

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at:
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/51782943>

Aspirations and realities of love, marriage and education among Among women

Article in *Culture Health & Sexuality* · November 2011

DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2011.626074 · Source: PubMed

CITATIONS

3

READS

82

3 authors, including:



Joanna White

University of the West of England, Bristol

16 PUBLICATIONS 75 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



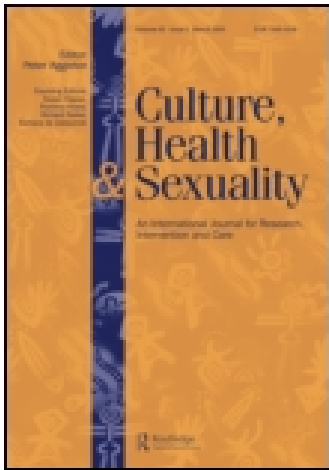
COST IS0907 Childbirth cultures, concerns and consequences [View project](#)



Midwives' contribution to normal childbirth care: Cross-sectional study in public hospitals in Catalonia. ISRCTN14062994 DOI 10.1186/ISRCTN14062994 [View project](#)

All content following this page was uploaded by [Joanna White](#) on 01 October 2015.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.



Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tchs20>

Aspirations and realities of love, marriage and education among Hmong women

Thi Huong Nguyen ^a, Pauline Oosterhoff ^{a b} & Joanna White ^{c d}

^a Medical Committee Netherlands Vietnam, Hanoi, Vietnam

^b Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^c Independent Researcher, Vietnam

^d Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRIA), Lisbon, Portugal

Published online: 08 Nov 2011.

To cite this article: Thi Huong Nguyen, Pauline Oosterhoff & Joanna White (2011) Aspirations and realities of love, marriage and education among Hmong women, *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care*, 13:sup2, S201-S215, DOI: [10.1080/13691058.2011.626074](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2011.626074)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2011.626074>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Aspirations and realities of love, marriage and education among Hmong women

Nguyen Thi Huong^{a*}, Pauline Oosterhoff^{a,b} and Joanna White^{c,d}

^aMedical Committee Netherlands Vietnam, Hanoi, Vietnam; ^bRoyal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; ^cIndependent Researcher, Vietnam; ^dCentre for Research in Anthropology (CRIA), Lisbon, Portugal

(Received 1 April 2011; final version received 19 September 2011)

Stereotypical portrayals of the Hmong in Vietnam emphasize their apparently exotic customs related to sexual relationships and marriage and their alleged backwardness and resistance to change. Yet their history shows their ability to respond to changing socioeconomic contexts. This study details practices and aspirations concerning love, marriage and education among different generations of White Hmong women in the northern mountains of Vietnam, with particular attention to the perspectives of young women. We found a diversity of ideas and identified certain rapidly changing practices regarding marriage. Forced marriage through ‘wife-snatching’ was reported to have always been rare and its meaning and prevalence has seemingly been misunderstood by outsiders. Bride price payment was reported to be an important element of most Hmong marriages. Hmong girls studying at high school and secondary level were found to have particular aspirations pertaining to their marriage, education and career, but lacked confidence in their abilities to create their desired future. Findings also reveal how patrilocal residence following marriage places young women under the strict control of their husbands and parents-in-law, which is likely to contribute to their lack of self-esteem and sense of autonomy.

Keywords: cultural change; marriage; love; Hmong; Vietnam

Introduction

Hmong people began moving from Southern China to other Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam at the end of the eighteenth century to avoid persecution and social unrest. Thousands have moved from refugee camps into Western countries since the late-1970s (Hamilton-Merritt 1993; Millett 2002) and have adapted to different contexts while maintaining their cultural identity (Kunstadter et al. 1993; Duchon 1997; Lemoine 2005; Turner and Michaud 2008). Recently groups of Hmong in Vietnam have converted to Protestantism, inspired by radio broadcasts from Hmong missionaries in the USA, thus strengthening transnational identities that are politically problematic within the Vietnamese national context (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam 2011). This complex history is rarely presented in media representations of the Hmong in Vietnam. Instead, simplistic accounts which emphasize traditional, conservative elements predominate (Nguyen Van Chinh 2010).

Stereotypical definitions of the ‘Other’ have long been understood as serving both western colonial ambitions (Said 1978) as well as ‘internal colonialism’ whereby certain

*Corresponding author. Email: huong021184@gmail.com

ethnic groups within a country privilege themselves over others (Schein 1997). It has been observed how stereotypes of minority ethnic groups often have eroticizing or pathologizing undertones which may not, in fact, reflect actual sexual practices but can be interpreted as signifiers which are used to define cultural and socioeconomic distance between ethnic groups (Schein 1997; Hyde 2007; Lyttleton and Sisouvanh Vorabouth 2011). Similarly, in Vietnam long-standing representations of the Hmong not only emphasise their geographical remoteness but their cultural distance from the Kinh (the majority ethnic group). Media accounts, for example, portray ethnic minorities such as the Hmong as ‘exotic’ and ‘backwards’, although at the same time reflect a certain ambivalence through their simultaneous representation of such groups as part of the rich diversity of cultures within the nation (Duong Bich Hanh 2008).

One example of a stereotyped emphasis on difference is Kinh portrayal of Hmong marriage. Kinh descriptions of Hmong marriage in Vietnam dwell on ‘exotic’ details, such as the ritual process of observing the colour of the boiled feet and skull of a hen and rooster to decide whether the ancestors permit marriage between a particular couple (Cu Hoa Van and Hoang Nam 1994; Hoang Hoa Toan and Tran Van Ai 2002). Hmong have a reputation for early marriage and Hmong men have acquired some notoriety for a practice of ‘wife-snatching’, whereby women are reportedly abducted for marriage, a phenomenon that is generally understood (by outsiders) to occur without the consent of either the woman in question or her parents. Wife snatching (*txhom poj niam yuav*) or ‘bride capture’, when a man, usually with the assistance of male relatives or friends, abducts the woman he desires and takes her to his house, is, indeed, widely reported in the literature (Culhane-Pera et al. 2003). Yet this is only one among several premarital procedures. Bride capture (*zij poj niam*) can also be consenting and pre-arranged with play-acting elements (Norgren and Nanda 1996; Cooper 1998). A third variant is arranged marriage (*nqis tsev hais poj niam*). This union is organised by two sets of parents or relatives for the benefit of both families (Culhane-Pera et al. 2003). Hence, similar to amongst the Kinh, a traditional significance of marriage is as a union between families as well as between individuals (Huu Ngoc and Borton 2006). Fourthly, marriages can also be initiated by couples (*xav sib yuav*) who request their parents’ permission to marry. In the fifth case, a couple can elope to the man’s house (*caum txiv*). Lastly, there are forced marriages (*yuam sib yuav*), whereby families make a pregnant woman and the father of her baby wed (Cu Hoa Van and Hoang Nam 1994; Yia Lee 1995; Cooper 1998).

