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## Historical Continuities and Changes in the Ethnic Politics of Hmong-Miao Millenarianism

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*Abstract: Millenarian movements used to be regarded as native reactions to enormous social disruptions caused by colonial intrusion, doomed to failure and at best a step on the way to more 'modern' forms of collective social resistance. In fact, they both pre-dated and outlasted colonialism, featuring in ethnic politics across Asia and beyond to this day. However, its encounter with modernity has not left millenarianism unchanged, as is unpacked in this article's historical case study. A comprehensive timeline and mapping of past and present Hmong-Miao millenarian activity highlights several enduring features including a context of economic and political crisis, their transnational nature, the prevalence of manipulation and/or coercion, and specific cultural symbols within supernatural predictions. Equally important are the historical developments, from pan-ethnic to mono-ethnic and from violent to peaceful (but still threatening to political and religious authorities), reflecting historical trends of ethnicization and territorialisation. The mechanics of such reproductions and transformations are then unpacked, before the Hmong-Miao experience is compared with millenarian activity from other groups of upland South East Asia. Millenarianism continues to play a role in voicing social discontent, challenging power structures and moulding ethnic relations, but needs to be examined and understood within evolving socio-political contexts.*

Key words: Millenarian, Messianic, Religious, Ethnicization, Territorialisation, Borderlands, Modernity, Conflict, Highlands

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In May 2011, several thousand ethnic Hmong villagers gathered in Mường Nhé, an obscure corner of Northwest Vietnam, described by various news reports as a religious gathering, mass demonstrations against government discrimination, and/or an independence movement. After a few weeks Vietnamese forces were sent in to disperse the crowds and forcibly return them to their home provinces, with unconfirmed reports of police brutality and lethal clashes. Eight Hmong men were subsequently found guilty of “propaganda against the state” and seeking to establish a “Hmong Kingdom” to “replace the State of Vietnam”, and given prison sentences of between two to seven years (Rumsby, 2018).

This incident was not an isolated event, but merely the latest manifestation of a long historical pattern of diverse East and South East Asian millenarian activity. Over the last two hundred years at least, religiously-inspired political rebellions have been a common and important feature of power relations between different groups of people throughout the region: the infamous Taiping Rebellion (Russell, 1977), the contemporaneous ‘Miao’ uprisings of 1854-1873 in Guizhou (Jenks, 1994), early 19<sup>th</sup> century Karen millenarian Buddhist sects (Stern, 1968), Hoa Hao and Cao Dai movements of Cochinchina in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tai, 1983), and the ‘Saya San’ rebellion of 1930-1932 in Lower Burma (Adas, 1987) are just a few examples. While millenarianism in the lowlands has tended to become institutionalized or outcompeted by other mass movements over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the highlands it continues to influence modern ethnic politics of South East Asia – albeit in new ways – despite contrary predictions of its demise with the advance of modernity (Worsley, 1968; Barkun, 1974).

The recurrent incursions of heterodox politico-religious movements into contemporary social affairs are dramatic reminders that the Eurocentric secularisation narrative is “a political discourse, not a transcendent set of principles, or an accurate representation of history” (Scott, 2017, p. 9). On the one hand, there is an argument that secularism was only ever a myth (Ward, 2014), while in reality religion and politics has always been intertwined – with Europe seen as an exceptional case. On the other hand, others point to a post-modern (and, in some places, post-socialist) ‘re-enchantment’ (Taylor, 2007) or ‘deprivatisation’ of religion whereby “religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them” (Casanova, 1994, p. 5).

But while it is now generally acknowledged that religious or spiritual spheres continue to entangle with political and economic rationalities across the world, this does not mean that they entangle in the same ways as they used to. ‘Re-enchantment’, for example, cannot simply be a return to the ‘original’ enchanted worldview, but must re-invent itself in a new context of mass education, technological advance, nationalism, globalisation and hegemonic capitalist economic relations (Van Der Veer and Lehmann, 1999; Gauthier, Martikainen and Woodhead, 2013). Webster (2013) grapples with these dynamics, positing an uncomfortable duality of “an enchanted Christian world shaped by the immanence and imminence of transcendence, that, in many respects, is forced to orbit around a larger

context of social, economic, and demographic disenchantment” (2013, p. 220). But there are other possible arrangements and Lambert (1999) lists four distinct effects of modernity on religious activity: decline, adaption/reinterpretation, conservative reaction and innovation – clearly millenarianism is a manifestation of the latter.

Comaroff (2012, p. 42) observes that we should expect the form and substance of contemporary religious movements to “have a great deal to teach us about the current social epoch”. This logic can also be applied retrospectively: what might the historical changes or continuities of religious activity have to teach us about historical changes or continuities of wider society? This is the question addressed in this article, with regard to religious, ethnic and territorial politics in East and South East Asia. After some cursory remarks on the relationship between millenarianism and modernity, the Hmong-Miao millenarian tradition will be introduced as a case study to explore the above question, based on an extensive review of relevant scholarship and historical sources. Historical continuities include a backdrop of politico-economic turmoil, the transnational importance of operating in (and across) borderlands, the prevalence of alleged manipulation and/or coercion, and specific cultural symbols – some of which are appropriated from external politico-religious traditions.

Equally important are the historical developments, with diminishing ethnic diversity of millenarian activity reflecting the sharpening of ethnicity that defines post-World War II Southeast Asian politics, and recent state gains in military power vis-à-vis minority groups limiting the potential of millenarian movements to use violence. I draw on Sahlin’s ‘structure of the conjuncture’ to understand how such transformations are related to the above historical continuities. These findings will then be nuanced and compared with millenarian activity from other neighbouring groups in upland South East Asia, highlighting the unique influence of intense Cold war conflict and transnational migration on Hmong millenarianism. Such an analysis reveals insights on the mutually constitutive interactions between religion, ethnicity and conflict as well as the importance of geography and borders within dynamic majority-minority power relations, the implications of which are relevant across Asia and beyond.

