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Returning Home: The Thesis of a Master

Yang Thai Vang
(Xwb Fwb Yaj Ceeb Vaj)

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Returning Home: The Thesis of a Master

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Master of Arts

Over centuries, Hmong people have moved from mountain to mountain, home to home, country to country, crossing rivers and valleys in search of an escape from oppression. The *Txiv Xaiv (Plig)* ritual and chant have survived serial exodus and diaspora that Hmong people have experienced. This ritual encodes Hmong historical and cosmological understandings as an oral text, passed down from master to student, and performed at funerals to apply that understanding in the management of souls—ultimately to send them home. The *Txiv Xaiv (Plig)* serves as a glue, connecting the past generations to the generation of today and the generations of tomorrow. A funeral without a *Txiv Xaiv* is like a tree without its roots. Its ability to preserve Hmong history, morals, and traditions is unparalleled, but the dispersion of Hmong communities across a now global diaspora threatens the vitality of this oral text.

An ethnographic film constitutes a critical and central empirical element of this thesis. This film, entitled *Returning Home*, draws on the affordances of visual and sonic mediums to both depict this oral text and the practices associated with it, and to unpack the cosmology of personhood encoded in the text, which Hickman (2014) calls “ancestral personhood”. The film centers on a particular form of the *Txiv Xaiv Plig* that was preserved by a paramount Master, Shong Ger Thao, who passed down a critical version of the ritual to the director of *Returning Home* (and author of this thesis) before he passed away. This version of the ritual has the unique capacity to manage the soul of a person who did not receive a complete funeral and proper burial when they passed away, such as the post-1975 exodus from Laos, when Hmong families had to flee for their lives and many people were killed in the jungle along the way. By fate or coincidence (most Hmong would err on the side of fate), the first time that the director of this film was called upon to perform this *Txiv Xaiv Plig* was for an ex-post-facto funeral for Master Shong Ger’s wife, Kia Yang, who had passed away during the lock-down phase of the Covid-10 pandemic, when large gatherings (necessary for a proper Hmong funeral) were not permitted. This film draws on this poetic circle of the passing down of knowledge and putting it into practice, in order to demonstrate the value of the knowledge that Master Shong Ger had preserved, specifically through the use of that knowledge to manage his own late wife’s soul, thus completing the circle from one generation to the next in Master Shong Ger’s family.

This project—the written thesis in conjunction with the film—advances a “Hmong Oral Knowledge” approach that is critical to both understanding and preserving Hmong cosmology. This approach puts Hmong cosmology and philosophy into dialogue with scholarship being produced about Hmong communities across the world which tends to treat Hmong ideas as mere data-to-be-analyzed. The thesis focuses on the substance of Master Shong Ger Thao’s philosophy (derived from Hmong oral ritual), in order to “look” and not just “see” (MacDougall

2019) human experience from a Hmong theoretical perspective. Given the primacy of oral and physically performative ritual practice, this thesis employs the medium of film in order to engage with Hmong ritual knowledge and practice in its own terms. The film provides a 'thick depiction' of these practices, and seeks to explicate the cosmology of the 'three souls' model of personhood that underpins these practices, while also focusing on the legacy of Master Shong Ger Thao, who cultivated and preserved the details of this cosmology and the oral texts that encode it.

Keywords: Hmong, Txiv Xaiv (Plig), ethnographic film, Hmong oral knowledge, exodus

ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

An ethnographic film makes up a substantive element of this master's thesis. This film, entitled *Returning Home*, was directed and co-produced by the author, and the film constitutes the central empirical and analytical element of this thesis project. The written thesis document works in conjunction with the film, providing the context and situating the film and its intellectual objectives in a broader disciplinary setting. Both document and film work together in order to capitalize on the distinct modalities that resonate with different dimensions of Hmong knowledge and understanding, as described herein. The film can be accessed at the link below or by contacting the author of this thesis.

Returning Home

<https://vimeo.com/user156386582/returninghome>

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1 | Preface

A Personal Statement (In Hmong)

Yeej tsis yog ib qho uas yuav yooj yim kiag li, yog yus yuav los sau txog tej yam uas yus yog tus paub dua thiab txawj dua lawm tus lawm. Vim yuav tsis muaj tus los tawm tsam tau nrog yus rau qhov tsis muaj neeg yuav paub tob dua thiab tshab txhais tau zoo dua npaum li yus lawm. Ib txij li thaum kuv xeev xwm thiab nco qab tau los ces kuv yeej txawj neeb, txawj zaj tshoob, txawj txiv xaiv, thiab paub ntau yam hais txog Hmoob tej kab lis kev cai nyob hauv Hmoob lub neej ntawm txoj kev ua neej thiab ua neeg los. Yav tag dhau los lawm mas tsuas muaj cov tub txawg tuaj nug thiab kawm ntawd kuv xwb. Muaj coob leej ntau tus tub txawg tau sau txog kuv lub neej thiab kuv txoj kev paub txog ntawm Hmoob txog kev ntseeg thiab sab ntsuj plig. Tab sis zaum no kuv yuav los sau thiab ua txog sawv cev ntawm uas kuv yog Hmoob ib leeg tug txawg nyob rau ntawm sab kab lis kev cai thiab kev cai dab qhuas txhua yam.

Kuv yug hauv ib lub yeej thaj nam tawg rog nyob rau Thai Teb, kuv txawj ua neeb thaum yau los lawm. Kuv kuj tau kawm tiav ntau tus xib fwb ntawm sab kev neeb kev yaig thiab kev cai dab qhuas pib txij li thaum kuv muaj kaum xyoo xwb. Kuv tsev neeg tau tuaj rau teb chaws Mekas no thaum kuv muaj li ntawm 11 xyoos. Yeej tsis tau pom dua uas ib tug me nyuam yaus li kuv es ho yuav kawm tau ntau yam thiab to taub ntau npaum li kuv li hais txog ntawm peb Hmoob tej kab lis kev cai thiab kev cai dab qhuas. Nyob hauv kuv lub neej uas pib thaum yau los mus txog rau niaj hnuv nim no ces kuv yeej ib txwm keeb nraim thiab nrog cov laus lis tej kab

mob kev nkeeg, kab lis kev cai, kev dab kev qhua thiab kab tshoob kev kos tas li xwb. Kuv loj hlob los tsis xws li feem coob ntawm cov me nyuam yaus uas tuaj nyob teb chaws Mekas no vim tias kuv yuav tau coj yam ntxwv li ib tug neeg laus tas li xwb, vim rau qhov yus yog tus paub txog Hmoob lub neej txoj kev ua neeg thiab kev ntseeg ntawm sab ntsuj plig lawm. Vim li no kuv thiaj li tshab txhais tau Hmoob cov lus thiab kab lis kev cai zoo dua thiab meej dua lwm leej lwm tus ces txawm kuv hnuv nyug tseem hluas los kuv thiaj li yog ib tug laus neeg nyob rau hauv Hmoob txoj kev ua neej thiab kev ntseeg lawm.

Kuv ntseeg tau lawm hais tias nws txog lub sij hawm uas kuv yuav tsum tau sawv los tawm suab thiab los txhim kho cov tub txawg uas tau sau qee yam yuam kev thiab tsis meej pem txog ntawd peb Hmoob lub neej thiab txoj kev ua neeg, peb kab lis kev cai, kev cai dab qhuas, thiab txoj kev ntseeg ntawm sab ntsuj plig. Hmoob tej laus ib txwm piv txoj lus tias, “Tus neeg txawj mas mus kawm tiav ces txawj xwb, hos tus neeg ntse mas yeej ib txwm ntse hauv nruab thiab los lawm”.

Hnuv no kuv yog tus uas kawm tau sab ntawm Hmoob li ntiag tug thiab mus kawm tiav sab uas yog lwm haiv neeg li txuj ci uas hais txog tib neeg txoj kev ua neej thiab ua neeg, kev ntseeg nyob ntawm sab ntsuj plig. Kuv ntseeg tias yog kuv tsis muab sau thiab teev cia ces tom ntej no tsis hais me nyuam Hmoob xwb lwm haiv neeg cov tub txawg los yuav haj yam tsis to taub thiab nkag siab txog peb Hmoob li txuj txoog, keeb kwm, kab lis kev cai, thiab kev cai dab qhuas mus ntxiv. Vim yam tag dhau los lawm peb Hmoob pheej cia rau lwm haiv neeg sab nraud tuaj tshawb fawb thiab sau txog peb li txuj txoog, keeb kwm, kab lis kev cai, thiab kev cai dab qhuas xwb.

Yog li ntawd hnuv no kuv thiaj li yuav los piav thiab sau txog kuv li feem xyuam raws li qhov uas kuv yog ib tug kws, “Tshaj Lij” ntawm Hmoob tag nrho suav daws. Nws kuj tsis tau txhais tias cov txawg tug uas tau tsawb fawb thiab sau txog Hmoob tej no sau tsis yog lawm. Yeeb vim

lawv tsis yog Hmoob ib tug tus txiv neeb, txiv xaiv, txiv qeej, txiv taw kev, mej koob, thiab txiv muam ces lawv tsuas sau thiab piav tau sawm daim tawv xwb mus tsis txog hauv lub plawv.

Feem coob lawv tsuas tshab txhais tau li qhov lawv nkag siab thiab to taub xwb lawv tsis paub txog cov tseem ntsiab lus tiag tiag hais tias nws txhais li cas thiab yog vim li cas Hmoob pheej yuav ua tej kev cai no ntau ua luaj li thiab Hmoob yeej tsis kam muaj txo los sis muab tso pov tseg li.

Vim Hmoob muaj txog peb txheej lus hais, txheej ib yog lus me nyuam yaus, txheej ob yog lus laus, txheej peb yog lus nom lus tswv. Neej feem coob tsuas paub txheej ib thiab ob xwb lawv tsis paub mus txog rau txheej peb. Vim txheej peb mas koj yuav tsum tau kawm kom muaj xib fwb cob qhia thiab muaj kev tshab txhais mas thiaj li yuav nkag siab. Tab sis feem coob ntawm Hmoob cov xib fwb thiab thwj tim tsuas yog kawm los ua xwb tseem txhais tsis tau lub ntsiab kom meej ces suav daws thiaj li tsis paub txog lawm.

