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ABSTRACT

This article examines missionary encounters that have facilitated the extraordinary conversion of nearly one-third of approximately one million Hmong in Vietnam to Evangelical Protestantism in the last two decades. Since this conversion is not officially approved by the Vietnamese government, these missionary encounters and the networks that facilitate them are highly informal and largely underground. This article argues that the informality of Hmong evangelical networks as well as the conversion that they facilitate can only be fully understood if one seriously takes into account their ethnic and transnational aspects. Ethnic ties are important factors that motivate overseas Hmong to carry out missionary work in Vietnam, and such ties are also the primary reason why evangelism, carried out by Hmong missionaries, was—and continues to be—so readily accepted by so many Hmong people in the country. In other words, it is an ethnic aspiration to change their group’s marginal position and a desire to become modern that lead many Hmong in Vietnam to convert to Christianity. Similarly, the missionary zeal of many American Hmong Christians is connected to their ethnic commitment to the Hmong in Asia, while simultaneously being shaped by their conversion to Protestantism during and after their migration to the United States. In this article, I will show that it is also because of an ethnic commitment that many Hmong missionaries undertake the risk and brave the danger of evangelizing in Vietnam.
INTRODUCTION

Over just two decades, from the end of the 1980s, nearly one third of approximately one million Hmong in Vietnam have converted from animism and ancestral worship to Evangelical Protestantism. Since this conversion is not officially approved by the Vietnamese government, there are only a few ways in which the Hmong Christian converts can acquire theological knowledge about their new faith. Recently, thanks to the flexibility and resourcefulness of global Protestant networks, theological training courses have been specially organized by overseas Hmong missionaries and by the Chinese underground churches in various border towns in China for the Hmong converts in Vietnam. Many Hmong converts from Vietnam cross the border to attend these courses, often at high risk to their personal security, because this action is illegal in the eyes of both the Chinese and the Vietnamese police.

The conversion to Christianity of Hmong people in Vietnam today faces political trouble and conflicts with the state. Among the many reasons for this is the fact that the majority of Hmong people live in Vietnam’s highly sensitive borderland. The Vietnamese state, like many other Asian states, is not in favor of the conversion to Protestantism of the country’s ethnic minorities and of those who live in the international borderlands (and who, like the Hmong, still maintain strong ties with their ethnic fellows on the other side of the border). This state’s disapproval of Hmong conversion is connected to the way in which Protestant converts themselves perceive their new faith and what benefits it can offer. Various scholars have observed that Protestant conversion, aside from being seen as a form of "modernization" through its alliance with a major world religion, also entails the adoption of an attitude of being different from the dominant religion of the nation or the state, thus helping to express and/or maintain ethnic difference without a sense of inferiority (van der Veer 1996; Keyes 1996; Salemink 2003, 2004). Hofner (1998: 5) offers a useful insight into this process; he asserts: "Protestantism takes hold among long-marginalized populations seeking to maintain an identity apart from the dominant culture even by appropriating the symbols and instruments of modernity." In this case, conversion reproduces the binary logic of ethnic categories even as it transforms their cultural content. Besides its impeccable "world building" ability, (Hofner 1993) through which it relocates local customs and dogmas within the domain of the higher religious truths and in the realm of transcendence, a world religion like Christianity also has an immense institutional capacity to standardize knowledge and identity across history and culture. In Hofner’s (1993: 20) view, it is precisely this capacity that "has allowed the religions we know as world faiths to take advantage of the conditions that have accompanied the emergence of multiracial, state-based societies."

In today’s rapidly globalizing world where non-stop transnational flows of people and expanding networks are redefining and transforming the conventional grounds of membership and belonging, the important questions before us are: To what extent do world religions like Christianity take advantage of such novel conditions to further conversion? What implications does this have for the widespread conversion to world religions by indigenous communities across the globe in the last few decades? In this article, I argue that the informality of Hmong evangelical networks as well as the conversion that they facilitate can only be fully understood if one seriously takes into account their ethnic and transnational aspects. Ethnic ties are important factors that motivate overseas Hmong to carry out missionary work in Vietnam, and such ties are also the primary reason why evangelism, carried out by Hmong missionaries, was—and continues to be—so readily accepted by so many Hmong people in the country. Hmong conversion to Protestantism in Vietnam is deeply ethnic in nature (Ngo 2010, 2011). In other words, the decision of many Hmong in Vietnam to convert to Christianity is driven by an ethnic aspiration to change their group’s marginal position and by a yearning to become modern. Similarly, the missionary zeal of many American Hmong Christians is connected to their ethnic commitment to the Hmong in Asia, while simultaneously being shaped by their own conversion to Protestantism during and after their migration to America (Ngo 2011). I will show that it is also because of an ethnic commitment that many Hmong missionaries undertake the risk and brave the danger of evangelizing in Vietnam.

