



Journal of Southeast Asian American
Education and Advancement

Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Volume 18

Issue 2 *Toward HMoob-centered Inquiries:
Reclaiming HMoob American Educational
Scholarship and Curriculum*

Article 2

2023

“My Own Kwv Txhij: Reflecting on Self Learning of a Hmong Oral Tradition”

Chong A. Moua
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, mouac@uwosh.edu

Toward HMoob-centered inquiries: Reclaiming HMoob American educational scholarship and curriculum

Choua P. Xiong and Kaozong N. Mouavangsou

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea>



Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moua, Chong A. (2023) “My Own Kwv Txhij: Reflecting on Self Learning of a Hmong Oral Tradition”, *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 2, Article 2.

DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1301

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea/vol18/iss2/2>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).



"My Own Kwv Txhiaj: Reflecting on Self Learning of a Hmong Oral Tradition"

Chong A. Moua

University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh

Zaj Kwv Txhiaj: Hmoob keeb kwm

Nib yai...niab tab nob ntuj teb os ib tsoom phooj ywg Hmoob cas tiam no

Es peb Hmoob nim ib txhiab ib txhi ib txwm tsis muaj teb muaj chaws

Ua lub neej txom nyem zoo puab tim tam li nstuag nos nyob tsaus ntuj nti tsis muaj **hnuab**

Thiaj li niaj hnuab mus nce tej toj roob hauv pe seev yum yees los kua muag nrog sis xws li dej dag nyab lawm qab **ntuj**

Yog Vim txoj kev ntshaw ntshaw ib thaj av los ua peb **tug** os peb tsoom phooj ywg mog om...

Es peb Hmoob nim ib txhiab ib txhi ib txwm tsis muaj teb muaj chaws

Ua lub neej txom nyem zoo puab tim tam li nstuag nos nyob tsaus ntuj nti tsis pom **hli**

Thiaj li niaj hnuab mus nce tej toj roob hauv pe seev yum yees los kua muag nrog sis xws li dej dag nyab lawm qab ntuj tsaus **nti**

Yog Vim txoj kev ntshaw ntshaw ib thaj av los os ua peb **li** os peb Hmoob aws....

Nib yai...niab tab nob ntuj teb os ib tsoom phooj ywg Hmoob cas tiam no

Es peb Hmoob nim raug mab raug sua tsuj thiab kav ib tiam mus ib **txhis**

Es lawv thiaj li siv riam siv phom coj peb poj koob yawm ntxwv mus ua tub qhev ntxhais **txib**

Peb thiaj li khiav mus khiav los, hla cuaj lub ciam teb dhau yim lub ciam chaw **ti**

Los tshwm sim ua neeg thoj nam loj hlob tsis muaj kwv muaj **tij**

Es peb Hmoob nim raug mab raug sua tsuj thiab kav ib tiam mus ib txheej **ntev**

Lawv thiaj li siv riam siv phom coj peb poj koob yawm ntxwv mus ua tub txib ntxhais **qhev**

Peb thiaj li khiav mus khiav los, hla cuaj lub ciam chaw dhau yim lub ciam **teb**

Los tshwm sim ua neeg thoj nam loj hlob tsis muaj vaj muaj **tse** os ib tsoom Hmoob es yom...

Nib yai...niab tab no ntuj teb os ib tsoom phooj ywg Hmoob cas tiam no

Es peb Hmoob nim zoo puab tim tam li qoob loos raug cua daj cua dub tshuab ya yuj yees

Los poob thoob qab teb qaum ntuj es peb nim hlav mos nyuj nyoos ntsuab xub xiab nrog luag muaj **neej** es

Txawm ib sim neej no peb tsis muaj faj tim fuab tais los peb caj ceg keeb kwm Hmoob muaj zoo looj mem tam li tus me ntoo txwj ntoo laus plhis ua tus txha nyiaj txha kub los kav los txhawb peb ib tsoom Hmoob kom muaj kev vam **meej**



Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement*, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or **JSAAEA**.

Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement, Vol. 18, Iss. 2, (2023) ISSN: 2153-8999

Es peb Hmoob nim zoo puab tim tam li qoob loos raug cua daj cua dub tshuab ya yuj yees
Los poob thoob qab teb qaum ntuj es peb nim hlav mos nyuj nyoos ntsuab xub xiab nrog luag
muaj cuab muaj **yig**

Txawm ib sim neej no peb tsis muaj faj tim fuab tais los peb caj ceg keeb kwm Hmoob muaj zoo
kab looj mem tam li tus me ntoo txwj ntoo laus plhis ua tus txha nyiaj txha kub los kav los
txhawb peb ib tsoom Hmoob kom muaj kev vam meej hauv paus nto **ntsis** na om
Ces nim zoo siab ua luaj no...

My Reflection

When I was young, it was hard for me to imagine how kwv txhiaj was taught. Growing up in California, where my family resettled in 1989 as refugees from the secret war in Laos, I heard the sounds and melodies of Hmong kwv txhiaj around me. My mother watched Video Home System (VHS) tapes of Hmong artists in Laos and Thailand singing kwv txhiaj with one another. Although I've never heard my mother sing kwv txhiaj, I knew she understood and appreciated the art form. When she watched the VHS tapes, there would be an occasional chuckle or giggle, conveying her joy at the cleverness of the artists—especially if the kwv txhiaj was of the courtship genre. My father, in his youth, was known to have been a proficient kwv txhiaj singer—some would say it was part of his charm as a young man. Every now and then, I would hear him humming as he watered the garden or strolled in the front yard. My eldest sibling, my sister who is almost 10 years older than me, is also a very good kwv txhiaj singer. During Hmong new year celebrations, such as the one in Fresno, California, suitors would ask her to sing kwv thiaj while they pov pob. Dressed in Hmong clothes my mother sewed, my sister would sing as she and her suitors tossed a green neon tennis ball back and forth. Around her, a handful of people would gather to listen, some holding tape recorders close to her mouth to capture her songs.

I have never asked my mother, father, or sister how they learned the Hmong oral art form of kwv txhiaj or what it meant to them. Critically acclaimed Hmong American writer, Kao Kalia Yang (2016) uses the words of Ralph Ellison to talk about Hmong kwv txhiaj. Yang writes,

Kwv txhiaj is, in the words of Ralph Ellison on American blues, “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-cosmic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” (p. x)

Comparing it to American blues, Yang is essentially saying that kwv txhiaj is the lyrical narrator and knowledge keeper of Hmong life, history, and experiences. I had always been curious about kwv txhiaj because I saw how it captured and sustained the attention of those who knew it. Even though I didn’t understand it, I knew kwv txhiaj was a way for Hmong people to talk to each other in metaphors, similes, and allegory that my untrained ears could not decipher.

I have had two occasions to learn kwv txhiaj—neither opportunity involved me learning from my parents or sister. The first time was in the summer of 2008 during an intensive Hmong language program at UW Madison. I was placed in the advanced level where we were exposed to Hmong language used in various celebratory or ceremonial settings. One of the components of the final project that year was to sing a kwv txhiaj. The kwv txhiaj I sang was not one I had written. I

ended up performing one written by my eldest sister. I told her I wanted a courtship kwv txhiaj because there was a fellow student in class that summer who I liked. Even though I memorized and sang the song my sister wrote for the final and did well in the class, I still did not know kwv txhiaj.

My own kwv txhiaj was the result of the second opportunity I got to learn about kwv txhiaj through a workshop offered by Minnesota (MN) Zej Zog, a non-profit organization that centers Hmong language and the arts to promote empowerment, healing and wellness, in the summer of 2021. The workshop was taught by two Hmong women who had been teaching kwv txhiaj for many years in various classroom settings. The most important lesson that the teachers taught on our first day of virtual class was that kwv txhiaj is a universal vessel to convey feelings, knowledge, and experience for Hmong people. And more importantly, kwv txhiaj might be the most significant Hmong oral tradition because it can be learned and practiced by anyone. This oral tradition has no gender or ritualistic barriers to practice compared to other Hmong oral art forms that are tied to ceremonies like weddings or funerals. I now realize that this universality of kwv txhiaj resonated deeply with me because it was one of the few artistic expressions I can recall that my mother, father, and eldest sister had in common.