Vim Hmoob tej laus muab Hmoob cov kev txawj kev ntse no hais ua paj lug lawm kom cov yeeb ncuab nrhiav tsis tau hos dab noj nyug hauv txias nrhiav tsis pom. Yog li ntawd kuv daim yeeb yaj kiab no, kuv yuav qhia thiab piav txog peb tug ntsuj plig uas thaum nyuam qhuav pib xeeb rau hauv niam thiab txiv lub nrog kev mus txog rau thaum muaj txoj sia txoj pa los mus rau thaum yug poob nthav puv peb tag kis. Kuv yuav muab tshab txhais kom suav daws nkag siab thiab to taub txog ntawm peb tug tseem ntsuj plig no nyob rau hauv peb Hmoob txoj kev ntseeg tias thaum yug, los qhov twg los hos thaum tag sim neej lawm ne ib tug yuav mus qhov twg rau qhov twg lawm? Kuv vam thiab cia siab tias kuv daim yeeb yaj kiab no pab teb tau rau suav daws lo lus nug tias:

1. Hmoob los qhov twg los, thaum tuag lawm Hmoob ho yuav mus rau qhov twg?
2. Yog vim li cas Hmoob thiaj li tsis kam muab tej no hloov thiab tso pov tseg?

3. Yog vim li cas Hmoob siv tsiaj siv txhuv nyob rau hauv Hmoob txoj kev ntseeg?
4. Yog vim li cas Hmoob lub ntees tuag ntev ua luaj li?
5. Yog vim li cas ho tseem yuav tso plig thiab ua nyuj dab thiab?

Kuv daim yeeb yaj kiab no yuav tshab txhais tau txhua txhua lo lus nug uas tau hais los saum no. vim kuv tsis yog tus kawm thiab tshawb fawb txog xwb, kuv yog tus kws ua dhau los lawm, yaj ceeb thiab yeeb ceeb los mus muab ncig thooob, Hmoob li txuj txoog kuv thiaj li yog tus mus muab poob, yaj ceeb yeeb ceeb kuv mus muab ncig txhua, Hmoob li txuj txoog kuv thiaj yog tus mus muab cuag. Vim Hmoob muab Hmoob lub neej txoj kev ua neej thiab ua neeg cog rau hauv Hmoob peb tug ntsuj plig lawm ces Hmoob thiaj li yuav tsum tau ua txhua yam kom Hmoob peb tug ntsuj plig txhob tuag thiab txhob ploj ces Hmoob thiaj li yuav muaj lub neej nrog luag ua lawm yav tom ntej.

Kawg no, txawm peb Hmoob tsis muaj ib daig av luaj peb nti, tsis muaj ib lub teb chaw uas yog peb li, los tsuav kom peb tseem khaws tau peb li lus, keeb kwm, teej tug, txuj txoog xwb ces ntawm sab cev nqaij daim tawv txawm peb tsis muaj teb chaws los ntawm sab ntsuj plig peb tseem nrog luag muaj teb chaws vim peb peb tug ntsuj plig tsis ploj tsis tuag ces Hmoob yeej yuav tsis tu noob.

Thaum kuv tseem yog ib tug tub kawm ntawv nyob rau hauv lub tsev kawm ntawv qib siab hu li University of Wisconsin-Madison, kuv tau raug caw ntau zaus los ntawm cov tsev kawm ntawv qib siab thiab ntau koos haum kom kuv mus tham thiab piav txog Hmoob kev dab kev qhua thiab kev neeb kev yaig. Tau muaj ib zaug uas kuv tau mus tham rau hauv ib lub koom txoos uas cob qhia cov xib fwb qhia ntawv K-12 uas lawv yog cov kawm thiab qhia txog lwm haiv neeg cov lus thiab kab lis kev cai nyob hauv lub xeev Wisconsin. Lawv tau tuaj mloog kuv tham txog Hmoob lub neej thiab txoj kev ntseeg ntawm sab ntsuj plig xws li yog kev ua neeb ua

yaig. Tau muaj ib tug xib fwb tau los tawm tsam thiab nug kuv hais tias tham li kuv tham es kuv tau kuv tej kev paub ntawd los qhov twg los no. Vim nws ntsia kuv hluas dhau lawm ces nws thiaj li xav tias xyov kuv puas paub thiab to taub txog tej yam uas kuv tau piav thiab qhia lawv nyob rau hnuv ntawd. Kuv kuj tau nug nws rov qab tias, ua li nws ho puas tau kawm txog Hmoob li kev neeb kev yaig es nws thiaj li tau nug kuv li ntawd. Ces nws kuj tau teb kuv tias nws tau nyeem ib phau ntawv hu li *An Introduction to Shamanism*, sau los ntawm ib tug tub txawg hu li Thomas DuBois uas hauv nws phau ntawv tau piav thiab qhia txog Hmoob thiab lwm haiv neeg li kev neeb kev yaig thiab kev ntseeg nyob rau ntawm sab ntsuj plig. Kuv thiaj li xav tias nws txaus luag heev nyob hauv kuv lub siab, vim phau ntawv nws hais txog ntawd ces twb yog Thomas DuBois sau txog kuv lub neej thiab kuv txoj kev ua neeb ua yaig xwb. Ces kuv thiaj tau teb rau tus xib fwb ntawd hais tias kuv ces txawm yog tus uas nws tau nyeem txog ntag.

Yog muab hais mas zoo li tsis txaus ntseeg lis, vim kuj tau muaj ntau zaus uas kuv tau rov qab kawm thiab nyeem txog kuv tus kheej thiab kuv lub neej ntawm kuv txoj kev ua neeb ua yaig. Xws li tau muaj ib zaug uas nyob hauv tus xib fwb Neil Whitehead chav kawm ntawv, hu li “ANTHR 666: Anthropology of Shamanism & Occult Experience,” uas qhia txog kev ua neeb ua yaig thiab. Dua li ntawd lawm, nyob hauv lub chav ANTHR 104, kuv kuj tau saib thiab kawm txog ob daig yeeb yaj kiab uas lawv ua txog kuv lub neej ntawm kuv txoj kev ua neeb ua yaig tib yam thiab. Daim ib ua los ntawm PBS Wisconsin hu li “Teen Shaman” hos daim ob yog *Split Horn*. Kuv thiaj mus qhia rau tus xib fwb hauv chav natwd tias kuv ces yog tus me nyuam yaus uas nyob hauv ob daig yeeb yaj kiab ntawd ntag hos, ces kuj ua rau nws ceeb thiab zoo siab heev, ces tom qab ntawd nws thiaj li kom kuv los tham thiab piav txog kuv txoj kev neeb kev yaig rau cov me nyuam kawm suav daws.

Li kuv tau hais los saum no lawm, kuv los yuav piav thiab qhia txog nyob rau hauv kuv daim

yeeb yaj kiab hais tias kuv tau kawm tau ntau yam Hmoob li txuj txoog los ntawm kuv tus Xib Fwb—uas nws yog tus kws tshaj lij dua nyob rau thaum xyoo 1960 ntawd nyob rau hauv lub teb chaws Los Tsuas. Vim nws cob qhia kuv ntau yam uas yog qhov tseeb dua, meej dua, ntxaws dua thiab txhua lwm tus xib fwb li. Xib Fwb Soob Ntxawg Thoj tau xaiv thiab tsa kuv los sawv ces rau nws nyob rau hauv lub xeev Minnesota ua ntej thaum nws tau tag sim neej (e.g., Lee 2015), yog li ntawd, kuv thiaj li txiav txim siab xaiv lub npe los rau kuv daim yeeb yaj kiab uas kuv ua txog no hu li: Nrhiav Txov Kev Rov Qab Los Tsev: Ua los ntawd tus Xib Fwb. (*Returning Home: The Thesis of a Master.*) Txawm li cas los kuv xav tias nyob rau peb phaum hluas tam sim no ces kuv yeej yog tus nkag siab thiab to taub dua hais txog Hmoob lub neej thiab txoj kev ntseeg ntawm sab ntsuj plig lawm.

A Personal Statement (In English)

It's never an easy thing to write about esoteric subjects of which you possess extremely rare knowledge and expertise. There are no others who can challenge your perspective because there are none with deeper knowledge or understanding to exceed your own in that space. Since the day I was born and ever since I can remember, I always understood the rituals, religion, customs, and culture of the Hmong people throughout the generations. In years past, many scholars traveled to interview me and learn from me. Many of them have written about my life and have gleaned from my knowledge and experience to write about Hmong religion and spirituality. However, this time, I will write from my own expert practitioner's perspective, and combine my expertise as a practitioner with my training as an anthropologist.

I believe that is finally time for me to rise up and write to address misconceptions and misinterpretations published by well-intentioned authors who have written about our Hmong

lives, rituals, customs, culture, and spirituality. I do this in the spirit of an old Hmong proverb that says, “*Tus neeg txawj mas mus kawm tiav ces txawj xwb, hos tus neeg ntse mas yeej ib txwm ntse hauv nruab thiab los lawm*” (A smart person finishes school and consequently gains mastery, but an intelligent person is intelligent from inside the womb). As the primary expert in every aspect of Hmong customs and rituals, it is my responsibility to contribute my unique perspective to these conversations.

I was born in a refugee camp in Thailand and was called to become a Hmong shaman at a young age. I was struck with an illness and diagnosed by a shaman as having been called by shamanic spirits to take up this mantle. This was unheard of for a child of my age. Beyond my shamanic calling, I have been trained by many Hmong traditional religious masters to the highest level of the Hmong language and culture since the age of ten—once again undertaking ritual training and mastery that is more typical of old men. My family came to the United States as refugees when I was twelve. Becoming a religious expert and practitioner at such a young age is uncommon, and my childhood was spent performing shamanic ceremonies, funerals, and weddings for Hmong in need of these spiritual services. I had to intersperse these spiritual duties with youth sports and other activities that are more typical of an upbringing in the United States. However, this spiritual training has provided me with unique insights into Hmong language and history, which are woven throughout Hmong ritual texts, of which I have become one of the foremost experts. My expertise and ritual acumen even led figures like General Vang Pao to seek me out for a private interview shortly after my family came to the United States. Years later, I was formally conferred the title of “*Tshaj Lij*” by Master Shong Ger Thao.

