

HMONG REFUGEES AND THE UNITED STATES: “HOME” LOSS AND ESTRANGEMENT

ผู้ลี้ภัยชาวม้งและประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา : การสูญเสีย “บ้าน” และความบาดหมาง

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Abstract


This article aims to understand and explores narratives of loss through examining the experiences of the displaced and resettled Hmong in the United States. I also aim to better understand the meaning of “Home” and the repercussions that its loss can bring. This paper was guided conceptually by “Home” loss. Current and past qualitative literature on the Hmong was used. The Hmong culture is not static and Hmong-Americans are interacting with both America’s culture and their traditional culture, thus molding their common memory of “Home” and “Home” loss in the process. During that process, many of the Hmong have experienced xenophobia through the anthem of nativism.

Keywords : Hmong, United States, “Home” loss, common memory, culture

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ข้อแรกเพื่อศึกษาและทำความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับเรื่องการสูญเสีย “บ้าน” ของชาวม้งที่พลัดถิ่นมาอาศัยอยู่ในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา และวัตถุประสงค์ที่สองเพื่อศึกษาความหมายของคำว่า “บ้าน” และผลกระทบของ “การสูญเสียบ้าน” ของชาวม้งพลัดถิ่นในอเมริกา งานวิจัยนี้ใช้วิธีการศึกษาจากข้อมูลแบบทิวทัศน์ ทั้งจากอดีตและปัจจุบัน จากการศึกษาพบว่าวัฒนธรรมของชาวม้งในอเมริกานั้นไม่เหมือนดังเดิม กล่าวคือ มีการผสมผสานระหว่างวัฒนธรรมอเมริกันกับวัฒนธรรมม้งดั้งเดิม ดังนั้นจากการผสมผสานทางวัฒนธรรมดังกล่าวจึงทำให้เกิดความทรงจำร่วมกันของคำว่า “บ้าน” และ “การสูญเสียบ้าน” ของชาวม้งในอเมริกา และถูกหล่อหลอมให้กับคนรุ่นต่อไป ซึ่งทำให้ชาวม้งในอเมริกาส่วนใหญ่เกิดความเกลียดและกลัวชาวต่างชาติ

คำสำคัญ : ชาวม้ง, ประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา, การสูญเสีย “บ้าน”, หน่วยความจำร่วมกัน, วัฒนธรรม



Throughout the world there are countless narratives of loss, solitude, estrangement, and suffering. This paper aims to understand and explore one of those narratives through examining the experiences of the displaced and resettled Hmong in the United States. The paper was guided conceptually by “Home” loss. I used past and current qualitative literature on the Hmong that chronicle and reproduce Hmong identity in the US. Since their initial displacement, thirty years have come and gone. That passage of time has allowed different generations of Hmong to experience “Home” loss and experience that “Home” loss differently. By understanding how the Hmong have been treated by native born non-Hmong Americans and how the Hmong have tried to maintain their Hmong identity amongst so many forces of assimilation will allow me to better understand the meaning of “Home” for the Hmong and the repercussions that its loss can bring.

According to Terkenli (2005), “Home” can be understood as being constructed through “social and habitual conditions” (Terkenli, 1995:324-334). Edward Said has said, “Home” is created by a community of language, culture, and customs. “The essence of home lies in the recurrent, regular investment of meaning in a context with which people personalize and identify through some measure of control” (Ibid).

During the Vietnam War the Hmong, a national ethnic minority in Laos were trained by the CIA and sided with the US allied Royal Lao government against the Communist Pathet Lao in the struggle for sovereign power within the territorial boundary of Laos, began losing some of that measure of control. That contestation for sovereign control of the territory put the Hmong in an abysmal position following the Pathet Lao victory and the US withdrawal from the region. The new Pathet Lao run communist government viewed the Hmong as traitorous enemies, which left the Hmong with inadequate juridical protection to deal with persecution. In fact, as Arendt points out, without a government of their own there was no one to guarantee their minimum rights (Arendt, 1951:282). Where were the Hmong to turn?

