



MMG Working Paper 09-11 • ISSN 2192-2357

TAM NGO

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of the Hmong in Vietnam

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Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
Göttingen

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ISSN 2192-2357 (MMG Working Papers Print)

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Introduction

In the world today, “the return of religion” is often seen as being characterized by the use of the media rather than by its rejection (Weber, 2001: 55). This, however, confronts the modernist idea that linear modernization, secularization, and differentiation all contribute to the logic of disenchantment. In fact, various forms of mass mediation of religion all over the globe challenge the hitherto widely held assumption that with the global spread of “modernity”, societies will become more and more differentiated, and religion will retreat into its own domain of “the sacred” and “the private” (Clark and Hoover 1997). In the 21st century, it is difficult to conceive of religion as being detached from the dizzying array of media that amplify and circulate its ideas and practices. Although people are now beginning to recognize the significance of this connection, there are very few academic locations where the necessary interdisciplinary academic expertise is available for understanding these processes across diverse traditions, past and present.

Another significant development, or one of ‘the most striking developments’ in the history of modern civilizations, as Hefner (1993) argues, has been the conversion of tribal and non-state peoples to more expansively organized ‘world’ religions. However, in searching the fast-growing body of literature on religious conversion, it is surprising to find how neglected is the mass media’s contribution to this development. Perhaps this is because the idea that mission via media could generate the act of conversion is hard to imagine, since conversion is often seen as one of the most profound transformations an individual or a community can experience. Classic missionary narratives about the conversion of indigenous people provided by Christian missionary literature, for example, often depict mission as a lengthy and complicated task requiring missionaries to stay in close physical and spiritual contact with their targeted groups and to have a great deal of charisma and bravery, love and compassion, patience and devotion towards their flock. There are also numerous cases of de-conversion among Christians of post-colonial societies wherein the end of colonialism brought about the physical absence of missionaries among the converts (Tran 1996, Ngo 2005).

However, conversions to world religions of indigenous people, of whom the conversion to Evangelical Protestantism of the Hmong examined in this study is but one example, are now being significantly effected through transnational religious broadcastings.

With a population of 787.000 people, the Hmong are one of the 54 officially-recognized ethnic minority groups of Vietnam. Originally from China, the Hmong migrated to Vietnam during the last two centuries and made their home in high-land areas near the country's borders with China and Laos. As recorded in the massive *Histoire Des Miao* (1924) by Savina, a French Catholic missionary stationed in Sapa, Laocai, some Hmong began to undergo religious changes in the early twentieth century. The rest of this ethnic group, however, had never heard of Evangelical Protestantism until the late 1980s, when some of them accidentally found the Christian proselytizing programmes broadcast by the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) from the Manila Station on SW 25 between 6.00 to 6.30 am and 6.00 to 6.30 pm daily. Conversions of Hmong to Evangelical Protestantism soon occurred and are still occurring on a massive scale. It is remarkable that just over one decade later, there are already around 300,000 Hmong in several Northern provinces of Vietnam claiming themselves to be believers in Evangelical Protestantism.

The conversion of the Hmong is an extremely complicated ongoing transformation¹. My aim in this paper is, therefore, only to understand why the conversions of thousands of Hmong could be made possible by FEBC's proselytizing programmes. In section 2, I will start with a discussion of some theoretical issues in the conceptualization of the relation between religion and media and how they provide epistemological and methodological frameworks for the understanding of the Hmong conversion. Section 3, then examines the history and strategies of FEBC programmes. Section 4 describes how the Hmong responded to FEBC's call for faith in Christianity. In my conclusion (Section 5), I shall indicate several critical questions that deserve more empirical and epistemological attention in religious studies.

Religion and media: a dialectical relationship

Is the connection between religion and media that one can witness in the world today something entirely new? Religious ideas, as history records, have circulated through a variety of media for millennia. This can be explained by the fact that mediation is inherent in religion itself. Mediation of magic and miracles has never been possible without introducing a certain technicity and, quite literally, manipulation (De Vries, 2001; 24). Being very crucial in shaping religious experience, such spectacles as the crucifixion or the revelation of divine knowledge, however, have been mediated

to religious adherents through various forms, from textual to contextual, or from audible to visual. Thus, rather than assuming the connection between religion and media to be uniquely modern, we should try to understand their original relationship. As is increasingly realised among scholars of religious studies, revealing the key nature of this relationship may help us to explain a broad range of phenomena: from the historical circulation of portable print texts such as Buddhist sutras and the Jewish Torah; to the spread of Koranic tafsir throughout the Muslim world on audiocassettes, and the worldwide circulation of Christian evangelical broadcasting, of which the FEBC is but one example; and most recently, the proliferation of religious practices of all sorts on the Internet.