### **Millenarianism and modernity**

As a historical phenomenon millenarianism can be defined as the quest for total, imminent, ultimate, this-worldly, collective salvation (Cohn, 1957), bringing “not only improvement in material and spiritual welfare but a complete and irrevocable triumph of redemption” (Levine, 1991, p. 2). The essence of millenarianism lies in the “fusion of the secular and the sacred” (Hill, 1971, p. 326), incorporating both political and religious goals to redeem a group of people from an unfavourable position. Messianism is a related term defined as “a collective movement of escape from the present and of expectation of salvation, promoted by a prophet-founder, following a mystico-ecstatic

inspiration” (Lanternari, 1962, p. 70). Both millenarianism and messianism are concerned with salvation from some present crisis and renewal (or redemption) to a primordial or paradisiacal ideal, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. On the other hand, Levine (1991) treats messianic movements as a specific subcategory of overall millenarian activity, one which is particularly focused around an individual, charismatic leader. Although several Hmong-Miao movements are named after (and give prominence to) their leader, this article does not focus specifically on the role or characteristics of messianic leaders; therefore, the broader term ‘millenarianism’ will be used unless referencing other authors.

It is well-known that established world religions such as Christianity (Lanternari, 1962) and Jainism (Burrige, 1971) contain messianic elements, beginning their life as millenarian sects branching off other religions (Judaism and Hinduism respectively). Some writers have further expanded the boundaries of millenarian activity by pointing to the ‘millenarian character’ or ‘messianic themes’ of modern socialist and totalitarian movements (Barkun, 1974, pp. 117–8). Comparing the Hòa Hảo movement to communism in Vietnam, Tai asserts that “the millennial myth and the revolutionary ideal are both about violent, total, and lasting change” (Tai, 1983, p. ix). In another example of a more liberal use of the term, the international development project has been interpreted as a form of secularised messianism which promises “to bring heaven down to earth” (Rist, 2002, p. 218). This chapter does not attempt to cover all such applications of millenarian theory, but focuses more narrowly on the dynamic and fluctuating collective activity which characterises Hmong-Miao history. So millenarian movements here are restricted to new politico-religious movements which did not (or are yet to) achieve an established orthodoxy and legitimacy from external authorities.

Earlier academic writing on millenarianism had a strong modernist flavour, often viewing it as merely a stage in a linear progression of social movements. For instance, Adas’ (1987) historical analysis portrays colonial rebellions essentially as indigenous reactions to Western civilisation – despite millenarian activity in South East Asia actually pre-dating and outlasting colonialism. Barkun (1974, p. 117) argues that millenarianism is basically a rural phenomenon which is destined to disappear with urbanisation, while Hill (1971, p. 349) implies that millenarianism is only a popular form of social expression in the absence of competent state governance and alternatives within civil society. Worsley’s classic study is most explicit:

“I believe... that the activist millenarian movement is typical only of a certain phase in the political and economic development of this region, and that it is destined to disappear or become a minor form of political expression among backward elements.” (Worsley, 1968, p. 254)

Underlining these arguments were modernist assumptions about progress, religion and rationality which rendered predictions of millenarianism’s demise inaccurate – or at least premature. Modernity is presented as “a progressive force promising to liberate humankind from ignorance and irrationality”

(Rosenau, 1992, p. 5), underpinned by an opposition between faith and reason (Marshall, 2009). This was supposed to detach individuals from traditional collectives and shift personal loyalty to the nation-state, allowing for individual labour commodification without interference from any supernatural entity (Park and Yoo, 2014). Framed as ‘truth’ and backed by political and military power, such theories were exported to many parts of the non-West through colonialism and imperialism.

This Eurocentric model of secularised modernity has been thoroughly critiqued (Asad, 2003; Thomas, 2005), especially in Asia where “religion-magic-secularity-spirituality is an integral part of modernity” (Van Der Veer, 2013, p. 10). After various states tried and failed to discourage or control religion, religious belief is now on the rise across China (Yu 2012) and South East Asia (Taylor, 2007). The optimism of post-WWII social scientists, who anticipated the decline of supposedly irrational ‘primordial loyalties’ such as kinship, caste and ethnicity with the advance of modernisation, has also been abandoned (Tambiah, 1989). Both globally and in South East Asia, ethnic conflict has increased in frequency and intensity in the late twentieth century and shows no sign of relenting. It is now accepted that modernity produces and intensifies difference, exclusion, and marginalization (Giddens, 1991), conditions which are not inimical with millenarian tendencies. Indeed, Miles’ definition of millenarian movements as “attempts by marginalized or excluded peripheral people or ethnic minorities to create a unifying identity and exclusive space against the invasion of modern institution and authorities” (2010, p. 647) implies that modernity ought not to replace but rather to *provoke* such movements.

However, its encounter with modernity has not left millenarianism unchanged. Just as traditional worldviews and spiritual conceptualisations were profoundly affected by the colonial encounter as Western theories of religious compartmentalisation were imposed upon, and gradually internalised across Asia (Picard, 2017), so too are the dynamics of millenarianism influenced by wider socio-political transformations. Yet the evolution of millenarian activity over time has not resulted in a concurrent conformity to clearly defined norms or easily ‘legible’ activity (Scott, 1998). On the contrary, as will be seen below, it has the disconcerting potential to absorb or infiltrate into more established world religions, only to erupt into disruptive heterodox breakaway movements. Therefore, millenarianism continue to be a source of anxiety for modern states wishing to categorise and govern religious impulses, as will be seen in the case of the Hmong-Miao.

### **The Hmong-Miao case study**

Today around 4-5 million Hmong are spread over the borderlands of China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma (Lemoine, 2005). Since ‘Hmong’ is an endonym and most of their history has been written by outsiders, they have also been labelled ‘Miao’ (in China) or ‘Meo’ (in South East Asia, now considered derogatory). To complicate matters, early Chinese historical sources referred to generic

non-Han peoples to the south as ‘Miao’, a catch-all term meaning ‘barbarian’ regardless of linguistic or ethnic identity (Diamond, 1996, p. 92). The term only came to refer to a more specific ethnic group in the past two or three centuries, and ‘Hmong’ is now a subcategory of the ‘Miao’ national minority in present-day China. Therefore, although millenarianism has featured in Chinese minority rebellions since at least the fourteenth century (Jenks, 1994, p. 59), this review is limited to millenarianism in modern history where Miao, ‘Meo’ or Hmong participants are alleged to have been involved.

As some of the more dramatic elements of Hmong-Miao history, individual millenarian movements have been the subject of academic enquiry but there have been few attempts to analyse the broader significance and trajectory of the historical tradition. Taking a macroscopic lens, James Scott (2009) uses the Hmong as a key case study to support his provocative *Art of Not Being Governed* thesis for upland South East Asia as a historical ‘zone of refuge’ from state formation, with millenarian rebellion as one extreme option for hill peoples to keep the state at arm’s length. Whilst this perspective reveals some insights on pan-ethnic appeal and cultural appropriation which will be explored below, Scott’s all-or-nothing dismissal of the relevance of his own analysis from 1945 onwards (2009, p. xii) ignores the reality of continuing Hmong millenarian activity until the present, albeit in changing political and economic environments.

