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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “EDUCATED” FROM AN ORAL CULTURE: A  
STUDY OF TRADITIONAL HMONG KNOWLEDGE

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Xong Xiong

College of Liberal Studies  
Department of Educational Studies

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STUDY OF TRADITIONAL HMONG KNOWLEDGE

By Xong Xiong

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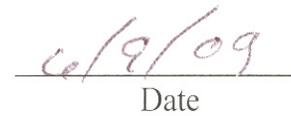
Margaret J. Finders Ph.D.  
Thesis Committee Chairperson



Date



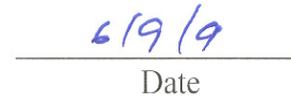
Christin A. DePouw Ph.D.  
Thesis Committee Member



Date



Vincent K. Her Ph.D.  
Thesis Committee Member

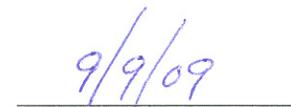


Date

Thesis accepted



Vijendra K. Agarwal, Ph.D.



Date

Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

## ABSTRACT

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This study explores Indigenous knowledge in juxtaposition with Western liberalism. It draws from diverse bodies of research on Indigenous oral traditions and ways of knowing. However, the focus is on (H)mong oral culture and traditions through a critical race theory and phenomenology lens. The exploration of what it means to have knowledge and how knowledge is obtained for a (H)mong person draws from the interviews of five (H)mong Elders ages 65 to 79. The study concludes that (H)mong oral tradition is rich, complex, irreplaceable and does not need legitimization from print societies to justify its validity.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout (H)mong history, there were constant conflicts with the dominant group to assimilate. The (H)mong have indeed paid a heavy price to maintain their traditional culture and oral knowledge. (H)mong oral tradition and knowledge is sacred, personal and important to those that still practice and maintain it. Though it has only been in the last 35 years that the majority of (H)mong people in the United States have been “educated” in written literacy, an overwhelming majority of (H)mong Americans are starting to value the Western liberal ideologies of objectivity, universality, and neutrality (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005).

This study examines the concept of knowledge through the perspectives of the (H)mong. It examines what Indigenous knowledge is and, beyond that, challenges the idea that valid knowledge must be empirically based and documented in ink. The study examines (H)mong oral culture and traditions through a critical race theory and phenomenology lens. Because of limited sources regarding (H)mong oral culture and knowledge and in order for us to have a better understanding of oral cultures, this study draws from a larger research and theory base of orally transmitted knowledge from other Indigenous peoples.

The study focuses on five (H)mong Elders who have chosen to live selectively in the oral world despite being surrounded by the demands of the print world. It will also

look at the impact of written literacy on (H)mong oral culture and ends with a discussion of the place that (H)mong oral knowledge - and by extension, Indigenous knowledge systems - have in academia.

### **Statement of the Problem**

(H)mong oral tradition and knowledge are sacred, personal and important to those who still practice and maintain it. The (H)mong, an Indigenous group of Laos who entered the United States under political refugee status, are under intense pressure to assimilate. In the last thirty-five years a majority of them have attained a formal, Western liberal education that, because they accept it as superior to their traditional forms of knowledge, threatens the survival of their own culture. The push for literacy in their adopted country with little regard to the importance of their rich traditional oral traditions and knowledge exacerbates this issue.

### **Significance of the Study**

(H)mong culture and traditions are oral-based, passed on from one generation to the next through songs, ceremonies, chants, conversations, gatherings and daily interactions with one another. If we truly want to understand the rich oral traditions of the (H)mong, that embodiment of knowledge to a traditional (H)mong person and how it is passed down from generation to generation, we must first try to understand the perspective and philosophies of the persons living in the oral world by deconstructing our own biases and miseducation about traditional orally transmitted knowledge; in this case the concept of “pre-literacy” and what that means to (H)mong Americans.

(H)mong oral knowledge is often seen as deficient because of the label of pre-literate. As Chamberlin (2000) stated, people assume that oral traditions are less evolved

than print cultures socially, culturally, emotionally and intellectually. (H)mong oral culture is rich and deep with a strong philosophical tradition that has been in place for thousands of years (Thao 2006). This study is important because it looks at (H)mong oral culture and knowledge through the eyes of the (H)mong Elders, who have chosen to live only in the oral world. Their wealth of knowledge could enrich and inform our understanding of (H)mong oral knowledge and contribute to more complex academic understandings of knowledge, especially within Indigenous studies.

I hope that this study will peak the interest of (H)mong youth here in the United States. There is no doubt that steps need to be taken towards the preservation of their language and culture. These youth are essential to the continued survival of their own languages and rich oral traditions. Yet, there is minimal awareness amongst them of the importance of oral traditions to their identity.

This study is also significant to educators of Indigenous students. The hope is that it will prompt critical explorations of the different styles of knowledge acquisition cross-culturally and what it means to be intelligent. So very often teachers expect their students to process and learn as they do. We know, however, that most individuals who come from oral cultures (and many who do not!) perform better academically when they work collaboratively in groups. They sometimes do not thrive in the individualistic and competitive environments that our society has set up.

Finally, the research findings here are a small addition to the expanding library of Indigenous oral traditions and knowledge. Hopefully, it sparks interest in future scholars of (H)mong/Indigenous cultures to take part in the struggle for the survival of their oral

cultures and traditions, which are so vital to their continued survival as a culture as well is language diversity in the world.

### **Objective of the Study**

The subject of this study is personal to me because it is something that I care deeply about. I will be writing in 1<sup>st</sup> person and in 3<sup>rd</sup> person. For me the tension emerged between my role as the researcher with all of the academic system of requirements (institutional, academic norms etc.) and my role as a member of the community whom I'm researching. Living between the personal and the professional, I choose to alternate between 1<sup>st</sup> person and 3<sup>rd</sup> person. This break in tradition with formal academic writing is intended to make visible the complex contexts between my different roles and identities. I traversed the locus of Western scientific ways of research in order to complete requirements for a Western academic institution and access the traditional oral knowledge of the Elders from my community.

This study was done for my own curiosity as well the need to relearn from the missing years of my life. Those years were spent in a Western educational setting reading, writing, memorizing and internalizing all the tools that were given to me to be productive citizen. I did not realize until much later that there were huge pieces of my culture that I was missing, for I was so focused on so many things "American".

As a child, I grew up in a dream world of oral storytelling, songs and poetry, filled with the magic of spoken words. When I arrived in the United States at the age of 9, written literacy was heavily forced on me and as a result of this, I never had the opportunity or time to continue to learn the traditional oral knowledge of my family. Throughout my 20 years as a student, my focus became more and more in written literacy

and less of the oral culture.

One of the strongest contributing factors was my time in the public schools. I was taught to be ashamed of my ancestors and who I was. I learned quickly that because we didn't have a written language, a country of our own, or a centralized form of government, we were not "civilized" based on colonizing Western liberal ideologies. I learned that my "difference" or ability to speak (H)mong was seen in school as my deficiency. I was asked to only speak English and learn everything "American."

An example I could remember to this day was trying to learn English as fast as I could. Though I could not speak English, I would pretend to speak gibberish as English. As a nine year refugee child, I knew that anything but (H)mong was better. Though I could not use gibberish to communicate, I kept pretending that I could. I wished that if I kept pretending that I could speak English, I would hopefully lose my ability to speak (H)mong. For me (H)mong was an unimportant language because all it ever brought me was misery, pain and shame. Events like this have had a lasting impression on me, sometimes leaving me in a state of confusion and marginalization. At times I feel like a piece of my soul is scarred and missing because for so long I have suppressed it or pretended that it did not exist.

As an adult those things that I have tried to suppress for so long soon disappeared and I no longer know where they are. Reflecting on it now, the hardest thing was that through those long years, never once did I stop to question if my culture was valid and if learning in a Western educational setting was really the only way. As a child, the only option was that it was that English literacy was the ONLY way.

The process of assimilation worked extremely well on me because I still have a

difficult time establishing communication with my elders, not because of a language barrier but because of my inability to understand the contextualized information. I learned throughout my research that I've lost the ability to communicate orally in the (H)mong way. The words I could hear and understand, but the meaning I had to work extra hard to find. I often wonder, if I was never exposed to written literacy, would I have had an easier time communicating in the (H)mong way with these elders. I've often wondered what my perception of life would be like living strictly in the oral world. I've often wondered, would I still value the oral tradition of my people as much if I'd never missed learning it.

On a personal note this research was done to relearn how to hear, see and find the words spoken by my Elders. This study was also done to question a generally accepted standard of what knowledge is and hear through the words of five (H)mong Elders who come from oral-based cultures with little or no exposure to written literacy what their thoughts are on oral knowledge. The intent of this study is not done to put (H)mong oral knowledge on a pedestal or to contrast binary opposites between (H)mong oral knowledge and the written literacy of print societies, but to help us understand what it means to be an educated person from the (H)mong oral perspective. This study also is intended as a contribution to Western academic perspectives in regards to the "value" of (H)mong oral knowledge and culture. Finally, this study does not claim to be the "voice" of all (H)mong Americans, but instead is one contribution to a broader conversation on this issue.

### **Limitation of the Study**

The (H)mong have been in the United States for over three decades, yet the pool of

research on their culture and history remains minute. In the area of (H)mong oral knowledge, there is even less written. This may be due to what Struthers and Peden-McAlpine (2006) states as dangerous and unnatural to write about oral tradition because the essence of the living language may be lost in the writing process. The writing process also distorts the meaning of orally transmitted knowledge because the writing process can never capture the essence of the spoken word.

Under these circumstances this research draws from Indigenous scholars who have written about Indigenous oral cultures. Although, there are major differences in cultural practices and ceremonial events among Indigenous peoples, the overall general area of Indigenous oral knowledge are similar for the (H)mong and other Indigenous cultures around the world. This will later be elaborated in the literature review.

Because this paper is on oral knowledge, it would be imperative to summarize what Indigenous knowledge is; however, many Indigenous scholars have agreed that there is no one homogenous term to summarize what Indigenous knowledge is. To categorize Indigenous knowledge is to fall into the trap of Western education in which all knowledge is to be standardized. Indigenous scholars argue that Indigenous people are different from group to group, clan to clan, tribe to tribe and to summarize what is Indigenous knowledge in a Western contextualized term is not only offensive but dangerous. After careful evaluation and consensus, Indigenous scholars state that there are areas that could be used to talk about the broad field of Indigenous oral knowledge. This will later be discussed more in depth in the literature review as well.

### **Implications**

I hope that this study encourages (H)mong researchers, especially (H)mong youth, to take an interest in the preservation of their language and culture. Educators of (H)mong and Indigenous students could utilize the results of this study to have a better understanding of traditional orally transmitted knowledge and the significance that it has to the survival of Indigenous peoples.

