Aspirations and realities of love, marriage and education among Hmong women

Hmong: a special ethnic group

• Transnational identities
  – Moving from Southern China to other Southeast Asian countries
  – From refugee camps to Western countries
  – Converting to Protestantism

• Part of the rich diversity of cultures

• What about ‘exotic’ and ‘backwards’?
  – Resistance to change?
Total population

4 to 5 million[1]

Regions with significant populations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People's Republic of China</td>
<td>3 million</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>787,604</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>460,000</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>221,948</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>151,080</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2,190[3]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Guiana</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Languages

Hmong and Mong

Religion

Shamanism, Buddhism, Christianity, others
‘Exotic’ and ‘backwards’ of Hmong?


Hmong women: starting point and target

• Hmong marriage
  – Early marriage
  – Bride price
  – Six variants
    • Wife snatching (txhom poj niam yuav)
    • Bride capture (zij poj niam)
    • Arrange marriage (nqis tsev hais poj niam)
    • Initiated by couples (xav sib yuav)
    • Elopement couples (caum txiv)
    • Forced marriages (yuam sib yuav)
Hmong Wife Snatching
Hmong women: starting point and target

- Patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal society
  - Position of Hmong women in the society
  - Particularly disadvantaged in access to education
    - Reported literacy rate of Hmong women was 22% (2002)

- What about the trend of transformation?
  - Recent ethnographic research on young Hmong women
    - Contesting their traditional marginal status
    - Constructing new cosmopolitan spaces for themselves
Why we chose the topic?

• A question in working with minority ethnic groups: what are their actual, not stereotypical features?
• Specifically, in the framework of PMTCT program, understanding of their love, marriage and education may help to improve access to services
  – Aspirations
  – Realities
• The understanding will be investigated temporally, with changes between the Old and the Young
Methods

• March-April 2010
• Three study locations in Ha Giang province
• Participation of Hmong interpreters
• Data collection:
  – In-depth interviews
  – Focus group discussions
• Data analysis: SPSS 16.0
Methods

• In-depth interviews: personal life history
  – 58 women of reproductive age (15-49 years)
    • Random, proportional, age stratified sample
    • Women of reproductive age delivered at least 1 child
  – Explored key events and processes
    • marriage
    • fertility
    • HIV risks
    • perceived changes in women’s status.
## Methods

**Table 1: IDI sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Village A</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Village B</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Village C</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;40</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source of data: List of Hmong women of reproductive age with at least one child from CHC/THC health workers, January 2010
Methods

• Focus group discussions: audiotaped
  – Three FGDs at village level
    • Purposively selected women aged 30-70
    • Range of issues
      – changes in cultural practices pertaining to courtship and marriage
      – transformation of gender roles
      – reproductive health behaviour.
  – Three further FGDs in Meo Vac town
    • Young women, both in- and out-of-school
    • Cultural context, experiences and personal aspirations related to
      – marriage,
      – gender roles,
      – education
      – livelihoods
FGD with Hmong women
FGD with Hmong girls in school
Methods

Table 2: FGD sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FGDs with Hmong women</th>
<th>Total number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FGDs with villagers of different ages</td>
<td>24 participants (3 FGDs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGDs with secondary school girls</td>
<td>9 participants (1 FGD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGDs with high school girls</td>
<td>9 participants (1 FGD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGDs with Hmong drop-out girls</td>
<td>7 participants (1 FGD)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methods

• Limitations
  – Young female Hmong interpreters from the local urban settlement
    • Biases in how the research team was perceived and may have influenced answers
  – Study sites were easily accessible by foot from a paved road
    • Not represent the situation amongst Hmong living in more isolated mountainous areas
  – Limited size of the study sample
    • Not representative
Results
Changes in procedures and expectations of love and marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marriages based on mutual love (xav sib yuav)</th>
<th>53.1%</th>
<th>69.2%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consenting, pre-arranged bride capture (zij poj niam)</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcible wife-snatching or bride capture (txhom poj niam yuav)</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranged marriage (nqis tsev hais poj niam)</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women entered their husbands’ households in diverse ways around the age of 19 years.
Results

Changes in procedures and expectations of love and marriage

In the past, if boys like/love girls, they used to catch the girls any way. But now, it is more modern, marriage just comes from love; no love, no marriage.