I shall begin with a description of an encounter between present-day missionaries and their Hmong converts in Vietnam. I will then move on to a broader discussion of the politics of Hmong conversion in contemporary Vietnam, as well as the significance of the incomplete nature of conversion among the Hmong in the United States. I will conclude by making clear how Hmong conversion and the Hmong’s underground acquisition of Christian knowledge contribute to our understanding of religious encounters in the world today.

AN ENCOUNTER

On a spring day in 2007, Sua, a recent convert and a very active Christian Hmong, encountered two Hmong pastors from the United States. Since 2006 Sua has been the leader of one of the two large Protestant congregations in a place I shall call Cardamon Hill, located near Vietnam’s border with China. These two pastors, whom Sua called xib jwb (pastor) Pao and Fu, were roaming around Cardamon Hill pretending to be tourists. In Cardamon Hamlet 3, where Sua and a large part of his congregation live, they asked some Dao people who owned souvenir shops and herb sauna services
whether there were "Hmong Tseeg Vaj Taaw" [believers in God] here and who the leader of this group was. Very soon the pastors were directed to Sua's house. It turned out that Fu's wife was from Sua's clan and that Pao's uncle had married a woman whose parents were born in a village near where Sua's grandmother was born. Sua was deeply impressed by their rhetorical skill, and he found the two pastors to be pleasant people. They talked and prayed for a while, and then Sua and another man in his congregation took the pastors around to the nearby Hmong Christian communities.

Everywhere they went, they were received warmly. They managed to establish one or another kind of kinship relationship with the local people, just as they had done with Sua's family. Many villagers wanted to hear about where they came from, about how the Hmong people lived in America, and whether it was true that all Hmong people in America owned cars and lived in three-story houses. Young girls asked whether it was true that in a Hmong Christian wedding in America, the bride always wears a beautiful white gown and the groom wears a beautiful suit, just like as seen in Korean movies. Some middle-aged women wanted to know whether all Hmong people in America were Christian and whether the government in America, instead of persecuting Christian people in America, encouraged them to believe in God. To this question, the pastors gave an affirmative answer. Upon hearing this, a Christian woman whose husband had suffered persecution for being a Christian convert, broke down crying. Perhaps to comfort her, Pao added that many Hmong people in the United States not only believed in God, but also believed that all Hmong people in the world should be treated like them, should live in prosperity, and should have the freedom to believe in God. Their mission (as well as that of many other Hmong people in the United States) was to help their Hmong "brothers and sisters around the whole world" to reach salvation via God. They said they couldn't make promises, but they would always do their best to "ask the American government to talk to the Vietnamese government" so that the Vietnamese government would stop harassing the Hmong Christians.

A few hours later, the two pastors and their local guides were stopped by policemen when they arrived in the neighboring district. The four of them were arrested immediately. Pao and Fu were detained separately from Sua and his fellow congregation member for one night. That night, Sua prayed for a very long time, asking God for help. The two pastors only had tourist visas for China, and not for Vietnam. They had entered Vietnam through an informal border route, and so the police wanted to take their passports and fine them 15 million Vietnamese dong, equivalent to $3,000. Sua believes that because he kept on praying, God answered his prayer. The next morning, he was allowed to see the pastors and translated for them while the police interrogated them. After some time, the policemen decided to give them back their passports and only fined each of the pastors three million dong ($200), then deported them to China. Sua went with them. At the border, before the pastors left, they told Sua that they would call him as soon as they reached the other side of the border. Half an hour later, Sua received a call from them and was instructed to take the river way (drowning) as a common way of crossing the border illegally to go to China. Once Sua was on the Chinese side of the border, he was picked up and taken to a house where he met with the head pastor of an underground Protestant church for Han Chinese in Hekou. The pastor was Han Chinese. He was very friendly toward Sua and encouraged him from now on not to hesitate to ask for any help that he needed. He informed Sua that they would be organizing a theological training course next month and asked whether Sua and other Hmong brothers and sisters in Vietnam would like to attend.