The aim of this thesis—which consists of an ethnographic film and writing that situates what I have documented in the film along with my own ritual expertise within broadly anthropological

contexts—is to integrate social science and educational training with my ritual practitioner perspective, in order to develop my capacity as a dual practitioner-researcher. Based on my religious training, I have developed and prepared curriculum on Hmong traditional wedding practices, funeral practices, and delivered special training courses in Hmong writing and speaking. I also want to integrate social science and educational training to develop my capacity as a researcher, which will allow me to combine the perspectives of a religious expert and academic to provide a combined expertise that will allow me to develop a more sophisticated pedagogy on Hmong language, culture, and history. This project also develops my broader professional objectives, in particular to make Hmong cosmological understanding more accessible and available to the current generation, where we are having to adapt to new social formations (e.g., not living in small traditional villages organized by kinship) and figure out how to carry out our traditions and to ‘be Hmong’ in a different sort of world.

Today, I may be the only person who is both a cultural practitioner of the Hmong ritual tradition and an academic scholar. I believe that if I don’t write everything down, not only future generations of Hmong but also other people, will progressively lose their understanding and comprehension of our Hmong language and culture. History shows that Hmong people have a habit of letting outsiders tell the stories of our traditions, heritage, customs, and religion. So, beginning today, I will explain these things from a “Tshaj Lij” Hmong cultural expert’s perspective. This does not mean that the experts who have researched and written about the Hmong are wrong, but their understanding is incomplete. These researchers are rarely Hmong themselves, and even then are not actual shamans or practitioners of the culture and religion who employ a vocabulary that is completely different from everyday speech. This limits these accounts to varying degrees of outsider’s perspectives. Most of them can only interpret or

understand a small part of what they learn without grasping the real meaning or reasons. Hmong people relentlessly maintain these customs and rituals.

The Hmong language is categorized into three degrees of speech, first being the vernacular (informal or infant) level – *lus me nyuam yaus*, second the proverbial (formal or mature) level – *lus laus*, and third which is the professional (ceremonial or ritual) level – *lus zaj lus zuag*. Most Hmong-speaking people only reach the first or second level of speech and rarely ascend to level three. In order to learn and understand the language or dialect of level three, most have to learn directly from practitioners or get translation services. Additionally, the vast majority of Hmong cultural practitioners are simply learning the procedures to perform so that they can officiate in rituals but cannot analyze, interpret, or explain their meanings clearly, which limits their analytical perspective.

Furthermore, Hmong elders and cultural masters incorporated their oral traditions and knowledge into proverbs to prevent discovery or interference from the Chinese in both the physical world and the spiritual realm. In order to cast more clarity on the issue, in this thesis film I will show and describe the three main souls in a typical Hmong life course, beginning in pre-natal infancy, progressing and developing into a full life, and moving toward burial and the fulfillment and ultimate renewal of life. I will give a clear explanation so that everyone can understand the three souls in Hmong cosmology—where you came from, and where you go after death. I hope that my film helps to answer the following questions:

1. Where did the Hmong come from? Where will the Hmong go when they die?
2. Why do Hmong people refuse to replace or discard oral traditions and customs?
3. Why do the Hmong use animal offerings in their religion?
4. Why do Hmong funerals take so long?

5. Why do we perform the “*Tso Plig*” (Soul-Releasing Ceremony) and “*Nyuj Dab*” (Cow Offering Spirit) weeks, months, or years after the burial of the body?

My film provides a sophisticated set of answers to the above questions because I am not just a scholar. I’m also a cultural master who can interpret everything ranging from a comprehensive temporal perspective to the spiritual and ethereal. Because Hmong people give life and live life grounded in the three souls, we must do everything we can to prevent the loss of our souls and to preserve our Hmong lives for future generations. It’s true that Hmong people do not have a land or country that we can call our own. But, as long as we preserve our language, history, rituals, and culture, we will be able to survive and prosper in the countries of others, both temporally and spiritually, because we still have our oral knowledge.

When I was a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I was invited to be a guest speaker at a workshop for K-12 teachers who teach in bilingual programs across Wisconsin. During my presentation, one of the teachers asked me what my sources were on Hmong spirituality—and Hmong shamanism in particular—because she had read some things that she thought contradicted what I was presenting. In response, I asked her what her source was that she thought was contradicting my presentation. She cited a book that she had read, entitled *An Introduction to Shamanism*, by Thomas DuBois. She actually had a copy of the book with her at the conference. My response to her was to point out that this author’s central source on Hmong shamanism was, in fact, me. Chapter 1 of the book begins with DuBois’s account of consulting me as a source, and Figure 1 in the book is a photograph of me explaining Hmong cosmology in a classroom (DuBois 2009:4). Without being disrespectful, I was simply making the point that I *was* the source.

This was one of several experiences where I came across my own personal experiences in the

university classroom. As a student in Neil Whitehead's anthropology course at Madison, "ANTHR 666: Anthropology of Shamanism & Occult Experience," I had also read DuBois's book about my life and perspective. When I attended the first day of class of an introductory anthropology course, ANTHR 104, the professor showed a PBS spot entitled "Teen Shaman" (PBS 2004), coupled with the documentary film, *Split Horn* (Siegel 2001). After the class was over, I went to speak to the Professor to tell him that I was the subject of the PBS story and also portrayed in the *Split Horn* film. He was surprised and asked me to speak to the class later in the semester about my experience.

As I describe below and in the film, my Master—who taught me the most detailed versions of the ritual texts for which I am now the steward—was formally recognized as a paramount master himself in late 1960s in Laos. Master Shong Ger passed that mantle on to me in Minnesota before he died. This fact is noted in other academic literature (e.g., Lee 2015), but I have not yet added my direct voice to this conversation. For these reasons—including my training since a young age, my calling in life, and my paramount stewardship of these Hmong oral texts—I have chosen to entitle this thesis: *Returning Home: The Thesis of a Master*. Accordingly, this thesis constitutes a dual academic- and practitioner-oriented contribution to understanding Hmong cosmology, histories, and futures.

2 | Introduction

In December 2012, I was conferred with the Hmong ritual equivalent of a doctorate degree by Master Shong Ger Thao, the Hmong 18-Clan Council, and the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. I am now considered one of the foremost Hmong cultural and ritual experts in the world. As Dr. Mai Na Lee, a professor of history at the University of Minnesota, writes in her book, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom*, “As a child prodigy, Yaj Ceeb mastered the Hmong rituals, including the *qeej* bamboo instrument and the marriage and funeral ritual songs while living in the refugee camp Ban Napo, Thailand. Also, Mr. Vang has been an initiated shaman from an early age and has been featured in *An Introduction to Shamanism* by Thomas DuBois (Cambridge University Press 2009). Mr. Vang first began studying the *qeej* instrument and other ritual rites under his father and his elder brother and has since also studied with master Shong Ger Thao and other Hmong masters in the U.S. as well as those in Thailand. In addition, he has earned the respect of the Hmong’s top cultural experts such as Shong Ger Thao and others in St. Paul, Minnesota” (Lee 2015:319-320).

I truly believe that I am the bridge between the older generation and the younger generation. By a divine calling, I was chosen as a Hmong shaman by the time I was three years old. As a child, I was born to a father who was one of the recognized masters of Hmong society. It was from my father and my older brother that I first encountered Hmong oral traditions and knowledge. The practice of shamanism is tied to my life experiences as a young refugee child. I

was born under the consequences of war and a life full of hardship at the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand. It is there, in a time of confusion and uncertainty for my people that I was first chosen as a healer of distressed Hmong refugees. Many Hmong people looked up to me for spiritual guidance as they suffered loss and dislocation from their homeland in Laos. In addition, when I was young, I was given the title, “*Me Nyuam Saub*” (A Child Prophet), because I had mastered the Hmong death and marriage rituals, which have always been at the forefront of my life. I also obtained the highest levels of Hmong language and oral cultural knowledge by the age of 10 years old. That was considered impossible at the time, for most Hmong practitioners only master one or two sets of the entire canon in their whole life. As a result, General Vang Pao thought that I was the reincarnation of the “Mother of Writing” Yang Shong Lue (see Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990). Many Hmong people view Vang Pao as a Hmong King (see Hickman 2021).

On September 4th, 1999, General Vang Pao set a time to come visit me in Appleton, Wisconsin. He sent Dr. Pao Ze Vang, his most trusted right-hand person, to my house. When I arrived at General Vang Pao’s hotel, he asked for all the elders and his bodyguards to exit the room, as General Vang Pao wanted to speak with me one-on-one. The conversation between General Vang Pao and I lasted for two hours. He asked me many questions, including some regarding the future of the Hmong in the United States. After the interview, I spent the whole day with General Vang Pao and his wife.

Even though many Hmong people see me as the child prophet because I should not have been able to master all of this Hmong oral knowledge, I do not believe I am the reincarnation of the “Mother of Writing”, Yang Shong Lue. Yet, I strongly believe that I was born with a deep craving to find meaning and reason for the Hmong human condition. Most of all, I have a

passion and desire to find solutions to save the souls of my people who are in deep spiritual and physical crises. I have a special role to play in helping translate and transmit Hmong cosmology and traditional oral knowledge to the next generation. Furthermore, being trained in socio-cultural anthropology for the last four years has helped me to gain a deeper understanding of my own and other cultures by analyzing everyday life using anthropological theories as the basis for interpreting Hmong oral knowledge. It has trained me to observe, notice differences, and judge critically. Building on this perspective, my film follows one domain of Hmong oral knowledge—the cosmology of the three souls encoded in the *Txiv Xaiv Plig* rite—and depicts it through audiovisual media that more closely represents the way that Hmong experience this understanding. As a practitioner, editing my film has helped me to understand the many principles and theories about human visual representation and meaning-making in general.

Hmong Historical Context

Hmong are a distinct ethnolinguistic group of people who live in the mountains of Southeast Asia, but the origin of the Hmong people—documented in both historical and folkloric accounts—is ancient China. According to Master Shong Ger Thao, a paramount master of the Hmong oral tradition, the origin of the Hmong began in “Pem Ceeb.” Upon further analysis, I suggest that this location maps onto Peking, China, now known as Beijing.

