

A Trip to Vietnam

Nicholas Tapp

Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies, The Australian National University

Recently a number of researchers have worked among the Hmong of Sa Pa district, in Lao Cai province of northern Vietnam on the Chinese border with Yunnan. The work of Jean Michaud and Christian Culas on the region is well known (see for example, Jean Michaud's edited *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples*, Curzon 2000, and articles in the special issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, April 2000). From the University of Washington Duong Bich Hanh is completing her doctoral research on a group of Hmong women who have moved away from village life to enter the tourist industry in Sa Pa, and the results of her amazing 'PhotoVoice' project ('Shoot Back') which empowered Hmong women to take photographs of themselves and their lives have now been published by the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi.ⁱ From Leiden University Ngo Thi Thanh Tam is now undertaking doctoral research on the sensitive topic of Protestant conversions among the Lao Cai Hmong.ⁱⁱ

Sa Pa is a misty hill-station in the far north of the country. It was a French colonial resort during the hot season, and before that it is said was probably a Hmong area. During the late 1920s and 1930s it was described as quite a prosperous place, with some 200 colonial villas, an airstrip, a few hotels and of course the Catholic church established there in the 1890s before the military sanatorium. Since independence in 1945 the area seems to have been largely bypassed by development, and it was further devastated during the 1979 Chinese incursion. Since 1992 it has been opened again for tourism which has expanded exponentially, year by year. Travellers on the night train from Hanoi are met in the early morning at Lao Cai by a host of vehicles waiting to escort them the drive up the mountain to this place which has now become a back-packers' haven (although it also caters for the better-off traveller, with one hotel at US\$120 a night). Almost a new town has grown up on the other side of the market, of middle-class Vietnamese nouveau riche and government officials; the town is full of internet cafés, guest-houses and hostels, restaurants and coffee-bars, and of course the tour agencies which take those tourists who prefer not to motorbike or trek by themselves to the nearby Hmong and Yao villages – mostly Vietnamese-run enterprises from Hanoi or Lao Cai.

It is a far cry from the late 1980s when there were only two hotels catering for visitors there, and the expansion even since 1995 when I first visited is truly stupendous, a witness to the continuing impact of globalisation on the region as a whole.

And what of the Hmong? Well, we know how extremely poor and dispirited the Hmong in other parts of Vietnam are, despite the existence of some high-ranking Hmong officials in the government and party, how sensitive their relationships with neighbouring Hmong in Laos or China are.ⁱⁱⁱ And how

genuinely alarmed the government is at the strength of protestant conversions and periodic sporadic outbreaks of a messianic movement reported along the China-Vietnam border since 1978. I was invited to specifically address this topic at a talk at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, but restricted myself to my better knowledge of the Hmong elsewhere. By comparison the Hmong of Lao Cai province, in the districts of Sa Pa, Muang Khouang, and Baccha at any rate (which I have visited), are relatively well-off. Tier upon tier of terraced rice fields, remarked on by early French travellers like Abadie (1924), add to the beauty of the place and while the area remains largely undeveloped (traditional dress is still worn and spinning of hemp is still customary), the tourist trade has brought huge benefits to some of these Hmong, particularly various groups of the women researched by Duong Bich Hanh who are not ashamed to accost strangers in the market-place and on the streets of Sa Pa to sell them small pieces of embroidery or ear-rings. It seems to be particularly Western women who are an object of fascination to these Hmong women who wear the distinctive dark purple costume of Sa Pa.



Hmong in Sa Pa. This picture was taken by Fran Black, of Photobyte in London.

But there are a number of ethnographic puzzles here which I was reminded of on my visit earlier this year. There is still shifting cultivation in the region, but how this relates to the terraced rice-fields (not all Hmong) has not been properly researched; is there a mixture of upland

dry with terraced irrigated agriculture? Or are there different groups of Hmong practising different types of agriculture? And how did the Hmong, more usually shifting cultivators in the past, adopt the terracing of rice in this particular region?