From then on, Sua became a frequent attendee of theological workshops in China. Very soon, a large number of Hmong Christian congregational leaders in Lao Cai and in its neighboring provinces, Ha Giang and Lai Chau, also began participating frequently in the courses. Each course was two to four weeks long, and attracted about 30 attendants. Aside from the Chinese pastor and a deacon of his church who took care of the logistical arrangements, each course had different lecturers, and many of these were, and still are, American Hmong pastors. Through them, the course attendants were provided with bibles (printed in Hmong Romanized Phonetic Alphabet), learning materials, and other financial support to cover travel costs for leaders of congregations who lived far away from the border and living costs for their stay in China. In the harsh winter of 2007-08, several backpack-size loads of second-hand winter clothes donated by the Hekou Protestant church were taken to Vietnam to be distributed in Hmong villages high up in the mountains.

In the beginning of 2008, Sua began looking for a house to rent in Lao Cai town to serve as the office and training center for the Hmong Christians of Lao Cai. He asked me for help. It appeared that many missionaries who worked with Sua had decided that it would be better to have a training center near the Lao Cai border instead of in Cardinson Hill. So that for security reasons Hmong missionaries could just hop in for a day to give a lecture and then return to China in the evening. If the center were located in Lao Cai, it could be reached more easily by Hmong people on the eastern side of the province than if it were located in Cardinson Hill. Sua told me that the missionaries and the Chinese church were willing to give a maximum of 6 million dong per month ($400) to cover the rent of the house. As far as I know, before I left Lao Cai at the end of June 2008, Sua was still looking, and the training center was still being planned. The only difference was that the police had heard of this plan and had become very watchful of Sua's actions. They began to constantly call upon to question him about this or that.
ETHNIC COMMITMENT IN THE HMONG TRANSNATIONAL CONVERSION

I met and became friends with Su in the middle of my in-depth ethno-graphical study of the massive recent and ongoing—and politically controversial—conversion to Protestantism of members of the Hmong group in northern Vietnam. Starting somewhere in the middle of the 1980s, this conversion movement was intimately linked to global movements of Christian missionary activities and conversion in the second half of the twentieth century. As Su’s story, which is only one among many, makes clear, conversion, like that of the Hmong, involves many factors and processes: national and regional histories, the impact of states, the power of religious institutions in imposing orthodoxy, as well as transnational and global processes. Various forms of religious networks, operating on a global scale, play an important role in the widespread conversion to Christianity of people in many places around the world.

Locally, the Hmong, being the “poorest of the poorest” in Vietnam, have experienced increasing difficulties, especially when it comes to the question of continuing to practice their costly and time-consuming traditional religious and healing rituals. Đài mỏ, the far-reaching economic reform programme launched in 1986, has deregulated many subsidized programmes aimed at the peoples of the mountainous regions, while imposing stricter regulations on land use and ownership, and has prohibited slash-and-burn farming and opium poppy cultivation. The consequences of these changes, combined with population increase, dislocation and migration, and environmental degradation, have increased poverty and intensified the sociopolitical and cultural marginality of the Hmong. Parallel with these mounting local difficulties are the intensified contacts and exchanges of ideas and goods between the Hmong in Vietnam and their ethnic fellows who became war refugees in the United States in the aftermath of the Secret War in Lao (Ngo 2010). These contacts and exchanges helped to engender an aspiration to be modern and a yearning to belong to an emerging “global Hmong community” (Lee 1996), a desire that is widely shared by members of the Hmong group in Vietnam (Ngo 2011). The combination of all these factors has, directly and indirectly, created a fertile ground for conversion to Christianity among this group. On the global scale, the dynamics of religious revivals have activated transnational religious networks, which make use of ethnic affiliates overseas, and which exploit the organisational and communicative strengths of Protestant churches, to facilitate conversion among the Hmong by circulating religious symbols and goods, and by financing and using evangelical transnational radio broadcasts in vernacular languages such as the work of the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) [Ngo 2009]. The Hmong conversion to Protestantism is a powerful example of how globalization enables the sociocultural and identity transformation of marginalized ethnic minorities and non-state people.

