. Furthermore, I began to understand that the Hmong diaspora, their nostalgia for a homeland and the destructive silence regarding non-heterosexualities are all connected by patriarchal practices. This

system presents men as crucial for the continuation of Hmong identity and culture. I felt that in order to understand the root issues to all the subjects mentioned above, including violence within Hmong communities, I had to address Hmong men and masculinities. This study is my attempt to extend gender studies beyond self-identified Hmong American women and problematize Hmong men's experiences as *men* instead of taking for granted their normalized masculinity.

### *Asian Masculinities*

Succeeding the feminist movement's calls for the inclusion of women in male-dominated fields and the following explosion of academia which analyzed and liberated women was the growing interest in masculinities during the 1980s (Louie). As the pre-supposed "universal" experience where every history was "his-story," men and masculinities retained the position of dominance simply through the normalization of their masculinity. Problematizing masculinity was less of a priority than creating space for marginalized communities. However, scholars are beginning to assert that there is a profound poverty in gender studies with regards to masculinities, specifically Asian masculinities which does not argue from a vantage point of Western conceptualizations of masculinities (Ford and Lyons 2012; Louie 2003). Kam Louie's phenomenal research on Chinese hegemonic masculinities will help inform the framework of Hmong masculinity. He highlights the significance of the concept of *wen-wu*, literally translated to mean "literary-martial," and its centrality to the construction of hegemonic Chinese masculinities. Louie further argues that even among research seeking to address Asian/American masculinities, the majority of scholars rely upon Western masculinity



schemas to explain narrow experiences of masculinities (2002). While insightful and informing, such scholarship can be problematic because it is undoubtedly influenced by the Western gaze that solely eroticizes and feminizes the East (Louie 2002).

This study seeks to understand Hmong-American men's sense of emasculation and ways they reclaim their masculinity in this moment of crisis by examining the film *Nub Nphlaib thiab Ntxawm*. Richard Howson's masculinities schema will be utilized to explore Hmong masculinity. The masculinities schema identifies and organizes specific forms of masculinities and femininities that simultaneously support and subvert the dominative hegemonic masculinity at various degrees.

Minimal research has been done on Hmong masculinity. Instead the main focus of scholars exploring gender roles have been on Hmong women's increasing economic independence and their visibility in public spaces. Immigrant women's rise in social status and control over the family finances in relation to men's decreasing family role can empower women to challenge the traditional patriarchy authority (Espiritu 2000). Research supports that as cultures undergo radical shifts in social hierarchy and community values, the rate of violence within these communities escalates, which is sometimes attributed to men's desire to reclaim their loss of authority (Pho and Mulvey 2007; Long 2008). When men's privileges—which are tied to their sense of masculinity—are under threat, one response is to denigrate women (Espiritu 2000). Domestic abuse and gang membership are prevalent problems in the Hmong community. However, while the majority of men may participate in the domination of women, they do so in varying degrees that is mediated by their race, class, and sexual identification. Hmong men are not the sole perpetrators of violence (one case of a

Hmong murder-suicide was that of a woman who strangled her six children, intending to commit suicide afterwards but was unsuccessful and instead called for help) but to more efficiently address gender-based violence calls for investigations into the construction and maintenance of Hmong masculinities.

R.W. Connell's theorization of Western masculinity remains a foundational text for scholars in masculinities studies and informs this paper. However, I apply Connell's theory with caution and seek to utilize Louie's theory of Chinese masculinities as well as keep in mind how Confucianism continues to structure Hmong culture.

### *Hmong Masculinity*

Hmong masculinity is in a moment of crisis. Because Hmong men are no longer the only breadwinner and are subordinate to an unachievable hegemonic masculinity that is first and foremost White, they feel emasculated. They seek alternative ways to re-establish their sense of male privilege and validate their masculinity—and some of these ways result in violence directed towards women and children.

Intimate partner violence and murder-suicides are pressing concerns in the Hmong community. In a blog written by Maiv Npauj called "A Hmong Woman," she lists eight murder-suicides beginning in 1998 and in each case the male partner committed murder before killing himself. The most recent article written about a Hmong murder-suicide was published in the Twin Cities' *Pioneer Press* on March 26, 2013, the same day 31 year-old male partner, Chue Lor, stabbed his wife and her brother to death in Frogtown, Minnesota. He was also found dead. It is possible that many more cases of murder-suicides occur which do not receive as much media attention. To state these

tragic events occurred because Hmong men in these cases were reacting out of a sense of castration is an extreme simplification of the situations. To say so would be ignoring how both partners (and kinship systems) play a role in these cases. However, there is merit in my claim that Hmong men react in extreme violence against their partners in part due to their personal sense of powerlessness. As I will later cover, the Western masculinity scheme described by Howson places Hmong men in the category of “marginalized masculinities”—a subordinate position to White heterosexual masculinities. Another crucial aspect which allows these situations to occur at all is the patriarchal culture wherein the patriarch’s authority is traditionally understood to be absolute. To call for further radical approaches in addressing violence in Hmong communities may threaten the patriarch system that privileges male authority, which might be why these problems have not been effectively addressed. Hmong feminists have critiqued the male clan elders for their lack of initiative in addressing these issues. *Pioneer Press* recently published an article on April 2, 2013 about the 18 clan council’s meeting to address the latest murder-suicide in Frogtown. The article paraphrased Ly Vang’s (executive director of the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota) comment that, “the council was ‘taking no responsibility’ because they were afraid to take action against a patriarchal system.” Extreme violence against women in the Hmong community is not something of the past, nor is it a new occurrence. A myriad of factors play into the prevalence of such violence but discussion of possible solutions has to expand beyond gender. We must place Hmong culture and identity in the contemporary moment—where “Hmong” is sexualized, racialized, and politicized.

In order to better understand why domestic violence occurs among Southeast Asian populations at such a high rate or the involvement of youth in gangs, we cannot just examine women's changing gender roles. We have to examine the overall structure of gender relations in the Hmong community for real change. A deeper understanding of gender relations does not only address gender inequality (as seen in family instability, domestic violence, child abuse), but may also help explain the prevalence of youth involvement in gangs, the high rate of welfare dependency, and the low rate of those pursuing higher education.

Alternative ways Hmong men may seek to reclaim their masculinity is through traveling to the homeland—mostly Laos, Thailand, or China. Many choose to engage in sexual relations with young women, which may or may not end in transnational marriages. Men's control and access to women's bodies and their reproductivity is an aspect of maintaining patriarchy. In addition to sexual relations, some girls may serve as "ethnic call girls" (Lemoine 2012) for international Hmong men. Some Hmong men travel to the "homeland" and produce and/or direct digital catalogs of young girls, and often the camera man will ask the young girls (some as young as fourteen) their clan name and age (Schein 2012). Within this context the film *Nuj Nphlaib thiab Ntxawm* takes on an extended new meaning. The types of masculinity performed by Nu Plaib, the protagonist, and Tiger, the antagonist, provide scripts for Hmong-American men visiting the "homeland."

In the film, Nu Plaib utilizes the character Yer's female body as a means of communication with Tiger. As a representation of hegemonic masculinity, Nu Plaib's sense of masculinity is the dominant ideal among his peers and within the village. Tiger

threatens Nu Plaib's masculinity when Tiger steals Yer away, Nu Plaib's intended bride. Although Yer does exert an unexpected agency (although never with the intention to save herself) her body is the site for the power struggles between two men. Nu Plaib triumphs over Tiger at the end and proves his hegemonic masculinity superior to Tiger's counter-hegemonic hypermasculinity. The complex interaction between Nu Plaib and Tiger is a reflection of Hmong-American men's efforts to validate their sense of masculinity when they visit the homeland.

Chapter One utilizes Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Confucius principles to provide a foundation for understanding hegemony and the hierarchy of gender relations. The chapter will expand how Hmong masculinity is in a crisis moment by revealing the clash between Hmong cultural values and the Western schema and the displacement of Hmong masculinity within the Western masculinity schema. This chapter will also conceptualize how the traditional patriarchal clan system—which served as a regulatory institution that governed many aspects of Hmong life both within the family and community—is under threat from a superseding authority that undermines Hmong male authority. Lastly this chapter will review some experiences Hmong-American men may choose to engage in when they visit Laos, Thailand, or China.

Chapter Two analyzes the characters Nu Plaib and Tiger for the types of masculinity they perform. Nu Plaib represents the traditional hegemonic masculinity while Tiger represents counter-hegemonic hypermasculinity. As the ideal man, Nu Plaib does not need to prove his masculinity until Tiger steals away Nu Plaib's "property" (i.e. Yer), thereby jeopardizing Nu Plaib's masculinity. Chapter Two will provide some

analysis of Yer's performance as the emphasized femininity and ways she may or may not subvert male authority. The interaction between Nu Plaib and Tiger is a reflection of Hmong-American men seeking to redeem their sense of masculinity in the homeland through female bodies in opposition to a White hegemonic masculinity that threatens their own sense of masculinity.

Chapter Three reveals the connections between Hmong American men's sense of hegemonic masculinity and the character Nu Plaib's performative masculinity. This chapter draws parallels between their emasculation and how they seek to reclaim their masculinity. This chapter will also cover limitations of the thesis and implications.

Hmong masculinity is in a moment of crisis, but ultimately those tensions which underlay any hegemonic structure where gender is unstable and performative is amplified during certain "situations" (Connell 1995; Howson 2006). The "situation" is a result of Hmong people's experiences as refugees of the Vietnam War, who were evacuated to various countries including the U.S. Similar to other Southeast Asian communities, Hmong communities are undergoing radical shifts in gender relations, financial control, labor divisions, traditions, and identity.

## Chapter 1

### Hmong Gender Schema

#### *Gender Roles*

Gender is relational because gender roles and principles develop in relation to some perceived Other (Howson 2006). Therefore, all constructions of femininity and masculinity exist in an unstable state, vulnerable to “crisis tendencies” which threaten the current social order (Howson 2006). Hmong communities are in such a moment of crisis wherein traditional gender roles and social politics are in question. Since their resettlement in the United States following the Refugee Act of 1975<sup>1</sup>, Southeast Asian communities have experienced dynamic shifts in labor distribution, sexual politics, gender roles, and economic relations. Overwhelmingly, research on Southeast Asian communities reflects the greater economic and social freedom women experience as they become the primary financial generators (Ong 2003; Pho & Mulvey 2007). Traditional gender roles are challenged as more girls pursue higher education and eventually become the breadwinners of the family, a phenomena disrupting the traditional hegemonic masculinity.

