

THE NEW WAY: PROTESTANTISM AND THE HMONG IN VIETNAM

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On the eve of the Lunar New Year, 2005, I helped Mr. Gi prepare the last ritual of the Hmong traditional New Year. He was grateful for my assistance in setting up a new altar for the *dab txhiaj meej*, the spirit of wealth and prosperity, and the *dab roog*, the guardian spirit of the house, for he and I were alone in the house. A bunch of freshly plucked chicken feathers and a ceremonial paper in his left hand, Mr. Gi slowly hoisted himself up onto a wobbly little wooden chair. Keeping the chair steady with one hand, I held out with the other a little bowl, half full of glue made of cooked sticky rice flour. Dipping his thumb in the glue and smearing it on the paper, Mr. Gi carefully attached the ceremonial paper onto the wooden wall right above the outside of the main door, and then the chicken feather on top of it. The door was significantly taller than in most Hmong houses, so decorating its lintel was a rather arduous job; but finally, it was done. Still standing on the chair, Mr. Gi began to recite an incantation. The relatively short chant sounded melancholic. The night grew gloomier.

Ordinarily, the task of preparing for the New Year would be shared among all members of a Hmong family; but, after quarreling with him all afternoon about his desire to carry out the ancient rituals, his wife and three adult children had gone to a neighbor's house to listen to an Evangelical radio broadcast. Accustomed as I had become to the family's frequent conflicts since coming to stay with the GIs more than a month earlier, I was still taken aback by the intensely sad atmosphere in the house that night. Like the Chinese or Vietnamese, most Hmong avoid conflicts at this time in the hope of ushering in a harmonious year. For them, the New Year is the most important time of the year, a vital moment in which ties with ancestors are renewed. The ancestral and domestic spirits of the family are honored through the renovation of altars in and around the house, and food is offered by the head of the family.

The Hmong New Year only becomes meaningful once these rituals are performed in the household. For this reason, it is also the time when the unity of the family and the household is affirmed and ritually sanctioned. On New Year's Eve, it is essential that the family stay together. Yet the performance of this all-important ritual had caused dissension and discord in the Gi family.

What had happened? The brief answer is that after nearly a decade of 'experimenting' with Christianity Mr. Gi had chosen to return to his ancestral worship, while Mrs. Gi and all the children preferred to remain members of the Church. The divergent ways Mr. Gi and his family chose to mark New Year – he by performing ancient rituals, his wife and children by listening to a religious program broadcast from America – encapsulate some of the tensions between old and new caused by the introduction of evangelical Protestantism among the Hmong of Vietnam since the 1980s. About one third of the more than one million Hmong living in Vietnam have converted to Protestantism. The rest include some who have steadfastly resisted the appeal of Protestantism or, as in the case of Mr. Gi, have chosen to return to their ancestral faith. While Mr. Gi clings to old religious beliefs and practices that are at the core of Hmong identity, his wife and children are connected via these radio broadcasts to the transnational Hmong diaspora that came into being after the end of the Second Indochina War (1965-1975). This diaspora encompassed not only Vietnam but also Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, America, France, and Australia. Mr. Gi and his family are part of the story of the spread of evangelical Protestantism throughout the world, a phenomenon that is at once highly local and global.

My book *The New Way. Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam* (University of Washington Press 2016) addresses the interplay between the global reach of Christianity and the ways in which it is articulated in the Vietnamese Hmong society. It approaches the emergence of Hmong Protestantism from various perspectives, those of the Hmong converts and non-converts as well as those of the deconverted, of the Vietnamese state authorities, and of the missionar-

ies. One of the classic narratives of Christian conversion is modelled on that of Saint Paul: a sudden flash of insight and a complete transformation. In fact, however, conversion is a complex social phenomenon that takes place in specific political circumstances. Conversion to Christianity in the Roman Empire is different from conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism in early modern Europe and from conversion under colonial or postcolonial conditions. In all these cases the relation to state power is crucial. In Vietnam therefore conversion not only means change of belief, but also a different relationship with the state and, very crucially, with one's relations with one's kin group. While the emphasis in the narrative of conversion is on the individual's change of heart, it is actually the social situation that is transformed in the first place. This is immediately clear in the fact that the Hmong convert en masse, although not in their entirety.

To explore the different social and individual aspects of what conversion means for the Hmong, this book pays close attention to the way in which Hmong people—converts and non-converts—make sense of their community, locality, and identity in space and time, especially in the face of the material and moral challenges that globalization presents to them. In describing the peculiar way in which the Hmong received the evangelical message, I explain that the initial appeal resonates with the Hmong's own messianic beliefs. I also address their longing to escape conditions of marginality – geographic, socio-economic, and political – and their aspiration to modernity, however defined over the course of the twentieth century, by different actors: the Vietnamese state, with its sudden shifts in policy, or the US-based Hmong diaspora which supplies both missionaries and audio-visual illustrations of global modernity. What is the impact of conversion on the converts' sense of self through their discovery of sin? The New Way, as converts often refer to evangelical Protestantism, reshapes crucial dimensions of Hmong lives; it even affects those who refuse to convert, or who, having converted, decide to return to their old beliefs and practices. All must interact and be affected

by the New Way, including the Vietnamese state authorities.