Again, the past. There seems to have been very little Vietnamese presence in the region prior to the impact of French colonialism; there was I understand a Vietnamese magistrate in Lao Cai with a small entourage, but I still find it difficult to visually imagine life in these regions prior to the French. Michaud and Turner (2000) mention the possibility that Tai people had 'passed through' the area prior to the arrival of Hmong and Yao montagnards; there are still Tai-speaking people in the Sa Pa valley today. Michaud and Turner also draw attention to the presence of Cantonese and Yunnanese traders in the town of Lao Cai in the 19th century and 'probably earlier' who were involved in the timber trade and the purchase of other 'forest' products including, later, opium (cf. Michaud 2004). It is worth pointing out that this trade in 'coffin

continued on page 2

wood' points to the probable involvement of upland minorities like the Yao and Hmong who did indeed specialise in cultivating China fir and other related tree species; this trade may have been instrumental in lessening pressures on the land brought about by shifting cultivation and facilitating the conversion to a more permanent-field type of economy in the uplands (see Menzies and Tapp 2000). But just how Chinese, Vietnamese, or Yao or Hmong the area was at that time remains a task for historians to research further, based on archives which may even not exist.^{iv}

And an old riddle which continues to exercise me is, to what Hmong cultural sub-group do these Hmong of Sa Pa belong? In Thailand and Laos the distinctions between Hmong Ntsua and Hmong Daw (Green Hmong and White Hmong) are very marked'. They speak systematically different dialects, have radically different traditional costumes, live in traditionally quite differently structured houses, and show other variations of custom and ritual. These are not distinctions invented by outsiders, as communist ethnographers often affirm, and probably originally the groups in China had nothing to do with each other; up to very recently settlements were different and inter-marriage very rare. In China one comes across all sorts of sub-cultural distinctions which seem to have lost most of their importance and validity today. There are not only Hmong Ntsua and Hmong Daw (in Wenshan, Panzihua, and Guangxi) but also Hmong Shua and Pe and Pua and Xau and Shi. A book prepared by three Hmong officials in Yunnan published with the assistance of Father Yves Bertrais^{vi} (Zhang et.al. 1988) lists these and gives photographs of the costumes worn by some of the different sub-groups. Of course over 100 years of turmoil in modern China huge changes have taken place and these distinctions only remain valid in very remote or border regions like in Wenshan. Up in Sichuan I will remember three young Hmong men asking me what sort of Hmong they were supposed to be. Still, these distinctions clearly existed and were important.

When I first went to Sa Pa the Hmong there identified themselves to me as Hmong Shi and I went around Vietnam with a version of the Swadesh 100-word list recording dialectal variations as best I could. One very clear sub-group were the Hmong Pua, whom I have also met throughout China and say 'vaiv' for father, 'noj tsuas' for 'eat rice' and convert the 'aw' vowel of White Hmong systematically into 'ia'. Whenever local officials promised us a visit to the fabled 'Black Hmong', they invariably turned out to be Hmong Pua.^{vii}

The dialect in Sa Pa is very strange and may be a mixture of several. I hear it as very similar to White Hmong, but with some peculiar Green Hmong characteristics (like final nasalisation and the conversion of the vowel 'ia' into 'a' which could not occur in White Hmong – yet without the 'kl' consonant typical of Green Hmong).^{viii} Yet a Hmong friend tells me it sounded more like Green Hmong to him, and he may well be right. On the other hand I heard – distinctly as day – two little Hmong girls exclaim to each other, running down the steps of the large Catholic church which stands in the centre of Sa Pa where the Hmong congregate, 'tshai pla' (I'm hungry!) to which the other replied

'no mo' (let's go and eat!) - this could only be White Hmong, and indeed some of the older women seemed to talk pure White Hmong and identified themselves to me as White Hmong.

Yet today most of the officials, and a lot of the local people, seem to think of themselves as 'Hmong Leng'. Now Hmong Leng is usually (in Thailand and Laos, at any rate) an alternate term for Hmong Ntsua, meaning 'Striped'.^{ix} (It is odd that 20 years ago the Hmong Ntsua in Laos stated they wished to be known as Green Hmong (Hmong Ntsua) rather than Hmong Leng, which they found derogatory, while now the younger generation in the US (ignorant of the past) say just the opposite, and resent being called Green Hmong!^x They even send hate mail about it).