A “masculinity schema” (Howson 2006) is a hierarchal map determining how different forms of masculinities and femininities support and subvert the dominative hegemonic masculinity. The dominative hegemonic masculinity is subject to its

<sup>1</sup> Under the leadership of General Vang Pao and funded by the CIA, Hmong guerrillas aided American troops during the Vietnam War. Some Hmong people claim they were promised a separate Hmong kingdom as an incentive. After American troops pulled out of Southeast Asia, large numbers of Hmong were persecuted for assisting American interests. Many more fled Laos to hide in the jungles or crossed the dangerous Mekong River where they settled in refugee camps. The first wave of Hmong refugees started in 1976. (See Quincy for further details.)

surrounding changing conditions but is the ultimate “ideal” masculinity in a given socio-historical situation (Howson 2006). Gender does not stem from biology but is relational to other social constructions such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and history, in particular. The interests and identity of different masculinities and femininities develop in contrast to each other and operate at multiple levels of the individual, family, local and national (Howson 2006). What constitutes a specific gender is in a constant state of vulnerability because, as a social construction, gender responds to its conditions and is never fixed. Thus, the crises we may see in specific moments of history have already always been present. Those moments we call crisis are merely situations in which underlying tensions become more pronounced but the centralization of the dominant hegemonic masculinity ensures the continuation of the current hegemony. Furthermore, these organized power structures can even control such crises. The dominant hegemonic masculinity must constantly address the “problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (Connell 1995). Additionally, the current masculinity schema must allow the existence of alternative forms of masculinity, provided they remain subordinate. Howson describes a “release valve” whereby alternative forms of femininity and masculinity are allowed to display small demonstrations of protest and subversion, provided they do not fundamentally challenge the existing structure. The maintenance of the current gender schema relies upon certain key principles, which must always be reproduced for ensured continuation.

Relying upon Connell’s theory of masculinity, Howson describes the dominative hegemonic masculinity in America as White, heterosexual, middle-class, rational, independent, competitive, aggressive but controllable, and being mentally/physically



tough (Howson 2006, 60). This dominative hegemonic masculinity relies upon three key principles: “heterosexuality, breadwinning, and aggressiveness.” Heterosexuality dominates the current marriage institution but Howson provides little insight as to how heterosexuality supports the dominative hegemonic masculinity. Instead Howson focuses on how men, as the breadwinners of the family, become the source of safety and security. They justify the claiming of public spaces as the family breadwinner. The centralization of men in public spaces and in workplaces normalizes White heterosexual masculinity and helps negate crisis situations.

Some scholars criticize Connell’s construction of hegemonic masculinity for its predication on a fixed notion of hegemonic masculinity which denies that gender identity is a “fluid, socially constructed concept that changes over space and time” (Ford and Lyons 2012). Other scholars point out that although Connell includes marginalized masculinities in her theory, she overlooks the significance of their role in simultaneously supporting and subverting the dominative hegemonic masculinity. Further, Connell bases her theory in Western rationale, which may not necessarily apply to masculinities not situated in Western contexts. However, her theory of gender hierarchy continues to influence most scholars who write about masculinities.

Howson understands dominative hegemonic masculinity as relying upon the principles of heterosexuality, breadwinning, and aggression, specifically for Western masculinities (Howson 2006). The most significant difference between Howson’s masculinity schema and the Hmong masculinity schema is that those principles for Western masculinity are presented as mostly significant only to the question of masculinity. The principles of Hmong dominative masculinity –which I will later

discuss—do not just define masculinity, but are at the core of Hmong values and spirituality. As Confucius principles, they are a way of life. However, Howson's theories are also applicable to Hmong masculinities as Hmong people become increasingly engaged in American culture and politics. The dominative hegemonic masculinity is central to a "masculinity schema" that prioritizes values which privilege men. Those institutional and personal relations—the clan system and family roles—which have always maintained patriarchy within Hmong communities is being challenged.

Research on Southeast Asian communities reveals that men seem to have more trouble becoming self-sufficient in comparison to women and children, which has been attributed by some scholars as a result of not being able to adopt American values and a greater reluctance to learn English (Ong 2003; Pho & Mulvey 2007). Ong speculates that the welfare system is biased towards women and children because in a general sense, they are considered more helpless than men. The breadwinner role is one of three principles of the hegemonic masculinity, so for men to seek financial assistance is to theoretically admit that they are not "men." As such, the social workers who represent that state act out these gender expectations and often give the welfare check to women (Ong 2003). Their sense of masculinity, which in part relies upon being considered the sole source of financial security and stability within the family, cannot be performed within this situation. In addition, jobs which are available to non-English speaking men who have little formal education—such as at the Laundromat—are historically considered "woman" jobs. Consequently, men feel helpless and emasculated (Ong 2003).

Several scholars imply Hmong men seek to reclaim their male privilege through aggressive acts of domination. Scholars have noted the increased rate of domestic violence in Southeast Asian families, some cases which have escalated to the point of murder-suicides between Hmong partners. Although undoubtedly necessary, the current abundance of research on Hmong women's changing gender roles and the effects of such extreme cultural transformations sometimes vilify men. This is in contrast to early research on Hmong history, where researchers posited men as the sole active leaders without critical analysis of existing gender roles. Scholarship within the past two decades reflects the growing number of Hmong achieving higher education and their increasing visibility in mainstream America. Littered throughout research on Hmong adaptation in America is the observation that Hmong women were adapting faster to American culture than men. This may be because, as Ong observed, the State (which acts as the patriarchy authority) is more inclined to provide assistance to women because dependency is a gendered expectation. Unfortunately, few articles address Hmong men's experiences in terms of how they act out their masculinity and manhood. Instead of merely seeking to unveil the *woman question* (Howson 2006), we must investigate the overall gender structure and its role in the matrix of oppression. As this chapter will reflect, Hmong masculinity—specifically Southeast Asian refugee constructions of hegemonic masculinity—is severely under-researched.

Starting in the late 1970s, following the victory of the Pathet-Lao, large numbers of Hmong began migrating to Thai refugee camps from Laos due to ethnic persecution. Many were re-located to American towns and cities in strategic locations, designed to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves in order to promote self-sufficiency (Miyares

1998). However, secondary migrations to cultural centers such as Fresno and St. Paul occurred regardless of federal attempts to discourage these enclaves because of the strong kinship ties between Hmong families (Miyares 1998). This reveals how important kinship ties are; as a diasporic community with no generally identified “homeland,” kinship ties have always kept Hmong communities together. As the clan leaders, men had control over where Hmong communities formulated. The formation of these enclaves and increasing visibility of Hmong people within these towns prompted initial research publication on Hmong people within America<sup>2</sup>, usually by White academics.

Some of the most influential texts on Hmong history and gender roles are written by such persons and are valuable because of the extensive research but are problematic in various aspects. Nancy Donnelly’s ethnographic text on transforming gender roles in Hmong-American families provides insights to the patriarchal framework that governs Hmong society, but she writes from a paternalistic Western perspective that posits her voice as the authority on Hmong culture. For example, the first chapter is titled “Discovering the Hmong” as if Hmong people were a sub-class of people and products of her research. She is not alone in this perspective. Keith Quincy’s significant historical text is one of the most comprehensive books detailing Hmong migration from China to the United States but has no analysis of gender dynamics. Every active hero or leader who plays a role in Quincy’s reconstruction of Hmong history is male, with the noted exception of one shaman woman who was a rallying symbol for anti-French Hmong (Quincy 1995). Further, Donnelly’s research reveals a Western feminist

<sup>2</sup> Father M. Savina, a French missionary, was one of the first Westerners to publish research on the Hmong in the early 1900s, and also created a Romanized alphabet the Hmong still use today.

perspective that does not account for cultural nuances in terms of Hmong women's agency and different forms of resistance.

However, her text constructs a portrait of Hmong American life during the 1980s and the difficulties many families experienced adjusting to America with a special focus on women's experiences. She details life histories, hand-catch marriages, courtship rituals and marriage negotiations between clans, clan intervention during marriage conflicts and other aspects affecting Hmong women's lives. Patricia Symonds and Donnelly's texts provide a view of traditional Hmong culture, although Symonds conducted research in a Hmong-Laotian village relatively uninfluenced by American values while Donnelly wrote about Hmong-American experiences on the Western U.S. coast. From their research we can understand men's experiences as described at the periphery. Both Donnelly and Symonds emphasize the significance of the clan in determining women's status within the larger society.

The clan system is the systematic representation of patriarchy. It was the largest political force within a village, whereby the eldest male from each clan formed a governing authority that mediated disputes between married partners, families, and also negotiated appropriate marriage contracts. "The clan structure became the center of Hmong political culture" (Miyares 1998). Marriages formed alliances between clans. The general family relationship with other clans took precedence over individual happiness. As I will discuss later, maintaining overall community harmony is a higher priority than individual safety (Kaiser 2004), as has been the situation in multiple cases of domestic violence. The clan system is the ultimate vehicle for male authority and reinforces patriarchy because no woman can be the leader of a clan. Women are thus heavily

dependent on the men in their lives, whether on their husband, father, or eldest son, to represent them in any domestic disputes or marriage choices. Additionally, an all-male governing authority ensures that the majority of its decisions exclude women's voices—which might help explain why Quincy indicates that there were minimal Hmong women leaders, because the leadership of women was less public.

From infancy Hmong men are treated with special preference by society and family members because men are believed to continue the family lineage and are the only ones who can perform the rituals for ancestor worship (Yang 1997). As Vincent K. Her's analysis of Hmong cosmology reveals, the metaphysical road the deceased spirit travels through affirms their Hmong heritage and rebirth. Most notably, women can only attain equal social status when they join their husband (and by extension his family tree) in the afterlife. Therefore ancestor worship and funeral rituals—which only men can perform—is especially important to affirming cultural identity. The exclusive hold men have of marriage contracts and death rituals, which are both aspects considered extremely crucial to Hmong identity, sustain the dependency of women on men. Although Symonds argues the Hmong believe that balance comes in pairs, men clearly have greater access to positions of power. Men's sense of masculinity is thereby largely founded upon the subordination of women.