The late Nicholas Tapp (2015) gave a more nuanced historical perspective of Hmong-Miao messianism, seeking to understand the repetition of themes and ideas within the contexts of colonialization, mass migration and marginal social status. Nevertheless, he can be critiqued for assuming, or at least implying, that “the millennial tendency of the culture or society toward millennialism remains unchanged” (Huang, 2014, p. 20). For instance, Tapp does not take into account the gradual but pervasive state expansion into peripheral highland areas over the 20<sup>th</sup> century or its associated impact on the socio-political contexts of Hmong millenarian activity. A more balanced analysis requires a middle path between Scott’s modernist post-WW2 cut-off and Tapp’s lack of historical contextualisation, which can appreciate both recurrent *and* changing dynamics of Hmong-Miao millenarian movements across modern history.

Mai Na Lee’s (2015) detailed study of Hmong leadership cycles within colonial Indochinese history is an excellent example of a more diachronic approach, providing a compelling account of the consecutive rise and fall of secular brokers and messianic rebels. She identifies the continual longing and waiting for promised return of the legendary Hmong king as a key structural continuity which “opens the door for the emergence of the messianic leader or prophet during junctures of economic and political distress” (2015, p. 26). From 1850 to 1960, Lee argues, fluctuating leadership has caused Hmong society to shift dramatically between overt resistance against and a tenuous alliance with the state. Like Tapp, her emphasis is on historical continuity rather than transformation – how this pattern of messianic rebellion following state subservience repeats itself. I aim to build upon Lee’s robust analysis by extending it

further back into early modern history and forward up to recent events, as well as incorporating Vietnamese-language material which the above authors have not engaged with.

To achieve this, I started with an extensive review of historical and contemporary texts concerning Hmong-Miao millenarian activity to search for common features or chronological trends. Such texts were written by missionaries, colonial officers, government officials and academics, and the detail of these accounts vary from a throwaway sentence in a diary entry to an entire ethnography. Of course, it must be taken into account that these observers had different motives and interests in recording and portraying millenarian events (Salemink, 2003), and later I discuss the limitations of this method in learning about historical non-violent millenarian activity. Therefore, secondary data is complimented with primary research data collected from Vietnam's highlands between 2013-2017, primarily in the form of in-depth interviews. This added a layer of richness and depth to accounts of recent millenarian activity which Hmong interviewees were involved in, or at least familiar with, that is not always available from etic historical accounts. Figure 1 (below) provides a timeline of millenarian activity which, while at risk of reducing massive complexity, helps locate the arguments made in this article.<sup>1</sup>

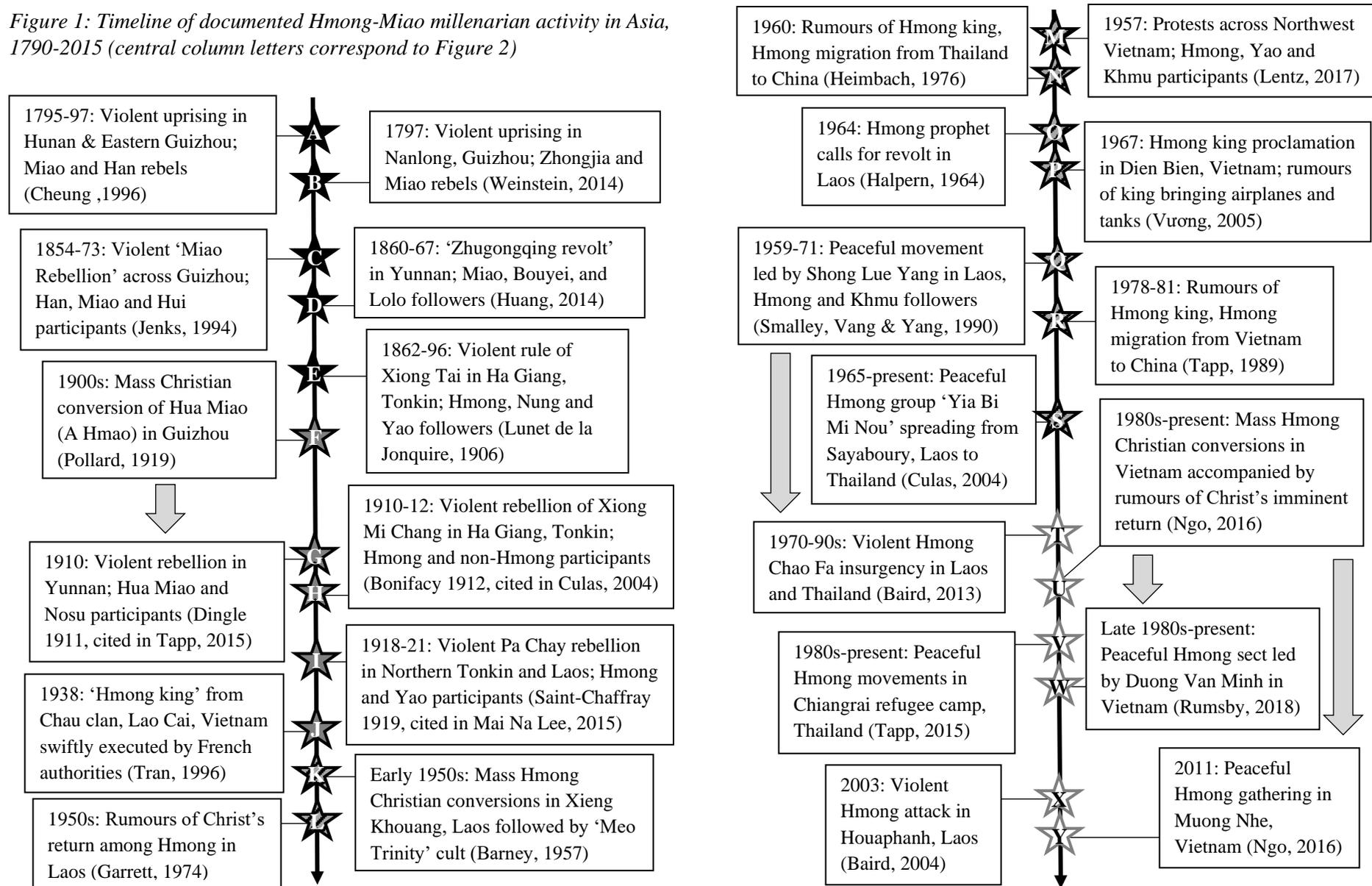
### **Millenarian continuities**

To generalise, four recurring patterns and two historical developments can be observed, with a few exceptions which will be covered later. Firstly, and most obviously, there is a recurring backdrop of severe economic hardship, social change and political upheaval. Millenarian activity flourished in the unstable conditions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Han expansionism and then the Indochina Wars, during which Hmong-Miao territory became the battleground for colonial, nationalist and communist forces, while conversely no significant millenarian disruption was recorded during the period of (relative) regional stability between the two World Wars. There is some debate as to whether relative deprivation (Chinnery and Haddon, 1917; Adas, 1987) or revitalisation theory (Wallace, 1956; Corlin, 2000) offers a more satisfactory causal explanation for millenarian movements – but either way, this historical overview affirms that economic and political crises are clearly crucial triggers.

