

# **The Religious Life of Hmong Protestants in the Central Highlands of Vietnam**

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## Deutsche Zusammenfassung

### Das religiöse Leben der Hmong-Protestanten im zentralen Hochland Vietnams

Seit der Übernahme des Landes ist es eine Tatsache, dass die vietnamesische Regierung für ihre Politik und ihre Maßnahmen in Bezug auf Religion und ethnische Minderheiten stark kritisiert wird. Es wird angenommen, dass die „Religionsfreiheit“ erheblich eingeschränkt wird und dass „das Leben und die Stimmen der marginalisierten Minderheiten“ weitgehend als selbstverständlich angesehen werden. Durch die Untersuchung eines spezifischen Falles, der beide gegebenen Bedenken abdeckt, bietet diese Studie Einblicke in der Art und Weise, wie eine ethnische Minderheitengruppe - die Hmong - ihren religiösen Glauben seit der allerersten Massenkonzersion zu einer westlichen Religion aktiv auslebt, obwohl die Härten, mit denen sie in verschiedenen Lebensbereichen konfrontiert sind, zahllos, ungeschaut und unsagbar sind.

Während die Bekehrung der Hmong zum Protestantismus von der Regierung und ihrem Volk, das die traditionelle Religion beibehält, vor allem in der Anfangszeit erheblich behindert wurde, ist ihr religiöses Leben nicht genau untersucht worden, was für Außenstehende grundlegend wichtig ist, um sie besser verstehen zu können. Ich entscheide mich daher für eine qualitative Forschung unter diesen Konvertiten und ermächtige sie, ihre Geschichten mitzuteilen, damit sie aufmerksam angehört werden können, um ein komplexes und detailliertes Wissen über diese marginalisierte Gruppe zu erlangen. Insbesondere wende ich die Methode der Ethnographie an, bei der intensiven Feldarbeit durchgeführt wird. Laut Ansicht vieler Wissenschaftler ist eine solche Methodik der beste Weg, um „die gelebte Realität bzw. die Performanz der Religion“<sup>1</sup> einer Gemeinschaft zu erforschen, die grundsätzlich gemeinsamen Muster von Werten, Verhaltensweisen, Glauben und Sprache<sup>2</sup> aufweist. Im Fall von Vietnam wird sogar davor gewarnt, dass langfristige Feldforschung in „naturalistischen Lebensumgebungen und in den Sprachen der untersuchten Völker“ unter ethnischen Völkern sehr gering ist<sup>3</sup>. Daher ist die Ethnographie die am besten geeignete Zugangsweise für diese aktuelle Forschung im Bereich der Religionswissenschaft. Meine Feldforschung fand hauptsächlich in einem Schwerpunktdorf namens Yagad im zentralen Hochland statt, und ich unternahm mehrere Exkursionen zu einigen anderen Hmong-Dörfern in Vietnam, um

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Harvey, „Participant Observation,“ in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 217.

<sup>2</sup> G Scott Davis, *Believing and Acting: The Pragmatic Turn in Comparative Religion and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3. John W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 68.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Taylor, „Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam,“ *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 3 (2008): 25.

vergleichende Daten zu sammeln und die Gedanken und Stimmen von mehr als 100 Teilnehmern zu würdigen.

In Bezug auf die spezifischen Datenerhebungstechniken habe ich unter Berücksichtigung der Forschungspopulation die Schlüsseltechniken Tiefeninterviews, teilnehmende Beobachtung und Fokusgruppen flexibel verwendet. Ferner nutzte ich das Sammeln von Regierungs- und Kirchenberichten sowie lokalen Forschungen, sowohl veröffentlichten als auch unveröffentlichten als eine wichtige Aufgabe, um wertvolle Textquellen zu erhalten. Diese zahlreichen Datenerfassungstechniken wurden durch „Feldnotizen“ unterstützt, die ich regelmäßig anfertigte, um den komplizierten Forschungsprozess an den Feldstandorten zu verfolgen, an denen sich „hoch politisch sensible Forschungspopulationen“ aufhalten. In der Tat ist es in Vietnam schwierig, die Erlaubnis zu bekommen, sich bei den Hmong-Hochlandbewohnern aufzuhalten. Es ist auch üblich, dass der Forscher abgeschoben werden kann und seine gesammelten Daten jederzeit von der Polizei beschlagnahmt werden können. Daher habe ich mich im Feld vorsichtig verhalten, um Daten zu sammeln und sie gleichzeitig zu bewahren.

Strukturell beginnt die Dissertation mit Teil I Einleitung, in dem erklärt wird, wie die Forschung definiert und konzipiert ist und wie die gesamte Forschung methodisch bearbeitet wird. Teil II befasst sich mit den Hmong und ihren Begegnungen mit dem Christentum auf regionaler und globaler Ebene, wobei sich ein größerer Teil der empirischen Daten auf ihre derzeitige Konversion zum Protestantismus in Vietnam konzentriert. Teil III schließlich, mit dem Titel „Die Hmong-Protestanten in Vietnam: Eine ethnographische Studie“, untersucht ausführlich das religiöse Leben der Hmong-Konvertiten in einem zentralen Dorf des zentralen Hochlands. Dieser Teil überprüft bestehende Schlussfolgerungen über die Massenmigration der Hmong nach Süden in den frühen 1990er Jahren und bietet eine detaillierte Untersuchung ihrer religiösen Praktiken und Glaubensvorstellungen. Außerdem werden die Auswirkungen des Protestantismus auf das Leben dieser ethnischen Minderheiten aufgezeigt, wobei deutlich wird, wie ihre ethnischen und religiösen Identitäten verhandelt wurden, was schließlich zu einer rekonstruierten Identität als „Hmong-Protestanten“ führt. Die wichtigsten Ergebnisse sind im Folgenden zusammengefasst.

Als die Hmong in den späten 1800er Jahren aus dem Mutterland China nach Vietnam kamen, lebten sie Berichten zufolge nur in den höchsten Bergregionen des Nordens, was sie relativ weit von der Bevölkerung im Tiefland trennte. Nach 1960 wurde dieses Lebensmuster teilweise durch die Migrationspolitik der vietnamesischen Regierung durchbrochen. Seit 1990 sind die



ersten Migrationen der Hmong nach Südvietnam dokumentiert, was schließlich zu einem historischen demographischen Wandel dieser ethnischen Minderheitengruppe im Lande führt. Diese südwärts gerichteten Massenmigrationswellen sind, wie meine Forschung zeigt, eher religiös als wirtschaftlich motiviert, wie sie interpretiert wurden. Fast alle Hmong-Einwanderer im zentralen Hochland sind statistisch gesehen „Protestanten“.

In Bezug auf die Konversion der Hmong zum Protestantismus, die in den späten 1980er Jahren begann, zeigen die gesammelten Erzählungen, dass die vietnamesischen Hmong, die sich für eine Konversion entschieden haben, nicht von irgendwelchen äußeren Akteuren oder Interessen gesteuert wurden, sondern aktiv nach Wegen suchten, ihren neuen Glauben kennenzulernen und ihn zu stärken. Nachdem sie etwa 1986 zufällig die Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) erreicht hatten, versuchten sie, das zu praktizieren, was ein Hmong-Pastor der FEBC, namens Vam Txoov Lis, ihnen im Radio gesagt hatte. Die Hmong waren zunächst verwirrt, da sie nur passiv dem Radio zuhören konnten, anstatt direkt geführt zu werden. Diese Tatsache führte dazu, dass ein Teil von ihnen fälschlicherweise dem Katholizismus folgte oder/und sich von „falschen“ Missionaren überzeugen ließ. In den frühen 1990er Jahren, nachdem einige Hmong-Pioniere Briefe an Pastor Lis geschrieben und schließlich seine Antwort erhalten hatten, die sie dazu brachte, eine protestantische Kirche in Hanoi zu suchen, kamen Hmong in verschiedenen Dörfern Gruppe für Gruppe zum Büro der EVC-N (Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North). Ihre enthusiastische Einstellung und Entschlossenheit waren in der Tat die Schlüsselfaktoren, die ihnen halfen, heute offiziell als Hmong-Protestanten in Vietnam anerkannt zu werden.

Obwohl ihre Bekehrung nicht nur von den politischen Machthabern, sondern auch von ihren Familien und ihrem Volk stark behindert, unterdrückt und sogar in beleidigender Weise abgelehnt wurde, haben die Hmong-Protestanten durch „Versuche und Irrtum“ eine Lösung gefunden. Sie waren entschlossen, neue Orte zu suchen, um sich niederzulassen und ein neues Leben aufzubauen. Nachdem sie erste Informationen über die Region des Zentralen Hochlands aus verschiedenen Quellen erhalten hatten, wie z.B. über nationale Sender im Radio und ehemalige Hmong-Soldaten, die während des Vietnamkriegs für ihren Armeeeinsatz in dieser Region geblieben waren, begannen viele männliche Hmong aus verschiedenen nördlichen Dörfern, meist Haushaltsvorstände, in verschiedene Teile des Zentralen Hochlands zu reisen, um die Gegend zu sondieren und auszuwählen, in die sie mit ihrer ganzen Familie ziehen würden.

Die Prozesse der Hmong, neues Land zu suchen und sich niederzulassen, waren nicht einfach. Sie bekamen an abgelegenen Orten tödliche Krankheiten, es fehlte an Nahrung oder sie wurden von der lokalen Regierung abgewiesen. Meine Studie zeigt, dass die Hmong-Migranten versuchten, auf verschiedenen Ebenen um die Erlaubnis der Regierung für ihre Migration in den Süden zu bitten, anstatt, wie in der Literatur häufig angenommen, „vor der Regierung wegzulaufen“. Sie kamen nach Hanoi, um die höchsten politischen Beamten um Unterstützung zu bitten, nachdem sie von den lokalen Regierungen in den Abwanderungsorten abgelehnt worden waren. Auch nach ihrer Ankunft im zentralen Hochland um 1995 versuchten die Hmong-Migranten, die lokalen Führer zu kontaktieren, um eine Niederlassungserlaubnis zu bitten. Sie bekamen schließlich die legale Erlaubnis, in der neuen Nachbarschaft zu bleiben. Während einige Wissenschaftler diese Hmong-Einwanderer dafür verantwortlich machen, dass die abgelegenen Wälder des zentralen Hochlandes verschwinden, zeigen mehrere lokale Berichte, auf die ich zugreifen konnte, dass die Wälder schon vor der Zeit, als die Hmong-Leute kamen, für kommerzielle Zwecke zerstört wurden. Außerdem könnten unausgesprochene oder stillschweigende Zugeständnisse“, die es Holzunternehmern erlauben, die Wälder auszubeuten, der entscheidende Grund dafür sein, dass illegale Holzammelaktionen auch heute noch in den Hmong-Siedlungen zu finden sind. Es ist also offensichtlich, dass die Hmong nicht der einzige und bedeutende Faktor sind, der zu einer erheblichen Abholzung in der Region führte.

Im neuen Land erhielten die Hmong-Einwanderer zunächst wenig Unterstützung von ihren lokalen Nachbarn. Nach ein paar Jahrzehnten haben sie jedoch eigenständig eine starke Gemeinschaft aufgebaut, sowohl politisch als auch wirtschaftlich, und sind zu vertrauenswürdigen, freundlichen Nachbarn und Kunden für Menschen anderer ethnischer Gruppen geworden, die in einem gemeinsamen Ort leben. Dank flexibler und kluger Führung, des Bewusstseins, Neuankömmlinge zu sein, und einer positiven Einstellung haben sich die Hmong-Protestanten im Brennpunktdorf erfolgreich an die fremde Gesellschaft angepasst und sind dennoch in der Lage, ihre relative Autonomie und Freiheit zu bewahren. Sie leben immer noch konzentriert so, wie es ihre vorherigen Generationen getan haben. Sie führen ein Dorf, in dem alle Anführer ihre Leute sind - einheimische Hmong, in dem die einheimische Sprache zu einer effektiven Barriere wird, die sie bis zu einem gewissen Grad vor Außenstehenden schützt. Es ist auch eine Tatsache, dass die Hmong-Jugend heute lieber in bequemerer Gegenden lebt, anstatt in den höchsten Bergregionen Vietnams zu wohnen, wie ihre Vorfahren es taten.

Was ihr religiöses Leben betrifft, so waren fast alle Hmong-Einwanderer Protestanten und gründeten gleich nach ihrer Ansiedlung im Jahr 1995 verschiedene kleine Gruppen, um ihren Glauben zu praktizieren. Zwei Jahre später versuchten die Hmong dank der Informationen, die

sie von ihrer früheren Kirche, der Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECV-N), erhalten hatten, mit den Leitern der Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South (ECV-S)<sup>4</sup> Kontakt aufzunehmen, die sie dann bei der Organisation und Durchführung von Gottesdiensten enorm unterstützten. Dennoch waren sowohl ihre Konversion zum Protestantismus als auch die ECV-S zu dieser Zeit rechtlich nicht anerkannt. So mussten ihre religiösen Aktivitäten im Geheimen stattfinden. Dank der reformierten Religionspolitik der vietnamesischen Regierung, der Unterstützung durch internationale Aktivisten und vor allem der kontinuierlichen Arbeit der Hmong wurde die Hmong-Gruppe Yagad CMA im Jahr 2007 anerkannt. In den Jahren danach wurden die Hmong-Konvertiten jedoch immer noch von der Regierung gezwungen, erweiterte Teile der Hauskirche zu entfernen, die sie angefertigt hatten, um den Anhängern zu helfen, genug Platz zu haben, um der Kirche beizutreten. Erst 2012 wurde der Yagad-Kirche schließlich erlaubt, eine neue Hauskirche zu bauen, obwohl deren Kapazität von Anfang an nicht für alle Anhänger ausreichte. Dieses Phänomen des „fehlenden Platzes für die Anhänger, um die Kirche zu besuchen“ ist bei allen Hmong-Hauskirchen, die ich in ganz Vietnam besucht habe, üblich.

Nachdem die Yagad Hmong-Gemeinde Mitglied der ECV-S wurde, wurden mehrere Hmong dabei unterstützt, eine theologische Ausbildung in der Stadt Buôn Mê Thuột in der Provinz Đắk Lắk und Hồ Chí Minh Stadt zu besuchen. Einige werden Pastoren, entweder ordiniert oder ernannt, einige sind Missionare, und einige studieren ihre Religion in Kurzzeitkursen weiter. Auch die örtliche Gemeinde wurde aufgebaut und verbessert, die heute relativ stabil und gut organisiert ist. Auffallend ist, dass die Hmong-Gemeinde, obwohl sie sich im Wesentlichen an der ECV-S orientiert, grundsätzlich unabhängig ist, nicht nur in finanzieller Hinsicht, sondern auch in der Art und Weise, wie sie ihren christlichen Glauben am liebsten ausleben. Im Unterschied zu anderen Hauskirchen gibt es zahlreiche tägliche Gebetsgruppen, die über die ganze Region verteilt sind und es jedem Anhänger ermöglichen, regelmäßig an religiösen Aktivitäten teilzunehmen. Außerdem sind die Gemeinde- und Gruppenleiter engagiert, kenntnisreich und erfahren, von denen man sagt, dass sie die Menschen enorm unterstützen. Es werden wöchentlich, mittwochmorgens, sonntagmorgens und nachmittags Versammlungen angeboten, die für jeden die zugänglichste religiöse Umgebung schaffen. Im Gegenzug ist die Kirchenbeteiligung der Hmong, einschließlich der Teilnahme an formellen

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<sup>4</sup> Sowohl die ECV-N- als auch die ECV-S-Einrichtungen wurden ursprünglich von der Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) - einer amerikanischen protestantischen Konfession - unterstützt. In Vietnam werden ECV-N und ECV-S auch als CMA bezeichnet.

Gottesdiensten und anderen religiösen Aktivitäten, relativ hoch, so dass die Kirche nicht nur voll von Menschen ist, sondern viele auch vor der Kirche am Gottesdienst teilnehmen müssen.

Wie andere Christen feiern auch die Hmong-Protestanten wichtige religiöse Ereignisse wie Weihnachten und Ostern. Allerdings scheinen diese Menschen das Neujahrsfest nach dem Mondkalender zu bevorzugen - das traditionell größte vietnamesische Fest im Jahreskreis. Diese Vorliebe impliziert keine politischen oder religiösen Anreize, sondern es geht um die „verlängerte Auszeit“, die es den Menschen erlaubt, mehr Pausen mit ihren Lieben zu haben. Inzwischen ist Weihnachten das wichtigste christliche Ereignis. Hmong-Konvertiten brauchen etwa einen Monat, um sich auf verschiedene kirchliche Aktivitäten zu diesem Anlass vorzubereiten. Die Frauen sind auch damit beschäftigt, ein neues traditionelles Hmong-Kleidungsset zu kaufen, für sich selbst zu nähen oder bei einem professionellen Schneider zu bestellen. Dennoch schmücken sie ihre Häuser und ihre Nachbarschaft nicht speziell für religiöse Anlässe, wie es die meisten westlichen Christen tun. Auch wird unter den vietnamesischen Hmong kein Brauch des „roten Umschlags“ durchgeführt, der in der Kultur ihres Gastlandes üblich ist.

Ereignisse des Lebenszyklus zeigen eine deutliche Veränderung der spirituellen Praktiken der Hmong-Protestanten im Vergleich zu denen der traditionellen Hmong. Während andere Hmong-Protestanten an anderen Orten in Südostasien als „Halb-Gläubige“ gelten, die ihre traditionelle Religion nicht ganz aufgeben, werden in Yagad keine schamanistischen Rituale durchgeführt und bei protestantischen Zeremonien wie Hochzeiten und Beerdigungen gibt es weder frisches Tierblut noch alkoholische Getränke. Auch praktizieren diese Protestanten, anders als einige ihrer gleichgesinnten Katholiken, keine in der traditionellen Religion definierten Tabus. Die Hmong-Konvertiten ziehen es vor, medizinische Gesundheitsvorsorge sowie Heilungen auf Kräuterbasis in Kombination mit Heilungsgebeten für ihre Krankheiten zu wählen, anstatt traditionelle oder schamanistische Rituale zu praktizieren. Sie praktizieren jedoch keine Exerzitien und/oder Meditationssitzungen, wie es viele westliche Christen tun.

Meine Forschung zeigt außerdem, dass religiöse Führer ihren Leuten nicht bei der Ausübung von Geschäften (*lòm kinh té*) helfen, wie es in der Literatur als „wirtschaftlicher Anreiz“ für diejenigen beschrieben wird, die konvertieren. Die Beziehungen zwischen den religiösen Führern der Hmong und den einfachen Anhängern sind fair und gleichberechtigt, was spirituelle Unterstützung und gegenseitiges Verständnis in der Gemeinschaft am ehesten möglich macht. Inzwischen fehlt den Yagad-Kirchenführern sogar oft die Zeit, Landwirtschaft zu betreiben und ihren Lebensunterhalt wie andere Dorfbewohner zu verdienen. Sie erhalten tiefgreifende

Unterstützung von ihren Ehepartnern, anstatt finanzielle Hilfe von außen zu bekommen, wie manche Außenstehende vielleicht bezweifeln. Es ist eine Tatsache, dass abgesehen von den konfessionellen Kontakten innerhalb der ECV-S es zwischen den Hmong Yagader und Hmong in Übersee keine politischen und religiösen Verbindungen bestehen.

Was den religiösen Glauben anbelangt, so ist unter den verschiedenen internen und externen Faktoren der einflussreichste, der den Glauben der gewöhnlichen Hmong-Protestanten auf regelmäßiger Basis grundlegend prägt, die Rolle ihrer religiösen Führer, ungeachtet von deren theologischen Zertifikaten oder Abschlüssen. Da sie in einer geschlossenen Gemeinschaft leben, verlassen sich Hmong-Konvertiten in erster Linie auf ihre Führer, um etwas über ihren Glauben zu erfahren. Die meisten gewöhnlichen Hmong-Anhänger glauben, dass die Gebete ihrer Führer aufgrund ihres besseren Verständnisses von Gottes Worten und der richtigen Art zu beten effizienter sind, nicht wegen irgendeiner übernatürlichen Macht, die religiöse Führer besitzen könnten. Einige religiöse Führer behaupten auch, dass ein Titel oder eine Position nicht dazu führt, dass das Gebet von jemandem besser funktioniert, es geht nur um den Glauben, den ein Gläubiger hat. Wenn es um das „kollektive Gebet“ geht, sind sich sowohl Leiter als auch Anhänger einig, dass es effektiver ist als ein individuelles. In der Zwischenzeit unterscheiden sich auch normale Anhänger darin, wie sie ihre auf dem Glauben basierenden Anliegen ausdrücken. Während zum Beispiel eifrige Bibelleser häufiger theologische Fragen stellen, bringen ungebildete Anhänger, hauptsächlich ältere Menschen, mehr Gebetsanliegen vor, obwohl sie sehr fromm sind.

Nach der Konvertierung zum Protestantismus ist die wesentliche Veränderung, die die Weltanschauung der Hmong am meisten rekonstruiert, „ihr Glaube an Gott und biblisch begründete Wahrheiten.“ Dieser Glaube verändert die Wahrnehmung von Geistern, welche die traditionellen Hmong seit Jahrtausenden begleitet oder belastet haben. Hmong-Konvertiten glauben nicht, dass ihre toten Vorfahren Geister sind. Sie nehmen nur an, dass es sich bei „Geistern“ um „böse Kräfte“ handelt, nicht um die Seelen der Verstorbenen, die in der lebenden Welt existieren und die Menschen dazu bringen können, sich von Gott (*ròi xa Chúa*) abzuwenden, indem sie ihren Glauben stören. Die Namen der Jenseitswelten variieren leicht von Individuum zu Individuum, doch die meisten von ihnen bestehen darauf, dass es zwei gegensätzliche Orte gibt, an die „gute“ Gottesanhänger und „schlechte“ Menschen nach dem Tod geschickt werden würden. Während die meisten Hmong-Protestanten glauben, dass „Gott gerecht ist“, so dass ihre verstorbenen Vorfahren in der Vergangenheit in gewisser Weise in den Himmel kommen konnten, denken einige, dass ihre Vorfahren nichts von Gott wussten und ihm nicht folgten, so dass sie nicht in den Himmel geschickt werden konnten. Trotzdem glauben

sie alle, dass Gott wiederkommen wird, aber wir Menschen können uns über den Zeitpunkt nicht sicher sein. Dementsprechend interpretieren die Hmong-Konvertiten Unglück und Krankheit auf der Grundlage dieser Wahrheiten und sagen, dass „böse Kräfte schlechte Dinge erschaffen“ und „gute Dinge das sind, was Gott auf menschliche Gebete antwortet. Viele Hmong glauben jedoch auch, dass Gott sie herausfordert, indem er ihnen das Leben auf verschiedene Weise schwermacht, z. B. indem er unerwünschte Antworten schickt. Keiner der Hmong-Protestanten gibt Gott die Schuld für Verluste. Die meisten von ihnen glauben, dass auch wenn Menschen auf unerklärliche Weise sterben, es Gottes Wille ist und wir Menschen schließlich bei Gott sein können, was nicht beängstigend ist.

Da sie für ihre Einfachheit im Denken und in der Lebensweise bekannt sind, scheinen die bekehrten Hmong auch in der Art und Weise, wie sie mit Gott kommunizieren, einzigartig zu sein. Sie „fühlen“ Gott eher in sichtbaren und wahrnehmbaren Erfahrungen als in abstrakten theologischen Konzepten und Theorien. Gottes Offenbarungen begegnen ihnen oft auf verschiedene Weise, z.B. durch „plötzliche Gedanken“, „Naturphänomene“, „heilende menschliche Beziehungen“, „heilende Wirksamkeit“, „Glück“ oder sogar durch „unerwünschte Reaktionen“. Offenbarungen passieren jedoch eher denjenigen, die an diese Möglichkeit glauben. In der Zwischenzeit kann der eigene religiöse Glaube dank „sozialer Interaktionen“ innerhalb und außerhalb der Gemeinschaft beträchtlich geformt/umgeformt und gestärkt werden, was sogar für diejenigen funktioniert, die bereits getauft sind, aber mit sich ringen. Unter den internen Interaktionen bestätigt sich einmal mehr die entscheidende Rolle der Hmong-“Erneuerer“ bei der Bekehrung ihres Volkes zum Protestantismus, wie es ihre Vorfahren in den 1950er Jahren in Laos taten; auch wenn solche vietnamesischen Hmong-“Erneuerer“ eher gewöhnliche Menschen sein können als solche, die eine einzigartige Position wie die eines Schamanen oder Politikers innehatten, wie ihre laotischen Pendanten.

Während einige Wissenschaftler hervorheben, dass die Hmong durch die Konversion zu einer westlich geprägten Religion ihre ethnische Identität und ihre traditionelle Kultur verlieren, was für die kommunistischen Führer Vietnams zu einem Beweis dafür geworden ist, ihre Konversion zu verhindern, zeigt diese Studie bemerkenswerterweise eine widersprüchliche Situation. Da die Hmong-Protestanten in die protestantischen Lehren eingetaucht sind, haben sich unter ihnen zahlreiche neue Werte etabliert. Diese Werte beziehen sich hauptsächlich auf „Geschlechterrollen und -normen“, „Ausgeglichenheit“, „Bräuche und Unterhaltungsaktivitäten“ und den „heiligen Sonntag“ und haben sich, wie untersucht, als positiv auf das Leben der Menschen ausgewirkt, was von der Regierung und akademischen Gelehrten weitgehend anerkannt wird. Außerdem ist es offensichtlich, dass die kritischen

ethnischen Identitätsmerkmale der Hmong, insbesondere „Kleidung“ und „Sprache“, im protestantischen Kontext noch besser erhalten bleiben. Außerdem wurde untersucht, dass einige traditionelle Aspekte und Charakteristika unter den Konvertiten immer noch vorhanden sind, wie z.B. diejenigen, die sich auf „das Patriarchat“, „Essen und Musik“ und einige „gemeinsame ethnische Persönlichkeiten“ beziehen. Dadurch konnte festgestellt werden, dass mehrere verbleibende Veränderungen und Probleme, die in der heutigen protestantischen Hmong-Gemeinschaft existieren, nicht die Folgen des „religiösen Wandels“ sind. Solche Veränderungen und Probleme betreffen u.a. höhere Ausbildungsmöglichkeiten und die Teilnahme an einer lohnabhängigen Wirtschaft. Genauso ist eine Vielzahl traditioneller Spiele und Feste nicht mehr vorhanden. Manche Hmong nennen als nachteilige Entwicklung auch, dass nun vorgezogen wird, in einer bequemen Nachbarschaft statt in den Bergen zu leben oder dass einige traditionelle und religiöse Werte in Frage gestellt werden, wodurch einige Bräuche verloren gegangen sind.

Insgesamt haben die Yagad-Hmong, nach mehr als zwanzig Jahren Leben im zentralen Hochland, nicht nur erfolgreich ihre Gemeinschaft aufgebaut und gestärkt, sondern leben auch in Harmonie mit ihren Mitbewohnern verschiedener ethnischer Herkunft. Ihre Toleranz in Bezug auf die „religiöse Wahl“ ist sowohl in ihren eigenen Familien als auch in der breiteren Gemeinschaft deutlich sichtbar. Es gibt keinen Druck auf Neuankömmlinge, die unbekehrt bleiben, oder auf die Hmong, die sich entscheiden, zu einer anderen religiösen Gruppe zu wechseln. Der „Wechsel zwischen den Konfessionen“ unter den Hmong-Protestanten geschieht nachweislich in einem freiwilligen und respektierten Prozess, nicht als „Gerangel um Anhänger“, wie es anderswo festgestellt wird. Verschiedene protestantische Hmong-Konfessionen koexistieren in einem gesunden Umfeld, das den Anhängern nicht nur mehr Möglichkeiten bietet, die für sie am besten geeignete Gruppe zu wählen, sondern auch Alternativen in bestimmten Fällen bietet, wenn die Menschen nur eine begrenzte Auswahl haben.

Was die „Religionsfreiheit“ als Menschenrecht angeht, so wird berichtet, dass die lokale Regierung heutzutage nicht mehr in religiöse Aktivitäten eingreift. Die Beamten besuchen nur noch selten Hmong-Konvertiten oder erteilen direkte Befehle, wie sie es früher taten. In besonderen Fällen werden nur die religiösen Führer zu einem Treffen gerufen. So ist es möglich, dass die gewöhnlichen Hmong-Protestanten in Yagad die Freiheit haben, ihren Glauben aufrechtzuerhalten und zu stärken, da sie in der Lage sind, verschiedene religiöse Ressourcen, die ihnen regelmäßig zur Verfügung stehen, ohne Probleme zu erhalten. Jedoch gibt es neben dem eingeschränkten Zugang zu Bibeln in der Hmong-Sprache und den

begrenzten Kirchenkapazitäten, die die Hmong daran hindern könnten, ihre Religion vollständig auszuüben, immer noch einige Kontrollen. Hmong-Missionare und Pastoren dürfen nur in ihrem jeweiligen Dorf, für das sie eine Registrierung haben, tätig sein. Mit anderen Worten: Jede Predigt außerhalb ihrer Nachbarschaft wird als illegal betrachtet. Außerdem müssen alle religiösen Veranstaltungen für das folgende Jahr bis zum 15. Oktober bei der lokalen Regierung angemeldet werden. Alle Veranstaltungen, die ohne Genehmigung stattfinden, sind ebenfalls ungesetzlich. Folglich ist die Religionsfreiheit für die Hmong in Yagad zwar relativ gewährleistet, dennoch sind ihnen Grenzen gesetzt. Die vietnamesische Regierung verhält sich zwar nicht feindselig gegenüber „fremden Religionen“ aufgrund von „ideologischen Unterschieden“, aber sie achtet besonders auf das, was als „politisch heikles Anliegen“ definiert wird.

Zusammenfassend lässt sich sagen, dass die jüngste Konversion der vietnamesischen Hmong zum Protestantismus und ihr religiöses Leben umstrittene Themen sind, zu denen die Regierungsführung, in- und ausländische Wissenschaftler und Menschenrechtsbeobachter in zahlreichen Punkten widersprüchliche Positionen vertreten, und dass es an intensiven Untersuchungen fehlt. Die Zahl der Forschungen über Hmong-Christen in Südostasien ist zwar begrenzt, aber sie werden nur in Laos und Thailand durchgeführt und konzentrieren sich hauptsächlich auf die Konversion der Hmong. Ein kürzlich erschienenes Buch und mehrere Artikel eines vietnamesischen Gelehrten über Hmong-Protestanten in Nordvietnam sind bemerkenswert; sie zielen jedoch auch darauf ab, die Bekehrung der Hmong zu erforschen, ohne die spezifischen Konfessionen dieser Konvertiten zu definieren und zu untersuchen. In der Zwischenzeit studieren die meisten einheimischen Wissenschaftler die Hmong-Protestanten hauptsächlich durch Interviews mit Regierungs- und Religionsführern, anstatt sich monatelang mit den Insidern vor Ort aufzuhalten und ihnen aufmerksam zuzuhören. Außerdem vertreten diese von der Regierung geförderten Wissenschaftler mehr oder weniger die kommunistische Position, die Hmong-Konvertiten als „Objekte“ für politische Zwecke zu betrachten, anstatt sie als Menschen zu verstehen. Eine solche Perspektive führt manchmal dazu, dass Urteile über diese religiösen Anhänger aus einer atheistischen Haltung heraus und/oder aus einer überlegenen Position heraus veröffentlicht werden. Meine Forschung trägt daher zu einer intensiven und systematischen Kenntnis des religiösen Lebens von Hmong-Protestanten verschiedener Konfessionen bei, die auf der Grundlage meiner häufigen Reflexionen als unpolitisches Individuum erstellt wurde, um mögliche Vorurteile zu vermeiden. Die Forschungsergebnisse werden außerdem durch mehrere Methoden verifiziert, um die Genauigkeit zu gewährleisten, wie z.B. die Überprüfung der Mitglieder und die Triangulation



der Datenquellen. Der Prozess der Validitätsprüfung wurde von vielen Teilnehmern verschiedener politischer, kultureller und ethnischer Gruppen, die eng mit der angestrebten Forschungspopulation verwandt sind, maßgeblich unterstützt. So können die Forschungsergebnisse Außenstehenden helfen, diese marginalisierten Menschen besser zu verstehen, insbesondere von der vietnamesischen Regierung und den traditionellen Hmong, die diesen Christen gegenüber feindlich eingestellt sind. Darüber hinaus enthüllen Interviews und Folgegespräche mit den allerersten Hmong-Konvertiten zusätzlich einige Fakten, die nie veröffentlicht wurden, wie z.B. „unsagbare Faktoren, die die Konversion unterstützen“ oder „Missverständnisse über den Hmong-Begriff „Vang Tsu“, der zu vielen politischen Anschuldigungen gegen Hmong-Konvertiten führt“, obwohl diese Punkte nicht zu den Forschungsfragen dieser Untersuchung gehören./.

*For the Hmong*

# Part I – Introduction

## Chapter 1. Defining and Designing Research

It is widely recognized that *religious changes* and *ethnic minorities-related politics* are two of the most politically sensitive topics in the scholarship on contemporary Vietnam. If someone connects these separated topics, s/he can find the keyword of ‘*Hmong Protestants*’ most highlighted. According to the 2019 national census, there are 1,393,547 Hmong people living in Vietnam. This number makes them the 5<sup>th</sup> largest ethnic group in the country after the majority Kinh (82,085,826), *Tày* (Tai) (1,845,492), *Thái* (Thai) (1,820,950), and *Mường* (Muong) (1,452,095) ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>. Although ‘Hmong Protestants’ are not the only ethnic minority people converting to Protestantism<sup>2</sup>, they are the largest group by population<sup>3</sup>. Their conversion has been known as a phenomenon that draws increasingly particular attention to the outsiders.

Originally only residing in China, the Hmong first migrated to Vietnam a couple of centuries ago<sup>4</sup>. They first arrived in Hà Giang, then expanded to several other northern provinces such as Lào Cai, Sơn La, Yên Bái, Cao Bằng, Nghệ An, Lạng Sơn, Tuyên Quang and so forth. Because of the late immigration<sup>5</sup>, Hmong people settled in the highest mountainous areas as other ethnic groups are living in the lowlands. As the major way of making a living for the Hmong is subsistence farming, they move from place to place to seek more productive land to survive. Vietnamese Hmong are believed to have experienced increasing difficulties and are considered to be “the poorest of the poor”<sup>6</sup> in Vietnam.

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<sup>1</sup> Ủy ban Dân tộc & Tổng cục Thống kê, “Đặc trưng cơ bản của 53 dân tộc thiểu số năm 2019 [Basic Characteristics of 53 Ethnic Minorities in 2019]” (Nhà xuất bản Thống kê, 2020), 54.

<sup>2</sup> In northwest Vietnam alone, there are 20,000 people of *Dao* (Yao), *Sán chỉ*, and *Thái* ethnic minority groups who convert to Protestantism, see Thanh Xuân Nguyễn, “The Development of Protestantism in Vietnam,” *Political Theory-Research Journal and Scientific Voice of Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics*, April 22, 2020, Accessed March 2, 2021, <http://lyluanchinhtri.vn/home/en/index.php/forum/item/693-the-development-of-protestantism-in-vietnam.html>. Further information on ‘Protestantism in Vietnam’ is available in following parts.

