



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

EDUCATION *for* HMONG WOMEN *in* THAILAND

XUEFANG PENG

Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, No. 27 Zhongguancun Nandajie Street, Haidian District, Beijing 100081, Peoples Republic of China

■ Abstract

The Hmong are the second largest tribal group in Thailand. Hmong society is stratified by both age and gender. Women were considered inferior to men in Hmong traditional society. There was a strong bias against education for Hmong women in the past. Hmong women's access to education has improved with recent developments in the socio-economy and modern educational system. Today there does not appear to be discrimination against girls in continuing their education beyond the compulsory level. However, the conventional ideas that "marrying early, bearing early, and having many children are blessings" are popular in the Hmong community. Many girls of school age leave school for marriage. These traditional conventions are an obstacle for females in continuing their formal education. Today, the Hmong's traditional subsistence economy is undergoing change, and many Hmong women are actively involved in business. Adult and vocational education is also an important way for Hmong women to improve their educational level and gain new skills for making a living. This paper is based on anthropological field research carried out in northern Thailand from December 2003 to September 2004, supported by the Asian Scholarship Foundation.

■ Introduction

This study explores and analyses Hmong socio-economic change and modern educational development and their influence on issues of gender. This study uses the theories of gender and ethnic culture, making use of socio-cultural analytical methods as its tools. Central to the socio-cultural analysis of gender is the recognition that gender and culture are inseparable (Peplau et al., 1999, p. 34). This study makes use of anthropological methods of participatory observation, interviews and questionnaires in field investigation. This research also draws on published and unpublished works about the Hmong of Thailand.

Gender issues are related to human rights, population, ethnicity, and poverty. Gender impacts both scholarship and social practice, a focus well prioritised in modern societies. Gender studies are also an important topic for anthropology and sociology. The study of minority women and gender is significant, especially for developing multiethnic countries where one of their strategies for sustained development covers such measures as raising minority women's educational level and changing women's disadvantaged status.

In Thailand much research on women and gender has been concerned with the majority Thai people. However, for minority tribal women, there remains a weak link in woman and gender research, and only limited research is concerned with Hmong women and gender. The Hmong have a long history and unique culture, and are found in China, Southeast Asia and recently in some Western countries. In Thailand, Hmong are the second largest hill tribe. The Hmong have been subjected to ethnic discrimination and labeled "backward", "forest destroyer", "drug addict" and "revolt to Thai state" (Hengsuwan, 2003; Leepreecha, 2001), and the Hmong's voice has not generally been heard. This is particularly true for Hmong woman, as Symonds (1991, p. 115) notes, "Hmong ideology stresses male dominance and female submission, and obedience and deference from the young to elders". In Hmong traditional culture, women are considered inferior to men.

■ Hmong population and distribution

The Hmong originally came from China. In China, the Hmong are referred to as "Miao". The Miao call themselves "Hmong". The terms "Hmong" and "Miao"

are still used interchangeably. The ancestors of the Hmong originally lived in the basins of the Yellow River and Yangtse River. Due to social unrest and war, Hmong migrated to southwestern China and from there to Laos, Burma, Vietnam and Thailand. Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, a large number of Hmong have immigrated into Western countries. Nowadays, the Hmong are an ethnic group with wide distribution in the world. They are found in China, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, Canada, United States of America, Argentina, Australia, Germany, France, and French Guiana.

■ The Hmong in Thailand

The Hmong in Thailand bear historical relations with the Miao ethnic minority of China. The migration of Hmong into northern Thailand is thought to have started around 1885. By 1929, there were Hmong around Tak Province in northwestern Thailand (Cooper et al; 1996, p. 6). In Thailand, the Hmong are divided into two main subgroups: Blue Hmong and

White Hmong. They are distinguished by their dialects and costumes. It is believed that other subgroups of Hmong also migrated to Thailand but assimilated into these two main groups (Leepreecha, 2001, p. 32).

The Hmong are distributed in 12 provinces in Thailand. They are settled in 253 villages with a total population of 153,955 within 19,287 households and 24,551 families. Within the total population there are 45,382 men, 45,703 women, 31,578 boys, and 31,292 girls. The Hmong make up 16.52% of the total tribal population of Thailand. The population breakdown of the Hmong by province is: Tak province 31,710, Chiang Rai province 29,720, Chiang Mai province 24,895, Nan province 23,385, and Phechaboon province 17,311. Seven other provinces have a Hmong population of less than ten thousand (Tribal Research Institute, 2002) (Tables 1-2).

■ Field research sites

In this study firsthand data was gathered through direct field research in the Maesa Mai village (Blue

Table 1. Tribal population summary in Thailand 2002 (Tribal Research Institute, 2002).