Liberty is part of American identity. In fact, Paul Viotti (2010) calls American liberalism as the ideological core of American exceptionalism (Viotti, 2010:113). Prior to the “Bush Doctrine” the US “served the cause of universal democracy by setting an example rather than by imposing a model.” (Walter, 2001:182) Americans have grown up singing songs in elementary school about liberty and freedom, like ‘My Country Tis of Thee, saying the pledge of allegiance, and singing the national anthem at each and every sporting event they have attended. That has shaped their identity by reproducing and instilling the idea of America as being a “shining city upon a hill”. Jonathan Monten (2005) calls liberal exceptionalism as the defining feature of American nationalism. (Monten, 2005:112-156) Those values are deeply embedded in American culture and are also internalized by members of policy elites (Viotti:2010). American liberalism reects a deep commitment to the idea that representative democracy allows broad political, economic, and social freedoms (Viotti:2010). Without juridical protection, the Hmong lost those political, economic, and social freedoms.

That internalization of liberalism in the US opened the door for the US to begin accepting Hmong refugees in the late 1970’s. Many of the Hmong did in fact initially find “protection” in Thai refugee camps, but since refugees can create tension between the host state and the state of origin (Cronin, 2003:153), it

was in Thailand's interest to see many of the Hmong resettled elsewhere. The refugees that did manage to stay in camps were experiencing "deplorable" conditions. It has even been suggested that Hong Kong purposely made their camps "deplorable" to discourage refugees seeking asylum (Davies, 2008:191-217). At a time that saw many nation-states throughout South East Asia practicing "push backs" of boat people, partially due to intra state relations in the region, the "friendly" and patron-client US-Thai relationship (Kusuma, 2001:198) made the US the perfect state to accept the Hmong.

Whether it was in the US' interest (e.g. having and maintaining a "special" relationship with Thailand), or not, from a minimalist position one might conclude that "at least" the Hmong were no longer vulnerable to persecution by the sovereign power in Laos and were now under the juridical protection of the hegemonic power. However, that view misses the struggle of losing one's "Home". As Liisa Malkki (1995) has pointed out, "'Home' is where one feels most safe and at ease, instead of some essentialized point on the map" (Malkki:509) and the Hmong did not just lose their land; they lost their "Home". As a nomadic slash and burn people, the Hmong's understanding of "Home" is not entrenched in one particular place. For the Hmong, their nomadic traditions and religion drenched in animism, shamanism, and ancestor worship make up the foundation of their nostalgic "Home"; particularly the first generation of the displaced. When the Hmong were brought to the US they brought their traditions or "Home" with them and were confronted by the individualist US culture of "assertiveness, initiative, attentiveness, and public image consciousness" (Scott, 1982:146-160). Trying to bring their "Home" with them was not conducive to life in the US. The culture shock deeply affected the Hmong refugees. For some, after being concretely situated in the US for only a few days was too much to bear. The cultural differences have affected the different generations differently, but both dramatically.

The idea of "Home" has an ethos that lightens the heart, and its loss, can stricken it. The stress from not being able to carry out their traditional religious practices, memories of dead friends and family, and images on television caused sudden death for many (Munger, 1986:383). For those that struggled through the swamp of initial shock transitioning to the culture of the US was and is a formidable task. Living with so much stress led many of the Hmong to grow ill. In traditional Hmong culture, when someone falls ill that person is said to be losing their soul (Lemoine, 1986:367). That loss of soul can be sparked by fear or a feeling of separation from their family, or in other words, being estranged from their "Home". Traditionally, the Hmong will do an animal sacrifice and cook the animal's head and then place it around the ailing person in order to replace the missing soul with that of the animal's (Ibid). Practicing animal sacrifice and traditional shamanism further alienated and estranged the Hmong within the primarily Christian (approximately 75%) (Scott, 1982:146-160) population of the United States.

That initial estrangement faded with the clustering of Hmong refugees into one area in which they made into their own "community". Approximately 99% of the 4,500 or so refugees in San Diego, now live in an area of not more than fifty square miles (Scott, 1982:146-160). One thing that is interesting about the

Hmong's experience of "Home" loss is that the Hmong are not traditionally a homogeneous group. Rather, the Hmong can be found throughout Indochina and despite some intermarriage between the groups, there continues to be strong distinctions in custom, dress, and dialect among the different Hmong groups (Cooper:1984).

The distinction can also be drawn on a political line. It is interesting that between 100,000 to 300,000 Hmong refugees fled from the Communist Pathet Lao government into Thailand, while at the same time many Hmong in Northern Thailand joined the communist party of Thailand (CPT)(Tapp:2005). Why the Hmong within different nation-states would choose different ideological stances is outside of the scope of this paper, but considering the Thai policy that was illustrated by General Prapas in 1968 that urged the hill people to abandon their nomadic lives (Ibid), it is understandable that the Hmong in Northern Thailand would not want to lose part of what made up of their "Home" or identity.