The reported kidnapping of the bride-to-be, as well as rumours of former Hmong lovers who were forbidden to marry each other having sex with the consent of their current spouses during an annual ‘love market’ in Ha Giang, have piqued the interest of both Vietnamese and Western audiences (Boobyer 2007; Duong Bich Hanh 2008). The love market has been depicted in a number of documentaries by both foreign and Vietnamese film-makers and has consequently become something of a tourist attraction. A quick Google search on the internet using keywords Love Market and Ha Giang yields thousands of English language sites to attract tourists to ‘the Khau Vai love market festival in Ha Giang’, hence Hmong sexuality, in an exoticized form, has become a marketable commodity in a similar vein to the Akha and Khmu in Laos (Popenoe 2011; Lyttleton and Sisouvanh Vorabouth this issue) the Bru-Van Kieu in Vietnam (Sweeney this issue) and the Xishuangbanna Dai in China (Hyde 2007).

Another recurrent theme in colonial and contemporary descriptions of marriage in Asia and South-East Asia is the ‘sale’ of women by their families. However, definitions of marital transactions such as dowry are diverse and the relationship between changing dowry prices and the status of women is a subject of a longstanding debate (Nazzari 1991;

Werner 1998; Anderson 2007). Hmong society in various countries and contexts has been described as patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal (Pranee Liamputtong Rice 2000; Symonds 2004). Hmong girls and women are known to be particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to education (World Bank et al. 2006); in 2002, the reported literacy rate of Kinh women was 92% while that of Hmong women was 22% (General Statistics Office and The National Committee for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam 2005). Bride price is known to be paid amongst the Hmong in the form of cash, gold/silver, livestock and other goods, and can be of considerable financial value (Cooper 1998), although symbolic gifts-in-kind are also accepted amongst poor families (Symonds 2004). The protective role of bride price amongst the Hmong, creating social and economic pressure on the groom to treat the bride well, has also been emphasized (Cooper 1998). Concern has been expressed about the effects of bride price and early marriage on Hmong girls in Vietnam (Amin, Chong, and Haberland 2008). However, no research has been conducted on the historical presence or significance of bride price among the Hmong in Vietnam or elsewhere in the region. Further, financial payments prior to marriage are common amongst many ethnic groups in Vietnam, including the Kinh (Huu Ngoc and Borton 2006), hence the scrutiny of contemporary Hmong practices in isolation may be skewed.

Exploring the experiences and attitudes of generations of Hmong in rapidly-transforming Vietnam can improve understanding of the wider dynamics of change among this minority ethnic group. Although current stereotypes present the society as traditional and resistant to change, few studies have, in fact, examined inter-generational cultural transformations. Yet recent ethnographic research suggests, for example, that certain young Hmong women are contesting their traditional marginal status and constructing new cosmopolitan spaces for themselves, challenging stereotypes imposed on them by wider Vietnamese society (Duong Bich Hanh 2008).

The qualitative study described in this paper investigated practices and aspirations concerning love, marriage and education among different generations of White Hmong women and men, in Meo Vac District, Ha Giang, with particular attention to the perspectives of young women. The study was undertaken under the auspices of a prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV programme. Vietnamese authorities working with the programme reported problems in their attempts to reach Hmong women and girls with social, health and educational services. Hmong people are the majority population in the district but relatively few Hmong women attend ANC and PMTCT services. During an assessment it had become clear that some staff were concerned about Hmong women's health but considered low attendance to be an example of overall Hmong backwardness and unwillingness to participate in modern Vietnamese society (Oosterhoff and Tran Thi Minh Nguyet 2009). At the same time, the fact that most health staff are from a different culture and do not speak the same language as their minority clients is a known deterrent to service attendance in Vietnam (WHO 2003; Humphreys and Vu Thi Hien 2008; Sepehri et al. 2008) and stigmatization by Kinh health providers towards the Hmong has also been reported as a negative factor affecting service utilisation in this province (UNFPA 2008), which suggests that attendance problems are more complex.

Due to the scarcity of social science research on Hmong women in the local area, the study was undertaken in order to explore the situation of Hmong women of different generations and to learn what young Hmong women aspire to in terms of marriage, the status of women and other issues in order to help service providers better understand the sociocultural background context and contribute to decreasing stigma towards Hmong clients.

Table 1. In-depth interview sample.

Age	Village A		Village B		Village C	
	Women of reproductive age with at least one child	Sample	Women of reproductive age with at least one child	Sample	Women of reproductive age with at least one child	Sample
<20	1	1	4	1	0	0
20–30	35	12	32	10	7	2
31–40	20	7	45	13	8	0
>40	17	7	18	5	2	0
Total	73	27	99	29	17	2

Note: * Source of data: List of Hmong women of reproductive age with at least one child from Commune health centre/Town health centre workers, January 2010.

Methods

The research was conducted in March and April 2010 by a group of seven female researchers (Kinh and European). As Hmong women do not always speak Vietnamese, five young, literate female Hmong interpreters from the district town were recruited and given basic training on interview techniques, such as building rapport and asking open-ended questions. The interpreters also assisted with the refinement of the study tools to ensure they were sensitive to the Hmong cultural setting.