Ethnic groups	Total village	Total persons in household	Total family	Total men	Total women	Total boys	Total girls	Total population
Karen	1,912	87,628	95,088	151,186	147,168	70,193	69,584	438,131
Hmong	253	19,287	24,551	45,382	45,703	31,578	31,292	153,955
Lahu	385	18,057	20,347	32,059	32,094	19,430	19,293	102,876
Akha	271	11,178	12,909	20,948	21,876	12,756	13,073	68,653
Yao	178	6,758	8,022	15,260	15,442	7,609	7,260	45,571
H'tin	159	8,496	10,474	15,512	14,941	6,084	6,120	42,657
Lisu	155	6,553	7,338	12,345	12,505	6,737	6,712	38,299
Lawa	69	4,361	5,098	7,454	7,553	3,536	3,717	22,260
Khamu	38	2,256	2,523	3,991	3,873	1,366	1,343	10,573
Total	3,420	164,574	186,350	304,137	301,155	159,289	158,394	922,975

Table 2. Distribution of Hmong population in Thailand by provinces (Tribal Research Institute, 2002).

Province	Village	Household	Total persons
Tak	43	3,867	31,710
Chiang Rai	49	3,854	29,720
Chiang Mai	57	2,946	24,895
Nan	28	3,052	23,385
Phechaboon	25	2,240	17,311
Phitsanulok	7	1,011	6,900
Phayao	9	828	6,318
Mae Hmong Song	14	370	3,763
Kamphaengphet	6	417	3,120
Phrae	3	282	2,412
Lampang	6	149	983
Sukhothai	3	66	563
Total	250	19,082	151,080

Hmong) in Mae Rim District, and Khun Krang village (White Hmong) in Chomthong District, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand.

Maesa Mai (Blue Hmong) village

Maesa Mai Blue Hmong village is located in the mountains within the Suthep-Pui national forest protected areas. The distance to Maesa Mai village is only 35km from Chiang Mai city. Maesa Mai village is neither too primitive nor too modern compared with other Hmong communities in Thailand. Yet it still retains many traditional cultural features of the Hmong. In 2004 Maesa Mai village had a population of 1,681 with 205 households and 316 families. There were 852 males and 829 females in the village. Each household had an average of 8.2 persons. In 1998, the village had a population of 1,591 people within 186 households. There were 809 males and 728 females (Leepreecha, 2001, p. 296). There was an average of 8.55 persons per household at that time. All households are Blue Hmong, except for one Thai family and one Chinese family. Hmong households are made up of five surnames: Xiong, Thao, Yang, Hang and Lee.

In the late 1960s the Thai Royal Development Projects was carried out in the Hmong and other upland tribal areas. The main purpose of this project was to eradicate opium cultivation and reduce deforestation, while improving the population's standard of living. Furthermore, in 1980 the Highland Agricultural Marketing and Production (HAMP), funded by the United Nations, launched a project to replace opium with other cash crops in the Hmong villages. After two decades of agricultural experimentation, Maesa Mai villagers finally found that lychee orchards provided the best agricultural opportunity for them. Other minor incomes are obtained through growing short-term cash crops and selling souvenirs in towns (Leepreecha, 2001, p. 42).

Most villagers of Maesa Mai are engaged in farming. In order to improve economic income, some villagers hold two or more jobs at the same time. They supplement family income with wage labour or commercial trade. About 30 to 40 women of the village are also engaged in wage labor and about 50 women are occupied as traders in the Chiang Mai local markets. There are also six small stores within the village of Maesa Mai which sell such commodities as vegetables, milk, eggs and candy to local villagers.

A majority of households have a pick-up truck which makes it convenient to travel back and forth between Chiang Mai city and the village within one day. Some villagers have bought land and built their own houses in lowland areas. The highest annual household income in the village is from 200,000 to 300,000 Baht, which is equivalent to about 5,000 to 7,500 dollars U.S. Most household average incomes are about 100,000 to 200,000 Baht, which is almost 2,500 to 5,000 dollars

U.S. The lowest household income in the village is 20,000 to 30,000 Baht or almost 500 to 750 dollars U.S. Individual household economy is maintained by wage labour, because the land had been sold by the head of the family for drug use.