### **Definition of Terms**

Throughout this paper, the following terminology will be used:

(H)mong: The (H)mong living in the United States have been classified into two linguistically defined groups. Phonetically, in the “Green” Mong Leng (Moob Leeg) dialect, “(H)mong” sounds like and is spelled “Mong”. In the “White” (Hmoob Dawb) dialect, “(H)mong” sounds like and is spelled “Hmong”. Both are pronounced closely to “Mong” even though the spelling is different. Different (H)mong scholars have used “Hmong” or “Mong,” depending on the dialect that they speak. Although the most common spelling used for “(H)mong” is “Hmong”, I have decided to combine the two dialects and use (H)mong in order to be impartial and inclusive of both groups.

Indigenous People: “Indigenous people” is a socially constructed term and many different people/groups/agencies have come up with different terms to describe what or who Indigenous people are. The sources that are gathered and summarized in this paper have broadly defined Indigenous people as the original inhabitants of an area that still culturally practice the traditional ways of their ancestors and have a respected spiritual relationship with their environment. This term is used throughout the paper because, although (H)mong no longer live on the land of their ancestors (due to many conflicts throughout their history), they still maintain close ties to the land of their ancestors

through traditional sacred songs that have been part of their culture for thousands of years. Western academic institutions have defined (H)mong people as an ethnic minority tribe. Due to the negative connotations of “ethnic minority tribe”, which is used by anthropologists and social scientists to identify (H)mong people, I have chosen to use the word “Indigenous” instead. This is done for many reasons, but the most important is to acknowledge the relationship between all tribal or Indigenous people and to also acknowledge the many differences, similarities and struggles of Indigenous peoples throughout the world.

Orally transmitted knowledge/Indigenous knowledge: Throughout this paper, these two terms will be used interchangeably. The reason is that orally transmitted knowledge in the context of this study is the basis of Indigenous knowledge. Many Indigenous groups pass down their knowledge orally from one generation to the next. This knowledge is broadly defined to include information that is passed down orally for maintaining and fostering the traditions, survival, histories and cultures of a group.

Oral Culture: Cultures who may not have written historical records or a written language and who instead use oral communication as their main method of transmitting cultural and religious traditions from one generation to the next.

Print Culture: Societies that have written historical records and a written language, and who use writing as their main form of knowledge transmission. In this paper, “print culture” also refers to Western cultures within the writing of the West (Western European liberal traditions in particular).

Western Liberalism: The idea that all European knowledge/culture is the only correct lens to look at the world; the idea that Western knowledge is free from bias because it is based on rational scientific thought and knowledge.

Western Empirical Knowledge: The pervasive normative notion of what knowledge is in the analytical scientific method of Western liberalism.

### **Chapter Summary**

In a world that is globalizing rapidly, the need to standardize knowledge will have negative consequences for many Indigenous peoples that come from oral cultures. Because of biases in which knowledge is measured, the research was conducted to address the misunderstanding the dominant culture has of oral cultures by looking at the rich oral culture and tradition of the (H)mong.

This study looks at what knowledge is in the (H)mong oral tradition and challenges the idea that valid knowledge must be in print. This research investigates what oral knowledge is and where its place is within Western academic institutions. This study will help educators of (H)mong students to have a better understanding of their background and gain a different perspective of (H)mong oral culture.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many individuals, groups, and/or agencies have come up with different definitions for what it means to be an Indigenous group. The sources gathered and summarized in this paper broadly define Indigenous people as the original inhabitants of an area who still practice the traditional ways of their ancestors and have a respected, spiritual relationship with the Earth (Hammersmith, 2007; Hendersen & Battiste, 2000; Smith, 1999; Brayboy, 2000). The literature review is broken down into three main sections. First, it gives a generalized account of the issues of Indigenous groups today. Then, it examines what it means to be Indigenous by looking at Indigenous peoples' worldviews and knowledge systems. After this, we will focus specifically on the (H)mong. To gain a better understanding of the traditional oral knowledge of (H)mong Americans, a review of (H)mong history is essential. This literature review looks at written sources from Western scholars interpreting the writing of Chinese scholars and at recorded (H)mong oral testimonies. It will wrap with an examination on the impact of literacy on (H)mong oral culture and how the absence of written literacy in (H)mong historical memory has and still defines the modern (H)mong identity.

#### **Trends in the Recent History of Indigenous Peoples**

In a world that is constantly changing through globalization, we are rapidly losing diversity in language and culture. Globalization, often lauded as a key source for

increasing diversity awareness, has had a most negative effect on the diversity of Indigenous peoples, who make up over 500 million of the world's population (Driver, 2009; Henderson & Battiste, 2000). They are often overlooked, silenced, and/or ignored by those around them, their rich cultures targeted for extermination, termination, relocation and dispossession, their lands exploited by dominant cultures and states (Gedicks, 2001; Young, 1995). The dominant societies that surround them take the view that their unique cultures are not worthy of being "saved" because they are primitive, uncivilized and barbaric (Maluleka, Wilkinson & Gumbo, 2005). These very views have historically been used to justify pushing "civilization" and "progress" on Indigenous peoples.

Globalization encourages monolingualism. It has resulted in about 90 percent of the world's population speaking only 100 most commonly spoken languages (McCarty, 2003). According to UNESCO (2009), last century alone, 600 languages have disappeared; scarier yet, 90% of the world's languages will likely disappear by the end of this century. That is a rate of one language every two weeks—a virtual "cultural holocaust," as Linden (1991) puts it. Indigenous peoples are by far the most impacted. Indigenous people comprise only four percent of the world's population, yet they speak 4,000-5,000 of the world's 6,000 languages (McCarty, 2005). We could try to save these endangered languages and cultures with modern technology. However, the essential of the living language and culture cannot be captured, for they are interwoven into the people's way of life Linden (1991).

It is through language that Indigenous people come to know, represent, name and act upon the world. Language is what interweaves their oral traditions, culture, and

Indigenous knowledge. Their loss, according to McCarty (2003), is a human rights issue and shows the inequities in the power structure between the dominant societies and them. To illustrate, the policies of colonization, genocide and forced relocation adopted by the United States government against Native peoples has resulted in the survival of only 173 Native languages out of 500 plus languages; of the 173 only 20 are being actively supported and used today (McCarty, 2003, 147).

Indigenous peoples feel intense pressure to give up their cultures, languages and Indigenous ways of knowing to conform to the dominant culture's economic, social and political standards. The youth, more impressionable and accessible, have been most vulnerable to assimilation. Their demographic loss is detrimental to their respective cultures. For example, Linden (1991) writes that after being educated in missionary schools, the Indigenous youth of Papua New Guinea began to view their traditional culture and oral knowledge as backwards and barbaric. They no longer valued the spirits of the jungle that their Elders respected and became ashamed of who they were. In the late 1980's, the government of Papua New Guinea razed a large part of the rainforest where these youths lived, destroying Spirit houses integral to their culture. None of them spoke up against this destruction of their ancestral lands and religious sites. The extinction of Indigenous knowledge, culture and languages will affect us all, for our diverse perspectives on the world would be narrowed to only a handful of languages and cultures, satellites of a few perspectives.

The dying of Indigenous peoples' languages, cultures and knowledge is a loss of irreplaceable knowledge to modern civilization. Indigenous people have developed countless technologies, such as farming the desert without irrigation, navigating the vast

oceans, contributing to our knowledge of medicinal plants (75% of the world's plant-based pharmaceuticals come from traditional medicinal plants found on Indigenous people's lands), and giving us corn, potatoes, peas, sugar and tomatoes (Linden, 1991; UNO, 2009). Linden urges us to think about these forms of lost knowledge as we in the developed world stand by and do very little or nothing at all. If we continue not to acknowledge the importance of these diverse knowledge systems, we will continue to do nothing to preserve them.

### **Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

As Indigenous ways of knowing are embedded and expressed through their languages, the survival of their language is essential to any discussion of Indigenous epistemologies. There is no one definition of what "Indigenous knowledge" means. Indigenous scholars have argued that asking for one is Eurocentric. The question relies on using a Eurocentric framework into which Indigenous knowledge does not fit. A few Indigenous scholars who have been trained in Western academia have come up with what they think would have the closest representation of what it is: the expression of the vibrant relationship between a people, its ecosystems and other living beings and spirits that share the land (Smith, 1999; Hammersmith, 2007; Henderson & Battiste, 2000). However, what it means to have knowledge differs, not only from a Western standpoint as opposed to an Indigenous one, but within Indigenous groups themselves. Indigenous keepers of Indigenous knowledge systems often cannot categorize into a Eurocentric way of knowing, because categorization and standardization is not part of Indigenous thought (Henderson & Battiste, 2000). Instead, each knowledge system is rooted in the lived experiences of its people, gathered and preserved over time, passed on from generation to

generation. It is integral to the spiritual health, culture, language, survival, relationships and the collective experience of the people.

What is difficult for many scholars who do not come from an oral knowledge background is that the knowledge system is a part of the keeper, unidentifiable except in a personal context. This type of knowledge cannot be learned in a few days or even over a few hours of conversation with an elder. It cannot be written down as a standard and taken for truth from person to person, culture to culture. It has to come with experience and a long-term relationship with the environment (L. Cardinal, personal communication, June 17, 2008). Indigenous knowledge is “systemic and has an internal consistency” (Brayboy, 2009, p. 128). To engage in conversations on connections between Indigenous knowledge and reproduction we have to move beyond simple taxonomic distinctions of Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies to a more nuanced and holistic consideration of it as an entire system.

As Brady (1997) reminds us, in many Indigenous communities the right to transfer knowledge is based on circumstances like gender, age, status, kinship, ancestry and other social/cultural rules, which have very little recognition, if any, in Western institutions of education. Indigenous scholars like Hammersmith (2007) and Smith (1999) argue that Indigenous peoples do use empirical codes of detection, exploration and investigation of knowledge similar to that which Western science uses when setting up a study. Although they may not reason in linear fashion, Indigenous peoples conduct similar work in observation and investigation. Indigenous knowledge is complete with its own epistemology, philosophy, scientific and logical validity that are complex and built on thousands of years of carefully observed natural phenomena and orally

transmitted knowledge handed down from generation to generation and continuously reviewed and revised as necessary through a process of trial and error (Pember, 2008; Hammersmith, 2007; Smith, 1999; Henderson & Battiste, 2000).

Indigenous peoples have circular worldviews, which means everything and everyone in the world has a relationship to everything and everyone else (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009). To an Indigenous person, there is no separation between the body and the mind, the physical and metaphysical, between human and other living forms. These connections and relationships are central to how Indigenous people come to view their own place within the larger cosmos of all living things.

