



ASIAN FESTIVALS OF
WASHINGTON STATE

Hmong New Year



Jack Straw Productions • Ethnic Heritage Council • Washington State Arts Commission

Asian Festivals of Washington State

Hmong New Year



Joan Rabinowitz,
Editor

"The year is through, twelve months are over.
The weather will change from summer to winter.
Winter will come, winter will go away, and summer will return.
Leaves will come out and grow green on whole branches,
Insects will sing. Pairs of insects will sing,
That the old year is past and the new year has come.
New Year is come. Everyone is killing boars, the relatives
All join together, every brother, every cousin..."

a song by Mai Hang, a Hmong woman.

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A Collaborative Project: Honor Our Ethnic Communities

THE ASIAN FESTIVALS OF Washington State project was made possible through the collaborative work of leaders in the Hmong, Indian and Japanese-American communities, and the Ethnic Heritage Council, Jack Straw Productions, and the Washington State Arts Commission. The events included in this project were Hmong New Year, the Indian Diwali Festival of Lights, and the Japanese Cherry Blossom Festival.

The Festivals

The Hmong Association of Washington has produced a *Hmong New Year* celebration every year since 1976 with over 1,000 Hmong people attending each of the last three years. In Laos, the New Year was an important community harvest festival, marked by singing, dancing, feasting, and courtship games. In the USA, it has taken on additional significance, functioning as a celebration of the survival and renewal of the arts and culture of a refugee people making the transition to a new cultural context. The Hmong Association states, "We wanted to build a stronger social life together in this country, so together we formed an association to help newcomers and to keep communication going between us."

Diwali, the Festival of Lights, is one of the most widely celebrated festivals in India. It is celebrated throughout India, not only as a religious festival but as a social event, as well. For many, it is a celebration of the time that Rama and Sita returned to their kingdom after fourteen years of exile. For students, it is a time to pay tribute to Sharada, the goddess of wisdom and learning. It is also a harvest festival. In the Seattle area, the celebration is hosted annually by the India Association of Western Washington as well as other Indian community organizations. Like the Hmong New Year Celebration, the festival enables the community to



Girls in costume at the Hmong New Year Celebration at the Seattle Center (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

maintain important links with its homeland.

The *Seattle Cherry Blossom & Japanese Cultural Festival* has been the principal community event of Washington's Japanese-Americans. An annual event since 1975, it has grown to be one of the larger ethnic festivals in Seattle. A traditional dancer who has received several awards, Tazue Sasaki and her husband, Yutaka, along with artist and musician, Midori Kono Thiel, have helped produce Cherry Blossom and other Japanese cultural events, for nearly two decades.

The Organizations

The Ethnic Heritage Council (EHC) was founded in 1979 and is dedicated to the preservation of the diverse ethnic communities of the Pacific Northwest. EHC provides opportunities for exposure, performance, visibility and education to the hundreds

of ethnic organizations that make up its membership. The Asian Festival project represents the kind of work EHC does throughout the year with a broad spectrum of Northwest ethnic communities.

The Washington State Arts Commission is a state agency dedicated to the improvement and preservation of the arts and strives to make art of the highest quality available to all citizens through a combination of grant programs and services. The Folk Arts Program helps preserve, present, and protect the traditional arts of the many diverse cultures among the state's citizenry.

Jack Straw Productions (JSP) is a non-profit organization that promotes and facilitates the creation and distribution of art and ideas

through audio media. Its goals are to produce high quality, innovative and diverse arts, cultural and public affairs programming; to identify, encourage and support emerging audio artists; to make its facilities and personnel available to independent radio producers, non-commercial radio stations, musicians, and other artists using audio creatively in their work; and to serve as an educational organization involved with youth and others interested in audio art and production. For over 30 years, JSP has fostered cultural heritage through education, artist support services and radio productions.

JSP has been directly involved in the research, writing and editing of these booklets, and also produced radio documentaries on each of the festivals for public radio.

Traditional Artists in our Midst:

Asian Festivals of Washington State

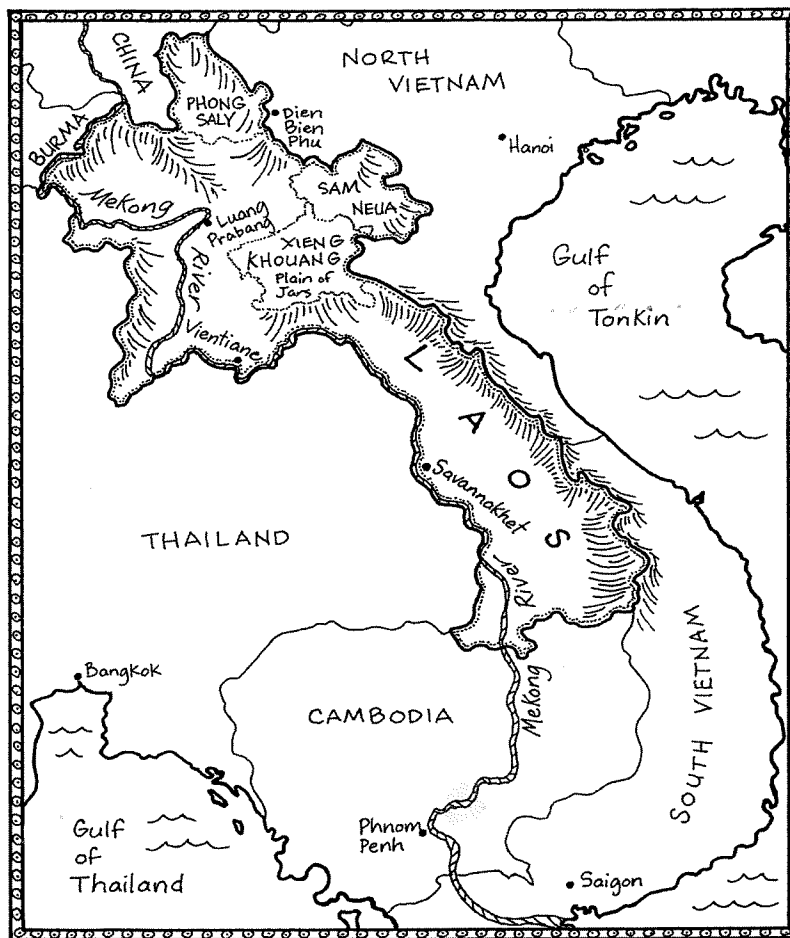
The project

The Asian Festivals of Washington project booklets are the result of a project that sought to encourage traditional arts presentation and documentation in the Northwest. Three Asian community events in the Northwest - Hmong New Year, Japanese Cherry Blossom and Indian Diwali - provided the focus for exploring how cultural identity is at once preserved and continually evolves within Asian communities.

The project emphasized the value of recognizing and highlighting traditional art and artists at important community events, informing the public about their work, and recognizing their importance within a community. This kind of acknowledgment encourages an ethnic community to value what these artists represent, stimulating pride in one's own heritage and promoting overall growth in the traditional arts.

In addition to encouraging traditional arts presentation and the work of traditional artists, this project also reflected the ways in which *festival* celebrations serve to unify members of an ethnic community by rekindling each individual's sense of cultural identity through traditional and even nontraditional means. Indeed, none of these events was purely traditional. Contemporary forms of expression such as popular music at evening dances, modern painting, and even commercial art were common. Each group of festival organizers chose to showcase that which, in its view, represents the essence of that community's still living cultural expressions while integrating elements of the larger American cultural context.

Aside from all being Asian, the three communities involved in this project and their respective festivals are not particularly alike. All three events, however, hold special significance for those who attend and participate in linking "homeland" to the adopted land. The art forms featured at all of these events give expression to the individual emotions that each member of that



Map illustration by Barbara Scholen.

ethnic community inevitably feels. Traditional, community-connected arts hold a power and importance stemming from this emotional connection, particularly within the context of a society that presents challenges to holding onto one's heritage and maintaining a cohesive sense of community.

