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The Hmong Language as a Connection Between Past and Present in Rural Thailand

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ABSTRACT

My ethnographic research took place in Pa Klang in Thailand during a university field school from late May to early August 2022. The Hmong are an ethnic group who originally lived in Southeast Asia in mountainous regions, supported by an agrarian lifestyle. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Hmong language had no writing system and was based on oral traditions. The methods I used to gather data included observations of social interactions and participation in events, interviews, and surveys. Though most research about Hmong language maintenance has been done in the United States, diasporic Hmong communities exist in many parts of the world and assimilate into many different cultures while trying to sustain theirs. I focus my research on a Hmong community in Thailand. I argue that the younger Hmong generations have a different experience with language loss and maintenance in Thailand compared to the United States. I argue that Hmong youth in Thailand seek to learn more about their language in churches and university clubs to remain emotionally and linguistically connected to their friends and family, learn their roles in Hmong society, and pass the language on to future generations.

Keywords: Hmong language maintenance, Hmong literacy, Hmong diaspora, next-generation Hmong, Pa Klang, Thailand.

On a sweltering June day in northern Thailand, my classmates and I went into the mountains to observe a *pauj yeem* ('pow yang'), or an offering ceremony to the spirits for a great harvest season. The highlight of our trip was when my classmates and I performed a Hmong song for karaoke. For our Hmong 101 language class project before our study abroad, we learned a Hmong children's song about the Hmong writing system. No one expected us to sing in Hmong, as was evident by the fact that all the men and women in attendance jumped from their seats and pulled out their phones to record us. Their surprise was enhanced when someone shared their recording of us on Facebook with the translated caption, "I am Hmong, but I can't sing. [They are] American but [they] can sing Hmong songs." Further attesting to the novelty of our performance, to date the Facebook video has almost 70,000 views.

In front of this crowd, there were five white, young adult women singing about the basics of the Hmong writing system. They knew before we started singing that our Hmong was barely conversational, yet the energy on top of that mountain shifted after our musical number ended. People went up to our professor and exclaimed how brilliant the song choice was. They loved our dancing and how happy we looked as we sang for them. Later, more people came up to us commenting, "my kids do not even speak Hmong, so to have these foreigners sing in Hmong is cool," or, "Could you teach my kids this song?" For me, this primary school song I did not fully understand opened the door to discussing how children in Pa Klang lack proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing Hmong.

At the beginning of the trip, I had thought that literacy was the most crucial way to learn

and maintain a language. Quickly, I learned that the Hmong language is more significant than words on a page or sounds I could not understand. Despite living lives using both Hmong and Thai languages, my interlocutors and my (host) family predominantly spoke Hmong. After four months of learning Hmong in a small classroom, I could recognize a few words here and there, but it took almost the whole three months in Thailand to start communicating with my family. This communication was based on more than just written words. While I did use Google Translate often with my host family, I started to pick up on mannerisms and gestures as well as vocal cues to understand my role as a member of the family. Being adopted into this family, I was the youngest which yielded me the opportunity to be more on the quiet side, but that did not stop my host mom and host siblings from interacting with me as much as they could in English, Hmong, and, infrequently, Thai. Still, I was perplexed by the relationship between my older siblings and their children. Why was everyone but the younger generation speaking Hmong?

While most research about Hmong language maintenance has been done in the United States, diasporic Hmong communities exist in many parts of the world and assimilate into many different cultures while trying to sustain theirs. I argue that the younger Hmong generations have a different experience with language loss and maintenance in Thailand compared to the United States. I argue that Hmong youth in Thailand seek to learn more about their language in churches and university clubs as a means to remain emotionally and linguistically connected to their friends and family, learn their roles in Hmong society, and pass the language on to future generations. For most Hmong people, literacy is not the goal for language ability; the ability to verbally communicate with loved ones, pass on traditions, and teach the next generation how to speak the Hmong language are the most important abilities for my interlocutors in Pa Klang. My interlocutors attain these goals in settings like churches and universities which stand as distinct sites of language revitalization among younger generations.

Background

The Hmong are an ethnic group who originally lived in mountainous regions of Southeast Asia supported by an agrarian lifestyle. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Hmong language had no writing system; foreign missionaries created the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) in the early 1950s. This newly written script became the unofficial writing system for all Hmong dialects and became a way for Hmong speakers to record their wisdom in writing. Despite the emergence of a writing system, many of my Hmong interlocutors cannot read and write the Hmong RPA.

Pa Klang is divided into smaller villages with distinct names. I will focus on data gathered from Suan Sai, Kang Ho, and Nam Peun, referencing the area collectively as Pa Klang. The estimated population of Pa Klang is 12,000 people with about 7,000 ethnically Hmong individuals. Although Green Hmong and White Hmong are the primary ethnicities among the Hmong communities in the town and speak two different dialects, I will not make distinctions between them as they are mutually intelligible.