Yet, to understand of the nature of this relationship is not an easy task. There have been numerous academic attempts to recognize the significance of the study of media as an aspect of religious practices (e.g. De Witte 2003, De Vries and Weber 2001, Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Hackett 1998, Hoover and Lundby 1997, Stout and Buddenbaum 1996). Representing different intellectual traditions, these new studies move beyond a prevailing intellectual prejudice against popular media as a degrading influence on, if not as an antagonistic competitor with, religious life. Yet, even when a relationship between religion and media is acknowledged, there is still a tendency to perceive the assumed link between religion and media as often an instrumentalization of one by the other. In other words, this relationship is often seen as un-dialectical, as if media formed the mere vehicle of religion, or perhaps that the medium was endeavouring to create religion in its own image. As De Vries (2001; 19) critically points out, "Medium is not secondary, nor is the religious mere epiphenomenon. This is what even the most promising theoretizations of the contemporary social and cultural work seem to overlook."

Scholarships that regard the relation between religion and media also often raise the question why the global mediatization of religion we are witnessing today is more fundamentally Christian than Jewish, Islamic, or Buddhist. Apparently, no other group of people have been so quick to realize and embrace the potential of electronic communications as the Evangelical Christians. What insights does this fact contribute to our understanding of the creative agency of the religious, in particular the Christian religious? In other words, to what extent does this fact answer for us the question of whether there are historical structures of possibility that are more available in one religion than in others, especially in the field of technological media? If there are such potentials, what do they mean epistemologically and methodologically for the topic we are addressing?

A Bible message taken seriously, particularly by Evangelical Christians, is that about the Great Mission: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" [Mark 16:15]. Yet, this does not really explain why Evangelical Christians were the first to view the ability to communicate over the air-waves as a gift from God intended to be used to fulfil the Great Mission. There are similar messages in Islamic, Judaic, or Buddhist traditions, but the first transmission of the human voice over the air (December 24, 1906) was, of course, a religious communication, not about Abraham the Patriarch, or Buddha, but about God and his son Jesus Christ. However, this proved to be the beginning of a tradition. A century later, Christian broadcastings, especially Evangelical Protestant programmes, are still dominant in the religious mediascape worldwide. In the U.S.A., religious broadcasting has been an integral part of American culture since the very beginning of radio.

So even if the biblical potential is not enough to warrant the Christian privilege, what other factors could explain such a huge achievement of this religion in using mass media to undertake their mission in the contemporary world? First, if one regards as a 'medium', be it technological and/or religious/spiritual, that which is aimed at creating a connection between the present and the absent, or between the visibly present and the invisibly present, or between the physical and spiritual (De Witte, 2003; 174), then at the very core, every religion is a kind of mediation between, first, the physical and the spiritual world, and second, the individual person and the religious community. In this sense, a religion's success in using technological media to effect this function depends on the structural potential of the religion itself. Evangelical Protestantism is, of course, structured around the idea that individuals can directly connect to God via the Bible – God's words, and around the emphasis of personal interpretation of the Bible. This feature meshes very well with the character of the radio medium that it is also very personal. Indeed receiving the gospels via radio voice provides space into which an individual fill his own imagination of the connection he has with God. This space is larger than that created by television or by other forms of visual mediation, since images also have as their downside that they can narrow the gap of imagination, or create an "inactivity of imagination", and de-personalize the message they carry. Second, the concept of medium also infers the existence of a public sphere, a presumed public or audience. It strongly insists on the importance of receiving God's words in one's own language; in fact, Evangelical Protestantism is the religion with the longest history of translating the Bible into various forms of vernacular languages. Along with this tradition of translation, of course, a considerable amount of knowledge about the cultures in which the ver-

nacular languages are embedded was also acquired by the Evangelists. This explains why most of the Evangelical Protestant radio ministries, of which FEBC is among the largest, have an immense capacity to design programmes to fit the cultural and psychological tastes of various indigenous peoples.

In the following sections, I shall examine the case of FEBC's broadcasts and the Hmong's responses, to illustrate how the historical context is crucial in the success of Evangelical Protestantism to instrumentalize radio for their mission. Having their message mediated by technological media gives Evangelical Protestantism a new mediatic character.

