

Loss of Oral Tradition in Yunnan, China

Nou Vue and Kelly Wonder & Ezra Zeitler | University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire



Background

- Research was conducted by eight students and two faculty mentors in Yunnan, China of July 2012. Research topic focuses on storytelling and its impact in the villages of Yunnan, China.
- Questions include:
 - What are stories that were passed down from ancestors?
 - How do stories affect people today?
 - What are peoples' views of these stories (do people believe them)?
 - How do these stories vary from place to place/group to group?
- Storytelling has been around for centuries, usually for entertainment purposes and for individuals to share an experience through cultural engagement.
 - Stories in the Hmong households are close-knit and pertain to moral lessons for both children and adults.
 - "Their deeper meanings and allusions to religious and philosophical thoughts are subliminal." (Cha & Livo 29)

Methodology

- Participant observation and interview sessions were conducted in the United States and in Yunnan, China to collect qualitative data for comparison.
 - Interviewed 10 participants from the US (5 males & 5 females; ages range from 6-60).
 - Interviewed 1-2 individuals in 10 of the 16 villages visited (ages range from 10-60).
 - Interviews were done in Hmong.
 - Students and mentors held debriefing sessions to recollect information for the day.
- Interview process led to adjustment of original research topic.
 - How have stories changed over time?
 - What reasons led to the halt of pastime oral tradition?

Findings

- Very few people knew or heard of stories.
- Those who knew were either *elders* or *educated*.
 - *Educated elder* from Kunming.
 - Tells a story similar to one heard among Hmong Americans.
 - Commented that not many people tell stories anymore.
 - *Elder* from Village Quav Qiab.
 - Tells a story told among his village but never heard among Hmong Americans.
 - Hard to understand due to his strong Chinese accent.
- Those who didn't know were more *traditional and younger*.
 - *Village man* from Yan Shan.
 - Has never heard of any; this was evident among many others.
 - *Working woman* from Village 13.
 - "We don't have time to tell stories because we are too busy trying to make a living."



- ↑ Top: Yunnan Province is highlighted in green. Located right by the border of Southeast Asia.
- ↓ Bottom: Hmong story cloth, usually displaying the fleeing during the Vietnam War. But in China, none of this artwork can be found.



Discussion/Implications

- Results were different than expected when compared to the data gathered from Hmong Americans.
 - Gathered information from pre-field work suggested that stories may be similar for both groups, but research stated otherwise.
- Storytelling is less of an importance to the communities.
 - Led to hypothesizing the possible reasons why:
 - Diaspora from country to country over the centuries.
 - Modernization.
 - Trying to make a living, so pastime activities are no longer practiced.
 - The majority of the visited communities concentrated on farming and agriculture.
 - The rest invested in business.
- Story cloths play important roles in the daily lives of *Hmong in Southeast Asia and for Hmong Americans*. They usually depict the struggles of war and stages of new crops and harvest seasons.
 - However in China, none of the Hmong there displayed hand sewn story cloths anywhere.
 - Story cloths were actually not made until victims of war migrated to Thailand.
 - "Newer forms such as story cloths demonstrate the fluid nature of culture and visual non-verbal languages." (Craig 5)
 - "A legend that claims the Hmong used to have a written language but when the Chinese made it illegal to speak or write Hmong, the Hmong women hid the alphabet in the folds of the women's skirts. With complex patterns of embroidery, appliqué and batik in skirts made of twenty-four feet of cloth compressed into tiny pleats." (Craig 5)
 - The legend can not be proven due to the fact that the Hmong costume is constantly changing, which may also lead to the making of the story cloth, hence the reason why there are none in China.

Conclusion

- Over the centuries, the Hmong Chinese have completely come to a stop for storytelling as a form of entertainment and teaching lessons for their children. Trying to "catch up" with society has led to the loss of oral tradition, an important cultural component among the Hmong.

Reference

- Cha, Dia, and Norma J. Livo. *Teaching with Folk Stories of the Hmong*. Westcort, CT: Library Unlimited. 2000. <http://books.google.com/books>
- Craig, Geraldine. "Patterns of Change: Transitions in Hmong Textile Language." *Hmong Studies Journal*, Volume 11: 5. Web. 23 May 2013.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the Freeman Foundation through AsiaNetwork for funding the trip. A big thanks to Ari Anand and Ka Vang for revisions on the grant proposals. Thank you to Christian DePoew and Charles Vue for steering the research project towards outstanding faculty help.

"Hmong stories retain the unsanitized richness of the culture."

- Dia Cha