In the US, the loss of "Home" pushed the differences aside and redened the Hmong identity. They now lived and are living together as a homogeneous Hmong community that identifies with the common memory of "Home" loss. That community feeling of being away from "Home" has interacted with the feeling of not "belonging" to the society they now call home. Many of the refugees went to Wisconsin and across the Midwest, but for the most part they settled in Central California in a second migration (Jan,2003:365-379). Now, more than half of the Hmong population is in California(Ibid).

Rebecca Clouser (2009) explains how landscapes can mold thoughts, evoke memories, and shape social reality in relation to the landscapes of terror(Clouser:2009). I argue that the same can be used to recover feelings of "Home". That is exactly what many Hmong in the US have tried to do. To try to bridge their old nostalgic "Home" with their new home, many of the Hmong moved to Central California believing that they would be able to recover some of their lost "Home" by cultivating and molding gardens in lush Central California. The area's agricultural reputation drove many Hmong to move there, but since most of the farming in Central California is in fact large-scale and commercial, there was little opportunity to rekindle their ways of life and most ended up settling in metropolitan areas. Despite living in an urban setting, the Hmong were able to evoke memories of their "Home" by molding their landscapes by constructing small gardens full of traditional Hmong food (Jan,2003:365-379).

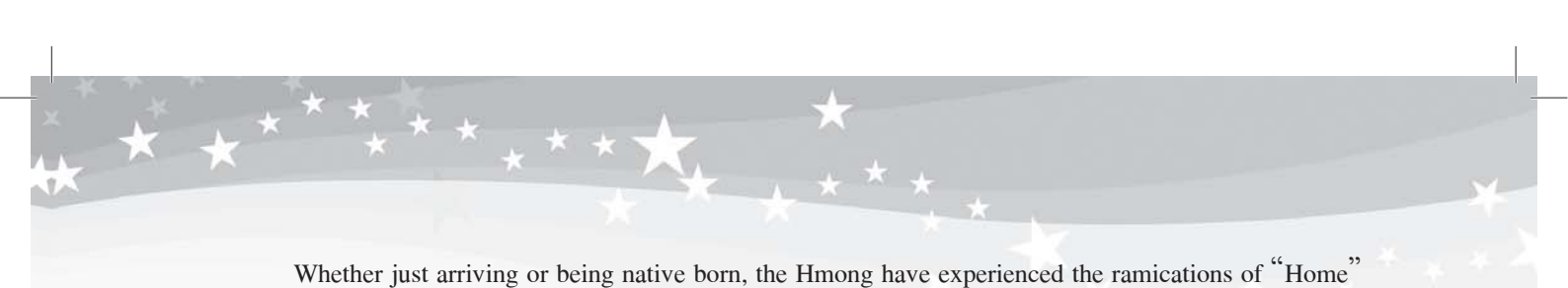
The gardens helped to quench the yearning for safety and the feeling to be at ease. Those tangible reminders of "Home" became visible marks on the land, characteristic landscape features for description and analysis(Helzer,1994:51-64) for the Hmong to reach back "Home". The tangible gardens helped, but as Malkki (1995) has reminded us, "Home" is where you truly feel safe and at ease. Many of the Hmong have not felt at ease. Racism and nativism, particularly in small towns in Middle America, produced more feelings of exclusion, estrangement, and reminders of "Home" loss. One Hmong settlement is very telling in this sense.

Wisconsin is most famous for football and cheese, but there also happens to be a large settlement of the Hmong right in the center of white Middle America. Before the Hmong's arrival, the small town was 99% white, today it is 95% (Hein,2000:413-429). The Hmong experienced verbal and physical harassment, avoidance, police mistreatment, and ejection. The Hmong are seen as "Asian" and are often called chink or gook and are harassed for having "slanted eyes" (Ibid). Some have experienced being viewed suspiciously and given poor service in stores and seen as "undesirable" customers. Most of the non-native born Hmong-Americans struggle with the English language. That has put them at a disadvantage while navigating through American society and has allowed the police to ignore their voices in accident incidents or crimes. Much of the rejection and exclusion experienced comes from nativism rather than racism. The Hmong are not seen as legitimate members of the nation-state in some Americans' eyes and that makes the Hmong feel unsafe and uneasy.