The belief of opposite but equally valuable gender roles is challenged by her observation that women are perceived to provide the "house" or "shell" of the child at birth, but men call in the soul of the child (Symonds 2004). Even though both roles are arguably necessary men are understood to provide the very essence of a person, thereby having more value. Donnelly observes that men inherit their ethnic identity as a

right while women are only considered Hmong through association to the men in their lives. Women are believed to derive their Hmong identity from their father, husband, or son since males continue the family lineage (Donnelly 1994; Miyares 1998; Symonds 2004). If a woman were to marry a non-Hmong individual, she would be considered non-Hmong too since women derive their identity from their husband once married (Symonds 2004). Conversely, if all Hmong men were to die, “Hmongness” would cease to exist since only men can call in the soul of a newborn and honor the ancestors—thereby ensuring the continuation of lineage. Symonds notes that, in a sense, women are perpetual outsiders to Hmong culture since they are external to the patriarchal system. One of Donnelly’s interviewees framed this dynamic in the following analogy, “Wives and daughters are like the leaves and flowers, but men are the branches and trunk of the tree, always strong and never changing.” According to Hmong culture, women are temporary because they are no longer members of their natal clan once they marry. Conversely, men are essential for the continuation of Hmong culture. Without men, the diasporic Hmong community would cease to exist because they essentially continue the Hmong heritage.

Traditionally, Hmong children are not considered adults until they marry and begin a family (Symonds 2004). The word “man” is synonymous with “father” and “husband” in Hmong—to be a man is to be a husband and father. Hmong masculinity is intricately tied to clan affiliation and lineage continuation. If a man’s wife cannot produce children, societal rules allow him to marry a second wife so he may secure his family lineage (Symonds 2004). Similarly, the term “woman” is the same word as “wife” and “mother.” Donnelly notes that when she informed her female participants she was

single, and furthermore *chose* to remain unmarried, the Hmong women she interviewed were puzzled. In Hmong society, a childless or unmarried woman was often socially ostracized because to be either signified deficiency in terms of being a woman. She is considered “unlucky” and at death is buried quickly instead of the usual three-day funeral assembly (Symonds 2004). Even in the case where the man is sterile, the wife still suffers the social consequences. Women who were considered too old (who might be in their early twenties) married into their husband’s family at a lower bride-price in comparison to younger girls. Women are valued for their reproductive bodies and were a form of communication between men.

Marriages occurred through several ways. Hand-catch marriages—previously termed bride-kidnapped marriages but due to negative connotations have changed to the first term—are cases where the man and his male relatives “grab” the intended bride. In most cases, she has indicated her consent but must protest for the sake of modesty. Marriages also occur when arranged by family members, when the woman is pregnant, when both partners elope (she spends the night at his parent’s house, thereby ensuring that her parents will allow the marriage because they want to save face), and also by mutual consent (Symonds 2004). Following the event is a long arduous process of contract negotiation between the groom and bride’s male relatives, who also represent their own respective clan. The groom must pay the bride’s family a bride price for the debt owed to her parents, called “milk and care money” or *nqe mis nqe hno* (Symonds 2004). This bride price, criticized by Western researchers as Hmong men literally buying their wives, doubles as insurance for her security in her new home but also gives “them [her husband and his family] rights to her labor, sexuality and



reproduction” (Donnelly 1997; Symonds 2004). The exchange of women’s reproductive bodies as goods solidifies clan alliances and patriarchy since the clan system is a vehicle for male authority. Women are essential to Hmong patriarchy but are valued first and foremost for their capability to bear children and aid the man’s duty of family lineage continuation. Men have more control over the direction of a woman’s future. Once a woman marries into a clan, she may maintain some contact with her natal clan, but generally married women are understood to belong to her husband’s clan.

Because being a mother and wife is considered essential to femininity, women who choose to divorce their husbands are usually stigmatized and ostracized. Traditionally, any male children born of the union will stay with the father and his family following the divorce while female children can opt to stay with their mother (Symonds 2004). Women suffer the social consequences of a divorce and also must relinquish any rights as a mother once divorced. She is deficient in some manner as a woman and will most likely have trouble re-marrying. Furthermore, as a divorced woman she is considered “fair game” for sexual harassment, since she no longer has the protection of a husband (Kaiser 2004). These profound social consequences strongly discourages women from divorce, even at the cost of personal safety as in the case of domestic violence. Men have more sexual freedom and their privilege as men ensures that any sexual relations they choose to engage in, if not sanctioned, is nevertheless allowed by the larger community.

Tamara Kaiser concluded through her interviews with men and women involved in a domestic abuse case that although the general community did not support domestic abuse, clan relationships took precedence over individual safety. “Saving face” governs

many aspects of Hmong behavior, and helps explain why battered women within the Hmong community do not seek help unless the violence is extreme. “In collectivist cultures, preserving face to maintain social harmony in a close-knit community is vital, given that losing face is directly linked to isolation and abandonment from the community” (Xiong et. al). Since men have full control over women’s bodies, she cannot speak for herself in any marriage disputes. If she wants to change her situation, she must go through the proper channels—she must approach her husband’s male relatives and ask them to speak to her husband on her behalf. Her husband has the power to discipline her—and in some cases this involves physical violence—but he must be disciplined by other men. This parallels Michael Kimmel’s theory that men, while they compete for women, really compare themselves to each other and measure their masculinity against another man’s sense of masculinity (Kimmel 1996). If this method fails, a male representative from her natal clan will discuss the issue with the husband and his male relatives to reach a compromise. She cannot represent herself, but must rely on her male kinsmen to speak on her behalf. These dynamics are reflective of the gender hierarchy.

One man, who was the male representative for his cousin who had been in an abusive relationship with her partner throughout their 35-year marriage, was reportedly more concerned with clan relationships than her happiness (Kaiser 2004). Although the interviewee indicated his family had been aware of the intimate partner violence and her numerous attempts to ask for help from her husband’s relatives, he was clearly more concerned about following societal protocol than her well-being despite the fact that the beatings were so severe she was hospitalized at one time. As such, women are often

advised to “be patient” and continue her responsibilities as a wife and mother (Kaiser 2004). Usually, the men are chastised by his male relatives and may or may not change his behavior. For men, the consequences are noticeably less dire. Furthermore, if she divorced her husband, Kaiser revealed that many of her interviewees (out of 39 interviews) would nonetheless blame the woman for a failed marriage. Kaiser’s research divulges that some considered physical punishment as a disciplinary tool acceptable, while others allowed that the woman might not be at fault but did not criticize the man either. These comments reflect the extreme gender stratification and double standards in Hmong culture. These studies disclose how thin the boundary is between the public life—in the form of community gatherings and clan meetings—and private life in families.

In addition to negotiating marriage contracts and settling marriage disputes, the clan system largely determined secondary migration destination after initial resettlement from Thai refugee camps (Miyares 1998). Her research divulges how extensive and influential the clan system is in determining migratory patterns and the formation of Hmong communities. For example, in 1982 Vang Chou—leader of the Vang clan and also nephew to venerated General Vang Pao who lead Hmong troops against Pathet-Lao forces—settled in Merced and was quickly followed by fellow clansmen and family members. By 1990, Merced was one of the political/cultural capitals of the nation with a population of 6,458 Hmong (Miyares 1998). Home does not refer to a geographic location but rather depends on the strength of clan relationships. “Thus, if the clan leader calls Fresno ‘home,’ then Fresno becomes *tsev* for those who follow his leadership” (Miyares 1998).

Each study discussed so far diverges in topic and argument, but all reflect how the clan system, patriarchal culture, and patrilineal practice allowed men to occupy positions of great control and power over identity construction and cultural production. As such, Hmong masculinity relies on the continuation of lineage—and being a father/husband—and participation in clan politics to be fully realized. The increase of domestic violence and prevalence of murder-suicides in Hmong communities (Donnelly 1994; Xiong 2006; Long 2008) is a product of Hmong masculinity in crisis.

### *Dominative Hmong Masculinity*

Howson describes a “masculinity schema” as a “system of relations and practices controlled and directed by a dominative and asymmetrically operating force” (Howson 2006). The “masculinity schema” is therefore a structure which generally normalizes men’s domination over women, although marginalized men have varying levels of access to these privileges. He identifies six forms of masculinities and femininities which all ultimately support hegemonic masculinity, or ideal masculinity, in complex ways. Among these are complicit masculinities, marginalized masculinities, subordinate masculinities, emphasized femininities, ambivalent femininities, and protest femininities. Within the current social situation, the dominant American hegemonic masculinity is White, heterosexual, middle-class, rational, independent, competitive, aggressive but controlled, and is tough both mentally and physically (Howson 2006). Relying upon Connell’s definition of hegemonic masculinity, Howson argues that two principles maintain hegemonic masculinity’s dominant position over other forms of masculinities and femininities. First, the subordination of women by men is “taken as a

guarantee” (Howson 2006). Second, masculinity’s centralization in social organizations ensures its continuing domination and can even control or negate crisis tendencies (Howson 2006). These theories will be crucial in explaining Hmong traditional hegemonic masculinity.

Little research has been written about Hmong masculinity. In Mark Pfiefer’s review of Hmong scholarship he reveals two significant articles written by Kou Yang and Stacey Lee about Hmong masculinity. As such, definitions of a hegemonic Hmong masculinity will mostly rely on research indirectly analyzing Hmong masculinity and they experience emasculation in different ways. Kou Yang and Stacey Lee concentrate on different generations who present multiple forms of Hmong masculinity. Yang’s research analyzes the elderly Hmong men in California who experience a strong sense of emasculation and displacement, attributed to two factors. First, elderly Hmong men feel increasingly marginalized because the influence of American culture tends to glorify the young and relegate the elderly to secondary positions. This is in direct conflict with traditional Hmong culture which places the elderly in positions of great authority and respect, especially for men. Additionally, although current Hmong leaders may refer to the elderly out of respect for tradition, most elderly Hmong men who previously occupied positions of authority and leadership experience helplessness because of their illiterate state.

Since the majority of Hmong people lived in rural areas in Laos, many did not attend school past the elementary level and instead concentrated their efforts towards farming in order to secure family finances. Beyond trading with other non-Hmong villages, the need for literacy was less urgent than in America. As such, the majority of

elderly Hmong men are illiterate, uneducated, and may suffer psychological illnesses due to war trauma in addition to trying to adjust to a foreign land.

...many Hmong men are distressed because of Hmong women's ability to generate income in the United States; the role reversal between the young and the old (i.e. relying on the young for language translation and cultural interpretation); an inability to learn in school; and, feelings of fear, hopelessness, and despair (Yang 7).