Khun Krang (White Hmong) village

The second research community is Khun Krang village, located in Chomthong District, Chiang Mai Province. The village is located within the Doi Inthanon National Park. To travel from Khun Krang to Chiang Mai city by car takes over two hours. The village has a population of 1,104 with 170 households and 245 families. Within the total population of the village there are 533 males and 571 females. The average size of each household in Khun Krang village is 6.49 persons. All households in the village are White Hmong except for two which are Blue Hmong. The households include the surnames of Yang, Lee, Wang and Xiong, but most surnames in the village are Yang. The Hmong of Khun Krang began to settle in their present location over 20 years ago. Due to their practice of swidden agriculture, villagers lived in small hamlets scattered throughout the area before moving to Khun Krang village. The Hmong have settled in this area for over 90 years.

The Royal Development Projects have been carried out for about two decades in the Khun Krang village. After the opium ban, cash crops were promoted in the Doi Inthanon plateau. The raising of flowers was the best cash crop and the villagers have cultivated flowers for the past 20 years. Most of the households in the village make a living by growing flowers. Furthermore, the village has become a tour destination for ecotourists. Villagers have gained income from tourism by offering food and accommodation to tourists. Also a market has been operating along the road near the village for the past 20 years, and there are more than 50 families who own booths in the market. These sellers can speak Thai. They use calculators to show the price of goods to tourists who cannot speak Thai. In Khun Krang village the highest annual income for village households is 300,000 to 400,000 Baht, which is almost 7,000 to 10,000 dollars U.S., and the lowest household income is between 70,000 to 80,000 Baht, or about 2,000 dollars U.S. About 25 households are poor, mostly due to a lack of land and the scourge of drug addiction.

Comparisons of the two study villages

The two Hmong villages were selected as field sites to provide a research sample of the present situation of the Hmong in north Thailand. There are few apparent cultural differences between the two villages of this study except in dialect and dress. However, through research it was found that there are differences between the two villages in economic condition and

population size which are outlined below. From initial field research it was apparent that Khun Krang village seems more modern than Maesa Mai village because of the development of tourism. Tourists often visit this village and buy some locally made products and souvenirs. So Khun Krang villager's incomes are higher than that of villagers in Maesa Mai. Some Hmong villager's houses are Thai-style in Khun Krang.

In both villages, modern consumables have come into the villagers' lives. A majority of households have a pick-up truck, and a few households have two trucks. Pick-up trucks, motorbikes, cell phones and television sets have become necessities. Even poorer households have an old television set. Many households use electric rice cookers and gas burners. However, gas burners are a luxury as the price of a jar of gas is 160 to 200 Baht, and too expensive for most. Instead, many use traditional wood-burning stoves. In the two villages the system of production has changed from self-sufficiency to commercial production for the outside market. New technologies have been applied to agricultural production, and this is reflected in their methods and costs of production. Villager's incomes are increasingly a combination of agricultural as well as non-agricultural occupations.

The Hmong household is composed of parents, unmarried children, married sons and their wives and children, with one or more nuclear families closely related through the male line. There is an average size of 8.2 persons per Hmong household in Maesa Mai village. There is an average size of 6.49 persons per household in Khun Krang village. Average household size of Maesa Mai is bigger than that of Khun Krang.

In Maesa Mai village, the distribution of population by age shows that people under age 15 account for 39.86% of the total while in Khun Krang village those under age 15 account for 49.91% (Table 3). Relatively speaking, the population of Khun Krang is younger than that of Maesa Mai. The young age distribution implies high fertility for Hmong women in Khun Krang.

The distribution of total population by gender indicates that in Maesa Mai village males make up 50.68% of the total, and females account for 49.32% of the total while in Khun Krang village males make up 48.28% of the total population, and females account for 51.72% of the total. From the sex ratio, the male ratio is higher than that of female in Maesa Mai; while the female ratio is higher than that of male in Khun Krang (Table 3). This is a reason why

women in Khun Krang have high fertility in order to give more boys.

The comparative analysis between the two study villages indicates that the decline in fertility is associated with the sex ratio of the children. Yet Hmong often desire to have more children. The key reason most often stated is because Hmong hope to have more boys than girls. If their earlier children are daughters, they will not stop child-bearing until they have one or several sons.

■ Hmong culture and gender ideology

Social stratification

Hmong society is patrilineal, with descent and inheritance traced through the male line. To the Hmong, men are more important than women. Men are perceived as the "skeleton of the society". Men may continue prosperity for the lineage and household, look after parents in their old age and carry out essential rituals. Women are regarded as "other people's daughters" since they must move into the husband's household after marriage. Women have no public voice in the political, economic or ritual areas having to do with the patriline. Tapp (1985) used the metaphor of men as roots and women as flowers. Roots of the tree, as symbolic of males, are more valued than flowers, which are symbolic of females.