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<sup>1</sup> Specific timeline events which mentioned in the article will be additionally referenced in bold with a letter corresponding to their position on Figure 1; e.g. the 1795-97 violent uprising in Hunan & Eastern Guizhou (**A**).

Figure 1: Timeline of documented Hmong-Miao millenarian activity in Asia, 1790-2015 (central column letters correspond to Figure 2)



Secondly, uprisings have constantly occurred in ‘borderlands’ regions, either defined as territories claimed by multiple polities without clearly demarcated boundaries (Giersch, 2006), or in the literal sense after modern state borders were established (see Figure 2). This factor has been crucial to the ability of millenarian movements to operate transnationally, as leaders or followers regularly crossed borders to evade state armed forces or recruit more people. Thus, it took weeks for imperial forces to reach the backwaters of Guizhou in response to early Miao uprisings, while in 1918 Chinese-born leader Pa Chay fled from northern Tonkin into Laos following a heavy defeat by French troops (**I**), only to amass more followers and continue the resistance for another two years (Culas, 2004; Lee, 2015). During the Cold War, Hmong people crossed the border to China from Thailand (Heimbach, 1976, pp. 35–6) following rumours of a Hmong king (**N**), and in 1979 Vietnamese newspapers accused Chinese authorities of disseminating millenarian propaganda to attract Hmong to the Chinese side of the border (**R**) at a time when Sino-Vietnamese relations were at an all-time low (Tapp, 1989, p. 131).

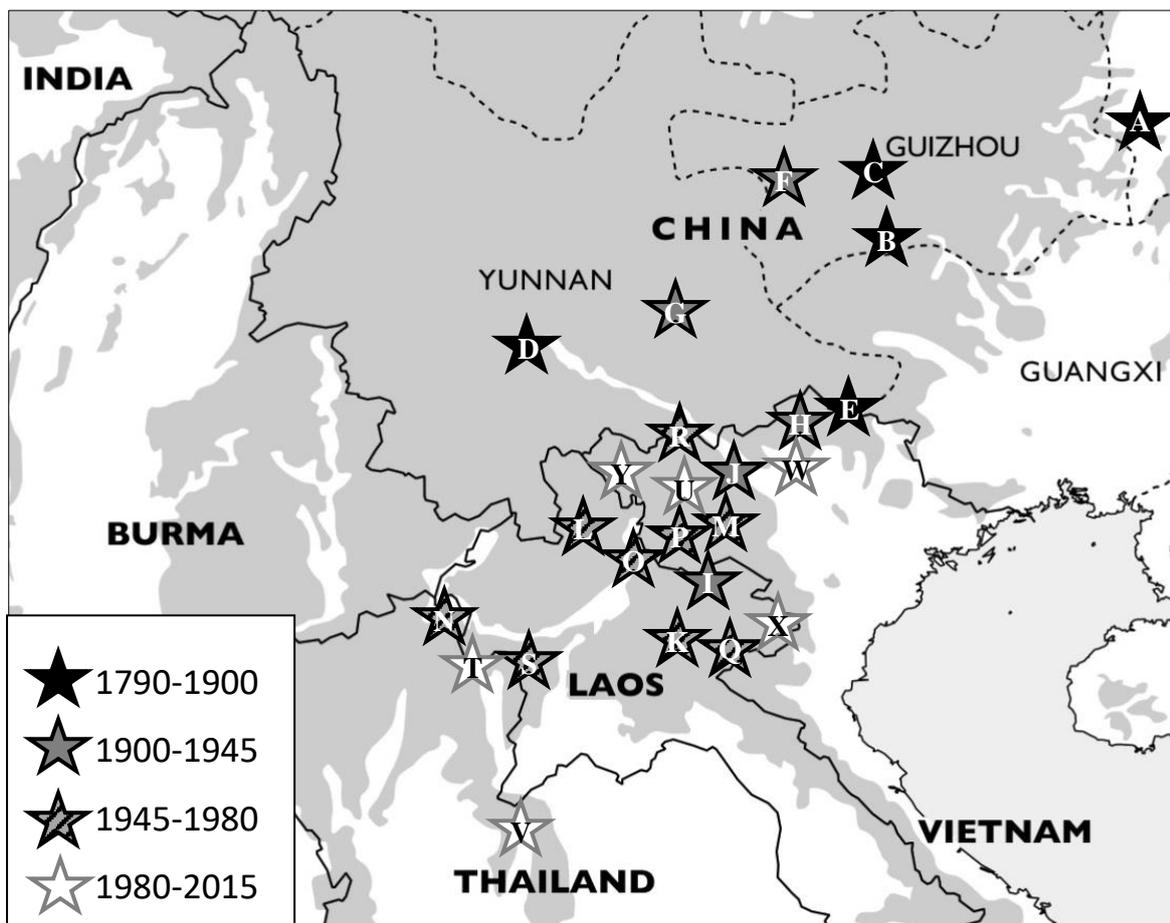


Figure 2: Map of historical Hmong-Miao millenarian activity. Grey zone denotes Southeast Asian Massif, letters in stars correspond to timeline summaries presented in Figure 1; note that stars are only approximate locations and several millenarian movements occurred across a wide, transnational area. (adapted from Weinstein 2014, reprinted with permission of the University of Washington Press)