Respondents

To explore changes in the reality and desires of Hmong women over recent history, we included women of different generations in three study locations close to the district town in one district in Ha Giang Province. For each location, a random, proportional, age-stratified sample was generated from the village health worker's list of all the women of reproductive age (15–49 years) who had already delivered at least one child. As a result, 58 women (out of a possible 189 Hmong women) were selected for in-depth interviews (IDIs) across three villages (see Table 1). There were 12 Hmong participants on the list who were not at the village at the time of the survey; these were replaced by other randomly selected women in the same age category. All of the IDIs were conducted by a Kinh researcher in Vietnamese (Kinh) language, with the assistance of a Hmong interpreter. The interviews explored personal life history, including key events and processes relating to marriage, fertility, HIV risks and perceived changes in women's status.

In addition, six focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with Hmong women (see Table 2), facilitated by one Kinh researcher and two Hmong interpreters (one to interpret

Table 2. Focus group discussion sample.

FGDs with Hmong women	Total number of participants
Villagers of different ages	24 (3 FGDs)
Secondary school girls	9 (1 FGD)
High school girls	9 (1 FGD)
Hmong school drop-out girls	7 (1 FGD)

and one to take detailed notes). Three FGDs were held at village level whereby participants were purposively selected from the village list of women aged between 30 and 70 years (excluding women who were interviewed individually) to provide a range of age groups. The discussions explored a range of issues including changes in cultural practices pertaining to courtship and marriage and the transformation of gender roles and reproductive health behaviour. Three further FGDs were conducted with young women, both in- and out-of-school, in Meo Vac town. One group of nine women aged between 12 and 16 who attended the sole secondary school in the town was purposively selected, to include girls native to the commune where the IDIs took place. Another group of nine adolescents aged 16 to 18 was recruited from the sole high school in Meo Vac town, according to the same procedure. Lastly, one FGD was conducted with seven Hmong girls between 18 and 25 years of age who had already dropped out of school. Initial participants for these final three FGDs were introduced to researchers by school teachers and the rest recruited using a snowball method. The FGDs explored cultural context, experiences and personal aspirations related to marriage, gender roles, education and livelihoods.

All study participants gave written informed consent prior to the commencement of the study and ethical approval was obtained from provincial authorities.¹ Two of the researchers had already made numerous visits to Meo Vac town and the surrounding area as part of the PMTCT programme and the pre-existing relationship between the programme and local authorities facilitated the research, enabling good access to Hmong communities, which is normally problematic in Vietnam due to political sensitivities. Researchers took detailed notes during the IDIs and all FGDs were audiotaped. As both Hmong and Kinh languages were used during data collection the Hmong interpreters and Kinh researchers checked transcripts for accuracy. The lead researchers analysed the IDI data using SPSS 16.0.

The study had certain limitations. The use of young female Hmong interpreters from the local urban settlement may have created biases in how the research team was perceived and may have influenced answers. Study sites were easily accessible by foot from a paved road, so the study cannot claim to represent the situation amongst Hmong living in more isolated mountainous areas. Finally, the limited size of the study sample means it cannot claim to be representative, but findings may nonetheless reveal issues that are relevant to Hmong communities in similar geographical areas with a comparable socioeconomic context.

Results

Changes in procedures and expectations of love and marriage

This study confirmed the patriarchal nature of Hmong society. Women were rarely the head of their household: two-thirds of interviewees reported their husbands and one fifth their parents-in-laws as the head of household. However, women entered their husbands' households in diverse ways around the age of 19 years (Figure 1). Four dominant types of marital union procedure were reported: arranged marriage (*nqis tsev hais poj niam*), the frequency of which had reportedly fallen over time; forcible wife-snatching or bride capture (*txhom poj niam yuav*), without women's consent and without the women's families prior consent or knowledge, which occurred in very small numbers; consenting, pre-arranged bride capture (*zij poj niam*) with the process receiving both parents' approval (as detailed below this process can be considered a kind of 'play acting' of kidnap); and marriages based on mutual love with parents' approval (*xav sib yuav*), which was the most common procedure reported by interviewees. Elopement (*caum txiv*) and forced marriage

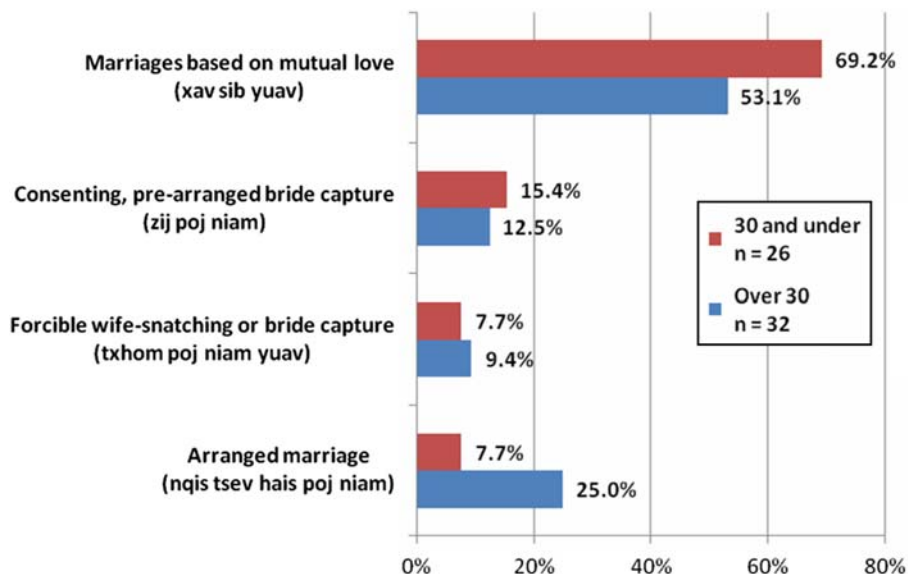


Figure 1. Type of marriage for Hmong women of different age range.

after pregnancy (*yuam sib yuav*) were known of but not reported by any study participants as something that they themselves had experienced.