For the recently converted Hmong in China, Laos, and Vietnam, the conversions of most of them to Evangelical Protestantism have not yet been fully approved by the state authorities. In Vietnam, the conversion to Protestantism by Hmong people has been partially recognized by the state only since 2005, an even this recognition is restricted by many conditions. Hence, some Protestant worship still remains illegal and is conducted within the realm of underground house churches, with informal religious networks being the main channels of missionisation. This is very similar to what Castells (1996) sees as being a result of the network society in which movements and flows are more important than formal organizations, and in which transnationality is an element of globalization. Although in the case of the Hmong converts, informality is primarily the result of government restrictions on religious organizations, one can see a process in which, under changing government policies, this informality may change into formal structures. However, behind this process of formalization, transnationality plays itself out in informal networks, whatever the government policy may be.

Su and the two Hmong American missionaries involved in the encounter described above were from different places, even different continents. But, as shown in the encounter, there were few obstacles preventing them from connecting to each other. The two missionaries found their way into Hmong communities within a very short period of time. Forging such an immediate connection is possible only because both parties are bound together by a shared ethnic identity being Hmong. In one way, this ethnic tie is inherent in the basic nature of the Hmong kinship system (Ngo 2010; Trân 1996; Pham 1995; Leepreecha 2001; Tapp 1989a; Cooper 1984; Lee 1996; Julian 2003). Regardless of where they come from, regardless of the region or country they inhabit, all Hmong who bear the same clan name are supposed to consider each other as brothers and sisters. In addition, ethnic ties are reinforced by the shared condition of being marginalized ethnic minorities in all the countries in which the Hmong live (Schein 2004, 2007), and where they are all well known for their persistence in resisting cultural assimilation and preserving their ethnic identity. This situation resembles what Flikken (1993) and Barth (1969) see as the configuration of ethnicity through locally interactive relations between different ethnic groups. In the Hmong case, however, the configuration of ethnicity seems to occur not only in a local, but also in a transnational, context. Transnational connections between various groups that reside in various countries transcend locally constructed or locally configured ethnicity to respond to a global Hmong identity (Julian 2003; Lee 1996).

It is important to identify the ethnic ties between the two groups since this can explain most of the encounters and transnational linkages between...
them. It is also important to identify the nature of what I shall call "double transnationality" in this case (Bhachu 1985). Since they are also a part of an older Southeast Asian diaspora, the Hmong in Vietnam share with their Laotian, Thai, and Burmese Hmong counterparts a history of southward migration from China and a memory of a historic "homeland" situated in China, which influenced, or still continues to influence, messianic tendencies (as mentioned previously) (Tapp 1989a; Trần 1996). This characterizes the "first transnationality" of the Hmong in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

The "second transnationality" emerged after the end of the Secret War in Laos in 1975, as hundreds of thousands of Hmong and other Lao Laotians were forced to leave the country and become political refugees in the West. This result of "double transnationality" is the ambiguous meaning of homeland. Indeed, as Schein (2004) notes, there is a strong tendency among American Hmong to imagine and recreate a double homeland in both Laos and China. The Southeast Asian Hmong are related to the Chinese Hmong, who are classified as Miao in China. Similarly, although these people came mainly from Laos, the notion of national boundaries does not converge with the Hmong's notion of ethnic boundaries. As various forms of global connections have emerged in the past few decades, thanks to the increasing availability of communication technologies and the increasing affordability of national and international travel, the notion of a geographical homeland has been enlarged to include other locations in Southeast Asia where the Hmong reside, such as Thailand and Vietnam. Many Hmong in the United States told me that they or their relatives were born in Vietnam and then moved to Laos, and that often they still have relatives who live in Vietnam. This is the reason why in the encounter described above, one of the American Hmong missionaries could claim the same place of origin as claimed by one of the Vietnamese Hmong villagers.