The acknowledgement of an intimate connection with one's surroundings is what shapes Indigenous understandings and relationships with the rest of the world. Recognizing these relationships and connections are critical to Indigenous knowledge reproduction. Brayboy and Maughan (2009) believe that this is the ultimate premise of many Indigenous knowledge systems. As Smith (1999) would add:

The arguments of different Indigenous peoples based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape and to the stones, rocks, insects and other things, seen and unseen, have been difficult arguments for Western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept. These arguments give a partial indication of the different worldviews and alternative ways of coming to know, and of being, which still endure within the Indigenous world (p. 74).

When everything and everyone is connected, responsibility towards the community is clear for an Indigenous person. This evolves into a logical outgrowth of Indigenous philosophical understanding of their world and how the larger cosmos play a vital role in the world. It also is an Indigenous person's connection to the past, present and objects animate and inanimate.

Indigenous peoples' quest for the respect of their knowledge systems is difficult because it asks for acknowledgment and recognition of their rights to their respective identities and the preservation of their heritages and languages. The absence of a writing system in many of their cultures has historically been regarded as a lack by their more dominant neighbors who do rely heavily on literacy and has been used as justification for the ongoing norm of academic condescension when it comes to analyzing the oral knowledge that Indigenous groups possess (Littlebear, 2000).

### **Western Liberalism**

Western liberalism is the conviction that the European mindset, philosophy and values are the only lens through which to look at the world because they are rationally based, free from bias and scientifically sound. Without question, it is viewed as superior to all other ways of looking at the world. Because it views itself as up on a pedestal, when it is challenged by Indigenous peoples, the argument ends with the speculation that Indigenous knowledge is easily influenced by dogma and superstitions because Indigenous people are from societies that are "primitive" (Smith, 1999).

Smith (1999) agrees that there is a widely held belief that Western science and education are the "all embracing" methods for understanding the world (p. 65). Western science is denoted as the unquestionable voice of the truth and progress and Indigenous oral knowledge "unempirical" despite much evidence to the contrary. For example, Inuit whalers' traditional knowledge of detecting the number of whales by listening to the sound of their breathing was dismissed because it was not "scientific." The International Whaling Commission discounted their estimated number because it did not match the

International Whaling Commission's numbers. However, aerial surveys later confirmed that the Inuit's numbers were more accurate (Cochran et al., 2008).

The tsunami in 2004 that killed hundreds of thousands across Southeast Asia is another example. It was estimated to have released the energy of 23,000 Hiroshima-type atomic bombs, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. In its aftermath, relief workers were sure there would be no survivors from Indigenous communities in this part of the world. To their puzzlement and the amazement of the global world—one of the headlines of MSNBC was “Stone Age Culture Survives Tsunami Waves” (Mirsa, 2005)—the Indigenous peoples suffered very few casualties compared to their “modern” counterparts. Their knowledge of their environment and the sea saved them.

The liberal ideology around progress and civilization as hierarchical solely based in Western European norms serve to justify the denigration of Indigenous knowledge as lower in the liberal hierarchy of “valid” knowledge (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005). Where Indigenous knowledge is acknowledged in Western academia, it often has to comply with strict Western codes into which it often does not fit. This patronizing presumption of itself as more objective and more rigorous than other systems of thought robs Indigenous knowledge of the right to exist on its own grounds (Henderson & Battiste, 2000). When Indigenous knowledge is forced to “fit” into a Western context, it loses its original content. In his study of Western academic research practices, Walker (2003) states that Western paradigms marginalize many Indigenous paradigms because they ignore the established premise that Western science is culturally biased. To assume that phenomena from another worldview can be adequately explained from a totally foreign worldview is the essence of psychological and philosophical imperialism.

Henderson and Battiste (2000) agree that this becomes dangerous, for it assumes Eurocentric thought, based on progress and development, as normal and universal. European colonization so “progress” could be achieved has led to the destruction of the Earth’s delicate balance of resources (Young, 1995). Non-Europeans are guilty of this as well. However, Young (1995) states that the destruction of the Earth’s resources has never been at the scale of Europeans.

Smith (1999) argues that there is a globalization of knowledge systems in which the Western one forms the center of legitimate knowledge. This postulates the superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans and assumes that this superiority is based on inherent characteristics of virtue, rationality, independence and innovation of the European mind (Smith, 67). Thus, non-Europeans necessarily lack these same characteristics. These biases have institutionalized into scholarship, opinion, minds and laws of the West since the time of the Enlightenment (Henderson & Battiste, 2000). They cloud our understanding and our empathy when it comes to discussing issues such as knowledge loss through culture and language loss.

Western liberalism postulates that in order for something to be true and valid it has to be written down. Western liberalism believes that documentation in ink is essential for it to be “valid” knowledge and therefore it is empirically sound. Such a view illegitimizes Indigenous knowledge.

### **(H)mong History**

It is appropriate to start a review of the literature of the history of oral cultures such as the (H)mong culture with a disclaimer. Agawu (1992) cautions African scholars of African music to be vigilant when citing research done by European scholars because

European interests and viewpoints in African music are inherently biased, done in European languages and epistemologies for a European audience (p. 256). As this point pertains to (H)mong history and culture, the caution is in being critical about conclusions based on colonialism and racialized hierarchies of cultures, which often are presented as neutral and objective (DePouw, 2006; Smith, 1999; Henderson & Battiste, 2000).

(H)mong people have never written their history down. All written records have come from colonizers and cultures with writing systems that surrounded them. The written historical record of the (H)mong, therefore, is deficient and biased to start out. Indigenous scholars such as Battiste (2000) and La Duke (1998) argue that Indigenous history from the colonizer's perspective is not the history of Indigenous people. Written history of the (H)mong not written by (H)mong people may misrepresent them and establish misunderstandings about (H)mong history and culture.

The (H)mong living in the United States have been classified into two linguistically defined groups: the Green and White Hmong. In the Green (Moob Leeg) dialect, (H)mong is spelled "Mong." In the White (Hmoob Dawb) dialect, it is spelled "Hmong." The perfectly natural explanation for this is that in Green (H)mong, the 'h' sound is not present when one says '(H)mong,' whereas in White (H)mong it is. Different (H)mong scholars have used "Hmong" or "Mong" depending on the dialect that they speak.

There are many theories on the origin of the (H)mong, but the oral history says that they come from a land where there was snow and the nights were cold and long. Most anthropologists believe that it is Siberia, Mongolia, or the Tibetan Plateau, given the land description and the practice of shamanism (Quincy, 1995). The oral history of

the (H)mong in the United States traces them to China. Due to Chinese persecution, however, they were slowly driven off their land and pushed into the mountains (Thao, 2005). This part of their history is represented by (H)mong people who still reside in the mountains of China. The common ancestry of the (H)mong who live in China and those scattered elsewhere in the world can be traced by the shared cultural practices and their central usage of oral knowledge through different traditional ceremonies still practiced today (Tapp, 2008).

Oral history of the Hmong also coincides with that of written Chinese records. The (H)mong Elders interviewed by Thao (2006) confirm Chinese historical records of (H)mong relations with the Chinese. One of the Elders stated that the reason why her grandparents left China was because the Chinese were persecuting them and the only way to escape was to leave. She remembers her grandparents talking about the harsh trip through the cold mountains that took many lives (Thao, 2005).

The (H)mong from the United States first migrated into Laos in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, some from Northern Vietnam and others from China. In 1970, the total population of (H)mong people in Laos was around 293,000 (Cheng, 1994). They led relatively secluded lives in the steep and remote mountains away from the lowland Lao who found the mountaintops too cold and the terrain too harsh to farm (Quincy, 1995; Lee, 2009). The majority of the ancestors of the (H)mong living in the United States settled in Xieng Khuang Province, the province most heavily influenced by the Secret War.

When the (H)mong reached Laos, the French had just begun their colonial rule of the country. They imposed a system of heavy taxation and many discriminatory policies against the (H)mong. This led to conflicts between the two until the French figured out

that they could appoint (H)mong leaders to negotiate and be middlemen (Lee, 2009). According to Chan (1994) the French had very little interest in developing Laos economically or culturally after they discovered that they could not use the Mekong as a trade route into China. However, they could still expand their empire through the opium trade. They began to actively promote opium growing among the (H)mong as a way to help them pay for their taxes. Though the opium trade has traditionally been blamed on the different ethnic minorities in the golden triangle, the ones profiting from the opium trade were Chinese and Lao merchants and the French.

When the Viet Cong, the pro-independence faction in Vietnam, forced the French out of Indochina in 1954 and declared Vietnamese independence, the United States decided to step in on the deteriorating political scene. It got involved for various reasons. One was the so-called “Red Scare,” the fear that if Communism spread throughout Indochina then the U.S. economy would fall as a result of socialism (Lee, 2005). The United States believed that if Laos, a weaker, smaller country sandwiched between Vietnam and the rest of Indochina, could fall under Communism, then so could all of Asia.

The Geneva Accords of 1962 signed by both the United States and North Vietnam pronounced Laos a neutral country (Thao, 1999), which meant that the people of Laos would determine their own sovereignty. Both countries broke the Accord, however, by invading Laos. According to Leary (1995), the United States already had military personnel in Laos training recruiting and illegally training (H)mong soldiers to fight even before the signing of the Geneva Accords. By 1954, the United States was supplying 70% of the cost of the war in Vietnam (Duffy, year, p. 30).

If the imperialistic Western forces in Southeast Asia learned nothing else about the people they were trying to master there, they at least had learned how important group allegiances were. The CIA exploited this knowledge in recruiting the (H)mong. It turned to Vang Pao, a young (H)mong man who first caught the attention of the French and later the CIA for his many successful raids against North Vietnamese forces. With Vang Pao actively recruiting on its behalf, the plan to establish an indigenous military force consisting primarily of (H)mong villagers that could carry out covert operations against communist forces was more easily accomplished (p. 31). In return for their service, (H)mong soldiers were provided a monthly salary and food (McCoy, 2003). (H)mong soldiers had three main objectives:

1. Stop the Viet Cong from transporting weapons from North Vietnam to South Vietnam.
2. Rescue American pilots shot down.
3. Secure the American base in Xieng Khuang (Thao, 1999; Lee, 2005; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

The U.S. operations in Laos were so secretive that this information was not declassified until the early 1990's (Baldillo, Mendy, Eng, 2005), but to the (H)mong the U.S. war was no secret. According to Anne Fadiman (1997), between 1968 and 1972, more than two million bombs were dropped on Laos, more than the bombs dropped in Europe and the Pacific during World War II combined (P. 65). The death rate among the (H)mong was so high that toward the end of the war boys between the ages of 10 to 14 were recruited to fight. (H)mong soldiers died at a rate ten times that of American soldiers and suffered worse losses per capita than the South Vietnamese, but for the U.S.,

(H)mong lives were cheap: a (H)mong soldier was only being paid roughly \$2.00 a month compared with his American counterpart who received between \$200.00 and \$335.00; (Fadiman, 1997; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

In 1975 when the U.S. withdrew from the war, it left thousands of (H)mong behind to be slaughtered by the Viet Cong. The (H)mong had to flee, leaving their homes, gardens, and beloved mountains behind for the safety of the jungles and the refugee camps in Thailand eventually (Lo, Scarseth, Mattison, 1994). Many, the majority of whom were women, children and the elderly, died along the journey from starvation, diseases, and unexploded ordinances (UXOs). The war and the arduous journey to the refugee camps through the jungles and across the Mekong River decimated one third of the (H)mong population of Laos (Lo, 2001; Fadiman, 1997).