I signed up for the 8-week version of the workshop to take advantage of the additional four weeks of guidance and coaching to write my own kwv txhiaj. The first half of the course introduced us to different types of kwv txhiaj and how each type correlates with the regions of Laos where Hmong people lived. We also learned that kwv txhiaj is a remarkable art form that is flexible and not bounded by any subject or restricted to the use of poetic languages so long as the song follows the structure. Learning about the malleability of kwv txhiaj demystified the art form for me and made it less intimidating. It made me, a menyuam Hmoob, born in Laos, but raised in America feel like I could have my own meaningful relationship with the art form.

Learning how to break down a kwv txhiaj and recognize some of its basic parts did not necessarily make it easier when it came time to write my own. Writing my own kwv txhiaj from scratch was humbling because the process highlighted my linguistic insecurities but also reminded me that I had more of the Hmong language in me than I realized. Even though I was born in Laos, as far as I can remember, I have always been fluent in both Hmong and English. I don't have memories of struggling to learn English like some of my older siblings. Growing up bilingual, however, did not mean I had equal confidence in both languages. Outside of my home, the English-dominant environments in social spaces and public institutions told me that there was no place for Hmong language and that English was the path to success. These opportunities to engage with kwv txhiaj showed me that while my parents did not teach me the art form, the Hmong language they taught me at home was more than enough when the time came for me to learn kwv txhiaj—that what they gave me at home allowed me to later find my way to kwv txhiaj.

My kwv txhiaj is a product of my own creativity and lived experiences with guidance and input from my teachers. Kao Kalia Yang (2016) adds that kwv txhiaj songs can be duets where different voices can come together to form different verses within the same poem. I consider my first kwv txhiaj a duet between my curiosity about the role of kwv txhiaj in Hmong life, my admiration of my parents and eldest sister, and the me who has always wanted to learn but didn't know how to ask them to teach me. By no means am I close to being a kwv txhiaj singer, artist, or practitioner. I'm still the menyuam Hmoob who wanted to know what was being shared by Hmong people through this art form. The only difference is I now have a kwv txhiaj of my own. While my parents and eldest sister didn't teach me kwv txhiaj, they taught me the Hmong language and its beauty through an unabashed embrace of kwv txhiaj. In so doing, I am proud to say that

I'm also now a menyuam Hmoob who has learned to listen to my people better. Learned to pay attention to the rhyming couplets that could reveal the message of a kwv txhiaj. Learned that even if I didn't understand much of a kwv txhiaj, if I followed the rhythm and the rhymes, if I trusted the words and the sounds I was taught at home, I could find my way into the poetry and meaning of the song and perhaps begin to understand what my people have been saying to each other for generations.

About the Author



Chong A. Moua's research interests center around the question of how immigration, race, gender, citizenship, and U.S. empire produce discourses of cultural and national belonging. She is currently an assistant professor of Hmong Studies and History at UW Oshkosh.

Acknowledgements

This piece is inspired by the life of my mother, Yaj Mim Hawj, sister, Npib, and father, Npuag Looj. I have yet to tell them but this is my way of thanking them for showing me what it means to love my language. I also want to thank the teachers who've been a part of my kwv txhiaj learning journey: Mai Na M. Lee, Bounthavy Kiatoukaysy Thao, and Caroline Paaj Zaub Thao-Vue. This work was also supported by funding from the Office of Research and Evaluation at AmeriCorps under Grant No. 22RE249214 through the National Service and Civic Engagement research grant competition. Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, AmeriCorps.

References

Yang, K. K. (2016). *The song poet: A memoir of my father*. Metropolitan Books.



Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Vol.18 Iss. 2 Special Issue (2023) www.JSAAEA.org

Special Issue Co-Editors

Dr. Choua P. Xiong

University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh

Dr. Kaozong N. Mouavangsou

University of California, Merced

Editor

Dr. Wayne E. Wright

Purdue University

Associate Editors

Dr. Chhany Sak-Humphry

University of Hawaii at Manoa

Dr. Phitsamay Sychitkokhong Uy

University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Book Review Editor