There are interesting connections between various Hmong groups and those left behind in Southeast Asia. I have encountered many Hmong in Madison, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Minneapolis who told me about their recent visits to Vietnam to look for their long-sepated relatives. A successful banker in St. Paul told me about a trip that she had made in early 2007 with her husband to a village all the way up in the Giang province in Vietnam, to visit her father-in-law's younger brother. The brothers had been separated for more than sixty years because of war and migration. It was only in early 2000 that the banker's father-in-law learned that his brother was still alive, but he was too old to make the trip to Vietnam to see him. After many difficulties, they managed to establish contact, first by sending cassette tapes via the missionary networks, and later by telephone. In 2006, the banker's father-in-law passed away without realizing the dream of seeing his brother again.

On his deathbed, he told his son—the banker's husband—to go to Vietnam and realize that dream for him. The wife told me this story between tears, but once the emotional part was over, she became cheerful and talked non-stop about how beautiful, how traditional, and how "authentic" her Hmong people in Vietnam were.

I witnessed another example of this kind of enthusiasm at the First International Hmong Studies Conference held at Concordia University in St. Paul in 2006. One presentation was about the Hmong population in Vietnam, given by a Hmong high school teacher who had led a group of Hmong students on a school tour to Vietnam. Although it was not really an academic paper, her presentation was among the best attended during the entire conference, with standing room only. The school teacher proudly presented general background information on the socioeconomic and cultural life of her "Hmong brothers and sisters" in Vietnam despite the fact that she did not manage to visit any Hmong areas during her stay but just remained in Hanoi. The materials she used for illustrating her talk were pictures and printed materials about the Hmong population in Vietnam that she had gathered from Hanoi bookstores and from the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. Even more interesting, the main part of her talk focused on how "authentic" and how "traditional" the Hmong in Vietnam were. During the discussion, several young Hmong audience members made remarks, not so much about the presenter or the presentation, but rather about the Vietnamese Hmong and how admirable it was for them to be so poor and still be able to preserve "our" beautiful Hmong culture.

Ethnic ties are also recognized by theologians as a strategy for bringing Hmong people into the fold of Christianity. Pastor Timothy Vang (1998), for example, points out that the third major factor that contributed to the rapid growth of Hmong Christian populations was the fact that the Hmong evangelize the other Hmong. He explains it in theological terms as the "homogeneous units principle," a principle based on the idea that "people accept the Christian faith most rapidly when the least change of race or clan is involved" (Vang 1998: 129). That is, people are more likely to convert to Christianity, presumably, if they do not have to deal with ethnic, racial, linguistic, and other social differences during and after their conversion. Quoting McGraw, Vang writes "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" and they want to join churches whose members look, talk, eat, and dress like them (1998: 166). In conclusion, Vang argues that the application of this principle by the Missionary Alliance's (CMA) has contributed "significantly" to the growth of the Hmong CMA in Laos from the 1950s to the 1980s. 

According to Julian (2003), Schein (2002, 2004) and Lee (1996), the Hmong diaspora in the West tends to reconstruct its identity by erasing cultural and linguistic differences between themselves and all the Miao in China. By reclaiming a common identity for all Hmong and Miao in the world,
the Hmong diasporas assume membership of a much larger community (about ten million Miao rather than roughly three million Hmong). This diaspora is closely associated with Christian evangelical broadcasts, such as those of the FEBC, which, in turn, are closely linked to the conversion of the Hmong in Southeast Asia (Ngo 2009). Every year, the CMA Hmong district organizes its annual church conference, which often attracts a massive crowd of up to 1,500 people. In the last few years, the need for conducting missions among Vietnamese Hmong has increasingly become the major theme of the conference.

AMERICAN Hmong MISSIONARIES IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM’S BORDERLAND

In the 2008 CMA annual church conference in Denver, a session called “Prayer for Mission” was organized in a large hall on the ground floor of the Renaissance Hotel, with at least 500 participants. Four large maps of the world were displayed on the walls of the hall. The session started with long prayers, several speeches by missionaries who were working mainly in China, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, and the screening of a video film made for fundraising purposes about a mission among the Daxia Miao in Guizhou, China. At the end of the session, all the attendants were asked to group themselves and to stand under the port of the map that displayed the country or region where they were either doing missionary work or where they wished to go to do missionary work. After several chaotic minutes, with people running from one side of the room to the other, the groups were formed. Because the maps were rather small and because the size of the groups varied considerably, someone proposed the idea that one person from each group should write the name of the country where his/her group was intending to go on a piece of paper and hold it up. All the participants started praying for their respective groups. It was interesting that the two largest groups whose members wanted to conduct missionary work were those targeting Vietnam and China. After the long prayers, murmured in low voices, the crowd dispersed. I started wandering around the hall, trying to take as many photos as possible of the displayed objects and photos about the missions in Vietnam organized by CMA Hmong members. Tow (a man with whom I had become acquainted during the conference) came up to me, along with several young missionaries. He introduced me to them as “tuoi mem Hmong najj luj” (Sister Hmong Vietnamese). As we talked, these missionaries told me that their ultimate wish was to go to Vietnam and do missionary work among the Hmong there.