The (H)mong who made it to Thailand soon found out that aside from the silence of bombs and guns, life was not much different. Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was at the camps to monitor the status of the refugees, it was the Thai who were in charge of distributing food and monitoring the security of the camp. There were numerous cases of mistreatment, rape, theft and killings by the Thai. Yang (2008) stated that the Thai did not want the (H)mong refugees in their country and so mistreated them cruelly.

Many (H)mong families decided that it was better to leave for an unknown world than stay behind. Some resettled in western countries, like the U.S., Canada and France. Some stayed in the camps for over a decade in the hopes of returning to Laos (Lo, 2001). The UN camps closed in 1996. Although some were repatriated to Laos, some who did not want to migrate into Western countries went to live in a *wat* with a Buddhist nun and

monk. The U.S. reopened its doors in 2003 and accepted another 10,000 of these refugees (Lee, 2009).

As with any new group of people coming to the U.S., the (H)mong were no exception to discrimination, hate, and prejudice. What makes their experience different from those of previous Asian American groups is the fact that many (H)mong refugees entered the U.S. with little or no literacy. Adapting to the new culture, one highly dependent on it, was a struggle for many (Thao, 1999). As Thao (1999) points out, of all the recent immigrants to the U.S., the (H)mong were the least technologically sophisticated and least formally educated. As a result, they have faced notoriously difficult adjustment problems in almost every aspect of their lives in the U.S.

Despite barriers, the (H)mong have made some positive adjustments to life in America, such as sending their children to college, participating in public office and enjoying increasingly successful engagement in business and commerce. However, these positive adjustments have come at a great cost to the practice and maintenance of traditional (H)mong oral culture. Due to the heavy push for assimilation in education and written literacy, (H)mong oral culture is threatened in the United States (Thao, 2006).

### **(H)mong Knowledge System and Worldview**

Like many Indigenous peoples around the world, the (H)mong regard knowledge as coming from their environment. It is gained from a way of living and being in the world. The (H)mong depend on hunting, farming and gathering as a means of survival (Thao, 1996). This intimate link with the environment crosses over into a spiritual relationship which begins the moment a (H)mong person is born and continues beyond death. For example, during a traditional (H)mong funeral, the spirits of the land, water

and trees are always acknowledged as a part of each elaborate ceremony (Her, 2005). This also happens during a birth and after death, when descendants of a deceased call upon his/her spirit during certain ceremonies.

(H)mong spiritual beliefs are inseparable from daily life and experience. Everything in the (H)mong world has an aspect of sacredness to it. Certainly, like most Indigenous peoples, the (H)mong believe that all natural beings and phenomena, as well as many manmade objects, have souls or spirits. The (H)mong believe that the souls of animals are not as removed as they are from Western beliefs.

For example, Fadiman (1997) writes that animals are used as offerings in many (H)mong ceremonies because of the recognition of the closeness in this relationship. An animal is used as an offering to appease the spirits, to ask for the exchange of a human soul and as a way of communicating and establishing good relationships with spirits. And it is through language that communication can be established between the various dimensions of existence. Therefore, words in many ways are sacred for it is your only means of connecting through the many realms of existence.

(H)mong knowledge systems are integral to the way (H)mong people have chosen to live their lives. Everything the next generation needed to know would be passed down orally and by example, such as how to worship the ancestors, how to grow crops according to the seasons, how to track or hunt animals, how to build a house and many things that would be vital to the survival of family. Fadiman (1997) writes that language is the essence of the (H)mong life. For example, The (H)mong have 20 words relating to opium. Such as the seeds from which the poppies grow, to the name of the ground in which it grows best as well as to the many different stages of harvesting. Opium was

central to their way of life, used for many illnesses as well as traditional spiritual practices.

### **Literacy and the (H)mong**

According to Duffy (2007), literacy was not an obtainable tool for (H)mong people because of more powerful nations that controlled them or fought with them throughout their history. He suggests that the reason the (H)mong people in China never learned to read and write the Chinese language was because it was seen as assimilationist. It was not until 1939 that the French, at the insistence of (H)mong leaders, built the first (H)mong school in Nong Het. Those who attended formal schooling learned to read and write in French and Lao.

The (H)mong did not have a writing system of their own until the 1950's when William Smalley, Yves Bertrais and Linwood Barney created the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) (Leepreecha, 2001). The main reason for its development was to help missionaries Christianize and assimilate them. Most of them rejected this attempt, and it was not until the 1980's that the RPA became popular, because it became essential as a means of transmitting messages and establishing contact through the (H)mong Diaspora (Duffy, 2000; Smalley, 1990). Today this system is still used widely by the (H)mong in the United States, Vietnam, Thailand and Laos. However, the majority of the (H)mong Elders still rely exclusively on their oral culture and tradition. Traditionally raised (H)mong children are still taught through the oral traditions, learning to read and write (H)mong only later in life.

Because the (H)mong are just beginning to write their own history, the imposed narratives of others have defined largely what their identity is for non-(H)mong and

increasingly assimilated (H)mong youth. (H)mong American writers have urged (H)mong people to start writing and telling their own stories from their perspective, thereby creating their own image of themselves. When they do not do this, others write their stories for them, and they are in danger of accepting the images others have painted of them (Moua, 2000). For example, in written sources from China, the (H)mong are called “Miao.” This becomes dangerous when looking at the historical context of who are the (H)mong, for “Miao” is a Chinese colonialist term used to identify all who are non-Chinese. Western scholars have made the mistake of viewing the two words interchangeably in looking to fill in missing gaps in (H)mong history. Therefore, many have mistakenly interpreted other ethnic minorities’ histories as (H)mong history and vice versa.

### **Chapter Summary**

The literature review gave a broad definition of Indigenous knowledge as the expression of the vibrant relationship between a people, its ecosystem and other living things and spirits that share the land. It introduced the (H)mong specifically as an Indigenous people from northern Laos. They trace their oral history to China. Due to war and persecution, many of them fled Laos and the 1960’s and 70’s and have resettled in the United States. Presently, their culture and oral knowledge is threatened by the more dominant American one. They face the challenge of carving their history and their present to represent their identity without the hegemonizing influence of Western thought and philosophies.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In Brayboy's (2000) article on conducting research in Native American communities, he shares his struggles between being a researcher and a "good" Indian. I sympathize with him because I, too, struggled with what is the most appropriate way to conduct research with the Elders. For example, I struggle with the thought of recording, because recording it would contrast the entire point of my paper. I ask myself, if I did write it, am I attempting to validate it in Western eyes through Western means? In other words, will I corrupt the purity of the oral form because oral tradition and knowledge is the heart and soul of the (H)mong culture. Am I doing this because I want to bring attention to or recognition of it in Western academia? Therefore, I have chosen to carry out this study using phenomenology. The results of the study were analyzed using critical race theory and TribalCrit.

#### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenological research is a discipline in philosophy that originated in Europe with philosophers like Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer. Narrative communication is the cornerstone of phenomenological research. For this reason, it is most compatible with studying Indigenous peoples whose cultures revolve around oral traditions. More importantly, it is adaptable and acceptable to Indigenous people and their communities (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005).

A phenomenological research method is appropriate for Indigenous people because the Indigenous worldview is holistic. Western formal academic research practices are carried out in linear fashion (i.e. statement, evidence, conclusion) and have no room for concepts such as circularity, oneness, and holism, all of which are integral to the indigenous worldview (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005; Henderson & Battiste, 2000). As a result, unspoken, significant, and implicit meanings of the experiences of Indigenous people generally pass unrecognized (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005).

The goal of phenomenology is to look for themes that depict the phenomenon of the everyday lived experience. The accounts of the lived experience are more accurately depicted through this research process because phenomenology asks that the researcher be intimately involved in his/her research process. For example, I spent as much time as I could with the Elders in the comforts of their living arrangements. As stated by Struthers and Peden-McAlpine (2005), in the research process, the lived experience brings a “metaphysical presence and holistic, intuitive, spiritual and natural way of knowing response to the research context” (p. 1266). It is important in oral cultures that this research process is used because it is able to capture the “lived” phenomenon of very day life of the Elders.

I have chosen to use phenomenology because it gave me the tools to conduct the interviews in a way that was comfortable for Elders. It allowed me the flexibility to actively participate and carried out the research in a way that I thought was culturally appropriate. This was important to me because of my previous experiences with research projects in which culture “appropriateness” was not taken in to consideration. Often there was one goal and that goal is often the researcher’s goal with little consideration for

the participants who were just “subjects” to be studied. With phenomenology, there was enough flexibility to allow me to conduct the research that the Elders thought was acceptable and appropriate for them as well.

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Critical race theory (CRT) is a movement that came out of the critical legal studies in the 1970’s and early 1980’s in response to the slow progress of the Civil Rights Movement (Ladson-Billings, 1994). CRT is interdisciplinary and places race at the center of its analysis. There are six tenets of CRT as defined by Dixson and Rousseau (2005):

1. CRT challenges historicism by insisting on a contextual/historical analysis of the law and adopts a stance that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of a group advantage and disadvantage;
2. It is interdisciplinary;
3. It works towards the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression;
4. It recognizes that racism is endemic in American society (p. 9).
5. It insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and their communities of origin in analyzing law and society;
6. It expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy;

According to Ladson-Billings (1994), racism is so heavily embedded in society that it has become invisible. This negatively affects the educational experience of many children of color. For example, because (H)mong children come from homes with little

exposure to literacy and a heavy emphasis on oral tradition, it is assumed by educators that literacy is not valued by (H)mong parents and this lack of “values” is the basis of all literacy problems that (H)mong children encounter. Their oral culture becomes a scapegoat in their slow progress in reading and writing. CRT confronts and challenges what is regarded as the norm by pushing for a commitment to social justice.