Social status refers to a person's rank, privilege, or power in a group. Traditionally, age and gender have been important determinants of status. In a system of patriarchy, the father or senior male is the acknowledged decision-maker for the family (Peplau et al., 1999, p. 28). Hmong society is stratified by both age and gender. Historically, the Hmong retained their own language without a writing system. Their traditional culture relied on oral history passed down by the older generation. Hence, old people are accorded a great deal of prestige. As Symonds (1991, p. 110) has pointed out, "elders control production and subsistence, and are more knowledgeable than the young". Therefore, they are afforded respect, deference and honour. Women are men's complementary opposites. Males, however, are considered to be smarter, stronger and more capable, while females are considered less smart, weaker, and less capable. In Hmong society, elders hold priority over younger people within

Table 3. Age and gender distribution of the two study villages (Compiled interview data: local villagers, 2004).

Age	Maesa Mai			Khun Krang		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
15 years and above	491	520	1011	245	308	553
Under 15 years	361	309	670	288	263	551
Total	852	829	1681	533	571	1104

the same gender group. Older women have more authority than younger women, especially daughters and daughters-in-law. Hmong society operates as a patriarchy, with rank, privilege and power residing with the males. Therefore in relationships between gender and age, gender takes priority over age. Younger men have more authority than older women. These distinctions in social status and rank for the Hmong are fundamental to their social structure and social organisation.

Roles of women

In Hmong society, gender inequality begins at birth with the burial of the placenta. The burial of the placenta signifies the distinction made between males and females. A boy's placenta is buried at the most important part of the house, near the middle place where the spirit of the clan resides; a girl's placenta is buried under the bed of her parents where she was conceived so that the girl will grow up to have many children. Fertility defines a Hmong woman from birth (Symonds, 1991, p. 119).

Gender role is one of the first identities that human beings acquire, first through investiture, and then through socialisation. For the Hmong, a good girl must be good at needlework. Hmong girls begin to learn needlework as early as six to seven years of age. A Hmong girl must marry someone, or people will think there is something wrong with her and no man marries her. In Maesa Mai village, one spinster at the age of 30, who was a drug addict in the past, expressed that she would become a good housewife if someone would marry her. Hmong girls fear to be spinsters. A girl who cannot marry is considered unfortunate because of her family's loss of face, bride price, and social relationships between other clans. She is buried quickly and without ceremony after her death. A woman without a husband is "worthless", hence she is not respected within the community. Marriage is the precondition for a woman to shift her social status. Therefore, Hmong girls marry as soon as possible. After marriage, a woman must become a good wife and mother and satisfy her husband's family. She must behave according to traditional customs and habits. Good temper and workskills are the characteristics most valued in a young woman. A good woman must work hard in the fields and in the home. In Hmong culture, the prototypical gender image of man and woman is father and mother. Giving birth is the mark for a woman to shift her social status. Women gain respect and status by child-bearing. A good wife must bear many children, especially sons. She must train children well. She must respect her parents-in-law and all other elder people, bringing honour and respect to her natal family and husband.

■ Education for women and gender equality

Many of the disadvantages faced by Hmong women are associated with lack of education. Hence, the strongest way to improve gender equality is to raise women's educational level. The forms of available education include formal school education and adult and vocational education.

Gender difference in Hmong educational levels

According to Thai scholars, there was a strong bias against education for Hmong females. In the 5 to 14 year age category educational attainment remained low with only 8.2% of the females and 25.5% for males attended school. For those aged 15-34, only 4.2% of Hmong females and 27.7% of Hmong males had any education (Kamnuansilpa et al., 1987, pp. 26-27).

In Maesa Mai village there is a preschool and a primary school, but there is no middle school. The primary school was formally opened in 1970. The school ran up to the fourth grade. In 1978, the school expanded to the sixth grade. Leepreecha (2001, p. 148) provides a sample of Hmong educational levels in the late 1990s in Maesa Mai village. From Table 4, it can be seen that: (1) 37.08% of the males and 55.50% of the females never attended school; (2) 43.39% of the males and 33.38% of the females attended only primary school; (3) 12.11% of the males and 6.52% of the females attended secondary school; (4) 1.98% of the males and 0.77% of the females attended vocational college; and (5) 1.1% of the males and no females attended university. In general, Hmong levels of educational attainment are low. For example, 46.16% of villagers did not attend school, and 38.47% of the villagers attended only primary school. A majority of villagers did not continue education beyond compulsory years. Comparatively, Hmong women's educational level was lower than that of men.

In the Hmong village schools almost all teachers have a university degree. However, there is a lack of native teachers. Among 17 teachers in Khun Krang village, there is not one Hmong teacher. In Maesa Mai village there is only one male Hmong teacher. There is a need to develop normal school training for the Hmong which will enhance training for both male and female teachers and encourage the teaching of Hmong culture for the benefit of future generations.