Language tensions in Pa Klang

I first want to address tensions between Hmong communities and Thai society to illustrate the effects on language acquisition in smaller villages like Pa Klang. In Thailand, Thai people refer to Hmong communities and other minority groups with the derogatory term "hill tribes" which means tribes that originate from the mountains. The "hill tribes" became a way for Thai officials to denote uplanders and lowlanders (Morton 2019, 1). The Thai government claimed superiority by controlling minority villages through police surveying and demarcations of upland regions by state agencies (Hickman 2011; Morton 2019). These demarcations forced Hmong refugees into the mountainous areas of Thailand, geographically separating them from Thai society.

Pa Klang became a resettlement village for the Thai government to supervise the Hmong people. Hmong immigrants began to relocate to Pa Klang in the late 1960s as a result of conflicts with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and other conflicts along the Lao border (Hickman 2011). In the process of warding off the CPT and

allowing migrants to relocate to these controllable villages, the Thai government's 'concerns' about national security facilitated the underdevelopment and marginalization of ethnic minorities (Morton 2019). The lack of resources put Hmong villages and other communities at the mercy of the Thai government which continued control by educating the children of the hill tribes in only the Thai language. A possibly detrimental exchange then began in the 1960s period of relocation: if minority groups pledged loyalty to the Thai government, then the government would provide educational opportunities to the children and thus make the minority people more compliant to Thai society (Ueda 2019, 48).

The Thai government has used education and schooling to control minority communities to acculturate into Thai citizens which would strip these minority groups of their language and culture (Ueda 2019, 50). Upon settling into Pa Klang, children immediately began school in the Thai language. Through education, the Thai government created an environment in which Hmong children were exposed to Thai ideologies linked to language, classroom etiquette, and social hierarchies. Classrooms in Thai schools have the national flag, a statue of Buddha, and a portrait of the king and teach compulsory lessons about Buddhism (Ueda 2019). The Thai government does not recognize shamanism as a religion, so practitioners of Hmong shamanism are registered as Buddhists (Hickman 2011), stripping the community of a primary time and place of Hmong language use and traditional instruction. Therefore, in the last fifty years, Hmong people have received their education in Thai, which has damaged the culture of Hmong peoples and their perception of identity as Hmong communities in Thai society, beginning with the parents of the current generation (Ueda 2019).

There are several hurdles associated with endangered language learning, including few opportunities to hear the language, little presence in media and literature, and large geographical areas where speakers are spread out. Much of learning a language is focused on the linguistic constructions of that language which requires individuals to focus on literacy (Hall 2018). However, written and spoken

language do not have to coincide; reading and speaking are very different. Hall (2018) posits that writing becomes a crutch for language learning as it is processed in the brain separately for a person already speaking the language.

Identifying Through Language

There are several ways identity can be understood in a Hmong context. I will be using the ideas of Norton (2005), who describes identity as relating to a person's understanding of their relationship to the world and their possibilities for the future, which stems from a connection to others and their perceived role in society. Language continuity is a concept that has emerged in linguistics of endangered languages as the first language "link[s] the present generation to past generations from whom the language is learned and with future generations now acquiring it" (Handman 2009, 637). More specifically, I focus on how Hmong youth in Thailand understand themselves as individuals and use that understanding to make decisions about their roles in Hmong and Thai society.

Handman (2009) writes about language ideologies, endangered linguistics, and the role Christianization has on endangered languages and their revitalization. One critical aspect of sustaining language has come from the concept of intangible heritage. Intangible heritage includes performing arts, rituals, festive events, mythology, and traditional craftsmanship (Handman 2009). Handman (2009) argues that when endangered language speakers begin to use a writing system, they do not form a connection with it and become passive learners. The continuity of the mother tongue is what links past and present generations, not just the written form of a language. For example, my interlocutors used Thai anytime they wrote something even when they predominantly spoke Hmong amongst each other.

The value of reading and writing as dominant forms of teaching has been a factor in the decline of traditional oral transference of Hmong knowledge which makes the transmission of Hmong oral culture difficult (Xiong 2018). The lack of reading and writing is not the cause of the decline because Hmong

oral histories do not map onto Western idolization of literacy. While younger generations may not be literate in Hmong RPA, the ability to speak the language is more important for language continuity. The accepted Hmong RPA "gathers all the Hmong of the diaspora under the same coherent alphabet no matter the country they live in" (Ly 2020, 12). A written system for Hmong has only existed for the last seventy years and could be "a door for a journey to literacy and written communication." Maintaining one's language is central to perpetuating culture in the presence of another, more dominant culture and language (Xiong-Lor 2015, 2). While Western and Hmong linguistic values differ, my interlocutors demonstrated time and again that they value their Hmong language enough to find ways to interact with it and maintain speaking it in their capacity which is illustrated in the data examples below. Hall (2018) continues writing that someone acquiring a new skill must feel that skill has value; that person must also value the method used to teach that skill. The value of speaking and learning Hmong is demonstrated by most children speaking Hmong in the home, learning the Hmong RPA in churches, and joining culture clubs at universities.