Since many of the refugees were and are unemployable because of age, language barriers, or lack of skills (e.g. many working age Hmong only had experience in rudimentary slash and burn cultivation and hunting), 95% of Hmong refugees rely on some form of public assistance (Scott,1982:146-160). That has perpetuated the idea that the Hmong are only in the US to obtain public assistance (Hein,2000:413-429). Many of the Hmong have experienced xenophobia through the anthem of nativism, "[chink, gook, chinaman, etc.] "go back home" or go back to your own country". That is really one thing that many of the Hmong have a problem with. They feel like most Americans do not understand that they are in the US because they or their relatives put their families and "Home" at risk to help the US during the Indochina war and can't go home. They are home.

The native-born and or younger generation of Hmong-Americans are affected by the same racism and nativism, but they also have to contend with trying to "t in" with American society as well. Many of the younger generation feels stuck and conned by the older generation's clinging to "Home". They feel they are unable to t in, in a large part because of their Hmong heritage. The Hmong culture in the US, though not static and surely changed through the process of interaction with the new American culture, remains very conservative and patriarchal like that of those of the Hmong that remained in Laos (Ngo:2002).

The Lao Family Community Inc., a mutual-aid association, tries to promote the English language and other marketable skills, as well as Hmong identity solidarity. Many of the Hmong resist assimilation and remain very proud of their Hmong heritage. Many of the older generation continue to feel that projects of assimilation are just "a continuation of centuries of persecution by stronger neighbors" (Tapp,2005:13). Relationships in America between Hmong women and both Hmong-American and non Hmong-American men reect the Hmong's conservative culture. They are stringently scrutinized and oftentimes mothers accompany their daughters on dates, even up through college. That makes the young Hmong-American women feel alienated from their Hmong family within the context of the US' typically more liberal culture. They are at odds with the two cultural poles. Some feel the need to defy their parents by marrying early and leaving home to get away from that cultural clash (Ibid). They are trying to "t in" in what they feel is their "Home".



Whether just arriving or being native born, the Hmong have experienced the ramifications of “Home” loss. The initial shock of “Home” loss that the first Hmong refugees felt continues to mold the identity of the Hmong people in the US today. They felt and feel estrangement and rejection. “Home” is denied differently by the different generations of the Hmong living in the US. The older generation yearns for a nostalgic “Home” that now only exists in the common memory of displacement and the molded gardens of the displaced Hmong. While at the same time, “Home” for the native born Hmong-Americans, the nostalgic “Home” of their older relatives is seen as a barrier to fitting in, in what they feel is their true home, America. Living in the US has and redefined the Hmong identity. They now live as a homogeneous Hmong community that identifies with the common memory of “Home” loss. They are no longer the Hmong before the Indochina War.

To get a deeper and more personal understanding of what “Home” and the loss of that “Home” means, one must reflect on one’s own “Home”. Of course, an individual’s subjective understanding of a densely woven concept such as “Home” and “Home” loss makes the universality of the concept problematic, but that does not mean we are unable to sympathize with “Home” loss. As a child, I witnessed home loss and experienced displacement. Not at the same level of the Hmong, but an experience nonetheless. In the US, a materialistic consumption based society, the importance of acquiring belongings is reflected in the high level of consumerism. Being homeless and being displaced from home after home and never having the means for a high level of consumerism, I felt disconnected and alienated from much of society. However, I did not truly know home loss until the age of 18.

I watched stupefied as everything that my family and I had acquired was being engulfed in front of our eyes. Without being able to stop the flames devouring our home I could really understand the feeling of losing one’s “Home”. I felt loss, solitude, estrangement, vulnerability, and suffering. The memory of the helplessness in my father’s eyes will always be with me. Moving was not the same as moving back “Home”.

Constructing gardens in urban areas to evoke memories or going back to a now more “receptive” Laos, will not bring back the nostalgic “Home” for the older generation of the Hmong. Homer eloquently described how Odysseus finally returned to Ithaca, but as Malkki (1995) reminds us, it is far from clear that returning where you left is the same as “going Home” (Malkki, 1995:509). The native born Hmong-Americans are interacting with both America’s culture and their traditional culture, molding their common memory of “Home” in the process.

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