Asian Festivals of Washington State booklets:

Each of these booklets includes historical information about a particular Northwest Asian community, about each community's most important annual festival and about the related traditional art forms and artists. While they offer some basic information concerning traditional visual and performing art and

artists within these communities, there are many more artists and traditional art forms that could have been included. The booklets represent just one step in the process of comprehensively identifying and highlighting the role of traditional arts in these communities.

We encourage readers to look beyond the information presented here and to discover more about the cultures that surround us through direct personal involvement. We hope the booklets are useful for educators both inside within and outside of these particular ethnic communities and that they serve to encourage an ongoing process of learning about, presenting and documenting community-based art forms.

The Hmong Community: From Laos to the Puget Sound

By Nancy Donnelly, Ph.D.

THE FIRST HMONG PEOPLE

arrived in Washington state in September 1976, and continue to live and contribute in their communities. According to Seattle resident Bliia Xiong, who came to the United States in 1976, "Our sponsor dropped us in an old house, showed us the supermarket, laundry, Goodwill, English classes. That was it. We had to learn everything all over, from our toes up. We missed Hmong people so much. We said if any other family moved here, we would help them and help them!"

The Hmong in the United States come from Laos. They were part of a minority group living in the highland areas close to China, where they farmed the mountain tops to grow corn, dryland rice, and poppy; while also raising chickens and pigs. Their lives were filled with hard work and family ties. To Hmong, the center of the social and political life was the family, from the eldest grandparent to the newest baby, and included all the cousins and collateral relatives. Descent and inheritance were figured only through the male line, and the men were responsible for the success of the whole family enterprise.

Families were very self-sufficient, even making their own cloth, their own knives, jewelry, and household tools, and handling all the education of their children by themselves. A few Hmong had been converted to Christianity, but most believed in a Hmong-created religion that proposed a spirit world affecting human lives (mainly for ill). Shamans and herbal healers provided the only medical care.

They had no written form of Hmong language (although in the 1930s a Hmong had invented a script, it was not generally used). They believed that they had had writing once, but lost all their books in their earlier migration from China. Missionaries invented a typed version of Hmong, but only a few knew about it.

As the 2nd Indochina War (Vietnam War) heated up and spread into Laos in the 1960s, new trade goods, like flashlights and flip-flop sandals, started to appear in the mountains. A few Hmong moved into the city of



A silver Hmong necklace, Xauv, worn and owned by Xoua Her Vang (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

Vientiane, where the men joined the military hierarchy. Some children started going to Laotian schools, and some families engaged in trade.

The war and the sudden connections with the larger political world began to create a more sophisticated Hmong middle class. These leaders encouraged rural Hmong to join the army and fight on the side of the American-supported Royal Lao government. Eventually most of the men became soldiers, and most of the women

and children could not farm any more. They became refugees within Laos, concentrated together for safety in temporary towns. When the Pathet Lao Communists defeated the Royal Lao government (ending a coalition government in 1975), the Hmong on the Royal Lao side felt forced to flee.

The American Hmong have survived many hardships to get here. The war cost them their farms and livestock. Many of their relatives died, both soldiers and civilians. Those who

The Hmong Language: An oral memory

by Cliff Sloan

For centuries, the Hmong language was based strictly on oral communication. There was no alphabet, no written texts, no cultural reason to require literacy. Literature and learning were passed on from memory; the most learned elders were those with the most exhaustive memories, and the ability to apply only to daily life.

There have been many efforts to develop a writing system for Hmong, with varying degrees of success. In the early 1950s, a team of French and American missionary-linguists developed a way of writing Hmong words that used the same letters as English, French or German. Their intention was to develop a system that could be used on the simplest typewriters, without any fancy marks or accents. This was the Romanized Popular Alphabet, or RPA. Within 10 years, it became extremely popular, and remains to this day the most widely used writing system.

Hmong words have some unique features. Each word is a single syllable, characterized by an initial consonant (or cluster), a vowel, and a tone. There are no final consonants.

Tones are just as important a feature of the words as are the consonants and vowels. There are seven tones in Hmong, represented by a written consonant at the end of a word. For example,

- tsib (meaning, "five") has a high level tone, represented by -b.
 - tsiv (meaning, "to move") has a rising tone, represented by -v.
 - tsij (meaning, "to drive a nail") has a falling tone, represented by -j.
 - tsi (part of the expression meaning "what?") has a medium tone.
 - tsis (meaning "no" or "not") has a low level tone, represented by -s.
 - tsim (meaning, "Wake Up!") has a short, low, grunt-like tone, represented by -m.
 - tsig (not a real word) has a falling, breathy, gasp-like tone, represented by -g.
- Some Hmong words end in a sound similar to a final -ng, like "sing." This is represented by the use of a double vowel. Thus, the way to write Hmong would be "Hmoob."

There are also many sounds in Hmong that do not exist in English. For example, the letter /t/ sounds like the English /d/, but with the tongue rolled back. The letter /c/ is closest to the English /j/, but unvoiced. There is also a distinction between aspirated and unaspirated consonants. For example, the letter /p/ is unaspirated; it sounds like an unvoiced /b/, while the consonant /ph/ sounds like the English /p/.

Vowels, too, are typically Hmong. The Hmong family name, spelled in RPA as Hawm, is spelled in English as Her; the family name Thoj is spelled in English as Thao.

fled suffered from hunger and sickness, often walking for weeks through forests and across mountains to reach the Mekong River. Crossing the river usually meant paying smugglers to provide boats, rafts, even inner tubes, and then paying bribes so Thai soldiers would not return them to Laos. Refugee camps were extremely crowded and full of uncertainty. Families could stay in camps and hope someday to go home, or they could choose France, Australia or the U.S. What to do? Many families found it hard to decide. They knew that if they left Southeast Asia they might never see their homeland or their relatives again.

The first Hmong who arrived in the U.S., in 1976, settled in Montana and Minnesota. One family came to Seattle that year. The big rush of Hmong resettlement began in 1978 and ended in 1981; about 65,000 were placed with sponsors around the country. Once they got here, the process of finding their families, moving together with relatives, figuring out what states and localities offered the best chance of education and future prosperity, then created a large secondary migration. Since 1981 a trickle of resettlement has continued, and Hmong have focused on establishing large families like they had in Laos. Today probably about 120,000 Hmong live around the United States. About half live in the Central Valley of California, and most of the rest live in Minnesota and Wisconsin. There are also Hmong communities in North Carolina, Michigan, Texas, and a few other states. Washington and Oregon have about 3,500 Hmong, principally in Seattle, Spokane and Portland.

In 1978 other Hmong began to arrive. A year later, Hang Sao, the leader of the Blue Hmong in Laos, came to live in Seattle. All of a sudden, lots of families followed hoping he would have good connections with Americans and could help them get housing, jobs, and an education. By 1981, about 2,000 Hmong lived in Seattle and Carnation. But when federal resettlement grants were cut during the Recession of 1982, many families could not find work. By 1985, only 300 to 500 Hmong remained in this area.

In Laos, all Hmong families were self-supporting. Most worked their own farms. According to Mr. and Mrs. Bliu Tu Soung, "Back home we had everything enough, but we had to work very, very hard. We had our farm,

chickens, pigs, buffalo, ducks, everything. Everyday we worked on the farm, picked vegetables on the way home to feed the pigs, worked at home, too. Strong or not strong, it didn't matter, you had to do it. If Americans had to work that hard, we think they couldn't!"

A few, also, were traders, teachers, and nurses. During the war, men became soldiers, pilots or army clerks. Hmong are used to hard work, but they had to start over practically from scratch in this new country. At first, they did anything they could: farm labor, maid work, dish washing. The Indochinese Farm Project, funded by a Seattle city block grant and by the King County Park Commission from 1983 through 1990, helped some Hmong and other former farmers from Laos learn about Seattle soil, weather, marketing, and business practices.

Several Hmong families have established truck farms near Woodinville, selling vegetables and flowers in the Pike Place Market in Seattle. Church sponsors often proved themselves to be strong advocates for the families they sponsored. Mr. Joua Pao Yang says, "If it had not been for the church sticking with us all these years, my daughters never could have gone on to college."