From the author's field investigation, it was found that many women over the age of 30 did not attend school during their school age years. One of the reasons was that there were no schools in their villages, and it was inconvenient for girls to attend school outside their village. Another reason was that women were considered inferior to men according to Hmong traditional conventions. Parents would keep girls at home to work on the land and only boys had the opportunity for school, so many middle-aged and

older women remained uneducated. Some women attended literacy classes and have learned how to read and write in Thai later on. But there still are a few old Hmong women who cannot speak Thai.

Hmong women’s access to education has improved over the past 20 years. In Thailand, education is compulsory up to the sixth grade. Today there seems to be no discrimination against girls in continuing their education beyond the compulsory level. This is because socio-economic development and a shift in the economic system have changed the educational attitudes of the Hmong. Many parents express that, if possible, they would like to support their sons and daughters furthering their education. Hmong villagers perceive that higher education will bring in higher income and better occupations. They are eager that their children find a good job in the city and not follow an agricultural way of life. Even though there are primary schools in the villages that are free of charge where the students pay only about 200 Baht for books and notebooks per term, the tuition is 1600 Baht per term in the primary school of town.

There is also a middle school in the Khun Krang village, enrolment figures are found in Table 5. Some Hmong parents send their children to primary and middle schools in Chiang Mai city and other provinces. In Khun Krang, about 100 primary and middle students go outside the village to study. In Maesa Mai, some primary students also go to Mae Rim District or Chiang Mai city to study. One reason for this is the lack of quality in village schools. Another reason is parents want their children to adapt to mainstream society early in order that they may have a better chance to pursue higher levels of education. To send children away from the home village for their education demonstrates the parents’ determination to provide a good education for their children.

Nowadays, there is an increase in the number of Hmong women who attend college and university. For example, before 1998 there were no females from Measa Mai village who attended university, but now there are several female undergraduate students from this village. Most of the students go to university by taking out loans. These students will begin to pay back their loans two years after graduation, paying one percent interest on loans with a 15 year

Table 4. Level of formal education in Maesa Mai village (Leepreecha, 2001, p. 148).

Education	Male	Female	Total
Never enrolled in school	300	434	734
Preschool	35	30	65
Primary school	351	261	612
Secondary school	98	51	149
Vocational college	16	6	22
University	9	0	9
Total	809	782	1,591

term. This practice of loans is helpful for students from poor families when they want to pursue higher education. The Thai government and non-governmental organisations also provide scholarship funds and welfare schools for children who have good achievement but are short of money. These measures have promoted further educational development for tribe women. However, though Hmong women have equal opportunity to continue education beyond the compulsory years, the fact remains that the rate of educational attainment for Hmong female students is lower than that of male students in the middle school and university.

Factors that limit education for Hmong females

(1) The economic condition of the household

Though most households in advanced agricultural villages can afford the fee for children’s further education, and many parents also express a willingness to support daughters to continue their higher education, it is observed that girls from well-off households have greater opportunity to continue higher education than those from economically disadvantaged households. For example, in Khun Krang village the only female graduate student was from a well-off household. Another girl in the same village wanted to continue her education after graduating from secondary school, but she had to give up this plan because her family was poor.

(2) Family economic necessity for girl labour

If a girl is the eldest child in the family she has to sacrifice her educational opportunity since she is burdened with a heavy work load.

Table 5. Students numbers, Khun Krang village school (Khun Krang school statistics April, 2004).

Education	Male	Female	Total
Preschool	53	51	104
Primary school	134	103	237
First grade	26	15	41
Second grade	23	22	45
Third grade	21	19	40
Fourth grade	19	16	35
Fifth grade	23	14	37
Sixth grade	22	15	37
Middle school	59	52	111
First grade	29	23	52
Second grade	19	18	37
Third grade	11	11	22
Total	246	206	452

(3) Traditional conventions is an obstacle for girls to continue their education

Like the Miao (Hmong) areas in China, the conventional ideas that “marrying early, bearing early, and having many children are blessings” are also popular in the Hmong community in Thailand. Many girls just finish primary school or lower middle school and leave school for marriage. It is a common phenomenon in the villages that Hmong girls at the age of 14 or 15 are married and have one or more children before the age of 20. Marrying early is also popular for Hmong in Western countries. Lynch, in her writing about Hmong in America, points out that: “Teenage females bound for college often expressed conflict over delaying their marriage to get an education ... Teenage females realise that Hmong American men are often hesitant to marry women with higher levels of education than their own” (Lynch, 1999, p. 56). Based on the author’s field research findings, the marriage age of Hmong girls is related to their level of education. The girls who have a higher level of education may marry late. In the two research communities there are 12 girls aged above 25 years who are unmarried. Of these a few have higher educational levels.