Now, Jacques Lemoine (1995) says there are 4 distinct Hmong groups in Vietnam. There are the Hmong Daw (White Hmong, whom the Vietnamese call Meo Trang, or White Meo); the Hmong Leng, or Striped Hmong, whom the Vietnamese refer to (confusingly in view of a similarly named but entirely different group in Yunnan) as Meo Hoa, or Flowery Meo; the Hmong Ntsua or Green Hmong (whom the Vietnamese call Meo Xanh, or Green Meo); and the Hmong Pe (whom the Vietnamese call Meo Do or Red Meo). However, Zhang et.al (1988) say quite clearly there are no Hmong Leng any more than there are such groups as 'Red' or 'Black' Hmong or any other such kinds of weird Hmong, and that 'Leng' just means anyone who is not Hmong Daw (all the non-White Hmong, that is)! From that point of view, to the extent that the majority of Hmong both in Sa Pa and Baccha are not speakers of White Hmong, they are quite appropriately described as Hmong Leng.

If Lemoine is right, and there is a separate group of Hmong Leng in Vietnam, it implies that two quite distinct groups in Vietnam, the Hmong Ntsua and the Hmong Leng, somehow became merged in Laos, probably still showing some signs of their distinctiveness. If, however, 'Hmong Leng' is simply a generic term for all the non-White Hmong (as Zhang et.al. 1988 say), the use of that term in Vietnam implies that some process of amalgamation of smaller, non-White Hmong, sub-groups is occurring, or has occurred, in Vietnam, under the generic name of 'Hmong Leng' - but not including the Hmong Ntsua - while the use of the term 'Hmong Leng' as a common synonym for the Hmong Ntsua in Laos may imply either that the Hmong Ntsua of Laos have absorbed a number of smaller, 'Hmong Leng' groups from Vietnam, somehow unnoticed by previous ethnographers, or that the term 'Hmong Leng' is in fact used for the Hmong Ntsua in Laos quite correctly as a general term, simply because they are the only non-White Hmong there!^{xi}

It certainly seems that at least two or three sub-groups in Baccha (Hmong Pe, Hmong Shi, and Hmong Pua?) have adopted the distinctive reddish costume which is indeed very like that of the Hmong Pe of China as illustrated in Zhang et.al. (1988), while again at least three sub-groups in Sa Pa (the White Hmong, the Hmong Pua, and the speakers of the intermediate dialect I have mentioned, who may be Hmong Shi or Pe) have adopted the distinctive dark purple costume one sees the women there

continued from page 2

wearing, from which original group I have no idea (another ethnographic puzzle)^{xiii}. And it seems highly probable that, while the Hmong of Sa Pa may contemptuously refer to the red-skirted Baccha Hmong as 'Red Hmong' ('Hmong La'), as I have heard them do, those in Baccha may equally dismissively have referred to the dark-clothed Hmong of Sa Pa as 'Black Hmong' (leading incidentally to a lot of confusion among Vietnamese and other ethnographers). There is no reason, after all, why the generally red-skirted Hmong of Baccha should refer to themselves by the term of 'Red Hmong' which others use for them; they may well call themselves Hmong Pe, as Lemoine says is true of those whom the Vietnamese call 'Red Meo', or by other indigenous Hmong terms. And if this is true, then it is even possible that the other terms we have for indigenous Hmong cultural divisions, like the Green and the White Hmong, were also not originally terms used by those groups for themselves, but terms each group used for the other, with slightly derogatory connotations; always terms used by other groups of Hmong, then, to distinguish Hmong they felt to be unlike themselves in some important way. When, then, does unlike become like?^{xiii}

These are not frivolous questions for they are I believe deeply related to the impact of globalisation on these regions, over the past 150 years.^{xiv} The impact of globalisation was certainly felt by the Hmong of this area and large parts of southern China in the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the arrival of Welsh and other Protestant missionaries, and may have begun even earlier than that with the work of hitherto unresearched Catholic missionaries. With the impact of capitalist economies, increasing population pressures, and scarcity of fertile land powering large-scale migrations southwards, and in fact all over the place, and the



Hmong Pe in Wenshan, Yunnan, China (Zhang et al. 1988)

how the White Hmong actually emerged, or how the Hmong Leng became absorbed (or did not) into the Hmong Ntsua, or why three separate cultural divisions of the Hmong in the Baccha region may have decided to adopt the costume of just one of them, for this may show us precisely what impact globalising forces have upon local cultural processes, and lead us to a better understanding of the politics of culture between social groups with varied backgrounds and histories.