These findings suggest that the infamous *txhom poj niam yuav* practice (forced wife snatching or *cuop vo* and *keo vo* as it is known in Kinh) was rare in the recent past amongst the Hmong and remains infrequent. Moreover, love marriages in which a couple has time to get to know each other, which study participants saw as a modern practice, can be seen to be increasing amongst the younger generation. As one FGD participant described:

In the past, if boys like/love girls, they used to catch the girls any way. But now, it is more modern, marriage just comes from love; no love, no marriage. (Vu Thi Cho, 25-year-old woman, FGD with school drop-outs)

Further, the proportion of interviewees who reported choosing their own husband independently was found to have increased over time (Figure 2). The accelerated change from 1995–2005 shown in this figure might reflect the general very fast pace of socioeconomic development and change in Vietnam during those 10 years, as a result of the opening up of the country following *Doi Moi* (Griffiths 2006).

At the same time, memories of forced wife snatching (*txhom poj niam yuav*) remain vivid amongst those who have experienced it:

I was grabbed by my husband. He could not take me by himself and he had to ask his friends for help . . . I did not agree but still was taken and did not know how to stop them. I lay down on the floor but they dragged me over to his house and I could not leave. (Lau Thi Say, 38-year-old woman, Female FGD, Village A)

In contrast, discussions with Hmong women confirmed that within the more common *zij poj niam*, whereby couples have a generally rapid, mutually agreed courtship and obtain the parents' consent for marriage, there is often an element of abduction, but in the form of voluntary play-acting. The older generation of women who had experienced or witnessed *zij poj niam* (consenting and pre-arranged wife snatching) explained that in many cases

there is communication and affection, even love, between the couple before the boy ‘pulls’ the girl:

I loved him, he loved me, we agreed he would drag me and I was taken. (Sung Thi Gia, 62-year-old woman, Female FGD, Village A)

In such cases, neither older nor younger women could recall cases where the individuals involved were complete strangers (‘when they [boys] want to ‘pull’ a girl, they know that girl first’ noted one high school student). Yet the speed and apparent simplicity of the arrangement was emphasised: ‘You like me, I like you, hence we go home’, described Ms Lau Thi Cay, 40-year-old woman, for example. Various descriptions attested to the continuing prevalence of this phenomenon:

We made friends with each other on the road in the village. He asked me: ‘Do you like me? If you like me, we can go home now’. And then he asked me: ‘Will you marry me?’ I said ‘Yes’ so I went home with him. (Vu Thi My, 28-year-old woman, Female FGD, Village A)

We met and liked each other at the market, I did not know him before but he already knew me, so he wanted to take me to his home. He said he knew my village and I am a good girl in a good family. He added that if I agree, he would give all his love to me and take loving care of me. Then I agreed to follow him as I knew that he is a good guy. (Sung Thi Pa, 30-year-old woman, Female FGD, Village B)

But a 25-year-old participant in the FGD with school drop-outs, who had left school after completing Grade 7 and married, described her rapid courtship and, in retrospect, cautioned against such a swift process:

Immediately after we had just fallen in love, he asked his parents to propose marriage to me. His parents asked him to bring me to his home, so that they could know me. After one week, his parents agreed. After the marriage proposal, we got married. Falling in love and the marriage proposal took place almost at the same time . . . I was immature . . . I only loved him

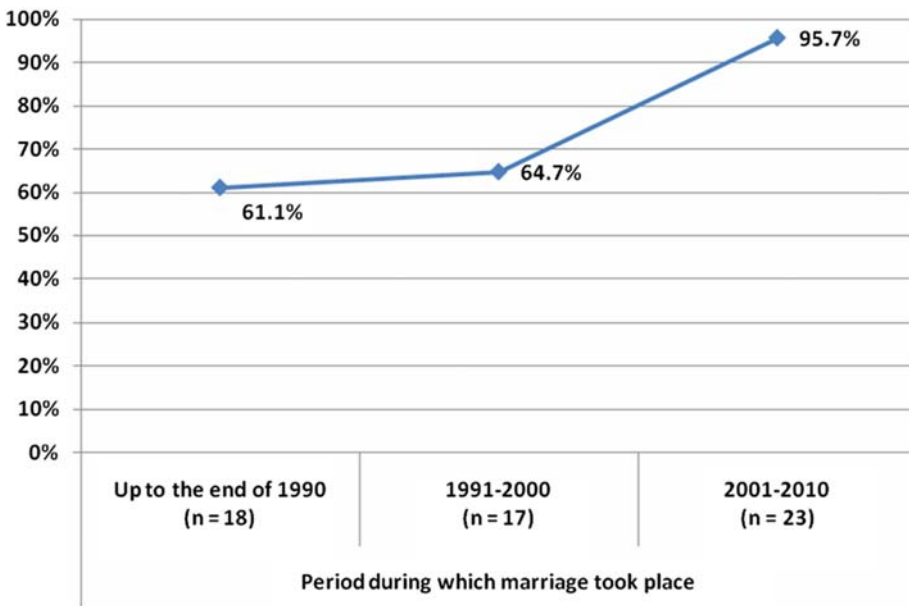


Figure 2. Changes in proportion of Hmong girls allowed to choose a husband.

and thought of marriage and didn't know how to make money. Now I have reflected on it, I think one should have a stable job before getting married. And one should be careful in choosing a husband, you should consider who is good first and test him so he can prove himself in a difficult situation before getting into marriage. (Vang Thi Say, 25-year-old woman, FGD with school drop-outs)

Similarly, a young woman who had dropped out of school to get married – reportedly a common phenomenon – expressed some regret in hindsight about her decision:

I was in love so I decided to finish at grade 9 and get married instead of studying to grade 12. So I stopped studying ... I agreed. It was with my agreement ... I feel happy because I and my husband get on well ... but I feel unhappy because we don't have enough money to raise the children ... now I would like to be at school. Before I got married I used to think marriage would make me happier. Now because I am married already, I think going to school is more enjoyable. (Vu Thi Cay, 22-year-old woman, FGD with school drop-outs)