<sup>3</sup> Quốc Đông Ngô, “Hiện Trạng và Đặc Điểm Tín Đồ Công Giáo, Phật Giáo, Tin Lành ở Tây Nguyên [Current Status and Characteristics of Catholics, Buddhists, Protestants in the Central Highlands],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 7 (2015): 61.

<sup>4</sup> While western scholars believe that the Hmong first arrived in Vietnam in the 1800s; the Vietnamese researchers say they might be present in Vietnam around more or less 300 years ago. Detailed explanations of this matter are available in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6.

<sup>5</sup> There are some contradictory opinions on whether or not the Hmong ‘chose’ or ‘had to’ live in mountainous areas because of the late immigration. This matter will be discussed in latter parts of the thesis.

<sup>6</sup> T. T. Tam Ngo, “Ethnic and Transnational Dimensions of Recent Protestant Conversion among the Hmong in Northern Vietnam,” *Social Compass* 57, no. 3 (2010): 333, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768610375518>.

Since the late 1980s, around 249,000 out of roughly one million Hmong or so in Vietnam have converted from animism and ancestral worship to evangelical Protestantism<sup>7</sup>. This phenomenon has caused many problems not only outside the Hmong community but also within their group.

More specifically, the Vietnamese government is not in favor of this conversion and attempts to prevent it in various ways, even using violent suppression. Before converting to be Protestants, the Hmong's 'superstitious' traditions were considered to be outlawed. The mountain ethnic minorities, including the Hmong, were pressured by the authorities to abandon their traditional religious practices. From the 1960s to 1990, the government had not allowed the Hmong to celebrate their month-long New Year and some other traditional festivals and ceremonies<sup>8</sup>. However, since some Hmong converted to Protestantism, their faith choice once again has been denied. The government has unreasonably forced them to return to their ancient traditions that were previously forbidden. More seriously, some Hmong who resisted the government's measures even suffered severe punishments such as arrest, imprisonment, and hard labor<sup>9</sup>. Dealing with the growth of Protestantism among upland ethnic minorities, especially the Hmong, has been a challenge for the state. Furthermore, handling the Hmong-related issues has placed the government under critique from not only domestic activists but also foreign governments and human rights agencies, especially when it comes to protecting religious freedom<sup>10</sup>. In the latest annual report on Religious Freedom of 2018, the U.S Department of States accused that "Vietnamese local authorities, police, or hired thugs regularly target certain individuals and groups because of their faith; ethnicity; advocacy for democracy, human rights, or religious freedom; historic ties to the West; or desire to remain

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<sup>7</sup> According to the latest source I could find, there are around 249,000 Hmong Protestant in the country, see Thanh Xuân Nguyễn 2020. Meanwhile, scholars hold different opinions. Tam Ngo insists that the number of Vietnamese Hmong converts was 300,000 by 2009, yet she does not offer any clear explanation, see T. T. Tam Ngo, "The 'Short-Waved' Faith: Christian Broadcasting and Protestant Conversion of the Hmong in Vietnam," 2009, 8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12011>. Nguyễn Văn Thắng (2009) supposes that the estimated number might be from 120,000 to 150,000 Hmong Protestants out of 787,604 Hmong in Vietnam, Văn Thắng Nguyễn, *Giữ "Lý Cũ" Hay Theo "Lý Mới"? Bản Chất Của Những Cách Phản Ứng Khác Nhau Của Người H'Mông ở Việt Nam Với Ảnh Hưởng Của Đạo Tin Lành [Maintain "The Old Way" or Follow "The New Way"? The Essence of Different Responses of the Hmong in Vietnam to the Impact of Protestantism]* (Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, 2009), 105. Most of the Vietnamese scholars I talked with suggest 'a lower number than 300,000.'

<sup>8</sup> James F. Lewis, "Messianism as a Factor in Vietnam's Hmong Mass Conversion to Christianity: 1990-2005," in *Regional AAR Meeting - Luther Theological Seminary*, 2006, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần, *Văn Hoá Hmông [Hmong Culture]* (Hà Nội: Nxb Văn hoá Dân tộc, 1996), 177-78.

<sup>10</sup> James F. Lewis, "Vietnamese Religions, Asian Studies, and the Rule of Law," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 2, no. 2 (2013): 58-59. Also, see more at John Gillespie, "Human Rights as a Larger Loyalty: The Evolution of Religious Freedom in Vietnam," *Harv. Hum. Rts. J.* 27 (2014): 107.

independent of Communist government control.” Noticeably, among nine groups<sup>11</sup> specifically named as religious groups and individuals who have experienced the most harassment from the government, the Hmong remain “three in one”: Hmong, indigenous people, and followers of Dương Văn Minh<sup>12</sup>. The continuing abuses on religious communities maintain Vietnam on the list of CPC (country of particular concern) that have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom as it has every year since 2002<sup>13</sup>.

In terms of the Hmong themselves, there are numerous severe tensions and conflicts within the Hmong community because of differences between the traditional Hmong religion and Protestantism. Some Hmong converts have started living separately from traditional groups. In many cases, Hmong people have not been able to find a way to live together, and therefore some converts have decided to migrate to other parts of Vietnam, including the Central Highlands<sup>14</sup>. Interestingly, among the converted Hmong, a lot of people are struggling with their new faith. Some of them choose to maintain the Christian faith, some re-convert to their traditional religion, and some pause to consider everything carefully after many changes have happened in their lives<sup>15</sup>.

In conclusion, being a marginalized ethnic minority group, the Hmong have experienced increasing economic difficulties and political and social challenges, especially Hmong Protestants. It is widely reported in scholarship and on media that Hmong converts have faced denial and intervention from the government and severe conflicts within their communities and family structures. Some Hmong, at the same time, are also struggling with their new Christian faiths. The Vietnamese government finds it challenging to deal with this phenomenon of conversion among this upland minority. Therefore, comprehensive research on the nature of Hmong Protestants’ religious life to obtain accurate knowledge is timely. Accordingly, this type of study would become a reference to enhance mutual understanding between the state and the Hmong Protestant community, and the Hmong themselves.

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<sup>11</sup> Nine groups include independent Cao Dai, independent Buddhists like the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), Hoa Hao, and Khmer Krom, Montagnards, Hmong, indigenous peoples, Falun Gong, and followers of Duong Van Minh.

<sup>12</sup> This Hmong group would be discussed in latter parts of this work; for indigenous people, see at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/about-us.html>

<sup>13</sup> See more at “Vietnam Chapter 2018 Annual Report” (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2018), Accessed November 27, 2019, [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1\\_VIETNAM.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_VIETNAM.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn, *Giữ “Lý Cũ” Hay Theo “Lý Mới”?* *Bản Chất Của Những Cách Phản Ứng Khác Nhau Của Người H’Mông ở Việt Nam Với Ảnh Hưởng Của Đạo Tin Lành* (Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, 2009), 38, 146, 157.

<sup>15</sup> Duy Quang Vương, *Văn Hoá Tâm Linh Của Người Hmông ở Việt Nam: Truyền Thống và Hiện Tại [Spiritual Culture of the Hmong in Vietnam: Traditional and Present]* (Hà Nội: Nxb Văn hoá - Thông tin & Viện Văn hoá, 2005c), 203–4.

## 1.1 Literature Review

### 1.1.1 Clarifying terms

Except for the term ‘*Hmong Protestant*’ that is originally used in this study, two other terms are also used in the scholarship elsewhere equivalent to it: ‘*Hmong Evangelical Protestant*’ or ‘*Hmong Evangelical Protestant Christian*.’ All of these terms are in fact understood as “*người Hmong theo đạo Tin Lành*” in the Vietnamese language. In fact, the word ‘*Tin lành*’ also has its particular history in Vietnam: it is literally translated from the word *Evangelical* instead of *Protestantism*, the latter one in Vietnamese yet means ‘*Kháng cách*.’ According to Nguyễn Xuân Hùng, the very first person who translated the Bible into Vietnamese and used the term ‘*Tin Lành*’ to refer to Protestantism was a Catholic Priest named Cố Chính Linh<sup>16</sup>. Priest Cố Chính Linh did this translation work a couple of years before the first Protestant denomination, the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) – an American Protestant denomination, was settled in Vietnam in 1911 in Đà Nẵng - a coastal province of central Vietnam. In the early years, Protestantism was considered ‘the religion that abandons ancestors’ in the country. This perception led to the discontent attitude of Protestant foreign missionaries and Vietnamese followers. Therefore, whenever someone stopped by a theological class and asked ‘*What is the religion?*’, missionaries and Vietnamese adherents all together responded: ‘*Tin lành đây mà!*’ (‘It is Protestantism!’). Since then, the term ‘*đạo Tin lành*’ has been used for Protestantism<sup>17</sup>. In turn, ‘*Tin lành*’ is officially translated into Protestantism in English and Protestantisme in French<sup>18</sup>.

In both academic and non-academic discourses, most Vietnamese people refer to ‘*Tin lành*,’ not ‘*Kháng cách*,’ as ‘Protestantism’ in English. Thus, to meet academically coherent requirements, particularly in Vietnamese literature, the terms ‘Protestant,’ ‘Protestantism,’ and ‘*Tin Lành*’ are mainly used in this research. Meanwhile, it should be highlighted that ‘Protestantism’ has numerous denominations in Vietnam, both officially recognized and not

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<sup>16</sup> The official information of ‘who Catholic Priest Cố Chính Linh is’ and his nationality are not mentioned in Nguyễn Xuân Hùng’s research. According to some available sources, it seems that Cố Chính Linh is the Vietnamese name of French Father Albert Schlicklin, who, be revealed on a French source, is the person first translating the Bible into Vietnamese. See Villebonnet, “Le Père Albert Schlicklin” (France-Asia Research Institute, 1932), Accessed December 16, 2019, <https://www.irfa.paris/fr/bulletins/le-pere-albert-schlicklin>. Another Vietnamese source is also available although it might be not a trusted academic source, see at Phước Nguyễn, *Quá Trình Phiên Dịch Kinh Thánh Sang Tiếng Việt [The Process of Translating the Bible into Vietnamese]* (San Diego, California: Nguyệt San Linh Lực, 1996), Accessed December 16, 2019, <http://www.thuvientinlanh.org/qua-trinh-phiien-d%E1%BB%8Bch-kinh-thanh-sang-ti%E1%BA%BFng-vi%E1%BB%87t/>.

<sup>17</sup> Xuân Hùng Nguyễn, “Về Nguồn Gốc và Sự Xuất Hiện Tên Gọi Đạo Tin Lành Việt Nam [Regarding the Origin and Appearance of the Name Tin Lành in Vietnam],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 3 (2001): 53.

<sup>18</sup> Xuân Hùng Nguyễn 2001, 55.

recognized by the Vietnamese government. Such classification is employed for Religious Affair Management purposes in this socialist country. Specifically, the oldest and largest recognized Protestant denomination in Vietnam is ‘the Evangelical Church of Vietnam’ (EVC) (*Hội thánh Tin lành Việt Nam*). Although the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECV-N) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South (ECV-S) are considered church members of ECV, they have their own histories that are significantly independent of each other. However, both of them were originally supported by CMA which they define as their *Mẫu hội* (Mother church)<sup>19</sup>. There are also eight other Protestant denominations and groups recognized in Vietnam. However, up to 78 Protestant denominations and groups are not officially recognized. Most of them are either newly restored or formed<sup>20</sup>. The religious groups of such unrecognized denominations may be allowed to practice their religion privately, yet they might be restricted to a certain extent from fully living out their faith<sup>21</sup>.

Returning to the current research, in a narrower scope, the term ‘Hmong Protestants in Vietnam’ refers to those Hmong who convert from their traditional belief to Protestantism/ Protestant Christianity. Besides, Hmong Protestants are not the only Hmong group converting to Christianity in Vietnam. A part of this ethnic group also converts to Catholic Christianity. Therefore, it is necessary to examine existing research on Hmong Christians in Vietnam, Asia, and beyond before going into a deeper analysis on ‘Hmong Protestants in Vietnam’ – the focus of this study.

### *1.1.2 Existing Research*

It is impossible to do justice to all Hmong-related research on a broad range of topics such as history, culture, religion, social and economic issues, gender identity issues, health and medicine, education and youth, etc. Due to the scope of this study, only previous academic research on Hmong Christians will be discussed.

Since the very first Hmong converted in the late 1890s in Northwest Yunnan, China, thanks to missionary work of Samuel Pollard from the London Missionary Society, Hmong Christians have caught the particular attention of scholars worldwide. There are two major trends of

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<sup>19</sup> Hoàng Phú Lê, *Lịch Sử Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (1911-1965) [A Short History of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (1911-1965)]*, trans. Nghiên cứu Phúc Âm (TEE) (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tôn giáo, 2010), 157.

<sup>20</sup> Thanh Xuân Nguyễn 2000. It should be noted that the names of Protestant denominations in Vietnam have been differently translated into English by authors. Therefore, in this study, I mainly follow the pioneering researchers who use translated names coherently. In some cases, I choose to keep the Vietnamese names for some denominations that might require more careful research to be given accurate titles.

<sup>21</sup> Several cases of recognized and unrecognized Protestant groups in Vietnam will be specifically discussed in latter sections based on empirical data of this study.

Hmong Christian-related research that are mostly conducted from sociological and/or anthropological approach: *Research exploring the nature of Hmong conversion to Christianity and analyzing the impact of it upon the Hmong, both converted and non-converted*, and *research exploring the religious life of Hmong Christians by discussing certain aspects and activities*. Because some scholars cover both these trends, I will review them in chronological order instead of trendy categories. For those who have done various work on Hmong Christians in different periods, I group all their work rather than classifying them chronologically. Fundamental research on Hmong Christians will be examined first; those on Hmong Christians of Vietnam would follow.

*Hmong Christians Worldwide*. One of the earliest works on Hmong Christians was done by George Linwood Barney titled *Christianity: Innovation in Meo Culture: A Case Study in Missionization*. This 1957 unpublished dissertation explores the first Hmong conversion to Christianity in Xieng Khouang province, Laos, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Based on an analysis of the cultural change of Hmong in Chapter III, Barney devotes chapter IV to discover the Christianization among this ethnic group. According to him, there are various factors that motivated the conversion to Christianity of the Hmong in Xieng Khouang, which are: ‘the willingness for change of the Hmong as cultural changes among them already became common,’ ‘the role of reputable innovators,’ ‘converting by the household which was the critical element of the society,’ ‘Christianity seemed to be a convenient alternative for the Hmong’s traditional religion,’ and ‘Christian faith supported the revitalization of Hmong’s culture.’ Doing social science research as well as some missionary work, Barney did great work on describing and discussing how the first Hmong came to believe in God and decided to convert group by group and village by village that finally resulted in a fact that Hmong Christians making up 70% of the total number of Christians (around 5000 to 6000) in Xieng Khouang by the end of 1954.

While there were no Hmong Christians in Australia by 1986, another 1986 short paper by Timothy Dunnigan titled *Processes of Identity Maintenance in Hmong Society* displayed the case of Hmong Christians who were refugees in America from Laos. He claimed that half of Hmong in America were defined to be Christians, both Catholic and Protestant denominations<sup>22</sup>. One of the key findings that Dunnigan reveals is Christianity did help the Hmong to maintain their cultural and social distinctiveness. However, it seemed that Dunnigan

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<sup>22</sup> Timothy Dunnigan, “Processes of Identity Maintenance in Hmong Society,” in *The Hmong in Transition* (New York: Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc. The Southeast Asian Refugee Studies of the University of Minnesota, 1986), 47.



did not offer an in-depth analysis of and enough ethnographic evidence for his argument. All in all, this work is worth attention as it is one of the few earliest pieces on Hmong Christians worldwide.

A giant in Hmong studies is Nicholas Tapp, who dedicated his life to researching Hmong in various countries in Southeast Asia and beyond. His 1989 academic paper, *The Impact of Missionary Christianity upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities: The Case of the Hmong*, explores the exact nature of the relationship between missionary Christianity and the ethnic minorities. Apart from textual analysis, he undertook anthropological fieldwork in North Thailand that allowed him to define the motivations of Hmong mass conversion to Christianity and the significant impacts of Christianity upon the Hmong converts. According to Tapp, the mass and rapid conversion were because of the Hmong's actual economic and social situation and Christian missionaries' effort. More importantly, he pointed out that the real motivations for such conversion must be sought in more culturally specific factors. The first motivator is 'the desire for literacy' of the Hmong, and the second is because of their messianism. Regarding the impacts of Christianity upon Hmong society, Tapp supposed that Christianity enhanced the Hmong status as an ethnic minority, on the other hand, contributed to a severe contradiction among the Hmong and between themselves and the members of the majority or dominant populations. One of the most significant statements is that Tapp did not find anyone who had wholly abandoned their faith in the efficacy of ancestral rituals. A Hmong Christian did not entirely reject his original belief.

Apart from books that shortly mentioned Hmong Christians<sup>23</sup>, a part of Chapter 4 in 2010 book *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand* mainly discussed the Initial, Later Impact of Missionary Christianity and its current situation among Hmong of northern Thailand. Again, 'severe economic stress,' 'education,' 'literacy' and 'the close connection between Christianity and messianism' are generally used to explain the very first Hmong conversions to Christianity in China and Laos, among which Tapp was consistent with concluding that "what had attracted these great crowds was not initially economic succor, but a rumor that the missionary had a book, or books, which was specially meant for the Miao"<sup>24</sup>. When it comes to the case in Thailand, Tapp discussed how Catholicism was more successful in converting the Hmong than extreme Protestantism. Plus, once again, the status of 'half-

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<sup>23</sup> For example, see *The Impact of Christianity*, 40 – 44 at Gary Yia Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, ed. Greenwood (Connecticut, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Tapp, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand*, South-East Asian Social Science Monographs (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989b), 94.

believed' among Hmong Christians is pointed out. In general, Christian missionaries in Thailand are considered to offer the Hmong a better alternative way of “*remaining Hmong without being assimilated* by the state”<sup>25</sup>, compared to Buddhism, while they were in their dilemma.

Regarding the conversion to Christianity of the Hmong refugees in Canada, we can name the 1992 paper of Daphne N. Winland titled *The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement: The Case of the Hmong*. In this research, Winland explores the process of religious change among Laos Hmong refugees in Canada that, according to her, is a process that involved changes in many areas of social life such as leadership and authority, group identity, and legitimacy. Besides, she displays the profound significance of the Hmong's conversion in the country on the configuration of the social and economic relationship. In Winland's discussion, the conversion of the Hmong was caused by economic motivations and something more that is about life-meaning seeking, peer gathering, and so on. Refugee families attend religious activities together, and they often convert as a group<sup>26</sup>. Finally, the positive role of the religious organization on the refugee's adaptation in the case of Hmong in Canada with support of the Mennonite church is undeniable, as stated by this Canadian scholar.

While in a 1992 article, Daphne N. Winland discusses Hmong refugee's resettlement in Canada from a more general perspective, another piece of her published in 1994 focusing on the conversion and adaption among Hmong refugee women in particular in a small regional city in southwestern Ontario, Canada<sup>27</sup>. These refugees had been in Canada for up to six years at the time of the research. After analyzing Hmong women's experience, most of whom converted after their settlement in Canada, Winland claims that most of them did not see Christianity as a threat to their cultural heritage. Instead, her work proves that the church plays a central role and is a valuable resource in helping female Hmong refugees dealing with the trauma, discontinuities and reconstruction of their lives. By providing a facility for regular social interaction, network formation, and supporting the utilization and/or maximization of new resources, the church helped Hmong women to better cope with their changing roles at various levels, and in other cases, with constraints of being ethnic minority refugees in a western country. It is interesting that most Hmong women in Canada came to church because of their desire for the community; rather than spiritual guidance or commitment. The church served as

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<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Tapp 1989b, 103.

<sup>26</sup> Daphne N Winland, “The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement: The Case of the Hmong,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 24, no. 1 (1992): 107.

<sup>27</sup> Daphne N Winland, “Christianity and Community: Conversion and Adaptation among Hmong Refugee Women,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie*, 1994, 21–45.

the center for social activity and became the main attraction for these female Hmong. Noticeably, on the one hand, the positive impact of Christian conversion upon Hmong women refugees' life is improved; the Hmong nonetheless were able to preserve essential aspects of Hmong spiritual expressions. There was even a case in Canada that a female Hmong was a Christian and a Hmong shaman simultaneously<sup>28</sup>.

From an emic perspective, Vayong Moua published his 1995 work named *Hmong Christianity: Conversion, Consequence, and Conflict* at St. Olaf College, Minnesota. Moua firstly intends to identify the reasons for conversion. In his discussion, he argues that the Hmong muse is driven more than material needs alone. Apart from 'the desire for literary' as Tapp proposed in 1989, Moua claims that there are more reasons for the Hmong to convert, such as some Hmong saw themselves as faithful Christians and have further included themselves in the people of God; the respect and following of authority and leaders in the Hmong culture significantly caused mass conversion; lack of traditional knowledge and shamans directed many Hmong in the American context to Christianity; legal issues and the high cost of animals prevent the Hmong from practicing their traditional spiritual practices; some Hmong accepted Christ as their savior who believes sincerely and is drawn to Christianity for purely spiritual reasons. Furthermore, Moua analyzes the situation from the Christian side; he affirms that: Church provides social activities, a sense of solidarity and networking; Christianity with its structure and organization gained recognition and influence within the mainstream and Hmong community; being Christian was perceived as being more American, Christianity helps to reduce time, money and labor compared to conducting traditional Hmong ceremonies. In that way, life's events are considerably more convenient; Scare tactics and aggressive persuasion of some missionaries created little space for Hmong to move. All these factors altogether led to Hmong's conversion to Christianity in Laos as well as America.

In this article of Vayong Moua, he also defines showing the cultural changes and addressing the conflict is the focus of his work. Vayong Moua considers changes in marriage, funeral, power, and leadership, and Hmong women's roles are most noticeable in terms of consequences and changes. As a result, conflict among Hmong Christians and traditional Hmong becomes visible. Both sides feel disrespected, misunderstood, and not tolerated by the other. They refused to accept or negotiate the other's beliefs and rituals. However, according to Moua,

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<sup>28</sup> Winland 1994, 22-4, 36, 40. See more at Nicholas Tapp, "The Impact of Missionary Christianity upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities: The Case of the Hmong," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20, no. 1 (1989c): 70-95.

religious conflict is unnecessary and resolvable if the Hmong can all affirm their beliefs without limiting the world's vision.

All in all, Moua's arguments are not entirely unreasonable, but they may need more empirical data and more in-depth analysis. The lack of the author's information and details on ethnographic research may make the paper unreliable to some audiences. The author himself claims that the article is a blend of his ethnographic research and personal philosophy, refusing to be distant and objective to the readers<sup>29</sup>.

From another emic perspective, a Hmong Christian missionary Timothy Vang researched his people in Laos, reflected in his Doctor of Ministry's thesis in 1998 titled *Coming a Full Circle: Historical Analysis of the Hmong Church Growth 1950-1998*. A considerable proportion of Vang's dissertation is devoted to explaining Hmong's nature conversion to Christianity, which has both increasing and decreasing tendencies. Vang believes that the Hmong become Christians faster if they confront hardship, suffering, crisis, persecution, or insecurity. Otherwise, they would be more resistant to Christianity, particularly in the time of peace, security, prosperity, or self-sufficiency<sup>30</sup>. Other parts of this dissertation focus more on the missionary work done and what should be improved to reach more people. Although this research is seriously criticized by his Hmong counterparts<sup>31</sup>, one can find some useful Hmong Christians' facts in history. It is already claimed that the dissertation was done at the faculty of the School of Theology Fuller Theological Seminary. The bias, to a certain extent, is unavoidable.

*Hmong Christians of Vietnam*. The Hmong Christians of Vietnam, in particular, have been an increasingly special interest in academia. In this part, scholarly research will be discussed into two groups: research of *domestic scholars* and *international scholars*.

It is a fact that the Vietnamese language research, which precisely focuses on Hmong Christians in Vietnam, is relatively minimal. One of the earliest Vietnamese research<sup>32</sup> belongs

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<sup>29</sup> Vayong Moua, "Hmong Christianity: Conversion, Consequence, and Conflict," Hmong Conversion. St. Olaf College, 1995, Accessed October 12, 2016, <http://www.akha.org/content/missiondocuments/thehmongreligiousexperience.html>. Because the article is designed in a website format, pages are not defined.

<sup>30</sup> Timothy T. Vang, "Coming a Full Circle: Historical Analysis of the Hmong Church Growth 1950-1998" (Pasadena, California, School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> See Nao Xiong and Yang Sao Xiong, "A Critique of Timothy Vang's Hmong Religious Conversion and Resistance Study.," *Hmong Studies Journal* 9 (2008).

<sup>32</sup> Some earlier Vietnamese scholars did research on the Hmong, not Hmong Christians, are Tâm Lâm, "Lịch Sử Di Cư và Tên Gọi Của Người Mèo [Migration History and Names of the Meo People]," *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 30 (1961)., Việt Đăng Bê, "Dân Tộc Mèo [The Meo Ethnic Group]," in *Các Dân Tộc Ít Người ở Việt Nam (Các Tỉnh Phía Bắc) [Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam (Northern Provinces)]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học xã hội,

to Trần Hữu Sơn, who published a book titled *Văn hoá Hmông* (Hmong Culture) in 1996<sup>33</sup>. The book was built on field research conducted in Lào Cai province, where some first Vietnamese Hmong became Catholics under the influence of a French priest. Apart from some sentences elsewhere, there are only 11 out of 248 content pages of the book, from page 178 to page 189, that mainly refer to Hmong Christians with the section's title *Kitô giáo (Đạo Thiên chúa và Đạo Tin lành) đã thâm nhập vào đời sống tinh thần người Hmông* (Christianity (Catholicism<sup>34</sup> and Protestantism) already infiltrated into the spiritual life of the Hmong). In this section, the information on very first Hmong Christians of Vietnam is revealed. According to Trần, the very first Hmong conversion to Christianity occurred thanks to the missionary work of Father Savina in 1921. But this Catholic missionary work is considered a strategy to relieve and delude (*xoa dịu and ru ngủ*) the Hmong's severe resistance to French authorities.

In early 1940s, there were 33 Hmong households of eleven villages converted<sup>35</sup>. When it comes to the Hmong's motivation to convert to this colonial time, Trần argues that these people converted because of profane reasons that economically exhausted them, not religious matters. They were convinced that if they followed Catholicism, they might get support from the French and Vietnamese Kinh people. Catholic missionary tactics were highly effective that was also a major account for the conversion. In the later time of the late 1980s to 1996<sup>36</sup>, the dramatic conversion of the Hmong to Christianity was analyzed. On the one hand, some conclusions seem to be biased. For instance, the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC)<sup>37</sup> propagandized the Hmong against the Vietnamese communist state. Christianity was considered a negative force that leads to some serious problems among the Hmong themselves as between them and the government and other ethnic groups. On the other hand, Trần claimed that the Hmong did not have any intention to fight against the Vietnamese government; they were only taken advantage of by the foreigners. Noticeably, Trần is one of few Vietnamese scholars who did not advocate for the government to use any decisive intervention in Hmong conversion. He

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1978), Hoà Văn Cư and Nam Hoàng, *Dân Tộc Mông ở Việt Nam [Hmong Ethnic Group in Vietnam]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá Dân tộc, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996.

<sup>34</sup> The author used the word 'Đạo Thiên chúa' to refer to Catholicism, however literally 'Đạo Thiên chúa' in Vietnamese means 'Christianity.' Considering the context of the text, I decided to translate 'Đạo Thiên chúa' to 'Catholicism.' By the time the book was published, there might be some confusions in using Western religious terms in Vietnamese. This phenomenon happened not only in Trần's text but also elsewhere in the Vietnamese literature at that time.

<sup>35</sup> Trần 1996, 179.

<sup>36</sup> 1996 is when the book was published; thus, it should be defined to avoid misunderstanding of the word 'to date' (tới nay) that the author used.

<sup>37</sup> Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) is a Christian radio broadcasting group located in Manila, Philippines since 1949 due to the Victory of communist China, Philippines. It was originally created in 1945 by an American evangelical organization.

supposes that all extreme methods to prevent the conversion only resulted in the contrast consequences. Directly declaring war with the religion is not a wise action.

Another significant work of Trần is his conference paper titled *Đạo Tin Lành Vùng Đồng Bào Dân Tộc H'mông ở Lào Cai (Nhìn Từ Văn Hoá Tộc Người)*<sup>38</sup> which aims to explore the impact of Protestantism on Hmong ethnic culture elements. The paper is based on field research in July and October 2012 at Sàng Ma Sáo commune, Bát Xát district, and some other districts of Lào Cai province where very first Hmong converted to Catholicism in 1921. Although the paper only has nine pages, including references, it is informative and careful research work. After discussing several changes in the Hmong cultural ways since some of them converted, Trần highlights the negative and positive impacts of their new religion on the Hmong society. On the one hand, he insists that Protestantism divides the Hmong, makes their cultural identity gradually lost, and leads to numerous severe free migration with the nonsense rumor on the Hmong Kingdom. On the other hand, Trần also defines several positive impacts of the conversion. First, converting to Protestantism helps the Hmong to have a better material life as they do not need to spend money on expensive traditional rituals. Plus, the Protestant Hmong community unites better than their traditional counterparts. Gender equality is also improved, and the number of heroin and alcohol addicts are decreased. In addition, they go to the medical center when they get sick instead of doing spiritual healings as they all used to do.

Being one of the earliest scholars researching Hmong Christians of Vietnam, Trần is also a fair researcher who appreciates the Hmong conversion's positive side. Whereas most other early government-related research on Hmong Christians hold severe negative attitudes upon this conversion. One of the earliest unpublished reports is a 2000 scientific project supported and managed by the *Trung ương Đoàn TNCS Hồ Chí Minh* (Central Committee of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union) in which Trần Quốc Huy is the lead researcher<sup>39</sup>. Within the project, six major written reports that are done by official leaders at both central and local levels. They all consider *Vàng Chứ*<sup>40</sup> as negative and harmful, and belonging to hostile foreign forces, which mainly imply the American government, that the Vietnamese government at various

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<sup>38</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần, “Đạo Tin Lành Vùng Đồng Bào Dân Tộc H'mông ở Lào Cai (Nhìn Từ Văn Hoá Tộc Người) [Protestantism in Hmong Ethnic Minority Area in Lao Cai (Seen from Ethnic Culture)],” in *Kỷ Yếu Toạ Đàm Đạo Tin Lành và Văn Hoá Việt Nam [Seminar Proceedings on Protestantism and Vietnamese Culture]* (Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo - Hội Việt-Mỹ và Viện Liên kết Toàn cầu đồng tổ chức, Hà Nội, 2012), 126–34.

<sup>39</sup> Quốc Huy Trần, *Công Tác Xây Dựng Đoàn - ĐKHTN Dân Tộc H'Mông Vùng Có Hiện Tượng “Vàng Chứ” [Construction of the Youth Union - ĐKHTN Hmong Ethnic Group in the Region with the “Vang Tsu” Phenomenon]*, Unpublished Scientific Project, KTN 99-09 (Hà Nội: Bộ KH-CN và Môi Trường - TƯ Đoàn TNCS Hồ Chí Minh, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> ‘Vàng Chứ’ refers to Hmong religious change in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which will be discussed in latter parts.

levels needed to prevent and fight against. It is argued that *Vàng Chứ* did not belong to any branch of Christianity. Most of the Hmong who believed in *Vàng Chứ* were ignorant, illiterate, uneducated, poor, and easily scammed. Most of them did not understand anything or improperly understood (*sai lạc*) the religion they followed. Plus, rarely attending government-based groups is also identified a reason that led to such ignorant decision following *Vàng Chứ* among the Hmong<sup>41</sup>. Furthermore, *Vàng Chứ* leaders were defined ‘*những kẻ cầm đầu*’<sup>42</sup>, ‘*thành phần quá khích*’ (extremists) who should be detected, seriously legally judged, re-educated, and propagated by the government. Notably, some of the authors seemed to understand the message of FEBC well, saying that FEBC did not hesitate to convince (*ngang nhiên kêu gọi*) the Hmong that, “if you want to have Hmong King and your nation, you have to go forward to West where the sun goes down”<sup>43</sup>. The authors also suggested the government to handle the harmful consequences that FEBC had caused<sup>44</sup>. However, no written or empirical evidence was available on FEBC supporting these authors’ conclusions on this radio network.

Sharing voices with those 2000 research project’s authors, numerous other Vietnamese scholars hold similar statements. In 2003, another government-sponsored project was conducted led by Lương Thị Kim Duyên – the Head of Committee on Ethnic Minority and Mobilization Affairs of Sơn La province (*Trưởng Ban Dân tộc và Dân vận Tỉnh uỷ Sơn La*). Eight colleagues were working with Lương, who were also provincial leaders. The project shows its authors’ position right on its title of *Research and Propose Guidelines and Solutions for Illegal Missionary Work and Training among some Hmong groups in Sơn La*. Generally, Christianity is considered as an object that should be fought against and be deleted. These authors claim that because religion is based on idealistic philosophy, it has no proper method to help people have authentic happiness. Therefore, freeing people from the impact of religion is the position of communists. Also, some statements are made without careful research, such as confidently insisting that the Hmong had their kingdom and King in the past, calling Protestant pastors as *cha đạo* (Catholic Father), or considering Catholic and Protestant

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<sup>41</sup> Văn Cầu Lê, “Giải Pháp Tăng Cường Công Tác Xây Dựng Tổ Chức Cơ Sở Đoàn Vùng Đồng Bào Dân Tộc H’Mông Có Truyền Đạo Vàng Chứ - Tin Lành [Solutions to Strengthening Local Youth Union Organization among the Hmong in the Region with the ‘Vang Tsu’ Phenomenon],” in *Công Tác Xây Dựng Đoàn - ĐKHTN Dân Tộc H’Mông Vùng Có Hiện Tượng “Vàng Chứ”* [Construction of the Youth Union - ĐKHTN Hmong Ethnic Group in the Region with the “Vang Tsu” Phenomenon], Unpublished Scientific Project (Hà Nội: Bộ KHCHN và Môi Trường - TƯ Đoàn TNCS Hồ Chí Minh, 2000), 70.

<sup>42</sup> This term has extremely negative meanings in the Vietnamese language, referring to leaders or pioneers.

<sup>43</sup> Thanh Nguyễn, “Từ ‘Xung Vua’ Đến “Đạo Vàng Chứ”: Hoang Tưởng và Tai Hoạ [From ‘Proclaiming King’ to ‘Vang Tsu Religion’: Paranoia and Catastrophe],” in *Công Tác Xây Dựng Đoàn - ĐKHTN Dân Tộc H’Mông Vùng Có Hiện Tượng “Vàng Chứ”* [Construction of the Youth Union - ĐKHTN Hmong Ethnic Group in the Region with the “Vang Tsu” Phenomenon], Unpublished Scientific Project (Hà Nội: Bộ KHCHN và Môi Trường - TƯ Đoàn TNCS Hồ Chí Minh, 2000), 48.