Intentional Projects: The works of the Far East Broadcasting Company

General history and strategies

It is said that the Americans tend to be among the most religious people of the world today.² Missionary outreach is a strong Christian tendency, but for the Americans it is even more of a life goal (Keyes, 1996). Religious broadcasting since its very beginning has been an integral part of American culture, first domestically and then it was only a matter of time before some organizations would seek to extend this activity to other parts of the world, where Christians were in the minority or even altogether absent. This is the context of the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC), a non-denominational international Christian radio, which was founded in 1945, by a U.S. evangelical organization,³ and became the third largest international broadcasting station in the world. From the beginning, FEBC's interest was to reach both the converted and unconverted, the latter in particular. As its history dates back to the close of World War II, when countless U.S. soldiers were returning home from the conflict in the Pacific, newly aware (as they saw it) of the great spiritual needs of Asia, FEBC's goal was to meet this perceived need. Thus, not only did it choose a foreign location – Manila – but also its programme schedule was rich in evangelizing messages, religious music and specific examples of conversions to Christianity on the part of listeners. This is quite significantly different from that of the Vatican Radio, the first international religious broadcasting, which attempted to serve Catholics wherever they might be, but particularly in remote locations, and the programme schedule was dominated by talks, masses, etc., that would help to make up for the

absence of a Catholic church or priest. Today, as self-claimed, FEBC broadcasts the gospel in 158 languages from 36 transmitters located throughout the world with programmes that reach an area in which two-thirds of the world's population live and FEBC receives in excess of 750.000 listeners' responses annually.

Among FEBC's programmes, the "Unreached People Groups" (UPGs) is a special one for which FEBC devotes particular attention and strategies. "An Unreached People Group" (also referred to as 'Hidden People' or 'Forgotten People') is defined as "an identifiable group of people distinguished by a distinct culture, language, or social class who lack a community of Christians able to evangelize them without outside help." According to this definition, FEBC sees the only opportunity for these groups to hear about salvation as being through an "external witness." Historically, an "external witness" was a Western missionary committed to sharing Christ with a people group, but these days this can be replaced by "indigenous missionaries" and "gateway" groups to reach their non-Christian neighbours. Since indigenous means "native to a specific area", "an indigenous missionary is a person who shares his faith with his own people. He has a great advantage over foreign-born missionaries because he understands the language and culture and is thus more effective in leading people to Christ."⁴ Likewise, the "Gateway" groups are seen as people who live in close proximity to other minority groups. When gateway people are exposed to the gospel and become believers, they become a conduit to surrounding unreached groups. Two examples of "gateway" people are the Khmu of Laos, who are successfully evangelizing neighbouring Laotian minorities, and the Chin, a minority group living in Burma, who are reaching out to the Shan, also of Burma."⁵

According to the FEBC, radio can also be an "external witness". "Many regions that are inaccessible to man – either geographically or politically – can easily be reached by radio waves. Radio is resource efficient: a few dollars pays for one minute of airtime, touching the lives of those in remote areas where most have never seen a pastor, teacher or missionary; the skills for just a few workers can reach thousands who have not even heard the name of Jesus."⁶ Seeing the efficiency of radio as such, FEBC has called for support from donors for a programme to give radio to its listeners. "Portable Missionaries" was a term coined in the early 1950s when staff members from FEBC Philippines designed and constructed transistor radios for the purpose of giving them to people in remote areas. The "box that can talk" brought them the Good News in their own language. PM radios continue to be effective means of sharing the gospel with people who live in restricted access countries or those unable to attend a local church.

Perceiving that there are still so many more UPGs in the world who have not heard of the Gospels, FEBC presses on, one language and one people group at a time in order to follow Jesus' commandment to "go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations."⁷ Today FEBC claims to minister to over 100 different UPGs in Asia. Explaining why the UPGs seem to respond so favourably to the gospels, FEBC believes that one of the reasons for the massive growth in Christianity among minority groups is the sense of dignity and worth that indigenous broadcasts offer them. People from these backgrounds "grapple with persecution and discrimination most of their lives, but when they hear a radio message spoken in their own language, it validates them. Many minority groups see the broadcasts as their only means of Christian instruction and fellowship."⁸

The Hmong Mission: Indigenization of Christianity in the Transnational Sphere

Since the 1950s, as Keyes (1996; 286) observed, there has been a concerted effort on the part of almost all Protestant denominations in Southeast Asia to "indigenize" their local congregations. "Indigenization has meant, first and foremost, replacing Western missionaries by local clergy and lay leaders. At a deeper level it also involves re-working the religious message of Protestantism in indigenous languages using local meaningful idioms and expressed in ritual linked to local social processes." On the basis of this definition, can we see the FEBC's programme for the Hmong as also a kind of indigenization of Christianity? And if we can, what are the implications of this as regards the indigenization of world religions to local practice in the transnational sphere?