Shifting gender roles was, and still is, a major concern for the community. Miyares observes that in 1980, one of the major concerns of the small Hmong community in California was women's increasing role outside domestic affairs. In fact, increased domestic violence and men's growing concern about women's heightened economic independence and improved mobility was a common theme among research on Southeast Asian refugee communities (Ong 2003; Pho and Mulvey 2007; Long 2008).

Refugee men were in a moment of crisis. Ong reports that some men became depressed because of their perceived loss of authority and status, and sometimes took to drinking. Consequentially, many women became the household providers. "Most households came to be headed by women, widows, or divorcees preoccupied by a major worry..." (137). As a consequence, domestic abuse rates escalated as men's sense of emasculation increased. "Some Cambodian men lashed out at their wives in order to restore their sense of male privilege" (150). Additionally, Ong argues that the welfare and governmental refugee resettlement agencies are biased towards women and children, "whereby the Cambodians as a group were feminized by a strategy of ethnic transformation that aimed to empower weak refugee women and marginalize

patriarchal-deviant refugee men” (Ong 147). Welfare agencies and social workers viewed Cambodian refugee communities, dependent subjects of the state, with a paternalistic Western gaze which Ong called “compassionate love.” This paternalistic Western gaze, which dominated Western colonialism, posited Cambodian—as well as Hmong and Mien men—as “Asian peasant or tribal patriarch[ies] from which refugee women and children must be saved” (Ong 160). Women’s increasing public roles and economic independence in America threatens patriarchy and the status quo. Fear of change is not exclusive to Hmong, but cultural identity and kinship ties—which the male-dominant clan systems determines—have always defined “Hmongness” rather than geopolitical affiliation (Long 2008). Maintaining the patriarchal order is therefore perceived as congruent with conserving a disappearing Hmong culture.

Emasculation came from a sense of losing authority in the household and family not just because women were increasingly financial holders, but also because the patriarchal clan system became superseded by a larger political authority—the state. “The state could circumscribe the authority of a man even within his own household, for instance by forbidding him to beat his wife” (Donnelly 1994). Hmong men became dependent on social workers and welfare agencies that represented the state, and in the case of one Cambodian family, parents had to cede complete authority over their daughter when the state determined the parents were too controlling (Ong 2003).

Pho and Mulvey also indicate the prevalence of domestic violence in their research among the Southeast Asian community in Lowell, Massachusetts. Although domestic abuse is not limited to certain communities, these refugee women face additional cultural and linguistic barriers (Pho and Mulvey 2007). Interestingly, Pho and

Mulvey report that the “high domestic violence levels are attributed to war-related violence, post-traumatic stress disorder, and urban violence” in general” (Pho and Mulvey 193). This is significant because even though scholars have researched mental disorders among the Hmong population—specifically the Sudden Death Syndrome—little exists on the connection between domestic violence, gender roles, and post-traumatic stress. They argue that the increase in domestic violence was attributed to women working outside the home, men feeling a loss of authority due to American values and women’s increasing visibility in public spaces (194). Additionally, they link the high rate of domestic violence in Southeast Asian homes to early marriages for young women, and the isolation of the elderly for older women (195). However, they also focus primarily on women’s experiences instead of including how men’s gender roles in perpetuating patriarchy.

From the previous articles we can glean a sense of what traditional hegemonic masculinity was. Hmong men were the breadwinners, decision-makers, policy-makers, enforcers of cultural heritage, continued the family lineage and were really the “true” Hmong. However, as gender roles are shifting a different construction of the hegemonic masculinity simultaneously forms. Stacey Lee identifies the new hegemonic masculinity as a middle-class educated bi-cultural Hmong man, who retains his Hmong roots but is also financially successful. This new Hmong man validates the myth of meritocracy by working hard to elevate his socioeconomic status—thereby fulfilling the American Dream—but he also fulfills his traditional role as clan leader by participating in Hmong community politics.



Lee's research presents us with three adolescent boys who represent three different types of Hmong masculinity: traditional masculinity (Cha), current hegemonic masculinity (Kao), and counter-hegemonic hypermasculinity (Houa). She defines the hegemonic masculinity at the high school as White, assertive, athletic, and well educated. Boys who embodied these characteristics were active in extracurricular activities, friendly with teachers and administrators, and took up space, both literally and figuratively (Lee 2004). Cha, who embodied the "dated" traditional masculinity, was passive, participated little in classroom and extracurricular activities, and was studious—he epitomized the effeminate "model minority."<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Kao embodied hegemonic masculinity although he could not achieve full masculinity because of his race. Kao was vocal and active in academics and sports, and was also on good terms with the instructors and school administration. Most importantly, Lee notes that Kao was active within his American school and his ethnic community. Lee argues Kao represented the new ideal Hmong man, who was bi-cultural, educated, and acculturated just enough to be financially and socially successful in American society, but still "Hmong" enough to fulfill his obligations as a good son. On the other end of the spectrum, Houa represented counter-hegemony. He adopted a form of hypermasculinity emphasizing "toughness, consumerism, and resistance to authority" (Lee 2004). Some teachers correlated Houa's hypermasculine behavior with gang involvement, and were both fearful and critical of others like him. All three boys struggled to define their own masculinity within the confines of a larger hegemonic masculinity that subordinates them because of their race and class.

<sup>3</sup> See Rosalind Chou and Joe Feagin's *Myth of the Model Minority*.

All three boys fall within racialized categories of Asian American masculinities. Cha represents the “model minority” who is geeky, passive, and worst of all, effeminate. Houa represents hypermasculinity which emphasizes aggression and pride, similar to other men of color like Chicanos who adopt *machismo* in defiance of and conformity to the dominant hegemonic masculinity. Kao is somewhere in between both extremes. His sense of masculinity conforms to neither stereotypes of Asian American men, but rather to the dominative hegemonic masculinity that is White, middle-class, heterosexual and entitled. However, Kao’s sense of masculinity may never be fully realized because of his race. Lee’s analysis does not provide a full portrait of the complexities of masculinity, race, and sexuality but is a great start considering the lack of scholarship on Hmong masculinity.

Although Michael Kimmel focuses exclusively on historical-social constructions of White American masculinities, the insights he makes about correlations between personal interactions and institutional practices are very informative. Additionally, Kimmel utilizes literature and media as his source material and how he weaves together critical gender theory and narratives helps inform this study. However, in his attempt to understand hegemonic masculinity in America through a historical lens the White man’s experiences are presented as *the* American experience. For the most part, Kimmel does not engage with race or sexuality analysis and focuses more on class and gender constructions—a problematic aspect of his analysis as they are all interconnected.

The passive effeminate Hmong character makes another appearance in *Gran Torino*, Clint Eastwood’s 2008 Hollywood film. Three forms of masculinity are presented. Clint Eastwood’s character, Walt Kowalski, is a White man who represents

the dominative hegemonic masculinity. He is aggressive, violent (but only when provoked), physically tough, and has already proven his manhood by participating in the Korean War. As the dominant White man, Walt “teaches” the main male character, Thao, how to “man up” by assigning him tasks requiring manual labor (Schein 2012). As the subordinate masculinity, who is nerdy, effeminate, and overshadowed by his older sister, Thao needs Walt’s paternalism in order to become a man. On the opposite end of the masculinity spectrum are the uncontrollably violent and uncivilized gang members. As hypermasculine Hmong men, they offer an alternative way for Thao to actualize his diminished masculinity which Thao declines. His sister Sue, who at the beginning of the film was assertive but becomes increasingly submissive as Walt helps Thao realize his masculinity, is raped by the gang member Spider. The violation of Sue’s female body sends a message to Walt and Thao’s, challenging their masculinity because they could not protect their “territory.” The rape serves as a catalyst for Walt to martyr himself by confronting the gang members, the quintessential White Savior (Schein 2012). Sue’s femininity is characterized by her sexual objectification because not only is she “disciplined” for her outspokenness, but she becomes the measuring stick for their masculinity. This sort of dialogue regarding Asian Americans is not new, but follows prescribed scripts delineating race and gender that triumphs the White Man.

In the film, race and gender is oversimplified to fit a mainstream binary mold of race politics. As an Asian American man, Thao is presented with two performative scripts for masculinity— a White masculinity (represented by Walt) and a Black masculinity (represented by the gang). This is to say that there are no other scripts he can choose from because White masculinity (as the ideal masculinity within the Western

masculinity schema) is the top of the hierarchy while Black masculinity is at the bottom, and all other masculinities are merely copies of either one. Hmong masculinity has no place within this system, and so Thao must choose to either emulate the morally righteous White masculinity or a violent and misogynistic Black masculinity. Similar to Yer's character in the film I will later discuss, Sue—Thao's older sister—becomes a tool of communication between Hmong men. The Hmong gangsters' violation of her body sends a declaration of war to Walt, the proverbial White Savior, and Thao. Thao cannot retaliate because he has not fulfilled the requirements for reaching manhood but Walt, as the ideal heterosexual White Man is sanctioned to inflict his own form of justice in the form of violence (in contrast to the Hmong gangsters, who in the beginning of the film used their gang reputation to protect Thao from a rival Mexican gang). White heterosexual masculinity is the only hero in this story.

In most mainstream portrayals of Asian American men, they can be feminine, asexual, or homosexual—what Shimizu calls “straitjacket sexualities” (Shimizu 2012). In each case, their sexuality is portrayed as deviant from the “norm” and while many scholars critique Hollywood films for their feminization and de-sexualization of Asian American male characters, Shimizu argues that these are “places of possibility” (2012). In contrast to Schein's reading of a feminized Thao who needs to be taught masculinity by Walt, Shimizu instead claims that Thao “claims the power of lack” and thereby critiques hypermasculinity (2012). By refusing to align himself with the Hmong gangsters, Thao rejects hypermasculinity. Similarly, when Walt seeks to teach him White masculinity, Thao likewise reveals the ridiculousness of gendered scripts and expectations. By refusing both hypermasculinity and White masculinity, Thao claims a

space that is “lacking.” In contrast to Schein’s reading, Shimizu incorporates a stronger queer analysis that celebrates asexual, feminized, and gay representations of Asian American men in media. Shimizu’s radical approach critiques those scholars who viewed the portrayal of feminine, gay or asexual Asian American men as something negative. Such critiques perpetuated heteronormativity and furthermore made no attempt to include the value of non-heterosexual identities. Although this film is the first Hollywood film to specifically feature Hmong-American characters in lead roles, the portrayal of Hmong-Americans follows historical representations of Asian American men.