A number of young women who participated in FGDs were vocal in their negativity about *txhom poj niam yuav* (forced wife snatching), with some high school students describing how they deliberately avoid traditional clothing in order not to be a candidate for this practice, explaining that if they do not look like a Hmong girl then it is a clear message to a man that he may get into trouble if he tries to force her to be with him:

We live in town and wear no ethnic clothes so that we cannot be taken. (Vang Thi Tam, 17-year-old woman, Grade 11, FGD with high school students)

Modern clothes protect us against rude male behaviour, such as slapping girls' bottoms, or touching girls' breasts. With my modern look they do not know if I am Hmong or maybe a mix, or Kinh, and so if they do it [rude behaviour] to me, I can feel free to hit them. (Lo Thi Lien, 17-year-old woman, Grade 11, FGD with high school students)

Hence dressing traditionally is interpreted amongst some Hmong women (and, it is implied, men) as a public conformity to traditional practices and values; some individuals choose to dress in a modern style to demonstratively resist and extricate themselves from such practices.

For some girls, being in an urban environment provides protection from sexual harassment that they feel is linked to Hmong views on gender roles:

Hmong are old-fashioned so people value boys and look down on girls ... (Giang Thi Sam, 16-year-old girl, Grade 9, FGD with secondary school students)

Men still do all of these things [rude behaviour] with real Hmong girls in the commune who look traditional. (Sung Thi My, 16-year-old woman, Grade 10, FGD with high school students)

An explicit link was also made between education and enabling women to reject traditional marital practices and sexual harassment:

We study at school so we can avoid and eliminate some of these customs like forced wife-snatching. I am not sure about the past, but these customs are not suitable for us any more. It is not teachers or other authorities who are telling me that these old marital customs should be omitted. No, I myself find that people should study to have knowledge so they can adapt to different situations. (Vu Thi Xia, 16-year-old girl, grade 9, FGD with secondary school students)

Persistence of bride price payment as cultural practice

Bride price was found to be the norm amongst the communities included in the study. Nearly all of the women interviewed (55/58; 94.8%) reported that their family received bride price payment on the occasion of their marriage. In the few instances where bride price was not paid, this was attributed to the existing wealth of the bride's family, that the

families were very urbanized and/or that they were now following Kinh custom;² the latter cases suggesting some change in behaviour amongst Hmong families living closer to town, albeit a small minority.

The reported amount of bride price paid was diverse. Amongst the poor of different generations bride price was paid in kind, not cash. Focus group discussion participants reported that bride price in rural areas was higher than in urban areas and has increased over recent years, but this was difficult to verify. Indeed, any changes in the value of bride price over past decades were difficult to ascertain, given historical inflation patterns. Since 2001, the mean reported bride price was over two million VND (103 USD³), within a wide range, from 200,000 VND to six million (10–308 USD). Yet in a district in which 44.22% of families are poor, and average incomes are less than 200,000 VND/person/per month (10 USD) in rural areas (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2005; Ha Giang Statistical Office 2009; Truc Anh 2010), reported bride price payments can be considered a substantial outlay of household income. Focus group discussion participants confirmed that some families sell land to ‘buy’ a wife for their son. Further, it was proposed that high bride price rates provide some insurance for the individual woman and her family of the quality of the family she is marrying into. In the words of one 24-year-old woman:

Nowadays women are more protected . . . a daughter is worth a motorbike. Today, a daughter will make you richer. In contrast a son will make you poorer. (Sung Thi My, 24-year-old, FGD with school drop-outs)

Focus group discussion participants did not consider bride price as something that needs to be eradicated. No one appeared to question bride price as something that negatively affects the status of women. However, participants observed that the negotiation of bride price can be complex and protracted, particularly in cases of *txhom poj niam yuav* (forced ‘wife snatching’). They described that if both families agreed to the marriage the wedding could take place within three or four days. But parents could delay the marriage of their daughter for one year if they were reluctant to give their consent. They could also request more money if they considered that the girl was taken against her will and when no prior discussions had taken place between the families. Indeed, a number of older FGD participants commented that the reason they certainly do not want their son to get married through forced ‘wife snatching’ was because of the potentially crippling financial costs:

If a boy snatches a girl, the girl’s family asks for too much money, we cannot afford it. The family may have to sell buffalo and land to pay. (Lu Thi Cho, 55-year-old woman, Female FGD, Village A)

This reported risk of higher bride prices for marriages without consent of the women reflect potential financial consequences when girls’ marital desires are not taken into account and highlight a potential economic factor influencing the decline of this practice.

Changing views on sexuality, marriage and personal aspirations

A number of older FGD participants described the experience of getting married at a very young age. One woman’s experience interestingly reveals how young marriage does not necessarily constitute early sexual intercourse:

I married in 1979 when I was 14 years old, and my husband was 13. We didn’t know anything about sex at this time so we just slept together to keep warm, until I was around 19 years of age, my husband came back from the military, we had sex and had the first child. (Thao Thi Tung, 45-year-old woman, Female FGD, Village A)

Girls in high school and secondary school who participated in FGDs had quite a good understanding about condoms, pills, the intra-uterine device (coil), calculating their menstrual cycle and even vasectomies. They obtained information about sex and reproductive health from the Internet, television, newspapers, books and friends, something which their mothers had not been able to do. Girls also mentioned that parents or teachers rarely discuss sexual and reproductive health issues with them. These Hmong girls now live in and around the town where the only high school of the district is located. Their level of knowledge is certainly not representative of all Hmong girls in the district, but reveals an eagerness and ability to inform themselves and learn new things, which their parents had not be able to do. It was emphasized that although some young people have pre-marital sex, pregnancy before marriage poses a risk for the girl to be socially rejected:

Sex before marriage is rather common here now. But if you are careless and become pregnant before marriage you have nowhere to go. Among Hmong people, you can't deliver at your own parent's home. ... Old people do not accept a daughter-in-law who is considered naughty, and the marriage won't be accepted. (Vu Thi Cho, 25-year-old woman, FGD with school drop-outs)