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Hmong in Baccha. Local postcard

formation of modernist nation-state borders in the region with the French colonisation of Indochina and the British colonisation of Burma, the Hmong like other upland minorities in the region have been involved with global processes for well over a century of turmoil and incessant political changes, throughout China, Vietnam and Burma. The civil war between the nationalists and communists in China, the invasion of the Japanese in Indochina and the formation of resistance groups against them, tore the Hmong between support for opposing forces and these conflicts

continued on page 4

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ⁱ Through H'Mong Eyes, ed. Duong Bich Hanh, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology with the support of the Toyota Foundation, n.d.

ⁱⁱ Also Nguyen Tran Lam from the University of Amsterdam is beginning his doctoral research on the Hmong medical system, and related topics.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the 1999 census there were 787,604 Hmong.

^{iv} Michaud and Turner (2000) note the general scarcity of historical records on the montagnards of the region, with the exception of Sa Pa, suggest there may be none specifically on the ancient history of the Sa Pa area, and remark that research into Vietnamese and Chinese archives on Sa Pa under its old name of Lo Sui Tong still remains to be conducted.

^v I have modified the official Romanised Phonetic Alphabet (RPA) used for Hmong for the purposes of this article by converting 's' into 'sh', dropping the final consonants which are not pronounced anyway but only indicate one of the 8 tone values, and eliminating the slightly eccentric doubling of vowels to indicate final nasalisation (so 'Leng' is pronounced just like it is spelt, with the absence of any indication of tone, whereas in RPA it would be written 'Lees'). This should make it much easier to read. The only thing I have not modified is the vowel 'aw' (as in 'Hmong Daw' for 'White Hmong') which has no real English equivalent, but is closest to an 'er' sound (as in 'her' for example).

^{vi} Yves Bertrais' pioneering work on the development of Hmong orthography, and Hmong marriage customs, is widely respected. See Bertrais (1964; 1978).

^{vii} Similarly, Thang (2001, p.19) remarks that the 'Na Mieu' (Na Meo) of Lang Son are considered to be Black Hmong although they deny this, and also a group of 'Hmong Pou' in Sa Pa who 'were considered' to belong to the 'Black Hmong' rejected this appellation. See footnote xiv below. According to Zhang et. al. (1988), the Hmong Pua speak very similarly to the Hmong Pe, who themselves do not speak very differently from the Hmong Ntsua, but whose dress is more like that of the Hmong Shi; the Hmong Shi dialect is also quite similar to Hmong Ntsua, and they seem to be a much more populous group in China.

^{viii} This sound, variously transcribed as 'kl' or 'dl', has been described to me as a 'stop with a lateral release', which corresponds to a pre-glottalized consonant in White Hmong (Martha Ratliffe, personal communication 4 January 2006).

^{ix} It means 'Striped' in Hmong; the Vietnamese term for them, 'Meo Hoa', means 'Flowery Miao'.

^x See Bertrais' (1964) dictionary which actually notes (under the entry for 'Lees') that the Hmong Leng prefer to be called Hmong Ntsua.

^{xi} Thang, however, interestingly cites Tran Huu Son (1996 pp. 9-10) and international and Vietnamese ethnographers generally as agreeing on the existence of 5 Hmong groups in Vietnam; the White, 'Black' (who as we have seen, may be either Hmong Pua or the non-Hmong Na Meo), and Green Hmong, then, but translates two remaining groups, the Hmong Shi and Hmong Leng, as 'Flowery