The most common argument among previous research suggests that Hmong youth are giving up culture, language, and oral history to survive in different dominant cultures because a drive to be economically successful exists in developed societies (Xiong 2018). The desire to succeed in the dominant culture leads Hmong individuals to assimilate and reject their own culture, family, and selves at the cost of losing the ability to speak the Hmong language (Leonard, Vitrella, and Yang 2020). Hmong individuals first pursue mastery of the dominant language of their country and then return to the Hmong language in adulthood because "learning to read and write Hmong carries significant cultural capital, but does not necessarily help one economically" (Hickman 2011, 50). They seek to establish themselves economically and then continue learning Hmong by association with relatives who speak Hmong or participating in an organization where the Hmong RPA is taught.

Methods

My ethnographic research took place in a town in Northeastern Thailand called Pa Klang during a university field school from late May to early August 2022. Under the direction of Dr. Jacob Hickman, five white students, including myself, attended the field school as part of our undergraduate studies for the sociocultural anthropology major at Brigham Young University. In preparation for this trip, the five of us were required to take at least one Hmong language course. The Hmong we learned before our trip included basic conversational sentences with an emphasis on tonal pronunciation and spelling. I could briefly tell someone my name and simple statements about my American family in Hmong. None of us could speak Thai, so we relied heavily on our professor and an interpreter who lived in Pa Klang to translate. The methods I used to gather data included observations of social interactions and participation in events, interviews, and surveys.

Participation in Events

I spent a day at each of the following sites: a Hmong church service located in Pa Klang, a Hmong Christian Conference in Nan province, and the Hmong Culture Preservation Club's event at Naresuan University in Phitsanulok. I conducted participant observation and informal interviewing at the church in Pa Klang as a means to understand language use in Christian religious settings. Members of the congregation spoke only Hmong during the service, sang hymns in Hmong, and offered testimonies in Hmong after the main sermon. The larger Christian conference based in Nan actively promotes learning the Hmong RPA as part of a self-reliance program for their Hmong members. This conference is part of quarterly gatherings for church members in which members from other provinces can meet together. At Naresuan university, I conducted participant observation and informal interviewing of students as they rotated through activities focused on traditional Hmong practices, history, and language study. The language study portion was the most significant part of this site as the students in the club were all engaged in learning the Hmong RPA and practicing Hmong pronunciation.

Interviews

The second site is the town of Pa Klang where I lived and participated in interviews organized by an interpreter who is local to the main village. She is nineteen years old, currently enrolled in university, and fluent in Hmong, Thai, and English. She quickly became my main source of information about life in Pa Klang and Hmong traditional practices. After telling her about my project and my objectives, she invited community members to be interviewed. The people I interviewed were between the ages of sixteen and nineteen years old with a language ability range of fluent in both the Hmong and Thai languages to only fluent in Thai. These interviews lasted about an hour each and were recorded as a means to refer to specific interviews after I had left Thailand. The structure of the interviews started with me introducing myself in Hmong, stating my name and the purpose of interviews for my *wittiyanyppon brinyatree* or 'bachelor's thesis' in Thai (there is no Hmong equivalent to bachelor's thesis).

Surveys

Lastly, I implemented a survey with the help of my director and our interpreter to ask families about language use in their homes. We conducted a total of thirty-eight surveys in two weeks. Households were only interviewed if the members spoke Hmong in the home, therefore, all my respondents identified as ethnically Hmong. Each respondent was asked the same general questions with individual nuance based on each response. These questions focus on language use in the home, how often and when people switch between Hmong and Thai, how the respondent's personality changes when speaking certain languages, and advice the respondent has for younger generations. After the first five interviews, I added a new question asking why respondents think younger generations do not speak Hmong well.

Outcomes

Based on my interlocutors' responses, I have denoted three generational categories to show how each "generation" thinks about, talks about, and uses the Hmong language in their daily lives. I refer to these generations as younger, middle, and older. Older generations

are the “grandparent” generation, their children are the “middle” generation, and the “younger” generation is the young adults and adolescents. In the three following examples, I describe the scale of speaking ability that I found in Pa Klang. These examples show how family roles, possibilities of the future, and the influence of Thai language input affect a person’s Hmong speaking ability. At the same time, the point of these stories is to also illustrate that these young people expressed that wherever their language ability is at now, they all said they want to improve their current language ability, learn the Hmong RPA, and share the language with future generations.