Most of our knowledge today of Protestant missions in Southeast Asia is limited to those that took place in the colonial and neocolonial periods (Tapp 1988b; Kearns 2007; Krønmer 1990; Aragon 1996; Salenmink 2003; to name but a few). Much less known is the work of Protestant missionaries operating in the context of postcolonial and contemporary societies in Southeast Asia. As I have shown, the majority of Protestant missionaries who are responsible for the conversion of the Hmong are of Hmong ethnic background and are based in the United States. They are carrying out underground missions that are strictly prohibited by the state authorities. There are a number of similarities and differences between the current Hmong missionaries and the missionaries from Europe and the United States who came to Southeast Asia in the early nineteenth century. Let me first sketch out the differences.

Whereas the latter mostly carried out their missions under the protection and encouragement of colonial authorities (with the exception of missionaries in French Indochina and in Thailand), the former conduct their activities under secretive circumstances to avoid being arrested because their work is strictly prohibited by the state authorities in Vietnam, China, and Laos, the countries where they operate. The aura surrounding the act of becoming a missionary means different things to the two groups. For colonial missionaries, this was a calling that entailed leaving home, perhaps forever, working among people of wholly alien cultures, and undergoing the hardships of physical discomfort and ill health (Kyes 1996: 282). For the Hmong missionaries, the secretive and dangerous nature of the underground missions lends a heroic aura to their work. Unlike their colonial colleagues, the Hmong, the experience of going to Asia for missionary work is not an act of leaving home forever, but more like extended transnational travel, which makes them more cosmopolitan in the eyes of their community in the United States and in the eyes of the marginalized ethnic fellows they encounter in Vietnam, Laos, and China. While hardships of physical discomfort and ill health were life-threatening risks faced by colonial European and American missionaries, today these factors rarely exist at the same extreme levels as before, and often impart an adventurous tone to the missionary narratives of the contemporary Hmong.

The most important difference between the Hmong missionaries and their colonial colleagues are their respective relationships to the people they seek to convert and to the culture they aim to reform. For European and American missionaries, being missionaries meant working among people of wholly alien languages and cultures. In the alien worlds of Southeast Asia, European and American missionaries had no authority when they entered societies where “their very strangeness made them a curiosity, they were outsiders whose spoken language, much less written language, was totally incomprehensible to almost everyone they sought to convert” (Kyes 1996: 282). For the Hmong missionaries, this is not the case. The rapid growth of the Hmong Christian population in Asia today is attributed to the fact that it was Hmong missionaries who evangelized the other Hmong, something
that the pastor Timothy Vang (1998) describes in theological terms as the “homogeneous unit principle,” which I have mentioned above.

Despite these differences, there are some obvious similarities between the two groups of missionaries. First, both groups to some extent seem to share the same conviction that they had—and continue to have—a moral obligation to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet heard it. Second, their missionary zeal—the wish to become a missionary—has its roots in the conversion experience that they themselves had gone through, something similar to Brumberg’s (1980) finding that the roots of the first American foreign missions could be traced back to the “Second Awakening” of the early nineteenth century. As I have described in detail elsewhere (Ngo 2013), the American social context of the diasporic community from which today’s missionaries come, and the conversion experience that they themselves went through, are crucially important factors that explain their wish to become missionaries.