In fact, the history of the development of the Hmong programme of FEBC clearly shows a tendency to "indigenization" of Evangelical Protestantism in Hmong culture (Clifford, 2001). Moreover, the particularity of the Hmong history in 20th century Asia makes it possible that this "indigenization" has indeed been done in the transnational sphere. First, in terms of personnel, there has been a gradual replacement of Westerners by Hmong pastors/speakers. FEBC began broadcasting from Manila to the Hmong hill tribes in Laos as early as 1953. Yet during these early days, the stories of "God loves the Hmong" were not received by most of the Hmong there, as they were told by a Westerner and were in the Laotian language. At first only some educated members of this ethnic group who also spoke Laotian were able to listen

to the broadcasts, and some of these formed the first generation of Hmong Evangelicals in Southeast Asia. Even though the success in these early days was rather modest, its importance is not to be underestimated. From this first generation of Hmong Evangelicals in Laos, a crucial human resource was established to provide important Hmong agents and missionaries who helped to achieve the future victory of FEBC's mission to the Hmong not only in Asia but also among overseas Hmong communities.⁹

After the evacuation of Laos in 1975, programmes for the Hmong broadcasts for the FEBC were made in a makeshift studio in a trailer caravan in Loei, Northern Thailand, just across the Mekong River from Laos. But this was only a temporary measure. Perceiving a great need to encourage and support the Hmong Christians back in Laos, FEBC saw the necessity to establish a long-term production not only to meet this need but also that of thousands of Hmong refugees in camps in Thailand strung along the Laos border, a community which continued to grow in size even years and years after the end of the war in Laos. They certainly had huge needs and a lot of uncertainties, especially about the future. In 1979, FEBC set up the Hmong programme department in California with the aim of better serving the spiritual needs of these Hmong refugees. Also from 1979 the involvement in this project of members of a newly formed Hmong refugee community in the U.S. increased and became a decisive factor in the success of the project. Among the first Hmong staff members of FEBC, Vam Txoob Lis, or John Lee, and his wife, Pail, were the major figures. From their home in California, they had recorded more than a hundred hours of preaching which were sent to Manila FEBC station to broadcast to Hmong region in Asia.

In term of the indigenization of the Christian message, in Keyes' (1996) or Clifford's (2001) sense, it was the Lees who made a significant advancement of this task. They made a remarkable change in the content of the Hmong programmes. Various elements of Hmong traditional culture started to be incorporated into the programmes. Details of Hmong legendary and folkloric stories were used as reference to explain the Bible. "He [John] brought hope to his listeners by telling them of Fua Tai [or Vaj Tsw] – the God of Heaven – whom they could know for themselves. There was a way back to him through faith in Jesus! The Hmong had known through their oral history that they had become separated from Fua Tai – but now John was assuring them of a way back."¹⁰ The Lees also made partner with a female Hmong missionary¹¹ who has been famous for singing biblical stories, using Hmong Kwvthiab, or Hmong traditional ballad singing technique. Since Christian messages

were indigenized into the Hmong culture, they have been received by a much larger audience than their messengers had intended to reach. They therefore did actually create a Hmong public which is rather "self-organized", a very interesting fact which definitely deserves another study. This public was made up from the Lees' ethnic fellows who resided not only in Laos and Thailand but also in China, Burma and Vietnam. FEBC only knew about this unexpected effect when:

"Letters began to pour in from these countries. They spoke a common language of fear of evil spirits, and release from the spirits, of sickness and appeasing the spirits by costly sacrifice. Letters poured in faster than John and Pail could answer them – but they became excellent program fodder for John as he spoke about their questions and gave answers based on Scripture. Little did anyone know at that time that the programs were having a profound impact upon Hmong living in the mountain provinces of northern Vietnam. The first news of any stirring among the Hmong of Vietnam came through a surprising source – an article in a Hanoi newspaper in 1988 (?) written by a communist cadre lamenting the fact that many Hmong were becoming Christians. They were selling their livestock, going out and buying radios, and tuning in to Christian broadcasts from Manila. More than that, they were turning to the God of Heaven and becoming Christians. Large numbers were suggested: 250,000 was the Communist estimate."¹²