In her analysis of *Dr. Tom*, a Hmong-American transnational film, Schein focuses on the interactions between Hmong masculinities and femininities, particularly the eroticization of female bodies. This film is part of a larger media market where the majority of the films are produced, directed, or edited by Hmong-Americans. These include dramas, martial arts films, documentaries, music videos and karaoke films, dubbed films, New Year festivities, pageants, and films that reconstruct the historical migration of Hmong people. Overwhelmingly, these films are characterized by a male gaze eroticizing female bodies—whether through catalogue-like videos where the camera man asks the young girls their age and clan name while panning over their faces and bodies or reimagined folktales. *Dr. Tom* is neither; the story chronicles the journey of a middle-aged Hmong-American man who travels to Laos in search of a young second wife. Tom’s character is a portrayal of an emasculated hegemonic Hmong masculinity who seeks to reclaim his masculinity by acquiring Nkauj lab, the

ideal Hmong femininity. The interaction between both characters and family expectations reveal projected gender roles.

Hmong men's control of trafficking women's reproductive bodies may help explain why Tom traveled to Laos to reclaim his masculinity. Several aspects explain his decision; as the perceived homeland for many Hmong refugees, the nostalgic setting might be the "origin" of Hmongness. In this setting is an ideal Hmong culture largely untouched by outside influences that might jeopardize the dominative hegemonic masculinity, such as the shifting power dynamics between genders in America. The marriage institution—a key principle of Hmong dominative hegemonic masculinity—is undercut by the larger American legal system, which forbids underage marriages, hand-catch marriages, and polygamy. The restriction of men's sexual access to Hmong women by a superseding authority threatens the entire patriarchal system. Jacques Lemoine reports the discovery of Hmong girls from Laos and Thailand who act as "ethnic call girls" for Hmong-Americans. Additionally, many Hmong-American men who travel to Laos or Thailand engage in sexual relations with homeland women, which may or may not end in marriage (Schein 2004).

### *Conclusion*

For a deeper comprehension of gender violence between men and women, we need to understand the macrostructure of gender relations in the Hmong community. Most research on murder-suicides, gang related violence, and domestic abuse either focuses solely on women or negates the multiplicities of men's roles in perpetuating and contesting violence. The literature on Hmong women reveals that the construction of

femininity accommodates to the dominative hegemonic masculinity. The dominative hegemonic masculinity emphasizes aggression, controlled violence, dominance, heterosexuality, and the breadwinner role (Howson 2006). In this structure, women's subordination to men is "taken to guarantee" (Howson 2006) and the centralization of the dominative hegemonic masculinity ensures that most crisis tendencies will be controlled. Additionally, the research reviewed provides insightful perspectives to the inner politics of Hmong society and culture. The clan system acts as a regulatory institution trafficking the flow of women's bodies through marriages between clans, disciplining women and men, mediating marriage disputes including domestic abuse, and maintaining the hierarchal organization which privileges men and age.

The traditional dominative hegemonic masculinity in Hmong society is being questioned and at risk of losing male privileges. Gender and familial dynamics are shifting. Men's prescribed role as the primary source of stability and security for the family is no longer a guarantee—sometimes the women receive the welfare check and children teach their parents how to pay their bills. Older Hmong men, whose sense of masculinity was the dominative hegemonic masculinity, are displaced within the Western masculinity schema which values Whiteness. Their hegemonic masculinity has been reduced to a subordinate masculinity and leads to a profound sense of emasculation. The breakdown of traditional hegemonic masculinity that older Hmong men identified with and the dominative hegemonic masculinity both inform a new type of ideal Hmong masculinity. The new ideal Hmong man is bi-cultural, educated, middle-class, and acculturated enough to succeed financially and socially in mainstream society but still attends to his duties as a Hmong son who upholds the family lineage.

Additionally, American constructions of Asian American masculinities as the geeky, passive model minority or uncontrollable gang member inform alternatives types of masculinities. Their sense of emasculation drives Hmong men to reclaim their masculinity in diverse ways, mediated by age, class, family history, sexuality, and depth of acculturation.



## Chapter 2

### Gender Performance in the Film

#### *Hmong Transnational Media*

Kinship ties determined the secondary migration of Hmong in the 1980s, so that places like Fresno and St. Paul became the cultural centers of Hmong identity. As stated before, the Hmong are a diasporic people. Their *qeej* songs, *paj ntaub* (embroidery), funeral songs, and folktales capitalize on a deep nostalgia for a homeland. Since they have no generally agreed-upon homeland, they have continued their cultural identity and heritage by way of the clan system and community. As a patrilineal culture, one's identity as a Hmong person derived from knowing their ancestry. The current Hmong media market performs a similar function. The films (which can be accessed through Youtube) serves to consolidate Hmong identity and connect the diasporic community which has been scattered throughout the world—in unlikely places such as Argentina, Australia, France, Germany, etc. Through these films, Hmong in different nations are communicating and discussing what it means to be Hmong. The Hmong media market is a recent phenomenon that coincides with Hmong Americans' exposure and access to technology, starting perhaps in the late 1980s.

The film discussed here, *Nuj Nphlaib thiab Ntxawm*, was produced in 2001 by Ger Vue, a Hmong man from America. The film is based on a well-known folktale featuring three archetypal Hmong characters—the male hero (Nu Plaib), the youngest daughter of the village Elder (named Yer, she plays a similar role to Hans Christian Anderson and the Grimm brother's French and German folktales' of the "damsel-in-

distress” character) and the tiger (named Tiger). All three characters appear often in many other Hmong folktales. This film was chosen because of its success. It was so popular that a sequel was filmed, and the actors who played Yer (Nxtoo Lauj) and Nu Plaib (Kwm Lis) secured the lead roles in several different films thereafter. Although produced by a Hmong man from America, this film gained popularity in Hmong communities throughout the diaspora—as Gary Y. Lee reports observing children in Laos watching the film (Lee 2006). Additionally, I remember watching my younger male cousins play-act the character Nu Plaib and realized he was a male role model they could identify with. That was when I first became intrigued with how Nu Plaib’s performative masculinity could be a script for other Hmong boys and men.

The plot of the film is straightforward: Nu Plaib and Yer meet each other in the beginning of the film and fall in love. Tiger, a supernatural shape-shifting jungle tiger, tricks Yer into marrying him. He spirits her away and her physical body dies. While mourning on her fresh grave, Yer appears to Nu Plaib in her spirit form to inform him she was spirited away by Tiger. Nu Plaib then prepares his weapons and sets off on a two-year journey to find her. When he finally tracks down Tiger and Yer in a cave, he murders Tiger’s family while they are sleeping. Tiger survives because he tricks Nu Plaib and they engage in a long battle with flashy explosions and swordplay. Nu Plaib, of course, emerges from the battle victorious, having killed Tiger. Finally, Nu Plaib and Yer head home and although there is no actual marriage ceremony, they are nevertheless considered married.

### *Traditional Hegemonic Masculinity Performance*

Patriarchy relies upon the clan system to legitimize its dominance. The clan system reinforces three essential components of patriarchy—filial piety, kinship ties, and ancestor worship. As a patriarchal society, almost every aspect of Hmong culture centers on men. Religious practices, sexual relations, labor division, land distribution, funeral rituals, and marriage customs are constructed to legitimize men's domination of women. One key rule normalizing hegemonic masculinity is the exclusion of women from politics and public spaces. Pre-settlement, the clan system was the regulatory institution that decided nearly all components of Hmong culture. Clans can be understood as separate political units who compete for the best resources and positions of power, usually led by the oldest man of each clan. Together all eighteen clans form a system that regulates cultural values and gender relations. More specifically, the clan system serves to consolidate male privilege because only men can act as clan leaders and women are excluded from public roles demonstrating leadership. The clan system authorizes the exchange of women's bodies for the purposes of creating alliances with other clans and establishes men's roles as the carriers of family lineage, thereby positing men as essential for the continuation of Hmong identity while women are less crucial. The traditional hegemonic masculinity is defined by these three key Confucius principles.

Nu Plaib performs hegemonic masculinity through three different character roles—the Father, the Dutiful Son, and the Poetic Lover. Each character emphasizes different aspects of the ideal man. The Father, or patriarch, is the most crucial role to maintaining and validating the ideal masculinity. The Father and Dutiful Son are

intersected through Confucius principles of filial piety and ancestor worship. The roles of the Dutiful Son and the Poetic Lover support and help actualize the role of the Father. Nu Plaib transitions from the Dutiful Son, to Poetic Lover, to the Father.

From the very first scene, the film establishes how Nu Plaib embodies ideal masculine values. In the opening act, Nu Plaib is wheedling bamboo stalks with a sharp blade and when his friends ask him to join them on their social outing to pick up girls, he declines. He replies that if he leaves, no one would help his parents with the farm—their main source of income—or with chores around the home. In this scene, and throughout the film, Nu Plaib performs a crucial aspect of Hmong masculinity—filial piety. Here he is performing the role of the Dutiful Son. Filial piety is a concept deriving from Confucianism. In Chinese, filial piety is called “*hsiao*” (Lijun and D'Agostino 2004). The concept can be more accurately explained as “filial duty or submission...the respectful submission to the will of the father, which is assumed to arise naturally out of relationship” (Hamilton 1990). Following the logic of Confucianism, filial piety makes up a large part of hegemonic masculinity. “...only if a son is *hsiao* [filial] and *shun* [obedience] can he be considered a true son and a man” (Lijun and D'Agostino 2004). Respectful obedience to the patriarch is a value that arises out of Confucianism, which makes sense, given that the Hmong resided in China for several thousand years until they began migrating to Southeast Asia in the late 1700s (Quincy).

In fact, kinship ties, filial piety, and ancestor worship are the core of Hmong culture. All these principles dominate traditions, customs, spirituality—as principles of Confucianism, they are a way of life. These three key principles centers family stability and community harmony on the Patriarch. The father or husband is the ultimate family

authority. The definition of family encompasses all wives, concubines, sons and their wives, grandchildren, unmarried daughters, and can include siblings and nieces/nephews (Lijun and D'Agostino 2004). As such, the patriarch of the family wields enormous influence over many individuals and controls the family finances. He also operates as the family priest by performing the proper rituals to venerate the ancestors, who can be malevolent if the proper rituals are not observed. The Father, then, is the ultimate moral, spiritual, and financial generator who consolidates the family. Obedience to such authority is a guarantee because the patriarch is considered an earthly extension of the ancestors' will. "In identifying the deceased father with a superhuman force deserving of worship, Confucianism solidifies the connection between ancestor worship and filial piety" (Lijun and D'Agostino). As the direct link to the ancestors, the patriarch is crucial for the continuation of the lineage and family solidarity. While the patriarch demands complete obedience from those under his rule, his authority also depends on his relationship with his son(s).