Dixson and Rousseau (2005) state that in order for us to address the problems of inequities in education we have to actively participate and work towards racial justice. This is what sets CRT from other frameworks. Most importantly, the researcher goes beyond researching to take an active part in his/her recommendations for change.

A tenet of CRT central to the focus of this paper is the recognition of the experience of people of color. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) in their analysis of the research of CRT state that giving a voice to people of color is important because it counteracts the stories of the dominant group. This perspective is needed because throughout history, the voices of people of color have often been silenced. Where their voices have been represented it has often not been from their perspectives.

### **Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit)**

Tribal Critical Race theory (TribalCrit) is a shoot-off of Critical Race Theory. At first glance, it may appear to make more sense to use Asian Pacific American or APACrit (another shoot-off of CRT) in talking about (H)mong people. However, APACrit looks at issues of language, immigration, and naturalization as they relate to dominant Asian groups, such as the Japanese and Chinese, who have resettled in the United States. The (H)mong experience differs greatly from these latter. First, the (H)mong recognize themselves as a tribal people with no country, no standardized government, and no one

leader (Hamilton-Merritt, 1995). Also, their historical experiences of colonization, oppression, and forced removal more closely parallel those of Indigenous peoples. Finally, like their Indigenous counterparts, they are currently struggling for recognition of the legitimacy of their oral culture and knowledge. TribalCrit will allow more room for a deeper and richer analysis of the (H)mong experience.

The tenets of TribalCrit as written and explained by Brayboy (2008) are:

1. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change;
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and the desire for material gain;
3. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification;
4. The concept of knowledge takes on new meaning when examined through Indigenous lens;
5. Government polices and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation;
6. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to the understanding and lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups;
7. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being (p. 429);

The objective of TribalCrit is to have a method of conducting research that analyzes the data in ways that are centered around Indigenous ways of knowing.

TribalCrit has a better theoretical lens when talking about the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples because it uses tradition, histories, ideas and philosophies that pertain to Indigenous peoples. I will use TribalCrit to explore the results that were given in this study.

### **Procedure**

I arrived at Elder Mao's new house on a cold winter's morning. I had been to her house a couple of times with my parents, but this was my first time visiting her by myself. My parents used to let me go with them when they sought her assistance in ceremonies. Like many (H)mong Elders, she lives with her son. Her son answered the door at my knock. We greeted briefly, then he pointed me in the direction of his mother. I made my way into the living room where she was sitting on a stool watching television without any volume. Instead, I could hear her tape recorder playing *kwv txaij* (traditional poetic (H)mong songs) in the background. As I walked into the room, she got off of her stool and invited me to sit on the sofa. I told her that I preferred the stool on the ground as well, all the while thinking of how bad my back would hurt sitting there for a few hours. I refused the comfort of the sofa because I knew she was much more comfortable on the stool. If I had chosen to sit on the sofa, then as I was her guest, she would have had to sit on the sofa to make me feel comfortable.

We started small talk. Elder Mao asked me about my studies and commented that she thought it was important that all (H)mong children have the opportunity to go to school. We talked for three hours about her life, her grandson and her struggles adapting to American culture. We talked about politics and she commented on the little English that she had learned in her 20 years in America.

My time spent with the Elders was similar to this first time I spent with Elder Mao. I would ask a few questions and just let them talk. Conversing with a traditional (H)mong person is different from conversing with Americans, young or old, and Americanized (H)mong people. They never answer any question directly. Instead, they tell stories and branch into subjects that are rarely directly related to the question asked. Additionally, they never just sit and talk. The Elders were always doing something else in addition to speaking with me: sewing, carving, cleaning, fixing tools. Four of the five were the main caretakers of their grandchildren, so we would converse while I helped them look after the grandchildren. It is through these brief experiences that I have come to understand their educational experience and to know a little more about what they mean by (H)mong oral knowledge.

The whole research process took close to three years to finish, but all the formal, taped interviews were done within a year. I started interviews in March 2007 and finished in December 2008. Phenomenology calls for the interview to be in-depth. Prior to the interviews, I took close to two years preparing for the study by asking the Elders questions, such as what is the most appropriate way to do the research in the (H)mong community? These conversations took place at different ceremonies or events. I often would ask, should I even be writing about the importance of oral cultures and traditions? If I was allowed to do this research, what would be appropriate questions and inappropriate questions to ask? The investigation that I did before the documented research was to take place was critical to the study and it had to be done in a way that was culturally appropriate. For example, I knew that time was not a concept that the Elders understood, so sometimes I would sit and listen to them all day even though I had events

that I had to get to. I knew that it was important to let them finish what they wanted to say and that sometimes it could not be said in a few hours. I knew that it would always take a long time for them to warm up and I had to be patient. After going around talking to different community members about my research, I went through the process of getting the IRB approved to conduct the study. The interviews took almost a year.

The data used in this paper come from the taped interviews and informal discussions. After each meeting, I would listen to the tapes and analyze them for important information that I thought pertained to this study.

### **Participants**

All five participants are (H)mong Elders from the La Crosse area. They were chosen because of their expertise in the (H)mong oral ceremonies and (H)mong orally transmitted knowledge (i.e. ceremonial songs, medicinal plants, healing ceremonies). They were not chosen randomly, but rather based on my own background knowledge of their expertise in (H)mong oral knowledge. I first met these Elders through my parents who often seek them out for assistance with certain cultural ceremonies. In recent years, I have also worked closely with them in conferences organized through the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and as an AmeriCorps volunteer for the Elders assistance program at the La Crosse Hmong Mutual Assistance Association. These previous relationships made it easier to build trust between us.

La Crosse, Wisconsin is a town of approximately 55,000 people located in western Wisconsin. The (H)mong community makes up about 10% of the La Crosse population. It is a small, closely-knit group within which there are only two dozen or so Elders who practice traditional forms of knowledge. The entire (H)mong community,

therefore, depends highly on them for support and guidance. The different skills that are exchanged seldom cost anything. As Thao (2006) stated, oral cultures are based in trade and do not sell or buy things. Here is an example to illustrate: Elder Seng Na is a clan leader and knows the oral ceremonies of his clan. He seeks help from Elder Mao when it comes to shaman ceremonies that he does not have the ability to perform.

The participants are all related in the (H)mong way, that is, they define their relationships through kinship ties. For example, Elder Seng Na and Elder Mao are not blood-related. However, through the marriage of a grandmother to a great uncle in Elder Mao's clan, both Elders claim relations to each other and define their relationship accordingly. Relationships define a (H)mong person's duties and obligations. In these intricate, reciprocated relationships, I am also related to all the Elders. As Thao (2005) stated in his study on (H)mong oral tradition, the Elders he studied were related to him, either through his mother's or father's side of the family. All the Elders whom I interviewed for this study are related to me through my parents or my larger extended family. I believe that it would have been difficult if I did not have the (H)mong kinship system to build these relationships.

The participants' ages ranged from 65 to 79. Three were female and two were male. All have had very limited or no access to education. "Limited access" means recognition of the ABC's and the ability to read and write their names and numbers. In order to protect the privacy of the Elders, all names given are aliases.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

Four major themes appeared in the interviews with the Elders. The first is the personal meaning of knowledge and how it is obtained. The second is the Elders' perception of a lack of acknowledgement of the richness of (H)mong oral culture and tradition by younger generations of (H)mong youth and broader society. The third is problems the Elders face living in a world fundamentally based in print. The last is the sacredness of (H)mong oral traditions.

#### **Obtaining Oral Knowledge**

Most of the Elders say they have never seen a (H)mong written language. However, they do recall their grandparents telling them that the (H)mong have one, but due to Chinese persecution, it was lost. As long as they have been alive, they have only learned by memorization, and this is how they retain their oral knowledge and skills.

When I asked the Elders about the process of their acquisition of knowledge, they often denied having any. On a cultural level, this is because traditional (H)mong people are very humble. To acknowledge that they have knowledge is to be boastful. Less explicitly, it may be because knowledge is very personal and often cannot be separated and talked about in its own entirety. It is part of one's direct experience and cannot be separated and spoken of without relating it to multiple, complicated layers. As Thao

(2006) stated in his study, members of the (H)mong culture are raised without knowing that they have been taught (p. 11). This was apparent throughout all the interviews.

Despite their deliberate choices to lead traditional lifestyles with few impositions from the dominant culture, the Elders have been influenced by it. They consider being knowledgeable as being able to read and write. Elder Yeng Cha, stated in a recorded interview, “I am a very dumb person, I’ve never been to school.” When I first asked Elder Mao what she thought was knowledge her response was that as she had never been to school she would not know what to tell me about knowledge. All the Elders have in-depth knowledge of the songs and ceremonies important to (H)mong culture, however, all five were hesitant to talk about them because they did not see this as knowledge.

This lack of acknowledge of themselves as possessors of knowledge rendered my research difficult. How does one get someone to talk about their education when they do not perceive that they have any? I did it by way of exploiting their love of storytelling. I learned to ask open-ended questions and to listen without interrupting. I had better feedback from the Elders this way. They told beautiful stories about their everyday lives. They talked extensively about their native hills, where their fields were, what they grew up, the New Year, their favorite dress attire, and their families. It was through these stories, these oral semi-autobiographies that I could draw how they obtained their respective oral knowledge and skills.

The traditional method of learning within a (H)mong community was observation and direct participation. As Elder Mao summarized in one interview:

In the hills we do not have schools like how you have them here. We didn’t have teachers. We learned from watching and from observing our older siblings and those that were older than us. Our teachers were our parents and our

grandparents. If we didn't understand we would ask and they would demonstrate to us how it was done. This is how I've always learned.

Saum roob peb tsis muaj kev kawm ntawv li koj muaj li ntawm no. Peb tsis muaj xibfwb qhia ntawv. Peb kawm mas yog saib thiab ntsia peb tej nus muag hlob thiab tej tug uas laus tshaj peb. Yog peb tsis to taub peb yuav noog ces lawv yuav qhia peb seb ua li cas thiaj tiav. Li no yog qhov kuv ib txwv tau kawm.

Learning the skills necessary to participate fully in a (H)mong community is intimately linked to the everyday experience. To learn the funeral song, one had to be present at the funerals to listen to the chants and participate in the rituals; to learn *kwv txhiaj*, one listened in on older siblings and cousins singing them while gardening to pass the long hours spent in monotonous labor.