Unexpected Responses: Protestantism and the Hmong in Northern Vietnam

Mr. L, 74 years old and a 20 year Christian convert recalled the first time he heard of the Good News some 20 years ago. In the late 1980s, when his home village, Sa Pả became overpopulated, Mr. L's family and three others packed up their few possessions and hit the road to the empty mountains of Than Uyên where there was still some unclaimed arable land. Being a low ranking government cadre, Mr. L's working unit (tổ công tác), gave him a small National radio with all AM, FM, and SW frequency, which became his family's only source of entertainment after they settled down in their remote mountain. One day, not so long after arriving in the new home, while turning randomly through all channels searching for a comprehensible voice, he stopped at a frequency and couldn't believe his ears: he heard a Hmong voice. Since nearly one decade before when the last Hmong programme of the government's radio had stopped, Mr. L hadn't heard any Hmong voice on the air. Moreover, there was something special about this voice, as it was a warm and loving voice of a man telling an interesting story in a very relaxed manner, similar to the way a Hmong

father would tell a story to his children. Unfortunately, before he could understand what the story was about, the man announced that he was *xwb fwb* Vam Txoob Lis, (pastor, or teacher John Lees) and that the morning section would end here, but would continue later that day, at 6pm on the same frequency. That day Mr. L felt very anxious. He looked forward to 6pm to turn the radio on. Worried of not being able to find the channel anymore, he left the navigator at the same place and just turned the radio off. 6 pm finally arrived, Mr. L turned the radio on and his whole family was speechless to find a beautiful piece of music played to open the way for pastor Vam Txoob's story. This time Mr. L could hear clearly that the story was about Vaj Tswv (God), a Hmong king which he also knew from the time he was a child, under the name Fuab Tais. pastor Vam Txoob also said that Vaj Tswv loved the Hmong and he would return to help the Hmong one day. The other details such as human sin; the teaching that Vaj Tswv's son, tus Tsuav Yesu (Lord Jesus Christ) was sent by God to come to die to save mankind; and the discussion of the evil Sa Taab (Satan) – all these took Mr. L many more days of listening to *xwb fwb* to grasp some comprehension. Yet the message about Vaj Tswv struck Mr. L at once. Even though it was already dark, he sent his second son to the house of his friend who lived two hills away from his house to ask him to come over, for 'important business.'

When Mr. K, the friend and nearest neighbour arrived, the two men, surrounded by Mrs. L and the children, talked till very late that night trying to make sense of what the message was really about. Next morning, they got up together very early, turned the radio on and waited for the voice of pastor Vam Txoob. From that day on, Mr. K came over to Mr. L's house as often as possible to listen to the radio because he didn't have one at the time. Their wives and children also loved to join listening, especially stories that were told by pastor Vam Txoob's wife, *niam xwb fwb* Paj (Pail). They cried and couldn't agree more with pastor when he described how difficult and suffering a Hmong life was and how tired the Hmong were from having to satisfy the endless demands of spirits (*dab*). They were touched when pastor said that he would pray to Vaj Tswv to help them. They loved the music that was played between stories, and they thought the advice of pastor on 'the way of eating and doing' (*kev noj kev uas*) was convincing (*zoob*).

Some months after that, at the Sunday markets in Than Uyên , they began to hear of a widespread rumour that Fuab Tais, or Vaj Tswv was about to return to save the Hmong, and this time, he would come back for real. People should prepare themselves to get ready to go with Fuab Tais when he returned. Some said that you got to go to Bắc Quang, Hà Giang to look for Vaj Tswv, some others said that you

just stopped going to work on the field, stayed home, ate all stored food and cattle, because when Vaj Tswv came, he would only take people with him to the Hmong land where all houses filled with foods and tools awaited them. Some added that you had to buy Hmong handmade hemp clothes to hang in front of the house so that Vaj Tswv would recognize that it was a Hmong house to come in. At the beginning of the year after that, there were even people who gathered together to learn how to fly. Feeling anxious, Mr. L and Mr. K asked around and learned that these rumours came from people who listened to a Hmong voice from short waved radio. Yet, such details of the rumours to stop working to wait for the King didn't make sense to them. All they heard from the radio was just that Vaj Tswv loved the Hmong and that he would send his son with a book to teach the Hmong a new way. Also, to eat all stored food was not an option for them in their situation of constant food shortage. Learning that there were Hmong villagers in Lai Châu who had stopped working in the fields but that Vaj Tswv hadn't come to take them with him, so they ended up in having no food and had to dig banana roots to eat, Mr. L and Mr. K decided to continue growing the next crop.