<sup>44</sup> Thanh Nguyễn 2000, 49.



missionaries were one enemy forces who just changed their tactics over them to delude and take advantage of the Hmong. Apart from reasons that previous scholars negatively point out, Lương and her colleagues particularly highlight that the Hmong were extremely active in religious activities because of their limited awareness of the Communist Party's guidelines, policies, and the government's law on religion. They consider that only by having *tinh thần cách mạng*<sup>45</sup> can people stop believing in such religion. On the other hand, one also can find some facts reasonable. As these authors were local leaders, they might get valuable information related to several Hmong's controversial phenomena, which then helped to comprehend the whole picture throughout history. For instance, when it comes to some Catholic impact in the early 1980s among the Hmong of Sơn La, the authors provide exact names and stories that could be verified compared to other academic research<sup>46</sup>.

Followed by those early studies on Hmong Christians are a series of works, both published and unpublished, by Vương Duy Quang, a Hmong researcher working at the Institute for Religious Studies Hanoi. Vương himself is not a Hmong Christian; therefore, his research might not be considered emic work. Most of Vương's investigations are based on the government and police offices' documents rather than the voices of the Hmong converts even though he sometimes generally claims his information as '*thông tin dưới dân*' (information from people)<sup>47</sup>. The research is stated to be the result of continuous field work in the years of 1995, 1997, 1998, and 1999, which had been conducted in several locations of four northern provinces of Lào Cai, Lai Châu, Hà Giang, Tuyên Quang. Vương has published a variety of academic work on Hmong Christianity and the early version of it<sup>48</sup> such as a paper in 1994, eight out of thirteen reports on a 2000 unpublished project with his colleagues, other articles in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007 and some small sections on two books published in 2005 and 2016. It is not possible to mention all details of Vương's writings, but some significant contents can be summarized and discussed as follows. First, Hmong Protestants today had been known as Hmong *Vàng*

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<sup>45</sup> 'revolutionary spirit' refers to 'strong communist stance.'

<sup>46</sup> Thị Kim Duyên Lương et al., "Nghiên Cứu Đề Xuất Những Chủ Trương và Giải Pháp Giải Quyết Vấn Đề Truyền Học Đạo Trái Phép ở Một Bộ Phận Dân Tộc Mông Tinh Sơn La [Research and Solution Suggestions on Resolving the Issue of Illegal Religious Missionaries and Learning Activities among a Part of Hmong People in Sơn La]" (Ban Dân vận Dân tộc, 2003), 53, 25, 31, 37, 40, 42, 26, 34, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Most obvious, see Duy Quang Vương, "Vấn Đề Di Cư và Tình Hình Người Hmông Theo Đạo ở Tây Nguyên qua Khảo Sát Tại Tỉnh Đắk Lắk Hiện Nay [Migration and the Situation of Hmong Converts in the Central Highlands Surveyed in Dak Lak Province Today]" (Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo (Internal Report: Unpublished), 2003b).

<sup>48</sup> In Vương's explanation, before Protestantism was shaped and developed among the Hmong, there was only *Vàng Chứ/ Vàng Trứ* movement that entirely was not a denomination of Protestantism. Further discussion is available on the other parts of this research.



*Chú* or *Vàng Trú*<sup>49</sup> in Vương's imagination. He repeatedly suggests that at first, reaching FEBC had eventually led to the so-called religious movement *Vàng Trú*. This new movement cannot be defined as of a Protestant denomination; instead, it is a fake Protestantism (*đạo giả Tin lành*)<sup>50</sup> mixed from sacred and profane elements which are paranoiac, superstitious, non-cultural as well as both local and exotic (*ngoại lai*) like Christianity. It is also believed that this messy religion contains some elements that belong to no religion<sup>51</sup>. Noticeably, this movement is supposed to have been supported by Western forces' political purposes in which America is the leader. These enemy forces aim to distort the Communist Party and the Vietnamese government's guidelines and policies so that they would be able to attract the Hmong to their side<sup>52</sup>. In the later period since 1992, FEBC and ECV-N have been blamed for transforming the *Vàng Trú* phenomenon into Protestantism<sup>53</sup>. Vương calls it a conspiracy of ECV-N, FEBC, and western forces, particularly America. One of the convincing reasons for Vương to come to such a conclusion is that he believes *Vàng Trú* is originally a religion created by American Protestantism<sup>54</sup>.

To conclude, Vương's research proves that *Vàng Trú* and Protestantism among the Hmong are an evil scheme of enemy forces that should be seriously fought against and prevented. While Vương offers precious empirical evidence, several parts in his books and papers are duplicated without him informing the audience on the credit matter<sup>55</sup>; if he does, only citations are provided.

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<sup>49</sup> In papers before 2003, Vương used the term *Vàng Chú* that has been replaced by *Vàng Trú* as Vương lately explains that the term '*Vàng Trú*' in Vietnamese is closer to the Hmong term *Vangx Tsur*. Both these terms refer to the same religious movement among the Hmong of Vietnam in the late 1980s. For a more synced work, I prefer to use the term '*Vàng Trú*' to refer to the phenomenon. Any authors' intention regarding a specific term will be noticed.

<sup>50</sup> Duy Quang Vương, "Một Vài Nét về Quan Hệ Xã Hội, Tôn Giáo Tín Ngưỡng Truyền Thống Của Người Hmông và Thực Trạng Người Hmông Theo Đạo Vàng Chú ở Việt Nam Hiện Nay [Some Features of the Hmong's Social Relationships, Traditional Religion and Belief, and the Current Situation on Hmong Followers of Vang Tsu Religion in Vietnam Today]," in *Về Tình Hình Phát Triển Của Đạo Tin Lành ở Miền Núi Phía Bắc, Trường Sơn-Tây Nguyên [Regarding the Development of Protestantism in the Northern Vietnam, Truong Son-the Central Highlands]*, Unpublished Scientific Report (Hà Nội: Trung tâm Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn Quốc gia, Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, 2000b), 123.

<sup>51</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 190-1; Also, see Duy Quang Vương, "Hiện Tượng 'Xung Vua' ở Cộng Đồng Hmông [ 'Proclaiming King' Phenomenon in Hmong Community]," in *Người Hmông [Hmong People]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Trẻ, 2005b), 135.

<sup>52</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2000b, 124, 136.

<sup>53</sup> Duy Quang Vương, "Ảnh Hưởng Của Hội Thánh Tin Lành Hà Nội Đối Với Việc Phát Triển Đạo Tin Lành ở Vùng Hmông Lào Cai [Influence of The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North in Hanoi on the Development of Protestantism among the Hmong of Lao Cai]," in *Về Tình Hình Phát Triển Của Đạo Tin Lành ở Miền Núi Phía Bắc, Trường Sơn-Tây Nguyên [Regarding the Development of Protestantism in the Northern Vietnam, Truong Son-the Central Highlands]*, Unpublished Scientific Report (Hà Nội: Trung tâm Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn Quốc gia, Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, 2000a), 143-51.

<sup>54</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2000b, 118.

<sup>55</sup> For example, see section 3.1 on *Vàng Trú* - hiện tượng tôn giáo mới ở người Hmông Việt Nam at Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 173-9., and Duy Quang Vương 2005a, 128-132. The latter work is in fact slightly edited from the

Another respected Vietnamese scholar who had been working for the Institute of Anthropology in Vietnam is Nguyễn Văn Thắng. Nguyễn published some critical research on Hmong Christians, which are: a conference paper on changes in religion and identity among the Hmong of Vietnam (2004), a book on exploring the nature of different reactions of the Hmong in Vietnam to the Impact of Protestantism (2009), and a journal article on the similarities in the ways the Hmong of Vietnam and the Miao (*Miêu*) of China have reacted to the impact of Christianity (2013). Nguyễn proposes that the Hmong of Vietnam converted to Catholicism and Protestantism because of economic-social purposes that are more pragmatic than spiritual reasons. Therefore, the hypothesis that some foreign scholars such as Nicholas Tapps and Cheung propose ‘changing religion is the way for the Hmong to consciously build a new identity that distinguishes them from the majority ethnic’ should be more examined<sup>56</sup>. In the 2009 book, Nguyễn suggests the reasons why some Hmong converted and some chose to not convert to Protestantism as well as displays the impact of different responses of the Hmong to ‘the New way’<sup>57</sup>, to their society and culture. Similar to several other scholars at the time, economic reasons are still particularly highlighted<sup>58</sup>. In Nguyễn’s eyes, Protestantism is also a force that has taken the Hmong for advantage; and ECV-N is blamed for enticing (*lôi kéo*) this ethnic minority people. In the 2013 article, Nguyễn concludes that the Hmong of Vietnam and the Miao of China responded to Christianity differently due to their different perceptions about Christianity and its benefits that these people may get. Terminologically, in the earliest writings, Nguyễn has a mistake on calling ‘Catholicism’ as its broader term ‘Christianity’ (*‘Công giáo’* is referred to as *‘Kitô giáo’*); therefore, the audience might need to be more aware of that to understand the text correctly. More noticeably, the problematic way of explaining the term “*Vàng Chử*” in the 2004 article has finally led to a series of later academic work. The subsequent scholars consider Nguyễn’s words an original definition and consult it for their studies<sup>59</sup>. Plus, Nguyễn Văn Thắng uses some references in the text but did not list them on the reference list, confusing the readers and other scholars<sup>60</sup>.

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original 2003 paper; however, I am not able to access the original one, thus I only mention the 2005 version here, see Duy Quang Vương, “Hiện Tượng ‘Xung Vua’ ở Cộng Đồng Hmông [‘Proclaiming King’ Phenomenon in Hmong Community],” *Dân Tộc Học* 2 (2003a): 28–37.

<sup>56</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn, “Sự Thay Đổi Tôn Giáo và Bản Sắc Của Người H’ mông ở Việt Nam [Changes in Religion and Identity among the Hmong of Vietnam],” in *Việt Nam Học - Kỳ Yếu Hội Thảo Quốc Tế Lần Thứ Hai [Vietnamese Studies - Proceedings of Second International Conference]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, 2004), 573.

<sup>57</sup> means Protestantism.

<sup>58</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009, 141.

<sup>59</sup> More details on this matter will be discussed in the latter sections.

<sup>60</sup> For example, see citations on Tapp, Keyes, and Kammerer at Văn Thắng Nguyễn, “Sự Tương Đồng Trong Cách Phản Ứng Của Người Hmông ở Việt Nam và Người Miêu ở Trung Quốc Với Ảnh Hưởng Của Ki-Tô Giáo

Nguyễn Văn Minh, the current Director of the Institute of Anthropology, has no monographs or specialized research on Hmong Christianity. However, he has published several academic works that mainly refer to Protestantism in Vietnam and, more often than not, take the Hmong converts' case for example<sup>61</sup>. Questionably, Nguyễn shows some information that is different from other Vietnamese scholars' findings. For instance, while most researchers agree that the *Vàng Trú* movement began among the Hmong of Northern Vietnam in the late 1980s, Nguyễn decidedly claims that it happened in 1997<sup>62</sup>. Like some other scholars, Nguyễn also supposes that *Vàng Trú* is an extreme and fake religious organization run under Protestantism<sup>63</sup> that has been taken advantage by foreign forces<sup>64</sup>. There is a 2010 paper titled *Some issues/problems of Protestantism in the Hmong free migrants to the Central Highlands currently* in which Nguyễn primarily discusses the Hmong Protestants who freely migrated to the Central Highlands of Vietnam from the northern region. However, this nine-page article is not the result of any ethnographic research on a specific Hmong population.

On the one hand, Nguyễn reports that most Hmong Protestants in the area do not comprehensively understand their religion; they only converted because of the crowd effect. Furthermore, various Protestant denominations have had conflicts to the other and compete to attract more adherents. In terms of why many Hmong have migrated to the Central Highlands of Vietnam since 1986, Nguyễn doubts that it might happen due to the conspiracy of foreign enemy forces. On the other hand, he admits a better circumstance of the Hmong in the new land. There are no illegal religious activities among the people, and their conversion is an objective reality rather than totally a conspiracy of foreign enemies, as he insists in his other works<sup>65</sup>.

Apart from previous scholars who have special interests and done significant work on Hmong Christianity of Vietnam in its early period, the recent years have witnessed a

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[Similarities in the Responses of the Hmong in Vietnam and the Miao in China with the Christian Influence],” *Tạp Chí Dân Tộc Học* 5 (2013): 69–80.

<sup>61</sup> See Văn Minh Nguyễn and Ly Giang Hồ, “Một Số Vấn Đề Thực Tiễn về Đạo Tin Lành ở Các Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Vùng Tây Bắc Hiện Nay [Some Practical Concerns on Protestantism among Ethnic Minorities in the Northwest Today],” *Dân Tộc Học* 5 (2011): 3–14., 4.3 Đạo Tin lành ở vùng dân tộc thiểu số Việt Nam trong thời kỳ đổi mới, particular from page 195 to 200 in Văn Minh Nguyễn, *Tôn Giáo, Tin Ngưỡng Các Dân Tộc ở Việt Nam [Religions, Beliefs of Ethnic Groups in Vietnam]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, 2013)., and Văn Minh Nguyễn, “Ảnh Hưởng Của Đạo Tin Lành ở Vùng Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Nước Ta Trong Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới [Influence of Protestantism in Ethnic Minorities Areas in Our Country in the Doi Moi Period],” *Tạp Chí Dân Tộc Học* 5 (2014): 3–14.

<sup>62</sup> Văn Minh Nguyễn 2013, 198.

<sup>63</sup> Nguyễn uses *Vàng Chứ* in his original works, sometimes the term ‘*Tin làng Vàng Chứ*’ (Vàng Trú Protestantism) is also employed.

<sup>64</sup> Văn Minh Nguyễn 2013, 202-3., Văn Minh Nguyễn 2014, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Văn Minh Nguyễn, “Một Số Vấn Đề về Đạo Tin Lành Trong Cộng Đồng Người Hmông Di Cư Tự Do Vào Tây Nguyên Hiện Nay [Some Issues of Protestantism among Hmong Free Migrants to the Central Highlands Today],” *Tạp Chí Dân Tộc Học* 5 (2010): 38, 40, 42–43.

surprisingly increasing attention of Vietnamese researchers on this topic, who are Nguyễn Khắc Đức (2010, 2013, 2017), Đoàn Đức Phương (2014, 2015, 2018), Nguyễn Quang Hưng (2015, 2020), Võ Thị Mai Phương (2016, 2017), Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm (2016) and Trần Thị Hồng Yến (2018). While Nguyễn Khắc Đức, Nguyễn Quang Hưng, Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm and Trần Thị Hồng Yến do their research on Hmong Protestants in the northern Vietnam, Đoàn Đức Phương and Võ Thị Mai Phương choose Hmong Protestants in a province of the Central Highlands of Vietnam as their research objects.

Nguyễn Khắc Đức has published two papers in 2010 and 2013. The first paper is on *Changing Trends of Protestantism among Ethnic Minorities*. The second paper is on *Some Features of Protestantism among northern mountainous ethnic minorities today in our country*. These two papers are fundamentally similar to Chapter 3, pages 189 to 209, in his 2017 book titled *Protestantism in Hmong and Yao ethnic regions in the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam*<sup>66</sup>. Even though Hmong Protestants of northern Vietnam are mentioned in all those studies to a certain extent, their religious life is not fully displayed apart from some general conclusions. Specifically, Nguyễn classifies the Hmong and *Dao* (Yao) according to their belief. He suggests three categories: those who have followed for quite a long time would have real religious needs and understand the religious teachings, religious law to a certain extent and know quite well how to practice Protestant rituals; those who follow because of crowd impact would have faint belief in the savior and faint perception of Protestantism; and, those who used to follow but already abandoned Protestantism. Although religious activities (*sinh hoạt tôn giáo*), religious places (*địa điểm sinh hoạt tôn giáo*), and religious group leaders (*người đứng đầu điểm nhóm (trưởng điểm nhóm)*) are mentioned, there is no in-depth analysis. Nguyễn Khắc Đức also discusses the different periods of Protestantism development among Hmong in mountainous northern Vietnam as well as the reasons why the Hmong converted between the years 1987 and 2004, and the impact of Protestantism on them. In general, Nguyễn basically agrees with previous scholars on these matters.

Nguyễn Quang Hưng adds one more way to explain why some Hmong converted to Protestantism in his 2015 article titled “*A Further Discussion on the Causes led to a part of*

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<sup>66</sup> Khắc Đức Nguyễn, “Xu Hướng Biến Động Của Đạo Tin Lành Trong Đồng Bào Các Dân Tộc Thiểu Số [Changing Trends of Protestantism among Ethnic Minorities],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 11 (2010): 42–47., Khắc Đức Nguyễn, “Về Một Số Đặc Điểm Của Tin Lành Trong Vùng Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Miền Núi Phía Bắc Nước Ta Hiện Nay [Some Features of Protestantism among Northern Mountainous Ethnic Minorities Today in Our Country],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 8, no. 122 (2013): 53–58., Khắc Đức Nguyễn, *Đạo Tin Lành Trong Vùng Dân Tộc Mông và Dao ở Các Tỉnh Miền Núi Phía Bắc Việt Nam [Protestantism in Hmong and Yao Ethnic Regions in the Northern Mountainous Provinces of Vietnam]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Lý luận Chính trị, 2017). The author uses the term ‘the Hmong and Yao under the impact of Protestantism’ (*người Mông, người Dao chịu ảnh hưởng của đạo Tin Lành*) instead of ‘Hmong or Dao Protestants’.

*Hmong people converted to Protestantism*”<sup>67</sup>. He offers a similar explanation as earlier scholars. The difference is that Nguyễn highlights the most fundamental reason is ‘the religious crisis’ (*nhật đạo*), which refers to the process of becoming weaker of religious belief among a part of Hmong people. This phenomenon made a part of Hmong no longer desired to maintain their traditional religion, which has created the spiritual gap for Protestantism and some new religions to be penetrated.

Most recently, Nguyễn Quang Hưng and his colleagues published a 2020 book titled *Research and Evaluation on Religion and Beliefs of Hmong Protestants and Some “New Religions” in Northern Mountainous Provinces*. This book also includes the content of his 2015 article. Several sections that focus directly on Hmong Protestants are Some Characteristics of Hmong Protestants in northern Vietnam; Reasons for Hmong to convert from Catholicism to Protestantism; Religion, Ethics and Ethical Psychology: Hmong Protestants; Protestantism and Cultural Change of the Hmong; Institutional Change in Hmong Protestant Community and Protestantism and Demographic Change. As the book belongs to a national project, the authors may rely on the authorities’ political stance to a certain extent. For example, the Hmong Protestants are described as those who are extreme and willing to fight against and sabotage the government, or Protestantism among the Hmong has caused various negative consequences (*hệ lụy*) on culture-society and political security<sup>68</sup>. Such negative words in Vietnamese ‘*manh động*,’ ‘*cực đoan*,’ ‘*không ngán*,’ ‘*chống phá*’ are used to talk about aggressive Hmong Protestants. It seems that the Hmong converts are not to be adequately understood but to be evaluated. The evidence to discuss Hmong Protestants does not always come from those insiders but traditional Hmong such as the respected old Hmong Ma Khái Sò. On the other hand, this academic work is an excellent attempt at discovering the Hmong Protestant community that offers subsequent scholars valuable data and arguments.

Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm focuses on exploring the culture of the Hmong Protestants in Lào Cai province in northern Vietnam in her unpublished doctorate dissertation. She divides the Hmong Protestants’ culture into various categories, which are: material culture (*food, clothes, and houses*), social culture (*relationships between wife and husband, among family members, within*

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<sup>67</sup> English title is the original title on the abstract part of the paper, see Quang Hưng Nguyễn, “Bàn Thêm về Nguyên Nhân Theo Tin Lành Của Một Bộ Phận Người Hmông [A Further Discussion on the Causes Led a Part of Hmong People Converted to Protestantism],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 06 (144) (2015): 19–37.

<sup>68</sup> Quang Hưng Nguyễn, “Chương 6: Đạo Tin Lành và Biến Đổi Chuẩn Mực Đạo Đức, Văn Hoá, Tôn Giáo và Tổ Chức Xã Hội Đồng Bào Mông [Chapter 6: Protestantism and Changes in Hmong Ethical Standards, Culture, Religion and Social Organization],” in *Nghiên Cứu Đánh Giá Tôn Giáo Tin Ngưỡng Của Đồng Bào Mông Tin Lành và Một Số “Tôn Giáo Mới” ở Các Tỉnh Vùng Núi Phía Bắc [Research and Evaluation on Religion and Beliefs of Hmong Protestants and Some “New Religions” in Northern Mountainous Provinces]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tri thức [Submitted for Publication], 2020b), 434–35.

*the kinship, in the Hmong Protestant community, the role of Hmong women, the role of reputable persons), spiritual and religious culture (monotheistic worship, various collective praying gatherings, and other religious ceremonies, religious rules replace kinship and village's regulations, more systematic religious rituals replaces unique life-circle events' rituals), and lifestyle culture (văn hoá lối sống). Being a dissertation in anthropology, Nguyễn has done a good job on providing an ethnographic description on the culture of Hmong Protestants in a specific location. Although she is criticized for only offering an ethnographic description of changes in the Hmong Protestants' culture without explaining why those changes have happened<sup>69</sup>, Nguyễn's research is a rich source of reference.*

The latest research on Hmong Protestants in northern Vietnam is the 2018 book focusing on *cultural and social changes of Protestant ethnic minorities in mountainous northern Vietnam* by Trần Thị Hồng Yến and her colleagues. The authors claim that their research is the first monograph in the Anthropology of Religion, which focuses on social and cultural changes of Hmong and Yao Protestants' communities. They considered the criteria of 'locating in the frontier area' and 'being defined as sensitive/ hot spots (*điểm nóng*) of Protestantism's activities in recent years,' to choose field sites. The scholars also reveal their bias throughout the text viewing the religious adherents through the lens of authorities<sup>70</sup>. Thus, the voices of marginalized Hmong Protestants may not be attentively and correctly heard. However, it should be noted that this book provides a variety of precious updated government-based data that some other scholars may not have access. Several discussions on how the Hmong and Yao Protestants have changed their view and behaviors in terms of cultural and social aspects are also displayed, even though they usually come from interviews with government officials and religious leaders rather than adherents.

Being a policeman doing research among religious people, it is understandable that Đoàn Đức Phương's 146 content-page dissertation<sup>71</sup> aims to explore the religious life of the Hmong

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<sup>69</sup> Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al., *Biến Đổi về Văn Hoá, Xã Hội Của Cộng Đồng Cư Dân Theo Đạo Tin Lành ở Một Số Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Miền Núi Phía Bắc (Từ Năm 2005 Đến Nay)* [Cultural and Social Changes of Protestant Communities among Some Ethnic Minorities in the Northern Mountainous Region (from 2005 to Date)] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, 2018), 43.

<sup>70</sup> For instance, see Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al. 2018, 141-2, 144, 148, 200.

<sup>71</sup> Although Đoàn publishes several articles, they are either a short article (only four and a half page) with general information or offer discussion which are also included in his 2018 dissertation. Therefore, the review refers mainly to his dissertation Đoàn Đức Phương, "Đời Sống Tôn Giáo Của Người Mông Tin Lành ở Đắc Lắc Từ Năm 1986 Đến Nay [Religious Life of Hmong Protestants in Dak Lak from 1986 to Date]" (unpublished Thesis, Hà Nội, Học viện Khoa học Xã hội, Viện Hàn Lâm Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, 2018). For further information, see Đoàn Đức Phương, "Một Số Vấn Đề về Đời Sống Tôn Giáo Của Đồng Bào H'mông ở Việt Nam Theo Đạo Tin Lành Hiện Nay [Some Issues about the Religious Life of Hmong Protestants in Vietnam Today]," *Nghiên Cứu Đông Nam Á* 2 (2014): 72-76., Đoàn Đức Phương, "Một Số Vấn Đề về Sự Di Trú và Phân Bố Dân Cư Người H'mông Tin Lành ở Tỉnh Đắc Lắc [Some Issues about Migration and Population Distribution



Protestants (from page 65 to page 100) and subsequently its impact on economic, cultural-social and security-defense (from page 101 to page 112). In the analysis, he more often than not cites opinions of a few informants, then comes to conclusions for a larger population of Hmong Protestants as a whole. For example, most of the details on Hmong Protestants' religious life come from the interview with a Presbyterian denomination pastor named Ma Seo Din. Basically, Đoàn's classifies Hmong Protestants in Đắk Lắk provinces into three categories according to their locations (*those who spontaneous free migrating then settling in remote and isolated regions; those who live in the same region with other indigenous ethnic minorities; and those who stable communities settled by the government's plan*) then generally discusses their beliefs (at section 3.1.2, from page 80 to 88), religious practices (from page 88 to 101). There are seven in-depth interviews in which four of them are with religious leaders, one with a Vietnamese Kinh policeman working on Hmong Protestants' issues in the province, and one with two Hmong adherents of the Presbyterian denomination regarding their wedding. It might be questionable if the dissertation accurately reflects the religious life of Hmong Protestants with proper and sufficient empirical data. On the one hand, there are several problematic statements. For example, Đoàn claims that some Hmong groups migrated to the Central Highlands according to the government's policies, but they actually did not such as the Hmong of Yagad. On the other hand, Đoàn is the very first researcher studying Hmong Protestants in Đắk Lắk in terms of their religious life and providing a variety of government reports that one may consult to conduct related research, which Đoàn has the privilege to access as a policeman. His political position and biased conclusions are understandable rather than to be criticized.

Last but not least, in the latest book titled *Changes in Spiritual Culture of Hmong Migrants in Dak Lak*, Võ Thị Mai Phương discusses spiritual culture changes of both traditional Hmong and Hmong Protestants who migrated to Đắk Lắk province. The particular focus on changes in religion and belief of Hmong Protestants is between the page 202 and 211, in which Võ generally describes how the Hmong Protestants in Đắk Lắk believe and practice differently compared to their traditional people more often than not without comprehensive analysis. According to her, there are five major points regarding spiritual culture change of Hmong converts: totally believe in and only worship God; no longer practice worship ancestors, *ma nhà* (house ghosts) and other lords; change in how to conduct several agricultural rituals; there are still many imprints of religion, faith and beliefs that belong to the traditional culture in their

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of Hmong Protestants in Dak Lak Province],” *Nghiên Cứu Đông Nam Á* 10 (2015a): 80–85., Đức Phương Đoàn, “Những Biến Chuyển Trong Đời Sống Tôn Giáo Của Người Mông Tin Lành Di Cư ở Tỉnh Đắk Lắk [Changes in Religious Life of Hmong Protestant Migrants in Dak Lak Province],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 08 (146) (2015b): 121–31.

spiritual culture; and, the role of religious group leaders. Some of the statements are made only based on textual comparison rather than the voices of religious adherents. For instance, the differences between Protestantism and traditional Hmong religion are defined based on their theological principles rather than how Protestants Hmong think, believe, and practice in fact. In Võ's text, changes among customs within families or festivals are not included in Hmong Protestants' religion and beliefs. Although this book is the first published book particularly referring to Hmong Protestants in Đắk Lắk, it contains many false data and statements. For example, Võ confidently claims the number of Hmong in China is around nine million<sup>72</sup>, the number of total Hmong in Vietnam is 787,604<sup>73</sup>, the number of Protestant denominations is 285<sup>74</sup>; which are broadly not acknowledged or out-of-date in the scholarship. Also, Võ considers 'Vàng Chứ' a 'messianic movement' that appeared a long time ago in the Hmong history, or she calls 'Vàng Chứ' as 'mủ sư Vạn Trống'<sup>75</sup> which actually is the name of an American Hmong pastor<sup>76</sup>.

In short, most Vietnamese academic writings on Hmong Christians/ Protestants seem to take Hmong Protestants' voices as insiders for granted. They more or less reflect the political position of communist Vietnam. Instead of obtaining a comprehensive understanding to bring the authorities and people closer, the Hmong converts are observed, evaluated, and judged, which are then used for the policymaking process. Analysis and conclusions on this religious group are mostly built on religious teachings or government reports. Consequently, their religious life is not fully displayed or not significantly illuminated as an aspect of human life. On the other hand, those domestic writings contain a massive amount of statistical data from the government reports that international scholars might have limited access to, even though such data's authenticity may require more careful investigation. Terminologically, 'Hmong' in the Vietnamese language has been defined as *Mèo* or *HMông*, but recent works employ 'Mông.'

The Hmong Christians of Vietnam have also caught the further attention of *international scholars* as they have always been considered a politically sensitive marginalized population in Vietnam. James Lewis (2002) explains the Evangelical movement among Hmong of Northern

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<sup>72</sup> Thị Mai Phương Võ, *Biến Đổi Văn Hoá Tinh Thần Của Người Hmông Di Cư ở Đắk Lắk [Changes in Spiritual Culture of Hmong Migrants in Dak Lak]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia Sự Thật, 2017), 45., see more at Jacques Lemoine, "What Is the Actual Number of the (H)Mong in the World?," *Hmong Studies Journal* 6 (2005): 1–8.

<sup>73</sup> Thị Mai Phương Võ 2017, 190.

<sup>74</sup> Thị Mai Phương Võ 2017, 186.

<sup>75</sup> Thị Mai Phương Võ 2017, 185. See fuller explanation based on empirical data in the latter sections of this work.

<sup>76</sup> Thị Mai Phương Võ 2017, 197.



Vietnam and the government's response<sup>77</sup>. He offers an analysis of and accounts for Hmong religious life under the influence of the government's policies before 1989 and the government opposition. Lewis then discusses Evangelicalism's appeal to the Hmong, Marxist opposition to religion, internal security issues, and legal violations. Finally, he analyzes the Evangelical movement of 1993 – 2000 by providing three significant features: government's intervention, Hmong leaders, and the human rights and advocates of religious freedom on the Hmong.

Most recently, Ngo Tam has published a series of academic articles in the years 2009, 2010, 2015, and a 2016 book on Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam. By doing an impressive amount of fieldwork in northern Vietnam, the United States, Laos, Thailand, and China since 2004<sup>78</sup>, Ngo contributes significant and valuable arguments to the Hmong scholarship. First, she explains why FEBC was able to convert thousands of Hmong. Second, Ngo stresses the importance of ethnic and transnational dimensions in understanding Hmong's conversion to Protestantism in Northern Vietnam by examining religion's transnationalization in their case. In her current book, except the introductory part and Chapter 1 on the Hmong of Vietnam, Ngo provides detailed explanation of the Hmong conversion and its influence not only on the Hmong, both converted and non-converted, but also on other actors such as the government and Christian missionaries. Some ideas on the book can be found in her previous articles, such as discussing the short-wave faith or arguments on ethnic and transnational aspects of the conversion. Also, several conclusions are already stated in earlier research such as the one on conflicts between convert and non-convert sides, on the Hmong convert to Christianity that is 'not by rice alone', on how Christianity has improved gender inequality. Although Ngo seems to miss research of some Vietnamese and Hmong scholars on Hmong Christians' topic<sup>79</sup>, she does offer rich empirical data on such a politically sensitive issue that a foreign scholar may not have privilege to study. Noticeably, she goes further by discussing theoretical aspects that might inspire and challenge the audience to think more abstractly and deeply on the nature of the Hmong's conversion and beyond.

Apart from research on 'Hmong Christians' discussed above, there are some others conducted among Christian converts of Miao, which the Hmong has been a sub-group to, and/or among the A Hmao, who is considered the counterparts of the Hmong being one among four sub-groups of the Miao. Although these works do not particularly focus on Hmong Christians,

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<sup>77</sup> James F Lewis, "The Evangelical Religious Movement Among the Hmông of Northern Vietnam and the Government's Response: 1989-2000," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 16, no. 2 (2002): 79–112.

<sup>78</sup> Being claimed by Tam Ngo on her work.

<sup>79</sup> Also, see more at Mai Na Lee, "Lee Mai Na's Review on The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam," *Pacific Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2018): 426–28.

they are valuable sources to gain a deeper understanding of them compared to their Miao counterparts. Some work that can be named is Siu Woo Cheung's article on *Millenarianism Christian Movements among the Miao* (1995) and various book chapters on *Hmong/Miao in Asia* (2004).

In short, previous research on Hmong Christians either explores the nature of the conversion and its impact on society or examines religious change and its expression in several aspects within the Hmong Christian community. Besides, most of these scholars chose a sociological and/or anthropological approach for their discussions that may not provide comprehensive understanding of this religious population. On the one hand, ethnic minorities of Vietnam have been rarely investigated, particularly under proper research that appreciates how people represent themselves<sup>80</sup>. On the other hand, the study of ethnicity and religious life of communities are believed to be neglected by social scientists<sup>81</sup>. Thus, I would like to conduct intensive and systematic research in Religious Studies (Religionswissenschaft), employing ethnographic inquiry to obtain more profound knowledge of marginalized Hmong Protestants in Vietnam whose focus is on their religious life, which might be in a timely manner. Particularly because "The ideological justification of fieldwork strongly indicates that scholars should focus most on observable activities, actual events and practice, rather than on what texts, preachers or even 'ordinary' participants assert people out to do"<sup>82</sup>, my research might offer opportunities for insiders' voices to be heard and correct misunderstanding that has been claimed about this marginalized people.

## 1.2 Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore the religious life of Hmong Protestants in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where a part of Hmong people collectively migrated from northern Vietnam in the early 1990s by doing fieldwork in a focal village. Therefore, the central question to be answered is: *What are the characteristics of the religious life of Hmong Protestants in Vietnam?* In order to answer the central question, several sub-questions must be considered: *Who are the Hmong Protestants in Vietnam? Where do they live? How have the Hmong become Protestants? Why have they chosen Protestantism rather than other religions? What does the religious life of Hmong Protestants look like? And, how has "being a Protestant" changed Hmong life?*

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<sup>80</sup> Taylor 2008, 26-8.

<sup>81</sup> Kim Knott, "The Changing Character of the Religions of Ethnic Minorities of Asian Origin in Britain: Final Report of a Leverhulme Project," *Community Religions Project Research Papers* 11 (1992): 25.

<sup>82</sup> Harvey 2011, 217.

As the Hmong of Vietnam lives scattered across the country, it is not possible to do fieldwork in all their living locations in the country within the scope of a doctorate project. Consequently, based on the existing literature, I proposed choosing the focal village that is most ‘protestant’ among the Hmong of Vietnam. In other words, the Hmong Protestants’ village picked up to study should be the purest religious community rather than be the one in which both Hmong Protestants and their non-convert counterparts live together. However, the reality is significantly different from what has been reported in Vietnamese literature. This is the reason why the focal village of this research is changed after entering the field. More discussion will be available in the latter parts.

### 1.3 Research Approach

I personally find it very convincing that “methods... are central to research practice because they lay down the procedural rules to follow for obtaining certifiably objective and reliable knowledge”, and “If ‘methods’ are technical rules that define proper procedures, ‘methodology’ is the broad theoretical and philosophical framework into which these procedural rules fit”<sup>83</sup>. Being aware of the core role of both methodology and methods, I would explain how the theoretical and philosophical framework of this study is established and how methods are defined and employed in the field as well as in procedure of analyzing and writing up in this section.

#### 1.3.1 Research Design

The Hmong conversion to Protestantism has been considered a controversial phenomenon in Vietnam. However, their religious life has been a mostly unsearched topic. For quite a long time, the Vietnamese government and scholars considered the conversion to Protestantism of the Hmong to be a negative trend that should be prevented. Making assumptions and applying dictatorial policies on a group of marginalized people without adequately understanding them leads to severe consequences and human rights violence. To explore and understand this inferior population, I choose to conduct *qualitative research*. Being a social constructivist, I believe people create meanings on their own. Therefore, this research type would enable me to empower research participants to share their stories, hear their voices, and eventually obtain a complex and detailed understanding of them<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>83</sup> John Brewer, *Ethnography*, 3rd ed. (Buckingham. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>84</sup> John W Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), 4.