In Washington state, less than 12 percent of Hmong receive public assistance. Many Hmong work two jobs, often in factories, landscaping, house-keeping, or mechanics. Some are professional teachers, social workers or interpreters. Many women continue making tradition-derived needlework that finds its way to market, usually through fairs or the Pike Place Market. The beautiful embroidery and applique work from the mountains of Laos is now, with different colors and a mingling of styles, applied to pillow covers, bedspreads, jackets, aprons, and other useful items. For some, this has developed into other kinds of sewing, such as piecework, stuffed animals or hair bows, and factory sewing.

The families who stayed in Washington formed a hard-working, permanent nucleus. They became citizens, bought homes, worked hard, and invited other Hmong to join them. Today about 1000 Hmong live in Seattle, Burien, Renton, Bellevue, Montlake Terrace, and Carnation. There are also vigorous Hmong communities in Spokane and Portland.

The Hmong New Year: The Family and The Festival

by Blia Xiong

THE BIGGEST FESTIVAL WE

celebrate is New Year, Xyoo Tshiab. In Laos, the year started at the full moon of November. November in the Laotian calendar was like December in this country. People would watch for the moon, and at the full moon they would start the New Year. The men and women would gather food and meat for the festival. It was after harvest time, so they brought rice and corn in, too.

New Year went on for one whole month. Everybody got together to talk, to eat and tell stories at night. Boys and girls would sing songs to each other. Women talked about clothes for their children for New Year. Men talked about musicians, about playing *qeej* and *raj* and *ncas*.

The night of the full moon was the night before New Year's Day. Men shot their guns into the sky to send out the old year and catch the New year- to welcome the New Year. Parents taught their daughters that on New Year's Day the first girl to get water would have good luck for the whole year. So Hmong girls always planned to get up very early to be the first to bring water from the stream.

Traditionally, the head of the village would cut trees to build a doorway in the middle of the village - the door to the new year. He invited everybody in the village to walk through the door (*Iwm qaij*), and the old men would pass a live chicken over the top of everybody's head as they were passing through the doorway, to wish them good luck for the future. All the men, women, and children of the village were supposed to walk through that door. Early in the morning the head of the village would call everyone to pass through the door, to send the old year away and catch the new year. Then the villagers would come running - mothers with their children and little girls with their baby brothers - to walk through the doorway.

We had delicious food at New Year time. One important food was the sticky-rice cakes wrapped with banana



A Hmong woman plays the ncas at the Hmong New Year celebration at the Seattle Center (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

leaf. The women cooked the sticky rice, and the men pounded it into a paste in a wooden bowl with a wooden pestle. They wrapped the sticky-rice cakes in the banana leaves and left them by the fire to cook and for the rice to turn yellow from the leaves. Everybody helped each other, everybody doing something for another family.

They took sugar cane- this was before the New Year, to get ready- they cut the sugar cane and the men would crush the canes in between two logs, squeezing them to get the juice out and letting the juice fall in a wooden pan. They even jumped up and down on the logs. Then they boiled the juice until it turned into a sticky brownish sauce, and then put it in a can made out of a joint of bamboo, where it is stored. When the New Year came, they baked the rice cakes until the leaves were very brown, then they dipped the cakes in the sugar-syrup before eating.

In the morning of the new year, everybody ate and talked, ate and talked. The men went from family to family, and the women cooked and cooked, and

the men sat and ate and talked. Then they would go to another family, and others would come visit your family, and this went on and on the first three days of the New Year from the early morning until around 10 p.m.

When the sun was getting warm the daughters got dressed in their new clothes, all fancy with jewelry and purses hung with silver coins, and they would go to an open space in the village to play toss ball with the boys in a game called *pov pob*, to exchange bits of jewelry or their pretty purses if they should drop the ball, and to sing songs. And the mothers got dressed so nicely, and put the babies on their backs, and walked to the place where the young people were playing ball, to watch and listen to the songs. And the men would either go to the buffalo-bull fights (where bulls were trained to fight each other) or to play toss ball with the single girls, looking for another wife.

This went on for days and days. You could hear orphan songs (songs of unhappiness overcome by cleverness). Some people were very good at comic

songs. People sat around listening and laughing. And love songs, young people seriously talking to each other through the songs. An example of a comic love song I heard since being in America went like this, "We can get married and (for the bride money) I'll get my credit card and put you on my charge."

When the doorway tree got completely dry, the old men pulled it out of the ground where it was standing in the middle of the village, and threw it away. Then New Year was over. This usually lasted for almost a month. It's a wonderful



Xoua Her Vang, in her native Hmong dress, is ready to celebrate the Hmong New Year (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

holiday. Nobody cares about working on their farm, and everybody has enough to eat. Usually this is the time when people marry. Nobody wants to get married any other time of the year.

The New Year here in the U.S. is very different from what we had in Laos, because in Laos people could celebrate however they wanted to, and everybody had the freedom to do it. Here you can't do New Year the same way. Especially at the Seattle Center, you can't just take food, for instance, because you need a food-handler's permit. And food is one of the most important things for New Year, so it's not as much fun from that point of view. The feasts that the villages were able to give their visitors during New Year time, that doesn't happen any more. It's too hard because you have to buy

everything. People would be going broke if they tried to do it. Some people make the yearly sacrifices for the traditional religion, and it must be very expensive to do it. Back home you had your own rice, your own vegetables and meat, everyone could go around to everybody's house, but here besides having no money, you have no space, so we only share between members of the same families.

We still provide a program with *qeej* (bamboo-reed mouth organ), *kwv txhiaj* (courting songs), and *ncas* (Jew's harp), so people can see how they used to be. For me, the reason I still help with the New Year is the idea of having people come together with their costumes, see each other once a year, enjoy and talk, that's what I like the most.

Costumes have changed a lot, gotten much fancier. Now they have a lot of beautiful beads and very bright decorations. It's very simple to find beads here in this country, so people use them a lot. And the velvet and satin fabric is very nice and bright and simple to find. The style of the clothes hasn't changed much, though — they are just brighter and more decorative. But the hats have completely changed. Sometimes now they wear a Chinese-style hat, or whatever is the fanciest thing they can do. And the bird hat (*ko mom noog*, a take-off on the idea of a rooster-comb), that was originally for little children, but now all the teenage girls like to wear those hats. So mothers will make New Year clothes for their daughters, but actually many of the girls don't want to wear them. My daughters won't wear them unless I make them. They have two or three sets of Hmong cloths that just stay in the suitcase.

Young people don't sing anymore, when they toss ball, they just laugh and talk, but they don't sing or do any of those important things. Back home when you play toss ball, everybody is singing, and you can go from couple to couple and listen to their songs. Nobody plays *ncas* any

more. Especially for single people it is a courtship instrument, but young people don't have that knowledge any more.

Kwv txhiaj, the courting songs, are not supposed to be sung by married people, particularly not by married women. If you tell young people to do it like that, they say it's boring, and they don't want to do it. All they really think about is attending New Year to play toss ball in the daytime with laughing and talking, and in the evening they come to hear a western band.

So New Year is very different, because all those things are missing. The longer we are separated from Laos, the more different it will be.

Catch the Good Luck: Songs for Hmong New Year

by Joan Rabinowitz

"IN THE MORNING WHEN THE first chickens crow, you have to open the door and sing the song." Nhia Hieu welcomes the New Year with a song that comes from his Hmong ancestors in China. "You have to open the door," Nhia explained. "The old year is going and the new year is coming, and you open the door and give a lot of good wishes to the people."

Nhia Hieu is a Hmong basket maker and musician who grew up in the northern part of Laos, close to China. "We celebrate New Year in our country and we still use some of the ceremony that our great-grandparents from China did. In this country, I don't see it often."

Nhia has brought the old culture with him to Seattle. "The song for the morning is to catch the good luck and the happiness for the year. You know the Hmong culture, they may believe that some people's spirits may be wandering around somewhere else. And it's time to call everybody home. It's all the good things like the money spirit, the food spirit, everything good comes into the family, so you'll be happy for the next year."