Hmong migrated from southern China in the nineteenth century to the mountainous areas of Burma, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. In the early 1960’s, the U.S. CIA sought out the Hmong and recruited them to fight a “secret war” against the North Vietnamese and the communist Pathet Lao. When the United States and allies abandoned the region in military defeat, Hmong were singled out by the communist governments of Laos and Vietnam as collaborators with the

Americans. The Hmong were hunted down, taken to concentration camps, put into hard labor and persecuted. As a result, Hmong were forced to flee their homes and became refugees in Thailand from 1976-2004. After spending time in the refugee camps, many Hmong settled in a third-party countries including Australia, France, Canada, and the United States. Many who survived suffered physically, mentally, and emotionally, even up to the present day (Lee 2015).

Ever since we can remember, Hmong elders have always explained to our children, one generation after another, that the Hmong people originated in mainland China, and eventually fled because of political persecution and domination since the fall of the ancient Hmong kingdom. This is documented in their oral history, wedding songs, funeral chants, and folk songs—every reference to Hmong mortality and spirituality consistently returns to China. The Hmong first lived there and only fled to Southeast Asia after losing a great war with the Chinese Empire. Therefore, when an Hmong elder passes away, there are still some Hmong groups that play the “*Qeej*” (Kheng) song of fighting against the Chinese known as, “*Qeej ntaus Suav/Rog*.” This song is designed to help guide the soul of the deceased back to his/her ancestors’ country—which is the ancient Chinese homeland, and to take up arms along the way in preparation of encountering war with the Chinese in the post-mortal sojourn. Furthermore, there are also some Hmong people who make graves in the Chinese style because, in the old days, the Chinese would spitefully dig out any Hmong graves. These Hmong transform the appearance of their graves to look more Chinese so that the Chinese would not be inclined to dig them up.

As further evidence of this outlook, below are five famous Hmong proverbs about the Chinese:

1. “*Tsis pom dej dag siab tsis nqig*” (If you do not see the Yellow River, your heart will not be full)
2. “*Nyob twj ywm tsam Suav hnov Suav hlais nplaig*” (Be still, if the Chinese hear you, they will cut off your tongue)
3. “*Noj mov tsis txhob txhos caug tsam ua Suav qhev*” (Do not kneel while you eat, or you will become a slave to the Chinese)
4. “*Suav phais tsib*” (Chinese cut out the gallbladder (*tsib*: metaphor for knowledge and skill, as in “*thoob tsib to nrog*” – a wise or clever person; the general meaning is that Chinese will take or break your knowledge and skill)
5. “*Suav sau se*” (Chinese collect taxes—this is thought to be the reason Hmong left China, including many stories of families resorting the sale of a daughter or son in order to pay Chinese taxes)

With the history of Hmong knowledge being transcribed from mostly oral knowledge, it is no wonder that there is not enough written information about Hmong history, culture, and language, until recent years. For some, oral knowledge may not suffice, but in the Hmong community, it means more than just folktales and oral history passed from one generation to the next. For the Hmong community, oral knowledge is as valuable as written knowledge. For someone to maintain and be deemed as an expert in oral knowledge they need to have a reputable status within the community, have an extraordinary memory, and possess inherent intelligence. Therefore, Hmong oral historians are not only community members, but are people who have undergone critical studies in Hmong oral knowledge deemed adequate by their *Xib Fwb*, which

means Master. An expert in Hmong oral knowledge also needs to have a deep passion to retain the information so that the oral knowledge will not be altered despite it being taught without being written down. Much of the written history known about the Hmong are only from the past sixty years and for some this may be enough information to understand the Hmong culture and language, but it fails to address the origin of the Hmong knowledge and their roots.

Scholars in the field of Hmong studies have drawn from a wide array of methodological and theoretical approaches—spanning the entire spectrum of the humanities and social sciences—to make sense of Hmong experience and oral traditions, from Southeast Asia to the far reaches of the now global Hmong diaspora. However, in all this scholarship, Hmong experience, Hmong theories of reality, and Hmong oral knowledge have been treated largely as data-to-be-analyzed, rather than providing productive concepts that can be deployed for a broader understanding of human experience. Calls for decolonizing scholarship provide important critiques of this essential problem, and yet the way forward is rarely articulated in much detail. The purpose of my thesis is to advance a new mode of scholarship that rises to this challenge, namely centering Hmong concepts as analytical tools and frames of reference for scholarly production, rather than just data-to-be-analyzed.

Hmong Oral Knowledge Through Film

My work advances a “Hmong oral knowledge” approach that I have been collaboratively developing with my advisor. This approach emphasizes the oral tradition of ideas within Hmong society, including in the current moment where Hmong ideas can be put into dialogue with so much scholarship being produced about Hmong communities across the world. By placing the concepts, frameworks, understandings, and philosophies of Hmong ritual practitioners into

dialogue with anthropological, or critical-theoretical approaches to Hmong religious practice and the changing social contexts of these practices, this approach flattens the intellectual landscape and elevates oral traditions strains of Hmong thought about human experience to a theoretical interlocutor—as opposed to a mere subject—in producing new perspectives on Hmong oral knowledge. This new direction opens new, synergistic understandings of Hmong experience, and will become intellectually fertile ground for new modes of scholarship in the field of Hmong studies. A film of the Hmong oral knowledge approach, with its due emphasis on the oral tradition of ideas in social contexts, provides a critical, collaborative approach that opens these new possibilities.

I recognize that an ethnographic film is not the typical form of an MA thesis in the Department of Anthropology at BYU. However, ethnographic films are an established mode of scholarship in the discipline, particularly within the subfield of visual anthropology (see <https://www.societyforvisualanthropology.org/about>). In established visual anthropology programs (such as those at NYU or the University of Manchester), ethnographic films produced for graduate thesis research are typically accompanied by a piece of writing (which is significantly shorter than a typical thesis itself). The purpose of this accompanied writing is to contextualize the film, rather than to stand in for it. In other words, I have produced a written document to accompany the film, but this document provides the context for the film, such as how it fits into existing scholarship (both written scholarship and the canon of ethnographic film) and articulates some more implicit points in the film. I invite my audience to take seriously the possibilities that ethnographic film affords as actual scholarship, despite critiques from non-visual anthropologists and biases that suggest that ethnographic film is not serious scholarship (see Taylor 1996, MacDougall 2019, Lawrence 2020).

3 | The Ethnographic Film

The Hmong people have moved from mountain to mountain, home to home, country to country, crossing rivers and valleys in search of an escape from oppression. The *Txiv Xaiv* ritual and chant is one of the only original Hmong oral knowledge areas which has survived the large exodus and diaspora which the Hmong people have undergone. It serves as a glue, connecting the past generations to the generation of today and the generations of tomorrow. *Txiv Xaiv* is a ritualistic chant which must be performed properly for traditional funerals. The reason the Hmong people use *Txiv Xaiv* for such a critical traditional practice like the Hmong funeral is because it has both spiritual and physical effects on everyday lives of the Hmong people. Its ability to preserve their history, morals, and traditions is of the utmost importance. The *Txiv Xaiv* ritual and chant is critical to the Hmong people for helping their loved ones make correct decisions which will lead them to success and happiness. The ritual advises the future generations both materially and spiritually. The singer passes messages to the dead's loved ones so they can move on and continue to live happily. This singer is known as the *Txiv Coj Xai*, the man who conveys words of wisdom from the deceased to the deceased's loved ones. In this film, I am using my observations from a practitioner's point of view and from what I have learned from my Master Shong Ger Thao. In addition, I also further explain the significance of *Txiv Xaiv* in the lives of the Hmong people and why *Txiv Xaiv* is such important oral knowledge both spiritually and physically to the lives of Hmong people.

Hmong elders try to teach their children to work hard and teach them to have correct morals.

Jacob Hickman (2014) has examined the theoretical relationship between the morals and identity of the Hmong people. He observed among the younger generation that the morals taught to them by the elderly Hmong were vital to their feeling of being Hmong. One could extend this understanding to argue that a funeral without *Txiv Xaiv*, is like a tree without its roots. The film I produced, called “Returning Home”, draws out and analyzes the implications of this understanding, which Hickman (2014) calls “ancestral personhood”. This concept is rooted in an analysis of Hmong oral ritual texts and advanced understandings of the three souls that constitute a human being.

Western scholars—who have been heavily influenced by Christian beliefs and ideas—commonly believe that every human being only has one soul (even ‘secular’ accounts of individualistic personhood follow philosophically from Judeo-Christian ideas that have been fundamental since the Enlightenment). However, Master Shong Ger’s philosophy articulates the fact that each person has three main souls. According to this cosmology, when one dies, each soul has its own responsibilities and tasks for reaching its destiny. For example, the first soul will go back to live with the ancestors in the spirit world, the second soul will return to be reincarnated, and the third soul will stay as an immortal soul to protect the deceased person’s descendants for at least three generations before becoming a shamanic spirit helper. If all these things happen successfully, then the souls will complete their life cycles. Thus, we see the Hmong cyclical concept of personhood. *Txiv Xaiv Plig* is one of the essential methods for preserving Hmong oral knowledge and human life experience. *Txiv Xaiv Plig* is practiced by a practitioner who have learned the art of leaving behind words of wisdom for the loved ones of an individual who has passed on. Today there are not many people who know how to perform *Txiv Xaiv Plig*, only a handful are credible enough to do a *Txiv Xaiv Plig* at a *Ntees Plig*. A *Ntee Plig*

is a Hmong soul-releasing ceremony, the ending to a Hmong funeral process where the three main souls of the deceased are instructed to find their way back to their origins. Then, they can find a new beginning in both the spiritual and the mortal worlds.

My film draws from material we filmed of a *Txiv Xaiv Plig* in September of 2021 in St. Paul, Minnesota. I performed this rite for Master Shong Ger's wife, Kia Yang's *Tso Plig* (Soul-Releasing Ceremony). This film includes the end of the *Foom Kom* (blessing) called *Txwv Feej Plig* which refers to the *Ntsuj Xyoo Ntsuj Ntoo* (translated as "bamboo and tree soul") of Kia Yang returning home to her children. The ritual utterances of these rites provide a cosmology and philosophy that was central to Master Song Ger Thao's systematic framework. Poetically, the first time I performed this *Txiv Xaiv Plig*, which Master Song Ger had himself preserved and ultimately passed on to me before he passed away, was for his own wife after her passing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most Hmong would not consider this a mere coincidence, and this fact was worked into the narrative of the film.