According to Creswell and Poth<sup>85</sup>, qualitative research has various approaches: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnography and case studies. In current study, ‘*the religious life of Hmong Protestants*’ is the research focus to be discovered. This Hmong Protestants community is a culture-sharing group where the researcher can describe and interpret their shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language by using ethnography<sup>86</sup>. Besides, as a scholar of religion David Scott suggests that “understanding religion requires nothing more than the sensitive and imaginative reading of human phenomena informed by the best available ethnography set in the best available historical narrative”<sup>87</sup>. Plus, another scholar of religion – Graham Harvey – confidently confirms that “fieldwork is the best approach to research about the lived reality and/or performance of religion”<sup>88</sup>.

Notably, it is warned by an anthropologist specializing in Vietnam and Asia, Philip Taylor, that “the intensity of the scholarly gaze on the state far outweighs the degree of attention that has been devoted to ethnic minorities themselves. This is especially true of anthropological research on or in Vietnam. Compared with research conducted in most other countries in Southeast Asia, ethnographies that describe the worldviews of Vietnam’s diverse ethnic peoples and that ground these outlooks within the contexts of people’s histories and everyday lives are in precious short supply. Very little long-term fieldwork has been conducted in the naturalistic life settings and in the languages of the peoples studied.”<sup>89</sup> I, therefore, consider ethnography to be the most appropriate and timely design for this research in the field of Religionswissenschaft. This design of inquiry proposes the researcher study an entire cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time, employing methods of observations and interviews<sup>90</sup>. Concrete considerations on defining research methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation would be discussed in latter sections after theory use in the research is considered.

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<sup>85</sup> Apart from the identification by Creswell and Poth, there are many more approaches in conducting qualitative research such as 28 types by Tesch (1990), the 22 types in Wolcott’s (2009), see more at John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 183.

<sup>86</sup> Creswell 2007, 68.

<sup>87</sup> Davis 2012, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Harvey 2011, 217.

<sup>89</sup> Taylor 2008, 25.

<sup>90</sup> Creswell and Creswell 2018, 13.

### 1.3.2 Theory Use

The current study aims to understand the religious life of a marginalized community, mainly relying on the participants' views. Thus, there are no hypotheses or theories to be examined. Variables are not to be tested but would emerge from the data analysis as all empirical evidence only are available after the data collection period. The study also does not focus on a single aspect or several aspects of a specific issue such as gender, class, and race. Instead, the religious life of a faith-based group will be explored as a whole that includes the intertwined relationship among numerous actors and various dimensions<sup>91</sup>. As a result, among different qualitative theoretical perspectives such as *Feminist perspectives*, *Racialized discourses*, *Critical theory*, *Queer theory*, *Disability inquiry*, no single one is applied to the research.

Among possibilities of using theory in qualitative research, forming empirical data into categories or themes that are then developed into broad patterns, ideas, or generalizations seem to match this research's case best. Rather than generating an abstract theory, this study is expected to provide 'pattern theories' that Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to, which are explanations that develop during qualitative research<sup>92</sup>. These pattern theories or generalizations represent interconnected thoughts or parts linked to a whole that are exactly what the current study is looking for. At this point, it can be concluded that there are no orienting theories or theoretical framework will be used in this research. Instead, several theories on specific topics of the Study of Religion (Religionswissenschaft), such as 'religious conversion,' 'migration and religion,' 'religious belief' and 'religious practices,' would be consulted to illuminate the research findings, strengthen arguments that eventually lead to a possible contribution to the literature.

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<sup>91</sup> This complex essence of the research problem will be gradually illuminated throughout the text.

<sup>92</sup> Creswell and Creswell 2018, 64.

## Chapter 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Examining and Accessing the Fieldsite

*Evaluating the research field.* It is a fact that the current research problem and population are highly politically sensitive. Thus, before returning to Vietnam on 10.09.2018 (11 months after my Ph.D. program started), I spent months contacting government officials, Hmong studies scholars, and several Hmong Protestant leaders to set up appointments, get ready for paperwork, seek advice and prepare myself for the trip. Because the permission to stay in the field site for a long time could be rejected, and the deportation was expected to happen anytime; I also prepared for other field sites by contacting a colleague who has been doing his government-sponsored research in the location where there is a group of Hmong Protestants live. It is advised that the researcher should come to visit the field site before actually doing the work. However, as I was not affiliated with any official institutions or organizations in Vietnam, that may cause me problems if the police or local officials in the field ask for research documents. Plus, if my research intention is spread in the region before I actually come and work, government officials would possibly change their minds or prepare reasons not to allow me to get in. Therefore, I decided to take a risk and be ready to change my research in the worst case.

*The door opens.* In 2014, I incidentally found a friend I first met in 2005 after a long time we had heard nothing from each other. After our short conversation, the only information I knew about him is that he was working in Đắk Lắk province, where I had planned to go for my research. I shared my plan with him in 2016 and got the firm reply that he would help me when I came. Being unsure how he could help me, I still asked for recommendation letter from my supervisor and support from some professors at Vietnam National University whom I have known during my college years. A couple of weeks before I went back, my friend told me that the person who would help me was a leader of a police department named E., who was in charge of the village I would come vertically but directly.

One may wonder why such personal connections are mentioned here. It is a widely-known fact that passing the authoritative gatekeepers is the deciding factor for those who desire to do sensitively religious research among upland minorities in socialist Vietnam<sup>1</sup>, particularly for a

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<sup>1</sup> Being a senior Vietnamese scholar working at a government-funded institution, Trần also admitted that she and her colleagues were not allowed to stay overnight in some Hmong villages of northern Vietnam, see Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al., *Biến Đổi về Văn Hoá, Xã Hội Của Cộng Đồng Cư Dân Theo Đạo Tin Lành ở Một Số Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Miền Núi Phía Bắc (Từ Năm 2005 Đến Nay)* [Cultural and Social Changes of Protestant Communities

person who is affiliated with a foreign organization like me. Therefore, it is essential to explain how I get accepted to research such an abnormal field site.

*Experts and Insiders' Advice.* As the research problem is highly politically sensitive, I chose to meet with some Hmong studies scholars and some Hmong Christians before entering the field. I arrived in Vietnam on Tuesday 11.09.2018 and came to Hanoi for such meetings from 12.09.2018 to 20.09.2018.

Among the people I met, there was a policeman who researched Hmong Protestants in Đắk Lắk for his doctoral dissertation. His research was not conducted in my focal village, and his perspective was also different from mine. According to his experience, it is tough to approach religious leaders, and he was rejected all the time even though they first said they would be available to meet. The Hmong always said '*tsis paub*' (I do not know) while they met a stranger. Another scholar specializing in traditional Hmong shared his experience dealing with policemen in sensitive cases and advised me to prepare myself for such situations. There were also two Hmong pastors of the Presbyterian denomination whom I got contacted through my friend. They shared their thoughts and experiences in doing ministry work, and were willing to introduce me to the head and other Hmong in their denomination. All these valuable experiences are enormously helpful that finally became 'good reminders' for me throughout my journey.

*The day comes.* After meeting with some scholars and Hmong religious leaders, I flew to Đắk Lắk on 22.09.2018 as my friend advised that it was more convenient for him and E. to go with me to the remote Hmong village on the weekend when they were off at work. After driving almost four hours<sup>2</sup>, we first had lunch together at a Hmong policeman's house nearby the chosen village named Hawj V. L. where I met and talked with L's wife – Haam M – quite a lot during my first days staying in the field. We then visited the family I would stay in Lakad – the village I chose to study on the research proposal. My Hmong host father – Haam T. – is the head of the village and plays several roles in the political system, which becomes the standard that E. chose to ask for supporting me. It should be clear that E. and I had never met before; understandably, we could not have firm trust from the beginning. Thus, letting me stay at a communist's house would be easier for him and his police department to control me.

*Entering to and Modifying the Field site: Establishing Rapport.* As this study aims to explore the religious life of Hmong Protestants, it would be best to choose a "purest" field site where

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*among Some Ethnic Minorities in the Northern Mountainous Region (from 2005 to Date)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, 2018), 24.

<sup>2</sup> It usually took me around five or six hours to go from the Buôn Ma Thuột city (or Buôn Mê Thuột) to the field commune by public transport and private services as the road is very complicated and rough.

Hmong Protestants are significantly separated from their traditional people and other religious groups. Additionally, the site chosen should have the largest number of Hmong Protestants compared to other villages. The ideal village should also be established for a long time enough that its inhabitants have more stable lives. These standards of choosing a field site for the given research would enhance the validity of findings. After researching various academic resources, I elected Lakad village which belongs to Pák commune, Krông Bông district, Đắk Lắk province as my research site. As informed in the literature, this village is located in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, with 414 households and 1023 Hmong in total. There are 391 households following Protestantism, making up more than 94% of the entire village<sup>3</sup>. However, after entering the field for a couple of days, I found another village that best fits my research named Yagad. Yagad is located in another commune called Đák of the same district as Lakad, yet rarely mentioned in the scholarly work. In fact, Lakad was divided into smaller villages in 2008, which I will refer to as ‘Lakad I’ and ‘Lakad II’ throughout this study. This section, therefore, aims to describe ‘how the research population was identified,’ ‘how rapport in both original and new villages was established,’ and ‘how the focal village was modified thanks to the flexibility of ethnographic design that allows researchers to make adjustments when it is necessary<sup>4</sup>.’

Apart from well-known political challenges for researchers to do ethnographic work among the Hmong Christians in Vietnam, the Hmong is also considered hard-to-approach people. As mentioned earlier, the strangers often than not get a *‘tsis paub’* (I do not know) when they first asked Hmong for any information, especially while a male stranger approached a Hmong woman. The Hmong is also known for their hospitality and friendliness if they trust someone but would not trust again once they are scammed. Thus, to get valuable and verified data among these people, trusted relationships should be first established and strengthened. This is not an exception to ethnographers, particularly throughout the rapport establishment, but it is absolutely inevitable to those who want to research Hmong people. Researchers can even apply a covert ethnography as Calves, Graham, Holdaway, Feilding suggest<sup>5</sup>; but I personally find this method not applicable among honest Hmong people. I agree that “it is often unnecessary to use covert methods since permission can be granted or other roles utilized”<sup>6</sup>. Plus, it is also about the ethnic research matter as “open identification of oneself as a researcher is the correct

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<sup>3</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009, 39-40.

<sup>4</sup> Brewer 2005, 103.

<sup>5</sup> See Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography Principles in Practice*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), 56.

<sup>6</sup> Brewer 2005, 98.



stance to adopt in relation to others”<sup>7</sup>. The researcher needs to be trusted so that people would be willing to engage in conversation and interviews.

I was the first person doing intensive research in Yagad and stayed that long with the Hmong. Thus, I often got questions about my presence and purposes, particularly in the early days when most people did not know me and doubted if I was a Vietnamese government cadre. Some villagers asked about my religion or tried to convert me, which is not uncommon to ethnographers<sup>8</sup>. In such cases, I chose to explain my concerns on religious freedom and special care for religious people, especially those marginalized. Their past vulnerable experiences and current misunderstanding that the outsiders hold about them made my purposes understandable to them. I believe if a researcher hid his/her identity and purpose or just intended to lie, s/he would never be accepted among the Hmong.

Instead of being active and openly sharing about myself with research participants as I have done in western communities, my strategy had changed this time. I stayed relatively closed and silent for the first meetings and let people actively managed the talk and decided if they wanted to continue the conversation or not. For those curious about my work or even considered it entirely unnecessary, I chose to keep silent at first and found an appropriate time to communicate with them.

On the first day staying in the host family, the host father prepared a meal for me, and only two of us ate in the living room; other family members ate in the kitchen. In their custom, welcoming guests in the living room is polite. I shared that I would like to experience their actual life and would be happiest to live in the way they had been living. The first morning broke the ice after asking if everyone had a good sleep and found out that my host father could not rest due to his emerging festering acne. I then gave him some medicine that quickly cured him only over one night. Plus, similarities between us significantly established the rapport: I come from the northern mountainous village as they do, the host father’s name is precisely my father’s, and his son is mute and deaf that my younger brother is as well. I believe my remote hometown and experience as a mountain person are advantages in working among rural people. We then started to become more open, and I began to be able to ask for more information on Hmong Protestants. Several first interviews were conducted on the first Sunday I was in the village – 30.09.2018. Except for the first week of settling down and traveling back and forth for permission in the commune and the district, I believe that in my case, the ‘ice-breaking’

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<sup>7</sup> Harvey 2011, 235.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey 2011, 223.

process was quite fast that saved me significant amount of time, particularly while I had so little due to the doctorate project time limits.

After a couple of days, the host told me that commune leaders already reminded him to regularly report on me and my village activities before my arrival. Plus, there are always some secret policemen observing me, which is not uncommon to ethnographers researching in Vietnam. In other words, I was supposed to be observed and controlled in all authoritative levels, both vertical and horizontal axes. Thus, I could not do any interviews for first weeks or mentioned any religious things to them. It should be noted that I was advised numerous times to avoid mentioning doing research on religion in Vietnam to government officials. Thus, I chose to tell them at first that I would do research on Hmong migrants' culture. After getting closer to the host family, village and commune leaders, and district police officers, I decided to tell them more precisely about my study of religion to avoid any doubts that might not be good for human relations by any means. This also opened me another door: I discovered another village where the largest Hmong Protestants community in the Central Highlands is located – Yagad – thanks to conversations, I decided to begin on such a sensitive topic: *religion*.

Yagad village is located in another commune called Đăk of the same district as Lakad. Thus, I needed to ask for permission to get into that commune. It was lucky that I got to talk more with E., and he started to trust me more. It unexpectedly took me time to travel to the district center for permission, then travel back to the Đăk commune to meet commune leaders. These offices are far from both Hmong villages. I then was permitted to stay in Yagad village by government officials and got passed the Protestant gatekeeper – the only ordained Hmong pastor of Đăk Lắk province on Sunday 20.10.2018. This religious gatekeeper actually offered me the virtual permission letter and certificate of 'being a trustable person' to officially begin my presence in the community and allow me to start talking to adherents with confidence. Although it is hard to conclude that the Hmong religious community has an especial hierarchical structure<sup>9</sup>, religious leaders hold the highest reputation among these Christian minorities. Thinking that way, I defined the religious leader as the key person with the power to 'open to door' – in other words, he is the village gatekeeper. Therefore, interviewing with him was the very first interview I took in Yagad<sup>10</sup>.

As a matter of fact, being a scholar of religious study is different from an anthropologist that "Fieldwork conducted by scholars of religion only rarely entails long-term dwelling among

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Davidson Bremborg, "Interviewing," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 312.

<sup>10</sup> Details on these two Hmong villages are provided in Chapter 5.

those whom researchers wish to observe. Most often, it involves only periodic or regular observation of significant events or processes.”<sup>11</sup> However, the Hmong religious people have been vulnerable regarding religious matters; thus, short and periodic visits may not be sufficient to build rapport to obtain their trust that is the essential factor for successful fieldwork research. Therefore, I then chose to stay in the village as long as possible.

## **2.2 Collecting data**

As defined in the previous section, this study employs qualitative research design based on ethnographic inquiry. Therefore, I chose to mainly use data collection techniques of participant observations, interviews including in-depth and informal/ personal conversations, focus groups. In addition, local research, government and religion-related documents were collected as much as possible for textual analysis. The whole data collection process had been recorded into personal fieldnotes.

### *2.2.1 Interviews*

*Research Participant Recruitment and Interview Questions.* In Religious Studies, “interview is a very useful method since people’s beliefs are diverse and multifaceted... Qualitative interview result in rich, complex and nuanced data”<sup>12</sup>. In ethnographic research, the interview is also considered an essential data collection technique. But researcher cannot interview a large sample. Instead, they need to select the most appropriate participants to obtain representativeness<sup>13</sup>. As a matter of fact, ethnographic decision-making is a vital skill to be trained before entering the field as “decisions have a profound impact on the content and character of the ethnography that ultimately gets produced”<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, although it is indispensable to prepare sampling strategies beforehand, I am fully aware that they are not definitely fixed. These strategies have to be implemented and altered throughout the research process. Interviewees, the time and location of interviews would have to be developed as time goes by<sup>15</sup>. Thus, I drafted a recruitment plan but tried to be flexible in choosing participants. In the field, my participants even picked me in some cases.

To be more specific, several characteristics of research objects were identified before I went to the field. Because the research is about the religious life of a group of people, the adherents and their religious leaders are absolutely included, who would vary in gender, age, occupations

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<sup>11</sup> Harvey 2011, 219.

<sup>12</sup> Bremborg 2011, 310.

<sup>13</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 106.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Kwame Harrison, *Ethnography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 40.

<sup>15</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 4.

and so on. In particular, the believers who have unique traits such as ‘joined a political protest’ would be considered to be a research subject. In such case, the complexity of religious faith and practices could be explored to see how they have been changed under the impact of certain factors. Furthermore, for comparative data, the interviews would be taken among adherents of other religions or denominations and research subjects’ neighbors who have certain shared-characteristics and religious and political leaders at various levels. By doing so, a considerable number of interviewees as ‘outsiders’ would be counted.

It should be aware that numerous people would possibly be interviewed more than once, particularly if some vital information was revealed in the first talk that would possibly be further discovered or needed to be checked<sup>16</sup>. In addition to employing the ‘snowball’ technique and defining must-have types of participants, I was able to identify who would be the best next interviewee by exploring new information while I was in the field. This way allowed me to discover precious information and aspects that had been hidden within the target faith-based community that significantly shed some crucial insights for my research questions.

In terms of interview questions, Hammersley insists that “Ethnographers do not usually decide beforehand the exact questions they want to ask, and do not ask each interviewee precisely the same questions, though they will usually enter the interviews with a list of issues to be covered”<sup>17</sup>. This statement exactly describes how I had been preparing for my interview questions. To my knowledge, ‘religious life’ – the central theme of this current research – is not clearly defined in scholarly sources. Thus, I have been attempting to define most visible indicators that make ‘religious life’ of a group most sense.

*Interviews in the field.* On the research proposal, I planned to conduct in-depth interviews with ten to fifteen participants as “Many studies show saturation between 12 and 30 interviews... if the group is rather homogenous, if the research question does not involve comparisons of several variables or sampling groups, and if the domain of inquiry is well defined, then 12 interviews are enough”<sup>18</sup>. I, in fact, had more interview opportunities at the research sites. Thus, I had been attempting to collect as much data as possible since I was not sure if I would be deported due to any sensitive reasons, which finally leads to having more than one hundred participants for the whole project<sup>19</sup>. Sometimes, up to five in-depth interviews were taken a day with a duration of one to three hours. Most of the interviews in the village are

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<sup>16</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 106.

<sup>17</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Bremborg 2011, 314.

<sup>19</sup> A detailed table on Key Research Participants is provided at the end of this chapter.

followed up by in-person conversations, phone calls, and texts<sup>20</sup>. Since I left the village and Vietnam, I have been keeping in touch with some participants such as pastors, religious leaders, religious people, particularly my host family.

In the focal village, I attempted to talk or meet with as many people as possible, then classified them into participant categories I wanted to interview most, then conducted interviews to gain as much information as possible. Plus, I usually did not ask people for an interview or ask them to connect me to someone else if we first met. What I did is I got to know people first, defined if they were the ideal respondents I could find; I then conducted the interviews most naturally as I could. Because studying religion is itself a complicated work, and it becomes extremely tough regarding personal religious beliefs of vulnerable, marginalized people; therefore, I followed the advice that “Non-threatening questions are also best asked first and sensitive topics addressed only after a rapport has been established”<sup>21</sup>.

At first, I only conducted interviews with ordinary people or more open people instead of taking risk interacting with challenging participants as the trust needed time to be firmly built in the whole community. I then took time to identify the circumstance, approach and set up appointments with special interviewees such as ‘female religious leaders,’ ‘Mường Nhé political revolt attendees,’ ‘very first villagers’ ‘followers of different ethnic group backgrounds,’ ‘followers of strange/undefined faiths.’ These unique and ‘challenging’ cases often required more time and carefulness to be welcomed and trusted. When my research questions I prepared basically reached their saturation, I continued to seek answers for emerging problems such as “Why does the praying house always look low and narrow?”, “Why is the number of church gathering attendees always much higher than that seats a church space could offer.” I also visited other denominations/ groups to investigate emerging controversial phenomena such as Bãi Ba, Bãi Năm, Bãi Si, which belong to another district of Đăk Lăk.

Although being aware of and respect the fact that researchers often target the people “who have the knowledge desired and who may be willing to divulge it to the ethnographer”<sup>22</sup>, I decided to try approaching potentially informative participants. In fact, my research population is said to be very cautious people. They are often ‘shy’ or even walk away when they encounter strangers. Thus, it is important to create a chance to convince them to join me. For example, I could never contact a protestant leader of a small group in the field village. All my phone calls were ignored or rejected. From my experience, one is normally welcomed to join a protestant

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<sup>20</sup> Phone calls and texts are mainly used after I left the field.

<sup>21</sup> Brewer 2005, 66.

<sup>22</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 106.

church mass if he or she sincerely desires to. Therefore, instead of assuming that the leader did not want to talk to me, I decided to come to their Sunday gathering after asking permission to enter the mass from a village police officer. What happened then became much more understandable, and I was welcomed to join their coming gatherings as well as the leader's daily evening prayer at his house with his wife and children.

In terms of the interview scene, it is suggested that the interview place has to be relatively silent because noise can easily drown the voices and make it difficult or impossible to hear the recording afterward. In noisy environments, taking rich notes is most advised<sup>23</sup>. These two recommendations are not highly applicable for this research. Almost all people in the fields do not have a private office or a private living room for guests, and it is not common to ask them to go to the café shop. Therefore, interviews were taken place at the informants' house where their relatives were around and could communicate together anytime, especially kids. Some of the recordings are too noisy that I could not transcribe. Whereas in Hanoi, several interviews at café shops were affected by unexpected loud music. On the other hand, I realized after a couple of times practicing that taking detailed notes while interviewing Hmong people often made them feel unsecured or awkward.

### *2.2.2 Participant Observations and Focus Groups*

*Participant Observation.* Participant observation is a critical ethnography data collection technique that “involves data gathering by means of participation in the daily life of informants in their natural setting: watching, observing and talking to them in order to discover their interpretations, social meanings and activities”<sup>24</sup>. Any daily insight I could ‘take-away’ in the field was recorded on the ‘quick notes’ subfolder of my fieldnotes.

One of the primary personal qualities that a researcher should obtain is the ability to “maintain the balance between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status”<sup>25</sup>. Specifically, the researcher should be close to participants and be in the field as a native but still maintain a professional distance that allows proper observation to be achieved. As I experienced that myself, such distance also reminds me that ‘I am doing scientific research’ and prevents me from over-enjoying my participants’ company. I realized that it was relatively easy if the rapport was already well built, I may treat people as my friends and act emotionally. Therefore, attempting to be rational allowed me not to forget to pay attention to valuable information.

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<sup>23</sup> Bremborg 2011, 316.

<sup>24</sup> Brewer 2005, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Brewer 2005, 59.

When it comes to the ‘insider’ position, it is best to immerse self in society, to think, feel and sometimes act as a member of the researched culture. I often dressed up as a female Hmong, learned the language, and practiced daily talks to communicate with people. Later on, I realized that talking even a little in the native language could warm up the conversation that made people feel more connected with me. Being an ‘insider’ helped me stay closer to people and enables me to feel their way of living, thinking, and acting. Those ‘being insider’ senses eventually helped me better reflect on the research while working on my desk and writing it all up after withdrawing from the setting.

Apart from daily activities, I employed participant observation techniques, particularly during religious activities such as weekly gatherings, daily evening prayers, Sunday and Wednesday/Thursday prayers, and gatherings of different religious groups. In some cases, I failed to do ‘religious event’ observation as the religious gathering was not taken place as people planned to. For example, the Thoj family in Yagad claimed to pray altogether on Saturday morning; but, when I came, they did not practice that weekly mass because, they said, there were not enough members. The following Saturday was not different. Thus, in such a case, I could only take notes on what and how people interacted with me instead of a detailed religious event description.

In terms of *focus groups*, I planned to invite participants then enhance the discussion by raising several key questions as I did in western communities before. However, it was not easy to set up such a group in the village as most people were not all available at the same time. Besides, they seemed to hesitate to attend something official/ formal because, as I mentioned, vulnerable Hmong did not like to be officially asked because of their unpleasant encounters with political power across generations. But it then naturally happened when I invited them for tea time with men, chat time or cooking time with women, hangout time with the youth, and tutoring with kids and secondary school students. The number of participants, questions, and duration depends on the location and individuals. In general, one or two central questions were raised at first; then, the conversation was developed in various ways that allowed a lot of valuable information revealed or verified vital data.

In short, I am considerably convinced that “Participant observation... does not only mean doing what other people do and then wondering what they think they are doing. It involves dialogue with others. This might entail more-or-less intense conversations ... or more-or-less formal interviews”<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, when I classify data collection techniques and discuss them, it

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<sup>26</sup> Harvey 2011, 231.

does not mean that those techniques are not related. I suppose that these techniques are intertwined to a certain extent, such as dialogues of participant observation and personal talk of the interview. Being aware of each method helps me stay conscious of employing them, not for a rigid application most effectively. Plus, as I was not able to record with essential details on my fieldnotes as mentioned above, images, videos, and audios play a substantial role in helping me to recall exactly what had been done, “especially in relation to religious events or rituals”<sup>27</sup>; and inspire me to connect ideas from textual codes with meanings revealed on photos/videos/recordings. The Hmong are more often than not shy from the camera; thus, I only took pictures and recorded videos if they were comfortable, on special collective occasions or on the last days I was about to leave.

Apart from empirical data I have collected in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, empirical data collected from my short field trips to northern Vietnam (December 2016 and February 2020) would also be used in this research as comparative sources. A detailed explanation of those trips will be provided in the latter sections.

### *2.2.3 Government Reports and Other Documents*

In terms of materials, I mostly collected at Central Highlands University (*Đại học Tây Nguyên*), Institution of Social and Sciences, the Central Highlands Region (*Viện Khoa học Xã hội vùng Tây Nguyên*), Vietnam National Library (*Thư viện Quốc gia Việt Nam*), Institution of Religious Studies (*Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, Viện Hàn lâm Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam*), Institute of Ethnic Studies (*Viện Dân tộc học*). Some reports were gotten directly from officials, local authorities, and religious leaders.

Collecting official documents from the government leaders at various levels were difficult, particularly with those who hold the highest political positions in the region. After talking on the phone and meeting several times with the head of the provincial Committee in Religious Affairs named N. C., I could only get a one-page document that was cut and printed to give to me. Whereas, E. – the district police department leader who supported me on the first days I was in the Central Highlands – seemed to be open and helpful but always ignored once I asked any questions on documents. E. even intentionally stopped his colleagues while I was asking for some reports on religions in the district. Regarding commune leaders, they were more comfortable giving me some documents and asked their staff to print some for me in a morning when I was there. But after our lunch, the commune policeman detected that I was asking for

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<sup>27</sup> Harvey 2011, 237.



some ‘sensitive’ reports, he did not give me any more documents even though I called the commune secretary to get permission. It is a fact that commune police officers belong to vertical government offices, not to commune government. The main reason that these officials told me is that I was related to a foreign university. Thus, they suppose that it is dangerous to give out such politically sensitive documents.

Meanwhile, I could access existing local research at libraries of a local university and research institution without many difficulties even though they were concerned that I was back from a western country at first. In terms of religion-related documents, the pastor seems to be more careful in giving me written records. Still, I got some crucial ones from the church secretary whose wife I often talked with and visited. Being a vulnerable person, it is understandable why the pastor hesitated to give me any documents. The last day I saw him, he showed me numerous ‘*Giấy triệu tập*’ (summons) sent by the local police department since he settled down and played a role as a religious leader in Yagad. He shared with me some difficult situations that he encountered with policemen over the past decades. He then rejected to let me take a copy of those documents because he worried for his family’s safety and himself.

Apart from above documents, it is a fact that some Vietnamese research on Hmong Christians are not carefully investigated. For instance, a scholar writes that he took an interview with a Hmong pastor in Đắk Lắk throughout his study. As he did not hide the real name of that pastor who I sometimes talked with while I was in the province, I found out that he never met the pastor and present in the village where the pastor resided. In another case, after talking with some domestic researchers who also contributed to researching Hmong Protestants in northern Vietnam, I was told that various questionnaires of that project were not authentic. Thus, such sources and findings are not used to make any conclusions in my thesis even though I acknowledge their existence elsewhere.

#### *2.2.4 Field notes*

On the one hand, doing ethnography means relying to “a number of particular data collection techniques, such as naturalistic observation, documentary analysis and in-depth interviews”<sup>28</sup>. On the other hand, considering the specific context I was in, I decided to use ethnographic fieldnotes as a strategic method for managing empirical data, particularly highlighting insights daily that I would use after leaving the field sites.

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<sup>28</sup> Brewer 2005, 27.

Using a computer and writing something on a notebook seemed suspicious to local people, particularly those who had no idea of who I am and what I am supposed to do in their neighborhood. I was assumed to be a cadre who came to catch people who illegally collect wood in the forest. Therefore, I decided not to take any fieldnotes during daytimes in the first weeks. After interviewing or talking to people, I quickly noted on my phone some key points while I was alone. Plus, interview notes were not applicable. While talking to people, if I am distracted or try to do something else or write something, I would be doubted or distrusted. This problem actually sometimes happened to me. Thus, during the interview, I only could take quick notes on my phone if people did other things like getting more water to talking to other people. In those circumstances, I was only able to jot down a few words or short sentences. Afterward, I wrote in details on my field note file when I was alone working on my computer, mostly at night or early morning, in the quietest manner not to wake people up as we stayed in the same space<sup>29</sup>.

In the latter weeks, I felt a bit more comfortable working on my computer once in a while. I sometimes taught kids English or showed them some words or pictures on the laptop, which made more sense to people of computer usage. However, it still caused doubt for those who saw me for the first time. Plus, it is easy to be lost among fieldnotes; therefore, I tried to highlight new ideas or findings in another file to remind me of the main lines that I am following. Thus, when I am back with fieldnotes later, I can connect ideas that I have been organized and add some new ideas or information if they occur during the time I code all of my field notes and other documents.

#### *2.2.5 Withdrawal from the field*

To my limited knowledge, it seems that ‘withdrawal from the field’ is taken for granted in some ethnographic writings. I personally consider it one of the most critical steps that should be carefully prepared as it is profoundly related to human emotions. It may be problematic if a researcher leaves wonders, questions, or shocks for people in the fieldwork. In addition, particularly in Vietnamese culture, it is so common that someone is accused to be ‘ungrateful’ if they are so close to people, ask for information, and then disappear. That is why I decided to create a ‘withdrawal trial’ while leaving for a conference and seminar in Religious Studies in Hanoi and some meetings with officials in Buôn Mê Thuật at the beginning of December 2019.

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<sup>29</sup> My host family house, similar to many other Hmong houses, does not have private rooms. Our beds were in a shared space, which also functions as a living room.

When I was in the field, I was with villagers 24/7. We are together, talk, and share all day long. The rapport was intensely built, at least between my host family members and me. Therefore, before I left, I already said: ‘due to my workload in Hanoi, I may not call you often. Do not be sad. It is only because I am at work or be tired when I get home’. These sincere words, I believe, let people not expect me to contact them while being not in the field frequently. That means in another case, such as when I returned to Germany, they would be ready that our contact could be less frequent. This strategy sounds similar to what Brewer calls ‘leave in stages’<sup>30</sup>. By now, although I cannot call them often, we are still kept in touch, particularly during special occasions such as Christmas, Lunar New Year, or during the Coronavirus time. I stay in contact with my host family, some other villagers, and religious leaders in the focal village and other villages in Vietnam where I had a chance to visit. My promise of going back to see them when I return Vietnam in a few years is also a message I would like to send them that I would not disappear and that they are already parts of my life. The trips I took with my host family to northern Vietnam after leaving the village, I think, also strengthens their trust in me.

Plus, it is also warned that respondents might have negative emotions if they read the findings and/or find themselves to be cheated/duped<sup>31</sup>. I have reminded myself to be most aware of this fact. While in first talks to the religious leader and ordinary Hmong Protestants, I already said I was here not to tell only ‘good things’ about them, but to investigate and appreciate the truth. It is common knowledge to Christians that ‘God challenges them in various ways;’ and that ‘they should continuously correct themselves to be God’s faithful children.’ Thus, I have explained to them basing on this theological idea that even if my findings do not ‘please’ them, they will not harm them. The truth only helps us to be better. Also, their privacy will be guaranteed at most. Doing so allows me to openly discuss with Hmong followers, particularly religious leaders, even after leaving.

### **2.3 Data Analysis, Interpretation, Validation, and Limitations**

Though I have consulted various books on how to proceed with empirical data to get the final report, my current research needs a more flexible process because it was not entirely similar to typical ethnographic studies conducted in the Study of Religion. As mentioned, my participants are ‘vulnerable population’ and are not familiar with research work; most interviews did not go straight and smoothly as it is supposed to be. The participants went off

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<sup>30</sup> Brewer 2005, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Brewer 2005, 102.

track or wanted a chat more often rather than always being formal as interviewees. Thus, many interviews lasted up to several hours that demanded time-consuming transcribing work. Consequently, due to the limited time of this doctorate research, I could not transcribe all recorded interviews/talks word by word. On the other hand, all major points of interviews are taken into analysis along with field notes, which I regularly made in the fields. Any noticeable emotions, words, expressions, or so of interviewees were documented to support the data analysis process.

At first, I did an ‘initial code’ to define main themes, which are basically related to research questions. Throughout this period, ‘sentence by sentence coding’ was employed for every interview transcript. Any results were then double-checked with field notes. After completing this step, I was able to draft the first outline of my thesis. The second coding period required me to work on details of all themes to generate more convincing conclusions, which also needed to be supported with existing literature. Thus, I went back and forth between dataset and textual resources to examine my understanding and ensure that they are correctly verified. In fact, this process made my outline changed as many facts had gradually been revealed that resulted in an updated structure. While the second step was done, I was able to draft the main points for all chapters and sub-chapters of my research.

Finally, I started to write up the findings in detail, which eventually created a more coherent body as I re-visited all sources numerous times and obtained knowledge from new readings. This step was also the right time for me to sort the remaining ‘need-to-check’ information and double checked with all participants I have still contacted. However, as my writing process has been during the 2019 Coronavirus pandemic, I have no access to many books and articles that might be essential to challenge and support my results. Plus, the Pandemic prevented me from attending the April-2020 Hmong International Conference that I was invited to and broke my plan of accessing particular libraries on Hmong studies in Minnesota and Wisconsin in the USA, where there are a huge number of Hmong reside. Consequently, instead of consulting some original research on Hmong Christians preserved in the U.S., I have to use the translated versions, which is always noted throughout my writing. Also, as admitted in an earlier section that I failed to get some government documents. Thus, my analysis has to be done without a certain amount of data.