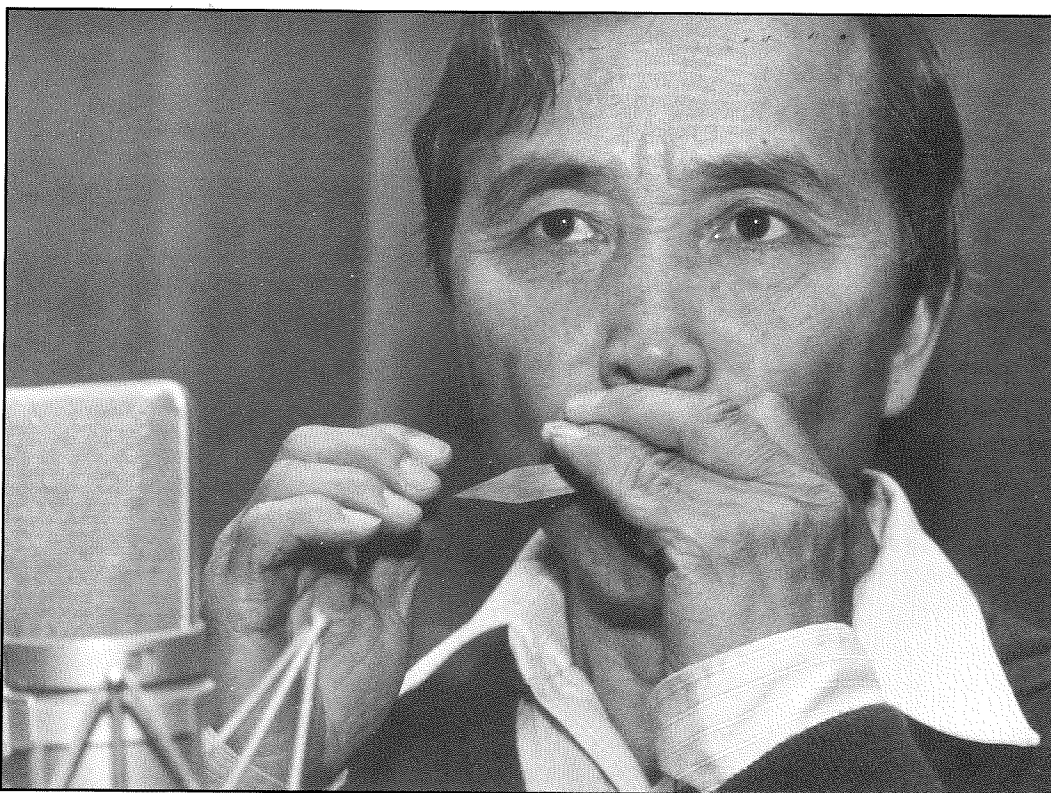
New Year is the most important Hmong holiday. In Laos, Hmong celebrate New Year for a full month. It's a time after the harvest for families to get together with friends and share the food they've collected, to visit, sing songs, play games, and it's a time for courtship. The first three days of the New Year is the religious, feasting part of the holiday.

"On the first day of the New Year, we have to cook a lot," explained Chong Moua Lee, a former Hmong farmer and qeej musician. "And we have to sacrifice to the old and to the dead. We feed them first, before we can eat. We also cut a tree and use chicken to ask the spirit from

the dead to come back and take all the bad things from the old year and bless the New Year."

"Then, after that three days, then people will start to play," explained Blia Xiong, an interpreter and one of the first Hmong in Seattle. "It's a time for the youth. Youth back in Laos work very hard,

old days, my parents told me that people stand very far from each other. And, if you drop the ball, then you have to give something," Blia explained. "For example, if the girl drops the ball, she has to give something to the boy. If she doesn't want to give anything from herself, like her jewelry, then she can sing a song. To pay for



Nhia Hieu plays the ncas, a Hmong jaw harp (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

just like the parents. Parents send children to the farm every morning. And, they have no time to see each other." It's at New Year's celebrations that youth have a chance to get to know each other. "So, that's the only time for them to talk and to share. Mothers will tell them to get ready for catching the happiness or the good luck for the New Year."

Singing plays an important part in bringing young men and women together. One form of courtship particular to New Year's time is "pov pob," or "toss ball." Rows of boys and girls, dressed in New Year's finery, stand opposite each other, tossing balls back and forth. "In the

it." In Laos, the games went on for days or weeks at a time, giving the youth time to get to know each other.

So, to win at toss ball, you had to be a good singer. Some songs were ones that had been handed down for generations. Others were joking or teasing songs made up on the spot. "For example," Blia began, "maybe in the beginning of the game, the boy will say, 'Would you like to marry me?' or 'Would you like to become my wife?' And, the song may say, 'You may have a girlfriend already, and you just come here making a joke at me.' And, then the boy will say, 'If you're thinking that I'm making joke at you,

Hmong Music: Talking Instruments

by Cliff Sloan

Hmong music and Hmong language are inseparable. More so than in almost any other culture, Hmong people do not distinguish between the sounds we call "music" and the "musical" way that words can be sung. This is not only true for vocal performances. It includes instrumental music as well. It is widely held that words can be "spoken" by musical instruments, and that the poetry for these "words" played instrumentally is identical to that of songs. One rarely encounters more than one person performing at a time, and nearly never accompanying songs.

There are two ways of categorizing songs. The most common is by **kwv txhiaj** (pronounced "kew TSEE ya"). Each **kwv txhiaj** is defined by the nature of the words, such as love songs, orphan songs, education songs, laments of the woman about to marry, etc. The other way songs are defined is by melody, or **suab** (literally, voice, pronounced "shoowa"). The **suab** is only an indicator of regional style, and gives no clue as to the meaning. In fact, it is possible to take any song text, and sing it to nearly any melody. It is equally possible to take a given melody, and sing songs of every possible mood to the identical melody.

Words to **kwv txhiaj** songs are always improvised. This includes the generation of rhymes and rhyming puzzles, where the successful rhyming resolution to a series of intricate word-plays is a vital aspect of the song's aesthetics. Singers are evaluated by their skill with words, not by the sound of their voice. A woman with a clear and beautiful voice might earn many marriage proposals, but her skill with poetry is what people listen for.

There are many types of **kwv txhiaj**, although some types are considerably more popular. The most common, especially during New Year celebrations, is **kwv txhiaj plees**, or love songs. When a young man expresses his interest in a young woman, especially during the New Year's ball-tossing game, she would be expected to respond in an appropriate manner. Traditionally, this would have been by singing a **kwv txhiaj plees** to him. A good performance would earn her family a far higher bride price.

Within the realm of secular music, one also finds many types of musical instruments. These include the following:

Ncas (pronounced njaa!): a thin strip of brass with a blade cut out from it. This buzzing metal blade is amplified and the sound quality altered by the whole mouth, similar to the jaw harp. This is the quintessential instrument of courtship. Its

soft sound encourages a sort of secrecy between two young people in love.

Raj is a category of small wind instruments. The word itself refers to any tube of wood, including those used to carry water. Two types are most common:

raj nplaim (pronounced Jahm blai): a long bamboo tube with a brass reed;

raj ntxhiam (pronounced Jahn jeeya): a fipple flute, similar to the recorder;

These are all used in a light-hearted, social way. Despite the fact that the instruments are playing words rather than melodies, the texts tend to be restricted to courtship themes.

Nplooj (pronounced mblong) is a leaf. This is a very loud instrument which can be heard for miles. A strong leaf is folded gently, placed in the mouth and blown forcefully. The sound has a high-pitched sound, manipulated by pulling on the leaf.

Nkauj nras ncas (pronounced NGAU nanjaa): This is the Hmong term for an instrument of Lao and Thai origin called so duang. The Lao expression "si so" entered into Hmong; many people then refer to it as **xim xos**. It is a two-stringed bowed instrument, with the bow passing between the strings. This is the only instrument that can be used to accompany songs, and only if the player is singing simultaneously. The first performer to do this, the late Sai Yang, first began the practice in the mid-1970s.