When I went to study advanced Hmong language and cultural practice under Master Shong Ger Thao from 2010 to 2013, I never would have thought I would be picked to perform his version of *Txiv Xaiv Plig* to his own wife's *ntees plig* (soul-releasing ceremony). While I was studying with Master Shong Ger, I asked him which, of all the Hmong rituals and ceremonies, contained the most profound Hmong ritual knowledge that would be able to give a scholar the clearest answer to Hmong human life experience. He replied, "The concepts of the three souls are described best and in most depth in the *Foom Kom Txiv Xaiv Plig Txwv Feej*, which talks about where each of the three main souls will go." He added, "In my lifetime I had only performed *Txiv Xaiv Plig* three times." The first time was back in Laos in the early 1970s for a Hmong captain who died in the battlefield and did not receive a proper traditional Hmong

funeral. The second time was back in the Thai refugee camp in the late 1970s for an elderly Hmong woman who drowned in the Mekong River. The last time was in the early 1980s in Madison, Wisconsin for another Hmong woman who died during the Vietnam war. Both women, too, had not previously received proper funerals.

Coincidence or not (“*Tej zaum yog txoj hmoo*”), maybe it is fate that Master Shong Ger wanted me as his last student, so I could perform *his* own version of *Txiv Xaiv Plig* to his wife Kia Yang. Kia passed away during the Covid-19 pandemic, and because of restrictions on public gatherings her family and children were not able to give her a proper traditional Hmong funeral. These funerals require much effort and a significant number of people in order to be carried out properly. However, one year later when the Covid-19 situation was slowing down, her family and children held a *tso plig* (soul-releasing Ceremony) for her so that she could complete her life cycle as a human being. Her children chose to ask me to perform their father’s *Txiv Xaiv Plig* for their mother. This event makes up the cornerstone of the film, *Returning Home*. The title of the film denotes the full life cycle of the soul, from birth, to life, to death, and rebirth. But the three souls are reborn in distinct ways. One soul returns to the ancestors to become an ancestor, another soul is reborn to another human life, and the third soul becomes a protector spirit for the family. If managed properly, all three spirits ‘return home,’ whether that is to the ancestral village, to be reborn as a future member of the family, or to protect the family as a guardian spirit in the home. *Returning Home* includes different chapters that depict the different phases of managing this return home.

Outline of the Film

1. Opening sequence: April 2021 Ogden, Utah. Robert Vang and Kengy Vang go to the gravesite to bring back their father Thomas Vang's bamboo and tree soul back from the cemetery to do the soul-releasing ceremony.
2. Sequence II: September 2021 St. Paul, Minnesota. Master's Shong Ger Thao's wife Kia Yang soul-releasing ceremony. The Qeej(kheng) player is guiding her bamboo and tree soul to back home to do the cleansing.
3. Sequence III: May 1997 Appleton, Wisconsin. Yaj Ceeb as a young ritual practitioner and a Hmong shaman, and a depiction of Yaj Ceeb's shamanic and cultural practitioner life.
4. Sequence IV: December 2012 St. Paul, Minnesota. Master Shong Ger Thao passes the mantle to Yaj Ceeb. Many of the Hmong cultural masters from the Twin-Cities were present to witness this passing of the mantle, including the Hmong cultural center representative, Suav Xwm Lis, and the Hmong 18 Clans Council representative, Nyiaj Xyooj Vaj.
5. Sequence V: Master Shong Ger Thao as a Hmong Philosopher and Theologian. Master Shong Ger's theory of the three souls and its significance to complete a Hmong life cycle as a human being.
6. Sequence VI: Master Ger Thao's last request and his funeral. His final request is to make sure he is receiving a proper funeral by choosing his three top students to guide his three main souls to their destinations. Yaj Ceeb explains what will happen to the three souls if they are not able to receive a proper funeral ritual.

7. Sequence VII: May 2022 Orem, Utah. Yaj Ceeb's coronary bypass surgery, and his concern that the knowledge to which he is now the only living steward will not pass on to the next generation.
8. Sequence VIII: September 2021 St. Paul, Minnesota. Yaj Ceeb performed Master Shong Ger Thao's *Txiv Xaiv Plig* version for his wife Kia Yang. Explaining the journey of the bamboo and tree soul returning home to be with her descendants.
9. Last Sequence: Yaj Ceeb's road to recovery from heart surgery. Yaj Ceeb went back to what he loves to do, traveling around the world and persevering and conveying Hmong oral knowledge.

4 | Master Shong Ger as a Hmong Intellectual Historical Figure

It is important to situate my tutor as an intellectual figure within the Hmong world. His own rise to recognition as one of the key masters of Hmong ritual practice takes us back to the secret CIA airbase in Laos during “America’s Secret War,” a theater in the Second Indochina War. In June of 1966, the Hmong General Vang Pao—the CIA’s political linchpin in Laos—had recently finished building up the region of Long Cheng, a “secret” CIA airbase. This airbase would come to be the largest settlement of Hmong in Laos; as Hmong fled to its protection while war ravaged northern Laos. Vang Pao's vision was to unite the Hmong people into one group, both politically and culturally. Therefore, he wanted to create a law for everyone to follow in the community and the city of Long Cheng at that time. He told the 18 Hmong clans to nominate a representative for their group and their clan, because he knew that to control the Hmong, he could not let outsiders, whether from the CIA or the Laotian government, become the Hmong leader. He thought that for the Hmong to obey, he would have to elect a Hmong person to lead the Hmong.

However, the type of person that the Hmong would likely follow are those who are very knowledgeable about the Hmong culture and language. As a result, Vang Pao came to an agreement with his advisers to set up a Hmong language and cultural competition to see who the best Hmong cultural expert was at that time. The judges at the time included Txawj Sua Lis of Muang Phá, Nyiaj Yeeb Lis, Tooj Ntxawg Muas, and Yaj Menu—Dr. Yang Dao's father. Most of the Hmong cultural experts in Shong Ger’s generation were invited to participate in the competition. By proving he possessed ritual knowledge beyond all others, Master Shong Ger

won the competition, receiving the title “*Tshaj Lij*,” a title given to one who has mastered all ritual knowledge, and he was awarded 50,000 Laotian kips. Master Shong Ger Thao knew two versions of *Zaj Tshoob* (wedding rites and songs), two versions of *Txiv Xaiv* (funeral rites and songs), three versions of *Nkauj* (funeral and wedding oral songs), such as *nkauj tuag* (funeral songs), *nkauj plig* (releasing soul-ceremony songs), *nkauj tshoob* (wedding oral songs), and all the other Hmong traditional rituals and ceremonies from birth to death. In addition, he was a craftsman and master of the *qeej* instrument. He became formally renowned as a *Xib Fwb* (teacher or instructor), *Kob Xwb* (master), and *Tshaj Lij*. Almost everyone else in the competition was only given the title “*Xib Fwb*”. This competition gained Master Shong Ger Thao wide recognition as the most accomplished ritual expert among Hmong in Laos.

In addition, Master Shong Ger was also given a second title “*Nai Koo*” as the District Leader and was appointed judge by the general. The majority of the Hmong people know Master Shong Ger by the title of “*Nai Koo*”. Since Master Shong Ger was the steward of all of this ritual knowledge, General Vang Pao did not send him to the battlefield because if something were to happen to Master Shong Ger, all the Hmong ritual oral knowledge would be lost. General Vang Pao believed that a people without its own knowledge is worse than a people without a physical country. In other words, Hmong people may not have a country to call as their own; yet, if they still have all their knowledge, that means they have their language, culture, and identity, and they can still thrive and survive in this world. However, if you win the war and lost all your knowledge, there is no point of going to war.

Master Shong Ger once said, “*Ib haiv neeg twg yog tsis muaj kev txawj kev ntse ces zoo li tsob ntoo uas muaj nplooj xwb tsis muaj cag, ib lub vaj lub tsev yog tsis muaj ncej ces yuav kav tsis ntev*” (A nation without its knowledge is like a tree without its roots, a house without its

foundation, a house that cannot last). One of the main reasons that Master Shong Ger's expertise won him this recognition is because he had been trained by three of the greatest masters of their time, Xaiv Xwm "Txiv Xaiv" Vaj, Soob Lwj Thoj, and Xaiv Kuam Vaj, among other Hmong masters. This led to his exposure to and mastery of distinct versions of key oral texts, which came from distinct intellectual lineages within the Hmong community in Laos. Ultimately, as I will describe, Master Shong Ger went beyond merely mastering these distinct forms and it led him to develop a mode of analysis of Hmong oral knowledge and cosmology based on a systematic comparison of these divergent ritual forms. He went on to create his own form of comparative religious study to inform his analysis and understanding of Hmong ritual and cosmology. Master Shong Ger spent 1 year and 6 months studying the Bible from Father Yves Bertrais (a.k.a. Txiv Plig Nyiaj Pov, the French Catholic missionary who helped create the most widely used Romanized script for Hmong, the RPA), and he spent another year and a half initiated as a monk at a Laotian temple studying Buddhist dharma. He undertook this comparative religious study in order to better articulate a Hmong-specific cosmology.

The Three Souls

It is important to provide a concise summary of the cosmology of personhood articulated by Master Shong Ger Thao, which he argued was the fundamental organizing principle of all Hmong ritual. The three souls were described by Master Shong Ger as follows:

1. *Ntsuj Roj Ntsuj Ntshav* – the oil and blood soul. This "genetic soul" relates to what the person inherits from their parents. This soul is the subject of the *Zaj Taw Kev* and *Ua Nyuj Dab* rites. This soul's destiny is to ultimately return to the land of the ancestors after death.

2. *Ntsuj Sia Ntsuj Zog* – the life and strength soul. This "living soul" is the subject of the *Qeej*

Tu Siav and the *Txiv Xaiv (Plig)* rites. The ultimate destiny of this soul is to be reincarnated after death, ideally as a descendant of the person who passed away, becoming a child of the current generation. In the film *Returning Home*, this is the protagonist soul of the main rites. Toward the end of the *Txiv Xaiv Plig* depicted in the film, when the married female descendants are kneeling with baby carriers turned outward, they are seeking to “catch” the spirit to be reincarnated into their wombs, to be re-born as their child in the next generation.