Regarding the data validation process, it was mainly completed in the field. As defined in the proposal, I have employed techniques of ‘triangulation of different data process,’ ‘member checking,’ and ‘extensive time in the field.’ I only began to explore emerging matters in greater

detail after the research's core problems reached relative saturation. Also, 'member checking' went many rounds such as 'religious leader – ordinary follower,' 'government official – religious citizen,' 'village leader – ordinary villager,' 'first villagers – new comers,' 'Hmong Protestants and their neighbors of various ethnic backgrounds,' 'Hmong Protestants of Central Highlands and their families in northern Vietnam,' etc. How data has been validated, and the voices of both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' are appreciated will be illuminated through detailed discussions throughout the thesis.

Due to the limited time of the current research plan, I was not able to extend my field research time that made me miss some religious events on an annual basis or life circle, such as Easter. As mentioned, not all recorded interviews and talks can be transcribed word by word; some interviews are also lost<sup>32</sup> or cannot be entirely transcribed due to noisy background, which made me miss some vital details. Plus, a couple of participants were not comfortable being recorded; thus, in that case, I was only able to rely on my memory and short field notes to write up the related findings. In most cases, I do not cite these participants to avoid insufficient-evidence and unverified conclusions.

One of the biggest problems of my research is that I was not able to master the native language before my field research started. Therefore, I was only able to use basic Hmong to establish rapport and warm-up conversations. It was also a huge disadvantage that I could not comprehend older people's thoughts and their Christian faith well, particularly those who could not speak Vietnamese Kinh. The translation support from native Hmong was sometimes not sufficient.

Last but not least, I have not been professionally trained to be an ethnographer. Also, my knowledge of methodologies and theories in the Study of Religion is limited. These gaps may result in less efficient data collection and analysis process, and less appealing academic writing.

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<sup>32</sup> Several interviews were not recorded because of technical reasons, and there is only one recording lost that I did not know the reason.

**Table 1 Key Research Participants**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Name (pseudonyms)</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Denomination<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Interview/ Conversation Place</i>	<i>Total Duration (only recorded interviews/talks are counted) &amp; Note<sup>i</sup></i>
<i>In the Focal Village</i>						
1	Faaj B.	F	22	Baptist I	Yagad	talk after the Baptist Christmas mass
2	Faaj C.	M	40	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 50 minutes; follow-up conversations excluded
3	H.	F	55	N/A	Yagad	Hmong's neighbor, ethnicity: Vietnamese Kinh
4	H. C.	M	N/A	CMA	BMT <sup>2</sup>	Pastor, ECV-S leader who frequently supports Yagad church of years
5	Haam P.	M	55	None	Yagad	3 hour 45 minutes (one is UGI), village secretary, FTE
6	Haam S.	M	39	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 35 minutes
7	Haam X.	M	53	CMA	Yagad	12 hours 19 minutes, SIC; Yagad church head, ordained pastor
8	Haam X. P.	F	26	CMA	Yagad	host sister-in-law, countless conversations, SIC
9	Hawj H.	M	32	None	Yagad	22 minutes (UGI), RTE
10	Hawj S.	M	54	None	Yagad	30 minutes, GDE; Yagad village head, communist
11	Hawj V.	M	36	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 45 minutes; GDE <sup>ii</sup>
12	Lauj S.	F	55	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 13 minutes (UGI), participated in a political revolt
13	Lê T.	F	38	Catholic	Yagad	Hmong's neighbor, ethnicity: Vietnamese Kinh
14	Lis S. C.	M	35	Baptist II	Yagad	53 minutes (UGI), switched religious group recently

<sup>1</sup> See latter sections for detailed interpretation of Protestant denominations' names used in Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> Buôn Mê Thuật, Đắk Lắk.

15	Muas L.	M	28	Baptist I	Yagad	4 hours, Baptist I house church head and pastor
16	Muas X.	F	27	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 53 minutes (some are UGIs), sometimes support as a translator, FTE
17	N. C.	M	N/A	N/A	BMT	1 hour 45 minutes, RTE; Religious Affairs government leader who is in charge of Yagad vertically
18	Niê N.	F	20	N/A	Yagad	1 hour, recently attended Hmong church but not yet baptized, ethnicity: Ede
19	T.	F	N/A	None	Yagad	Hmong's neighbor, ethnicity: Tai
20	T. T.	M	55	None	Lakad I	26 minutes, FME; former Đák/Yagad government leader
21	Thoj D.	M	27	CMA	Yagad	conversation after an interview with his father-in-law – Vaaj T
22	Thoj S.	M	23	CMA	Yagad	conversation before and after the ritual, a Child Dedication host
23	Thoj T.	M	22	Indefinable	Yagad	23 minute (UGI), hard-to-approach participant
24	Tsaab S.	M	41	Baptist II	Yagad	1 hour 45 minutes, his wife joined once; Baptist II house church leader
25	Tsaab T. S.	F	32	Baptist II	Yagad	53 minutes, switched religious group recently
26	Tscheej T.	M	22	CMA	Yagad	conversation before and after the ritual, a House Inauguration host
27	V. C.	M	56	None	Đák	1 hour 57 minutes, FME; current Đák/Yagad government leader,
28	Vaaj L.	F	26	CMA	Yagad	only an 8-minute interview including various details was recorded, FTE
29	Vaaj P.	F	31	Baptist II	Yagad	1 hour 13 minutes (UGI), switched religious group recently
30	Vaaj S.	M	32	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 07 minutes
31	Vaaj S. T.	M	38	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 07 minutes (UGI)
32	Vaaj T.	M	62	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 13 minutes; involved in a political revolt
33	Xyooj A.	F	19	CMA	Yagad	40 minutes, daily talks, and a 20 minute-group discussion excluded
34	Xyooj D.	M	34	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 50 minutes (UGI)

35	Xyooj H.	M	54	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 55 minutes, RTE
36	Xyooj L.	M	31	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 40 minutes, young missionary
37	Xyooj S.	F	19	CMA	Yagad	42 minutes, daily talks, and a 20-minute group discussion excluded
38	Y. R.	M	N/A	CMA	Yagad	20 minutes; church visitor from Lâm Đồng, ethnicity: Chil
39	Yaaj D.	F	23	CMA	Yagad	conversation before and after the ritual, a Child Dedication host
40	Yaaj F.	M	26	None	Yagad	22 minutes (UGI <sup>iii</sup> ), host brother, FTE <sup>iv</sup> , SIC <sup>v</sup>
41	Yaaj G.	F	30	CMA	Yagad	25 minutes, rapport time excluded (RTE) <sup>vi</sup> ; female religious leader
42	Yaaj G. T.	M	48	CMA	Yagad	3 hour 20 minutes, Yagad missionary, RTE
43	Yaaj H.	M	49	CMA	Yagad	14 recorded interviews and talks, FTE, GDE; host father in Yagad
44	Yaaj L.	F	23	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 15 minutes, FTE, SIC
45	Yaaj N.	F	23	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 45 minutes (one is UGI), FTE
46	Yaaj P.	M	64	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 35 minutes; first Yagad village head
47	Yaaj Q.	M	26	CMA	Yagad	54 minutes, young missionary, SIC
48	Yaaj S.	F	50	Indefinable	Yagad	23 minutes, hard-to-approach participant, RTE
49	Yaaj S.	M	51	CMA	Yagad	12 minutes, local healer
50	Yaaj S.	M	60	None	Yagad	14 minutes, RTE; former Vietnamese army soldier, communist
51	Yaaj T. L.	M	30	CMA	Yagad	unrecorded conversations, DC member, FTE, SIC
52	Yaaj T. S.	F	64	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 35 minutes (UGI), first Yagad village head's wife
53	Yaaj T. T.	M	51	CMA	Yagad	09 recorded interviews and talks, FTE
54	Yaaj V. L.	M	54	CMA	Yagad	51 minutes, RTE



55	Yaaj X.	M	41	None	Yagad	17 minutes (X's stories excluded); left church, current government cadre
<b><i>In other Hmong villages of the Central Highlands and northern Vietnam</i></b>						
56	Cao Đ.	F	50	None	Đắk Nông	24 minutes, Hmong's neighbor, ethnicity: Vietnamese Kinh
57	Êban C.	M	N/A	None	Yagad	20 minutes (UGI), an Ede district policeman, RTE
58	Faaj S. B.	M	25	TGPÂ	Hà Giang	unrecorded conversation
59	Haam G.	F	15	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 39 minutes (UGI), Lakad I resident
60	Haam M.	F	30	None	Păk	frequent conversations during the first days I was in Lakad
61	Haam M. P.	M	37	CMA	Lakad II	5 hours 20 minutes (some are UGIs), RTE; Lakad II church leader, missionary
62	Haam T.	M	53	None	Lakad I	3 hours, FTE, host father in Lakad I (talked once in Yagad)
63	Haam X. S.	M	25	CMA	Lakad I	talk after visiting his new-born baby, a former Vietnamese Army soldier
64	Hawj H.	M	30	Presbyterian	Hà Nội	50 minutes, active in Son La province
65	Hawj L.	M	46	CMA	Đắk Nông	2 hours 30 minutes, Grông house church head, ordained pastor
66	Hawj V.	F	33	TGPÂ	Hà Giang	28 minutes (some other short conversations excluded)
67	Hoàng N.	F	13	None	Đắk Nông	unrecorded conversation, Hmong's neighbor, ethnicity: Tai
68	K.	M	15	CMA	Hà Giang	41 minutes (UGI)
69	K. A.	M	22	CMA	Đắk Nông	11 minutes recorded and unrecorded conversations
70	Khaab D.	M	N/A	CMA	Thái Nguyên	Hmong house church leader, pastor, SIC (24.03.2019's recording lost, photos are still available)
71	L.	M	16	CMA	Hà Giang	41 minutes (UGI)
72	Lauj V.	F	30	CMA	Yagad	1 hour 39 minutes, Lakad I resident

73	Lê T. Đ	M	55	None	Đắk Nông	24 minutes (UGI), Hmong's neighbor, ethnicity: Vietnamese Kinh
74	Mã D.	M	37	None	Lakad II	30 minutes, RTE
75	Muas S.	M	40	CMA	Lakad II	2 hours 20 minutes (some are UGIs), Lakad II DC member
76	N.	M	19	CMA	Hà Giang	41 minutes (UGI)
77	Phuong L.	F	34	N/A	Hà Giang	50 minutes (UGI), a commune deputy secretary in Hà Giang
78	S.	M	N/A	N/A	Hà Giang	50 minutes (UGI), District Home Affairs Department Head in Hà Giang
79	Thoj C.	M	39	CMA	M'Đrăk	1 hour 23 minutes, house church leader
80	Thoj V.	M	N/A	CMA	NaP	1 hour 47 minutes, ordained pastor
81	Thu H.	F	N/A	None	Đắk Nông	Hmong's neighbor, ethnicity: <i>Nùng</i> (Nung)
82	Tswb T.	M	28	CMA	Păk	56 minutes (UGI), Lakad II DC member
83	Vaaj S. V.	M	N/A	Baptist	Păk	Baptist pastor in M'Đrăk, did a funeral ceremony in Lakad
84	Vaaj V.	M	38	None	Yagad	20 minutes (UGI), a Hmong district policeman, RTE
85	Yaaj M.	F	23	TGPÂ	Hà Giang	unrecorded conversation
86	Yaaj T. G.	M	59	None	Hà Giang	1 hour 19 minutes, District Vietnamese Fatherland Front's Head in Hà Giang; Yaaj H.'s brother
87	Yaaj T. H.	M	31	CMA	Hà Nội	1 hour 55 minutes; used to be a TGPÂ group leader (talked in Hà Giang)
88	Yaaj T. U.	M	35	CMA	Hà Nội	1 hour 23 minutes, ECV-N leader, Hanoi Hmong CMA group leader

It should be noted that all coded analysis comes from interviews and daily unrecorded conversations and follow-up talks, which play an essential role in checking data and exploring new findings. As most Hmong are not familiar with professional work style, such as setting up an appointment, I visited them once they invited me to their house. More often than not, someone came and joined our interviews unintentionally. Some of those 'random participants' are counted if they were actually involved in the interviews and shared their thoughtful voice.

Furthermore, 08 group discussions and 06 Hmong are not listed in this table but still mentioned elsewhere throughout the text. One of the reasons is that the time I spent with them was relatively short, or their information only helped verify/ strengthen data. Meanwhile, 19 Hmong whom I talked and/or conducted an interview with are not listed in this table nor mentioned in the text. However, they have also contributed to the data checking process and helped me find new information, which eventually led to subsequent vital interviews. Among these 19 Hmong, there is a female religious leader in Yagad named Yaaj A. (single<sup>3</sup>, age 30) who I failed to interview even though I attempted to set up the meeting several times. As other Hmong confirmed that she could speak Vietnamese, she refused to understand what I said or reply to me during our meeting. In other words, I only name those who I cite in my research in this table, but it does not mean that others who are not cited being taken for granted as all of Hmong have helped me to understand the whole as well as the details much better in various ways.

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<sup>i</sup> Details on Interview/Conversation Date and any specific context will be provided throughout the text. Detailed explanations on religious groups/denominations as well as Hmong participants in the focal village and beyond would be provided in Chapter 5 of Part III because the focal village of my research has its specific history and structure, and my way to probe field sites and research population took time and did not go straight due to high politically sensitive topic of this study.

<sup>ii</sup> Group Discussion Excluded (GDE) refers to those who participated one or more group discussion(s) that are not calculated into Interview/Conversation Duration.

<sup>iii</sup> Unplanned Group Interview (UGI) means that some interviews include two or three participants who were/did not intentionally invited/participate in/in the interview but naturally joined after the interview started for a while. Such a case happens quite common among the Hmong. As mentioned earlier, I could not set up interviews at a cafe shop or a more private space as Hmong are not familiar with such appointments, and they more often than not find it natural to join the conversation if they feel trusted, comfortable and/or welcomed. Whereas the target interviewees are not marked as 'UGI'.

<sup>iv</sup> 'Frequent Talks on daily basis Excluded' (FTE) which refers to Hmong who I talked with much more frequently than others and significantly supported in investigating new information and data checking when I was in the field.

<sup>v</sup> Still in Contact (SIC) means we are still in contact to keep the relationship and check/update data when it is possible/necessary. Not all Hmong can afford a smart device to maintain virtual contact; thus, I can only keep in touch with some.

<sup>vi</sup> Rapport Time Excluded (RTE) specifically refers to hard-to-approach participants, which required more rapport time than other participants. Most of these participants are politically or mentally vulnerable due to past unpleasant experiences with the Vietnamese police force and/or government officials.

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<sup>3</sup>While the Hmong are famous for their high child marriage rate, A.'s marriage status is specifically noted as it is uncommon.

## Part II – The Hmong and their Encounters with Christianity

### Chapter 3. Becoming Regional and Global

Chapter 3 aims to generally introduce the Hmong ethnic group from the very beginning to date. They are well known as a migrating tribe (*tộc người thiên di*) with massive waves of migration at both regional and global scales, departing from their homeland – China. Today the Hmong are present worldwide, with a total population of around five million<sup>1</sup>.

#### 3.1 The Origin

*Contradictory Opinions.* There have been different opinions on the origin of the Hmong in the scholarship. One of the most first well-known Catholic French priests doing missionaries among Hmong in the early twentieth century is Father Savina<sup>2</sup>, who said that this ethnic group could migrate from Mesopotamia through Siberia and Mongolia<sup>3</sup>. This position is shared by a USAID official on a 1963 document<sup>4</sup>. Another opinion stated by Keith Quincy saying that some Hmong first lived in Siberia based on an explanation of their similar look to Siberian people. Nicholas Tapp surely denied this stance, insisting that it is a part of “extraordinarily inaccurate and utterly misleading publication... called Hmong: History of a People”<sup>5</sup>. The most widely accepted opinion on Hmong’s origin, to my study on various research on Hmong people, is that before migrating to Southeast Asia, and lately to the West, the Hmong originally lived in southern China.

Also, I am more convinced that the Hmong originally lived in southern China because China is the ending point on a funeral song called ‘*khua kev*’ that tells dead Hmong where they should go to in order to meet their ancestors. Although the Hmong did not have a writing system in history, it is quite clear that their verbal myth has been accurately kept after centuries. Therefore, as China is the ending point on the way go back to the homeland on the traditional Hmong’s thought, it could be their homeland.

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<sup>1</sup> Lemoine 2005, 7.

<sup>2</sup> French Father Savina first convinced the French colonialists to allow missionary work among ethnic minorities in North Vietnam and Laos, then lived with the Hmong for quite a long time. He had done many pieces of research on these people. One of his famous works is *Histoire des Miao* published in Hong Kong in 1924, which was translated to Vietnamese in 1971 François Marie Savina, *Lịch Sử Người Mèo [A History of Meo People]*, trans. Viện Dân tộc học [Institute of Anthropology], Vietnamese Version (Hanoi, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Tapp, “The State of Hmong Studies (an Essay on Bibliography),” in *Hmong/ Miao in Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004b), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Tapp 2004b, 17. It is also suggested that “USAID... who may well have read Savina’s speculations”, Tapp 2004b, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Tapp 2004b, 18.

*The Hmong in China.* It is a fact that the word ‘Hmong’ is not included in traditional Chinese character systems. All historical records in Chinese found related to Hmong are referred to as ‘Miao.’ It may be because it is easier for the central authorities to manage their ethnic groups. It may also be a Chinese government strategy to group Hmong into Miao so that the Hmong could be removed over time.

‘Miao’ is the term that refers to all non-Chinese groups settling in southern China, including Hmong, Hmu, Xong (Qo-xiong), and A Hmao. During the period of 2300-200 BC, they were reported having lived in the surrounding Yellow River of central China. The rise and fall of the Hmong started this time as they were defeated by Chiyou Chinese and then Han Chinese that led to numerous rebellions of the Hmong, under the Yuan, for example. The years of 1733-1737, 1795-1806, 1854-1873, and probably 1851-1864 again witnessed Miao revolts in Guizhou and Hunan provinces occurring against Chinese rule. After making the last effort, some Hmong began leaving China for several Southeast Asia countries. Today, the Hmong who remain in China mainly live in the southern provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. The most updated number of the Hmong population in China is calculated to be 3,000,000<sup>6</sup>.

Although the Hmong were not recognized as an independent ethnic group in the history, Chinese government nowadays not only acknowledges them but also offers some Hmong language courses at universities. The international conferences on Hmong studies have attracted many Chinese scholars, and the interest in Hmong studies has been increased in Chinese academia.

### **3.2 Regional**

This section will briefly present the Hmong of Southeast Asia from the beginning to date. The massive migration from the motherland of southern China to Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand in the early 19th century made the Hmong a regional ethnic minority group. Their migration process, settlements, basic highlights on life in these receiving countries would be generally reviewed. After arriving, the Hmong have further moved to Myanmar and Cambodia that broadens their map in the Southeast Asian region.

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<sup>6</sup> The latest available data on the total number of Hmong of China is reported in 2005, see *Table 1. Approximate number of Hmong worldwide based on national censuses when available*, Source. Michaud, Ruscheweyh, and Swain 2016, cited from Jean Michaud, “The Art of Not Being Scripted So Much: The Politics of Writing Hmong Language (s),” *Current Anthropology* 61, no. 2 (2020): 000–000. This article version does not offer specific page numbers.

While *Hmoob* is the Hmong's name in their native language, which is presented through the Hmong Roman Popular Alphabet (hereafter: Hmong RPA) – the most common Hmong writing script; in Southeast Asian countries, the Hmong have been known in various names such as *Mèo*, *Maew*, *Miao*, *Mông* or *H'Mông*. Among these names, they are particularly not in favor of being called by '*Mèo*,' *Meow*, as some Hmong considered them derogatory<sup>7</sup>. In his dissertation, Yang Dao claimed that “the Hmong want to be called by the name they call themselves: Hmong, not Miao or Meo, the name imposed on them by outsiders”<sup>8</sup>. In several early academic works, such as the 1964 book titled *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, Hmong has defined a synonym of Miao<sup>9</sup>; however, the discussion on the Miao is about its sub-groups, not the Hmong alone. Meanwhile, another part on *Indochina Meo* is exactly about the Hmong group<sup>10</sup>, yet they were defined as Mlao, Mnong. The Thai Lan Meo (Meau) was identified as the H'moong<sup>11</sup>. Until recently, '*Hmong*' became the official name of this ethnic minority group in English literature.

Being aware of such fact, if '*Meo*' is mentioned to refer to the Hmong elsewhere in this thesis, it is only because of historical reasons or to respect original research. In Vietnamese literature, the Hmong used to be called as *Mèo*, *H'Mông* or *Hơ-Mông*; however, the official name today is *Mông* following the Official Dispatch No. 09-CV/HĐDT 04/12/2001 by the Committee for Ethnic Minorities of Vietnamese Government<sup>12</sup>. Although the reason why '*Mông*' is used instead is not always officially told, it might be because '*H'Mông*' or '*Hơ-Mông*' is sometimes misrepresented to '*hở mông*'<sup>13</sup> in Vietnamese by outsiders, which sounds derogatory as well. As a matter of fact, the 'H' of '*Hmong*' is a silent letter in its native pronunciation.

<sup>7</sup> In Vietnamese, '*Mèo*' means 'cat.' Some Vietnamese people even explain that the Hmong are called as '*Mèo*' because they live upland and climb well as 'cats.' According to Mottin, '*Meo*' means 'cat' in Laos and Thailand as well, see . Jean Mottin, *History of the Hmong* (Bangkok: Odeon Store, 1980), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Yang Dao explained that '*Hmong*' is how they have been calling themselves; Miao or Meo are the names imposed on them by outsiders, see Kou Yang, “Hmong Diaspora of the Post-War Period,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 12, no. 3 (2003): 276. Although I am convinced by Tapp that the way Yang Dao translated the term '*Hmong*' as '*free people*' has not enough credence, Tapp 2004b, 20., I cited Yang Dao's opinion in this matter as a way respecting the voice of insiders.

<sup>9</sup> Frank M Lebar, John K Musgrave, and Gerald Cannon Hickey, “Miao-Yao,” in *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1964), 64.

<sup>10</sup> In this section, the description of Indochina Meo matches the information on the Hmong that Hmong studies scholars defined, such as Barney's work on the Hmong in Xieng Khouang.

<sup>11</sup> Lebar, Musgrave, and Hickey 1964, 72, 77.

<sup>12</sup> “Ý Kiến - Đề Nghị: Thống Nhất Cách Viết và Đọc Tên Dân Tộc Mông [Comment - Suggestion: Hmong Names in Written and Spoken Language]” (Theoretical Journal of the Committee of Ethnic Minorities, June 19, 2009), Accessed April 9, 2020, <http://web.cema.gov.vn/modules.php?name=Content&op=details&mid=7677>.

<sup>13</sup> '*hở mông*' refers to the butt which is exposed.

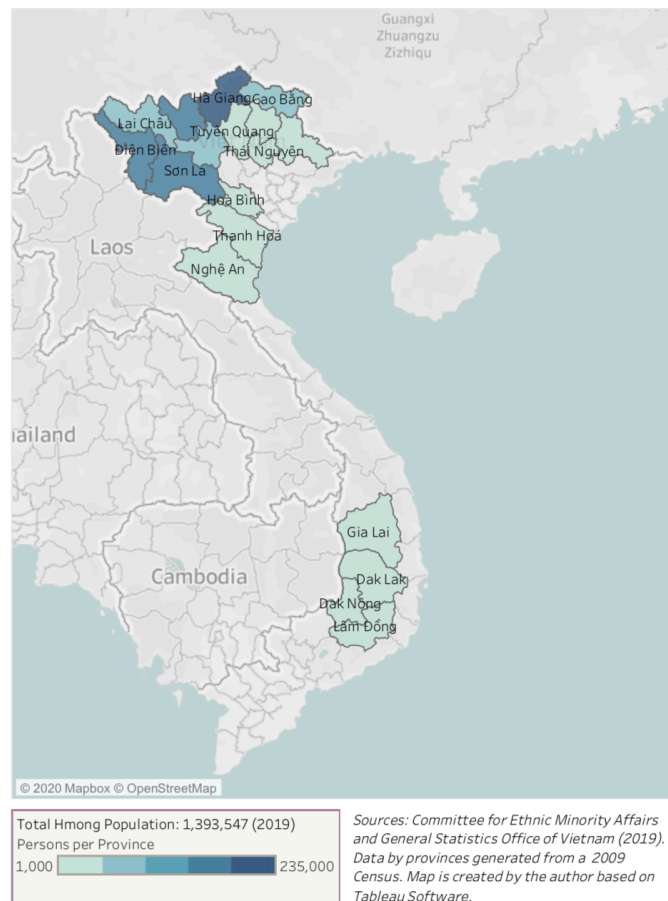
According to Jean Michaud, there is no evidence of the Hmong's presence in northern Indochina before the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first groups of the Hmong are believed to move to North Vietnam (*Bắc Kỳ*) first in 1860, to Laos around 1870, and to Nan province, Thailand around 1880<sup>14</sup>. The Hmong, in fact, was the only sub-group of Miao choosing to leave China<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.2.1 Vietnam<sup>16</sup>

While Jean Mottin supposes that the Hmong arrived in Vietnam first in 1800 and Jean Michaud considers that there were no Hmong in Indochina before the late 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>17</sup>; the Vietnamese researchers hold a different opinion. According to Cu Hoà Văn, Hoàng Nam (1994) and Vương Duy Quang (2005), these ethnic people fled China to Vietnam in three periods of time: the first wave was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (more than 350 years ago), second and third waves were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (more than 200 and 150 years ago respectively)<sup>18</sup>. As mentioned

earlier, being forced or actively chose, the Hmong settled in northern Vietnam's mountainous area. Their initial receiving regions were Mèo Vạc and Đồng Văn district of Hà Giang province (first wave), and other districts of Hà Giang as well as provinces of Cao Bằng, Lào Cai, Yên Bái, Lào Cai and Lai Châu (second wave). Most of these regions belong to the frontier provinces of northern Vietnam. After arriving, some groups of Hmong have continued to move inter and intra among different

**Figure 1 The Hmong Population in Vietnam (by Province)**



<sup>14</sup> Jean Michaud, "From Southwest China into Upper Indochina: An Overview of Hmong (Miao) Migrations," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 38, no. 2 (1997): 123–24.

<sup>15</sup> Mottin 1980, 37.

<sup>16</sup> As 'Hmong Protestants in Vietnam' is the research subject, this section only mentions basic characteristics of Vietnamese Hmong.

<sup>17</sup> Mottin 1980, 42., Michaud 1997, 123-4.

<sup>18</sup> Details on early and latest migrations of Vietnamese Hmong from China would be further discussed with precise references in Chapter 6.

villages/ provinces but only within the northern region. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were massive migrations among the Hmong from northern Vietnam southward that finally has changed their demographic map in the territory of this communist country, see *Figure 1. The Hmong Population in Vietnam (by Province)*.

A recent Census provided by Committee for Ethnic Minorities Affairs and General Statistics Office (*Ủy ban Dân tộc và Tổng cục Thống kê*) says that the total number of the Hmong in Vietnam in 2019 is 1,393,547. Among various areas, the largest groups of the Hmong by population are reported to live in northern provinces of Hà Giang, Điện Biên, and Sơn La<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, there are no detailed statistics on Hmong of specific provinces in 2019. The map, therefore, presents the Hmong by provinces relying on a 2009 Census<sup>20</sup>, which is only illustrated by color shades to not confuse with the most updated number of the total Hmong population in 2019.

Although the map only shows provinces, where there are 1,000 or more Hmong reside, it should be highlighted that there might be some groups of Hmong living in other regions as well, such as 90 Hmong are believed to live in the Red River Delta in 2009<sup>21</sup>. Noticeably, it is common nowadays that upland Hmong participate in higher education and the labor market in big cities, yet their permanent residence may still be defined as their home villages on their official documents. They come to cities, for instance Hanoi, for their studies, working as laborers at companies or doing office jobs. However, only a few people among them are officially registered as Hanoi citizens as most Hmong cannot afford to purchase a house or an apartment in the city that grants them a *sổ hộ khẩu* (Household Registration Book) for acknowledging their city citizenship.

Regarding their sub-groups, the Hmong of Vietnam are usually classified into four main sub-groups that mainly based on visible indicator, especially women's clothes. According to Cur Hoà Vần and Hoàng Nam, four sub-groups of the Hmong are (1) White Hmong (*Daw – Mông Trắng*) mainly live in Đồng Văn, Mèo Vạc and Quản Bạ (Hà Giang), Bảo Lạc (Cao Bằng), Sông Mã and Yên Châu (Sơn La), Phong Thổ and Tủa Chùa (Lai Châu), and Mù Cang Chải, Trạm Tấu (Yên Bái). (2) Flower Hmong (*Lenh – Mông Hoa*) mainly live in Tủa Chùa, Điện

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<sup>19</sup> Ủy ban Dân tộc & Tổng cục Thống kê, “Đặc trưng cơ bản của 53 dân tộc thiểu số năm 2019 [Basic Characteristics of 53 Ethnic Minorities in 2019],” 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ban Chỉ Đạo Tổng Điều tra Dân số và Nhà ở Trung Ương, *Tổng Điều Tra Dân Số và Nhà ở Việt Nam Năm 2009: Kết Quả Toàn Bộ [The 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing Census: Completed Results]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thống Kê, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Ban Chỉ Đạo Tổng Điều tra Dân số và Nhà ở Trung Ương 2010, 146.



Biên, Tuần Giáo (Lai Châu<sup>22</sup>), Trạm Tấu, Mù Cang Chải (Yên Bái), Thuận Châu, Mộc Châu (Sơn La), Sa pa, Bắc Hà, Simacai, Mường Khương (Lào Cai), Hoàng Su Phì, Sín Mần (Hà Giang); (3) Back Hmong (*Mông Đen*) mainly live in Trạm Tấu (Yên Bái), Phong Thổ, Tủa Chùa (Lai Châu) and some live in provinces of Lào Cai, Hoà Bình and Sơn La. (4) Hmong Sua (*Mông Súa*): partly live in Sính Phình commune of Tủa Chùa district (Lai Châu) and a small number of them live in Lùng Phình commune of Bắc Hà district (Lào Cai)<sup>23</sup>.

Those living locations of the Hmong in Vietnam were defined in the early 1990s. In recent years, the Hmong have spread across the country, but the majority of them still live in mountainous northern Vietnam, particularly in frontier provinces. In addition, before the 1960s, Hmong people resided only in high mountains. However, since 1960s, this unique style of living separated from other ethnic groups has been broken, which might be resulted from a government's policy on migration: moving the Vietnamese Kinh from lowland to upland regions and of the common migration tendency among ethnic minorities groups<sup>24</sup>. The Hmong's domestic migrations in the 1990s, which is significant due to religion-related reasons, would be further explored in Chapter 6.

Generally speaking, similar to those in Laos, the Hmong in Vietnam do not have frequent contact or have any severe conflicts with lowland ethnic groups except for some clashes that may have happened throughout their very first time of settlement. As Laos and Vietnam share long boundary line, the Hmong of both countries easily contacts in the mountains where they all reside. This condition had facilitated several involvements of both groups in contemporary wars related to the French colonial government and the Vietnam War.

After setting up their authorities in lowland Vietnam, the French colonists planned to take Hmong's mountainous regions in 1917 and benefit from those hill people's prosperous opium economy. The Hmong people, however, resisted by following Giàng Sĩa Lừ<sup>25</sup> in Lai Châu province fighting against the French. In July 1918, Vừ Pa Chay (Pa Chay Vua) in Pù Nhi commune, Điện Biên district of Lai Châu province (Điện Biên province now) led a rebellion

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<sup>22</sup> Điện Biên used to be a district of Lai Châu province. In the present day, all three these districts belong to Điện Biên province, which was divided from Lai Châu province in 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Hoà Văn Cư and Nam Hoàng 1994, 22-4.

<sup>24</sup> Thăng Văn Nguyễn 2009, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Lee Mai Na otherwise claims that the rebellion led by Xiong Mi Chang "was the first major Hmong revolt observed by the French," and that this rebellion was held in Hà Giang from 1910 to 1912. Although the names of Giàng Sĩa Lừ and Xiong Mi Chang seem to be totally different in terms of their pronunciations; and, the time and place of two 'first' movements are different, it is probable that two names refer to the one person, see Mai Na Lee, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 121. In fact, I am not able to find more information on this first Hmong revolt in Vietnamese, and Lee Mai Na also admits that she finds no extant Hmong testimonies about this uprising except for records kept by French, Lee 2015, 96.

against the colonists' plan on applying opium taxation on the Hmong and monopoly control this unique product in the Indochina. Pa Chay revolt then became the most significant movement among the Hmong, which spread across northwestern Vietnam (*Tây Bắc Việt Nam*) and upper Laos (*Thượng Lào*). There were, in fact, also numerous other Hmong revolts protesting the colonists, for instance, which led by Giàng San (1918), Châu clan (1938), Thào A Bâu (1953), Hờ A Trư (1967). In particular, four Hmong revolts are believed to emerge in various northern provinces in 1957 simultaneously. Such events are more often than not politically defined as 'protests,' 'revolts,' 'rebellions or wars.' In Vietnamese literature, they are labeled as '*Xung Vua*' (Proclaiming King), which is 'messianic movements' in English literature<sup>26</sup>.

### 3.2.2 Other Southeast Asian Countries

*Laos.* The Hmong of southern China arrived in Laos in the first half of the 19th century, roughly from 1810 to 1820<sup>27</sup>. A recent Census shows that the total number of the Hmong in this country is 595,028, constituting 9.2% of population<sup>28</sup>. A noticeable fact is that after the Secret War, about half of the total 300,000 Hmong in Laos<sup>29</sup> left for western countries, and some stayed in refugee camps in Thailand.

In general, most of the time, the Hmong of Lao have lived peacefully in the upland region. No apparent conflicts were reported until the French colonialists took over Laos and applied heavy and unjust taxation upon the Hmong, which finally led to the first revolt of this ethnic minority group in 1896 and the second one between 1919 and 1921. As a matter of fact, both French and Laos governments eventually had to allow Hmong to have a particular political regulation and to have the right of having autonomy<sup>30</sup>.

Involving the First Indochina War, except for those who remained neutral, the Hmong had supported both sides: the Vietnamese communists led by Hồ Chí Minh and the French colonialists. In fact, the entire Hmong of Laos was strongly divided due to a severe conflict between the Lo (also known as *Lao* or *Lauj*) and the Ly (or *Lis*) – the two most powerful families in the country since their very first arrival<sup>31</sup>. While one of Ly's family members<sup>32</sup> founded a village in the district of Nong Het, M'ble' Giao (also known as *Lo*

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<sup>26</sup> Further discussion on 'messianism,'/ 'messianic movements,' '*Xung Vua*' is provided in Chapter 4.

<sup>27</sup> Mottin 1980, 47.

<sup>28</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau, "Results of Population and Housing Census," *Vientiane: Lao Statistic Bureau*, 2015, 37.

<sup>29</sup> It was estimated that in early 1970s there were about 300,000 Hmong in Laos, see Yang 2003, 277.

<sup>30</sup> Guy Moréchand, "Thuật Sa Man Của Người Hmông (Le Chamanisme Des Hmong) [Hmong Shamanism]," trans. Ủy ban Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, 1972, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Mottin 1980, 47.

<sup>32</sup> This Ly member's name was not given.