(4) School achievement and interest in education for girls

Parents claim that children’s unwillingness is a major factor for discontinuing their schooling. Some girls stated that they did not want to continue their education due to low academic achievement.

(5) Educational level of the head of household influences girls education

Uneducated parents don’t attach importance to education for daughters.

(6) Employment opportunities appear to be the important factor

Some young people expressed that they did not want to pursue higher education because their friends who graduated from university had not found jobs. The fear of low returns from educational investment made them give up on furthering their education.

Adult education for Hmong women

Adult education is a relevant and appropriate way for the Hmong who live in the traditional community. This kind of education includes teaching cultural knowledge and training in vocational skills, and is outside the school system or in conjunction with formal schooling. Some young Hmong women have to stop attending school after finishing compulsory education because of various reasons. Due to the change of social circumstance, these women are eager to pursue

continuing education. Adult education programmes in town give them a chance to study, and they can spend their spare time going to school without neglecting work in the fields and at home. Some single women pursue a higher diploma as they are encouraged by their friends. Some women hope to at least complete high school. Some married women are also eager to learn useful knowledge through adult education in the villages. There was an adult class in Maesa Mai village. The class was opened in late 2003 and 10 women registered. They were aged from over 30 years to more than 50 years. They had a class once a week on Sunday from 9:00am to 3:00pm. They attended the class to learn basic skills in writing and reading Thai, though they could speak and understand Thai. It is useful to learn Thai in order to do business outside the village. In adult school women also learn some elementary knowledge of sanitation and health, environmental protection, raising children and traditional herbal medicine. In Maesa Mai village 20 women cultivated, as a collective, a herbal medicine garden. These women could then pass on their knowledge of herbal medicine to others. Women realise that education gives them knowledge and advantages in society.

From the author’s field research findings, drug crimes are related to educational level. A few years ago there were over 100 drug addicts and drug dealers in Maesa Mai village. Among of them, 33 people were females aged from teenagers to 50 years and over. These individuals had low education levels or were uneducated. The reason they were involved in drug crime was often influenced by their family members.

Vocational training for Hmong women

Vocational training is required to change lifestyles and enhance skills for making a living. During the last three decades the integration of women into development has occurred, opening up social spaces for them to participate in and gain the benefits from development programmes. Just as with other hill tribes, Hmong women have more accesses to other education supported by different levels of government. The following is one case. The vocational training programme on tailoring was operated in Maesa Mai village in the spring of 2004. This project was supported by the Chiang Mai provincial government. Its primary objective was to promote women’s skills thereby increasing opportunity for greater income. Thirty women applicants, aged below 40 years, attended this training class. Their educational level ranged from never attending school to tenth grade. Each group consisted of 10 trainees. Trainees with excellent and with poor skills were arranged in the same group.

The training schedule included two stages. The first one was 88 days of learning tailoring skills. Every trainee during this training period got 82 Baht recompense per day. The second stage was 100 days,

during which time the trainees practiced sewing. Each trainee during this training period was issued 50 Baht per day. Any additional income depended on the quality and quantity of their production. Payment for trainees was issued according to one's turn out for work. One consideration was that trainees could leave if they had to look after their children's needs or other immediate household responsibilities during training. The teacher, the machinery and the cloth were provided by the government. The teacher was a Thai woman from town. She said that she had taught technology of tailoring in other ethnic group villages. After each training completion, training organisations would keep in contact with trainees and provide market information for them. Most trainees felt their skill was enhanced through training and it was useful to their life. In addition to tailoring, advanced flower cultivation technology and the art of flower arrangement were offered by the vocational training programme. Vocational training raised women's sense of self-worth and enhanced their ability to adjust to social and economic change. From their vocational training women learned how to make traditional dress and personal adornments for tourism, not only to increase income, but also to show Hmong culture. It has proven a good way to adapt to socio-economic change and protect traditional knowledge. All these training activities provide Hmong women with new opportunities to change the social and economic condition of themselves, their families, and their communities.

■ Education about Hmong knowledge

The Hmong have been subjected to ethnic discrimination. In Thailand, young Hmong living in the city attempt to conceal their ethnic identity by adopting lowland Thai culture and ignoring their own culture. In the village there were very few young people who paid attention to Hmong knowledge and the way to conduct rituals. Elder Hmong were concerned that Hmong culture would be eventually lost. Therefore, in Maesa Mai village, Hmong cultural study courses have been designed to transfer knowledge from elderly to young people. For example, courses were established on how to play the reed pipes, wedding songs, funeral hymns, and the dispensing of herbal medicine. However, learning related to spiritual rituals was taught in the traditional way only to men.