A solid father-son relationship is necessary for the continuation of the system that privileges men. The father needs to teach his son(s) the cultural rituals for ancestral worship thereby ensuring his veneration in the afterlife as well as the entire ancestral clan. The son learns the rituals so that when he grows older, he can teach his son so he may also be venerated upon his death. Similarly, according to Confucianism, a son can only be considered a true man if he demonstrates filial piety because by honoring and referencing his male ancestors, he supports his masculine authority. Furthermore, Confucianism dictates that the father-son relationship and patriarchal authority maintains family solidarity and spreads to "ensure political stability and social harmony"

(Lijun and D'Agostino). The general belief in the significance of the patriarch's role in maintaining family, clan, and community harmony is so deeply rooted that to challenge the system would be to (presumably) alter the entire culture.

In the next several scenes, Nu Plaib and Yer meet and begin to fall in love. Before Yer is kidnapped by Tiger, whom performs counter-hegemonic hypermasculinity, the film spends a significant amount of time asserting Nu Plaib's desirability. In addition to playing the role of the Dutiful Son, he also declares his heterosexuality as the Poetic Lover. He courts Yer by exchanging coy promises of everlasting love, serenading her with the Jew's Harp late at night through thin bamboo walls, accompanying her to her family's farm, carrying her bag, and hand-feeding her. As the Poetic Lover, his desirability is heightened because he is projected as the object of men's envy and women's desire. Since men define their masculinity in relation to other men, other men will want to be like Nu Plaib because he is desired by other women. Nu Plaib's desirability among women calls into question other men's masculinity, since these other men can't "get" the girls, thereby implying they are not desirable to women and there is something wrong with their masculinity. Women are both the measurer and the measuring stick upon which men define their masculinity. Women receive cues about what is desirable in a man, and men witness what they think women desire, so then they want to be like Nu Plaib and emulate his traits in order to get the girl and also restore their sense of masculinity. It is important to note here that although Nu Plaib may function as an object of envy and desire in these scenes, he nevertheless is able to exert a much greater amount of control over his decisions.

Nu Plaib's performance as the Poetic Lover establishes an important component of hegemonic masculinity—his heterosexuality. As a patrilineal and collectivist culture, Hmong society is constructed such that the continuation of family lineage—through the act of marriage and producing children—takes precedence over individual happiness and is a crucial component of family harmony. An interview with an out gay Hmong man, Fong, reveals the stigma associated with being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or non-gender conforming (Ngo 2012). Fong disclosed that his mother felt that his gay identity would be viewed by the community as a “disease within the family” and furthermore decrease his siblings' marriageability (Ngo 2012). Part of Nu Plaib's responsibilities as the Dutiful Son is to carry on the family lineage and uphold the family name within the community. Family and kinship ties “provide individuals with physical and emotional support” (Ngo 2012) because individual identity is more closely intertwined with the collective identity. For individuals who wish to challenge the heteronormative patriarchal system, doing so might come at a very high cost. Nu Plaib's performance as a heterosexual man ensures he maintains those crucial connections and as the ideal man, preserves the status quo.

Another aspect of the Dutiful Son is to know the rituals necessary for ancestor worship, which include rituals to “invite the ancestors” to share a meal at every New Year, oral funeral songs, rhythmic funeral songs played by the *qeej* instrument, marriage rituals, and “calling in the soul” of a newborn child (Her 2005). All rituals involving birth, conception, and death affirm clan networks and family lineage. Ancestor worship, which acknowledges family lineage and clan networks, validates patriarchal authority. “The father's authority, on the other hand, is conceived as not originating from

the father himself but as springing from the ancestors and reinforced by them” (Lijun and D'Agostino 2004). The authority of the patriarch derives from the family's ancestors, and must be constantly validated through ancestral worship practices. Nu Plaib always carries the *qeej*, a five-reed bamboo instrument, in beginning of the film. The *qeej* has a tonal language similar to Hmong and imparts instructions to the deceased during funerals (Her 2006). Within the context of this film, however, the *qeej* serves not only as a symbol of ancestor worship (thereby fulfilling an aspect of the Dutiful Son) but more importantly, is a symbol of Nu Plaib's masculinity.

From the beginning of the film up until he leaves to chase after Yer and Tiger, Nu Plaib always carries the *qeej*. Just as Yer is rumored to be the most beautiful girl, Nu Plaib is rumored to be the most skillful *qeej* player. His ideal masculinity is further established through a *qeej* competition towards the beginning of the film, which was hosted by Yer's father, the village Elder. The test is to play the *qeej* while walking across a tightrope four feet in the air. Nu Plaib is the only contestant to successfully walk across and back while playing the *qeej*. This scene establishes his superior masculinity and solidifies the *qeej* as a phallic symbol. As a symbol of Nu Plaib's virility and masculinity, the absence of the *qeej* during Nu Plaib's quest to rescue Yer becomes an analogy of his threatened masculinity. In the beginning of the film, the *qeej* is always present because it reinforces his established hegemonic masculinity. The introduction of Tiger, however, threatens his sense of masculinity and he “loses” his penis. His stiff manhood has lost its erection and is vulnerable to castration. If he wants to reclaim his masculinity and virility, he must shed the Dutiful Son and Poetic Lover and become the



Father. Only after killing Tiger and returning home with Yer as his wife does the audience see Nu Plaib play the *qeej* again.

In a telling scene of the clear gender expectations, Nu Plaib asks his father, the family patriarch, for approval of a possible marriage with Yer and receives it. For Yer, however, she cannot ask her father directly. She happens to overhear her parents praising Nu Plaib's *qeej* playing skills, and later consults her mother and best friend (another village girl) for their opinions of Nu Plaib and his family. Both her mother and best friend reply that they've heard of his family's good reputation. Nu Plaib's father replies that he has heard of her rumored beauty, and it would make him happy if Nu Plaib was able to date her.

Nu Plaib's conversation with his father reveals that men can give their own opinions, and that he thinks of the potential union in terms of how Yer could benefit the family's social status. Furthermore, although Nu Plaib says he will pursue Yer if his mother and father approve of the union, his mother is not present in the scene. Nu Plaib really only needs the approval of his father, the patriarch of the family. The father-son relationship is part of ensuring the continuation of the family lineage, with ancestors on one end and descendants on the other (Lijun and D'Agostino 2004). The power difference among women and men in marriages is clearly conveyed here. As a man and the firstborn son, Nu Plaib only requires his father's approval to pursue a marriage. For women, however, the implications of marriage require subtle inquiring and the tacit approval of her father, mother, and community.

In accordance with Confucianism, "...the father-son relationship is the root of the harmony of family relationships and indeed of all other human relationships" (Lijun and

D'Agostino). Father and son(s) have a mutual relationship whereby the father demands obedience from the son, but the father is also dependent on the son to care for him in his old age. This dynamic is revealed in the scene following Nu Plaib's revelation that Yer has been kidnapped by Tiger. He consults a wise man whom imbues Nu Plaib with special magical properties and instructs Nu Plaib to craft a sharp sword to aid his quest. Nu Plaib tests the sharpness of his blade three times on a chicken, pig and cow. For the use of the chicken Nu Plaib asks his mother for permission, which reveals that killing chickens falls within the woman's realm of authority. Nu Plaib approaches his father for permission to test his blade on the pig and cow, which reveals that killing pigs/cows is a job for men. Although Nu Plaib asks his parents for the use of their only livestock, asking permission is more a gesture of courtesy. When his parents reply that they only have those three animals for livestock, Nu Plaib says that whether they permit him to or not, he will still test his blade on the animals. His parents concede to his will.

The interaction and dialogue between Nu Plaib and his parents demonstrates his male privilege and their increasing dependency on his support since he is the firstborn son and the only child. Furthermore, this scene reveals an important transformative period where Nu Plaib is seeking to transition from the Dutiful Son to the Father. In addition to being a Dutiful Son, performing the role of the Father is an even more essential component of Hmong masculinity. In fact, as mentioned before, to be a "man" is to be a "husband/father" because the word for "man" (*txiv*) in Hmong is synonymous to "husband/father." Nu Plaib's masculinity cannot come to completion until he is married and can act as the Father. In the scene described above, his role as the Dutiful Son is given less priority in comparison to fulfilling his masculinity by rescuing Yer and

assuming the role of the Father. His performance as the Dutiful Son is convincing, but he cannot truly be the ideal man until he can perform the role of the Father. He must marry Yer, the main female protagonist who functions in the film as a trophy to be acquired by other men.

Tiger's kidnaping of Yer simultaneously castrates Nu Plaib and is also the catalyst for him to transform from the Dutiful Son to the Father. His masculinity is in a moment of crisis. His proud manhood, established as superior through the *qeej* contest where he emerged victorious, has softened with the threat of Tiger's hypermasculinity. In this moment his masculinity is vulnerable to castration. As the Dutiful Son, Nu Plaib is still subordinate to his father's rule and so cannot fully become a man until he himself can be the Father. As is evidenced by the reappearance of the phallic *qeej*, Nu Plaib reclaims his masculinity after eliminating Tiger and going home with Yer. He removes the other masculinity whom could potentially occupy the role of the Father and marries Yer to become the Father. Nu Plaib completes the last stage in the cycle from Dutiful Son, to Poetic Lover, to Father and is the hegemonic Hmong man.

#### *Counter-hegemonic hypermasculinity*

Tiger's character is not as developed as Nu Plaib because he mainly serves as the foil to Nu Plaib. As the counter-hegemonic hypermasculinity, Tiger threatens Nu Plaib's hegemonic masculinity. He is more aggressive, violent, and "animal-like" but demonstrates a surprising amount of tenderness towards Yer. Despite carrying her across streams, assisting her climb boulders, providing food for her, and building comfortable beds for her, Tiger is still the "bad" man. He is deceitful and villainous—he

tricks Yer into marrying him and later again tricks Nu Plaib when they are battling.

Within the masculinity schema, Tiger's sense of masculinity would be subordinate to Nu Plaib's hegemonic masculinity. His subordinate masculinity is presented as devious and evil. Tiger is most threatening to Nu Plaib because he threatens to usurp/prevent Nu Plaib's role as the Father.