*Bliayao*) was the Chief of the Lo clan and the most important Hmong Chief in Xieng Khouang province. The Ly's third son married M'ble' Giao's daughter – May – in 1918, and their son named Touby Ly Fong was born in 1919. However, their problematic marriage led to May's suicide after four years of living in common. Anger and conflict between two clans had been growing since then that reached its peak when Touby Ly Fong took over and being the Head of the district of Keng Khuai that Touby's cousin – Fay Dang, who was Song Tong's younger brother – failed to maintain. In fact, after the Insane War, the French trusted and let M'ble' Giao control Nong Het district. However, because of the Ly and the Lo's quarrel, Nong Het was divided into two: Keng Khuai district head by M. Giao's son – Song Tou, and Phac Boun district headed by Touby Ly Fong's eldest brother. Fay Dang never forgave Touby, and he vowed that “whatever the followers of Touby Ly Fong might do, those of Fay Dang would invariably do the contrary”<sup>33</sup>. Consequently, similar to what the Ly had done, Touby Lyfong continued to support colonial France; the Lo, in the contrary, supported communist Pathet Lao and their allies, Việt Minh, fighting against the French.

The Japanese invasion of French Indochina (1940 – 1942) clearly divided two clans. This time Faydang supported the Japanese in the conflict against the French; meanwhile, Touby was on the French side. This huge conflict played an essential role in dividing the entire Hmong community into two parts: one standing with communist-China, the USSR who supported Pathet Lao and Vietnam, and the other standing with the West-the United States and SEATO members). A number of the Hmong were considered to remain neutral but still greatly affected by the war<sup>34</sup>.

Finally, the latest and also the most well-known war the Hmong involved in was the Secret War (1961 – 1975) in Laos that is also considered a part of the Vietnam War. When it comes to the involvement of the Hmong in the Secret War, the key figure is General Vang Pao, who was the leader of the secret troop established and supported by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), a civilian foreign intelligence service of the federal government of the United States. He originally served under Touby, later became a commander of the Second Military Region in Northern Laos and a general in the Royal Lao Army in 1964. In fact, Vang Pao led a troop known as a ‘secret army’, which belongs to the regular Royal Lao Army. Several parts of the troop were then trained and funded by the CIA. When the war ended in 1975, Americans had to withdraw from Laos, which means key leaders and their soldiers who had been supporting

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<sup>33</sup> Mottin 1980, 48-9. In this thesis, all Hmong historical figures' names are kept in their most common forms, such as Touby Lyfong, not Touby Ly Fong, as in some original old writings. All modifications are noticed.

<sup>34</sup> Yang 2003, 271, 275.

the CIA had to leave Laos under the American sponsor. This situation led the Hmong to their historic migration to the West as well as their tragic fates in refugee camps.

Regarding the Hmong's life in Laos, there are only several available writings by pioneer western scholars who had privileges of accessing the field sites thanks to the support of the French colonial government. Statistically, there were estimated at about fifty thousand Meo in Laos around the 1950s<sup>35</sup>. A research on the Meo of Xieng Khouang reveals that in the decades of 1950s and 1960s, Meo people, on the one hand, still maintained a rice-opium economy; on the other hand, they became ready to move toward a modified cash economy. Although this change in the economy had not yet significantly affected their indigenous village-based political structure, their participation in government marked a change in their attitude toward authority<sup>36</sup>. This time also witnessed a number of the Hmong adopted Protestantism, and missionaries began to work on building a writing system for the Meo, which the Hmong had never ever had. However, because of the high loyalty of the Meo had for their ethnic group, the Laos government has prohibited the printing of any material in the Meo language<sup>37</sup>.

In recent years, many of the Hmong remained in Laos continue to be active in the affairs of the one-party Laos government. According to Yang, "extreme economic hardship, allegations of being oppressed, and the general social and political situations of Laos... continue to nurture the Hmong and other resistance movements in the country"<sup>38</sup>. On the other hand, the Hmong economy has begun to flourish regardless of their inability to continue their previous livelihoods, such as swidden and opium cultivations due to Laos' government restrictions. For instance, thanks to the Hmong social network, particularly transnational one, small-scale rubber plantations have been significantly developed that make the Hmong the most successful rubber entrepreneurs in Laos<sup>39</sup>.

*Thailand.* The Hmong first migrated to Thailand via northern Vietnam and Laos<sup>40</sup> at the end of the 1880s<sup>41</sup> through three main gates: (1) between Mouong Sai or Huei Sai in Laos and Chiang Khong in Thailand, in the far North; (2) between Sayaburi and Pona, closer to the South;

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<sup>35</sup> The author precisely wrote: 'fifty thousand in Laos over a decade ago' that means around the 1950s compared to the published date of the work in 1967; In addition, I kept the term Meo as it was originally used by the author, see George Linwood Barney, "The Meo of Xieng Khouang Province, Laos," in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*, ed. Kunstadter Peter, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 271.

<sup>36</sup> Barney 1967, 290.

<sup>37</sup> Barney 1967, 292.

<sup>38</sup> Yang 2003, 296.

<sup>39</sup> Ian G Baird and Pao Vue, "The Ties That Bind: The Role of Hmong Social Networks in Developing Small-Scale Rubber Cultivation in Laos," *Mobilities*, 2015, 1–19, Accessed March 7, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Michaud 1997, 123.

<sup>41</sup> While some local Hmong said their parents might settled in Thailand around 1890, another report of the Tribal Research Centre of Chiang Mai estimated that the Hmong must come some times between 1840 and 1870, see Mottin 1980, 55.

and (3) between Phu Khao Khuai and Loei, much nearer Vientiane. After arriving in Thailand, some Hmong groups continued to travel, mainly following ranges of mountains, to other regions such as provinces of Mae Hong Son and Chiang Mai, the region of Thung Chang, Poua, Phrae, Khek Noi, and Petchabun. Later in around 1930 and around 1950, some Hmong continued to change their living locations to provinces of Tak and Kampheng Phet and Nakhorn Sawan.

Mostly residing in the mountains, the Hmong had taken little attention of the Thai government until 1955, when the circumstances that the Hmong involved forced the authorities to take action. More precisely, as the Hmong lived in remote and high regions, they might have contact with and possibly support communist insurgents hiding there<sup>42</sup>. In addition, the Hmong's way of clearing fields, devastating the forests, leaving soil unproductive for a long time, and doing opium economy worried the rulers<sup>43</sup>. A series of centers and offices established to look after the minorities, including the Hmong such as the Border Patrol Police (1955), the Central Tribal Welfare Committee (1959), the first Development Center (in Doi Mouseu, Tak province in 1959), the second Development Center (in Chiang Mai in 1960 then extended in provinces of Phetchabun, Pitsanulok, Loei, and Chiang Rai in 1963), a Tribal Research Centre (Chiang Mai University in 1964). The major purposes of these centers are to urge the minorities to give up their way of life, also to get a better understanding of these hill tribes in terms of their modes of life and needs. Particularly, a program for the diffusion of Buddhism was set up in 1965 that was also for establishing and strengthening better relations between the tribes and Thai.

However, the Hmong seemed to be the most turbulent among all minorities of Thailand. It is said that they received all these measures applied by the Thai government 'coldly'<sup>44</sup>. The Hmong were unwilling to come down to the low land. They, as being said that in obedience to the Communists, did a revolt in 1967. After realizing some mistakes in behaving with the Hmong by using forces such as shooting, the Thai government using helicopters that attempted to get in touch with the Hmong and ask them to surrender. While Green Hmong found it easier to surrender, the White Hmong remained in the forest<sup>45</sup>. In general, the Hmong in the country had little collaboration with the Thai or Karens except in circumstances they had shared danger. In fact, while communists and American-supported Thai military had been in severe conflict, in the late 1960 some Hmong found themselves in a dilemma of choosing which forces to

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<sup>42</sup> Also see Jean Michaud and Christian Culas, "A Contribution to the Study of Hmong (Miao) Migrations and History," in *Hmong/Miao in Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004), 82.

<sup>43</sup> Mottin 1980, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Mottin 1980, 58.

<sup>45</sup> Mottin 1980, 60.

support. Therefore, since 1967 some thousand Hmong from Nan province had moved to more peaceful mountainous regions of Laos. However, in 1975 as the war reached up to the Sayaboury region (Laos), those who fled Thailand before again returned back to the neighboring Thai provinces<sup>46</sup>.

In terms of religion, although a particular program has been launched to diffuse Buddhism, the Thailand's official religion followed by 95% of its population, among hill tribes, the Hmong seemed to not be interested in converting. That resistance is described as 'the failure of the Hmong to adopt Thai Buddhism'<sup>47</sup>. The reason, according to Nicholas Tapp, is that Thai Buddhism is essentially based on the values and ideals of Thai society and the Thai nation-state, which are fundamentally incompatible with the Hmong's system of values and belief. And if the Hmong had followed, they would have lost their ethnic identity<sup>48</sup>. To explain the Hmong rebellion in Thailand and/or to a certain extent, for any refuse and protest among Hmong against the authorities, Jean Mottin claims that it is not about ideology; it is about the Hmong themselves who "are fiercely independent people, allergic to all kind of authority"<sup>49</sup>. I find myself cannot agree more with this account, which I would further analyze in more detailed cases throughout this text.

While most of the Hmong fled China for northern Vietnam and Laos due to severe oppression of the Han, their migration to Thailand from Laos is believed to be driven by economic incentive: seeking for new swiddens, most notably for opium cultivation. In fact, Laos had no danger for the Hmong by the time they entered Siamese territory<sup>50</sup>. However, the 20th century shows us another scenario. When the Secret War ended, while a number of the Hmong, including military leaders supporting the CIA, were able to settle in Western countries right after 1975, others were stuck in refugee camps in Thailand after fleeing Laos, around 116,000 Hmong from Laos and Vietnam by 1990<sup>51</sup>. Some had no choice, some were afraid of leaving for the West, and some chose to stay with their family members who were not able to travel that far. In later years, a part of this Hmong refugee group was sponsored to leave to the United States and other western countries such as Australia, France, Canada, Germany, and so on. Meanwhile, there are families who have stayed there for so many years, even for decades, that witness many also were born and brought up in these camps. For those who had to or chose to stay, more and more were sent back to Laos and then had to face increasing harassment under

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<sup>46</sup> Michaud and Culas 2004, 82.

<sup>47</sup> Tapp 1989b, 90.

<sup>48</sup> Tapp 1989b, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Mottin 1980, 60.

<sup>50</sup> Michaud 1997, 125., Michaud and Culas 2004, 66.

<sup>51</sup> Michaud and Culas 2004, 80.



the Pathet Lao government. The most current largest eviction was in 2009 when 4,000 Hmong refugees were evicted by the Thailand Government regardless of the effort of the United Nations and human rights groups to suspend the operation<sup>52</sup>. In fact, some western countries continue to offer a certain number of resettlement places to these refugees, such as the United States, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands, but the Thai authorities have not allowed them to leave<sup>53</sup>.

To date, there are no official reports available on the number of total Hmong in Thailand<sup>54</sup>. According to Jacques Lemoine, there might be some 118,000 to 150,000 Hmong in the country by 2005<sup>55</sup>. In general, the Hmong in Thailand belongs to two sub-groups: White Hmong and Green Hmong; the latter group is sometimes defined as Blue Hmong. Some scholars believe that there might be some Black Hmong and a sub-group called Gua M'ba Meo<sup>56</sup> in this country. However, as J. Mottin claims, there are no Black Hmong in Thailand as well as so few in Laos<sup>57</sup>. Additionally, there is also no evidence or detailed information on the sub-group of the Hmong so-called 'Gua M'ba Meo'.

### 3.2.3 Discussion

Apart from Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, the Hmong in the present day are also found in Myanmar (Burma) and Cambodia. In fact, while entering northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, some Hmong also traveled to eastern parts of Myanmar<sup>58</sup> and settled there. The Hmong of Myanmar was estimated to be from 10,000 to 15,000 people by 2008<sup>59</sup>. Noticeably, their presence in Cambodia seems to be unknown in international academic discussion. However, according to some empirical information I collected from field research, some

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<sup>52</sup> Seth Mydans, "Thailand Evicts 4,000 Hmong to Laos," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2009, Accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/29/world/asia/29hmong.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watches, "Thailand: Protect Hmong Refugees," August 30, 2007, Accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/08/30/thailand-protect-hmong-refugees>.

<sup>54</sup> An older report in 1995 said that there were 124,000 Miao (including Hmong) in Thailand but no official document was provided, see Michaud and Culas 2004, 71.

<sup>55</sup> Lemoine 2005, 6.

<sup>56</sup> Văn Chính Nguyễn, "Chương 2: Tổng Quan về Người Mông Trên Thế Giới [Chapter 2: An Overview of the Hmong Worldwide]," in *Nghiên Cứu Đánh Giá Tôn Giáo Tín Ngưỡng Của Đồng Bào Mông Tin Lành và Một Số "Tôn Giáo Mới" ở Các Tỉnh Vùng Núi Phía Bắc [Research and Evaluation on Religion and Beliefs of Hmong Protestants and Some "New Religions" in Northern Mountainous Provinces]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tri Thức [Submitted for Publication], 2020), 99.

<sup>57</sup> Mottin 1980, 6-7.

<sup>58</sup> Michaud 1997, 123.

<sup>59</sup> Kou Yang cited Vuong Xuan Tinh's source, but the source is now not accessible for verification. In addition, as far as I research, Vuong Xuan Tinh does not provide any fixed statistic number on the Hmong of Myanmar in his native language - Vietnamese. See Kou Yang, "A Visit to the Hmong of Asia: Globalization and Ethnicity at the Dawn of the 21st Century," *Hmong Studies Journal* 9 (2008): 3. In the 2004 book chapter, Christian Culas and Jean Michaud also report the number of Hmong in Myanmar is 2.656 thousand. This number might be a typo, and the number the author is supposed to say should be 2,656 people as 2.656 thousand is not possible, see Michaud and Culas, 2004, 71.

Hmong families of the Central Highland of Vietnam might move to Cambodia via mountainous ranges across the border. Further studies on this group should be conducted.

In contemporary Southeast Asia, the Hmong have been still migrated among countries, mainly by road, particularly as their transnational network is much supported by modern technologies such as social media, communication applications, or phones. However, there are no recent massive moves. As pointed out above, the total number of the Hmong in this region is calculated to be more than 1,800,000 people<sup>60</sup>. This number might be much higher in reality as most of the statistics are out of date or not officially reported.

Although being a marginalized ethnic group, the Hmong proved to be independent and strong people throughout history. They had their own autonomic zone (Tai – Hmong autonomic zone: *Vùng tự trị Thái-Mèo*) in Tonkin, obtain certain benefits of governments in Laos, and be much more respected after the 1967 revolt in Thailand. In any regional war, any side must take the Hmong for serious considerations because “if a war broke out in the mountains, it could not be won without the help of the populations inhabiting them”<sup>61</sup>. The Hmong, to a certain extent, have been writing the regional history together with their host countries.

### **3.3 Global**

*Late 20th-century transition.* As mentioned earlier, a part of the Hmong in Laos joined the CIA fighting against Pathet Laos and communists in the Secret War. By the time the war ended in 1975, pro-America people had to flee Laos while Pathet Lao officially announced the plan of 'wiping out' the Hmong. Families of military leaders, General Vang Pao and his soldiers and their families, were able to leave Laos. While Hmong leaders such as Lyfoung, Lyteck Lynhiavu, and Yang Dao attempted to convince those who were running away from Laos to stay, they were so determined to leave as they were afraid of confronting Pathet Lao – the winners. Thousand Hmong with their families and belongings walked toward Ban Sorn, from where they could reach the Mekong River and found ways to arrive in Thailand. It is reported that half of them were able to reach Thailand.

On May 29, 1975, there was a terrible massacre of thousands of Hmong refugees at Hin Heup bridge, which is across the Nam Ngum river, took place by Pathet Lao. This massacre made many Hmong felt that they were left and betrayed by Vang Pao and their leaders, while many still hoped that their leaders would come back to rescue them one day. Regarding those leaders, thanks to a decision to host 3,466 Laotians from the Thai refugee camps by the United

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<sup>60</sup> If there is around 10,000 Hmong in Burma, then the total number of Hmong in the Southeast Asia is 1,823,217.

<sup>61</sup> Mottin 1980, 43.



States in August, Vang Pao, and his followers were able to resettle in the country by December 1975 safely. Those who could not flee Laos decided to take refuge in Laos's mountains. They had to abandon their homes and livelihoods to avoid being arrested and punished by the Pathet Lao regime. As a result, the number of Hmong who finally fled to Thailand was significantly increased as they tried their best to survive. The very first group of 2,500 Hmong arrived Nong Khai refugee camp in Thailand in May 1975, which went up to 60,000 people in 1979. It is estimated that there were almost 3,000 Hmong crossed the Mekong in a single month.

While these refugee camps were established across the Thai-Laos borders under the United Nations High Commissioner's administration for Refugees, they were under the administration of the Thai government who was not in much favor of welcoming those Hmong. Living under constant fear and uncertainty, the Hmong were then offered tremendous support from religious denominations. Some of the denominations are World Vision, CMA, Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and Catholic Relief Services. In fact, this hard time did witness many Hmong converted to Christianity, which may result from the generous help of those organizations.

In refugee camps, the Hmong were highly confused with their circumstances that led to several movements, such as a new messianic movement in Long Cheng in 1967 and another led by Lis Txais, who looked forward to the birth of a new Hmong savior. In addition, Hmong legends and nostalgia songs reconstructed and composed by Lis Txais mixed with some themes of Buddhist and Western traditions eventually discouraged the Hmong from leaving for the West. Furthermore, this circumstance of refusing to be resettled in the West was also explained by the Vang Pao's advice that they – Hmong refugees – should stay in the camps to support the resistance movement. Since 1992, some Hmong were supported to return to Laos by the United Nations. However, the stories on how the returners were discriminated and harassed had made them worry a lot more. As a result, the number of people who desired to return was decreased. There were families who had stayed in the refugee camp for decades as their parents got old or they needed to wait for their family members who were still stuck in Laos.

Due to rumors of serious revenge of Vietnam and Pathet Laos, the number of Hmong refugees was significantly increased in the period of 1977 to 1981. In March 1980, it was reported that there were 48,937 registered Hmong in Thai refugee camps. Specifically, apart from those who successfully arrived in the U.S. and some other western countries, 32,000 Hmong were resettled in several Hmong villages of Thailand through marriages with or joining relatives who already lived in the country. Another 30,000 Hmong lived around Wat Tam Krabok Thai Buddhist temple, of whom 16,000 were sponsored to resettle in the U.S. in later

years<sup>62</sup>. It is also reported that there are numerous Hmong who were forced to return to Laos. Those who did not want to go back to Laos due to the possible persecution had fled elsewhere. Whereas, Laos government once denied acknowledging Hmong ‘Laotians.’

Though the last Hmong refugee camps were closed in Thailand vary by time on different sources<sup>63</sup>, such events still left some unresolved problems, particularly a number of Hmong who had/have nowhere to call home.

*The Hmong in the West.* Except for those who had or have chosen to remain in Laos, since the Secret War ended, half of the total Hmong<sup>64</sup> have evacuated to multiple western countries. While a small number of Hmong were able to arrive in America right after 1975, the rest had stayed in Thailand refugee camps. The majority of these Hmong refugees then were resettled in the United States, and the remaining went to Australia, France, French Guyana, Germany, Canada, and Argentina. Some Hmong, in fact, resettled in China<sup>65</sup>. It is reported that nowadays, the total number of Hmong worldwide is approximately 5 million, including 3 million in their original country – China, 1,068,189 in Vietnam, 451,964 in Laos, 155,649 in Thailand, 2,000 - 3,000 in Myanmar<sup>66</sup>. In the west, the number is estimated to be around 200,000 – 300,000 in the United States, 15,000 in France, 2,000 in Australia, 800 in Canada, 1,500 in French Guyana; around 600 in Argentina and 92 in Germany<sup>67</sup>.

In the United States, the total Hmong population is 260,073 in 2010. They mainly live in the Midwest and West of the country. In fact, this ethnic group’s overall growth rate in Southern American is known to be the highest, which was 134% by 2010. The Hmong population is evaluated to be significantly younger than the total U.S. population and the total U.S Asian population, with average ages of 20.4, 37, and 33.1 years respectively. It is also reported that due to slowly declining fertility rates and household sizes among the Hmong Americans, the percentage of the Hmong population younger than 18 has decreased since the 2000 Census. Compared to the total U.S population and the total U.S Asian population, the Hmong population

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<sup>62</sup> Lee and Tapp 2010, 15-9.

<sup>63</sup> For instance, while a npr report says that the last Hmong refugee camp was closed in 1999, Anne Garrels, “Hmong Refugee Camp to Close” (National Public Radio (npr), December 27, 1999), Accessed January 31, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1068327&t=1612079514344>., a major refugee camp for ethnic Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok in central Thailand was closed in May 2005 as another report claims, see Radio Free Asia, “Hmong Sent Home, Some Flee,” March 26, 2009, Accessed January 31, 2021, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49ccdb81c.html>.

<sup>64</sup> About 150,000 out of 300,000 Hmong of Laos have left the country since 1975. The number of 300,000 was estimated to be the total Hmong in Laos in the early 1970s, Yang 2003, 277.

<sup>65</sup> It is believed that few Hmong families resettled in China in the 1980s but later repatriated to Laos, see Yang 2003, 277.

<sup>66</sup> See more at **3.2 Regional**.

<sup>67</sup> These numbers are collected based on various related academic works, most of which are previously cited. In a recently published paper, Michaud says that there is 270,000 Hmong diaspora who live outside Asia, see Michaud 2020.

has a slight difference in the gender distribution, which has maintained at approximately 51% males and 49% females. Meanwhile, the total U.S and U.S Asian populations have a higher number of females, making up ‘49.2% male and 50.6% female’ and ‘47.8% male and 52.2% female’ respectively. This fact can be the result of high expectations and the role of sons in the Hmong culture<sup>68</sup>.

After decades since the Hmong first settled in the U.S., they are believed to be active participants in the social, economic, and political development of the host country. Although numerous hardships and difficulties are still challenging them, they have become the symbol of miraculous survival and human courage, particularly when one sees how they have been going through from their upland mountain villages of northern Laos to the advanced society of America. They work in various sectors, from doing farming to building their own business enterprises. They are elected to public offices and becoming much more active at local, state, and federal government levels. Being an ethnic minority group who did not have their own writing language until 1953 and were largely illiterate while living in Indochina, the number of Hmong American doctorates were up to 175 in 2003<sup>69</sup>.

In France, the total Hmong population is around 15,000, which is only lower than that of the United States, making France having the second largest number of Hmong in the world. Compared to their counterparts in the U.S, the Hmong of France find it more challenging to migrate due to family or clan reunion once they, mainly Hmong male heads of their families, have offered a job. It is also a fact that most Hmong women have worked a little, or do not at all since they came to France, even learn how to drive<sup>70</sup>. Noticeably, the Hmong were also hosted by French Guiana – an overseas department of France on the northeast coast of South America – where they first settled in 1977 directly from Thailand-based refugee camps and later via France. The Hmong life in this region is reported to be less stressful than those of the U.S, mainly because the living conditions are more similar to theirs in Laos that allow them to do farming, maintain self-sufficiency, and independence. In fact, by date, around 2,100 Hmong of French Guiana live in rural villages, of which 90-100% are Hmong<sup>71</sup>. Economically, it is worth noting that these Hmong produce up to 50-60% of the French region’s fruits and

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<sup>68</sup> Mark E Pfeifer et al., “Hmong Population and Demographic Trends in the 2010 Census and 2010 American Community Survey,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 13, no. 2 (2012): 3, 6, 13–14, 19.

<sup>69</sup> Kou Yang, “Research Note: The Hmong in America: Twenty-Five Years after the US Secret War in Laos,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001): 165–74; Yang, “Hmong Diaspora of the Post-War Period.”

<sup>70</sup> Khou Xiong, “Hmong in France: Assimilation and Adaptation,” *UW-L Journal of Undergraduate Research VII*, 2004, 1–7, Accessed June 5, 2020.

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.543.1663&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> F. Patrick Clarkin, “Hmong Resettlement in French Guiana,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 6 (2005): 4.

vegetables. In Javouhey, for example, the Hmong are able to open their own general stores, restaurants, offices, and so on<sup>72</sup>. The Hmong of French Guiana are believed to maintain their independence and autonomy to a certain extent, which is considered superior to other western societies where the Hmong follows a ‘wage labor’ pattern. This trait also becomes more attractive to their counterparts in the U.S or France that significantly strengthens the ties among the Hmong in these countries. These counterparts sometimes come to French Guiana to hunt.

In some neighborhoods such as Cacao and Javouhey, the religious life of the Hmong is remarkably diverse. They practice Catholicism, Protestantism and some at the same time remain their traditional religion of animism<sup>73</sup>. Interestingly, some Hmong convert to Christianity still practices several traditional customs, doing ‘calling soul’ (*hu plig*) for example. Although there are still challenges and difficulties for the Hmong of this region, and the youth may be dissatisfied with their prospects of being farmers, they seem to be happy with their current. They still prefer to speak their mother tongue language at home, are proud of being independent Hmong, and are generally content with their lives, which is far different from those of Minnesota that 90% of whom were believed they would return to Laos one day<sup>74</sup>.

The case of Hmong refugees in French Guiana can be related to their people who were hosted in Germany in November 1975<sup>75</sup>. Although living in an advanced western country and converting to Christianity, the Hmong of Gammertingen are said to maintain their own language well, which is far superior to that of the Hmong in France and the United States. Noticeably, this Hmong population is supposed to be died out in the future because of marriage and emigration. To be more precise, 10 out of 18 total couples finally resided in the United States, France, and French Guyana after the wedding, particularly because the bride came from a foreign country. This also leads to their parents who are getting old and would not be able to take care of themselves moving to other countries following their children. This global marriage

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<sup>72</sup> Clarkin 2005, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Clarkin 2005, 7-9.

<sup>74</sup> According to a study conducted by the University of Minnesota in 1982 which is reported at Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 205., consulted from Clarkin 2005, 20.

<sup>75</sup> All of the Hmong who resided in Germany in 1975 came from Sayaboury province of Laos. They were interned at the Nam Yao camp in northeast Thailand after the Secret War ended. From this camp, they applied for resettlement to Argentina. In November 1979, while being at the Bangkok International Airport and preparing for departing, the Argentine government had changed its mind and refused to host these Hmong. The only reasons given out was due to medical problems that the Hmong refugee families had experienced. After returning to the transit camp, they got the news that they would be able to resettle in Germany instead of being brought back to their camp in Nam Yao. Five Hmong families and the other five Laos families in the same situation decided to opt for Germany. They then were hosted by the Gammertingen government after two weeks of staying in the refugee camp near Stuttgart, Germany. See more at Tou T Yang and D Pharm, “Hmong of Germany: Preliminary Report on the Resettlement of Lao Hmong Refugees in Germany,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 4 (2003): 1–14.

also reflects strong ties among Hmong Germans with their counterparts in other countries. In fact, Hmong Germans also make trips to France once or twice a year to join the larger Hmong CMA Community for Christmas or some other special occasions.

Regarding their life in Germany, while women stay home to be full-time housewives, most men work for low wage factory jobs. The Hmong youth in this region does not participate in college education. Nevertheless, their life is relatively stable as once they get a job, they are rarely laid off. Also, although Germany's welfare system is different from the United States, all children get government support that allows Hmong wives to be at home and take care of their kids. Religiously, all of the Hmong of Gammertingen have converted to Christianity, specifically the Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA). They are believed to convert when they were in Laos or Thailand-based refugee camps. It is reported that there had been no Hmong ordained pastor or church by 2002. They gathered at Mr. Xai Khue Lor's (*Xaiv Khwb Lauj*) house to celebrate church service every Sunday<sup>76</sup>. According to a 2019 German news, the Hmong are believed to attend a local Evangelical Church in Gammertingen. They gather at some Sunday afternoons at a parish hall and are able to do church service in their mother tongue language – the Hmong<sup>77</sup>.

Being one among the very first immigrant population of Australia, some Hmong families first arrived in this highly industrialized country in March 1976, and the last in 1992; all waves of those migrants flew over from Thailand-based refugee camps. The number of total Hmong today in Australia is about 2,000<sup>78</sup>. After resettlement, the Hmong have participated in the Australian complex wage economy that leads to their change in the labor division in the family no longer based on family membership as in the traditional society<sup>79</sup>. They also sell fresh, organically grown vegetables and colorful and unique embroidery (*paj ntaub*)<sup>80</sup>. Although not all members of a lineage were able to resettle that leads to the significant reduction of the traditional networks of kinship and mutual assistance, the small size of the Hmong community of Australia allows them – both old and young leaders – to have equal roles in leading their people in adjusting into a new culture.

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<sup>76</sup> Yang and Pharm 2003, 10.

<sup>77</sup> "40 Jahre Hmong-Familien in Gammertingen," Gemeindebrief Sommer - Lust Am Leben (Evangelische Verbundkirchengemeinde Gammertingen-Trochtelfingen, February 2019), Accessed May 8, 2020, [https://www.ev-kirche-trochtelfingen.de/fileadmin/mediapool/gemeinden/GKG\\_trochtelfingen/Gemeindebriefe/190707\\_Gemeindebrief\\_VKG\\_Ausgabe\\_2019-02\\_HOMEPAGE.pdf](https://www.ev-kirche-trochtelfingen.de/fileadmin/mediapool/gemeinden/GKG_trochtelfingen/Gemeindebriefe/190707_Gemeindebrief_VKG_Ausgabe_2019-02_HOMEPAGE.pdf).

<sup>78</sup> Roberta Julian, "Hmong Transnational Identity: The Gendering of Contested Discourses," *Hmong Studies Journal* 5, no. 5 (2004): 6.

<sup>79</sup> Lee 1986, 59.

<sup>80</sup> Julian 2004, 4.

Noticeably, it is reported that there had been no conversion into Christianity so far by 1986 that reveals the strong group cohesion of the Hmong in this country. Unlike the Hmong of the United States, the Hmong of Australia had resettled without supports from religious denominations but the Australian government. They further get encouraged to become a unique ethnic minority that contributes to the host country's multicultural landscape<sup>81</sup>. However, their traditional religion had to be adjusted to a certain extent. For example, mature members of Australia have to abandon several metaphors in the texts (*bài chỉ đường* or *Qhuab Kev*) that support the funeral ritual as there is inappropriateness in their new habitat. The funeral ritual is also shortened to one or two days instead of a long time as it used to be<sup>82</sup>. In 2004, it is reported that there is a small minority of the Hmong have converted to Christianity<sup>83</sup>. In general, the Hmong of Australia is considered to be more homogenous. Although a small number of people convert to Christianity as well as the culture loss appears to a certain extent among the youth, this Hmong population is seen to be more conservative than Hmong in other western countries such as the United States and France<sup>84</sup>.

Another western country that has hosted the Hmong refugees in Canada, where some 900<sup>85</sup> were reported to be admitted under the Indochinese Refugee Program. They first arrived in early 1979 from Thai camps such as Ban Vinai, Sob Tuang, and Nam Yao. In fact, those Hmong were sponsored by church groups, mainly by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). As sponsors were located in the Kitchener-Waterloo, this area then becomes the largest neighborhood of Hmong Canadians. In addition, the lower B. C mainland is now also the place an active and vibrant Hmong community resides in. To date, it acknowledged that the Hmong had been successfully integrated into Canadian partially thanks to supports of MCC and other church communities. All of the Hmong have jobs, houses, and cars, and their children have fully accessed to appropriate education. The Hmong conversion to Christianity<sup>86</sup> in this country is believed to reflect “a sense of obligation to a benefactor than mere economic opportunism”<sup>87</sup> in the early period of settlement. In later years, the conversion has been still continued, which

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<sup>81</sup> Lee 1986, 65.

<sup>82</sup> Catherine Falk, “Upon Meeting the Ancestors: The Hmong Funeral Ritual in Asia and Australia,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (1996): 11.

<sup>83</sup> Julian 2004, 6., many those who convert live in Cairns., Nicholas Tapp, “Hmong Diaspora in Australia,” in *The Hmong of Australia: Culture and Diaspora* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004a), 64, 67.

<sup>84</sup> Tapp 2004a, 66.

<sup>85</sup> Shalka Robert, “The Hmong After 40 Years in Canada” (The Canadian Immigration Historical Society, December 2019), Accessed May 10, 2020, <http://cihs-shic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Bulletin-91-December-2019.pdf>.; some other sources estimate the total number of Hmong in Canada was 800, see Winland 1992, 98.

<sup>86</sup> Although the Hmong conversion to Christianity is widely acknowledged on a large scale in Canada, I cannot find an exact number of the total convert by date.

<sup>87</sup> Winland 1992, 103.

is explained by the unique attraction of Mennonitism on its emphasis on community solidarity, family values, and mutual aide<sup>88</sup>. In fact, shared histories of sufferings and persecution become the commonalities of Mennonites and Hmong instead of any other religious characteristics such as the intensification of outreach and service to non-Mennonites internationally, which are the central work of this denomination<sup>89</sup>. In short, the resilience and determination of the Hmong Canadians are highly appreciated. It enables them to rebuild their lives by finding meaning and purpose however and wherever they prefer in an alien environment<sup>90</sup>.

The last receiving country where is believed to have over hundreds of Hmong reside in the modern time is Argentina. It is reported that there were from 25 to 50 Hmong families, which included from 100 to 250 people arrived in Río Negro province of Argentina in 1979. After a temporary stay in Viedma city of Río Negro, they were sent to Lamarque, Luis Beltrán, Choele Choele, and Villa Regina. In the 1980s, the Hmong of Argentina are said to still preserve their traditional religion. Noticeably, right after resettling in Argentina, the Hmong's identity was ambiguous. They were often considered Laotians or Thais, and classified to be Southeast Asians in the eyes of Argentinians. Even by now, their actual number in this country is questionable. While a 2005 article estimates that the total Hmong in this South American country was 600 people<sup>91</sup>, the latest article claims that there are only around 30-50 Hmong remaining in the whole country<sup>92</sup>. Apart from problems that the Hmong have confronted in this country, such as facing situation contrary to what the military government had promised or being a forgotten ethnic group with ambiguous identity<sup>93</sup>, the youth are believed to more successfully integrate into the host country than their parents and speak Spanish as their mother tongue language, which may be a positive sign one can hope for about this largely unsearched group in this faraway country.

### ***Conclusion***

Because of the involvement of a group of Hmong in the Secret War in Laos, the 1975 victory of their opposite side had forced them to be political refugees and flee Southeast Asia. While the majority of Hmong refugees were resettled in the United States, the rest mainly went to France, French Guyana, Australia, Canada, Germany, and Argentina. Although varying in time

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<sup>88</sup> 'mutual aide' is in the original text, which may be a typo of 'mutual aid,' see Winland 1992, 104.

<sup>89</sup> Daphne N Winland, "Revisiting a Case Study of Hmong Refugees and Ontario Mennonites," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 2011, 172, 175.

<sup>90</sup> Robert 2019, 3., Winland 2011, 115.

<sup>91</sup> Lemoine 2005, 7.

<sup>92</sup> Pasuree Luesakul, "The Hmong in Argentina and Their 'convergence' with the Rankülche.," *Hmong Studies Journal* 17 (2016): 17.