■ Social change and women's status

Hmong social change may result from development programmes and other broader social forces. The implementation of the Royal Development Projects and the Thai government's integration policy has had great effect on the lifeways of the Hmong. Traditional

swidden agriculture has been abandoned. Modern agricultural technology has been introduced into Hmong communities. Poppy growing has been replaced by cash crops in Hmong villages. Hmong are no longer migratory, and have taken up a full and permanent village way of life. Roads have been built to reach every Hmong village. Many households own modern vehicles such as pick-up trucks and motorcycles. It is convenient to travel to town. Villagers often drive trucks or motorcycles to the fields to work. Water-pipe systems, electricity and health centers have been provided. Since the 1970s Thailand has made great progress in primary compulsory education in the countryside, including hill tribal communities. Nowadays it is easy to find schools in Hmong villages. Educational rights no longer belong only to men. Hmong women also have equal opportunities in education.

In the past, Hmong women were restricted within the private sphere of the family. They couldn't easily leave their homes and villages except for special cases such as taking children to see the doctor. It was uncommon to find Hmong women in Chiang Mai city, but today many Hmong women trade in the Night Bazaar and Weekend Market in Chiang Mai as well as throughout the country. Some young Hmong businesswomen speak not only Thai, but also a little English, Chinese and Japanese when they are dealing with clients. They have become good business people.

The reasons Hmong women have become involved in business

For the Hmong, cultural support for high fertility leads to an increase in population which adds to the pressures on land. Moreover, some villages are located in national forest protected areas. In order to protect natural resources and the environment, as well as supplement household incomes, it is necessary to promote non-agricultural occupations for the villagers. Capitalism and a market economy have integrated the Hmong into this mechanism, making them rely on commerce and business (Hengsuwan, 2003). Further, before tourism developed in Chiang Mai, a few foreign traders went to Hmong villages to purchase traditional Hmong clothing and handicrafts. Hence Hmong villagers knew that their traditional culture was an economic resource. When the Chiang Mai Night Market was just set up in the early 1970s, a few Hmong women began to trade in the market. Furthermore, with the development of tourism in northern Thailand, more and more tourists have been attracted by Hmong's excellent clothing and handicrafts. This has provided a good chance for Hmong women to make money. Hmong women are actively participating in business, contributing to the sustenance of their families.

Hmong women's trade ways

(1) Trade in local villages

In tourist villages, such as in Khun Krang village, women need not leave home, but rather may sell their goods in the market alongside the road. This roadside market has been operating for the past 17 years. More than 50 families own their booth in this market. Sellers are mostly female and the oldest one is over 70 years old. They sell all kinds of handicrafts and local agricultural products such as flowers, vegetables and fruit.

(2) Trade in Chiang Mai city

Most of Hmong women trading in the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar come from Maesa Mai and Doi Pui villages. Taking Maesa Mai as a case, some Hmong villagers have been selling all kinds of souvenirs in the market since the 1970s. Now most of the businesswomen still live in the village. They travel between Chiang Mai city and the village every day, working in the village during the day and trading in the Night Market in the evening. These Hmong women who are engaged in business are farmers as well as traders. However, some women have moved from their village and live nearby in Chiang Mai city.

(3) Trade in other cities

Some women from the village carry out trading as a permanent occupation. They settle down in the lowlands and often go to Bangkok or other cities to trade. Today about 100 Maesa Mai villagers live in southern Thailand. Some of them are married women and have moved away from their home villages with their families to engage in trade on a full-time basis.

Educational development for Hmong women and their important economic role in society are beneficial to improve their social status and that of their families. Some Hmong women, such as female representatives elected by the villagers, have participated in deciding important affairs of the community. Women's social status can be viewed through the decision-making processes in the family. In some families, wives can join their husbands to decide on important family affairs and some men expressed that they would like to accept their wives' good advice.