The problem is that the parents-in-law of girls who become pregnant before marriage really hate them. (Sung Thi Mai, 18-year-old woman, Grade 12, FGD with high school students)

But it is not only the older generation that holds these views and norms. In-school FGD participants spoke harshly about girls who get pregnant, considering them social failures:

If one of my friends got pregnant before marriage I would be very disappointed. (Sung Thi My, 18-year-old woman, Grade 12, FGD with high school students)

This attitude might reflect both the pressure and the privilege felt by Hmong girls who are in school. Access to formal education was low across all generations of women included in the study. For example, among IDI respondents of those who were over 30, almost all of had no formal education (31/32; 97%); in the case of those 30 years and under the figure was lower, but still half had no formal education (13/26; 50%). The FGD with young women who had dropped out of school revealed that the principal factors influencing them to abandon their studies were marriage and family poverty. Women and girls perceive these two as linked: rural, poor families may encourage their daughters to marry relatively early at the expense of her education. For those who had dropped out of school and already married and had children, money was of key concern. 'Money is the most important thing' stated one 24-year-old FGD participant, while a 25-year-old commented, 'I need money to raise my children, so that they are not poor and miserable like me'.

The unmarried women students who participated in the study wanted to postpone marriage and study in order to do other things with their life before getting married:

I want to study and work. I think that when we get married, we have to sacrifice our career [stop working for a while]. Also, relationships between a husband and wife, between a daughter-in-law and parents-in-law are very complicated. (Tho Thi Va, 16-year-old, Grade 10, FGD with high school students)

Unmarried participants in the FGD with school drop-outs were also in no rush to wed: one 18-year-old and one 25-year-old woman both had long-term boyfriends studying away from their home commune. They maintained regular contact with these partners by letter and mobile phone, with no immediate plans of marriage, in what appeared to be thoroughly modern arrangements by Vietnamese standards.

The Hmong girls still studying in school valued their education and were focused on their studies and their possible future career:

The most important now is studying to have knowledge for a later occupation. (Sung Thi My, 16-year-old, Grade 8, FGD with secondary school students)

But although a number of them aspired to higher education, they expressed a lack of confidence in their abilities:

If you ask me what I like to do, I would like to study teaching, but just at the college, not at the university. I am not good enough. We don't have anyone to look up to, nobody who can help us find our way and get the best out of ourselves. We are not competitive enough. That's why our capacity goes down, not like in the lowlands where students compete with each other and are expected to try to be the best. We are ... short of everything here. You see, we studied Chemistry in 9th grade but we did not have a chance to practice. ... All that we learned about chemistry was from books. How can you learn about practical chemistry like that? (Giang Thi Dinh, 17-year-old, Grade 11, FGD with high school students)

Hence it appears that a lack of role models and a study environment that is insufficiently competitive and motivating, with poor facilities, contributes to young women's low aspirations for themselves. At the same time, these young women feel a great responsibility for their own families and sense a risk that domestic burdens could overtake their lives after marriage. A number of married FGD participants reported that their husbands had been able to continue studying following their marriage while they had dropped out of school, presumably to devote themselves to family domestic and livelihood activities, findings which highlight an inequity in access to sustained formal education. In the words of one FGD participant, 'Family-in-law members force some women to do so much and just let the husband go to school.' One young woman who left school to be married after completing 9th grade described how the decision to continue studying (her preference) was in the hands of her husband:

After I finished 9th grade, I told him I wanted to keep studying. But he deceived me. He told me that I would be allowed to keep studying after the marriage. One week after the wedding, when I asked him for permission to return to school, he told me that if I went to school, I shouldn't come back to his home. (Vu Thi Xua, 24-year-old, FGD with school drop-outs)

These examples reveal that no matter how the marital union was forged, young women may not be in control of their future following marriage, when their independence may be greatly curtailed. This issue was elaborated upon by a group of school drop-outs who were already married:

The atmosphere in the family is not as comfortable as I expected. My behaviour has to be much more submissive and soft in order to fit in. (Vang Thi Say, 25-year-old, FGD with school drop-outs)

I feel uncomfortable. I cannot be myself. (Vu Thi Cay, 22-year-old, FGD with school drop-outs)

All these young women reported that they have to request permission to go out, often first from their parents-in-law and then from their husbands.

When I do not ask permission I get scolded. ... In some families, if you don't ask for permission before going out, then you'll be beaten. And your husband says that because you haven't asked for permission and he doesn't know where you go, then if things happen [to you] you shouldn't blame anyone. (Vu Thi Di, 24-year-old, FGD with school drop-outs)

Conclusion

Prevailing depictions of exotic marital arrangements amongst the Hmong may serve the production of Kinh social identity through creating a distance between the 'modern' Kinh and the 'traditional' Hmong but ignore the actual diversity of premarital procedures as

well as changes across generations that exist amongst the Hmong in Northern Vietnam. Arranged marriage appeared to have declined markedly in the communities studied and was extremely rare amongst women aged 30 or under. Marriage through abduction without consent of the girl and her parents was found to be very rare, albeit traumatic for women who had lived through it. Hmong wife-snatching has clearly not been well understood and this contributes to some of the stereotypical sensational depictions of the Hmong amongst the Kinh and others. Some reports from older women suggested that their generation also had a say in choosing their partner, cautioning against notions of Hmong women as perennial passive victims in a patriarchal society. A couple might know each other and even be in love before attending a public space, and use this venue to become an official couple, or they might meet briefly and talk together for the first time in a public place and then immediately decide to go to the boy's family to complete the next conventional step of marriage. Forced marriage following pregnancy (*yuam sib yuav*) was mentioned as something that occurred to young women in the community but no women interviewed reported that they were forced themselves. Such low levels of reporting may have been influenced by the stigmatizing nature of extra-marital pregnancy, but it could be that women in our sample had not experienced this.