This leads to the third recurring feature: rumours and allegations of manipulation and intimidation surrounding millenarian activity. Weinstein (2014) describes ‘salesmen’ who travelled through Miao villages in Guizhou throughout the mid-eighteenth century (**B**), “spreading prophesies of natural disaster and plagues, or even predictions of the end of the world... promis[ing] salvation and eternal prosperity for those who bought the charms, and certain death for those who did not” (2014, p. 59). This narrative has been repeated many times since, most recently by Vietnamese police reports to denounce the 2011 gathering of several thousand Hmong in Mường Nhé (**Y**), with impoverished followers apparently selling possessions to contribute the \$150 necessary to receive up to \$5000 each and a share in the promised land, when the king returns (Nguyễn, 2015). Imperial Qing and current Vietnamese authorities considered millenarian leaders to be both exploitative fraudsters *and* dangerous precursors to rebellion, dealing with them ruthlessly. On another level, millenarianism is often seen as being exploited by different individuals and even states as a chance to change the balance of power, as Baird (2013) shows in the indirect support which the Chao Fa movement received from right-wing factions of the Thai police, military and intelligence service for their operations against the Lao state (**T**). This points to the fact that millenarianism represents not so much an attempt to escape the state’s control as a means of negotiating favourably with multiple external powers (Lee, 2015, p. 35), which will be expanded upon below.

There are several reasons why millenarianism may be so open to manipulation and coercion. Even more so than religion in general, the stakes claimed by messianic leaders are monumentally high and demand an immediate response: promises not merely of salvation or damnation, but of *imminent* judgement (although the failure to achieve the millennium is one problem that established religions do not have to face). It is not always easy to distinguish between con artists and sincere revolutionaries – with both demanding support and providing supernatural signs – nor are the motives for radical change and personal profit mutually exclusive. Several observers of Hmong culture have noted a strong desire for autonomy (Lee, 2015), fuelled by myths of a past where the Hmong had their own king and kingdom (c.f. Tapp, 1989), which could be instrumentally exploited for those familiar with this narrative. Furthermore, the generally marginalised status of participants, usually being urged to make decisions in times of crisis and desperation, make millenarian movements particularly vulnerable to misrepresentation by both internal and external actors.

### **Millenarian symbols and external influence**

The fourth constant theme is of specific cultural symbols present within millenarian activity, including: great importance attached to literacy and a Hmong script, appropriation of (and reactions against) external politico-religious concepts and symbols, ability to miraculously generate armies,

promises of invulnerability, abundance and, of course, the Hmong king(dom).<sup>2</sup> Tapp (2015) has already explored the meaning and significance some of these themes, framing them as “resistance to or reaction against forces felt to emanate from a sphere outside of that of Hmong culture and society” (2015, p. 303). His analysis could be stretched even further back to the 1797 rebellion of Guizhou (**B**), which was led by an ethnic Zhongjia local-healer-turned-Miao-king and an ‘immortal princess’ who chanted incantations of invulnerability to enemy bullets (Weinstein, 2014, p. 98), caused rice to pour down from heaven and planted beans which turned into thousands of soldiers (2014, p. 111). More recently (**Y**), similar predictions were repeated that “rocks will turn into buffalo and cows. Small stones will turn into gold and silver, corn will sprout up all over the fields and forests” (Gia Huy and Ngọc Hà, 2011), with rumours that weapons would not be needed for the Hmong to successfully defeat the lowlanders (Rumsby, 2018).

Culas (2004) claims that Christian themes are extremely rare in the Hmong millenarian movements he focuses on in Laos, arguing that missionary influence merely activated pre-existing messianic ideologies rather than introducing new ones. However, a broader transnational sample of cases reveals instances of distinctly Christian innovations intermingled with traditional Hmong themes. For instance, soon after witnessing mass conversions in Guizhou at the turn of the twentieth century (**F**), Baptist missionary Pollard complains about “old wizards” and “singing women” announcing various dates for the appearance of Christ, so that A Hmao believers stopped farming and “gave themselves up to singing and waiting for Jesus” (Pollard, 1919, p. 166). Later, in Laos missionary Barney (1957, p. 87) records a ‘Meo Trinity’ cult which emerged out of a new Christian movement in 1950’s Xieng Khouang (**K**), consisting of three men claiming to be divine – until the ‘Holy Spirit’ died trying to demonstrate his ability to fly. Furthermore, recent millenarian activity in Vietnam (**W**) placed strong emphasis on the ‘end of the world’ (Rumsby, 2018), surely a new eschatological theme introduced by Christianity – in contrast to pre-existing expectations of the millennium which, if anything, emphasises the hope that “the old order is destroyed and a new order is rebuilt” (Corlin, 1995, p. 38).

Scott notes how the “eschatological message of scriptural Christianity mapped closely enough on Hmong millenarian beliefs that little adjustment was required” (2009, p. 320). On the other hand, a tension exists as Hmong-Miao millenarianism appropriates Christian elements while orthodox Christianity simultaneously attempts to harness or stifle heterodox activity. Tracking the evolution of A Hmao Christianity in Guizhou since the 1900s, Huang argues that while existing millenarian traditions facilitated an initial engagement with Christianity, the latter became “a form of anti-millenarian knowledge that would enable A Hmao converts to reject their millenarian tradition and

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<sup>2</sup> Note that the promise of a Hmong kingdom/homeland is not limited to millenarianism but is a wider theme of Hmong politics, prominently utilised and aspired for by ‘secular political brokers’ (Lee 2017) Vang Pao and Touby Lyfoung among others. As stated above, this article employs a narrow definition of millenarianism, so wider use of Hmong cultural symbols/legendary themes by non-religious leaders is not covered in detail.

begin receiving education” (2014, p. 17). On the other hand, Enwall demonstrates how millenarian myths surrounding the missionary-devised script for A Hmao, interpreted as the restoration of the Miao’s lost writing, persisted up until at least the 1940s (Enwall, 1995, p. 134).

Striking parallels can be seen with recent developments in Vietnam, whereby Tâm Ngô (2016) documents the millenarian aspirations which initially encouraged Hmong Protestant conversions at a phenomenal rate (U). However, subsequent millenarian activity such as seen at Mường Nhé (Y) was denounced and disowned by Hmong pastors and officially recognised denominations, who now want to subdue this millenarian element which, arguably, they previously benefitted from (Rumsby, 2018). Huang (2014) claims that millenarian elements of A Hmao culture in China has successfully been tamed, while in Vietnam this appears to be an ongoing contestation: “Christianity is not able to contain and exhaust the possibilities of Hmong millenarianism” (Ngô, 2016, p. 167). It is also striking that although orthodox Christianity and the Vietnamese state have been embroiled in ongoing conflict and mutual opposition, they both converge in their perception of Hmong millenarianism as a threat to shared goals of order, progress and civilization.