Against the general background of colonialism wherein missionaries are often seen as siding with the colonial power, several anthropologists have pointed out that many such relationships were often rather ambiguous; there has always been tension between the colonial state, which wanted to guarantee peace and quiet, and the missionaries, who attacked native customs and created unrest. This is because, as Pels (1997: 172) explains, “[I]n individually, missionaries often resisted collaboration with colonial authorities, but they supported them by education and conversion.” Missionaries occupied a special position at the juncture of the colonial technologies of domination and self-control as a result of their religious teaching and their massive involvement in the colonial education system, but at the same time they were relatively independent from the practice of colonial control. Pels (1997: 172) also notes that for the colonized “education and conversion became technologies of self-control that enabled subordination of, but at the same time structured resistance to, Christianity, colonialism, and their trappings.” Similarly, in the case of marginalized ethnic minorities who become the major subject of evangelical missions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, conversion has often been interpreted as entailing a much more complicated power relation than in the case of majority groups converting to Christianity. It is seen as both a “mimicry” (Ilhaub 1994) of the Western power and a turn to modernity by disadvantaged minorities, and at the same time as resistance against their adversity, that is, resistance against the majority’s domination and authority (Cheung 1995; Kyes 1996; Salomink 2009).

Ever since Protestantism first reached the Hmong, the Northern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (NECV) has been a mediator for most of the actual contact between Hmong converts and Hmong missionaries. The church receives Bibles and religious materials as well as funding from overseas missionary organizations. These resources are then distributed among Hmong converts via a network of house churches approved by the church. If overseas Hmong missionaries want to organize pastoral and theological training for Hmong converts, they need permission from the NECV. Then they must deal with local logistics. The course participants are chosen by the NECV. In the beginning, the NECV was more eager to facilitate these activities, but has been much less so in the last five years. Many missionaries and house church leaders complain that the church has become much more particular about which missionaries it is willing to support locally and that it now asserts more control and censorship over the contents of the courses that Hmong missionaries want to offer.

One reason for this changed situation is that the NECV, like any established Protestant church, has a tendency to assert as much control as possible over the activities of its branch churches, which always have the potential to break away and establish a new congregation. The NECV did not want this to happen in the case of the Hmong church, which was still largely underground, and thus the Hmong church had limited control over its own organization and development.

Another reason has to do with the NECV’s own political status in Vietnam. Protestant missionaries started exploring Vietnam as a potential evangelical target in the late nineteenth century, but did not succeed in getting permission from the French colonial authorities to proselytize until 1931. In that year, Robert A. Iaffray, Paul M. Hoder, and G. Lloyd Hugl leaders of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, bought a small property in Da Nang in order to open the first Protestant chapel and seminary in Indochina. In 1937, the Vietnamese Protestant church was established under the name of the Vietnamese General Confederation of Evangelical Churches. In 1945, it was renamed the Northern Vietnamese Evangelical Church. At the time, it had 15,000 Protestants organized in 100 chapters. In 1954, there were more than 60,000 Protestants organized in 104 chapters and nearly 300 pastors and missionaries. Among them were 6,000 ethnic minority people from the Central Highlands. After the Geneva Agreement (1954), Protestantism developed differently in the North and the South. Most of the followers and clergy in the North fled to the South. The headquarters of the Vietnamese General Confederation of Evangelical Churches moved to Saigon. In the North, only about 1,000 followers and a dozen pastors and preachers remained. After three years of maintaining these chapters, the followers established their own church in 1955 and named it the Vietnamese Confederation of Evangelicals. From 1945 until today, the Evangelical Protestant Church of Vietnam in the North generally has not had an easy relationship with the Vietnamese government. The origins of the church and its links with American Protestant churches have made it a constant object of surveillance by the Vietnamese state authorities. In its relatively short history...
of facilitating the Protestant conversion of the Hmong, the Church came into conflicts with the state on many occasions, and senior pastors were arrested several times by provincial authorities for proselytizing "illegally" while touring Hmong villages. It is understandable that today the NECV has become more selective in the kinds of activities it wants to facilitate and the kinds of evangelism it is willing to support.