Meanwhile, they kept listening to the radio, until one day, after telling his Vaj Tswv story, *pastor* Vam Txoob suddenly addressed himself to 'our Hmong people living in Vietnam' (*peb Hmoob nyob hauv Nyab Laj teb*) that he was very happy to learn that everybody listened to his stories. In the coming days, pastor continued to address to 'Vietnamese Hmong' (*cov neeg Hmoob Nyab Laj*). He said that he had also heard of the rumours. They were false and people shouldn't follow them. Both Mr. L and Mr. K were very relieved. Later that year, pastor instructed them to come to the Evangelical Church in Number 2 Ngõ Trạm, Hanoi to fetch the book of written words from Vaj Tswv's son, Jesus Christ. It took Mr. L another year before he could gather enough money to travel to Hanoi. When Mr. L arrived at that address, he was received very warmly by a man of Kinh ethnicity who said he was also an pastor. In the three days he stayed there, the religion of God was explained to him: about how the greatest sacrifice that God had made for mankind was by letting his only son come and die to redeem mankind from their sins, as well as instructions on how to become a Christian. Also in those three days in Hanoi, one of Mr. L's life dreams came true: he saw uncle Hồ (Hồ Chí Minh), even though not alive but in his mausoleum. When he got home, Mr. L burned his family ancestor altar and invited his relatives and friends for a dinner where he announced that his family had become Christian.

(Fieldwork note, Than Uyên December 2005 and Sa Pa November 2007)

Conversion

The story of Mr. L above illustrates in miniature the way in which many Hmong in Vietnam received and responded to the evangelical programmes of the FEBC. Even though FEBC broadcasted the gospel in the Hmong language from the very early years of the 1980s, it was only after the second half of the decade that the Hmong in Vietnam started responding to this message. One of the explanations for this is that, as one Hmong informant told me, there were extremely few Hmong at that time who had radios. In fact, radios and most electronic items were luxury commodities which virtually only rich people from the city could afford in Vietnam in the 1980s. By the mid-1980s, as a result of the significant economic achievement of China, some industrial commodities, including radios run by battery, started to be available in black markets existing along the border between the two countries, despite that border's being officially closed during the border war in 1979. Being the residents of these areas, some Hmong whose prosperity came from opium production could purchase radios among other goods at these border markets. When the number of radios increased among these communities there was no other channel broadcast in the Hmong language except that of the FEBC. In turning through possible channels, just as Mr. L did, the Hmong found FEBC by accident, and many were soon attracted to the Lees' stories. From then on, thanks to word of mouth, many more Hmong people became a regular audience of the Lee's morning and evening sections.

The appeal of the FEBC programmes to the Hmong was due not only to the Lees' charismatic and elegant style of story telling, but also to the content of these stories. As mentioned above, the messages about Fuab Tais or Vaj Tswv [or Vang Tru in the Vietnamese translation¹³] meshed with the story of the legendary Hmong King about whom the Hmong folklore tales still told and from whom the Hmong had been separated since they lost their Kingdom in China. The Hmong's hopes and imagination had also been nurtured in their folklore repertoire by the idea that Vaj Tswv would come back one day to save the Hmong from their suffering life, and bring happiness, wealth, prosperity, and eventually a righteous Kingdom for them. When the personage Vaj Tswv was described as being actually the father of Jesus Christ and they were told that believing in Vaj Tswv requires believing in Jesus Christ as well, thousands of Hmong converted to Christianity as a consequence. This can be illustrated in the following letter of a man from Vietnam to FEBC:

Dear Mrs. Lee,

Everyone that accepts the faith does it through your radio program exclusively. After Pastor John died, it seemed as if we were without a father. Because we feel that all of this is a family. However, we want to thank God that we have come to accept the faith. Many of us in fact. But despite us being sad, we are happy that one day we will meet Pastor John in heaven.

There is so much to like about your programs be it the music you put on or the gospel that you preach. It encourages all of us greatly. The program does very much to feed our hunger for Christ.

Please pray that more of us will come to know the Lord. Thanks.

(Mr. X, Hmong from Vietnam, august 2004)¹⁴

Religious conversion is a cultural project entailing the multifaceted, ongoing transformation of a person's patterns of behaviour, way of thinking and daily life. The conversion initiated by FEBC is just the beginning of a complicated trajectory through which a convert Hmong has asserted him/herself as a Christian and in which the on-air missionaries had a lot more work to do. Upon realising the existence of a mass audience in Vietnam, FEBC has tailored its Hmong programme based on a close audience relationship. As mentioned in a quote from the FEBC website above, the letters (messages recorded in cassette tapes) sent to FEBC by the Hmong in Vietnam helped the Lees to redesign their programme to match their audience's needs. Missionaries who are Hmong were sent on field trips to visit various Hmong communities in Vietnam. Cooperation was established with the Northern Evangelical Church in Hanoi. This church soon became the major channel facilitating the flows of Bibles, cassettes recording sermons and other religious materials between FEBC and the Hmong. The church also provided leaders of many newly converted communities hundreds of thousand copies of a registration form. Any Hmong convert filled his/her name and address in the form and that would become a proof that legitimized their new faith, at least to the Evangelical church and therefore they could expect support from the church. Many of my informants recalled how helpful the radio was in instructing them on what to do during that period and in the following years when the government started to show disapproval of their conversion.