### **Changing socio-political contexts: territorialisation and ethnicization**

Alongside these noteworthy continuities in millenarian activity which stretch over centuries, a historical perspective also reveals two clear evolutions within Hmong-Miao millenarian movements. Firstly, there has been a general shift from open, armed rebellions to more peaceful, indirect forms of resistance. Whereas the mid-nineteenth century ‘Miao’ rebellions in Guizhou (C) and the Xiong Tai revolt in northern Tonkin (E) both achieved a degree of military success for over a decade, most recent millenarian activity has been in the form of non-violent, or only covertly violent, activity. This trend might be partially explained by historiographical bias: peaceful millenarian movements of the past were probably less likely to be noticed by lowland authorities than the more sensational rebellions. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that, while they may still *imagine* violent future episodes as part of the utopian vision, new Hmong millenarian participants are increasingly articulating their *practice* in ostensibly peaceful terms, while the one or two which have resorted to violence have not lasted long.

From a political perspective, perhaps the most straightforward explanation for the trend is in relation to territorialisation – the expansion of state military and bureaucratic influence to the edge of its borders (Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995) – in South East Asia over the twentieth century. Before World War II, state penetration of peripheral areas was uneven and limited, giving highland communities a degree of autonomy from, and negotiating power with, lowland states. However, over time states have benefitted from the advancement of “distance-demolishing technologies” (Scott,

2009, p. xii) such as roads, telecommunications, modern weapons and helicopter, gradually shifting the balance of power between highlanders and lowland states in favour of the latter.

As mentioned earlier, Scott's arbitrary drawing of a line in the sand at 1945 as the point at which uplands autonomy evaporated is problematic, in part because state expansion in South East Asia is an ongoing project occurring at different rates in different countries. In Vietnam, for example, an important means of territorialisation has been state-sponsored mass migration of more loyal *Kinh* (ethnic majority) lowlanders up to the highlands, to occupy land of the more troublesome ethnic minorities – but not in large numbers until the 1970s (McLeod, 1999). This triggered opposition among the indigenous Montagnards, including some violent uprisings under the auspices of FULRO (United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races). Although millenarian aspirations have historically appealed to the (non-Hmong) Montagnards of the Central Highlands (Salemink, 2003), FULRO was based more on a secular ethno-nationalism and surrendered in 1992.

At any rate, highlands millenarian movements are becoming less and less likely to compete directly with state military power. This is not necessarily a fundamental setback to Hmong millenarianism, which has persisted for centuries despite never ultimately achieving its radical ideals of lasting socio-political transformation. Indeed, Culas notes that “the disappearance of the armed wing of the messianic movement should not necessarily lead to the disappearance of the movement as a whole. After the disappearance of the warriors, the community of the faithful will sometimes have the opportunity to pursue its quest” (Culas, 2004, p. 153). Rather, millenarianism has adapted to new balance of power by taking more discreet, apparently peaceful but subversive forms, which are still regarded as threatening by state actors – as seen by the assassination of messianic leader Shong Lue Yang (**Q**): “He led no revolt, incited no revolution, but in his cryptic way he was critical of the authorities and gained a devoted following”. (Smalley, Vang and Yang, 1990, p. 10)

Secondly, there is a chronological change in terms of participants in millenarian activity involving the Hmong-Miao, from multi-ethnic to mono-ethnic. Scott (2009, p. 318) claims that “virtually all” millenarian rebellions tended to appeal to neighbouring upland people, and sees messianic charisma as a temporary glue to mobilise acephalous, dispersed societies who otherwise do not resist collectively. It should be noted that ‘charisma’ may include coercion, as in the case of Xiong Tai (**E**) who threatened to massacre neighbouring ethnic groups if they did not join them (Bonifacy 1912, cited in Lee, 2015, p. 98). Regardless, records of early millenarian movements all note inter-ethnic activity; thousands of Miao flocked to non-Miao leaders in 18<sup>th</sup> century Guizhou (**B**) and the majority of the so-called ‘Miao rebellion’ participants in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (**C**) were probably Han (Jenks, 1994, p. 57). Culas argues that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century rebellions supernatural protection in conflict was promised only to Hmong followers, but observes that other ethnic minorities nevertheless

participated, since they suffered similar political and economic hardships and shared the same “invincible desire for justice” (Culas, 2004, p. 145).

From World War II onwards, however, this became the exception rather than the rule. Apart from Shong Lue Yang’s movement, Hmong millenarian activity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has not crossed ethnic boundaries. Interestingly, this development mirrors the wider regional process of ethnicization, or ‘sharpening’ of ethnicity, suggesting a connection between the two trends. While historiography of early-modern Asia depicts ethnicity as flexible, fluctuating and just one (not usually the most important) of several factors affecting political allegiance (Lieberman, 1978), it has now come to be perceived as a fixed, primary and primordial identity (Taylor, 1982). This is in fact reflected in the changing use of the Chinese word ‘Miao’ which, as noted above, used to be a generic slur for non-Han ‘barbarians’, but in more recent times has acquired a more narrow meaning to refer to a (supposedly) specific ethnic group, distinct from other non-Han minorities in Southern China.

Regional ethnicization was initiated by European racial theorists looking at differences between communities, who developed a ‘social Darwinism’ discourse which linked biological differences with differences in behaviour and became widely accepted by the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Keyes, 2002, pp. 1165–66). These theories were exported to Asia, either through direct colonial rule or by local nationalist elites mimicking Western concepts and power structures for legitimacy and to achieve – or retain – independence (Gouda, 2000). Meanwhile, communist governments in China and Vietnam were influenced by Stalinist approaches towards ‘national minorities’ and self-determination which, although theoretically distinct from social Darwinism, in practice led to similar results:

there was a consensus prior to World War II among all ethnologists and anthropologists, Marxist and non-Marxist, that there were fundamental social structural, cultural, and economic differences among peoples that remained the same from one generation to the next and, thus, made it possible to produce scientifically precise classifications of different peoples. (Keyes, 2002, p. 1169)

Either way, primordial ideas about ethnic hierarchies and immobility of ethnicity led to the creation of mono-ethnic states, where the ideological character of the states and therefore their national identity became associated with the language, culture and values of the ethnic majorities (Brown, 1988, p. 54). As a result, the mono-ethnic nature of increased state territorialisation of peripheral areas since World War II caused huge social disruption and has often been interpreted as assimilation attempts (Duncan, 2004). Therefore, elites in these peripheral communities resolved both communal identity and elite legitimacy crises by adapting and articulating an ethnic nationalist ideology apart from the state (Brown, 1988, p. 55).