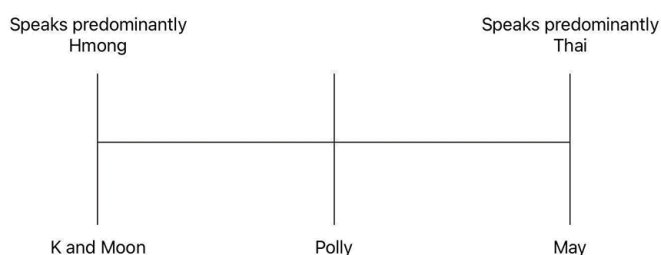


Figure 1: Scale used to illustrate the speaking ability of four participants.

Moon, K, and Gendered Familial Obligations

My first interview during my study abroad was with two teenage cousins three weeks after I arrived in Thailand. They are juniors at the high school located in Pa Klang studying math and science: Moon is female, K is male. They are on the left side of figure 1 because they speak both languages fluently and choose to speak Hmong more than Thai. We told Moon and K our names and then asked our interpreter to explain the goals of the interview. We then began our discussion about language, their roles in their families, and their thoughts about the future.

From the interview, I learned that women in the Hmong social hierarchy are not “responsible,” per our interpreter’s translation, for continuing Hmong surnames in their families, or the *dab qhuas* (dah kwah), which are the clan spirits that protect homes and are central pillars of Hmong religious practice. These spirits are protectors of the family physically and spiritually; if anything were to happen to the spirits, then ailments manifest

amongst family members often in the form of an illness or misfortune. In Moon’s case, she is not able to carry on the lineage of her clan spirits. When she marries, she is adopted into her husband’s clan and receives protection from his family spirits. Although she cannot continue her family’s spiritual lineage, she still wants to practice shamanism as an adult which means she will continue to participate in ceremonies organized by her family and thus continue to speak Hmong. The Hmong language will continue to be important to Moon as she fulfills her roles as a homemaker, mother, and supporter of her husband. To organize these ceremonies, build camaraderie with friends and family, and teach younger Hmong girls, she will continue to return home and participate in shamanic ceremonies and possibly start hosting ceremonies to honor her husband’s spirits in their home.

K, as the oldest son, will inherit the duties and responsibilities of caring for the *dab qhuas* wherever he may be, which is customary to return to live at the family home. While he may be able to spend some time away from home studying and working, he will always be expected to return to fulfill clan duties. The only way his return would not happen is if he chose to no longer practice the Hmong religion nor honor the spirits. This decision is highly unlikely because Hmong people strongly believe that spirits can physically harm living people if they dishonor or forget about the spirits.

Several times, Moon and K mentioned that they would have to leave home to pursue education and work, and at the same time, said they would still assist in ritual ceremonies either with their parents or their future families. The overarching theme of the conversation was that while they are away, they will continue to learn and participate in Hmong customs. This theme presented itself in the way they talked about their roles in their families and their desires to learn the Hmong writing system to fortify their language skills. Although they had no specific reason for why they should know the Hmong RPA right now or later in life, they both knew that it was important for them to eventually know how to read and write it. Therefore, they recognize that they will continue to speak Hmong while also exploring

how they fit into Hmong society after succeeding economically.

Polly and the Future

Polly is in the middle of the language scale as she speaks Hmong and Thai, but she does not wish to continue traditional Hmong practices. She is nineteen years old and attends a university in Bangkok. I consider Polly an oddity in Pa Klang because she is open about her opinions about the Hmong religion, patriarchy, and Thai society in general. She is the oldest of three daughters with her parents spending their time selling meat in Bangkok. The quality that makes Polly different from other young adults her age is her ability to also speak English. She is well-informed about Western culture, especially through social media platforms and her university major, English Literature.

Because Polly believes everyone is equal and should have equal responsibility or power to govern a family, she dislikes that Hmong culture is patriarchal. She was the first one to tell me she would not be responsible for anything clan related as she is a female and is unable to care for the family's *dab qhuas*. She considers herself superstitious in that she wears a bracelet her mom said would protect her from COVID-19 and thinks bad spirits are real, but she does not believe in Hmong shamanism. Polly thinks ceremonies are too old-fashioned and unnecessary in a modern world with Western medicine available. In our interview, she said that the only thing she wants to keep from Hmong culture is the Hmong language. She said that language connects her to family, so she needs to know how to speak Hmong so that she can communicate with her parents, aunts and uncles, and her grandmother.

I had many conversations about the Hmong language with Polly, and we did an impromptu Hmong lesson where I showed her my Hmong RPA booklet. She mentioned a few times that her mom knows how to read and write in Hmong. Polly's mom tried to teach Polly the Hmong RPA when she was younger, but Polly said that trying to learn the writing systems for Hmong and Thai was too difficult as a child. After starting as our interpreter, Polly's interest in learning the Hmong RPA sparked as she had to learn new words for our projects. She started

asking her mom about different words and phrases which had helped Polly to recognize and read some words. During our interview, Polly told me that she enjoys learning new Hmong words from her mom, and when Polly shows interest in learning from her mom, their relationship grows.