The study revealed that the current, biased focus on the supposedly 'backward', 'exotic' and static nature of Hmong society in Vietnam does not reflect the reality. Although probably invisible to new arrivals from another part of the country to Meo Vac, social change is underway among the Hmong in the spheres of courtship and marriage. Young Hmong women are stating a preference for love marriages and rejecting other arrangements as outdated, which suggests a growing desire for autonomy in their choice of marriage partners. Girls studying in school are particularly vocal about this issue. Young women were also found to be increasingly able to choose their own husband; 'love matches' were reported as the most common pre-marital procedure.

Hmong girls were also found to have detailed knowledge about sexual and reproductive health from a variety information channels, knowledge that was unavailable to their mothers. They distance themselves from village tradition by using modern clothing to mark and represent an urban, modern and more autonomous identity. In their aspirations and actions they appear to be moving closer to Kinh culture and further away from the Hmong. Indeed, some of the views of the Hmong girls in high school concerning Hmong villagers are remarkably dichotomous and similar to external, stereotypical Kinh media representations.

Bride price is a continuing practice amongst families across generations and can be a considerable source of outlay and income, especially among poor and rural households. Study findings suggest, however, that the social meaning of bride price is rather complex – it can be seen to represent women's value and simultaneously as act as a deterrent to certain behaviour such as 'grabbing' a wife. High bride price might therefore be considered an outcome of the increased recognition of a girl's right to personal choice of partner. Both elder and younger women articulated the financial repercussions of marriage without consent of the woman and her family for the in-laws, and the financial advantages of an increase in love marriages.

Girls enrolled in school visually communicated their aspirations of personal autonomy and unavailability for traditional marriages through dressing in modern clothes, which also reportedly afforded them protection from immediate undesired sexual attention. Yet young Hmong women students are clearly disadvantaged by a lack of confidence and lack of support, including a competitive atmosphere, poor facilities and positive role models, which may affect their access to higher education as well as their overall aspirations. The reality of marriage as described by study participants suggest that regardless of the desires

of the current younger generation for both marriages based on love and further education and employment opportunities, significant changes in married women's status within the family and autonomy may not yet be realized. Although the lives of the Hmong girls are different in many ways from their mothers' (as is arguably the case for all Vietnamese girls), the continuing patriarchal nature of Hmong society, manifest through patrilocal residence after marriage and the social control of the husband and parents-in-law over married women, severely limits women's autonomy and ability to realize their aspirations.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to the Medical Committee Netherlands Vietnam, Provincial AIDS Committee in Ha Giang, to the villagers and Sunflower group members who participated in the study and to the generous funding of the Royal Netherlands Embassy, Hanoi.

Notes

1. *Ha Giang People's Committee*, Document No 725 /UBND-VX on Ethical Clearance.
2. In fact, as noted earlier, bride price is common amongst Kinh communities.
3. This is to give an indication as exchange rates and inflation have fluctuated – 1 USD = 19,495 VND in January 2011.

References

- Amin, S., E. Chong, and N. Haberland. 2008. *Programmes to address child marriage: Framing the problem*. Brief no. 14, New York: Population Council.
- Anderson, S. 2007. The economics of dowry and bride price. *Journal of Economic Perspective* 21, no. 4: 151–74.
- Boobbyer, Claire. 2007. *Footprint Vietnam*. Bath, UK: Footprint.
- Cooper, R. 1998. *The Hmong: A guide to traditional life styles*. Singapore: Times Editions.
- Cu Hoa Van and Hoang Nam. 1994. *Dân tộc Mông ở Việt Nam*. [The Hmong people in Viet Nam], Hanoi: Culture Publishing House.
- Culhane-Pera, K., Dorothy E. Vawter, Phua Xiong, Barbara Babbitt, and Mary M. Solberg. 2003. *Healing by heart: Clinical and ethical case stories of Hmong families and western providers*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Duchon, D.A. 1997. Home is where you make it: Hmong refugees in Georgia. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 26: 71–92.
- Duong Bích Hạnh. 2008. Contesting marginality: Consumption, networks and everyday practice among Hmong girls in Sa Pa, Northwestern Vietnam. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3: 231–60.
- General Statistics Office and The National Committee for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam. 2005. *Số liệu thống kê giới của Việt Nam những năm đầu thế kỷ 21*. [Viet Nam gender statistics in the early years of the twenty-first century], Hanoi: Women Publishing House.
- Griffiths, P. 2006. Confluence and consequence: Globalisation, viscosities and transformation of HIV risk environments in Vietnam., PhD dissertation, RMIT University.
- Ha Giang Statistical Office. 2009. *Niên giám thống kê tỉnh Hà Giang 2008*. [Ha Giang statistical yearbook 2008], Ha Giang, Vietnam: Công Ty CP, Ha Giang.
- Hamilton-Merritt, J. 1993. *Tragic mountains: The Hmong, the Americans and the secret wars for Laos, 1942–1992*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hoang Hoa Toan and Tran Van Ai. 2002. *Tập tục trong chu kỳ đời người của các dân tộc ngôn ngữ Mông – Dao ở Việt Nam*. [Customs in the life cycle of Hmong-Dao language group in Viet Nam], Hanoi: Ethnic Culture Publishing House.
- Humphreys, R., and Vu Thi Hien. 2008. *The underlying causes of ethnic minority poverty in Northern Mountainous Vietnam: Independent study produced by the IDL Group, December 2008*. Hanoi: CARE Vietnam.
- Ngọc, Huu, and L. Borton. 2006. *Study Vietnamese culture: Wedding customs*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishing House.