## Transformation and reproduction

So far, we have identified a number of persistent themes within Hmong-Miao millenarianism – a context of economic and political crisis, their transnational nature, the prevalence of manipulation and/or coercion, and specific cultural symbols within supernatural predictions. In addition, I have posited external factors which mirror two significant historical transformations: the reduction in millenarian violence (in tandem with state territorialisation and distance-demolishing technologies) and trend from multi-ethnic to mono-ethnic movements (reflecting a broader sharpening of ethnicity). The next question to ask is how these changes – and reproductions – occurred in practice. This is potentially a more difficult question to answer, requiring a more fine-grained analysis of individual case studies; however, for now Sahlin's 'structure of the conjuncture' can provide some preliminary insights. In contrast to an ahistorical structuralist position, Sahlin (1981) argued that transformation of cultural norms and social structures are transformed precisely *through* the everyday practice of social reproduction:

People act upon circumstances according to their own cultural presuppositions, the socially given categories of persons and things... [but] the worldly circumstances of human action are under no inevitable obligation to conform to the categories by which certain people perceive them. In the event they do not, the received categories are potentially revalued in practice, functionally redefined. According to the place of the received category in the cultural system as constituted, and the interests that have been affected, the system itself is more or less altered. At the extreme, what began as reproduction ends as transformation. (1981, p. 67)

When applied to millenarianism, the 'structure of the conjuncture' argument would imply that Hmong-Miao actors and movements are not merely passive subjects of powerful external forces of state territorialisation, ethnicization and modernisation which are imposed on them. Rather, messianic leaders and followers have the agency to change history (though not always intentionally), mediated by "the specificity of practical circumstances, people's differential relations to them, and the set of particular arrangements that ensue" (1981, p. 68). This is particularly evident in situations of 'culture contact', making millenarian conflict between (or within) uplanders and lowland armies a potent sight of potential transformation. But crucially, historical changes are inextricably tied to, and effected through, the continuities of traditional millenarian practices.

As an illustration, let us contemplate exactly how external concepts such as ethnicization came to be replicated within Hmong-Miao millenarianism. A clue is found in Cheung's article on Miao millenarian groups' (A) "active appropriation of Chinese cultural markers for empowerment and mass mobilisation during their insurgencies resisting the encroachment of the Chinese imperial state" (Cheung, 2012, p. 144). For example, rebel leaders Xiong Mi Chang (H) and Pa Chay (I) expediently borrowed external symbols of power like the flag (Lee, 2015, p. 132) – probably inspired by the

‘Black flags’ armies operating in the area – as well as Vietnamese pantheon concepts (Culas, 2004, p. 198) to boost their legitimacy. Scott calls it “an audacious poaching of the lowland ideological structure to fashion movements that aim at warding off or destroying the states from which they are poached” (2009, p. 322) – although this is probably overstating the ‘resistance’ aspect of such activities.

Yet for external appropriation to be appealing to would-be messiahs, it had to be meaningful through reproduced Hmong-Miao cultural presuppositions, myths and socially given categories. So early 20<sup>th</sup> century rebels used the flag as a token understood to give the bearer invulnerability in battle, in fitting with millenarian legends, even while French observers understood it to be a rivalling claim to political authority. However, by the time of the Chao Fa insurgency (**T**) during the ‘secret war’, the millenarian flag was reproduced (Lee, 2015, p. 140) but its meaning had been transformed to more conventional political symbolism, no longer a token of invulnerability. This is accounted for by Sahlin’s ‘structure of the conjuncture’, which not only reveals the connection between continuity and change but also affirms the agency of ostensibly peripheral highlanders to transform history within the structural conjunctures of chance and contingency.

Another related lens through which to understand historical transformation is that of ‘mimesis’, which has been productively applied to understand dynamic South East Asian power relations (Jonsson, 2010; Tappe, 2018). Walker describes mimesis as “appropriation of the Other, and the power of the Other, as part of a process of social change” (2005: 192). This ongoing process of political acculturation from external sources of power appears to be one way that elites of marginal minority groups bolster legitimacy at a local level, and it is entirely plausible that Hmong millenarian leaders trying to challenge state authority in South East Asia have adopted the same ethnicized paradigm in which conflict is now perceived. The sharpening of ethnicity can be seen in Vietnamese media reports of millenarian rumours preceding Mùròng Nhé (**Y**), illustrating how ethnicity in and of itself has now become a tool for mobilisation:

if you are Hmong then you must go to Muong Nhe. There a Hmong king will appear; he will distribute all the land and money to Hmong families. Whoever doesn’t go will be attacked by the authorities and won’t receive any land or money... They won’t even be considered Hmong anymore. (Gia Huy and Ngọc Hà, 2011)

### **Outliers and comparisons**

The aforementioned historical continuities and changes are useful generalisations, but there are a few exceptions which merit further scrutiny. How did Shong Lue Yang (Yaj Soob Lwj) manage to attract both Hmong and Khmu followers in the 1960s (**Q**), unlike other late mono-ethnic Hmong millenarian

activity? One explanation is found in Yang's family background; Khmu was the birth language of his mother (Smalley, Vang and Yang, 1990, p. 127), giving him the unusual ability as a Hmong to be fluent in Khmu language, history, traditions and lore. Culas (2004) notes how Yang navigated a complex web of Cold War political tensions and religious influences in attempting to carve out an autonomous social space for his followers. The need for multilateral negotiation, along with Yang's unique family heritage, may have assisted a pragmatic trans-ethnic mobilisation which temporarily transcended the general tendency towards ethnicization in South East Asia.

After Shong Lue Yang's assassination in 1971, the movement was continued by his Hmong followers who kept the messianic script and took the name Chao Fa (T), claiming Yang as their spiritual leader (Baird, 2013, p. 134). However, at some point during this transition Chao Fa lost the support of the Khmu, becoming an exclusively Hmong movement. Perhaps the Khmu were side-lined by the change of leadership, with new leaders having no cross-ethnic familial ties. Another factor could be the increasing involvement of US-based Hmong diaspora who no longer lived near the Khmu and did not have a pan-ethnic vision.<sup>3</sup> Either way, the sharpening of ethnicity eventually caught up with this particular millenarian movement.