As one of the Elders shared with me:

I was a just little boy when my mother died. I was the youngest son. I was the youngest so all my brothers and sisters were older. They already knew how to do house work and tend the garden. You see, we learned how to do house work and tend the garden at a very young age. I would follow my brother Nhia to the garden every day. I would cry when I wanted something and we didn't have it. I was very spoiled you see. All my siblings loved me very much, they never would say a single bad word to me. They had a lot of patience with me. My brother Nhia loved me so much. He would carry me on his back all the time. When I was upset and crying he would always come and talk to me and use food and fruits to persuade me and stop me from crying. One time, I was very upset and he couldn't get me to stop crying. So he told me that if I would stop crying, he would teach me a courting *kwv txhiaj* so that when I get older I could sing it to the girls. I stopped crying and I would ask him every day to teach me. He would teach me a little here and a little there and pretty soon I learned the whole *kwv txhiaj*. It was my first *kwv txhiaj* that I learned. So come to think of it, I don't know how old I was. But considering that I was still crying like most toddlers, I was probably about 4 or 5. I still know that *kwv txhiaj* to this day. It's a beautiful song to sing and hear.

Thaum kuv niam tuag, kuv tsawm me me. Kuv yog tus tub ntxawg. Kuv cov muam thiab tij laug lawv twb paub tab tas lawm. Lawv yeej paub ua hauj lwm lawm. Koj paus paub, peb cov menyuum tauv mas peb yeej paub ua hauj lwm thaum peb me me los lawm. Kuv tsis paub ua cas, kuv yeej nej hnub raws kuv tuv tij laug Nyiaj mus ua teb. Thaum ntawv mas kuv xav tau ab tsis, peb

tsawm tsis muaj los kuv quaj xwb cas kuv cov muam thiab tij laug lawv yeej yuav mus nrhiav cov thaum xwb. Yog tsis thaum cas kuv quaj xwb. Lawv mas yuav tsuv ua lis kuv siab xav xwb. Kuv cov muam thiab tij laug lawv mas hlub kuv kawg. Tsawm peb tsis muaj nyiab los lawv yeej yuav ua li lawv uas tau rau kuv. Tsawm ua lis cas los lawv yeej tsis cem kuv. Lawv sawv daws yeej ua siab tev rau kuv kawg. Kuv tus tib laug Nyiaj mas hlub kuv tshab. Kuv mas ncawg nws tshab. Peb mus ua teb los mus qhov twg mas yog kuv mus tsis tau mas nws yeej ev kuv xwb. Yog thaum kuv taus chim, tij laug Nyiaj yog tus los ntxias kuv thiaj zoo siab xwb. Ib zaug tsis paub ua cas lawv tsawm ua lis cas los yeej tsis zoo kuv siab li. Tij laug Nyiaj thiaj los ntxias kuv hais thias “yog kuv tsis quaj ces kuv mas qhia ib zaj kwv txhiaj tam hluas nkauj rau koj.” Txhuas txhuas hnuv mas kuv yeej tiaj nws koj nws qhia kuv xwb. Ib hnuv nws qhia ib qhib rau kuv. Zoo lis ib hlis xwb kuv kawm tau zaj kwv txhiaj lwm tiag. Yog thawj thawj zaj kwv txhiaj kuv taus kawm. Yog muaj los xav lov nos ntshe kuv tsawm muaj li 4 los 5 xyoo xwb. Tiam si mas yog muaj los hais no, yus tsawm quaj quaj thaug ces tej zaum yus muab li 3 los 4 xyoo xwb. Txog hnuv no kuv tsawm nco zaj kwv txhaij ntawv. Zaj kwv txhaij ntawv mas zoo mloog thais zoo hais hneev.

What a stark contrast indeed to the modern day experience that these Elders are witnessing their grandchildren live, in which the principal way to become a self-sufficient, fully functioning adult takes place in schools isolated from the home and the bigger community.

### **(H)mong in America: Cultural and Language Loss**

The second theme that popped up consistently in all my interviews with all five Elders is the concern that (H)mong language and culture are doomed to disappear here in America. A common and very real fear among them is that when it comes time for them to be with the ancestors, the younger generation will not know how to lead them there, not having taken the time to learn the proper funeral songs. Elder Va Xa stated in an interview that even simple ceremonies that he knew at 15 years of age his son at 45 years of age does not know. According to him, his children feel it is an unworthy pursuit to learn the traditional songs and ceremonies. They may even be embarrassed to learn them.

The Elders have good reason to feel that their children and grandchildren harbor some shame in the thought of possessing oral skills valuable to a traditional (H)mong person. The younger generations refer to the Elders' traditional songs as "noise." Where there is a lack of reverence for the breadth of knowledge that many traditional (H)mong persons possess there is necessarily a lack of willingness to accept it into one's daily life, much less to acquire it.

Elder Va Xa stated that in the old country, everyone came to him for guidance and support, but here this is happening less and less. It seems no one wants to seek his guidance or advice. Elder Yeng Cha echoes this sentiment. She used to prescribe herbal medicines that she learned from her grandmother and through her dreams to people who came seeking her aid. Her medicines have helped many people. However, only the older generations come to her for help now. The younger ones rarely ask her assistance. She has gone as far as giving medicines to her daughters-in-law. To her original shock and dismay, they refused the help for fear of the herbs being poisonous.

In (H)mong culture, a person with such an important skill would never freely give advice. The person seeking advice would have to go through all the proper channels before advice or herbs are given. The person coming to seek assistance would sometimes bring a gift for the spirits. In this case, Elder Yeng Cha giving advice on herbs and getting rejected for it, is not only insulting but embarrassing.

The Elders are also competing against American schools for the attention of their grandchildren. Elder Seng Na states that he has tried to get his grandchildren interested in his ceremonial songs, but they are too busy with school to learn. The majority of the ceremonies he knows can only be learned by direct observation and participation during

actual gatherings; learning them outside of the context of a live event will offend the spirits. Here is an excerpt on what he has to say:

If you want to learn you have to put your heart and your mind into it. My grandchildren are working to pay for their bills; they are going to school. Their minds and their hearts are somewhere else. You cannot learn when your heart and your mind is busy somewhere else. I was able to learn because my grandfather would take me to these important ceremonies and tell me to watch and learn. I went with my grandfather and kept him company, but not because he asked me to go. Unlike my grandchildren, I really enjoyed spending time with my grandfather. It was important spiritually to have someone with him and he picked me, so I went with him. I could not refuse my grandfather; I knew it would make him sad. My grandchildren, they just say grandfather, how about you take so and so with you. I feel sad because they do not see the honor of me asking them to go with me. They see it as a burden and not as a privilege.

Yog koj xav kawm koj yuav tsum rau siab thiab ua siab loj. Kuv cov xeeb ntxwv ua hauj lwm them nqi, lawv mus kawm ntawv. Lawv lub hlwb thiab lub siab lub ntsws koj mus tso lwm qhov lawm. Yus kawm tsis tau thaum yus li siab ntsws nyob lwm qhov. Kuv tau kawm tau vim kuv yawg pheej koj kuv mus pem tej noj haus li dab li qhua tseem ceeb mus saib thiab kawm. Tsis zoo li kuv cov xeeb ntxwv, kuv fwm thiab nyiam nrog kuv yawg ua ke tas li. Li no yog ib qho tseem ceeb uas muaj leej twg nrog nws ua ke ces nws thiaj xaiv laib kuv nrog nws mus. Kuv yuav yeej tsis laib kuv yawg; kuv paub tias li no yuav ua rau nws tu siab. Kuv cov xeeb ntxwv, lawv tsuas hais kom nws koj tus no thiab tus no nrog koj mus. Kuv tu siab heev vim lawv tsis pom kuv li sim xeeb uas kuv yuav noog lawv nrog kuv mus. Lawv saib tej no yog kev ntxhov siab ntxhov plawv xwb tsis yog muaj hmoo.

Elder Xai encouraged her three grandchildren to learn Hmong traditional oral knowledge by telling them folktales, or creation tales. However, after they started school, they became less interested in her ways of knowing. They preferred to read and watch American television shows. Now when she tries to teach them, it feels like she is speaking a foreign language to them. According to her, they react by stating that she does not understand the American way. Elder Xai says:

We, the older generation, we learn by watching and listening to our parents. The children now, this is not how they learn. They learn differently, so when we try to teach them they just think that we are talking and that there are no lessons in it. So they don't listen as well, because they think that it is not relevant

to their education. We learn just by listening and hearing to what our parents say and we do as what they have taught.

Peb cov laus zog, peb kawm tau thaum peb saib thiab mloog peb niam thiab txiv lus. Cov me nyuam tam sim no, lawv tsis kawm li no lawm. Lawm kawm txawv thaum peb kawm, ces thaum peb qhia lawv los lawv tsuas xav tias peb hais lus xwb es tsis muaj txheej txheem dab tsi rau hauv. Ces lawv mloog tsis zoo, vim lawv xav tej no tsis muaj nuj nqis rau lawv tej kev txawj ntse. Peb kev kawm mas yog mloog lus zoo thiab cuab pob ntseg rau peb niam thiab txiv thiab peb ua raws daim li tej lawv qhia peb.

The other Elders generally agree with Elder Xai. Although they are glad that their grandchildren are being given the opportunity to learn to read and write, the lack of acknowledgement of their importance in the harmony of a working Hmong community hurts them. Elder Ying describes her grandchildren's reaction to her traditional oral knowledge thus:

My grandchildren do not believe me when I tell them stories that my elders have told me. They sometimes argue with me and tell me that it is not be true because the American teachers have not told them those stories.

Kuv tus xeeb ntxwv tsis ntseeg kuv thaum kuv qhia lawm dab neeg kuv tej laus tau qhia kuv. Lawv tej thaum cam nrog kuv thiab hais tias tsis yog tseeb vim cov nais khu AsMesKas tsis tau qhia lawv tej dab neej no dua.

This saddens her. It is as if her grandchildren's teachers have become the Elders. To her, the American teachers do not understand how important traditional (H)mong oral culture is. Elder Ying's grandchildren have been educated in the Western setting. They have also come to believe that in order for events to be true and, therefore, valuable they must be documented in ink and spoken through a "professional."

### **Impact of Literacy on Cultural and Language Loss**

The younger generations of (H)mong have acquired the skills of reading and writing only very recently. Literacy is not essential to the traditional (H)mong way of life. A traditional (H)mong person unexposed to the influences of the West would

probably regard it as the Elders' grandchildren regard their unique forms of oral knowledge: superfluous, useless, without sense or place in his/her life.

In one interview I had with Elder Seng Na, he stated that literacy is important because it seems the whole world needs it to survive. He never bothered to become literate because his parents felt it was not appropriate for him to learn how to read and write. It was a skill of foreigners. Also, they thought it would make him lazy. This took me by surprise. I asked how laziness is equated with literacy. Elder Seng Na stated that his parents thought that people who could read and write did not do real work. They did not value literacy because there was never a need for it. A Hmong man who learns to read and write sacrifices learning the skills necessary for the survival of the family. Being able to decipher print and scribble it on paper or on dirt does not teach one the proper way to sit and pass drinks at a ceremonial feast, for example. If he had gone to school, he would have acquired the former skill at the expense of the latter, so important in defining a (H)mong person.