There is another aspect of Hmong musical performance, the vast number of chants associated with religious activity. This includes marriage negotiation songs, spirit callings (called **hu plig**, songs to summon spirits to bless a house or occasion), healing songs (similar to **hu plig**, where ancestors are summoned to guide the ill person's soul to proper action) and funeral songs. The funeral ceremonies also call for laments played on the **qeej** (pronounced "keng"). These are long pieces with extensive memorized texts that give instructions to the dead person's soul on making the transition from the world of the living to the world of the spirits. The **qeej** and the singer will usually alternate verses in a ritual that may last three days.

Another part of the ritual is an acrobatic dance called **dhiam qeej tawj qeej** (jumping **qeej**, spinning **qeej**). In this, the **qeej** player dances while playing. The dance is full of meaning; every gesture is part of the message, a metaphorical depiction of the journey to the ancestors from the material world. The dance has worked itself into secular life, too; competitions are routinely held for the best dancers, especially during New Year.

would you like to come home with me tonight?"

"And, towards the end of the song, it may go very serious. Like, 'you have been making fun with me for these three days, and you have to marry me.' And, by the end of the games, many of the youth were married."

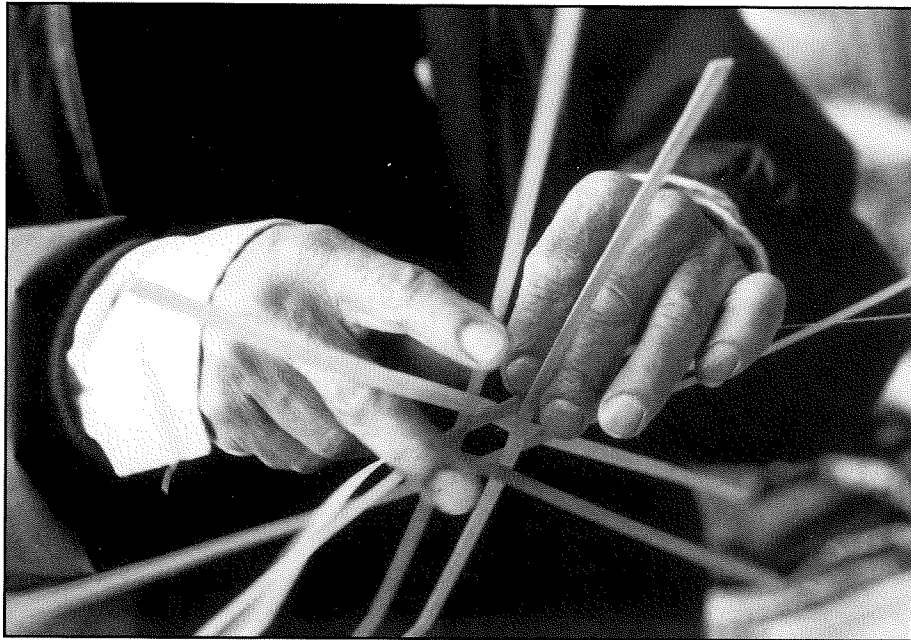
Parents and relatives enjoy the games. "They will come and sit around and watch their children sing. When it's a joking song, people will sit around and laugh. Songs like joking songs, you can make it up when you sing. And, a good singer make it up so quick. That's how they say that you're a good singer."

"But, there are also sad songs, like orphan and refugee songs. And people will come sit, and listen and cry. Refugee songs, where you're talking about what you left behind and what you miss. Songs will tell part of your past. It's like a history of the Hmong life."

These songs can also be played on the **qeej**, a Hmong instrument made from bamboo tubes with brass reeds. Chong Moua Lee played **qeej** for many different occasions in Laos, such as funerals, weddings, and New Year. "At the New Year, then you can play **qeej**. We call **dhiam qeej**. **Dhiam qeej** it's more like a dance with a **qeej**. A lot of times they let just one person play and then they all listen to the music. But sometimes people can play **qeej**; two, three people together, dance together too."

Chong Moua Lee continues to play for New Year in Seattle. One of the songs he plays is an orphan song. "This song, it's like being an orphan or lonely. It says that when I came to this country, I don't have anybody. And I just see people, friends, and other families, they have close family, brothers, and sisters, and food—they eat good food— and me, I don't have anybody, I'm alone. And I'm very sad. So when I go home, I just eat rice with vegetables only. And it makes me cry."

People also play other instruments at New Year as a form of courtship; the **raj**, a single bamboo pipe with a reed and the **ncas**, a tiny bamboo jaw's harp. Chong Moua Lee learned to play both instruments when he was young. "Youth in the Hmong people, they're really shy. When they're falling in love, they're not going to tell anybody. So they will blow it to give the missing part out of your heart. Boys al-



Nhia Hieu, demonstrates his well-known talent as a basketmaker (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

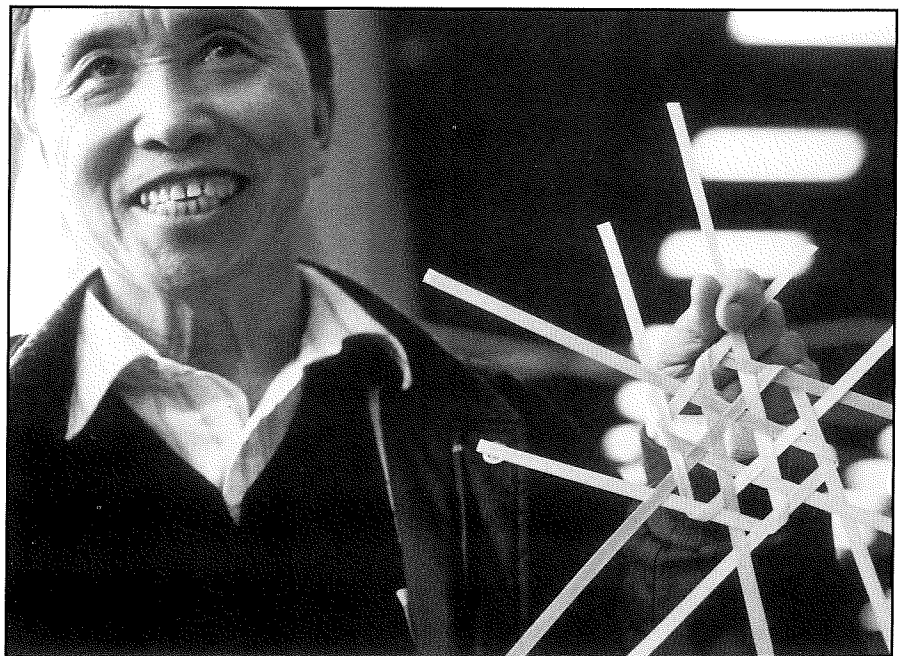
ways go at night to talk to girls, and they will use the ncas to communicate through the wall. And it's not to say in the real words, but to speak in the ncas, so the girls and the boys, they get to know each other and fall in love."

"Because, our culture, we don't date," Blia continued, "Boys will come at night. They learn where the girl's bedroom is and on the other side of the wall of the bedroom, they will call you and wake you up in the middle of the night. And the girl will sing, 'in the middle of the night, you wake me up and what is the reason?' And, the boy will answer, 'I don't want to knock your wall, because your parents may hear it. So, the only thing I can do is I pick up my ncas, and I will play it and I want you to answer me.' So, then she will pick up her ncas and answer him. And, that's part of the song. A lot of people will sing those kinds of songs. Back home, our wall is like bamboo. Where you can hear each other, and you can talk to each other through the wall."

"In our country," Lee went on, "raj and ncas, almost everybody knows how to play it. Here in this country, I don't really feel that people now are doing it. In about twenty or the next thirty years, I think it's going to be gone. Because children these days, they don't

want to learn it any more."