Despite Polly's current knowledge of Hmong cultural practices and the language, she still has more to learn. Some other classmates and I left Hmong language materials for Polly to use to learn the Hmong RPA. All her messaging (texts) communication with her mom and everyone else is in the Thai language; because she feels her relationship with her mom improves when her mom teaches her, their relationship could improve even more if they were able to message each other in the Hmong language.

May and Hmong Language Loss

May is sixteen years old and a sophomore in high school. She is the third of five daughters in her family. She is on the right side of the scale which represents the more Thai-influenced youth. She said that she can understand Hmong, but she no longer speaks Hmong. She attends the high school in the city of Pua about ten minutes outside of Pa Klang which is a more expensive school and has a Thai majority student body and faculty. The majority of her friends are Hmong, but they speak only Thai with each other mainly because May cannot speak Hmong. May hopes that when she is older, she will be able to learn to speak Hmong and learn the writing system because she wants to be able to pass the language on to her children.

Her family is Christian and does not participate in shaman ceremonies. The family attends a Christian church where the main service is in the Hmong language, but the classes for the youth are in the Thai language with Thai scriptures. The only time May and her siblings speak Hmong is when they address the elders of the congregation. However, during my interview with May, she did not seem to understand any Hmong. May's grandmother pulled up a stool a few minutes into the interview, sitting a few feet away from May. The grandmother loudly asked in Hmong, "Who are these people, and why are they here?" May looked at her grandmother confused as her

eyebrows scrunched and her mouth turned into a frown. She glanced back at Polly with wide eyes to which Polly said in Thai, "Can you understand?" Shaking her head, May said no and asked Polly to ask the grandmother to repeat the questions. We all awkwardly chuckled after Polly explained the interview to the grandmother and continued discussing why or how May "forgot" how to speak Hmong and what she recognized as Hmong culture. I say "forgot" because May told us that when she was younger, she could speak Hmong with her parents and grandparents, but when she started going to Thai school, she quickly adapted to Thai more than Hmong.

When asked why she no longer speaks Hmong, she said that she spends more time at school than at home, which increases her use of the Thai language. After a full day of speaking Thai at school during classes and with friends, May comes home and uses Thai again to speak to her parents. Despite her parents' and grandparents' fluency in Hmong and their desire for May to speak Hmong, May's parents speak Thai to May and her siblings because the children cannot understand the Hmong language and only reply in Thai. Even though she does not speak or understand Hmong very well right now, she knows that she wants to learn to speak Hmong again and also be able to read and write. May said that her church has programs where members learn the Hmong writing system. Her parents do tell her to study Hmong and speak more Hmong so that she can pass down the language to her children. She still wants to learn the language eventually because it will always be part of her and her family.

One of the objectives of my interviews was to understand how language facilitates communication and self-expression; however, based on this research, the Western concept of internal identity is not a significant factor in how Hmong individuals in Pa Klang think about themselves. During May's interview, I tried to ask her about her identity as a Hmong-born individual in Thailand, who only speaks Thai, specifically, if certain pieces of her routine or lifestyle are strictly Thai or Hmong. This question was difficult for May to answer because she does not think about her identity in ethnic categories. Instead, she told us about

how she values being a good person and following what God says in the scriptures. She thinks of herself as Hmong because she was born to Hmong parents, and she also thinks of herself as Thai because she grew up in Thailand.

Why Their Stories Matter

Moon and K's stories reflect Norton's (2005) definition of identity, specifically relating to how they see themselves in the future and accept their familial roles in adulthood. Moon and K up to this point in their lives recognize the possibilities of their futures as ways to develop economically but also culturally. Their perceived roles as female and male members of a Hmong community are explicit from birth demonstrated by their sense of obligation to continue caring for their families and participating in shamanic ritual gatherings. While Xiong (2018) argues that Hmong youth are giving up culture, language, and Hmong history as a means to be successful. Moon and K's experiences show they are still connected to their culture, language, and history contradicts Xiong (2018). Moon and K demonstrate their connections to Hmong culture through their knowledge of shamanic practices and by speaking Hmong.

Polly is the inverse of Moon and K in that her identity is not guided by her role in a Hmong community as she feels no obligation to participate in ceremonies or traditional activities, such as New Year's or rituals for family members. Her future is somewhat focused on economic prosperity but more for her to be alone and away from Hmong villages. She is definitive in her statements that her only connection to Hmong culture will be her ability to speak the language. In Polly's case, as she moves away from Pa Klang and starts to speak Hmong less, she made her stance clear that she will always be connected to the Hmong language as a way to stay connected to her parents and other older relatives. Polly's words suggest that she is assimilating or adopting the mindset of the dominant Thai society, yet her interactions with her mother specifically show that Polly is learning the importance of the Hmong language and the writing system. While Polly's exposure to Western ideals through English has created a divergent attitude about

Hmong culture compared to other Hmong peoples her age, she still comes back to Hmong as her first language and Hmong roots.