<sup>93</sup> See more at Luesakul 2016.



of settlement and the total number of people living in hosting countries to date, the Hmong have been acknowledged for their positive integration into the receiving nations. In general, the youth seem to better integrate than the first generation; however, their active participation in the mainstream societies has gradually threatened the Hmong tradition and customs, which the elderly and adults who maintain their traditional religion worry most yet acknowledge the unavoidable changes. Besides, a significant number of Hmong refugees have converted to other religions, mostly Christianity, either since they were in Laos, in Thai refugee camps, or after their resettlement in the West. A part of them converted because of the profound support they received from religious organizations while they were in the most challenging time. A portion of them converted because of their sense of personhood and community that they felt from a new religion. The visible benefits that involved more or less in the conversion of the Hmong, they are also believed to convert genuinely.

All in all, the Hmong in the West in the present day still have a strong feeling for their ancestral homeland. Being accepted, rejected, or bothered for their visas, the Hmong diaspora continues to go back to visit Southeast Asian countries and China. Their transnational network<sup>94</sup> is much more enhanced thanks to the modern technical communication tools, particularly among those who reside in the First World. The Hmong of different countries make trips to visit their counterparts to celebrate special occasions or find their spouses. The strength of this transnational tie and the attraction that the Hmong worldwide draw to the observers, including academics, have brought them an official status in mainland China where they used to be not classified as an independent ethnic group and had no official word to refer to. To date, China government offers numerous Hmong language courses at university levels as well as better facilitate researchers to do their work among these marginalized people./.

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<sup>94</sup> This chapter only aims to generally introduce the Hmong in Asia and their presence in the West. Further discussions on their conversion to Christianity and related concerns would be provided in the latter sections.



## Chapter 4. From Traditional Religion to Christianity

Chapter 4 presents critical points of the traditional religion which Hmong ethnic people have believed in and practiced for millenniums. Besides, the latter portions examine Asian Hmong encounters with Christianity from the beginning and the most recent Hmong conversion to Protestantism in Vietnam. The chapter then would provide useful background to comprehensively explore the religious life of Vietnamese Hmong Protestants in the subsequent chapters.

### 4.1 Traditional Hmong Religion

Having different sub-groups and living in various regions of the globe in the contemporary era, it is understandable that the Hmong ethnic group as a whole is not entirely homogenous in all facets. Due to the research's scope, I would only present the traditional religion, which can be seen through several critical aspects such as faith, culture, and customs, of Vietnamese Hmong. Those aspects of the Hmong in other countries, if mentioned, are only for comparative analysis purposes. Plus, more details on traditional Hmong clans, festivals, and life-circle events would be discussed in parallel with those of the Hmong converts in Part III. By doing so, how the Hmong have changed their culture and customs after converting would be most displayed.

It is a fact that numerous traits of the traditional Hmong religion sophisticatedly intertwined, which are differently interpreted even by different scholars in Vietnam. Plus, religious concepts are themselves abstract. Religious concepts in a foreign language conveying the meanings of an indigenous context are even much more complicated. In this text, religious terms in native language – *Hmong RPA*, in *Vietnamese* – dominant language or region where the given indigenous people reside, and in *English* are employed to avoid as much confusion as possible. In some cases, synonymous terms in English can be mentioned at the same time to offer the fullest meaning of complicated contextualized terms in Vietnamese and/or Hmong.

When it comes to the traditional Hmong religion, it is often described as ‘animism and shamanism’ or ‘ancestor worship and shamanism’ or ‘ancestor worship and animism’<sup>1</sup>. These ways are reasonable in their own scales. Instead of defining in either way, I would introduce the Hmong's world view first – ‘*animism*,’ which then leads to their practices of ‘*ancestor and supernatural worship*’ and ‘*shamanism*.’ Because there are various objects of worship in the

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<sup>1</sup> Such as defined by Gary Yia Lee, Lee 1986, 55.; or used by Kou Yang, Yang 2003, 279. In addition, there is another way of describing the traditional Hmong religion such as Tapp Nicholas and Gary Yia Lee analyze thoughts and religion of the Hmong in various aspects, which are Shamanism, God and Spirits, Death and funeral Rites, Paying respects to the Ancestors and to the Household Spirits, and Environmental Rituals.

traditional Hmong religion, it might be insufficient to mention only *ancestor worship*<sup>2</sup>. Thus, I choose to use the term ‘*supernatural worship*’ in addition to other main religious practices of *animism* and *shamanism* among Hmong people.

#### 4.1.1 World View

Traditional Hmong believe that all beings have a physical body and soul, which is terminologically defined *animism*. Academically, animism is a concept “derived from the Latin term *anima* (spirit), which is a belief that things within nature – animate and sometimes inanimate – are energized by spirits”<sup>3</sup>. So, ‘*how animism has been presented in Hmong thoughts and practices?*’

In Hmong’s imagination, except for tiny insects like mosquitos, all human beings, animals, or even plants that are close to the Hmong such as rice, maize, have souls<sup>4</sup>. While physical/ body world (*phần xác*) is visible, ordinary people cannot see the spiritual world of souls (*phần hồn*)<sup>5</sup>. The world of souls/ spirits has two types of god: good gods (good deities/ *thần lành*, including *ma nhà* (house ghost)) and bad gods (bad spirits/ bad ghosts/ *ma dữ*). While good gods bless people or punish them if they misbehave, bad gods are supposed to punish humans in various ways, such as making them and/or their cattle sick and even die, causing their harvest to be less productive<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile, bad ghosts always harm people, cattle, and crops. However, if worships are well conducted, bad ghosts also become less harmful.

Regarding Hmong’s view on ‘human soul(s),’ the Vietnamese scholars only describe by numbering then discussing them instead of giving it/ them a name. Sometimes, soul(s) are labeled by a specific name while their functions are described. For instance, whereas Trần Hữu

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<sup>2</sup> Or ‘ancestral worship,’ which is also used elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Olson, *Religious Studies: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 53.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of Hmong’s cosmology, some scholars saying that the Hmong believe there are two worlds: the world of human beings and the Heaven world, see Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 91-2.; some saying that Hmong believe there are three layers in the universe: Heaven Realm or layer (tầng trời), Earth layer or Human Realm (cõi người/tầng mặt đất) and Hell Realm or Rocky layer (Cõi âm phủ/tầng đất đá), see Mạnh Tiến Nguyễn, “Chương 3: Những Nền Tảng Của Tôn Giáo Mông Truyền Thống [Chapter 3: Foundations of Hmong Traditional Religion],” in *Nghiên Cứu Đánh Giá Tôn Giáo Tín Ngưỡng Của Đông Bào Mông Tin Lành và Một Số “Tôn Giáo Mới” ở Các Tỉnh Vùng Núi Phía Bắc [Research and Evaluation on Religion and Beliefs of Hmong Protestants and Some “New Religions” in Northern Mountainous Provinces]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tri thức [Submitted for Publication], 2020), 187–95. When it comes to Hmong of Southeast Asia, a western scholar – Christian Culas - also names two worlds in their cosmology: Human World which is visible, and Spirit World which is invisible. However, he in addition offers a visual map of Hmong cosmology that is much more complicated, including: Supernatural World which Terrestrial World of humans and World of spirits belong to, and Celestial World which Heaven of souls of the deceased and Heaven of the divinities belong to. See more at Christian Culas, “Innovation and Tradition in Rituals and Cosmology: Hmong Messianism and Shamanism in Southeast Asia,” in *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tapp et al. (Chiangmai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2004), 109–13.

<sup>6</sup> Cư Hoà Vân and Nam Hoàng 1994, 107-8.

Son<sup>7</sup> refers ‘human souls’ in Hmong thought as the first soul, the second soul, and the third soul, Nguyễn Văn Thắng says that Hmong people do not have same perspectives on how many souls exist within a human person. Most of Nguyễn’s participants believe that each person only has one soul; some believe a human being has three souls, which reside on top of the head and two hands<sup>8</sup>. A traditional Hmong and a writer, Mã A Lệnh insists that the Hmong never claims the exact number of soul(s) and that we should understand the fact that the human soul is present everywhere and resides at all parts of the human body<sup>9</sup>.

Though the interpretation of ‘how Hmong think about the human soul(s)’ might vary by scholars, it is agreed that the soul is closely linked to human physical health. For instance, let us review Trần’s explanation. Trần thinks that Vietnamese Hmong believe there are three pieces of the human soul or three souls: soul (1), soul (2), and soul (3). Each soul has its own function and locates in a specific part of the alive human body. The soul (1) is on the top of the head. This soul of children is very weak; then we need to avoid touching their heads. If someone uses a hand to touch a child’s soul (1), the soul (1) would be afraid and leave the child’s body. These ethnic people believe that in such cases, they need to do a ‘calling soul’ ritual (*húp pli*<sup>10</sup> or *Hu Plig*) to call the soul (1) return to the child’s body. If not, the child would die. The soul (2) on the belly bottom governs (*cai quản*) the whole body and internal organs. If this soul leaves the body, the person might get a stomachache. This soul of women is weaker than that of men<sup>11</sup>. The soul (3) is on the chest. This soul rarely goes out of the body, particularly in children’s bodies. Once it leaves, the person might get severe sickness. That is why most of the Hmong, especially children, wear a necklace called ‘protecting necklace’ (*vòng cổ bảo mệnh/ Life Protecting Necklace/ Patron Necklace*). Doing so prevents the soul (3) from going out of the body. A newborn baby does not have this soul. Therefore, the family needs to do a ‘calling soul’ ritual for him or her. After the soul comes into the child’s body, s/he is acknowledged by the community and given a name.

In short, souls are always closely related to people’s health. If one among three souls leaves the body, the person would be sick. How serious the person gets sick depends on how far the soul (1) and (2) go out of the body. In case one of the souls does not return, the person would

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<sup>7</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 44-5.

<sup>8</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009, 61-2.

<sup>9</sup> A Lệnh Mã and Ngọc Vụ Từ, *Tiếp Cận Văn Hoá Mông [Approaching Hmong Culture]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá Dân tộc, 2014), 320., cited from Mạnh Tiến Nguyễn 2020, 170.

<sup>10</sup> ‘*húp pli*’ is used by Trần Hữu Sơn, see Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 54. Whereas, ‘*Hub Plig*’ is a common Hmong word in Hmong RPA. Hereafter, the latter word defined in parentheses is its version in Hmong RPA, and former word(s) are its different versions used by certain scholars or in a particular local Hmong language such as Vietnamese Hmong.

<sup>11</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 54.

die. For Hmong people, their house is the safest place where good gods, including house ghosts (*ma nhà*), reside and protect them. The further they go away from their home, the lesser these gods are able to protect them. After death<sup>12</sup>, the soul (1) would go up to Heaven and return to ancestors; the soul (2) becomes the guard staying by and protecting the dead person's tomb, and often go back to bother living people. Therefore, on the 13th day, since the person dies, his or her family needs to do the 'evict soul' ritual (*lễ đuổi hồn*), which would prevent the soul from returning and bothering the family. The soul (3) would reincarnate to be a human person or an animal that depends on the dead person's morality when they are alive<sup>13</sup>. These beliefs of the traditional Hmong on the human soul, in fact, lead to their practices of *ancestor and supernatural worship* and *shamanism*.

#### 4.1.2 Ancestor and Supernatural Worship

As being mentioned earlier, the Hmong believe that there are good gods who bless living people. In terms of good gods, there are also various types, such as ancestors (*tổ tiên*) and house ghosts (*ma nhà*)<sup>14</sup>.

In terms of ancestor worship, the Hmong are supposed to worship their dead ancestors of the three latest generations. As previously mentioned, the soul (1) would go up to Heaven and return to ancestors' land. Soul of ancestors of latest three generations is believed to return back the family and bless their offspring. However, they also can punish their descendants if these descendants do not properly worship. Sometimes if ancestors are hungry, they would go back

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<sup>12</sup> Some Vietnamese scholars hold different explanations for how Hmong's souls would be after death. For example, Cu Hoà Văn and Hoàng Nam believe that the soul of Hmong would be divided into three souls after death: the soul (1) goes to 'the other world' (thế giới bên kia) living with ancestors. This soul often returns to the family and bothers alive people. Therefore, the Hmong do numerous rituals to please this soul. The soul (2) goes up to Heaven to ask Lord Heaven (*ông Trời*) why he forces the Hmong to die. After that, this soul stays in Heaven that means it does not go back to the earth with its corpse. The soul (3) will reincarnate to be a human or a beast, which depends on how good or bad the person is when they are alive. These two scholars do not mention three souls of an alive Hmong as stated by Trần Hữu Sơn (1996), see Hoà Văn Cu and Nam Hoàng 1994, 153-4. Meanwhile, Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến, who has conducted significant fieldwork among traditional Hmong of northern Vietnam in recent years, generalizes that although opinions on Hmong soul differ, there is a common viewpoint: after death, the Hmong soul goes three places: 1/ ancestor land, 2/ stay in the tomb, and 3/ go back altar at the family house. Although he does not mention reincarnation of the Hmong right after death, he guesses a part of the soul or a group of souls would go back to the ancestor altar at the family for three or five generations or reincarnate, see Mạnh Tiến Nguyễn 2020, 170, 186. In this part, view of the traditional Hmong of Vietnam on human soul would be displayed based on the author's perception, mainly built on Trần Hữu Sơn's opinion as he offers a clear explanation on the positions of Hmong soul on an alive body as well as how they would work after death. Although Trần's research objects are traditional Hmong of a specific province in northern Vietnam – Lào Cai, his description to a certain extent matches my empirical knowledge obtained while being among the Hmong. At the same time, the related existing literature is also consulted for further discussion.

<sup>13</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 55.

<sup>14</sup> The word 'ghost' may sound scary in the common meaning, but the Hmong in Vietnam often refer to 'good gods' who reside in their house as '*ma nhà*,' which literally means 'house ghost' in English. For more details, see section 8.1 in Chapter 8.

and ask for buffalos, pigs, and so on<sup>15</sup>, which partially leads to the animal sacrifice of the Hmong.

Ancestor worship places of the Hmong are considered to be simple; most of the families do not have a fixed ancestor altar. In fact, the Hmong of different regions may have different ways of establishing the altar. For example,<sup>16</sup> Lầu (Lo) and Lý (Lis or Lee) clans of Than Uyên – a district of Lào Cai province before 2004, now it belongs to Lai Châu province – believe that the main pillar is the place where ancestor souls sometimes return to visit the family and reside. Most of the Hmong clans believe that ancestors reside at the wall behind the center living room of the house (*bức vách hậu Gian giữa*) where is nearby the *Xử Ca* altar. However, they do not have a separate altar for ancestor worship for everyday use but a temporary altar (or just a place for worship offerings) on several special occasions. Some clans in eastern Lào Cai province, particularly in communes of Bảo Yên district where are nearby Hà Giang province, do have a separated altar at the center living room (*gian giữa* in a Hmong house which is similar to the nave of a church) for practicing ancestor worship, nearby the back wall (*vách hậu*). On this altar, there are also three incense tubes, which are symbols of their ancestors of three latest generations<sup>17</sup>.

Regarding house ghosts (*ma nhà*), the Hmong believe there also have different figures. The first house ghost, the most important one, is *Xử Ca*, who is a good wealth god helping the Hmong with money. The second house ghost is *Ma Cột Chính* (Main Pillar ghost), who helps the Hmong with health and family's destiny. The third is *Ma cửa Xia Mềnh* (Xia Menh Door Ghost), who works as a door guard preventing bad ghosts (*ma ác*) from coming into the house, protecting cattle, properties, and souls. This good ghost also prevents human souls from leaving out of the body. If cattle are sick or die, it is because the door ghost falls down. One of the main reasons for this phenomenon is when a pregnant woman of another family/ clan walks over the door. Fourth, *Ma Buồng “đá tròng”* (Room Ghost) is in charge of taking care of children's health and protecting cattle. If a married couple lives on their own (*ra ở riêng*, which means no longer live in an extended family), have their own kid(s) and the dad's middle name is already changed (*lễ đổi tên lót*)<sup>18</sup>, this nuclear family is qualified for worshipping room ghost. Fifth, *Ma bếp “đá Kho trù”* (Kitchen Ghost) is related to women's childbirth and help people with raising cattle. Therefore, the Hmong also have numerous taboos on behaving with the Kitchen ghost

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<sup>15</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Some pioneer scholars do not discuss Hmong's ancestor worship such as Cư Hoà Văn and Hoàng Nam (1994). Therefore, specific examples here are only provided based on available literature.

<sup>17</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 49-50.

<sup>18</sup> Only after having the first child, an adult man's middle name can be changed so that his new status would be acknowledged. This event is marked by a ritual called *Lễ trưởng thành* or *Lễ đặt tên già*.

such as not to place feet on the stove (*bếp lò*), not to hit or kick stove that is used for cooking food for pig (*bếp cám lợn*), not to take ash in the stove out if pigs are pregnant, put a stone into the stove before taking the pan which is being used for cooking pig's food (*cám lợn*: pig's food made mainly from rice bran). *Ma bếp lửa* (Fire stove ghost) in the center space of the house (*gian giữa*) who is able to extirpate bad ghosts. After conducting the 'calling soul' ritual, the Hmong throw insects, who are considered to be souls of diseases, into the fire store. There is also a ghost called '*Ma bảo vệ hồn lúa, hồn ngô*' (ghost protecting the soul of rice and maize). This ghost often resides in the garret (*gác* where is above the stove) where the Hmong store paddy and corn (*thóc và ngô*). His mission is a blessing or punishing the Hmong to have better or worst crops, which depends on the family's attitude. Daughters in law and women of different clans are not allowed to get in the garret<sup>19</sup>.

Apart from worshipping ancestors, good gods or sometimes even bad ghosts, the Hmong also practice worshipping village gods (*thần cộng đồng làng 'giao'*<sup>20</sup> literally means *village community gods*). In some villages, these gods are 'earth gods' (*thần thổ địa*: the god/ deity who is governing the land). Earth god is sometimes worshipped at the stump of a big tree or sometimes at abnormal/ strange big stones. In some places, the village god of the Hmong is a historical figure. For instance, those who live in the upstream of Chay river (*Sông Cháy*) have worshipped Mr. Hoàng Tín Dần – a Hmong leader in the resistance against the Chinese Han; while those who live in upper Bắc Hà district of Lào Cai province have worshipped Mr. Giàng Chín Hùng – a Hmong leader in the resistance against the French colonialists. In some regions such as Tả Phìn, Sa Pa, Quán Dín Ngải, and Trung Đô of Bắc Hà district, the village gods are very first persons who established the village. Similar to earth gods, these gods are believed to reside at a stone cave or a big tree stump in the forbidden forest (*rừng cấm*).

The village gods are believed to govern the whole village, blessing the Hmong to have good health, productive crops, and good cattle. In case the village has troubles such as cattle get sick or villagers get accidents, this is explained that there might be someone who improperly behaves with village gods such as cutting trees in the forbidden forests or damaging caves or tree stumps where village gods reside. Every year, Hmong household leaders go together to the forbidden forest to do village god worship and conduct a special ritual called '*Nào Xông*' (or *Naox Cxungx*<sup>21</sup>). In addition, the Hmong do not have gods of the whole ethnic group. In fact,

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<sup>19</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 47-8.

<sup>20</sup> Although some Vietnamese scholars call this type of worship '*giao*' worship. For them, '*giao*' or sometimes *Jaol, Jol, Jéz Jol* means 'village'. However, after doubling check with my participants, the Hmong do not call their village '*giao*', but *lob zos*. Therefore, I choose to use the term 'village god worship' or 'village-based god worship' instead.

<sup>21</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 86.



mythological characters such as *Ông Chày*, *Bà Chày*, *Gầu Á*, *Dầu Âu* are not creator gods or shared gods of whole Hmong; they are cultural heroes. Therefore, different from other ethnic groups of Vietnam, such as Vietnamese Kinh and Tai, the Hmong do not worship inter-village gods or the Hmong gods; they instead worship only their own village gods<sup>22</sup>. Noticeably, the relationship between the Hmong and their gods are equal: people worship gods with offerings; in turn, gods are obligated to bless and protect people.

#### 4.1.3 Shamanism

Shamanism is a technique of ecstasy in which “the shaman “specializes” in the trance state, during which his soul is believed to leave his body and to ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld... the shaman controls his helping spirits, in the sense that he is able to communicate with the dead, demons, and nature spirits without thereby becoming their instruments”<sup>23</sup>. While a shaman can be trained to become by the will of the clan or their own free will, this type of shaman is considered to be less powerful than those “who have inherited the profession or who have obeyed the call of the gods and spirits”<sup>24</sup>. Apart from Siberia, shamanism was first explored by travelers of Inner Asia where is also the homeland of the Hmong – an ethnic minority people practicing this unique type of spiritual practice.

Some Vietnamese scholars call the ‘shaman’ of the Hmong by ‘*chí nẻnh*’, which should be ‘*txiv neev*’ in the Hmong language. In every traditional Hmong village, there are always one or more shamans. According to a 1930 report, there were up to 788 shamans in 38 Hmong villages in a region of northern Vietnam<sup>25</sup>. As mentioned earlier, the Hmong believe that people will get sick if their soul(s) leave the body. Therefore, the shaman is the person who could go to ‘the other world’ (*thẻ giới bên kia* or also known as the Otherworld<sup>26</sup>) to look for and convince the soul to return to its body, so that the sick person can be recovered. In addition, a Hmong shaman is also able to find lost properties (*của cải bị mất*), host several religious rituals such as pig ghost worship. While entrancing into the spirit world, a Hmong shaman would be helped by a shaman ancestor called ‘*đá nẻnh*’ (*tổ sư Shaman* or also known elsewhere as *Shaman God*). The shaman ancestor would tell the shaman the reasons why the person gets sick and guide how to cure that person by a specific ritual<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12 (Michigan: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 8269.

<sup>24</sup> Jones 12: 2005, 8269.

<sup>25</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Tapp, “Hmong Religion,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 48 (1989a): 59.

<sup>27</sup> In another text, this process of exploring the reasons why the person gets sick would be supported by auxiliary spirits, see Culas 2004, 108.

An active shaman Hmong needs to have some required instruments. To be more specific, besides building an altar, the shaman also has a bridge made by three long bamboo trees above which there are three lanh yarns (*lanh*: *Linum usitatissimum* whose original word is *Lin* in French, also known as *cây gai* in Vietnamese, which plays an essential role in traditional Hmong religion) used to link the altar of shaman and the house roof. This special bridge would be for the shaman ancestor and soul of the shaman to travel. Thanks to this bridge of three lanh yarns, the shaman is able to travel back and forth between the real world and the ‘other world’. The bridge will be replaced with a new one on the New Year’s Eve worship by the shaman. Some other instruments are incense tubes, a bowl of roasted corn, a bowl of water having some silver coins within it, a pair of cow horns (or buffalo horns) which are used as yin-yang tool (*dụng cụ âm dương*), and several music instruments. Among these instruments, the pair of *kạ lénh* is a communication tool between a shaman and ghosts: one side represents a ghost, and another side represents a soul. While a pair of *kạ lénh* is tossed, there are different possibilities: If both sides of ghost appear, the soul goes so far away; if both sides of the soul appear, the soul already returns that means the shaman does not need to do a ‘calling soul’ (*hub pli*) ritual; if one side of ghost and one side of the soul are showed at the same time that means the shaman needs to negotiate with the ghost and attempt to take the soul back. There is an exceptional circumstance if the *kạ lénh* stays standing, which reveals the worst case that the sick person may die. Hmong shamans do not have any uniform as those of Tai and Yao. They only have a red piece of cloth used to cover the face, notably including eyes, while the shamans are into a trance.

Although a shaman can be hereditary, it is not common among the Hmong<sup>28</sup>. A moral married male Hmong is supposed to be possessed by the shaman ancestor (*đá lénh*) would be able to become a shaman. This man is noticed by being seriously sick or having a mental illness (*bệnh thần kinh/ neuropathy*) but cannot be cured by any means. At this point, the shamanism of the Hmong is similar to common characteristics of shamanism in the world. It is believed that a shaman would not be recognized until he has received two teachings, which are ecstatic (such as dreams and trances) and traditional (such as shamanic techniques, names, and functions of the spirits, mythology, and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etc.)<sup>29</sup>. After being detected the potential of being a shaman, that person would be trained by a *thầy Shaman* (shamanic Master). While the shaman among the Vietnamese Hmong is believed to be men<sup>30</sup>,

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<sup>28</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Jones 12: 2005, 8270.

<sup>30</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 60.



it is considered that for the Hmong in general, a shaman can be a woman, but the shamanic Master might be a man<sup>31</sup>.

It is worth noting that the Hmong shamanism is more often than not linked with a common phenomenon in the history of this ethnic people: *messianism*<sup>32</sup>. ‘Messianism’ literally means ‘*chủ nghĩa cứu thế*’ and it is often presented through messianic movements, which is ‘*Xung Vua*’ (Proclaiming King) in Vietnamese. Some Vietnamese scholars insist that if a Hmong desires to be a king (also known as *messianic leader*), he needs to be a shaman first<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, while a king comes from ‘the other world’ who is descended to the earth to help human beings<sup>34</sup>, a shaman is only an ordinary person who has ability to travel to ‘the other world’ and communicate with gods.

In Vietnam, messianic movements of the Hmong in history are named by outsiders in various terms such as revolt, uprising, rebellion, protest or even ‘*nổi phi*’<sup>35</sup>, which I mentioned previously as ‘political involvement’ of the Hmong such as revolts led by Giàng Sia Lửa in 1917, Vừ Pa Chay in 1918, and many others throughout the years between 1918 and 1967 in the northern region. The Hmong’s messianic movements are considered to be both secular and religious<sup>36</sup>. They reflect the ‘emptiness’ in the Hmong’s consciousness as they had a glorious past and have had to suffer for such a long time. In addition, this type of movement is also the way to protest in cases their life is threatened. It is said that such movement is a normal phenomenon that happens in the social life of the Hmong at a specific time that cannot be predictable<sup>37</sup>.

According to Vương<sup>38</sup>, there are a number of characteristics of Hmong messianism. First, the Hmong who leads a messianic movement does not define himself as ‘King’; but claims to

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<sup>31</sup> Culas 2004, 107.

<sup>32</sup> Although when it comes to Hmong/ Miao rebellions in history, Siu-Wo Cheung uses words of ‘*millenarianism*’ and ‘*millennial movements*’, Siu-woo Cheung, “Millenarianism, Christian Movements, and Ethnic Change among the Miao in Southwest China,” in *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell (University of Washington Press, 1995), 217–47.; other scholars of Hmong studies such as Nicholas Tapp, Christian Culas, Lee Mai Na, mainly use words of ‘*messianism*’ and ‘*messianic movement*’. In this work, I would employ the terms ‘*messianic/ messianism*’ for consistency.

<sup>33</sup> The Hmong differ by location and sub-groups may vary in their details but share common characteristics of messianism and shamanism. When it comes to the Hmong messianism and shamanism in Southeast Asia, Christian Culas provides a detailed comparison on the relation between shamans and messianic leaders, see Culas 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 61.

<sup>35</sup> There is no equivalent word in English to ‘*phi*’. While ‘*nổi*’ in ‘*nổi dậy*’ can be translated as rebellion, ‘*phi*’ is a Vietnamese noun referring to gangs of bandits, robbers or so.

<sup>36</sup> Although mentioning some religious reasons of messianic movement, no details of such reasons are named and analyzed, Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 159.

<sup>37</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 159.

<sup>38</sup> As far as I study, messianism is not a common theme among pioneer Vietnamese scholars’ studies except for Vương Duy Quang’s. Vương is a native Hmong researcher who had a chance to join a Hmong conference in France in 1998, where he may hear about this term from international scholars, which may lead to his subsequent

be the one who is inferior to, yet close to, the Hmong King (*Fua Tai*). Some messianic leaders call themselves the son of the King or the one who is commanded (*người được sai khiến*) or the minister (*người thừa hành*) or the communicator (*người truyền đạt*). These leaders would be deified (*thần thánh hoá*) to be a talented one who has miracle and mystery power so that they could attract their people to trust and follow. Messages such as ‘*those who fight against the French would not die or be wounded*,’ or ‘*the Hmong King would turn plants into swords and stones into animals*’ are spread and become rumors among the Hmong. Second, the whole messianic movement is always deified, which creates an exciting and sacred environment for those who participate. For example, people were required to build a wooden boat; so that once the blood comes, they would sit on the boat and follow the King going up to Heaven. In another case, a messianic leader attached two *mẹt* (a Vietnamese type of ‘flat basket’) to her arms then ‘fly’ down from a mountain with whom she taught people how to fly. Third, every messianic movement brings the Hmong the hope that ‘*the Hmong King would return and then the Hmong lives would become much better*.’ They expect that their King would help them to have a prosperous life and that they do not need to work so hard like they have to<sup>39</sup>. These Vương’s explanation and examples are to illuminate a phenomenon among the Hmong in the late 1980s called ‘Vang Tsu,’ which I would discuss further later.

Apart from worships and rituals mentioned earlier in this section, some other spiritual practices are also found among traditional Hmong, which is said to be related to Totemism (or Totem). For example, some Hmong clans have their own taboos of not eating or harming certain animals: the Hờ clan with the monkey, the Vừa clan of Than Uyên with the deer, the Lầu clan of Bắc Hà with the bear, Và clan with the tiger and Mùa clan of Mường Khương with the horse<sup>40</sup>. In some cases, it is stated to have not enough evidence to consider some taboos of the Hmong are related to Totemism, such as while Dàng (Yang) clan do not eat animals’ heart<sup>41</sup>. In addition, several religious symbols are also believed to appear in Hmong myths and culture, such as rooster, frog, hylarana, cicada, horse, buffalo, drum and horn, and *lanh* tree and cloth (*cây lanh, vải lanh*). The obsession of Han Chinese among the Hmong is even symbolized to be a spiritual symbol ‘*Han symbol*’ (*Biểu tượng Hán*). Particularly in Hmong funeral, the ritual

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discussions on ‘Hmong messianism’. Thus, this part mainly relies on Vương’s works. Other works, if I consult, are only discussed under other terms such as movement, revolt, *Xung Vua*, or so.

<sup>39</sup> This section only presents how the scholars interpret Hmong’s belief in such promises, which does not necessarily convey the insiders’ voice. A related discussion on whether or not the Hmong genuinely believe in those promises is available in Chapter 6.

<sup>40</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 63.

<sup>41</sup> Hoà Văn Cư and Nam Hoàng 1994, 109-10.

of chasing Di (Yi) and Han bandits (*nghe lễ đuổi cướp Di, cướp Hán*) is considered a unique part which most obviously reflects this Han obsession among the Hmong<sup>42</sup>.

#### 4.1.4 Discussion

Some scholars may conclude that the Hmong religion is simple, I in contrast, suppose that their traditional religion is not only sophisticated but also highly rational and coherent. Compared to other neighboring ethnic groups of Vietnam, including Vietnamese Kinh, the Hmong have numerous unique characteristics in their way of believing and worshiping the supernatural. First, the Hmong do not honor God or Lord Heaven (*ông Trời*) because they believe Lord Heaven dropped diseases on earth to harm human beings, including the Hmong. They do not worship Lord Heaven. Additionally, they do not have any word in their language referring the hell. Any ideas of *Diêm Vương* (Yama) are believed to be affected by the Han Chinese thoughts. For the Hmong, the ‘other world’ (*thế giới bên kia*) is only a dark deep hole under the ground<sup>43</sup>.

Furthermore, there are also no gods that the entire ethnic group worship; the Hmong only worship village-based gods. Mythological figures who all the Hmong respect actually are not gods but heroes. Regarding the impact of other religions, the Hmong of Vietnam are believed to not be significantly affected by the three religions – *Tam giáo* – of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Particularly, if ancestor worship is dominant among Vietnamese, the Hmong appreciate the *Xử Ca* altar much more. A traditional Hmong family always has *Xử Ca* altar, however ancestor worship for some is even optional. The place for worshipping ancestors is also not prioritized among the Hmong. If Vietnamese or Tai have their ancestor altar at the house center room like the nave of a church, the Hmong only have a small paper 20x30 cm nearby the *Xử Ca* altar on the wall of the house nave for worshipping ancestor<sup>44</sup>.

In the relationship with the supernatural, the Hmong respect but not passively obey or are afraid of. Instead, they worship gods with offerings, and gods, in turn, are obligated to protect and bless the Hmong. In addition, one could realize that the Hmong strictly believe in the causal law, which, I am quite sure, has an essential impact on Hmong thoughts: behave good, be blessed good things; behave bad, be punished. I suppose that this viewpoint, which has existed in Hmong’s thoughts for centuries, has been represented in most of the daily behaviors of this ethnic minority people. While Vietnamese Kinh is more or less afraid of their dead ancestors or gods or ghosts, most of the Hmong seem to only show their fear if they realize warning signs

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<sup>42</sup> Mạnh Tiến Nguyễn 2020, 204.

<sup>43</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 52, 43.

that reveal their bad behaviors, which result in being sick, for example. Equality also reflects on Hmong language and its usage that I saw most obvious in Hmong daily communication: *kuv* (I) and *koj* (you) are the only vocatives used among the Hmong, which is much different from Vietnamese Kinh culture with numerous vocatives particularly used for specific relations following strict rules of communication<sup>45</sup>. Although it might be difficult to conclude that using the same vocatives for all relationships means equality, it is not too difficult to see how the Hmong equally behave in their community with the support of language usage. However, they also greatly respect ethnic rules and clan regulations. Thus, it seems that the Hmong find it reasonable to follow the ultimate laws that they believe in, but with a calm attitude. Passive obedience might not be a value the Hmong follow; they prefer freedom most of the time.

In short, although recently an American traditional Hmong scholar determinedly claims that animism and shamanism are not correctly represented Hmong religion and that his emic view “is a healthier alternative to the etic concepts of animism and shamanism”<sup>46</sup>; these terms are still acknowledged and employed in this part due to several reasons. First, almost all of research on Hmong religion conducted throughout Hmong studies’ history based on concepts and perceptions of Hmong’s animism and shamanism, including insider scholars such as Vayong 1995 who writes “they were animalists and felt obligated to practice the religion”<sup>47</sup> when it comes to one of religious custom that sick people cannot enter to the house of others. It might be problematic if the current research is not built on the inheritance of pioneer scholars, particularly those of Vietnam. Second, while Her’s research objects are Hmong Americans in the Midwest and his understanding of Hmong religion based on the ritual traditions of the Hmong Americans who trace their origin to some Laos villages<sup>48</sup>; my research context is Vietnam in which the traditional Hmong religion is examined and becomes the basis for detailed comparison on how a part of those people who convert to another religion have changed their thoughts and rituals. Therefore, it might not be proper to apply his arguments to my discussion and analysis for this current work. Although Her’s analysis and arguments do not entirely convince me, it is worth acknowledging his new perspective in this section to avoid ignoring emic’s thoughts on the traditional religion of the Hmong people as a whole.

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<sup>45</sup> More details can be found at Thị Diễm Phương Nguyễn, “Văn Hoá Xung Hô Của Người Việt [Vietnamese Addressing Culture],” in *Kỷ Yếu Hội Thảo Nghiên Cứu và Giảng Dạy Việt Nam Học và Tiếng Việt [Conference Proceedings on Research and Teaching on Vietnamese Studies and Vietnamese]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, 2011), 386–94.

<sup>46</sup> Vincent K Her, “Reframing Hmong Religion: A Reflection on Emic Meanings and Etic Labels,” *Amerasia Journal* 44, no. 2 (2018): 38.

<sup>47</sup> Moua 1995.