■ Conclusion

The traditional subsistence economy of the Hmong has undergone change. Some features of change include education, information, new kinds of crops, and a strong engagement with the market economy. These changes have transformed the Hmong way

of earning a living. Hmong women are no longer restricted within the private sphere of family. They are now actively involved in business and are playing an important role in economic development. They also participate in the judgments and decision-making in the family and community. However, the bargaining power of each woman varies because of different conditions. For illiterate women, they might not think much about power, but rather emphasise traditional gender ideologies or moral norms concerning gender relations. Their status has not changed much since power and control remains mostly in their husband's hands. For educated younger women, their social status is undergoing a great change since they have brought home new concepts regarding gender roles. Educated Hmong women have greater confidence, more enthusiasm and an enhanced ability to earn a living. Participation in higher education has been a catalyst for the evolution of Hmong identity and for greater participation of Hmong women in modern society. This study has brought to light some issues of economic development and social change for the Hmong. However, additional studies into the topic need to be carried out in order to determine future benefits of education for the Hmong and its ongoing impacts to the social and economic condition of Hmong women and Hmong communities in Thailand.

■ Acknowledgements

First, I thankfully acknowledge that the Asian Scholarship Foundation offered me an opportunity to conduct fieldwork about the Hmong people in Thailand. The paper is based on the research project in Thailand. The completion of this project leaves me in debt to many people, including Mr Keith Clemenger, Director of the Institute of International Education, Beijing Office, who suggested that I research an ethnic minority group in Southeast Asia. I would like to thank him for his encouragement and suggestion. I also thank the scholarship committee in Beijing who approved my research proposal and gave me their helpful suggestions and comments. I am grateful that the National Research Council of Thailand kindly allowed me to conduct research in Thailand. In Chiang Mai University, Dr Paiboon Hengsuwan gave me some information and shared with me his Hmong village insights. I would like to make special mention of Dr Prasit Leepreecha, Hmong expert who works at the Social Research Institute of Chiang Mai University, for his suggestions and assistance in finding a research site. He was the first to introduce me to the Hmong villagers. There have been many Hmong people who have contributed to my work. During my fieldwork in Maesa Mai village and Khun Klang village, villagers kindly gave me their cooperation and support for all the information I required. I am deeply grateful to

them for help. Mr Yang Den Men, who was a student in Women Studies Centre of Chiang Mai University, gave useful assistance as an interpreter during my stay in Hmong village. Finally, I am grateful to the Editorial Board from the Oodgeroo Unit of the Queensland University of Technology and *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* for their interest in my research paper.

■ References

- Cooper, R., Tapp, N., Yia Lee, G., & Schwoer-Kohl, G. (1996). *The Hmong*. Bangkok: Artasia Press.
- Donnelly, N. D. (1994). *Changing lives of refugee Hmong women*. Seattle, DC: University of Washington Press.
- Hengsuwan, P. (2003, July). *Contradictions on the struggles over resources and contesting terrain of ethnic groups on the hill in protected area, Chom Thong, Chiang Mai*. Paper presented at the International Conference "Politics of the Commons: Articulating Development and Strengthening Local Practices" organized by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- Kamnuansilpa, P., Kunstadter, P., & Auamkul, N. (1987). *Hill tribe health and family planning: Results of a survey of Hmong (Meo) and Karen households in Northern Thailand*. Bangkok, Thailand: Family Health Division, Department of Health.
- Leepreecha, P. (2001). *Kinship and identity among Hmong in Thailand*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Washington, Seattle.
- Peplau, L. A., Veniegas, R. C., Taylor, P. L., & DeBro, S. C. (1999). Socio-cultural perspectives on the lives of women and men. In L. A. Peplau, S. Champan, S. C. DeBro, C. Rosemary, R. C. Veniegas & P. L. Taylor (Eds.), *Gender, culture, and ethnicity* (pp. 23-37). London: Mayfield.
- Peplau, L. A., Wade, C., & Tavis, C. (1999). Gender and culture. In L. A. Peplau, S. Champan DeBro, R. C. Veniegas & P. L. Taylor, (Eds.), *Gender, culture, and ethnicity* (pp. 15-22). London: Mayfield.
- Symonds, P. V. (1991). *Cosmology and the cycle of life: Hmong views of birth, death and gender in a mountain village in Northern Thailand*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.
- Tapp, N. (1985). *Categories of change and continuity among the White Hmong of Northern Thailand*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, London.
- Tribal Research Institute. (2002). *Tribal population summary in Thailand*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: University of Chiang Mai.

■ About the author

Peng Xuefang is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. Her academic interests include socio-cultural anthropology, women and gender studies, minorities and education. She has been invited to attend several international conferences and has delivered academic presentations in Canada, Italy, Australia and Thailand. From December 2003 to September 2004, she was the recipient of a ASIA Fellow Award to undertake the research on Hmong people in Chiang Mai University, Thailand. From January to October 2007 she received a grant from the Canada-China Scholarly Exchange Program to carry out research into Aboriginal people in Canada at the University of British Columbia and the First Nations University of Canada.