and 'Red' respectively (Thang 2001 p.19). This may be just an error (Tran in fact gives the same formulation as Lemoine except that he omits the Red Meo and replaces them with the 'Black Hmong' or 'Meo Den', so that for Tran the Hmong Leng are the 'Flowery' Hmong or 'Meo Hoa' and he does not mention the Hmong Shi); it would make more sense if the terms were reversed, so that the Hmong Lees as Flowery Hmong would confirm Lemoine's description, while the Hmong Shi as Red Hmong would raise very interesting questions about the relationship between the Hmong Shi and the Hmong Pe who Lemoine says are described as Red Hmong by Vietnamese ethnographers; are both these groups described as Red Hmong by others, has Lemoine somehow missed the existence of the Hmong Shi? Even if it is accurate, it implies that Lemoine has for some reason not considered the the Hmong Shi, and that they are perhaps hidden under his category of the Hmong Leng; if it is in fact the Hmong Shi who are generally locally known as Hmong Leng (together probably with other non-White Hmong), then the identification of the Hmong Ntsua in Laos with the Hmong Leng there (if there is a separable category of Hmong Leng who have merged with them there, or even if the Vietnamese Hmong Leng are a conglomerate of smaller non-White Hmong groups), would imply that many of the Hmong Ntsua of Laos are in fact originally Hmong Shi. Could the Hmong Ntsua really be a motley group of this kind? It is quite unlikely, given the distinctiveness of their dialect and costume. There certainly seems to be some confusion on the part of Vietnamese ethnographers with their category of 'Red' Meo, if they apply it both to the Hmong Leng (according to Thang), but also to the Hmong Pe (according to Lemoine) – if, that is, we consider the Hmong Leng as a distinctive group at all - which may point both or either to a relationship between the Hmong Pe and Hmong Leng (perhaps Hmong Pe constitute the majority of the Hmong Leng, if they exist), and to the basic invalidity of the category of 'Red' Meo which in my opinion (like 'Black' Hmong) corresponds to no self-identified Hmong sub-group whatsoever.

^{xii} There are actually at least three distinctively different costumes in the Baccha-Sa Pa area. Tran Thi Thu Thuy, of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi, who recently completed a doctoral thesis at the University of Hanoi on Hmong costumes, remarked to me that to be really sure of costumed differences, it is necessary nowadays to see the funeral clothes in which the dead are buried.

^{xiii} So that the 5 Vietnamese terms (White, Green, Flowery, Red, Black) do correspond to distinctions the Hmong make themselves, but almost certainly in the last two cases not to self-ethnonyms, and probably in the third case to a very general term, and they tend to be applied in a very haphazard manner in different regions to sub-groups who use other terms to identify themselves. 'Meo Xanh' (Green Hmong) for instance seems very arbitrarily applied to a number of groups who do not identify in this way. However, oddly enough, the broad outlines of the Vietnamese classification are actually confirmed by all this, for there are certainly distinctive groups of both 1) the White and 2) the Green Hmong, while (ignoring the non-Hmong Na Meo) 3) the Hmong Pua are often referred to as Black Hmong by other Hmong, and 4) (following Lemoine) it appears to be the Hmong Pe who are called Red Meo by the Vietnamese. If we discount the 'Hmong Leng' as a general term (assuming these are who is meant by 5) the Flowery Meo label), we are still left with the Hmong Shi, whom we might assimilate to that category. So that we have the Hmong Daw, Hmong Ntsua, Hmong Pe, Hmong Pua and Hmong Shi, roughly corresponding to the Vietnamese categories of White, Green, Red, Black, and perhaps Flowery if that is not a general term – but there is one other group who were mentioned occasionally in Vietnam, but who seem to have entirely disappeared, the Hmong Sua, who wear a peculiarly dark clothing illustrated in Zhang et.al (1988) (and in Scott 1900-01), who are not covered by any of these classifications.

^{xiv} Nguyen van Thang's (2001) fascinating thesis, also from the University of Washington, on the 'Na Mieu' of Lang Son, shows clearly how arbitrary and fluid local identifications can be; in their case they are speakers of another Miao language, Hmu, not Hmong, who have been considerably affected by the local Tay culture, and prefer to identify as Meo (Mieu in the southern pronunciation) although this is rejected by the Vietnamese Hmong as a derogatory term. Vietnamese ethnographers are in a quandary to know whether to classify them with the Hmong, as a related Miao group, or not; having moved a long way towards recognising these people as 'Hmong' rather than 'Meo', they now have a group which actively prefers the latter!