As discussed before, the role of the Father constitutes a significant part of hegemonic masculinity. Nu Plaib must fulfill this role in order to become the ideal man but he needs Yer to become the Father. Beyond using Yer as a tool to actualize his masculinity, to have a subordinate masculinity steal his woman questions Nu Plaib's position as the dominant masculinity. Women's reproductivity, sexuality, and labor are controlled by men within this patriarchal system. Men who perform the ideal or complicit masculinity have exclusive rights over women. As the dominative hegemonic masculinity, their domination over women is "taken as a guarantee" (Howson 2006). By taking away Nu Plaib's "woman," Tiger challenges Nu Plaib's position at the top of the gender hierarchy, thereby revealing the fragility of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is constructed to seem universal, dominant, and absolute but really derives its legitimacy from the cooperation of subordinate groups. Hence, the hegemonic masculinity is in a constant state of vulnerability and becomes more apparent at certain periods to manifest in a "crisis."

### *Emphasized Femininity*

Yer is introduced to the audience by way of Nu Plaib's male peers gossiping about her beauty. As the emphasized femininity in the film, her femininity is constructed

to accommodate and validate hegemonic masculinity as performed by Nu Plaib. From the outset Yer's desirability and value is defined in terms of her physical appearance. She is established as an object of male desire. Although Nu Plaib is also an object of desire, he has a far more active role in shaping other's perceptions. Yer, on the other hand, is passive and rarely exerts any self-agency. She never voices any complaints.

This scene highlights the gendered expectation that women should be modest. Yer cannot directly approach her father and ask for his opinion because to do so would be improper. Similarly, she seeks the approval of her family and friends because her reputation as a young woman is on the line and she would be the target of negative gossip if she did not have her family and community approval. Additionally, both her mother and friend repeat what others have said about Nu Plaib's family—there are two parts to their response. One, in accordance to Symond's analysis, young girls and married women are not supposed to directly answer questions but instead must repeat what their husband or father have to say (Symonds 2004). Secondly their response reveals that as women they must consider the family reputation because once women marry into a family, they are considered part of their husband's clan instead of their natal clan.

On their long journey to Tiger's cave, she has several opportunities to escape Tiger but does not take the chance to rescue herself. At the beginning of the journey to Tiger's cave, they encounter Nu Plaib but he has been placed under an enchanted sleep. She cleverly leaves behind her comb, *paj ntaub* (embroidery cloth), and shoes so she has excuses to return to Nu Plaib in the hopes of waking him. She performs these tasks without supervision, and so has ample opportunity to flee but instead relies upon

Nu Plaib to rescue her. When he does not wake up, she seems to resign herself to her fate and follow Tiger without protest. She is repulsed by Tiger but after he transforms himself into a human male, she grows to care for him as his wife. When Nu Plaib arrives and tries to behead a sleeping Tiger, she spreads her white skirts over him in an attempt to protect Tiger. She has grown to love Tiger, and having spent two years with him, has developed the ability to transform into a tigress herself. In the scene after Tiger's death, she transforms into a tigress and growls threateningly at Nu Plaib, who responds that if she is serious in her threat he will kill her too. She transforms back into a human, sobbing, and follows Nu Plaib back to his village. Before going back, she asks Nu Plaib to dig a large hole for her, which she lies in for days only to emerge from a metamorphosis as her human self. She asks Nu Plaib to throw away her tiger skin, and thereafter acts as the passive, soft-spoken woman she was before she was kidnapped.

Her time with Tiger and transformative skills are a subversion of the natural order; her femininity is not at stake as with Nu Plaib, but rather her humanity. Nu Plaib is the only main character whose humanity has not been compromised. As such, the implication is that Yer needs Nu Plaib to return her humanity. Through this sequence of events, Nu Plaib is presented not only as the ideal man, but also as a representation of huMan. Humanity has been gendered to assume the face of a man and posits "man" as the original, of which women and subordinate masculinities are merely incomplete copies.

It is also important to note that she is referred to as the Village Elder's youngest daughter (*Hmoob ntxhai ntxawm*). Her name, Yer (*Ntxawm*), is both a name and a term denoting her placement within the family as the youngest daughter. Women's social

positions are defined in relation to their father (if unmarried), husband, oldest son or other male relative and are addressed accordingly to their role in the family structure. The implication is that women are only Hmong through association and ensures that women are dependent on men for community inclusion and validation of their Hmong heritage. Being part of a collectivist society means that those who do not conform to the gender norms are socially isolated.

Yer's character is also an important tool that assists Nu Plaib in his journey of fulfilling the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. He assumes the role of the Father through heterosexual marriage with Yer, thereby also fulfilling his obligations as the Dutiful Son. Transferred from one patriarch to another, Yer is conditioned to be dependent on the men in her life for fulfillment. She cannot obtain it herself. The obedience afforded to the family patriarch also solidifies obedience to the clan, since the clan consists of kin who are connected by remote ancestors who must also be worshipped. Marriage legitimizes the regulation and censorship enforced by her husband, her parents-in-law, their nuclear family, extended family, and the clan is legitimized. Along with filial piety and ancestor worship, marriage is another societal institution which serves to legitimize patriarchy's tenuous domination.

As a patrilineal culture, family lineage is continued through the male children. They are the pillars of the family, since only men can continue the family lineage and Hmong cultural heritage. Women produce the "shell" of a newborn but men call in the soul, the very essence of a person (Symonds 2004). Women are considered temporary in the sense that once they marry into their husband's clan, their husband's family has "bought" her sexuality, reproductive body, and economic labor (Symonds 2004) so the

birth family has less incentive to invest in their daughters. Additionally, parents rely on their sons (or more specifically, their sons' wives) to care for them in their old age, so they have even more reason to value their male children. Under this reasoning, parents raise girls with the assumption that someday they will belong to another family so unmarried women are considered temporary. Symonds puts this most accurately when she states that women are perpetual outsiders in the Hmong culture (2004); patriarchy largely ignores their values and needs. Although hegemonic masculinity is posited as the universal ideal humanity, the power and privilege men wield over women is vulnerable and susceptible to crisis.



## **Conclusion**

### **Hmong-American Men and Nu Plaib**

Hmong masculinity is in a moment of crisis; this study specifically examines the emasculation of the 1.5 Hmong-American generation. Within the Western masculinity schema, their sense of hegemonic masculinity is instead in the position of the marginalized subordinate masculinity. Their hegemonic masculinity is predicated on the Confucius principles of filial piety and ancestor worship, which are enforced by the clan system and kinship ties. Such values are not reflected in the Western social schema. In addition to subordination to the White man, Hmong-American men face racism and poverty, both negatively impacting their self-perceived worth as men.

Hmong communities across the world view these films, creating a stronger diasporic community mediated by the television screen. As cultural productions, these films are not just reflections of Hmong American men's sense of emasculation as racialized bodies in the U.S. These films are also Hmong-American men's reconstruction of personal definitions of hegemonic masculinity that can speak to a wide range of audiences. As such, Hmong men are re-claiming their masculinity but they are also actively shaping the boundaries of that masculinity. These new constructions of masculinity are developed in relation to Hmong American men's experiences in the United States—where they are either ignored or portrayed as “straitjacket sexualities” (Shimizu 2012) that limits their perceptions of probable masculinities.

Films are cultural productions informed by these changes within the community. In many ways, these films are Hmong-American men's responses to these changes.

Similar to the emasculation of Nu Plaib, Hmong-American men who travel to the homeland have been prevented from reaching the role of the Father. To wholly realize their masculinity, Hmong-American men must assume the role of the Father but are stuck as dependent children in America. In America, some older Hmong-American men depend on welfare pensions, Medicaid, food stamps, children or wives to supply the family income. They live in an industrial nation where their farming skills are useless and the young are glorified. Many cultural values are displaced within mainstream American culture. Hmong-American men can no longer become the Father in America because they are the subordinate masculinity within the Western masculinity schema. They must travel to the homeland where their sense of masculinity is the hegemonic masculinity. In a place where their sense of masculinity is relatively unthreatened and affirmed by gender norms, they are able to transition from the Son to the Father through the act of claiming young girls and women's bodies. Access to the bodies of young girls and women allow them to progress from the subordinate child (of American paternalism) in the Western masculinity schema to self-actualized men as the Father.

From these conclusions it becomes clear that the three key principles of Confucius that defined hegemonic Hmong masculinity before settlement in the United States no longer has merit in the Western masculinity schema. As the moral, financial, and spiritual core of the family, the displacement of the patriarch threatens the entire family stability. Hmong American men, whose sense of masculinity was predicated on playing such a role, feel emasculated in the United States. Their volatility, in turn, affects the entire family and by extension the community. The murder-suicides are extreme cases wherein the Hmong-American men try to escape feelings of helplessness and

reclaim their masculinity by eliminating the threat. These issues affect entire communities across the nation and one response of the 18 Clan Council of Minnesota, headed by Cher Chai Vang, was to urge partners facing intimate partner violence to seek counsel from their clan leader. However, the Chief of Police, John Kirtwood, instead urged partners to contact police (Suab Hmong International Broadcasting Communications). There seems to be a profound disconnect in communication between the 18 Clan Council and the local police. Women's voices, however, does not seem to be included in this discussion about how to prevent and solve the problem of intimate partner violence.

Additionally, many Hmong community leaders are not addressing the root issue. Instead, blame has been charted back and forth between men and women instead of finding a resolution that will heal the community instead of further dividing it. The root issue is Hmong American men's sense of emasculation in the United States. As stated before, men were traditionally considered the ultimate family authority and their authority—and masculinity—was validated through kinship ties, ancestor worship rituals, and their role as the Dutiful Son. However, they are displaced in the Western masculinity schema and deprived of their privileges as men; their sense of masculinity holds no merit in the new system. They occupy the subordinate role to a dominant masculinity they can only hope to emulate because the hegemonic masculinity in the U.S. is first and foremost White. Of course, there are other factors that may contribute to issues of violence within Hmong communities—including how using violence against women as a disciplinary tool has always been accepted to a certain degree in Hmong communities.