Supported by Thai police and Buddhist monks, the Chao Fa movement also took a violent turn and took up arms against the Lao government, providing another exception to the general trend for millenarian movements to become more peaceful over time. The fact that the only other instance of recent Hmong millenarian violence (Baird, 2004) is also found in Laos, in Houphanh province in 2003 (X), draws attention to the importance of national contexts. Despite undergoing similar processes of territorialisation to its neighbouring countries, the comparative weakness of the Laotian state means that the expansion of its influence up to the edge of its borders has been slower and less complete, giving millenarian movements more potential military. And the fact that recent Houphanh attacks were almost immediately quashed indicates the progress of Laotian state territorialisation, in contrast to the Chao Fa who were able to persist for several years in the 1970s. In stark contrast, the overwhelming power of the Chinese state to control and assimilate minorities for some time now (Turner, Michaud and Bonnin, 2015) probably explains the absence of any modern Hmong-Miao millenarian movements, peaceful or violent, recorded in China. While territorialisation and ethnicization are helpful macro lenses through which to understand millenarian change, these exceptions highlight the enduring importance of individual contexts and national differences which impact socio-political conditions.

In addition to comparing across countries, millenarianism among other South East Asian highlanders provides an interesting contrast. Similarities include the enduring importance of borderlands location

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Ian Baird, personal communication, 05/01/2017.

and an overall shift towards more peaceful forms of millenarian activity. Moreover, Walker's ethnography on Lahu millenarianism, records a similar historical pattern from multi-ethnic to mono-ethnic activity:

The message of history seems quite clear, although it is nowhere as complete as one might wish. A number of charismatic monks of Han, Lahu and Wa ethnicity ...mount[ed] one revolt after another against the might of the Imperial Qing in the name of a Lahu polity seeking relief from outside political oppression. However... more recent Lahu prophets have had less obvious association with Buddhism, seeming instead to appeal to a wholly indigenous Lahu tradition. (Walker, 2003, p. 507)

On the other hand, a millenarian Buddhist holy man Khruba Bunchum in the Thailand-Myanmar borderlands has recently gathered a truly pan-ethnic following of Lahu, Karen, Shan, Lue and also Thai and Lao lowlanders (Jirattikorn, 2016). Baird (2009) gives another example of recent pan-ethnic messianic activity in 2004, where Brau and Kreung in North East Cambodia joined a 'Jarai king' movement along with Jarai followers fleeing from Vietnam. These cases raise further questions: why are other millenarian groups still able to transcend ethnic boundaries, but not the Hmong? Have the Hmong been more influenced by primordial ethnic discourses, or adopted them more readily, than other peripheral communities? These questions are outside the reach of this broad-stroke historical overview, but one likely relevant factor is related to the unique historical experience and heavy price paid by Hmong communities faced of transnational migration and being caught in the crucible of Cold War fighting, evoking Smith's cogent insight in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*:

[I]t is not society or ethnicity that determines war, but conflict itself which determines the sense and shape of ethnicity. War may not create the original cultural differences, but it sharpens and politicizes them, turning what previously were "ethnic categories" into genuine integrated ethnies, aware of their identities and destinies. (Smith, 1986, p. 39)

## **Conclusion**

Millenarian movements have often been regarded by academics as native reactions to enormous social disruptions caused by colonial intrusion, doomed to failure and at best a step on the way to more 'modern' forms of collective social resistance. In fact, millenarianism both pre-dates colonialism and continues to feature in the ethnic politics of South East Asia to this day. An analysis of past and present Hmong-Miao millenarian activity identifies several recurring elements: politico-economic crisis, transnational activity in borderland areas, allegations of manipulation and common culturally symbolic themes, including those borrowed from external politico-religious spheres. Some of these elements are repeated in new millenarian movements across the Hmong diaspora, despite very different socio-economic contexts. For instance, the US-based *Hmoob Tebchaw* ('Hmong State')

movement led by Seng Xiong has been accused of fraud and exploitation while promising the establishment of an independent territory in South East Asia for the Hmong diaspora to return to (Vang, 2018). As we have seen, such allegations are a common feature of millenarian movements, and they do not negate the potential for political impact, regardless of the leaders' motives.

Millenarianism has proved remarkably resilient in South East Asia, but its encounter with modernity has not left millenarianism unaffected and therefore it must be understood within changing socio-political contexts. A historical trend from multi-ethnic to mono-ethnic appeal indicates that the Hmong-Miao have been influenced by the ethnicization that characterises modern South East Asian politics, although this is problematized by the persistence of sporadic pan-ethnic millenarian movements elsewhere in the region. In addition, spontaneous, loosely organised religious movements can no longer compete militarily with modern states, so millenarian groups have generally become less directly violent in recent years, seeking their political goals in other ways. Perhaps peaceful, esoteric millenarian activity has always been present and remained under the historiographical radar, only to be 'discovered' more recently by modern anthropologists; regardless, explicitly violent movements are clearly petering out in the face of recent state territorialisation in upland South East Asia and China. This does not drain the disruptive potency from millenarian activities, as state attempts to govern and religious orthodoxies continue to regard them as a threat.

As the above exceptions and comparisons underscore, the transnational migration of Hmong populations is a distinctive factor shaping millenarian activity, perhaps distinguishing it from other South East Asian highlanders. Mai Na Lee notes the 'Virtual Hmong Nation' which has been created online by Hmong diasporas, enabling them to connect and share ideas regardless of geographical proximity or national citizenship (2015, p. 22). The mobilising potential of this new technology is demonstrated at Mùròng Nhé, during which the US Hmong diaspora were accused of spreading end-of-the-world predictions to Vietnamese Hmong communities (Ngô, 2016, p. 96). Further research on how this new transnational connectedness bears on the formation of present and future millenarian imaginaries and movements would be enlightening.

Burridge has remarked that millenarian movements often outlive the apparent failure of their prophecies because "the failure to gain the millennium is in itself, given the ambience, a guarantee that the activities will occur again or continue in more muted form" (1971:73). It is also important to note that only a fraction of the Hmong-Miao population in any given location or time period have engaged in millenarian activity, and it is often criticised or denounced by the wider ethnic community (Culas 2004:12). Nevertheless, there appears to be a millenarian undertone within many South East Asian highlands cultures (Corlin, 1995), with certain events and contexts acting as a trigger to bring millenarianism to the forefront. And while they may now operate under new ethnicized paradigms, with little recourse to open violence against the might of the modern nation-state, millenarian

participants still see the current political order as fleeting – just as those who preceded them. This article demonstrates the importance of both historical continuity and change for appreciating the role of heterodox religious activity in voicing social discontent, challenging power structures and moulding ethnic relations.

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