May's story is evidence of the possibility of Hmong language loss among the youth as she currently does not speak any Hmong and has very little Hmong input in her day-to-day life. May shows considerable signs of Hmong language loss as she cannot speak and understands little Hmong. However, I propose that if May were to start learning the Hmong writing system right now, she would be able to recover her language skills more easily than someone learning Hmong outside of a Hmong village. May is still immersed in the Hmong language in Pa Klang and could regain her Hmong language skills, but if she continues to primarily speak, read, and write in Thai, she is likely to lose all linguistic connections with the Hmong language. While her parents desire for her and her siblings to speak Hmong, they continue to speak Thai with their children, limiting the amount of Hmong spoken between the middle and younger generations.

Having said that, despite the evidence of language attrition in Pa Klang, it is not caused solely by youth dismissing Hmong culture. Some of the factors that contribute to the loss of Hmong language fluency stem from the parents who do not use Hmong in the home, increased Thai input during school, and the general side effect of assimilating into a more dominant culture. Youth in the United States are surrounded by Western ideals of individualism and capitalism. Hmong and Thai cultures are somewhat similar, so the result of language loss is not due to giving up cultural identity but not having enough structured language exposure during childhood. The Hmong language continues to be an identifying marker for the Hmong people and a skill more people desire. I advance Hickman's (2011) cultural capital claim that if opportunities were available for people to be literate in Hmong during childhood and young adulthood, more people would likely maintain their language because of the increased connections to family and daily life.

Language Acquisition in Churches

On a hot Sunday morning in late July, two other students and I went to a local Hmong Christian

church to observe their Sunday services. We did not know much about this particular place except that it is the only Christian church still active in Pa Klang. The building was across town, past the lake, nestled between houses and shops. The only sign I could use to identify it as a church is a cross painted on the wall near the roof. On days other than Sunday, I rarely saw anyone go in or out of the building. Sometimes, there was a pickup truck parked under the carport, but for the most part, it did not look like people visited often.

To our surprise, we walked up to the door and noticed the front patio adorned with shoes. As we walked in, a medium-sized room full of people turned to look at us, most likely an unconscious human behavior of looking towards noise but not acknowledging it. Our arrival had people doing double takes to process the new attendees of the meeting. I slipped into a pew with my classmate right as the pastor began addressing the congregation in the Hmong language. While the pastor talked, more people started to look at us in the small pew. After a few sentences, the pastor stopped and stared at us. He looked like he was waiting for a response, but neither my friend nor I understood all of what he was saying to know how to respond. Our response included awkward smiles and small waves because we assumed after a few minutes he had welcomed us or mentioned us as visitors like most other congregations do when new people participate in the services. He looked a little confused, so he turned to someone on the stage behind him. A man in the far-right corner of the stage, holding a guitar, looked up as someone else handed the man the microphone. In English, he welcomed us and asked us to introduce ourselves. He also mentioned that they do not receive visitors often, so everyone in the room was excited to see us. We briefly introduced ourselves in Hmong, including our names and that we were students writing our undergraduate theses, and sat down.

During the service, the hymns and testimonies were in the Hmong language. The main sermon was in Thai because, as I was later told by another church member, that particular preacher is ethnically Thai and does not speak Hmong. The lyrics for the hymns were displayed

on a TV so people could follow along reading the lyrics or memorize the lyrics without needing to read. A kind woman came and translated the meeting for us. We asked her if anyone could read the lyrics on the screen. She said that, over time, people get used to seeing the Hmong words on the screen, so they associate the words they sing with the words written on the screen.

From talking with our translator friend more, I found out that her family is responsible for the church. Her brother is the main director and the rest of her family participate in the music and teaching. She told us that she is a teacher and tutors her nieces and other kids to speak English. I thought that her teaching her nieces English was interesting as I knew English was already taught at the high school level. She commented that her English lessons were a way to supplement their English learned at school because the three of them already spoke Hmong and Thai fluently. To better understand this focus on English, we asked if children also learn to read and write in Hmong if they already know how to speak; she said yes. As part of the children's Sunday school activities, the teachers teach the children to read and write Hmong. This church is the only location in the village that I know of where the Hmong language is taught formally to younger people.