Dr. Vichet Chhuon

University of Minnesota

Creative Works Editor

Bryan Thao Worra

Lao Assistance Center

Journal Manager

Vikrant Chap

Purdue University

Editorial Review Board

Dr. Steve Arounsack

California State University, Stanislaus

Dr. Sovicheth Boun

Salem State University

Dr. Carl L. Bankston III

Tulane University

Dr. Phala Chea

Lowell Public Schools

- Dr. Virak Chan**
Purdue University
- Dr. Loan Dao**
University of Massachusetts Boston
- Dr. Linh Dang**
KIPP DC Headquarters
- Dr. Sophal Ear**
Occidental College
- Dr. Vincent K. Her**
University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire
- Dr. Nancy H. Hornberger**
University of Pennsylvania
- Dr. Peter Tan Keo**
New York University
- Dr. Yvonne Kwan**
San Jose State University
- Dr. Ravy Lao**
California State University, Los Angeles
- Dr. Stacey Lee**
University of Wisconsin, Madison
- Dr. Jacqueline Mac**
Northern Illinois University
- Dr. Bic Ngo**
University of Minnesota
- Dr. Leakhena Nou**
California State University, Long Beach
- Dr. Mark Pfeifer**
SUNY Institute of Technology
- Dr. Loan T. Phan**
University of New Hampshire
- Dr. Karen Quintiliani**
California State University, Long Beach
- Dr. Angela Reyes**
Hunter College
The City University of New York
- Dr. Fay Shin**
California State University, Long Beach
- Dr. Christine Su**
College of San Mateo
- Dr. Alisia Tran**
Arizona State University
- Dr. Khatharya Um**
University of California, Berkeley
- Dr. Kim Tran**
University of California, Los Angeles,
Glendale Community College
- Dr. George Chigas**
University of Massachusetts, Lowell
- Dr. Hien Duc Do**
San Jose State University
- Dr. Changming Duan**
University of Missouri-Kansas City
- Dr. Sothy Eng**
Lehigh University
- Dr. Jeremy Hein**
University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire
- Dr. Peter Nien-Chu Kiang**
University of Massachusetts, Boston
- Dr. Kevin K. Kumashiro**
University of Illinois, Chicago
- Dr. Ha Lam**
Independent Scholar
- Dr. Jonathan H. X. Lee**
San Francisco State University
- Dr. Monirith Ly**
Royal University of Phnom Penh
- Dr. Sue Needham**
California State University, Dominguez Hills
- Dr. Max Niedzwiecki**
Daylight Consulting Group
- Dr. Clara Park**
California State University, Northridge
- Dr. Giang Pham**
University of Massachusetts Amherst
- Dr. Malaphone Phommasa**
University of California Santa Barbara
- Dr. Kalyani Rai**
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
- Dr. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials**
University of Connecticut, Storrs
- Dr. Nancy J. Smith-Hefner**
Boston University
- Dr. Yer J. Thao**
Portland State University
- Dr. Monica M. Trieu**
Purdue University
- Dr. Silvy Un**
Saint Paul Public Schools
- Dr. Linda Trinh Vo**
University of California, Irvine
- Dr. Varaxy Yi Borromeo**
California State University, Fresno

Dr. Molly Wiebe

The University of Texas at Austin

Dr. Zha Blong Xiong

University of Minnesota

Dr. Soua Xiong

California State University, Fresno

Dr. Vicky Xiong-Lor

University of Wisconsin Whitewater

Dr. Yang Sao Xiong

The University of Wisconsin-Madison

Dr. Melissa Vang

San Diego State University

Dr. Khanh Le

The City University of New York

Dr. Jenna Leubner-Cushing

University of Wisconsin Whitewater

Doctoral Student Editorial Review Board

Diana Chandara

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Bao Diep

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Vanessa Sovanika Na

University of California San Diego

Khoi Nguyen

George Mason University

Hoa Nha Nguyen

Boston College

Linda Marie Pheng

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Latana Thaviseth

University of California Los Angeles

Thong Vang

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Kassandra Chhay

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Annie BichLoan Duong

San Joaquin County Office of Education

Nielson Hul

Cornell University

Dung Minh Mao

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Thien-Huong Ninh

University of Southern California

Krissyvan Truong

Claremont Graduate University

Mai Vang

University of Massachusetts Boston

Lee Her

Michigan State University

Cherry Lim

University of Massachusetts Lowell