Since Hmong-American hegemonic masculinity is no longer applicable in the U.S., a new construction of hegemonic masculinity which does not rely upon the subordination of women must be constructed. Stacey Lee describes the new Hmong masculinity in her study. Lee found that the traditional hegemonic masculinity was no longer viable and that hypermasculinity was not a route for Hmong boys either. The new hegemonic masculinity, she claims, will have to be bi-cultural, educated, financially successful, but still know how to perform the rituals for ancestor worship, filial piety, and know their kin. Those three key principles which traditionally defined hegemonic masculinity has not been replaced—rather, the markers of White hegemonic masculinity (the breadwinner role in particular) is adopted to inform the new Hmong masculinity. But can this be the solution? Although the three key principles which defined traditional hegemonic Hmong masculinity is incorporated in the new construction of Hmong masculinity—thereby ensuring and perhaps “stabilizing” the status quo—Confucianism still centralizes masculinity and men while relegating women and femininities to the periphery.

To speculate on the answer to this issue would be to fall into the “yes, but” game. Another possible route would be to examine Hmong-American women’s relative success in the new gender schema and why they may have acculturated faster than men. However, it can be very problematic to compare men and women’s experiences this way because firstly, it perpetuates a binary and heteronormative understanding of gendered experiences. Secondly, women’s place within the gender hierarchy fundamentally shapes their experiences as women and is not necessarily comparable to men’s experiences as men.

This is not to say that all Hmong men perform hegemonic masculinity. There are also a number of Hmong men who perform subversive masculinity. For example, through personal connections I have heard rumors of how the former Minnesota Senator Mee Moua's husband refused to pay a bride price to her family. Also, there are increasing numbers of Hmong-American men who self-identify as feminists and fully support women's rights. So Hmong-American men do not react to their sense of emasculation in the same way—through violence—but try to critically understand the source of their emasculation and become allies to marginalized communities within the larger Hmong community. Perhaps, then, another way to address the issue of violence is to acknowledge the multiplicity of masculinity scripts. There is not a "right" masculinity, but a range of masculinities that includes different manifestations of sexuality, gender expression, and subversion of the dominant schema.

### *Implications*

This study has two implications—one of subversion and the other of validation. This study has implications beyond the Hmong community. Although the homeland is the site of reclaiming masculinity, Hmong-American men's sense of displacement stems from their place as racialized, de-sexualized bodies in the U.S. Through the process of reclaiming and re-constructing their masculinity, it can be argued that in the process Hmong-American men are subverting White patriarchy. In Dia Cha's retelling of the folktale, Nu Plaib and Yer are already married. The conflict begins when Yer is kidnapped one day while she is traveling to visit her parents. The Poetic Lover is a character the director consciously decided to create in the film. He actively

reconstructed Nu Plaib's performance of masculinity so the film is not just a mirror of Hmong masculinity, but also a product. The added character of the Poetic Lover might be a product of the director's concept of love, whom as a Hmong-American man would have been exposed to Western romantic love. However, the incorporation of a Poetic Lover (which establishes Nu Plaib's heterosexuality) in the film could also be read as contesting the feminization of Asian/American masculinity in Western discourse. Asian/American men have historically been feminized, emasculated, and de-sexualized by the Western gaze. In America, one of the most prominent stereotypes of Asian/Americans is the "model minority"—geeky, passive, feminine, and intelligent but not able to perform sexually.

The model minority stereotype was developed in reaction to the Civil Rights movement and articles first mentioned the term in 1968 (Chou and Feagin 2008). The model minority legitimized one of the foundational myths of America—the myth of meritocracy. Meritocracy is the idea that hard work and persistence translates to economic success. However, this rationale completely ignores White, heterosexual, and class privileges that result from institutional incorporation of systems of oppression. The Hmong are grouped under the blanket label "Asian American" and are also subject to racist perceptions of Asian Americans. The director's decision to develop Nu Plaib's character as a Poetic Lover may be a reaction to this discourse, and a way for him to re-assert his own heterosexuality.

This study might not be generalizable to all Hmong men and Hmong transnational media since I only analyzed one film, but further paradigm developments and research of masculinity might reveal better reveal Hmong-American men's

relationship to Western masculinity. After completing this study, I propose a further theory. Hmong-American men's attempts to reclaim their masculinity via achieving the state of the Father through women's bodies may be a way for Hmong-American men, as racialized bodies themselves, to identify with their oppressors, the White hegemonic masculinity.

### *Limitations*

One important limitation to this study is the lack of a theoretical framework for Asian masculinities. This study utilizes Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to explain Nu Plaib's performative behavior but Connell's theory is constructed from a Western paradigm which posits the White masculinity schema as the universal structure. Additionally, her theory does not provide enough analysis of how subordinate and marginalized masculinities and femininities subvert the hegemonic masculinity. Her theory is not constructed from an intersectional standpoint and excludes how race, class, and sexuality influence gender constructions. Louie's paradigm of Chinese masculinities is more helpful because it relies more upon Confucian principles of the *wen-wu* (literary-martial) as the ideal Chinese masculinity. However one major difference between Chinese hegemonic masculinity and Hmong hegemonic masculinity is the influence of class. Although Louie accurately states that the paradigms of *wen-wu* is applicable to other East Asian cultures, as a largely illiterate culture the Hmong did not rely upon literacy to determine social status. Additionally, the patriarchal paradigm I have constructed is primarily from scholars who place men's experiences of masculinity on the periphery of their research.

Perhaps the most significant limitation to this study is my own biases as the author. I am a heterosexual Hmong-American woman who seeks to understand Hmong American men's experiences but my analysis is undoubtedly influenced by personal relationships with Hmong American men. Additionally, while I try to objectively construct and criticize men's masculinities, I am nevertheless an outsider to men's experiences as men. The purpose of this study is not to "bash" Hmong American men; this study arises out of my own desire to heal from the violence I have witnessed within my family. I try to construct a macro-understanding of gender relations within the Hmong community and how Hmong-American masculinity fits with the larger paradigm. Precisely because masculinity and men has historically been constructed to be the core of Hmong culture and spirituality, further research of Hmong masculinities, men, and their position within the greater Western paradigm is paramount to addressing violence within Hmong communities. Furthermore, more research might help explain the high rates of welfare dependency, gang violence, and the low rate of Hmong-Americans achieving higher education.



## Bibliography

1. Chou, Rosalind S. and Joe R. Feagin. *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008.
2. Donnelly, Nancy. *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994.
3. Espiritu, Yen Le. *Asian American Women and Men*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2000. Print.
4. Ford, Michele and Lenore Lyons. "Introduction." Ford, Michele and Lenore Lyons. *Men and Masculinities in Southeast Asia*. New York: Routledge , 2012. 1-19.
5. Gottfried, Mara H. "Frogtown slayings: Her police call wasn't an emergency. The next call was." *Pioneer Press* 26 March 2013: 2.
6. Hamilton, Gary G. "Patriarchy, Patrimonialism, and Filial Piety: A Comparison of China and Western Europe." *The British Journal of Sociology* (1990): 77-104.
7. Her, Vincent K. "Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights." *Hmong Studies Journal* (2006).
8. Howson, Richard. *Challenging Hegemonic Masculinities*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
9. Kaiser, Tamara L. "Achieving Shared Meaning in Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Understanding a Hmong Family's Response to Marital Violence." *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* (2004): 29-54.
10. Kimmel, Michael. *Manhood in America*. New York: The Free Press, 1996.
11. Koltyk, Jo Ann. "Telling Narratives through Home Videos: Hmong Refugees and Self-Documentation of Life in the Old and New Country." *Journal of American Folklore* (1993): 435-449.
12. Lee, Gary Y. "Diaspora and the Predicament of Origin: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity." *Hmong Studies Journal* (2007): 1-25.

13. —. "Dreaming Across the Ocean: Globalization and Cultural Reinvention in the Hmong Diaspora." *Hmong Studies Journal* (2006): 1-33.
14. Lee, Stacey J. "Hmong American Masculinities: Creating New Identities in the United States." Way, Nicole and Judy Y. Chu. *Adolescent Boys: Exploring Diverse Cultures of Boyhood*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2004. 13-30. Print.
15. Lemoine, Jacques. "Commentary: Gender-based Violence among the (H)mong." *Hmong Studies Journal* (2012): 1-27.
16. Lijun, Bi and Fred D'Agostino. "The Doctrine of Filial Piety: A Philosophical Analysis of the Concealment Case." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (2004): 451-467.
17. Long, Lisa A. "Contemporary Women's Roles through Hmong, Vietnamese, and American Eyes." *Frontiers* (2008): 1-36.
18. Louie, Kam and Morris Low. "Introduction." Louie, Kam and Morris Low. *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*. New York: RoutledgeCruzon, 2003. 1-16. Print.
19. Louie, Kam. *Theorising Chinese Masculinities*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
20. Miyares, Ines M. *The Hmong Refugee Experience in the United States*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1998. Print.
21. Ngo, Bic. "The Importance of Family for a Gay Hmong American Man: Complicating Discourses of "Coming Out"." *Hmong Studies Journal* (2012): 1-26.
22. Ong, Aihwa. *Buddha is Hiding*. University of California Press, 2003. Print.
23. Pho, Tuyet-Lan and Anne Mulvey. "Southeast Asian Women in Lowell: Family Relations, Gender Roles, and Community Concerns." Zhou, Min and J.V. Gatewood. *Contemporary Asian American*. New York: New York University Press, 2007. 181-205. Print.
24. Quincy, Keith. *Hmong: History of a People*. Washington: University Press, 1995. Print.
25. Schein, Louisa and Va-Megn Thoj. "Beyond Gran Torino's Guns: Hmong Cultural Warriors Performing Genders." *Positions* (2012): 764-792.

26. Schein, Louisa. "Homeland Beauty: Transnational Longing and Hmong American Video." *The Journal of Asian Studies* (2004): 433-463.
27. Shimizu, Celine Parrenas. *Straitjacket Sexualities*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.
28. Suab Hmong International Broadcasting Communications. "Hmong 18 Clan Council of Minnesota gathering to find way to prevent Domestic Violence." 8 April 2013.
29. Sucheng, Chan. *Hmong Means Free*. Berkley: Temple University Press, 1994. Print.
30. Symonds, Patricia V. *Calling in the Soul*. Seattle: Washington Press, 2004. Print.
31. Vezner, Tad. "St. Paul: At Hmong forum on domestic violence, women challenge leaders' strategy." *Pioneer Press* 2 April 2013: 2.
32. Xiong, Blong Z., et al. "Hmong Immigrants' Perceptions of Family Secrets and Recipients of Disclosure." *Families in Society* (2006): 231-239.
33. Yang, Kou. "Hmong Men's Adaptation to Life in the United States." *Hmong Studies Journal* (1997): 1-22.