This explains why many of the Hmong American pastors say that they prefer to work with Hmong Christian leaders in Vietnam via the intermediary role of the Chinese church. It is very difficult to obtain permission and support to work among the Hmong population via the NECV, especially when these Hmong American pastors do not have direct institutional linkages. Sue proudly praised the spirit of brotherly generosity shown to him and his Christian villagers by their American Hmong brothers. He told me about how "Hmong brothers and sisters in America are always willing to help the Hmong in Vietnam." For example, in 2008 he secretly brought a group of three American Hmong missionaries to his house church. Seeing how shabby and small the house church was, one of the missionaries suggested that Sue and his congregation rebuild the house. Sue told them that it had always been his dream as well as that of his congregation to have a big church to honor God, but unfortunately they did not have the financial means to pursue that dream. Another missionary then asked how much money they would need to build such a church. Sue answered that it would cost around one billion dong (570,000). The missionaries said "without hesitation" that they could "easily" contribute that money. Sue told me this story while we were sitting in his newly built house/church, which is a little less shabby, but still rather small; it does not look like a building on whose construction one billion dong had been spent. Perhaps seeing a cloud of doubt pass over my face, Sue added: "But after discussing the matter with others, we decided not to do it (build the church) yet. The government does not allow us to build a big church and they will certainly give us trouble about why we suddenly have such a big sum of money. So in the end, we just received a smaller sum, just enough to erect this wooden house, using the grounds of my house, so that we would have enough space for everybody in Cardamom Hill to use it as a prayer hall."

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined the ethnic and transnational dimensions of the Hmong conversion. I have shown that thanks to the work of the media and the continued importance of kinship and ethnic relationships, at both local and transnational levels, the overseas Hmong missionaries and their Vietnamese Hmong followers are bound together in a "single field of social relation" (Basch, Schiller, and Scantlon-Blanc 1994:5). I have argued that the strength of ethnic ties is one of the most important motivations for overseas Hmong to carry out missionary work in Vietnam, and it is also the primary reason why evangelism, carried out by Hmong missionaries, was so readily accepted by so many Hmong people in the country.

Missionary zeal among the Hmong is the result of an incomplete conversion from the traditional religion of the Hmong to Christianity, and at the same time the result of the incomplete process of Hmong refugees becoming Hmong Americans. The incompleteness of both conversions may be explained by the binary logic of American assimilation and minority identity politics. In the second section of this article, I examined the ethnic and transnational dimensions of the Hmong conversion to Protestantism and American assimilationism. For many Hmong Americans, becoming a missionary is one of the solutions to the contradictions they experience in their lives. To their Asian Hmong ethnic fellows, evangelism is an act of paying one's dues to one's kinnaver elsewhere, as well as an act of rewriting modernity. This remittance of faith and remittance of modernity is a double-edged sword. It transforms Hmong society in Vietnam via massive conversion, but by doing so it effectively leads to the disappearance of traditional culture for which American Hmong have a longing.

NOTES


All names of people and places in this essay are pseudonyms.

In order to do so, I did conduct single-location based ethnography that carried out for six months in Vietnam and for six months in the United States, along with three shorter field trips to the other side of the Chinese border, one in Lao Cai, Vietnam, and one trip to areas in China. In Vietnam, I conducted preliminary research during three months (November 2004 to February 2005), following research during two one-month trips (January 2006 and January 2007), and intensive research during a two month trip (September 2007 to June 2008). In the United States, I began my research with a three-week visit to Minnesota in March 2006 initially planned for attending the first international Hmong studies conference. In summer 2006, I returned to the Midwest to attend the Hmong language course at Madison, Wisconsin, while making several trips to visit Hmong communities in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Minneapolis. The second trip was conducted during this year formed the methodology of my fieldwork networks in summer 2008. The major methodology employed throughout the fieldwork is participatory observation and personal in-depth interviews. The information that I aimed to reflect is mainly qualitative. It includes personal narratives, life stories, and descriptions of relationships, behavior, and institutions that I observed in the field. A considerable number of scholarly works in and outside Vietnam are analyzed.
To provide an understanding of the different perspectives regarding Hmong conversion in Vietnam, three key factors to the questionnaires include quantitative data, and these factors each yield results which are organized elsewhere (Igie 2011). The quantitative information needed for supporting my research is mainly secured based data and government census data.

* This war was severe because, according to the 1994 Vietnam Account, Laos had been designated a neutral territory. Yet, with the escalation of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) started recruiting Hmong men, among other hill tribes in Laos, to rescue American pilots who had been shot down while bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The main supply base for the Vietnamese communist forces (VC/ NVA) from North to South Vietnam, which traversed through some parts of Laos territory. While the Hmong were told that the Americans would come to their aid should the war go badly, most Americans were not informed about the involvement in Laos until 1970. Most Americans do not know how the Secret War in Laos has disturbed the life not only of the Hmong but also of the many other ethnic minorities in Laos.

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