- Hyde, S.T. 2007. *Eating spring rice: The cultural politics of AIDS in South West China*. Berkeley: University of California University Press.
- Kunstadter, P., S.L. Kunstadter, C. Podhisita, and P. Leepreecha. 1993. Demographic variables in fetal and child mortality: Hmong in Thailand. *Social Science and Medicine* 36: 1109–20.
- Lemoine, J. 2005. What is the actual number of the Hmong in the world. *Hmong Studies Journal* 6: 1–8.
- Millett, S. 2002. *The Hmong of Southeast Asia*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications Company.
- Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs Vietnam (MOLISA). 2005. *The official letter No 2128/LĐTBXH-KHTC of MOLISA on the new criteria for poor household 2006–2010*. <http://thuvienphapluat.vn/archive/Cong-van/Cong-van-2128-LDTBXH-KHTC-chuan-ngheo-moi-giai-doan-2006-2010-vb2324t3.aspx>
- Nazzari, M. 1991. *Disappearance of dowry: Women, families and social change in Sao Paulo, Brazil (1600–1900)*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ngo Thi Thanh Tam. 2011. The new way: ethnic and transnational dimensions of recent protestant conversion among the Hmong in Northern Vietnam., PhD dissertation, Free University, Amsterdam.
- Nguyen Van Chinh. 2010. Representation of ethnic minorities on mass media through the lens of socio-cultural anthropology., Research paper. Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment, Hanoi.
- Norgren, Jill, and Serena Nanda. 1996. *American cultural pluralism and law*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Oosterhoff, P., and Tran Thi Minh Nguyet. 2009. Site Assessments of Lang Son, Bac Kan, Dien Bien, Ha Giang and Cao Bang, September–October 2008., Assessment Report. Medical Committee Netherlands Vietnam, Hanoi.
- Pranee Liamputtong Rice. 2000. *Hmong women and reproduction*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Said, E.W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- Schein, L. 1997. Gender and internal orientalism in China. *Modern China* 23: 69–98.
- Sepehri, A., S. Sarma, W. Simpson, and S. Moshiri. 2008. How important are individual, household and commune characteristics in explaining utilization of maternal health services in Vietnam? *Social Science & Medicine* 67, no. 6: 1009–17.
- Symonds, P. 2004. *Calling in the soul: Gender and the cycle of life in a Hmong village*. Washington: University of Washington Press.
- Truc Anh. 2010. Huyện Mèo Vạc, Hà Giang, tỷ lệ tăng dân số tự nhiên giảm còn 1,8% [The population growth rate in Meo Vac District, Ha Giang province reduces to 1.8%]. National Assembly of Socialist Republic of Vietnam. <http://www.na.gov.vn/htx/Vietnamese/?Newid=36023#Uei2V1pD7FUV>
- Turner, S., and J. Michaud. 2008. Imaginative and adaptive economic strategies for Hmong livelihoods in Lao Cai Province, Northern Vietnam. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies (Special Issue)* 3, no. 3: 154–86.
- UNFPA. 2008. Reproductive health of H'mong people in Ha Giang Province: Medical anthropology perspective., Research Report. UNFPA Vietnam.
- Werner, M. 1998. *South Asians and the dowry problem*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications.
- WHO. 2003. *Health and ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Technical Series No. 1*. Research Report, Hanoi: WHO Vietnam.
- World Bank, ADB, DFID, and CIDA. 2006. The Vietnam gender assessment., World Bank, ADB, DFID and CIDA. <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Translations/Vietnamese/cga-2006-vie-vn.pdf>
- Yia Lee, G. 1995. The religious presentation of social relationships: Hmong world view and social structure. *Lao Studies Review* 2: 44–60.

Résumé

Les portraits stéréotypés des Hmong au Vietnam mettent en avant leurs coutumes apparemment exotiques en ce qui concerne les rapports sexuels et le mariage, et leurs prétendus manque d'empressement et résistance vis-à-vis du changement. Pourtant leur histoire montre leur capacité à s'adapter aux contextes socio-économiques en mutation. Cette étude décrit les pratiques et les aspirations concernant l'amour, le mariage et l'éducation parmi différentes générations de Hmong blanches, dans les régions montagneuses du Nord du Vietnam, en se concentrant particulièrement sur les perspectives des jeunes femmes. Nous avons mis à jour une diversité de concepts et identifié

certaines pratiques liées au mariage qui peuvent changer rapidement. Les femmes ont déclaré que mariage forcé, à travers «l'enlèvement des épouses», a toujours été rare, et qu'il leur semble que sa signification et sa prévalence sont mal comprises par les personnes extérieures à leur communauté. Elles ont aussi déclaré que le paiement du prix de la mariée est un élément important pour la plupart des mariages chez les Hmong. Notre étude a révélé que les filles issues de la communauté Hmong et de niveau d'éducation secondaire en général ont des aspirations particulières se rapportant à leur mariage, leur éducation et leur carrière, mais manquent de confiance en ce qui concerne leurs capacités à réaliser leurs projets d'avenir. Les résultats révèlent aussi comment la résidence patrilocale qui succède au mariage place les jeunes femmes sous le contrôle strict de leurs maris et de leurs beaux-parents, ce qui contribue probablement à leurs faibles estime de soi et sens de l'autonomie.

Resumen

Las interpretaciones estereotipadas de los Hmong en Vietnam ponen de relieve sus costumbres aparentemente exóticas en lo que respecta a las relaciones sexuales y el matrimonio, así como su supuesto atraso y resistencia a cambios. Sin embargo, la historia demuestra su capacidad para responder a los contextos socioeconómicos en continuo cambio. En este estudio destacamos las prácticas y las aspiraciones en lo que concierne al amor, el matrimonio y la educación entre diferentes generaciones de mujeres Hmong blancas en las zonas montañosas del norte de Vietnam, prestando especial atención a las perspectivas de las mujeres jóvenes. Encontramos una pluralidad de ideas y observamos que las prácticas en lo que respecta al matrimonio están cambiando con rapidez. Se informó que los matrimonios forzados mediante los 'secuestros de esposas' siempre han sido muy raros y su significado y prevalencia han sido aparentemente malentendidos por extraños. Se comunicó que el pago de un precio por la novia era un elemento importante en la mayoría de los matrimonios Hmong. Observamos que las jóvenes Hmong que estudian en la escuela preparatoria y la enseñanza secundaria tenían aspiraciones concretas en lo que concierne al matrimonio, la educación y una carrera profesional pero no confiaban en su capacidad de construir el futuro que deseaban. Los resultados también ponen de manifiesto de qué modo el sistema de residencia patrilocal tras el matrimonio somete a las mujeres jóvenes al estricto control de sus maridos y suegros, una tradición que probablemente contribuye a su falta de autoestima y sentido de autonomía.