Another fascinating work that the FEBC did was to teach the Hmong how to use the Hmong Romanized Phonetic Alphabet (RPA). The RPA is a practical orthography based on the Roman alphabet and developed in Laos in the early 1950s by the missionary linguists Linwood Barney, Yves Bertrais, and William Smalley. There are

other writing systems – both older and more recent – for Hmong, but the RPA is not only the orthography that is accepted by the Hmong resettled in Western world. It is also the only script that is used to translate the Bible and other religious materials into Hmong. After receiving the Bible and other written religious materials, the Hmong converts were also instructed how to read this script. Mr. L from the story above had learned the Vietnamese Hmong script and worked for a while as teacher in various campaigns erasing illiteracy for the Hmong back in the 70s and 80s. Yet, according to him, it was much easier to learn the RPA, for ‘xwb fwb’s instruction was very clear and easy to understand’. He also recalled that certain animals and things that are familiar to the Hmong were used as references for memorizing certain words. That made it really so easy to learn so that, after only few months’ learning, his three older sons could already read and copy the Bible themselves, even though it was with some difficulty.

Religion as a medium

The explanations for the motivations to convert to or resist Christianity consist of long and complicated stories beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁵ I shall discuss here only a prominent feature of these motivations which infers a deeper philosophical message about the role and meaning of religion in individual and community life for the Hmong. As I mentioned earlier, their religion embedded in itself a mediatic function. For the Hmong, this mediatic function inherent in their traditional religion as the most important part of their culture is *Kevc'ai*, a term which can be translated as “customs” or “tradition”, but which literally refers to “ways” in the sense of “roads or paths”, classified predominantly as those of marriage and death, but also including those of the New Year celebrations, and more widely of birth, subsistence, litigation and dispute (Tapp, 2003). In this sense, it is the medium – the ways – that is important for them. For the Hmong in Vietnam in contact with Christianity, it is the *kevc'ai* which formed and is still forming the site of conscious, modern struggles over what tradition should now be preserved and what rejected. Christianity is most commonly translated as ‘*kevc'ai tshiab*’ or ‘new way’, and the productiveness of this translation is that the words ‘*kevc'ai qub*’ or ‘old way’ started to be used to call the Hmong traditional religious beliefs and practices. For a third of the Hmong community, Evangelical Protestantism is perceived as ‘new way’, a new road or a new ‘medium’, which

is ‘modern’ and capable of providing them with new perspectives or new philosophy of life. As conversion to Protestantism in the case of the Hmong is clearly a project of modernizing oneself and one’s world¹⁶, the FEBC’s message or the ‘good news’ may actually be itself the medium – the middle ground, and the means whereby and within which a new Christian Hmong society and cultures can be constituted. Also in this sense, it is important to note that members of the ‘remain-unconverted’ Hmong community, who although they do not share the same view on Protestant conversion as their Christian members, do increasingly share the view of their traditional *kevcai* as being “old”, “backward” and disjunctive as regards the world around them. This group therefore increasingly faces a ‘crisis’ to find a right form of medium – the middle ground and the means whereby and within which their society and culture can be reconstituted. Many members of the other part of the Hmong community (which was and still is much greater in size) and who resisted the call for faith in Jesus Christ nevertheless found FEBC’s broadcasts rather interesting. A number of my Hmong informants from the non-Christian groups admitted to me that they listen regularly to the broadcasts because “it is very interesting, from the music to stories. It is also very informative. You can learn a lot about what is going on with the Hmong abroad”.¹⁷

Conclusion

In this chapter, by examining the work of the Far East Broadcasting Company, I hope to have demonstrated that the relation between religion and media is a dialectical instead of merely instrumental one. On the one hand, Evangelical Protestantism’s success in using FEBC to spread the Gospel to indigenous people would not be possible without the religion’s biblical, historical and structural potentials. On the other hand, FEBC’s success in gathering a large listening audience, some of whom are even unexpected ones, would not be possible without being the messenger who brings the “Good News”.

It is the biblical, historical and structural potentials of Evangelical Protestantism that has helped FEBC to be successful in initiating the conversions of thousands of Hmong in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. It has done so by indigenizing thorough its entire evangelizing process. Christian messages were translated into the Hmong language and the Hmong medium, broadcasted by Hmong broadcasters

in a typical Hmong manner. In fact, until today John Lee is sometimes admirably addressed as the 'Billy Graham' of the Hmong by his missionary colleagues. Cultural repertoires such as myths and legends of the Hmong were exploited as being the best way to attract the audience's attention. Modern media techniques like public relations and audience response were employed to enhance the attractiveness of the programme. Last but not least, despite being a media ministry, FEBC works in close cooperation with local churches and agencies acting for them to 'ground' the 'aired faith' for and into the Hmong.