(Vu Thi Cho, 25-year-old woman, FGD with school drop-outs)
Results

Changes in procedures and expectations of love and marriage

Changes in proportion of Hmong girls allowed to choose a husband:

- Up to the end of 1990 (n = 18): 61.1%
- 1991-2000 (n = 17): 64.7%
- 2001-2010 (n = 23): 95.7%
Results
Changes in procedures and expectations of love and marriage

• Avoiding traditional clothing in order not to be a candidate for forced wife snatching
  – Modern clothes protect us against rude male behaviour, such as slapping girls’ bottoms, or touching girls’ breasts. With my modern look they do not know if I am Hmong or maybe a mix, or Kinh, and so if they do it [rude behaviour] to me, I can feel free to hit them. (Lo Thi Lien, 17-year-old woman, Grade 11, FGD with high school students)

• An explicit link between education and enabling women to reject traditional marital practices and sexual harassment
Results
Persistence of bride price payment as cultural practice

- Common among interviewed women (94.8%)
- Bride price in rural areas was higher than in urban areas and has increased over recent years
  - Mean reported bride price was over two million VND (103 USD, from 10-308 USD)
  - Be considered a substantial outlay of household income
    - Some families sell land to ‘buy’ a wife for their son
    - A daughter is worth a motorbike. Today, a daughter will make you richer. In contrast a son will make you poorer.
- Insurance for the individual woman and her family of the quality of the family she is marrying into
- It appeared not necessary to be eradicated
Results
Changing views on sexuality, marriage and personal aspirations

• Younger girls know much more information about sex and reproductive health

• It is not only the older generation that holds these views and norms of pre-marital sex
  – Old people do not accept a daughter-in-law who is considered naughty, and the marriage won’t be accepted. (Vu Thi Cho, 25-year-old woman, FGD with school drop-outs)
  – The problem is that the parents-in-law of girls who become pregnant before marriage really hate them. (Sung Thi Mai, 18-year-old woman, Grade 12, FGD with high school students)
  – If one of my friends got pregnant before marriage I would be very disappointed. (Sung Thi My, 18-year-old woman, Grade 12, FGD with high school students)
Results
Changing views on sexuality, marriage and personal aspirations

• Access to formal education was low across all generations of women
  – Over 30 years: 97% no formal education
  – 30 years and under: 50% no formal education

• Main factors influencing their school abandon: marriage and family poverty
Results
Changing views on sexuality, marriage and personal aspirations

- Although a number of women aspired to higher education, they expressed a lack of confidence in their abilities
- Inequity in access to sustained formal education
- Their independence may be greatly curtailed following marriage
  - They have to request permission to go out, often first from their parents-in-law and then from their husbands
Conclusion

• Distance between the ‘modern’ Kinh and the ‘traditional’ Hmong

• Current, biased focus on the supposedly ‘backward’, ‘exotic’ and static nature of Hmong society does not reflect the reality

• Young Hmong women are stating a preference for love marriages and rejecting other arrangements as outdated

• Hmong girls were also found to have detailed knowledge about sexual and reproductive health from a variety information channels
Conclusion

• Bride price is a continuing practice amongst families across generations
• Dressing in modern clothes shows their aspirations of personal autonomy and unavailability for traditional marriages
  – Also reportedly afforded them protection from immediate undesired sexual attention
• The continuing patriarchal nature of Hmong society severely limits women’s autonomy and ability to realize their aspirations.
Perspectives

• HIV among Hmong people – what we think and the reality?
• More understanding Hmong people to improve their access to health care services and other social activities
  – especially who live in more isolated mountainous areas.
• Any interventions based on research findings?
• The role of traditions/customs/footways in term of health
• Matrilocality and matrilinearity; feminist anthropological debate on empowerment and gender equity
• Identity and adaptation of Hmong people?
• Others???
Acknowledgements

• Medical Committee Netherlands Vietnam
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• Sunflower group members
• Funding of the Royal Netherlands Embassy, Hanoi
Pictures of Hmong marriage
Pictures of Hmong market
Pictures of Hmong life
Thank you!

Questions and comments?