Hmong celebrate New Year every year in Seattle. "We still really want to keep our own culture alive," explained Joua Pao Yang, president of Washington's Hmong Association. "So, we still have to celebrate the New Year. And, that's the only culture that we can keep for the children. And, especially



A Nhia Hieu basket is on its way (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

for the elderly to gather once a year, to get together, to be happy. To enjoy together. That's the only time and only way we can do.

Because of the conflict of the time, the work schedule, we cannot use time and moon for New Year as we used to in Laos. In the United States, we have to use only the time that allows people to come together. So, why we have to do on Saturday. That's the only time that people can be free."

"We have done that since 1980, when the refugees started coming more into this country," Blia explained. "In Seattle, here we have a small community and we only celebrate for one day." For the past five years, the community has celebrated New Year's at the Seattle Center. "During the day, we have a culture show where we go from music to singing, and then dancing, traditional dance. So, if you come during the day, you see young girl and young boy play toss ball. The young, these days, don't sing that well, but they still play toss ball and they still exchange things, just for fun. That change a lot in this country. And, at night, we will have party, you know, for traditional music and western music."

From a Hmong Village to America: Needlework Survives in a New World

An interview with Chia Thao By Ann Tippit

CHIA THAO ARRIVED IN SEATTLE FROM THAILAND on January 13, 1980. On January 25, in spite of culture shock, jet lag, and the snow that she was so unfamiliar with, she and her sister-in-law set themselves up at the Seattle Center to sell pieces of needlework. She remembers the dates immediately, as people do the dates which have deep significance in their lives.

Needlework has been part of her life, and the life of her mother and grandmother and back, from a time beyond memory. Unlike the women before her though, the events of Chia's life, including the war in Indochina, have landed her half a world away from her birthplace.

Throughout her journey, Chia's needlework has been constant, taking on different roles as needed: from the traditional clothing that announced to the village so much about who she was, to a commodity which helped support her family in Thailand, to a craft that though sold in the Pike

Place Market, still conveys proudly who she is.

Chia learned to sew when she was six. For the next five years, her life outside of school revolved around sewing. Along with friends and relatives, "We would sit down together, talk together: 'This is a mistake! You have to change this! You have to take it out and do it again!' So, that's what we learned from. This is the needlework that we were making because, you know, the New Year was coming. If I had beautiful clothing, they'd say, 'Oh, that girl! It's because her mother's teaching her and then she's listening to her mother. That's why she has beautiful clothes.'"

"But for those who don't have beautiful clothes to wear in the New Year, they say 'That girl never listens to what the parents say. She just doesn't learn anything from the family!' So that's why all the girls had to listen

to the mom and the mom had to teach the girls to make it."

As a young girl. Was sewing a chore or was it a joy? Chia answered, "I really enjoyed sewing because my mother and friends, they were teaching me to sew: 'Oh, you'd better do it! It's fun to do it!'" Chia laughs. "So I say 'OK, let me try to do it.' And then I just try.



Chia Thao continues the Hmong needlework traditions, and is working to pass them on to her children (Photo by Ann Tippit).

I'd say, 'Oh, it's fun!' Because, you know, we had no TV to watch. We had nothing to do. All you do is just bring friends and stay together and it's raining like today, you know. You bring friends, and you sit down together, teaching together so it's really fun. I love it."

When she was about 10, Chia didn't have as much time to sew because her father needed help with selling animals at the market. Then the war overtook their lives. They moved to another village and then again closer to Vientiane, the capitol of Laos. Chia sold fabric and later sold traditional Hmong pieces to Thai people in Vientiane, who would in turn sell the pieces to Westerners in Thailand.

Three months before Chia and her family escaped from Laos across the Mekong River to Thailand, she married. She received her dowry from her extended family.

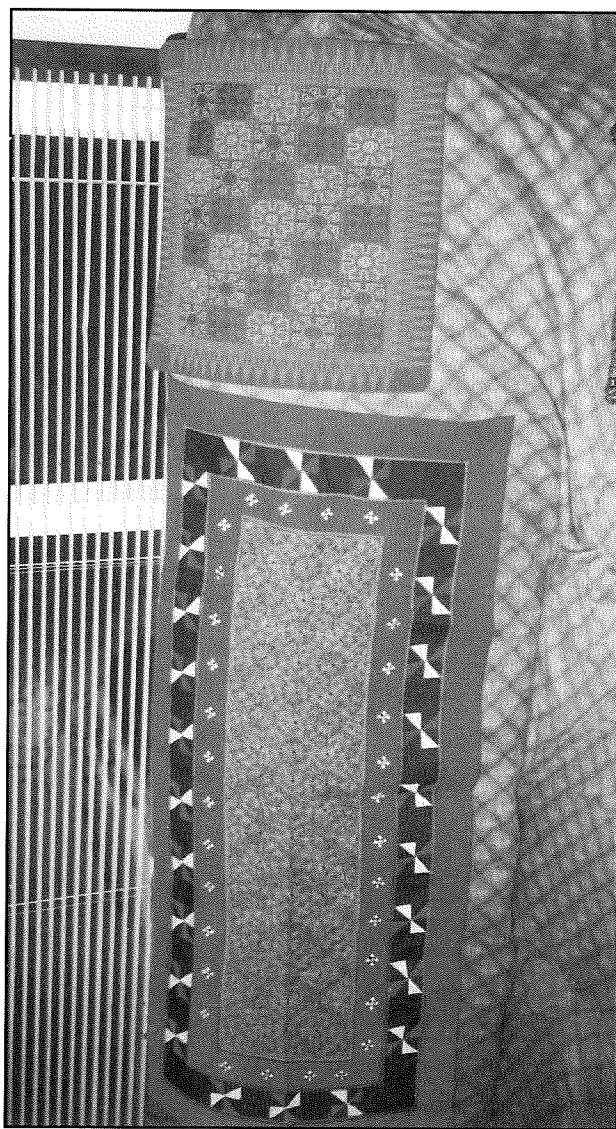
“It’s Hmong tradition, when you marry, right? All your cousins, aunties, your mother, they have to give all the needlework to you and you have to keep that for your life. So that is really important for the Hmong people, that you make needlework and you have to give it to your daughters, you have to give to your sons, you have to give it to somebody else related to you. I got a lot!”

The night they left for Thailand, they were fearful that the authorities were watching them. “I just [left] everything, I didn’t bring any piece—except me!” Chia laughs. “Yeah, I didn’t bring anything, you know. Since that night we went out from the house, we just were out completely, just the person. Nothing to carry out. Otherwise, they’d know that we were going to escape so... Everything there is lost. Everything.”

Danger, fear, and sorrow have imprinted details of the family’s escape vividly and permanently on Chia’s memory. Penniless from having paid a Thai farmer for help on their way, Chia embroidered not Hmong but Lao-style skirts to make money in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp.

Later, a Thai woman paid for Chia to sew designs on clothing to be resold to Americans. The woman told Chia what colors and styles to use on the pieces.

“She told us the colors, and she said, ‘This is the American style.’ We don’t do the bright colors, we need the combination of dark colors like the American style. You know, you had to use brown, grey together or you had to use brown and dark red together. It’s



The intricate patterns of Chia Thao’s needlework (Photo by Ann Tippit).

not our color anymore!”

“It’s really difficult because our needlework, we do really neat, you know. I mean it’s good needlework, but you know that style is big, the cutting’s big, the needlework’s big. I don’t really like it but she liked it so what can you do? You just make it for money, so you say, ‘well, I’d better do it.’” Chia laughs in her good-natured way.

Since 1980, Chia has been selling needlework in Seattle. Presently, she is the owner of Hmong Needlecraft. She and her family now design their own pieces. She designs work that will appeal to

the American sensibility—the colors are muted and coordinated to go with furniture. But she also designs pieces that display the bright colors of traditional Hmong work.

When asked what meaning the pieces that she sells now have for her, Chia said, “Well see, what I sell everyday now, I just think, ‘If you don’t keep your traditions, you don’t keep your work, that means your work’s going to be lost. So, why don’t I just keep it?’ I have a lot of [distractions], I have a lot of things to do to live, to get money, you know. But, I say ‘I’d better not change. If I change, that means I’ve lost my work. And then my children won’t know anything about the needlework. So why don’t I keep making it until...’ I just continue to make it, make it.”