3. *Ntsuj Xyoob Ntsuj Ntoo* – the bamboo and tree soul. This “shelter and support soul” goes to the grave upon death. This soul is the subject of the *Xi, Tso Plig*, and *Ntov Pob Ntoos (Laig dab)*, and is destined to become part of the protector spirits of the deceased’s family. Then after three generations, this soul is destined to become one of the *qhua neeb*, or shamanic tutelary spirits to help shamans undertake their spiritual healing.

5 | Preservation and Misunderstanding

Hmong religion involves belief in souls and spirits and the idea that the spiritual world coexists with the physical world. The spirit world consists of many types of spirits that influence human life. Hmong value their history and cultural traditions, as well as family and children, fidelity, loyalty, personal honor, responsibility, honesty, and good citizenship. Hmong oral knowledge and history emphasize the important relationships between living and deceased members by honoring their accomplishments and the suffering they endure to preserve tradition. For this reason, Hmong refuse to abandon these traditions. There is a need for the preservation of Hmong oral traditions and language because it is an important key to the Hmong people and its origin. This preservation is important because it can help prolong Hmong knowledge and ultimately provide resources for future generations. Currently, there is a lack of authoritative written knowledge and resources about the origins of the Hmong people. The preservation of Hmong oral knowledge and language is also important for the cultural identity of Hmong children. Hmong children often are presented with many challenges in terms of cultural identity because they live in two conflicting cultures: American culture and Hmong culture. American culture is the dominant of the two cultures because it has significant environmental influences such as school, work, and peers. This then leads to Hmong culture not being understood or clearly presented to Hmong children, which causes a culture clash resulting in the devaluing of Hmong oral knowledge and language.

There is still a significant gap in Hmong oral knowledge that is missing. As a Hmong

language and cultural expert, I feel that most of the scholars who have researched and studied Hmong oral history often write superficially. No one has dug deep into the heart of the intellectual part of the Hmong oral knowledge with adequate expertise to dig as deep as one might need to do so effectively. As Master Shong Ger Thao once told me, “you will not understand the Hmong language and oral knowledge to the fullest if you are only a researcher or an observer, until you have become a practitioner.” For example, the documentary film *The Split Horn* is one of the most cited ethnography films about Hmong spirituality in the United States. Yet, there were a lot of misinterpretations and mistranslations of much of the ritual knowledge, including in the funeral scene. The filmmaker, Taggart Siegel, uses Paja’s 10-year-old daughter, Chai Thao, as his informant. Since she was young and did not have a deep understanding of funeral rituals, she thought that a bowl of rice and an egg was to feed the deceased person’s soul on his journey back to the ancestor land. In reality, the bowl of rice and an egg is set up to keep the practitioner’s soul from going with the deceased to the spirit world. This detail matters in understanding Hmong cosmology and models of personhood, and it is important to help the next generation understand these nuances. Even esteemed western scholars have misunderstood the deeper meanings of the three souls, which are essential to the Hmong identity. Even though I found the publications by Gary Yia Lee and Nicholas Tapp on Hmong funeral to be insightful and stimulating, their analyses are also limited because they are not practitioners.

The best example of these fundamental misunderstandings comes from one of the most commonly cited ethnographic details in Hmong ritual practice. In the last 40 years, many western scholars who have studied and written about Hmong spirituality, have mistaken the *Tsho Tsuj Tsho Npuag* (The Spirit Jacket) to be the placenta, when it is actually the amniotic sac. The ethnographic literature on Hmong is rife with this mistaken identity (e.g., Helsel and Mochel

2002), describing how Hmong supposedly commonly bury the placenta at birth, as a ‘jacket’ to be retrieved upon death. Despite the clear affordance between the amniotic sac—as opposed to the placenta—as resembling a garment that covers the baby in the womb, this detail has been mistaken and perpetuated in the literature for decades. This is not done intentionally, of course, but it is a result of the fact that researchers lack first-hand knowledge and practice with these rites, and their informants either lack the nuanced vocabulary in English to discriminate accurately between ‘placenta’ and ‘amniotic sac,’ or themselves do not have a deep ritual understanding.

Another example is from Hickman article’s (2014) on Hmong personhood, where he goes through the different traditional rituals in a Hmong person’s life and explains the different stages of these rituals beginning from when a baby is born and a *Hu Plig* is performed, to when the individual gets married and a *Kab Tshoob Kev Kos* (Hmong wedding ceremony) is carried out to the point in a man’s life when he will *Tis Npe Laus* (Be Given an Adult Name), to when the person passes away, and the *Kab Ke Pam Tuag* (Funeral Ritual) is performed. And then, eventually, the *Ua Xi, Tso Plig* (Releasing the Soul Ceremony), and *Ua Nyuj Dab* (Cow Spirit) will also need to be performed after the person’s death. Everything is accurate until Hickman describes the two spiritual recipients of the *Nyuj Dab* (Cow Spirit) rite. Again, I believe that his informants, who did not have much knowledge on the oral traditions, assumed that since these spirits are represented by a set of female and male clothing together, it must be the wife and the husband who come back from the ancestral village to receive the rite. However, that is not the case. In a Hmong *Ua Nyuj Dab* (Cow Spirit) it is always a daughter-in-law and a father-in-law who accompany one another. This detail is important for various cosmological reasons, and are rooted in specific kinship expectations.

These are a few of the many misinterpretations that western scholars produce on some of the most essential parts of the Hmong oral ceremonies and rituals, which contain very sensitive oral physical and spiritual knowledge. The problem here, of course, is that many of these details are missed because of the lack of overlap between the analytical approach of the researcher and the depth of understanding of an expert cultural practitioner. With the film, *Returning Home*, I have created an opportunity for scholars to take a deeper dive into one critical and central rite—the *Txiv Xaiv Plig*—in the Hmong language and cultural canon of practice, to be able to understand the Hmong oral knowledge directly from an expert practitioner-analyst.

Preserving Hmong oral traditions is a way of teaching children to know what the Hmong people are like. We all need to learn about the past to understand why we are who we are today and how we can plan for the future so we can be better. Hmong refer to the oral history of their people over 5,000 years ago from China through storytelling and prehistory depicted in folktales, wedding songs, funeral songs, and other rituals. Hmong history and migration of their ancestors from the ancient China has been passed down from generation to generation orally. This film explores the importance of the Hmong oral knowledge in *Txiv Xaiv Plig*, which Master Shong Ger Thao described as encapsulating most succinctly the key elements of Hmong cosmology and history, since it is the ritual linchpin for managing the ultimate destinations of the three souls—to send them each to their proper home. It carefully analyzes and interprets it in depth to understand the Hmong oral traditions with the proper context and its meaning. As a Hmong educator and practitioner for over 20 years, my primary goal is to ensure that my perspective on the Hmong oral tradition will provide more clear details and explain different processes with concrete examples—such as this film—that will genuinely deepen the next generation of Hmong and scholars' understandings of the Hmong oral knowledge.

Why Oral Knowledge as a Foundation for this Project?

My goal is to describe the ideas and the deep thinking in Hmong literature and philosophy while drawing on oral knowledge. Studying oral tradition involves studying a peoples' ability to think and to understand ideas and information. The study of Hmong oral cultural history is the study of ideas and beliefs in their historical context. It is an inquiry into the inevitable changes in human affairs in the past and the ways these changes affect and determine the patterns of life in Hmong society. I am taking cues from the field of intellectual history (Whatmore 2016, Berlin 1997) and indigenous research methodologies (Gone 2019), which both considers the histories of ideas and their influences from the broader social contexts in which they emerge and circulate. The point would be to privilege neither purely academic accounts of Hmong oral tradition, nor singular community perspectives (which themselves vary), but rather to collect, document, and analyze these distinct perspectives, putting scholarly work into dialogue with practitioner theories and community perspectives, none of which are considered more fundamental than the others (cf. Goh 2019). The insights that emerge from this film likewise include understandings intended for a broad audience, in particular the global Hmong community, as opposed to focusing solely on academic theories of more limited interest.

Intellectual history as a field bridges multiple fields of inquiry. For example, there is an established tradition in both philosophy and religious studies, wherein scholars in these fields investigate where ideas came from and how different modes of thought were responding to each other or changing in broader historical or otherwise contingent circumstances. They bridge this more academic analysis with the production of ideas within those traditions, building philosophical systems and interpreting religious texts for actual religious practice. In sum, philosophers and religious studies scholars commonly produce scholarship that bridges

description and normative claims about the world-as-it-is, and the world-as-it-should-be. While many consider anthropology to be a more descriptive discipline, it is also clear that the popular modes of “militant” and critical anthropology are at least as prescriptive (Scheper-Hughes 1995). For example, Buddhist studies scholars dually contribute to Buddhist theology from a Buddhist perspective, while also maintaining an academic analysis of the history of ideas within Buddhism. Another example might be the philosopher and intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin. Isaiah Berlin was simultaneously producing a moral philosophy *and* analyzing the history of those ideas, many of which influenced or underpinned the very philosophy that he was seeking to develop (Berlin 1997). There is a rich tradition of intellectual history in academia, but it has focused largely on the Western tradition, or sometimes alternative world religions in religious studies programs. Similarly, indigenous research methodologists seek to integrate various communities’ understandings of the world with academic approaches to reach new synergies of understanding and practice (Gone 2019). My work takes this approach and applies it to the Hmong intellectual oral tradition.

Framing inquiry in this way enables several critical possibilities. First, it elevates Hmong ritual knowledge—transmitted orally through master-student apprenticeships—to the same level as written texts, the customary data of intellectual history. Second, it flattens the conceptual playing field by putting theories of human being inherent in these texts (including interpretations of practitioner-theorists) on the same level as social theory, considering both as mutual sources of understanding about human experience. Third, an intellectual history approach avoids essentializing tendencies that end up being a by-product of even critical-theoretical approaches advanced by many Hmong studies scholars (as in, for example, Vang, Nibbs, and Vang 2016). I argue that this anti-essentializing tendency is particularly important, given the nature of Hmong

ritual traditions, which can be described as *ontologically inclusive* (see Hickman, n.d.). Rather, my focus places these divergences and multiple manifestations of ideas as the very object of analysis.