Similar to the events at the church in Pa Klang, we also attended a Hmong Christian conference in Nan. This specific church uses previously recorded sermons to teach its lessons. The original pastor of the church was from South Korea, and all of his sermons are in Korean. Now, there are numerous dubbed translations of these sermons, so virtually anyone can listen and attend. When we observed the room designated for Hmong individuals, some attendees had the Bible translated into Hmong and others had Thai translations. Throughout the video sermon, scriptural references appeared written in Hmong. Later, we spoke with two of the organizers of the conference, and they said that the leaders of the church have emphasized learning languages, martial arts, and self-sustaining practices in finances and gardening to support a self-sufficient lifestyle.

From my experiences at the church and the conference, I could see that while Hmong reading and writing are not necessarily focused on, there is a level of importance in learning the writing system. Because Thai is the economic language, my interlocutors in Thailand focus on fluency in Thai during their educational years to have higher education as well as participate in the workforce to grow wealth. For my older generation interlocutors, higher education is not the focus of their lives, but establishing income and working are important factors that often lead to fluency in Thai. Therefore, the church leadership is not teaching language for economic skills but rather increasing the number of people capable of reading and writing in their native language. Within the community, people are trying to expand literacy in a small and direct way, which seems like a way for the church to attract potential converts as more young people and anyone else benefit from literacy in Hmong in a religious setting.

Hmong Culture Preservation Club at Naresuan University

A few weeks before the end of the field school, the program director taught a brief session as part of a culture club activity at a university located in Phitsanulok, Thailand. This university is in a heavily Hmong-populated area and attracts Hmong students elsewhere in the country to attend. As such, Hmong university-aged youth feel more comfortable moving away from home if there are restaurants and people close by with similar backgrounds. Although the majority of the club members are ethnically Hmong, about 122, a few of the Thai students also participate. The event we attended included a section about Hmong culture taught by a Hmong shaman from Pa Klang and a brief history lesson taught by Dr. Hickman.

Following lunch, all the students returned to the long classroom. The club leaders handed out a pre-test as students walked through the doors and took a seat. Two of my classmates, a previous field school student living in Thailand, and I sat in the back of the long room. This third lecture was dedicated to teaching all of the club members the basics of the Hmong RPA. We each received a test that was about twenty questions to take before the lecture as a way to test what we already knew about the RPA. All of

the questions were written in the Thai language, so I used Google Translate to figure out the questions and answers, marking my answers as I went. After everyone took the first test, the first lecturer and shaman from before began teaching us the consonant sounds and examples of Hmong words. On a separate sheet, we had a chart with each consonant section and a vowel section. Going through the boxes, the shaman asked the students to write the closest Thai consonant or vowel sound beside the Hmong letter. My classmates and I answered each box with the English equivalents we learned in our Hmong classes.

At the end of the class, we retook the exam to see if we had improved. Many of the students exclaimed as the club leaders projected the correct answers on the televisions throughout the classroom. Some students jumped out of their seats when they got the answers right, other students sighed when they got the answers wrong. We all laughed when students would try to argue with the teacher about the right and wrong answers. From what I could understand through body language and comparisons of answer sheets to other students, it looked like the students had improved their scores compared to the pre-test. The students who were not satisfied with their scores started to ask more questions which prompted a discussion between the students and the teacher. One of the older club members would stand up when the students got too loud, which resulted in the older student writing new examples on the board, pronouncing the word, and having the students repeat. Through those simple clarifications, the class would quiet down and then the cycle would start again if they had more questions.

The participation of around one hundred students is evidence that younger generations in Thailand do want to learn more about the Hmong culture, history, and language compared to research in the United States (Leonard, Vitrella, and Yang 2020). It also demonstrates the younger generations are self-motivated to seek out opportunities to teach others and to continue to learn after leaving home. One of the students friended me on Facebook, so I asked him later why he chose this specific university. He told me that he knew

about the Hmong Culture Preservation Club before applying, and it made him want to apply. In his own words, "I joined the club because it is a community of Hmong people and there are many activities that make us closer." He continued saying that other races of students join the club, so he can learn from them, too. Hmong youth are aware of and seek out opportunities to feel closer to their people which shows they value the skill (Hall 2018). This club creates a fun extracurricular for the students, promotes Hmong culture, and is an outlet for students to learn while at university, creating another door for Hmong literacy and written communication — something not often possible during primary school.

Language as a Connection to the Past

Polly, my classmate, and I biked around Pa Klang as we did surveys. We mostly focused on houses located in the town where it only took five minutes or less to travel. Upon reviewing the map and noticing we did not have many dots left in town, Polly suggested a house away from town and surrounded by fields. The concrete road turned into a gravel road and then turned into a muddy dirt road that went through two rectangular plots of land. In the corner of one of the plots was a concrete house behind a wire fence. An older gentleman was crouched down working in a garden. A middle-aged woman sat on the long porch with a little girl still in her school uniform. As we walked up the driveway, Polly politely announced our arrival and asked if either the man or the woman would like to participate in the survey.