The survival of Hmong needlework, like the survival of anything in a rapidly changing world, depends on a delicate blending of integrity and adaptation, a balance between what to keep and what to let go. Chia and her family clearly seek this balance

between the world of their traditions and the sweep of contemporary American life.

Will those in Chia’s family born in America continue the tradition? “And my daughter, Alice? She tries to do it. I say, ‘Oh you’re too young!’ And then right now, I don’t have time. But she’d really like to do it. She says, ‘Mom, can you teach me? How do you do it?’ I say, ‘Well, you grow up a little bit, then I will teach you.’”

The Thread of Life:

Hmong Needlework

Compiled by Pang Xiong



The hands of Xiz Thao bend and twist, as she diligently stitches a traditional Hmong reverse applique pattern in a piece of cloth (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

Paj Ntaub Txiaiv • Reverse Applique

"Hello, my name is **Xiz Thao**. In Laos, I lived in a small camp called Ban La Xeng. Sewing has been my main interest since I was 6 years old. Every young girl in my village was known for her work. Sewing was my second hobby, besides playing. Now I am making what is called 'Sev' (apron). It is pronounced 'Shay.'

Reverse applique is one of the hardest kinds of sewing in my culture. Out of 100, only 5 to 6 people can make an apron like I am making, the cuffs for sleeves and the two stripes on the front of the shirt. I learned reverse applique when I was 14 years old. Reverse applique can only be cut with small, sharp scissors. I can also make the cross-stitch (which is one of the techniques that we Hmong women learned from the Mien in Laos)."

Laug Hais • Needle-weaving

"Hello, my name is **Xee Vang**. I learned to sew weaving stitches last year in California from my two younger sisters. When I first learned, it was really hard. Counting how many threads to weave is difficult. Not so many young women my age could do weaving-stitches. I learned that weaving stitches were more confusing, but more exciting than cross-stitches. I am now making a head band for my son. I do enjoy doing this because I learned that continuing to sew using different techniques will keep our tradition alive and pass it on to younger generations."

Paj Ntaub Tib Neeg • Story cloth

"Hello, my name is **Mai Xiong**. I learned to make people-embroidery about 8 years ago in Ban Vinai, Thailand. I learned from my mother, Mai Yang, and also from my friends. Here, I am making people-embroidery for a small pillow case. People-embroidery was very popular back in the refugee camps in the 1980s in Thailand. Many of our Hmong women made people-embroidery blankets, pillow cases and many other things to sell in order to survive in Thailand, because there is no job available for refugees there. People embroidery always tells a story from our culture, or tells about our Hmong people in Laos, how we lived."



Paj Co • Single-stitch

"Hi, my name is **Xa-Mee**. I learned how to sew from my sister-in-law in a camp called Ban La Xeng, in Laos. I didn't learn to sew until I had 4 children, when I was 20. My mother, Mai Yang, was a tailor. Now I am making what is called "Paj Co" (single-stitch). It is pronounced Pa-chaw. This kind of stitch was adapted from the Mien tribal people.

The reason why we Hmong women do all sorts of techniques of sewing is that our ancestors wore these clothes from generation to generation, and now are passing this kind of sewing on to us. Bright and attractive is the style we like."

Xa-Mee learned Hmong sewing traditions in a refugee camp. Her specialty is the single-stitch (left) (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).



Paj Ntaub Ntawm Laug • Cross-stitch

"Hello, my name is **Dou Vang**. In Laos I lived in a small city called Sayaboury. Sewing was one of the things we little girls thought was interesting back then. I started to sew when I was 7 years old. My mother, Blia Ch, was a great tailor; she taught me how to sew. It wasn't until I was 9 years old that I could really make something on my own. Here I am making what is called "Sev" (apron) for my daughter, Xia. This is a cross-stitch apron which usually take me a couple of months to make. This one is easier to make than others, so it will probably takes me another 4 weeks to finish. I also know other stitch techniques, like reverse applique."

Dou Vang is carefully making a sav (apron) for her daughter, using the Hmong cross-stitch (above) (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

Hmong Dance:

Traditions Continue through Hmong youth

by Joan Rabinowitz

IT'S A FRIDAY EVENING IN THE RECTORY OF OUR Lady of Mount Virgin Church. Pang Xiong and See Yang, two Hmong girls in elaborate costumes, are rehearsing with their dance group. They practice every Friday and Saturday evening in preparation for their New Year's performance. As the music stops, the six girls begin laughing and talking, the ornaments on their dresses jingling as they move.

"The dance is about love," Pang explains. See adds, "Let time stand still, so that tonight we can be together forever."

Pang Xiong and See Yang are both twenty-two. They learned to dance from their older sisters. "Usually the older teach the younger girls, then they get married, then the young girls take over," See explains. See and Pang have been leading the group for eight years.

They took over after their sisters got married. "I think we're the longest lasting dancers," See continues. "Usually people dance for a couple years, or one year, and then they find somebody and they get married, because they're on-stage and everybody sees them, you know. So, they're pretty popular and they get married. But, I guess we're not popular or anything. It's been eight years, so they consider us very old and they don't want to watch us. But, we dance anyway. Because, we enjoy it. Twenty-two, that's over the hill. When you're sixteen, you're at your prime," she laughs.

See Lee is fourteen. She is the youngest girl in the dance group. See Lee began dancing last year. Cha Lai is seventeen, and Chee, who has been dancing for four years, is twenty. They all learned to dance from See and Pang. According to Pang, the girls in her group are all related, in some fashion or other. "See Yang and myself, her mother and my mother are cousin sisters. And, they're both from Black and White Hmong. And, Cha Lai is also my mother's cousin sister. That's three of us are the third generation. Their fathers are brothers. Chi is my sister-in-law, who is

Bi Song's wife. And, one is See Lee and her mom is also my cousin sister. And, one is Ia Cha, who is my sister-in-law's cousin sister. So, we're very, sort of, related. We get along pretty well. Except, sometimes See and I, we sort of disagree," Pang laughs.



A group of Hmong women dancers practices in a local church. Front: See Yang (left) and Pang Xiong (right) (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).

The girls wear very elaborate costumes. Their skirts come from Thailand or California, where there are large Hmong populations. "The skirts are harder to make, so usually we buy the skirts. It's too time consuming. We don't have the materials to make them," See explains. "Usually, the shirts and aprons, our mothers make them for us. We're supposed to do it ourselves, but we're in school all the time."

It is inevitable that the demands of living in the United States will conflict with traditional Hmong customs. But, the girls value their traditions, and want them to continue. "Because I teach dances and also do other things at New Year, sometimes I really get tired of it," Pang explains. "I just want, 'Oh, I wish New Year's were over, because I'm so tired. I have this and that to do. Homework and all these things, personal.' But, I think, New Year is one of the traditional celebrations that our ancestors do every year. And, See and I try to keep that alive in our young adults, young teenagers. So, when we get old and married, they will still continue. And, if I am fifty years old, and I will see younger kids perform which is passed on from my group, I will be very happy."

The Musicians of New Year: The Qeej Players and a Contemporary Sound

Compiled by Joan Rabinowitz

Chi Moua

“My name is Chi Moua. I played qeej in my country for years. Then I came to the United States.” Chia Moua played qeej in Laos for many years. His father and grandfather didn’t know how to play, so he learned from his cousin. In Laos, he played qeej anytime; for New Years, when somebody died, for weddings, to welcome guests. Then, he came to the United States. Now, Chi only plays for New Year celebrations.