Establishing a parallel field of Hmong oral knowledge can start to provide the type of analysis that I can pursue as both a practitioner and as a critic and analyst. This new approach, as my advisor and I envision it, provides a productive mode of integrating the theoretical analysis of anthropology and the oral-textual knowledge of the Hmong tradition. The complex canon of Hmong ritual practice has been passed down and transmitted from one generation to the next through an oral tradition, where established masters train students in the complex utterances and ritual forms. Because of the complexity of these “oral texts,” one must either master the forms or develop a close access (such as recorded transcripts) themselves to analyze them in any serious detail. Even based on recorded transcripts, these forms contain specialist ritual registers and esoteric ritual language that require a specialist’s knowledge to analyze and understand. Critically, these oral texts encode historical understandings, ethical frameworks, models of personhood, mythology, ontological frameworks, cosmology, and origin myths. These oral texts are the closest thing to a historical record of Hmong migration and cosmology. As described above, I am uniquely situated to engage in an analysis of these texts because I have studied and gained mastery of these ritual forms from a young age, having been trained by one of the great recognized masters in the global Hmong community. To this expertise I bring my training as an anthropologist and social scientist, uniquely affording me the possibility of integrating these two styles of understanding and analysis to reach beyond the possibilities of either approach alone.

As an example of what Hmong Oral Tradition as a mode of inquiry can produce, I co-presented (with Jacob Hickman) a paper that provides a preliminary analysis of the theory of

personhood developed by Master Shong Ger Thao, whose analysis of Hmong oral ritual revealed a particularly nuanced model of personhood that goes beyond models articulated by most theorists and laypersons. This is something Hickman has sought to induce from years of ethnographic research (largely with non-practitioners, see Hickman 2014). Centering my analysis on Master Shong Ger the way that an intellectual historian might, I argue, places his work and legacy in a historical context and dialogue with other ideas, many with which his framework was in explicit dialogue. Critically, this approach also puts Master Shong Ger's model of personhood on the same plane of developing theoretical and philosophical concepts to think with, rather than just data to be analyzed (cf. Webster 2013, Taylor 1985, Robbins and Engelke 2010).

There are hundreds of Hmong cultural masters, but Master Shong Ger's style of analysis, rooted in textual evidence and his systematic analysis of this oral-ritual evidence, allowed him a perspective which enabled his development of a comprehensive version of Hmong cosmology that surpassed the systematic nature of many practitioners. Additionally, Master Shong Ger cared about the philosophical and metaphysical implications of ritual practice in a way that many practitioners have not. This is not to say that his version of Hmong cosmology is the sole orthodox or legitimate version. Rather, it is to say that his is one that is worthy of an intellectual-historical analysis, as a Hmong philosopher whose ideas ought to be put in dialogue with other Hmong theories of personhood and broader anthropological theories of personhood, experience, and being.

In sum, Hmong oral knowledge has traditionally been treated as "data" rather than a source of theory among those—including by anthropologists—who have historically studied Hmong religion. Hmong knowledge has been transmitted via oral texts, but there is no reason that these 'oral texts' should not command the same respect or status as written texts do in the Western

tradition. A Hmong oral tradition project—the foundation on which I develop my thesis—treats Hmong ideas as sources of theory for understanding human experience. The film *Returning Home* develops this approach by centering on the work of Master Shong Ger Thao, and I argue that his ideas should be treated as a theory for human experience, and not just ‘a Hmong theory.’ His concept of the three souls articulates a theory of personhood and morality, including how the two are related to one another in human experience. Using this knowledge as a theory (not just data) helps understand human experience in new ways.

Since Hmong have a long and venerated tradition of ritual communication through oral, performative mediums, a film (as opposed to a written text) will help us see Hmong ritual knowledge through a medium that is closer to the terms of its own communicative norms, allowing for a better depiction of how Hmong experience this knowledge and understanding. In addition, film can reflect Hmong society and transform opinions.

6 | Contributions to Anthropological and Hmong Studies Literatures

One reason I chose to produce a film is because I have Hmong students in front of me in the classroom daily, experiencing identity crises and not knowing where they belong. They are lost on the bridge and do not know how to cross it to find themselves. I am harmoniously bridging the old way of life with our modern lifestyle, because unfortunately many Hmong people today are no longer in tune with their own cultural heritage and beliefs. I feel that I can help them connect back to their roots.

One of the strongest aspects of this film is my vast knowledge of Hmong culture knowledge and my ability to explain so many of the complexities of the Hmong knowledge and culture in ways that make sense, defining the more abstract concepts in concrete ways using metaphors that help convey the deeper meanings. The deeper knowledge of the Hmong language and cultural practices is what many younger generation Hmong are lacking and desperately in need of. In a “Hmong Spirituality 314” class that I taught at Metro State University in Minnesota during the spring semester of 2023, most of my native Hmong students agreed that the younger Hmong generation wanted to learn more, and the more they learned, the more they realized of how much they did not know. One student remarked, “This passion for learning and willingness to learn through our mistakes is what we hope to model for our students, but it also requires guidance from someone with a greater wealth of knowledge”. Rather than be scolded by *nej cov hluas tsis paub dab tsi, txhob ncauj ntau ntau* (you young people don’t know anything, don’t ask too much), or only given *peb yeej ib txwm ua li no los lawm* (we have been doing like this for a long

time) as an explanation, we need to be patiently taught so that we can pass this knowledge on to the Hmong children. My film is focused on interconnectivity and explanations without judgement for the myriad ways that these practices manifest in the diversity of Hmong oral knowledge. This affords us all a path forward by recognizing the Hmong oral traditions of these words and practices so that we may recognize where we are today, and why, and look forward to what we can hold on to for the future.

An ethnographic film affords the possibility of capturing knowledge of Hmong life experience in ways that a written paper is not able to do in the same capacity. As Andy Lawrence says, “We write to test our thinking, and the same is true when we film”. In visual anthropology, editing is equal to analysis. He adds, “filmmaking for fieldwork is an empirical art where each stage of the method contributes towards the creation and adaptation of knowledge” (Lawrence 2020:2). In addition, David MacDougall (2019) asks us to think about how films can affect the realities of our daily lives, arguing that this means preventing the stress of meetings and censorship. Furthermore, he also says, “embodied cinema is all about the ‘sentient link’, suggesting thinking of film as a sensory field in which the experiences of the filmmaker, film subject and film viewer cross and sometimes coincide... The camera seems to act as a lens above and beyond its optical properties, concentrating physical sensations and emotions” (MacDougall 2019:15). Producing a film as the centerpiece of my thesis allows me to capture the feelings and knowledge that help Hmong themselves understand human experience. It allows me to depict that process closer to the way that Hmong experience this understanding. André Bazin states, “Rather than tightly controlling or guiding viewers’ responses, they are to be given more space to watch events unfold and to interpret what they see, in a ‘cinema of duration’ advocated” (Lawrence 2020). By editing a film that shows Hmong ritual knowledge, I have analyzed the Hmong theory of

personhood in a way that has never been done before. MacDougall encourages, “regain[ing] a more searching, exploratory documentary cinema, beyond the packaged and prefabricated performances now so familiar to us.” Therefore, to see something differently, it requires a degree of honesty, even rejection. Film can expose the viewer to direct actions, without the necessity of ‘understanding’ everything in the logocentric way that is portrayed by the written word (Macdougall 2019).

In his book, *The Looking Machine*, David Macdougall (2019) says, “Seeing is one thing, looking another”. It is hard to understand someone’s thought without seeing its movement and apprehending its logic. MacDougall’s craft is filmmaking, and his argument is that some anthropologists do not grasp the depth of understanding that film can communicate—as compared to the written word—about human experience. But when properly developed as a craft, the capacity of film is to “to see in concrete detail how and what others see.” As pathbreaking ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch puts it, “Film is the only method I have to show another just how I see him” (MacDougall 2019:15).

My project builds on this parallel between “seeing” and “looking.” I would argue that most scholars have been “seeing” Hmong ritual knowledge, but not “looking” at it. The question is, how does one “look?” I will argue that to “look” at Hmong knowledge, it requires a depth of engagement with Hmong understanding where these ideas become concepts to think with, rather than objects-to-be-analyzed. This depth of engagement requires something like a practitioner’s engagement, and not just an outsider’s gaze. MacDougall further unpacks this statement:

“Seeing and looking can sometimes be distinguished by their intention or intensity, but each shades off imperceptibly into the other. And intention, like the privacy of our thoughts, is hard to read. We may just happen to see something, or we may put ourselves

in a position to see it; we may look casually or with obvious interest. Duration is critical here. A glance, one of our most instinctive and involuntary acts, can, if prolonged, quickly turn into a stare.

“Acts of looking satisfy our desires and answer to a variety of needs, whereas seeing serves chiefly as a means of navigation and recognition. We look if we are attracted by a sound or a movement, out of curiosity to see how someone reacts to another’s words or actions, to learn how something is done or what has happened, or simply because we take pleasure in the appearance of an object or an expression on a face. We also look involuntarily, since our eyes are always roving, catching at something here or there. Looking continuously reframes our interest as we move through different social and physical settings. During a conversation our attention may shift from one face to another, as if in a series of close-ups. When we enter a room filled with people, a quick glance may suffice to identify a friend. If we look more carefully, it is usually to work out the prominent features of an unfamiliar place. In a more familiar place, we tend to notice little, needing only a few landmarks to confirm where we are. In effect, we see but don’t look” (MacDougall 2019:15-16).

My film is premised on MacDougall’s concept of looking. I have used his models to describe the ideas and the deep thinking in Hmong literature and philosophy while drawing on intellectual history. Studying intellectual history involves studying a peoples’ ability to think and to understand ideas and information. Therefore, the study of Hmong intellectual and oral cultural knowledge is the study of ideas and beliefs in their historical context. It is an inquiry into the

inevitable changes in human affairs in the past and the ways these changes affect and determine the patterns of life in Hmong society.