As I argued earlier, the conversion initiated by FEBC is just the beginning of complicated trajectory through which a convert Hmong has asserted him or herself as a Christian and it requires the on-air missionaries to be continuously active. It would be interesting to further explore other aspects of this transformation, such as how FEBC as a new media never merely conveys the same message, already by using a different scale and broadcasting at a different pace; and how these changes create a certain ambiguity in the message. How does this ambiguity turn into an obstacle or into unintentional consequences with which FEBC as a ministry of an institutionalized religion struggles?

It could also be important to study further to what extent the emerging Hmong public sphere, or precisely the audience of the listening culture created by FEBC programmes, can be characterized as an unstable, constantly contested, and contradictory normative field, as any other public sphere, in which individual and collective identities are construed and deconstructed at once. Since many conversions were initiated by women in the Hmong case (Ngo, 2005), it is interesting to examine from a gender perspective how Hmong women's religious experience is different from that of Hmong men, and to ask how gender factors influence the formation of and characterise the FEBC's listening audience. Even though the Hmong conversion context is far from any of post-theological or post-theist context, it provides us with some of the most helpful conceptual and analytical tools for understanding the complex structure and dynamics of this field, mentioned by De Vries (2001; 7) as: "more clearly than ever before, what was once considered the message – revelations or the account thereof, the "good news," etc. – as being the medium, the middle ground, and the means whereby and within which societies and cultures constitute and are always in danger of undoing themselves".

Notes

- 1 For some detail on the complicated social and cultural implications of this conversion, see Ngo, 2005. "Protestant Conversion, Social Relations and the Dilemmas of the Hmong in Northern Vietnam." Paper presented at the conference *Vietnam Update 2005*, Australia National University, Canberra, August 2005.
- 2 For a rich historical and sociological discussion of how and why the Americans have become among the most religious people in the modern world, see Casanova, Jose, 2005. "Immigrant Religions in Secular Europe and in Christian America" (Paper presented at the Seminar "*Utopias/Dystopias: Modern Desires and Their Discontents*", Utrecht University, October 21, 2005.
- 3 A U.S. evangelical organization called "Pillar of Fire" applied to the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) for a construction permit for an international shortwave station in May 1938. Frequencies were available on a "shared time" basis only, and the organization was not interested in sharing time. Jerry Ray Redding, "American Private International Broadcasting" unpublished Ph.D dissertation.
- 4 www.febc.org
- 5 www.febc.org
- 6 www.febc.org
- 7 www.febc.org
- 8 www.febc.org
- 9 The evidence for this can be traced in "Believers by the Order of the Chief", and "The Remarkable Story of John Lee" in www.febi.org.
- 10 <http://www.silentplanet.org.nz/skywaves-feb2003.html>.
- 11 The name of this missionary is omitted to protect her identity since she is currently still carrying out missionary work in Asia.
- 12 www.febc.org See the autobiography of John Lee.
- 13 There are several explanations for the term Vang Tru/ Vaj Tsw. According to one explanation, in the Hmong language, Vang/Vaj means King and Tru/Tswv means lord, master, owner, or proprietor. Together the two words refer to "the King, who is Above All and Rules All" (Lewis, 2002: 88). In another explanation, provided by several Vietnamese scholars, the term "Vang Tru" has its origin in the Chinese expression "Miao Wang Chu Shi" (Mieu Vuong Xuat – The Hmong King is coming). This expression resulted from the Hmong history of continual millenarian movements in which a messianic tendency is central. This messianic tendency is built around the notion of a Hmong king who would come down to rescue the Hmong and restore their lost kingdom. Commenting on this, Tapp shows how flawed this explanation is, as why would the Hmong use half a Chinese sentence ('Wang Chu' would mean something like "King Come" but would be ungrammatical and incorrect in both Chinese and Hmong) to refer to a person or divinity? The term Vang Tru/ Vaj Tswv is a quite normal Hmong term for "God" or "Deity". (For a full account of this messianic tendency, please see Tapp (1989a) for Tapp is the first scholar, in Saleminck's (2004) observation, to zoom in on messianism and its connection with Christian conversion).
- 14 The Hmong letter for August 2004 (www.febi.org).
- 15 For an account of these explanations see, Ngo, 2005.
- 16 For this argument of "conversion to modernities", see Van der Veer, 1996 and Ngo 2005.
- 17 Interview, December 2004.

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