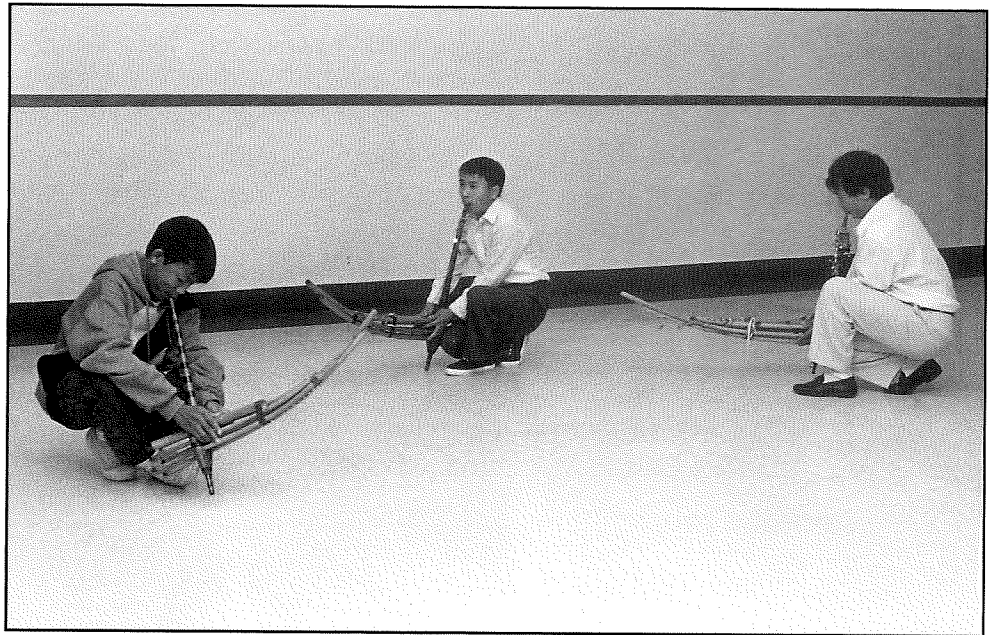
“When a person passes away, for three to four years, the person comes back, you have to send away again. Send the spirits to the ancestors. The spirit comes back, maybe just to say good-bye. And, then they use the mouth flute to do that ceremony, to send the spirit to go on to her next life.

“The mouth flute is also used for happiness. When you have someone from far away visiting you. You use the mouth flute to celebrate their welcome. The mouth flute is also used for weddings, but now we sort of lose the technique.

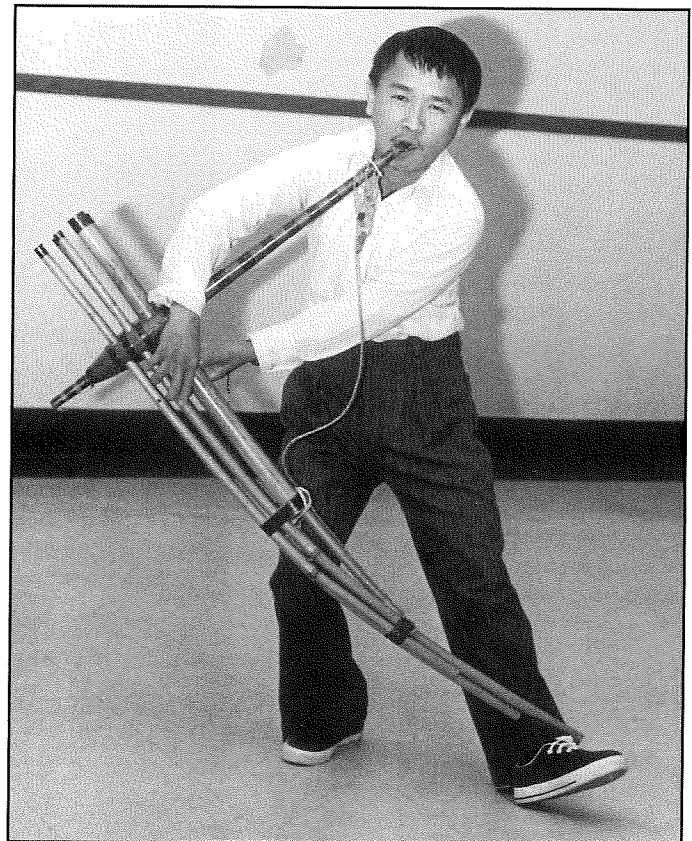
“Lazy to learn. Laugh. Until it pass away, and then regret, ‘Oh, I should have learned this.’”

Doua Pao

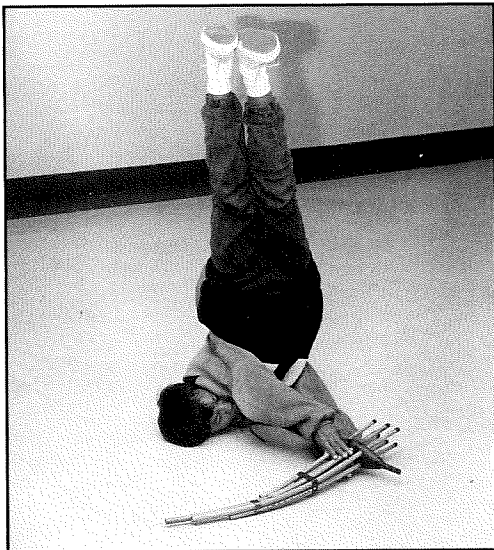
“My name is Doua Pao. I learned to play mouth flute (qeej) when I was five years old from my father. He’s a great mouth flute player. Mouth flute was my best hobby. I still play in Seattle. But, just for the ceremony for the New Year.”



The Qeej players, Jor Chang, Chia Moua, and Doua Pao, set the tone for Hmong New Year festivities (Photo by Nancy Donnelly).



Chia Moua



Jor Chang

Jor Chang

Jor Chang is fourteen years old. He began learning to play qeej three years ago from his father. He is especially good at dhiam qeej; acrobatic dancing while playing the qeej.

"My special technique. Not very hard. Younger people are very flexible." Jor's father is in Washington also. Although he still plays, his father doesn't perform anymore. "Without all the tumbling, walking low, he can still play, but if he's going to go through that process, he can't really do it."

Contemporary music:

Robert Bi Heng

I am Robert Bi Heng. And, I came from Laos. I came to the United States January 11th, 1983. I'm 29. I am still in high school at Highline High School.

My song is about Hmong New Year. I sang:

The end of the year is the 30th of December. The New Year is the first month and the first day of January. In this country, American and Chinese, they have their own culture, like Christmas, and the lights. And, our people, we celebrate New Year and come together, and are happy for New Year.

That is my own idea. I just think about and sing what I want to say. This is a song I thought of in the last couple days. Myself, I really don't like to sing old culture songs, because in this country, the young people really don't like old culture songs. So, you have to really sing what you are doing right now. So, I change. In my country, you have to sing what the person told you to sing. But, in this country, I think I should change it. So, if I want to think about what happened today, then just sing what happened today.

My mother usually told me that I was singing since I was one (laughs). I know how to sing to my mother when I



Robert Bi Heng

was very young, but the real thing, I begin to sing when I was about 10 years old. In the United States, more people know me, because I'm a very popular singer (laughs).

I used to sing in New Year, looking for a girl and the best singer (laughs).

My wife lived 3 or 4 days from my village. She came over to my village and we met each other. Just sing a couple of songs. Song can make a young boy, young girl love each other, too.

I record some songs for sale. And, I have some very old songs for sale. I just copy as many as I want and I bring to New

Year and if somebody is interested, they can buy from me. Only in New Year. The people that like my song, buy. I think New Year in Fresno, they have 4 or 5 men selling their own songs. The girl, I see just 2 or 3. Everyone can do that, if they want to.

People are collecting good songs these days. So, all the good singers will sing and present at the New Year, and people will try to collect that.

There aren't many good singers. I think in probably ten, fifteen years, there will be no more good singers for all the people, because the young boy, young girl, they like music more than culture songs.

Hmong music, too, but different.

I have 2 boys, 2 girls. I usually ask my boy to study from me, a couple of songs, but he say, "I don't want to." So, I don't think they like to sing a song.

In my country we celebrate at home for New Year. In this country some people still do that, but some don't. Because, they have a big celebration on New Year Day, so everybody already goes there and happy and all that.

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