Even if they had wanted, the Elders would not have been able to access the skills of reading and writing. Elder Yeng Cha stated,

My parents didn't know how to read and write so they taught me the *paj ntaub*. They told me that the *paj ntaub* would be my pen and paper.

Kuv niam thiab txiv nkawv tsis paub nyeem thiab sau ntawv ces nkawd thiaj li qhia kuv ua "paj ntaub" thiab nkawv hais rau kuv tias paj ntaub yuav yog kuv tus xaum thiab daim ntawv.

Today, Elder Yeng Cha can write her own name. People have helped her practice it. Although those strange marks that have become familiar to her now as the utterances for her maiden and clan name have no meaning to her, Elder Yeng Cha equates being literate with having a form of intelligence that she lacks. In her, there is the definite

western bias that illiteracy is equal to stupidity. She does not recognize that her ability to make cloth from hemp she grew herself and sew *paj ntaub* out of it is easily more complex than writing, and like it, takes many years to master. Why does a literate person not feel a lack in his/her person when he/she cannot reproduce beautiful craftsmanship or chant ceremonial songs that last upwards of two hours? There definite exists an imbalance in footing between the two. The power of the bias towards literacy over oral traditions and scholarship over lived experience is such that someone with skills as intricate, advanced and culturally important as Elder Yeng Cha finds herself feeling severely marginalized and worthless. Elder Seng Na nails it in the head when he stated:

I may not know how to read and write because I never got a chance to, but if I could write all that I know down for you, it would be a library full of books. You can never go through it all because there would be too much. We can sit and talk about how much I've learned and how much I've kept in my memory but we would never have enough time. Some people think that because we don't pick up pens and write that we are not intelligent. This makes me sad, because sometimes I also begin to feel this as well. So it is important that you younger generation learn how to read and write, because you have the ability to have memories and stories and have the ability write it down for your children. A person like me, when I die and if no one is interested in learning what I know, all the knowledge that I've learned in my lifetime from my elders will go with me.

Tej zaum kuv yuav tsis paub nyeem thiab sau ntawv vim kuv yeej tsis muaj hmoo mus kawm, tab sis yog kuv paub sau kom tas kuv li txuj ci kuv paub rau koj mas ntse lub "library" yuav muaj ntawv puv tas li os. Koj yuav saib tsis tas li vim ntau rhau lawm. We yuav zaum tau thiab tham txog seb kuv kawm tau ntau npaum li cas thiab tej yam kuv khaws ntsis hauv paj hlwb yog dab tsi tab sis wb yuav tsis muaj sij hawm yuav tham kom tag li. Ib co neeg xav tias vim peb tsis paub siv xaum thiab ntawv es peb ruam no. Qhov no ua kuv tu siab, vim qee zaus kuv xav tias qhov lawv hais yeej yog tseeb lawm thiab. Vim li no thiaj li tseem ceeb heev tias nej cov yau yuav tsum paub nyeem thiab sau ntawv, vim nej tseem muaj peev xwm kawm tau thiab muaj dab neeg es yuav muab sau tau rau nej cov me nyuam tau saib. Ib tug neeg li kuv, thaum kuv tuag es yog tsis muaj leej twg xav kawm tej yam kuv paub, tas nrho kuv tej txuj ci puav pheej tej kuv tau kawm los ntawm cov laus ces yuav ploj nrog kuv mus tas.

### **Shunning Literacy**

The (H)mong may have shunned writing deliberately because it has no role in the daily happenings of their lives. A (H)mong person's most sacred moments in life (the birth ceremony, the spiritual calling during marriage, the funeral chants) are unique to him/her, celebrated orally and accepted into the world of spirits, never to be repeated. To give an example, the spirit-calling ceremony, in which the spirit of the body of an ailing person is believed to have left that person, hence the resulting sickness, is called upon to come back and dwell within that person's body again. This ceremony should not be written down to be repeated any other day of the year. The words in the songs or chants used are a direct communication with spirits. They are regarded as having magical power and represent the role and place of the speaker.

Another example, one that the Elders came back to again and again, is the *qhuab kev* in a funeral. Though the exact ceremony may differ clan to clan, its purpose is to lead the soul of the deceased back to the land of the ancestors. This ceremony is as important to a traditional (H)mong person as the last sacrament is to a Christian. It is performed orally by the *taw kev*, the person leading the *qhuab kev*, accompanied by a family member who knows the deceased's history well. This family member tells the *taw kev* the history of the deceased's life, starting from the present and working backwards to the birth place. Through the chants of the *taw kev*, the soul of the deceased is guided back to his/her original birth place where he/she collects his/her buried placenta. Only after this can he/she journey on into the land of the ancestors and eventually get reincarnated.

When we write such a personalized ceremony down, it can be recited over and over again. According to many Elders, recitation causes problems for the person who has

passed on, for this person can never rest because he/she is being called continuously to undergo the journey back to the place of birth.

There is another reason why chants and songs cannot be written down. According to Elder Va Xa, not just any person can have access to them. Certain ceremonial positions of high importance in a traditional (H)mong community are fulfilled by individuals chosen by spirits. This means that sacred songs and chants are meant to be learned only by those whom spirits have chosen.

Because the (H)mong have no writing system of their own, they have been labeled as “pre-literate.” This stigmatizing label has had grave consequences for contemporary (H)mong oral culture, identity and education. The “pre-literate” label has long been attached to (H)mong people by anthropologists, social scientists, educators, and historians who have studied and written about them. In the 1988 issue of *National Geographic*, Sherman (1988) writes that “the (H)mong are an illiterate working-age man puzzle over the tools of the industrial revolution as the rest of America marches into the computer age” (p. 589). This view implies that (H)mong people are deficient because they lack a writing system. It also implies their way of knowing is not as rigorous as Western empirical ones. When we talk about (H)mong people as being pre-literate we equate them with ignorance, primitiveness and in a semi-barbaric state of development. For example, to state that the (H)mong are pre-literate is to suggest that the “widespread absence of reading and writing is a internal characteristic of the (H)mong culture, an inherent (H)mong practice, preference and value (p. 227).

### **Chapter Summary**

The four major themes that were talked about in this chapter had to do with how the Elders viewed knowledge and what knowledge is to them. The Elders didn't acknowledge that oral knowledge was also knowledge because it was learned orally from their Elders and not in a school setting. The Elders spoke about the lack of acknowledgment of the richness of (H)mong oral culture and tradition by the younger generation of (H)mong people in America. This anxiety puts into perspective a lot of their fears about the print world and what this means for sacred (H)mong ceremonies.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

This chapter discuss the limitations that I encountered in this research study and what my recommendations for future researchers. I also concluded with my thoughts on this subject and what it means for the survival of traditional (H)mong oral knowledge.

#### **Limitations**

The (H)mong have been in contact with literate cultures interested in studying them as an ethnic group for over a century. Their first contact was with French missionaries, three of whom gave them their current Romanized writing system. The pool of research on their culture and history has slowly accumulated over the decades. However, research of (H)mong oral knowledge is almost entirely nonexistent. An intermingling of reasons—disinterest on the part of Western scholars studying (H)mong culture; a dearth of (H)mong scholars; and the reticence of (H)mong Elders to share their oral knowledge—is responsible. Because of a lack of resources specifically on (H)mong oral knowledge, I have had to expand my research base to draw from Indigenous scholars who have written about other Indigenous oral cultures.

There were many Elders that I wanted to interview for this study. However, in the end I only interviewed five Elders. Five Elders cannot represent the entire (H)mong Diaspora. The Elders in this study used their personal life experiences to tell the many stories that are critical to what it means to be an educated person from an oral culture.

Their views were shaped by their unique personal experiences, which determined what they thought was knowledge and what was not.

I did not choose to record some of the conversations. Although it was by choice, this probably limited my study in that I could not remember everything that was talked about. Therefore, I could not do follow up questions. This was done intentionally to allow room for the Elders to speak without the fear of being recited. As the Elders stated earlier, words that we say to one another are sacred, therefore when we record it we lose some aspect of this.

Timing was also a limitation. All the interviews took less than a year. I did not have as much time as I would have liked to spend with each Elder. I did record some interviews; however the other years were done by interactions with the Elders. The process of memorizing our conversations might have distorted the writing when it came time to write it.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future researchers may want to take extended time to conduct more in-depth interviews with the Elders. This will allow for deeper examination of oral knowledge systems and realistic time to build relationships with Elders. Because relationships are critical to sharing oral knowledge I highly recommend that future researchers build trusting relationships with the Elders. It is essential that these relationships be built on a reciprocal give and take rapport. I highly recommend this to future researchers because oral knowledge is a very personal thing and Elders may not want to talk in depth if they are unsure of the researcher's intentions or the direction of the research. Anyone interested in really learning about (H)mong traditional knowledge or life must become a

part of the community. They must be willing to be known by others in the community. In fact, this is true for most Indigenous communities.

This research barely touches on the topic of (H)mong oral knowledge and tradition. There could never be enough time to write it all down, and even if there were there are aspects of (H)mong oral knowledge that cannot be written down. This is the challenge that faces future (H)mong generations in the United States.

I would also recommend that future researchers focus on just an area of (H)mong oral knowledge to give the audience a deeper understanding of the (H)mong oral knowledge systems. Future researchers must be aware of and sensitive to what is culturally appropriate to write about and what is taboo. Not everything is for non-(H)mong people and that important cultural precept must be acknowledged by any scholar who does not seek a dominant/submissive interaction. Establishing a strong relationship with potential participants, learning culturally appropriate responses and becoming a part of the community are essential in this process.

### **Conclusion**

When I started this research, I was very naïve and ignorant. To think that I could of written everything about the (H)mong oral knowledge system in a thesis is to think that we could summarize all the knowledge of a library in a thesis as well. I was wrong to think that my culture has so little to give and share with the rest of the world that it could be summarized in a thesis. Today many (H)mong youth are embarrassed of their culture and history, knowing only what Western scholars have written about them. Most of the historical “evidence” for these Western scholars has come from the writings of the Chinese.

I believe that (H)mong people did not pursue literacy. To say something one day may be relevant, but to have it written down may bring it into conflict with the spirit world tomorrow. They had ample opportunities to adopt a Chinese, Tibetan or Thai form of writing but chose not to because of the importance of the oral tradition in (H)mong culture and society. The Elders say that if we write something down, it ceases to be sacred. This destroys the many sacred relationships with animate and inanimate spirits that encompass a (H)mong person's existence. In print cultures, these relationships rarely exist. It is not necessary to think because anything and everything can be written down.