Immediately, the woman welcomed us up onto the porch, giving us each a small chair to sit on. At the same time as she was welcoming us, she apologized because she does not speak the Hmong language very well, so she might not be able to answer all the questions. I understood that much because I often found myself saying something similar. We sat with her as she told us about her family and how she has been staying at her older brother's house for a few months. The man working in the yard is her father and the girl is her niece. She went through other members of the family living in the house and never faltered in her Hmong speaking as we transitioned to the survey questions. The background questions are

simple and repetitive, which may have eased our respondent's fears about answering the questions clearly in Hmong. Yet, the more telling part of our conversation came when she perfectly answered the free-response questions while speaking Hmong.

Four months after this interview, I finally found out what she was describing when answering language-specific questions. She said she most often lives in Thai cities away from the Hmong villages, and, when she comes home, she has to readjust to speaking Hmong. She said that even though it is difficult for her to adjust back to speaking Hmong, the language comes back quickly because her parents only speak Hmong. She described that her relationship with her parents specifically changes when she speaks Thai and when she speaks Hmong. If her parents cannot understand her while she speaks Thai, she feels distant and disconnected. Therefore, she has to speak Hmong to communicate with her parents. She said, "if you speak Thai to them and they do not understand it, then the relationship is not as good. You are not as close to them. But when you speak Hmong, then they will understand, and you are closer and more related." She continued saying that, during her childhood, if a person did not know something about the language or life, they could ask their parents. Nowadays, people rely on technology for answers, which has distanced older generations from younger generations.

At thirty-five years old, this woman recognizes that her ability to speak Hmong is intimately connected to her relationship with her parents. This idea came up in most of my other surveys as people often described needing to know how to speak Hmong to communicate with the elders. The theme of speaking Hmong as a necessity came up more often than reading and writing Hmong because if families can still speak to each other in the same language, then reading and writing are not always necessary. Many of the respondents advised the younger generation that they must learn to read and write the Hmong language because it connects younger and older people and helps solidify cultural teachings "because that is ours" and "if [we] do not study and practice, in the long run, we are going to lose

[the language]. And this is very worrisome." Despite the threat of loss, people in Pa Klang are still capable of Hmong language acquisition because of relatives, places for Hmong language learning like the church, and a dedication to remembering the language which helps preserve traditions and culture for future generations.

As explained to me by my interlocutors, Hmong culture is defined as the language, playing the *qeej* ('gang') and the drum, *kw txhiaj* ('kuh ts-e-ah'), ceremonies and rituals, such as *hu plig* ('who plea'), *ua neeb* ('oo-ah nang'), New Year's celebrations, and the care for the ancestors, especially during funerals. For the majority of my respondents, the ability to speak the Hmong language in the future is of utmost importance. The language advice was generally followed by knowing and understanding Hmong culture. One respondent said that if younger generations can adapt and adjust to preserve the Hmong language, then they will be prepared to survive and thrive in the future. Another respondent remarked, "it is okay to learn [the Thai] language and culture, but we still have to keep some of our language and culture, too. We have to remember that we are Hmong." The surveys reinforce that language is central to Hmong ethnic identity in Pa Klang because it connects the community's past, present, and future.

Conclusion

Several of my interlocutors expressed that because of modernity they feel like their traditional agrarian lifestyle is dying out because younger generations do not participate in farming or handmade embroideries, nor do they want to. It could be considered that the Hmong language is one of the only things still connecting younger generations to older generations because younger people tend to only know enough to speak politely with the elders. Younger people who are confident in their Hmong speaking abilities often have stricter Hmong-speaking households as well as a personal dedication to knowing the language for the future. While education is a factor that contributes to language attrition, it also pushes younger generations to seek higher education possibly as a return to their parents to earn more money, be independent, and be members

of Thai society. Once they achieve those goals, younger generations can return to their roots and begin immersing themselves in the Hmong language and religion.

The Hmong language connects my interlocutors in Pa Klang to each other and allows family members in other countries to continue to be connected through a shared language and culture. The Hmong language gathers the Hmong diaspora to understand a coherent alphabet (Ly 2012). Even if the older generations are not literate because the language is relatively new, all generations can be brought together through the Hmong RPA. The desire to continue speaking the language is motivated by their family ties as they want to speak with older members of the family as well as pass on the language to their children. Pa Klang in particular possibly has a higher chance of language development as it is a Hmong community where the Hmong language saturates daily life. Language maintenance and language loss differ in Thailand compared to the United States because Hmong-Thai do not need to reject their culture to be successful. Even though discrimination is present and a hindrance for Hmong people, my interlocutors are proud of their heritage and recognize the benefits of being bilingual, especially in economic settings. It is possible that, over time, sites for Hmong language acquisition will become more prevalent in Thailand and allow more people to become literate in Hmong. For now, those sites comprise small churches and university clubs.

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