MacDougall discusses how concepts come from human activities and interactions in the same way that films use techniques to create an understanding of what causes human actions and interactions. He further explains how knowledge emerges from this process. In recent years, new methods to ethnographic research have emerged to bring collaboration, morality, and the use of new technologies (MacDougall 2019). New approaches to ethnographic writing have forced a renegotiation of the balance between research and representation (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; James et al. 1997). While the ethnographic film is not new, ethnographers are continuing to innovate and use visual and digital images and technology to research and depict the culture, life, and knowledge of others in new ways. Lucien Taylor (1996) articulated how these media, despite critiques from some of the most popular anthropologists, provide new possibilities of ethnographic scholarship that reach beyond the confines and distinct capacities of the written word. This, combined with the rapid advances in vision and digital technology that now promote visual science and representation, provides a new vision for multimodal ethnography.

An ethnographic film on my topic explores Hmong oral tradition as a new form of scholarship. It puts Hmong knowledge in direct dialogue with (rather than merely a subject of) academic approaches to studying Hmong oral history and culture. Several theoretical trends in and beyond our discipline converge on calling for new modes of scholarship that have the capacity to reach beyond assumptions and limitations of deeply entrenched, western philosophical positions. “Decolonizing the canon,” calls for “radical indigenism,” “the ontological turn,” and new frameworks for “indigenous research methods” converge on questioning key assumptions that have underwritten much anthropological scholarship for a very

long time (Laidlaw 2013). However, these distinct approaches vary in their capacity to not just critique but to build up viable alternative modes of scholarship that can rise to this challenge and “take seriously” the ideas of distinct communities and assumptions of various interlocutors. In the field of Hmong Studies, for example, even critical theory as applied by the current generation of Hmong studies scholars has the tendency to apply concepts that are more deeply rooted in western philosophical forms of “critique,” to the extent that the voices and experiences of Hmong in Southeast Asia (as compared to Hmong in the United States, for example) fail to be represented (at best), or even misconstrued and suppressed (at worst). In response to this trend in Hmong studies, my film seeks to depict Hmong understandings in the rich oral, visual, and performative modes in which Hmong practitioners experience them, rather than forcing their understanding into a different mode of understanding—the written word.

Master Shong Ger Thao once stated, “*Yog koj tsuas yog tus neeg tuaj tshawb fawb los sis nyob sab nraud ntsia xwb cws koj yuav tsis nkag siab txog Hmoob cov lus thiab tej kev txawj kev ntse txog thaum uas koj tau los nqis tes ua kiag lawm*” (One will not completely understand the Hmong language and oral knowledge if one is only a researcher or an observer; not until one has become a practitioner). This statement is rooted, at least in part, in the idea that many of the ‘texts’ of Hmong ritual knowledge are stored in oral performance that have historically only been fully accessible to students who learn them in apprenticeship with recognized ritual masters. In other words, even an understanding Hmong history must consider the type of critical dialogue that I propose, which would include Hmong historiographic imagination of Hmong history, in dialogue with standard academic historiographic assumptions.

As philosopher Mary Anne Warren describes, “the traits which are most central to the concept of personhood” (Warren 1973:5). First, is the individual awareness of one’s unique thoughts,

memories, feelings, sensations, and environments. Second, is the thinking process that uses logic of an inductive or deductive nature to draw conclusions from facts or premises. Third, is self-motivation—the force that drives one to do things. Fourth, is the transmission of information, which may be done orally or through writing. The final trait is the ability to be self-aware and represent one’s knowledge through tuning into feelings, thoughts, and actions. She stated that at least some of these are necessary, if not sufficient, criteria for personhood since humans communicate to relate and exchange ideas, knowledge, feelings, and human life experiences (Warren 1973). Similarly, Master Shong Ger Thao said, “*Hmoob tej kev txawj kev ntse, lub neej, laj lim tswv yim, dab neeg, keeb kwm ces Hmoob muab zais tag nrho rau hauv Hmoob cov kab lis kev cai lawm*” (Hmong oral knowledge are defined as historically significant events, ideas, and lifestyles that are ingrained into the hearts and minds of prestigious individuals, conveyed verbatim through oral cultural practices—these are central to the concept of personhood as well).

My project dives into the substance of Master Shong Ger’s philosophy (derived from Hmong oral ritual), to “look” and not just “see” human experience from a Hmong theoretical perspective. Master Shong Ger said that if you do not understand Hmong people's feelings and thoughts, then you will never understand their human life experience. There is a Hmong proverb that says, “*Pom dua, tsis cuag ua dua,*” (Seeing it is different from doing it), which indicates that it is impossible to understand by seeing alone; you cannot just look and expect to know, you must do it, to see and understand.

There are other concepts in traditional Hmong thought that further this point. Hmong oral knowledge is embedded into many cultural practices that are still in practice today, like *Txiv Xaiv Plig*. In addition, these practices are important for the preservation of historical events and human life experience. However, these cultural practices require that individuals have three main

characteristics: *laj lim*, *tswv yim*, and *cim xeeb*. Although there are no words that can directly translate these characteristics into English; the best interpretation might be as follows: **laj lim** is *the brain of the operation, having the ability to process and understand information effectively and efficiently*, **tswv yim** is *the ability to be creative and original, capable of coming up with innovative ideas*, and **cim xeeb** is *the intelligence that stems from an exceptional memory, beyond the ordinary*. Together, these concepts paint a Hmong picture of how intelligence and personality characteristics make up a person, specifically with regards to the capacity of a person to undertake these rituals.

Going back to MacDougall's point, the limitations of "seeing" (but not yet looking) might be found here. For example, when a person has *laj lim*, but not also *tswv yim* and *cim xeeb*, that person will not be able to operate or process information effectively and efficiently or be creative, original, and innovative to the same extent as others. Hmong oral traditions have been misinterpreted by many scholars, primarily because they have not considered these ideas and concepts as philosophically worthy to analyze the human condition but have rather only considered them content to be analyzed with a primarily Western philosophical tradition. My project overcomes these limitations by using these concepts in the ways that they are intended within a Hmong philosophical framework—as concepts to be applied to understanding and making sense of human experience.

7 | Conclusion: Understanding and Returning Home

In describing different ways of knowing, Bertrand Russel (1905) coined the phrase, “knowledge by acquaintance rather than knowledge by description.” My research asks, “what understanding does a Hmong theory of personhood offer us in terms of knowledge by acquaintance?” By looking—and not just seeing—at Hmong oral ritual knowledge, we are presented with a multifaceted model of the person. The details here, as well as a comparison of how this model varies from the Western atomistic model of the person, make up my master’s thesis film. It is worth noting one final implication of this multifaceted model of the person. That is, it does not lead to the conclusion that persons are singularly natured or overly consistent. Rather, I would argue that this multifaceted theory of the person can provide a better account of experiences like ambivalence, or “being of two minds” about an issue, and similar ideas. My ethnographic film provides an account of the performance of this Hmong oral knowledge, paired with daily experience in which this multiplicity of personhood plays out in Hmong daily life. Western philosophy struggles with such concepts because of an over-emphasis on explanatory consistency (Nuckolls 1993) or imposes a singular model of the person that is actually quite variable (Shweder and Bourne 1984), whereas a Hmong model of the person provides a more experience-rich account of the nature of personhood that accounts for such ambivalence. The multifaceted nature of the person, and the multiple ultimate spiritual destinations of the spiritual components of a person are experienced and depicted in a distinct way through Hmong ritual practice, such as the *Txiv Xaiv Plig*. I choose to integrate a film into my thesis in order to provide

a “thick depiction” (Taylor 1996) of these practices and experiences that resonates better with the mediums in which they are experienced.

Returning Home seeks to illuminate Hmong ways of knowing and a cosmological Hmong model of the person. The very basic premise of a Hmong intellectual history approach is to consider the histories, interactions, influences, divergences, and tensions in and among ideas circulated in Hmong worlds, and to center the analysis on these interactions of ideas and concepts. While this is not a revolutionary paradigm shift, I argue that shifting the analytic focus to one of Hmong intellectual history does, in fact, dramatically re-center the production of ideas to one where Hmong concepts of world-understanding are placed on the same plane as analytic concepts coming from other sources of influence (Chinese society, anthropologists, Hmong studies scholars trained in critical theory, etc.). The goal of my research has been to create a new type of scholarship that rises to the challenge. The point of departure for this approach begins at the intersection of practice and analysis. I am both a recognized expert in the Hmong ritual tradition and an anthropologist seeking to make comprehensive sense of Hmong experience in Southeast Asia and the United States. By integrating these approaches, I am looking to establish a mode of scholarship that privileges neither of these analytical stances—the ethnographic nor the practical—but rather puts them into dialogue with one another at every level. To be clear, this level of dialogue is intended to extend to the highest levels of theoretical and philosophical production, rather than stopping at the level of ethnographic engagement, as is the case in what has been termed the ‘ontological turn’ (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017). Ultimately, what this turn lacks is genuine, practical engagement with the frameworks that it ostensibly seeks to understand.

The aim of this thesis—which consists of an ethnographic film and writing that combines my own ritual expertise within anthropological understanding—is to integrate these perspectives and

provide an account of Hmong cosmology and personhood that is rooted in the dual perspectives of anthropologist and practitioner, drawing on both modes of expertise to derive a more synergistic and, I would argue, more complete understanding of Hmong cosmology. This project will allow me to make Hmong cosmological understandings more accessible and available to the current generation, a generation faced with the challenge of understanding and employing a religious framework that thus far has not been well suited to the globalized and fractured world in which so many Hmong now live. My work is designed to draw on the expertise of both traditions—Hmong ritual practice and the modern academe—to bridge these differences and translate these frameworks to help the current generation overcome this rupture. This will help the current generation understand the basic Hmong cosmology of the person, and precisely how the ritual practices that we have been carrying out for so long send the three souls to their proper homes. In preserving and adapting this understanding—and the practices that encode them—I hope to facilitate passing on these understandings and practices to the next generation in ways that they can continue to be effectively practiced into the future. Only then can the ancestral generation keep their connections with the current generation, as well as the next generation, and we can continue to perpetuate those connections into the future.

Hmong people ‘lost our home’ in China when the ancient Hmong kingdom fell, and we lost our home once again in Laos at the end of the Secret War. But as Master Shong Ger Thao articulated, our ultimate understanding of the nature of the person is even more important than a physical country. If Hmong people are able to keep our understanding of the three souls alive, and if we continue in our ability to send our spirits to their homes, and if we are able to keep each generation connected to the next, then as a people Hmong will forever maintain their ability to return home.

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