In the United States the process of assimilation is often so subtle that it has been given little attention in contemporary (H)mong society. Although it was not the goal of this paper to look at solutions to the threat of (H)mong oral traditions and culture in the (H)mong diaspora, it is worth noting that if (H)mong people choose to pay little attention to the rapid deterioration of their oral knowledge and tradition and continue to disregard how (H)mong oral culture is significant to tradition, then it will slowly fade away and be forgotten like so many oral cultures, and (H)mong people will no longer exist as a people with their own unique language culture and oral tradition.

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APPENDIX A

SUBMISSION LETTER TO UW-L IRB

## NARRATIVE STATEMENT

What does it mean to be “educated” in an oral culture: *a study of traditional Hmong knowledge?*

1. The purpose of the proposed research project is to collect and document traditional forms of Hmong knowledge. Data collection will begin, approximately, after February 25, 2008. The approximate end of data collection will be December 31, 2008. The purpose of this research is to look at oral components of Hmong tradition and culture, focusing on what it means to be educated in, an oral culture, and how these meanings are similar to or in tension with what it means to be educated in cultures that privilege written literacy.
2. The characteristics of subject population in the project are people of Hmong descent who are over the age of eighteen, and who possess and practice traditional forms of Hmong culture and religious ceremonies. The approximate number of participants is twenty people. The rationale for limiting it to persons of Hmong descent who practice traditional culture is that, because the purpose of this study is to look at Hmong traditional knowledge, people of Hmong descent who practice Hmong traditions are the best providers of this information.
3. Not applicable
4. Voluntary consent will be verbally obtained prior to the interview. Written consent forms will be given at the time of the interview. Because most of the participants are illiterate in written and/or verbal English, the researcher will explain and interpret the consent form into spoken Hmong. If agreed, the participant will sign the consent form and the researcher will provide the participant with a copy WRITTEN IN HMONG AS WELL AS IN ENGLISH.
5. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher will meet with the interview participants at a location chosen by the participant. The participants will also be given an alias when the interviews are transcribed.
6. Participants may experience emotional distress when discussing sensitive issues such as: the involvement in the “secret war” in Laos; the pain of losing loved ones, one’s culture and language; the harshness of learning to read and write; and adapting to American culture.
7. In order to minimize potential risk for the participants, the researcher will be explicit that the participants may choose not to answer any questions they deem sensitive or painful. The participants will also be informed that they can end the interview at anytime without penalty. The researcher will also accommodate to the schedule of the participant.

8. Potential benefits of the participants include: an opportunity for the subjects to express their knowledge of Hmong traditional culture that will be documented for future students. Anticipated beneficial knowledge includes an opportunity to contribute to the under-researched area of Hmong education and the unique opportunity to act as a primary source in an area of research that is almost non-existent in comparison to other areas of research, and that is also often misrepresented.

APPENDIX B

APPROVAL LETTER FROM UW-L IRB

To: Xong Xiong  
1724 State Street  
La Crosse, WI 54601

From: Bart Van Voorhis, Coordinator  
Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the  
Protection of Human Subjects

Date: February 11, 2008

Re: **RESEARCH PROTOCOL SUBMITTED TO IRB**

The IRB Executive Committee has reviewed your proposed research project entitled: *“What does it mean to be “educated” from an oral culture: a study of traditional Hmong knowledge.”* Because your research proposal will place human subjects at minimal risk, the protocol has been approved under the expedited review category with the following recommendations:

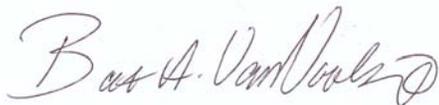
- Send an email to [irb@uwlax.edu](mailto:irb@uwlax.edu) with the response to the following questions:
  - How will you contact and/or recruit participants?
  - Who is Jim Stewart? Why is he listed as the Emergency contact number?
- Translated documents should be reviewed by another person qualified to check the accuracy and clarity of any translation.
- Turn in a completion certificate from the online IRB training.

You may collect data once you have completed making the changes listed in the above recommendations. Remember to provide participants a copy of the consent form and to keep a copy for your records. Consent documentation and IRB records should be retained for at least 3 years after completion of the project.

Please note that approval is for **one year only**, from the date of this approval letter. **If the project continues for more than 12 months, an IRB renewed approval must be requested. This renewal should be applied for at least one month prior to your one year expiration.**

Contact me if you have any questions concerning these items.

Good luck with your project.



cc: IRB File  
Jon Davies, Faculty Advisor

**Office of the Provost  
and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs**  
145 Graff Main Hall, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse  
1725 State Street, La Crosse, WI 54601  
Phone: (608) 785-8007, Fax: (608) 785-8046

APPENDIX C

ENGLISH CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Protocol Title: What does it mean to be “educated” in an oral culture: *a study of traditional Hmong knowledge?*

Principal Investigator: Xong Xiong  
1724 Market Street  
La Crosse, WI 54601  
(608) 784-1617

Emergency Contact: Jim Stewart  
(608) 783-0551

Purpose of and Procedure:

- The purpose of this research is to look at Hmong tradition and culture that is oral based and focuses on the question of: “what does it mean to be an educated person from an oral culture and how does this contradict societies that highly privilege literacy.”
- I will be contacted through telephone and if agreed an interview will follow.

Potential Risks:

- I may experience emotional distress when expressing my feelings and thoughts.
- I may feel uncomfortable when discussing sacred ceremonies with the researcher

Rights and Confidentiality:

- My participation is voluntary.
- I can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty.
- The result of this study may be published in scientific literature or presented at professional meetings and conferences.
- All information will be kept confidential through the use of alias.

Possible benefits:

- Ability to express and document my feelings, thoughts and beliefs of Hmong traditional ways of knowledge.
- Contributed to area of Hmong research.

Questions regarding study procedures may be directed to the principal researcher Xong Xiong (608) 784-1617 or to the study advisor Dr. Jon Davies, Department of Educational Studies, University of Wisconsin La Crosse (608) 785-5411. Questions regarding the protection of human subjects may be addressed to the UW-La Crosse Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of Human Subjects, (608) 785-8124 or [irb@uwlax.edu](mailto:irb@uwlax.edu).

Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D

(H)MONG CONSENT FORM

## Ntawv Tso Cai

Daim Ntawv Tshawb: Hauv ib haiv neeg tsis muaj ntaub muaj ntawv, ib tug neeg ho paub “txawj ntse” li cas: kev khoob khuab tshawb txog Hmoob li txuj ci txawj ntse?

Tus Thawj Tshawb: Choo Xyooj  
1724 Market Street  
La Crosse, WI 54601  
(608) 784-1617

Emergency Contact: Nom Neeb Xyooj  
(608) 526-2474

### Hom Phiaj thiab Txheej Txheem:

- Lub hom phiaj ntawm daim ntawv nod yog los tshawb txog Hmoob li kev lis kev cai muab piv tias tej phuav pheej txuj ci tas nrho yog ua lus hais es kawv xwb, yog li thiaj muaj lo lus noog tias: “nws txhais tau li cas yog ib tus neeg twg txawj ntse tab sis yog mloog qhuab qhia es thiaj txawj ces li no puas twv yeej tau tej pawg neeg es tsis ntseeg txog kev qhuab ntuas txawj ntse vim lawv muaj ntaub muab ntawv.
- Yuav tau hu foos ua ntej rau kuv ua ntej es yog xav sib txuas lus ntxiv ces mam teem lub sij hawj sib ntsib si tham.

### Kev kev txhawj xeeb:

- Thaum kuv qhia txog kuv li kev kawm thiab kev xav tej zaum yuav ua rau kuv yuav tus siab los kua muag los tsis paub.
- Thaum tham txog Hmoob tej kev dab qhuas, tej zaum yuav muaj qhee lus uas yuav ua rau kuv tsis nyiam, txaj muag los txhawj xeeb.

### Txoj cai rau kuv ua tswj tsis pub lwm tus neeg muab nthuav tawm:

- Qhov kuv ua nod yog kuv zoo kuv siab ua xwb tsis muaj leej twg yuam.
- Thaum twg kuv xav tsum tsis xav khoob khuab kawm ntxiv lawm kuv yeej muaj cai rho kuv tus kheej tawm yuav tsis raug lus dab tsi.
- Cov lus kawg ntsis ua kuv tau sau txog kuv hais ntawm nod tej zaum yuav tawm rau suav daws saib rau hauv cov ntawm qib siab thiab tej paj xoos sis tham loj nyob pem tsev kawm ntawm qib siab.
- Tas nrho cov lus tau los hais yuav tsis pub muab nthuav tawm yog tsis yeem los muab lub npe cuav los siv.

### Tej yam uas yuav ntxim li muaj nuj nqis rau yus tus kheej:

- Yuav haj yam muaj peev xwm ntxiv mus los piav thiab kho kuv li cov lus xav hauv kuv lub siab thiab kuv li kev tshawb hais txog lub neej Hmoob li kev txawj ntse los ntawm tej kev lis kev cai thiab kev ntseeg.
- Yuav pab tau rau ntxiv cov ntaub ntawm qhia txog Hmoob.

Muaj lus dab tsis txog lub hom phiaj yuav los tshawb cov ntaub ntawm no tiv tauj tus thawj tshawb: Choo Xyooj (608) 784-1617 los tus xwb fwb Dr. Davies nyob rau lub tsev kawm ntawv University Wisconsin La Crosse (608) 785-5411. Yog muaj lus xav noog txog cov cai los tiv thaiv neeg tiv tauj UW-La Crosse Institutional Review Board (IRB) (608) 785-8124 lo sau email rau irb@uwlax.edu.

Tus neeg pab lub npe \_\_\_\_\_

Hnub \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_

Tus thawj tshawb \_\_\_\_\_

Hnub \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX E

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**Research Questions:**

- 1) What is traditional knowledge?
- 2) How did you come to learn of it?
- 3) What made you want to learn traditional ways and knowledge?
- 4) What is the need to learn traditional knowledge?
- 5) How were you taught your form of knowledge?
- 6) What are your feelings on American education?
- 7) What are your thoughts and feelings on Hmong education?
- 8) If you practice both, how do you balance the two?
- 9) If you do not read or write, how do Americans see you as a Hmong person practicing traditional ways without a form of literacy?
- 10) What part of Hmong culture do you see that the younger generation is losing because of their exposure to literacy?
- 11) How are oral cultures different from literate cultures?
- 12) What is the essence of an oral culture? What would change if it was to be written down?
- 13) What was your first experience with literacy? What were your thoughts?