<sup>48</sup> Her 2018, 24.

## 4.2 Christianity among Hmong of Asia

The image of ‘a Hmong’ involved in church activities has been increasingly common in recent years, not only in the West but also in their homeland in Asia. To better comprehend the context of the current conversion of Vietnamese Hmong to Protestantism and how their spiritual life has changed due to that conversion, I would present the very first and latter Hmong conversion to Christianity in Asian countries in history, including in the Hmong’s motherland – China.

### 4.2.1 *The Context of First Christianity Emergence among the Hmong in Asia*

As summarized in the previous section, the revolts of the Hmong are quite common in history since they originally lived in southern China thousands of years ago, where they were classified into an umbrella group – the Miao. Their uprisings, as well as those of other non-Han groups of the southern region, became particularly endemic after the founding of the Ming dynasty (1386 – 1644).

In regions where the Miao settled, they were tenants, and the landlords were the Yi<sup>49</sup>. These minority people were not only suppressed by further Chinese expansion through military colonization but also tremendously depressed by the implementation of ‘*gai tu gui liu*’<sup>50</sup> policy. During this time, the Miao had to suffer from ‘scorn, contempt, and legal robbery in rents and taxes’<sup>51</sup>. They actually had to personally deliver a variety of goods to their feudal landlords, which are the large percentages of rice and corn they harvested or the monthly amount of alcohol. It is even said that ‘A Miao dare not get rich or his landlord will take away his wealth’. Being marginalized and continuously oppressed are what has mainly been recorded about the Miao, including the Hmong, while they lived in their original country, China.

The Miao then ended up relying on millenarianism to resist Han domination<sup>52</sup>. To be more specific, millenarianism has been said to be a unique characteristic of the Miao. Millennial movements occur when the Miao has to suffer severe circumstances. In these cases, the prophecy of the Miao King’s emergence would be supposed to reveal to someone, shaman-sorcerers or ordinary people who then would be called ‘prophets’. Since then, the Miao would be encouraged to abandon their daily activities and attend ceremonies in order to welcome their King<sup>53</sup>. In fact, this millennial belief and action are considered the habituated response of the

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<sup>49</sup> an ethnic group of China.

<sup>50</sup> also known as *gaitu guiliu* which means transforming chieftainships into Han direct administration.

<sup>51</sup> Tapp 1989c, 72.

<sup>52</sup> Cheung 1995, 222.

<sup>53</sup> Cheung 1995, 223.

Miao to Chinese expansion. The notion of ‘Miao King’, therefore, is a ‘sign of habit’ in Miao culture. In countless crises that the Miao has been going through in China, they always look forward to an ideal power order and other forms of the savior. The Miao King is one of those saviors. Interestingly, Jesus Christ is also considered to be one of those saviors since Christianity was introduced to the Miao, especially in their circumstances under the Ming dynasty.

#### 4.2.2 *Christian Missionaries among the Hmong in Asia and their Response*

*The term ‘Conversion’.* Before going into details of the massive conversion of the Hmong, it is indispensable to discuss the term ‘conversion’ from a theoretical perspective and how it would be applied in this research. Although the topic of conversion nowadays is widely researched by scholars in a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, history, sociology, theology, religious studies, and so on, there is no agreement on a specific definition of it. Basically, the conversion is religious change. It is explained in numerous ways from different perspectives. According to Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, while religious people change their belief because the chosen religion is true, “the secular person may use explanations that are related to psychological needs, sociological factors, cultural forces, economic incentives or deprivations, and/or political constraints or inducements to make sense of phenomena”<sup>54</sup>. This way of interpreting the conversion of secular persons is believed to reduce the concept of conversion to a mono-causal force instead of acknowledging its pluriform nature. Therefore, this effort fails to account for the multifaceted process that affects social, political, religious life, and so on. By defining that essence of conversion, the authors propose that there is no single theory that is able to fully comprehend all threads in order to entirely illuminate the religious change, which I personally entirely agree with. As a consequence, this study would examine various explanations of other scholars, then rely on religious and spiritual theories on conversion to provide further discussions.

*Christian Missionaries among the Hmong in their original land of China.* At the end of the nineteenth century, the very first European Christian missionaries reached out to the Hmong/Miao<sup>55</sup> in Southwest China. These missionaries belong to the China Inland Mission, a Protestant denomination, whose work focused on two Miao groups in Guizhou: The Hei Miao in the Southwest and the Hua Miao in the Northwest<sup>56</sup>. It is reported that the first missionary

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<sup>54</sup> Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion* 3 (Michigan: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 1969.

<sup>55</sup> In case the term ‘Hmong and Miao’ or ‘Hmong/ Miao’ is used, it refers to the Hmong in early history while they still lived in China and were a sub-group of the Miao.

<sup>56</sup> Although the Hmong was not specifically referred to when it comes to the very first conversion to Christianity of the Miao in southern China, it is widely acknowledged in the academic discussion that they were a part of the first Miao originally proselytized, see Tapp 1989c, 72., Cheung 1995, 217.



work among the Hei Miao was done in 1896 that obtained no significant success, but failure marked by the death of a missionary and the first Miao convert in an anti-Christian murder case<sup>57</sup>. In contrast, Christianity was introduced to the Hua Miao in 1895 by James R. Adam, earning considerable achievement with a large number converted. Another denomination operating in the region (Northwest China) is the United Methodist Mission led by an American missionary named Samuel Pollard<sup>58</sup>, who became a well-known incident ethnographer<sup>59</sup> when it comes to the Hmong studies in latter times. Basically, in terms of the outcomes of missionaries at that time, it is worth noting that there were nice centers established in Guizhou, Sichuan, and Wuding; and over thirty outstations founded by the United Methodist Mission by the year of 1920. Regarding the number of people who converted, there were approximately seventy thousand Miao Christians, with fifteen thousand baptized, and over sixty schools were opened<sup>60</sup>.

Remarkably, instead of being approached, a part of the Hmong/ Miao actively sought the help of missionaries. Thanks to the recommendation of a missionary, they heard about and came to Pollard's original mission station in Zhaotong. They then arrived group by group. In return, Pollard attempted to support the Miao and conducted mass baptisms for them. A church and a school were built at the hill that belonged to a Lo Lo Christian to avoid Han's intervention and supported them to have a better life regarding health care, healthy physical activities, and so forth. Remarkably, he invented the first script for any Miao language in which the Bible eventually printed<sup>61</sup> that might also include the Hmong language. In fact, those who converted during this time are those who lived with 'bad' landlords, and those who are tenants of 'good' landlords were reported to stay unconverted<sup>62</sup>. Therefore, to a certain extent, the first Hmong conversions to Christianity were also considered to be the result of the desire to get rid of the

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<sup>57</sup> Cheung 1995, 226.

<sup>58</sup> While Tapp states that Samuel Pollard is an Englishman who belongs to the London Missionary Society, Siu-Woo Cheung claims he is an American missionary of the United Methodist Mission. At this point, I am convinced by Tapp since he shows the evidence of Samuel Pollard's notes and diaries that have been preserved in the missionary archives of the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, see Tapp 1989c, 72. However, as this section on very first conversion of the Hmong is based on the more detailed and informative work of Cheung, missionaries' names and their denominations are maintained as on the original work.

<sup>59</sup> The way Jean Michaud called missionaries who worked with local people in colonial period in Asia. These 'incident ethnographers' provide precious writings that are extremely helpful for modern scholarship; see more at Jean Michaud, *"Incidental" Ethnographers: French Catholic Missions on the Tonkin-Yunnan Frontier, 1880-1930* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> The 'scores of churches' is mentioned but there is no clear explanation of it; therefore, it is not included. Cheung 1995, 226.

<sup>61</sup> Tapp 1989c, 74.

<sup>62</sup> Nicholas Tapp, *The Impossibility of Self: An Essay on the Hmong Diaspora*, vol. 6 (Berlin: LIT Verlag Münster, 2010), 74.

suffering and hardship they were confronting<sup>63</sup>. However, it is important to note that another deciding and constant motivation for their conversion is the desire for literacy. To Hmong people, the script is extremely meaningful that, to a great extent, presents their wisdom and power. In their imagination, they did have a script system, but it was lost on the way running away from Chinese oppression or in some legends revealing that buffalo(s) ate their books. Their desire for the script, in fact, is shown in Pollard's diary that "The great demand these crowds made was for *books*"<sup>64</sup>. Interestingly, the conversion turned out to be culturally meaningful to the Hmong. After the eighteenth century, the Hmong were forced to 'be like Chinese': wear Chinese dress, speak Chinese, be educated in Chinese schools, and adopt Chinese surnames. Such campaigns of the Chinese seriously threatened the Hmong identity. In that case, Protestant missionaries had attempted to reform Hmong cultural practices<sup>65</sup>.

In the mid-1990s, some groups of Protestant missionary Hmong from the United States came to visit as well as actively did their missionaries to convert their brethren. However, their activities and emerged conversions that time was discouraged by the Chinese Communist Party. Some arrests are also reported. Several moves of the Hmong in China towards Vietnam, Laos, and Burma were made accordingly, which led to the increasing concern of the Chinese government about the overseas Hmong visitors<sup>66</sup>.

To sum up, the first Hmong/ Miao conversion in southern China might be considered the foundation for later conversions among the Hmong in Vietnam in particular and in Southeast Asia in general, which would be examined below.

*Christianity among the Hmong in Laos.* Although the very first Protestant missionary organizations were established in Xieng Khouang, Laos, in the late 1920s<sup>67</sup>, the very first missionaries arrived in 1940. There were also some Catholic priests doing missionary work with the help of the French; however, they had not earned much success. In the first years, most

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<sup>63</sup> Tapp 2010, 57.

<sup>64</sup> Tapp 1989c, 74, 76.

<sup>65</sup> Nicholas Tapp, *The Hmong of China: Context, Agency, and the Imaginary* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 71.; also see Tapp 1989c, 94.

<sup>66</sup> Tapp 2010, 196.

<sup>67</sup> There is no specific date or year mentioned; it is only claimed that Protestantism missionary organizations were already established fifteen years before the very first missionaries arrived in Xieng Khouang in 1940, see translation version of George Linwood Barney, "Christianity: Innovation in Meo Culture: A Case Study in Missionization" (MA unpublished dissertation, Minnesota, University of Minnesota, 1957). at George Linwood Barney, "Kitô giáo: Sự đổi mới trong văn hoá người Mông. Chương III: Những thay đổi gần đây trong văn hoá người Mông [Christianity: Innovation in Meo Culture. Chapter III: Recent Changes in Meo Culture]," trans. Thi Bích Ngọc Hoàng, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo* 9 (2018): 37. Although this translation version sometimes is incorrect such as defining Posi as a male shaman, which is also found in some other Vietnamese academic work such as Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 235., it is a useful source. All information used is verified at numerous resources rather than the translated one; however, as the 1957 thesis of Barney is the most original source, it is mainly cited. In another source, first Protestant missionaries were believed to have been working in Laos since about 1930, Tapp 1989b, 97.



of the missionary work was related to creating a writing system for the Hmong, which involved both Catholic and Protestant missionaries. After being interrupted by World War II, the missionary work was resumed in 1949<sup>68</sup> that even reached the conversion of nearly 1,000 Hmong in a single day<sup>69</sup>. One of the key persons who played an important role in Hmong conversion to Christianity in Laos is Posi – a former female shaman. It is told that a dream came to her two years before the day she heard about God from Kheng, a Khomu pastor of Luang Prabang Church, who came to preach in Xieng Khouang. Posi then was the first shaman in Laos who abandoned the traditional religion to convert to Christianity. Another surprise is that after only two days of introducing the new faith, Posi and Kheng was able to convince the elderly people and the village head in her village to convert. This blessing work had been repeated village by village by Posi and Kheng. Interestingly, this mass conversion was not the result of any missionary work. Instead, Posi is considered to be the major factor in converting those Hmong of Laos. In fact, although Posi was no longer a shaman since she converted, her reputation was remained in the community<sup>70</sup>. After that mass conversion, Touby Lyfoung and his wife became other ‘innovators’ that led to the second mass conversion in Xieng Khouang. As previously mentioned, Touby was a highly respected Hmong official who supported the French and later the Americans. Though regularly attending masses and inviting missionaries to come to his private house for preaching, he did not want to be an official Christian with the required document because of the Buddhist government he was working for<sup>71</sup>. Although in March 1953<sup>72</sup>, all of the Christian missionaries had to leave Xieng Khouang because of the Việt Minh’s occupation (*Vietnamese Communists*), the conversion was believed to be continued among the Hmong. According to a report that was sent to missionaries later, there were approximately 5,000 to 6,000 converts living in 96 villages, in which there were 70% Hmong.

The missionary work had been disrupted. However, a number of religious activities were defined and properly organized. For example, up to 300 adherents joining mass every Sunday at Xieng Khouang church. Bible courses were offered regularly, which lasted from 6 weeks to 4 months, depending on cases. On important events such as Christmas or Easter, the number was even much higher, approximately 1,200 up to 2,000 participants. It is worth noting that Catholicism was in Xieng Khouang earlier than Protestantism, but a few or even no local people welcomed it. Catholicism was probably considered to be connected with western colonialists.

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<sup>68</sup> Tapp 1989c, 80.

<sup>69</sup> Tapp 1989b, 97.

<sup>70</sup> Barney 2018, 40-1.

<sup>71</sup> Barney 2018, 42.

<sup>72</sup> It is said in Tapp’s 1989 book that the Việt Minh occupation in Laos occurred in March 1957, Tapp 1989b, 97. As far as I study, it might be ‘March 1953’.

Colonial army and government seemed not to understand Hmong that they issued some policies inapplicable policies to them<sup>73</sup>.

*Christianity among the Hmong in Thailand.* Catholic missionaries started their work in Thailand by opening a particular school for Hmong children in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand<sup>74</sup> and earned more success in converting the Hmong than their Protestant counterparts, who even began their missionary work earlier in the 1920s. In fact, Protestant pastors seemed to be stricter on Hmong shamanism and ancestor worship. They encouraged the Hmong to abandon their traditional faith by destroying ancestral altar or shamanic equipment. As a consequence, the Hmong found it hard to accept this branch of Christianity. Meanwhile, Catholicism allowed their adherents to practice the traditional rituals as well as continue to drink and smoke, which are century-long faith and habits of the Hmong. It is said that Christianity at that time offered an alternative way for the Hmong to avoid being absorbed by the Thai state, which has been firmly based on Buddhism. Remarkably, none of the Hmong convert entirely abandoned their traditional religion. In addition, the conversion among the Hmong of Thailand this period more often than not happened by village, not individual, which in fact was considered to be the rule rather than an exception<sup>75</sup>.

Nowadays, there are approximately 5,000 Hmong Catholics in Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Chiang Rai, and Chiang Lay, belonging to 66 out of a total of 200 Hmong villages in Thailand. Instead of using the Bible in their mother tongue language, the Hmong Catholics at a Hmong Catholic Central in Chiang Mai use the Thai Bible for their religious practices. In terms of Protestantism, it is believed to still exist among the Hmong of Thailand in several provinces and cities. Among different Protestant denominations, Socoto<sup>76</sup> is known as the one which has the largest Hmong group following, around 3,000 adherents. However, some argue that Baptist might be the first denomination introduced to the Hmong of Thailand, which attracts the biggest group of Hmong people<sup>77</sup>.

*Discussion.* Christian missionaries introduced among the Hmong of Asian countries vary by denominations and time. While the earliest emergence of this world religion was in southern China in the late 1890s, in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, it has presented since the 1920s. Mass conversion among the Hmong has been reported to be a common phenomenon which is taken

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<sup>73</sup> Barney 2018, 44, 45, 47.

<sup>74</sup> There is no specific date or year provided referring the time first Catholic missionaries worked among the Hmong of Thailand.

<sup>75</sup> Tapp 1989c, 87-8, 74.

<sup>76</sup> There is, in fact, no detailed description of this denomination.

<sup>77</sup> Hmong Christianity in the present day is rarely documented. Most of the information in this part is consulted on the 2005 book by a Vietnamese Hmong scholar who claims to collect empirical data in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 1997 and 2003, see Duy Quang Vurong 2005c, 239-40.

place by village rather than by individual. Being a minority with a strong sense of ethnic identity, the Hmong of the late 19th and early 20th centuries seemed to determinedly resist the assimilation of any outside religion, ideology, or secular powers such as politics. For instance, those of Thailand rejected to convert to Thai national religion – Buddhism – but also refused to convert to a western religion, which was considered superior in the colonial time, that asked them to abandon their traditional faiths and customs entirely. Even in the case of conversion, it is believed that there were no Hmong who totally jettisoned their ‘old way’ of life. In other words, although choosing Christian faith a new religion, the attitude of the Hmong towards it stayed ambivalent.

Most interestingly, it is recorded that the Hmong appeared to be highly active in seeking missionaries and, in some cases converted without any priests or pastors’ persuasion. For instance, after a very few first Hmong having a chance to meet with Pollard and spread the word to their people, thousands of Hmong from outlying villages risked their lives to travel to Pollard’s house in Chaotung, Yunnan of China. Some of them had to travel up to five days on foot. The hard weather, the difficult and narrower paths they mainly walked through nights, and the possibility of being persecuted or put in jail by Chinese people did not discourage them<sup>78</sup>. In Laos, the case of Posi and Kheng, as discussed previously in this section, additionally proved the ability of self-making decisions of the Hmong as a united and autonomous ethnic group without the impact of the outsiders.

While official Christian denominations had publicly worked among the Hmong, it is noticeable that some Hmong, in fact, declared themselves to be Jesus, such as the case of ‘Meo Trinity’ in Laos. To be more precise, there were three men who claimed to present the Holy Trinity. They traveled from village to village, mimicked to be like missionaries, burned altars, and so on. Finally, one of these self-proclaimed prophets killed himself by jumping down from a high mountain ledge to prove that he could ‘fly like a dove’<sup>79</sup>. In addition, messianic movements sometimes occurred as well, such as the one led by Yaj Soob Lwj in 1967 in a Laotian military base of Long Tine or the one in Thailand during the early 1960s. In fact, this type of movement is considered to be common among the Hmong that happens if the Hmong are confronting severe hardships. Although messianic and Christian faith is elsewhere closely linked and supposed to support each other, in the case of the 1960s Hmong revolt in Thailand, it was different. The Hmong ‘King’ was believed to be born soon; however, this King would eliminate all foreigners that eventually threatened the lives of missionaries and their converts.

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<sup>78</sup> Her Xiong Sue, *History of Hmong Christian Mission* (St. Paul: Concordia University-St. Paul. Hoffmann Institute, 2010), 3.

<sup>79</sup> Barney 1957., cited from Tapp 1989c, 81.

Unfortunately, the remaining country of Southeast Asia – Burma – where some Hmong groups live, has no records on Hmong Christians. However, there could have been several Baptist influences among some groups of White Hmong in the Eastern Wa state of this country in the 1920s<sup>80</sup>.

### **4.3 The late 1980s Conversion to Protestantism of Vietnamese Hmong**

When it comes to the most recent religious conversion to Protestantism of Vietnamese Hmong in the late 1980s, which has also drawn increasing attention of domestic and international scholars, common questions, answered and unanswered, often raised are ‘*Why did Vietnamese Hmong choose Protestantism?*’, ‘*Have they converted to other world religions rather than Protestantism?*’, and ‘*Why is the late 1980s the right time?*’. This section will discuss these matters. Plus, the Hmong’s conversion to Protestantism has its own complicated narrative. I, therefore, would chronologically discuss different periods in detail to avoid confusion.

First, it is essential to examine significant encounters that Vietnamese Hmong have had with other religions rather than their own traditional one.

#### *4.3.1 Vietnamese Hmong’s Religious Changes in History*

*Catholicism.* After taking over Sapa – a district of Lào Cai province – in 1888, French colonialists planned to establish missionary stations in the region. As a result, the very first Catholic church and preaching houses were built in 1905. Accordingly, missionaries started to do careful research on the psychology and religion of the Hmong, then applied the findings into missionary work in Hmong villages to convert them, and more importantly, to alleviate their uprisings against French colonial rule.

Among French missionaries, Father Savina was the one who worked actively and lived closely with the Hmong. In 1921, he converted the very first Hmong: Mã A Thông and his family. In the same year, a total of five families converted thanks to Savina and his early adherents’ effort. The first preaching house (*nhà giảng đạo*) was built at Lò Lao Chải – a Hmong village of Lao Chải commune, Sapa district one year later. Furthermore, Father Savina invited two groups of Hmong missionaries from Yunnan, China came and preached to the Hmong in the region in 1924 and 1925. Consequently, another twenty Hmong families converted. By the early 1940s, there were 33 Hmong families of 11 villages that accepted the Christian faith to be Hmong Catholics in the area.

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<sup>80</sup> Tapp 1989c, 72.

The key message that Catholic missionaries preached to the Hmong is: God is the biggest ghost (*con ma to nhât*) so that the Hmong do not need to follow other ghosts<sup>81</sup>. Trusting in God only is enough to be able to return with their ancestors in Heaven. Plus, if the Hmong follow God, then French and the Vietnamese Kinh would support them to have a prosperous life (*đời sống ấm no*). The Hmong were told that all plants and trees of Catholics would become rice in 2000<sup>82</sup>. In fact, Catholic missionaries did great work on learning and understanding the Hmong's traditional beliefs and culture. Their strategic planning was to convert clan leaders first, then their family members would follow, which seem to always work effectively among the Hmong. What is more, the Hmong also received economic benefits for being Catholics, such as being offered agricultural lands, getting tax reductions, or having law consultation from priests. They even were able to get rid of their expensive traditional religious practices, which more often than not require animal sacrifice. It is also recorded that at this time, Father Savina<sup>83</sup> and Hmong missionaries of Yunnan studied the Hmong script and translated the Bible into Hmong script so that these people could practice their new belief in their own language.

Due to the Japanese invasion (March 1945) and then the communist Việt Minh's takeover in northern Vietnam (May 1954), it is reported that there had been no church, no priest, particularly from 1950 to 1996<sup>84</sup>. However, those who converted still voluntarily maintained the Christian faith and did regular practice. The living style of Hmong Catholics have been shaped to a certain extent: after getting up and going to bed, they pray; before eating, they pray; they do not eat food which is already used for worship purposes; marriage is only allowed within Catholic communities, or the bride/groom has to convert if they want to get married to a Catholic. The Bible is involved in every activity of the Hmong Catholics, especially in wedding and funeral ceremonies. Noticeably, the Hmong Catholics do not practice Confession, Communion and rarely do the baptism. Although this fact is documented, there is no detailed explanation for such a particular way of practicing among those converts.

After Japan's invasion and French occupation, the number of Hmong Catholics dramatically decreased. By 1985, there had been only 56 Hmong Catholic families in Sa Pa<sup>85</sup>. According to a Vietnamese scholar<sup>86</sup>, this phenomenon happened because the Hmong desired to have

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<sup>81</sup> As discussed earlier, the Hmong has a system of ghosts in their belief whom they follow and worship. There are both good and bad ghosts, which can also be known as spirits.

<sup>82</sup> This is recorded elsewhere in Vietnamese literature. I am personally not convinced that the French missionaries told this unrealistic thing to the Hmong, see Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 180.

<sup>83</sup> It is recorded that Father Savina researched and built the Hmong script, but there is no obvious connection between his work and other missionaries who created the Hmong script in Laos in the 1950s, see more at Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 194.

<sup>84</sup> 1996 is the time Trần wrote the book *Văn hoá Hmông* (Hmong Culture)

<sup>85</sup> a town of Lào Cai province of Northern Vietnam

<sup>86</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 182.

freedom, independence from the feudal system and colonialism, and they did not want to follow the religion of colonialists. Besides, after being able to handle urgent demands of arable lands and tax reduction, they easily abandoned their Christian faith<sup>87</sup>. Notably, at this time, the traditional Hmong religion was still strong. Therefore, they found it hard to abandon ancestor worship and traditional funeral rites as well as the wedding ceremony. In some cases, Catholic Hmong bride had to re-convert to traditional religion. It is recorded that there was only a natural increase in the number of Hmong Catholics during the years from 1955 to 1985. Those Hmong Catholics also became more flexible. For example, a bride of a Catholic family would be allowed to re-convert after getting married to a traditional groom. Plus, their Christian teachings were simplified. Although the convert does not worship house ghosts, they still respect taboos such as not sitting on the threshold, not letting legs, or knocking on the stove, and daughter in law is not allowed to go upstairs. In the New Year celebration, some Hmong Catholic families still practiced ancestor worship. In other words, although some Hmong converted to Catholicism, they did not want to totally abandon their traditional religion. At this point, one can find that the situation of the Hmong convert in Vietnam is quite similar to the Hmong conversion in Thailand, who rejected to entirely give up with their traditional religion. This phenomenon among the Hmong convert is described as ‘half-believed’ by Nicholas Tapp.

Apart from the early conversion to Catholicism of some Hmong in the 1920s and its continuance up to date, some contacts with Catholic priests are reported in the late 1980s and early 1990s. According to several local officials, in the years from 1986 to 1990 there was a group of Catholic Vietnamese Kinh from Hà Nam province (a northern lowland province of Vietnam) came to Đứa Mòn commune, Sông Mã district of Sơn La province to work as sawyers (or woodworkers) and house builders for local Hmong. These lowland people directly did missionaries, taught Catholic teachings, and guided the Hmong to practice some Catholic rituals. In addition, they helped the Hmong to build Jesus’ altar and the cross for them to worship without charging any labor fees. In 1998, two Hmong named Sùng Bả Dưa and Sùng Bả So traveled to Hà Nam province with these sawyers. They then got the chance to meet with Father Hoàn— a Vietnamese Kinh Catholic priest and were given three Bibles to bring back their home at Đứa Mòn to spread God words. These two Hmong are believed to come back Hà Nam multiple times in later years and got the chance to go to Búi Chu Church in Phát Diệm, Ninh Bình province. Vietnamese priests at Búi Chu gave them an organ so that they could have choirs at their home village.

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<sup>87</sup> In Trần’s discussion, he claims that thanks to the Communist Win in 1945, the Hmong and other ethnic groups in Vietnam got the independence.



Another case of converting to Catholicism occurred in the late 1980s thanks to a group of Hmong traders of Sơn La and Yên Bái provinces who traveled back and forth and spread the news on God and his followers. In some villages of Yên Bái, the Hmong has believed in Catholicism since the French colonial time. Witnessing a Hmong person got sick at Ít Lót village (Chiềng Cang commune, Sông Mã district, Sơn La province), a couple of Hmong traders stayed as guests had shared with the host about how sick Hmong were cured by praying God in their home villages in Trạm Tàu, Yên Bái. The host woman had once heard about God before; she then was entirely convinced of God's power this time. After traveling to and meeting with a Hmong priest at Trạm Tàu church in February 1986, this Hmong woman, with the help of the first followers, successfully converted 117 Hmong in her villages only three months after her trip. By the end of 1987, Catholicism was accepted among the Hmong of three districts of Sơn La province which are Mai Sơn, Mường La, and Sông Mã<sup>88</sup>.

Exceptionally as the Hmong began to listen to the radio broadcast operated by FEBC<sup>89</sup> and got to know God in the late 1980s, some actively sought help from several Catholic churches in other provinces such as Yên Bái, Hà Tây, which unexpectedly resulted in some Hmong converting to Catholicism<sup>90</sup>. Those Hmong came to these Catholic churches as they heard that at these churches, people followed God, and they knew how to pray and do rituals. At that time, they were not able to realize how different between Catholic churches and Protestant denominations as they were only guided by the FEBC. This unexpected conversion would be discussed with the conversion of the Hmong to Protestantism in a subsequent section as it is a part of this contemporary converting process.

Although there are around 20,000 Hmong Catholics in Vietnam<sup>91</sup>, their updated lives are not recorded with details in recent decades. Some Hmong Catholic families are believed to live in the Central Highlands of Vietnam as well. However, they seem to be considered minorities compared to their Protestant counterparts and are rarely documented in the literature.

*Buddhism.* Although Buddhism is also reported to have some Hmong adherents somewhere, this religion has not become common among these ethnic people. It is said that while the belief of some Hmong was becoming weaker and their traditional religious practices were being a burden for them, some Hmong in Hà Giang province came to Buddhist temples<sup>92</sup> such as Bình Lâm temple in Phú Linh commune, Hà Giang town (*thị xã Hà Giang* – a town of Hà Giang

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<sup>88</sup> Thị Kim Duyên Lương et al. 2003, 32-4.

<sup>89</sup> Further information is available in the latter sections.

<sup>90</sup> The mistaken conversion would be discussed later with the Hmong conversion to Protestantism as it was a period of becoming Protestants process of the Hmong.

<sup>91</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009, 82.

<sup>92</sup> No specific time is provided.

province) and Sùng Khánh temple of Đạo Đức commune, Vị Xuyên district, Hà Giang province. However, after a short time, those Hmong abandoned the new Buddhist faith, which is explained because they realized no difference between Buddhism and their traditional belief<sup>93</sup>.

According to the representatives of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam's in Sơn La province, although Buddhism had been introduced to the Hmong in two districts Vân Hồ and Mộc Châu of Sơn La, it is challenging for this religion to be accepted by this ethnic minority people not only in Sơn La, but also in other regions across the country<sup>94</sup>. In 2012, it was reported that a group of Buddhist monks and nuns came to visit the Lao village, a remote mountainous village of Cát Thịnh commune, Văn Chấn district, Yên Bái province, where 100% of habitats are Hmong people. These religious leaders helped the Hmong to build a street called 'Con đường ước mơ' (The Street of Dream), offered ceremonies to pray for Peace (*lễ cầu an*) and to take refuge (*quy y Tam bảo*) for almost 70 households in the village<sup>95</sup>. In fact, there are numerous news and reports<sup>96</sup> on how Buddhist leaders have offered support and help to the Hmong elsewhere; however, the exact number of Hmong Buddhists have not specifically mentioned and whether or not the Hmong continue to practice the Buddhist faith is not documented. Therefore, it can be concluded that Buddhism has attempted to approach the Hmong but gained no significant success.

#### 4.3.2 The Recent Vietnamese Hmong Conversion to Protestantism from the Beginning

The conversion of Vietnamese Hmong to Protestantism did not go as a straight line. In the beginning, groups of Hmong in different villages of northern Vietnam accidentally reached the radio wave of FEBC, which then led to noticeable events defined 'Vang Tsu'<sup>97</sup> phenomenon' by domestic scholars. I would first examine this beginning period at the end of the 1980s, then

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<sup>93</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009, 124.

<sup>94</sup> Tâm Đắc Lê, "Sự Chuyển Biến Trong Sinh Hoạt Tín Ngưỡng Của Người H'Mông ở Sơn La Hiện Nay [The Change in Religious Activities of the Hmong in Sơn La Today]," *Tạp Chí Lý Luận Chính Trị* 7 (2017), Accessed May 29, 2020, <http://lyluanchinhtri.vn/home/index.php/thuc-tien/item/2358-su-chuyen-bien-trong-sinh-hoat-tin-nguong-cua-nguoi-h%E2%80%99mong-o-son-la-hien-nay.html>.

<sup>95</sup> The information on how many Hmong were Buddhists before 2012 or if there are any Buddhist temple for the Hmong to visit regularly in the region is lacking. See Hiền Bùi, "Tặng, Ni Sinh và Những Hình Ảnh Cảm Động Trong Chuyến Đi về Bản Có 100% Là Người H'Mông [Monks, Nuns and Touching Images of the Trip Back to 100% Hmong Village]" (Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam, December 12, 2012), Accessed May 29, 2020, <https://phatgiao.org.vn/tang-ni-sinh-va-nhung-hinh-anh-cam-dong-trong-chuyen-di-ve-ban-co-100-la-nguoi-hmong-d8902.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Also see Thanh Hoàng, "Trao Quà Trung Thu Đến Các Em Nhỏ Dân Tộc H'Mông, Tỉnh Lâm Đồng [Offering Mid-Autumn Festival Gifts to Hmong Children, Lâm Đồng Province]" (Báo điện tử Phật tử Việt Nam, September 22, 2018), Accessed May 29, 2020, <http://www.phattuvietnam.net/trao-qua-trung-thu-den-cac-em-nho-dan-toc-hmong-tinh-lam-dong/>.

<sup>97</sup> In Vietnamese literature, some scholars use 'Vàng Chứ,' and some others use 'Vàng Trứ' to refer to the same figure. In this thesis, I choose to use a more common word 'Vang Tsu,' which is used in recent English scholarship to make the writing more readable. Meanwhile, the Hmong word in RPA is *Vajtswv*.



discuss how the Hmong officially became church members of a Protestant denomination in Vietnam in the early 1990s.

*Vang Tsu Phenomenon: The Beginning.* Some Hmong in northern Vietnam first got to listen to FEBC in the late 1980s that inspired them to learn more about God, then a number among them then accepted God. However, as FEBC is only a radio broadcast that did not provide physical human contact and direct instructions, the Hmong were confused with the messages they heard every day and wondered how they could practice being a God's follower.

It is recorded that the Hmong of Yên Hương commune (Hàm Yên district, Tuyên Quang province) were those who first heard about 'Vang Tsu' via FEBC in 1987, the news then was spread to Yên Sơn district of Tuyên Quang province and Điện Biên district<sup>98</sup> of Lai Châu province. From 1989 to 1994, the Vang Tsu movement was spread in the remaining districts of Lai Châu province. In some other northern provinces, the Vang Tsu movement occurred in different times, such as in 1987 in Sơn La province, in 1990 in Lào Cai province, and around 1991<sup>99</sup> in the homeland of Vietnamese Hmong - Hà Giang province.

The Vang Tsu phenomenon at first is defined as a messianic movement that happened when the Hmong had been going through severe difficulties. Vietnamese scholars believe that the Hmong who followed Vang Tsu trusted in the promises saying that their King would return soon and helped them to have better lives, like many other Hmong who trusted in messianic movements in history.

Since 1997, a considerable number of Hmong is documented to give up on their Vang Tsu belief. Besides main accounts of '*waiting but no prophecies happen*' and '*following Vang Tsu yet still poor,*' domestic researchers more often than not highly appreciate the propaganda work of the Vietnamese government and its officials and consider Hmong's abandon on Vang Tsu a success of the government. Such aggressive attitude of the rulers towards the Hmong's religious change may be the reason for some Hmong to pretend 'giving up Vang Tsu' to avoid troubles that they might confront. Some Hmong in villages of Vietnam where I did my fieldwork recalled that because of the severe intervention of the Vietnamese government to the Hmong who following God in the late 1980s, their activities of learning about God had to be held in secret<sup>100</sup>. Instead of praying in the daytime, they had to collectively pray at midnight or early

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<sup>98</sup> Now this district belongs to Điện Biên province.

<sup>99</sup> There is no record of the beginning of the Vang Tsu movement in Hà Giang province. However, by 1992 there were a significant number of the Hmong in various communes of this province had followed Vang Tsu: up to 17 out of 19 communes of Bắc Quang district, Tả Sĩ Choán (Tả Sĩ Choáng) commune of Hoàng Su Phì district, Nà Ma commune of Xin Mần district and Bạch Ngọc commune of Vị Xuyên district.

<sup>100</sup> For instance, Yaaj T. T, Vaaj S., and Vaaj S. T. shared similar experiences with me that they and their families had.

morning at around 3 or 4 o'clock. Obviously, such religious practices were not caught by the government that made the real number of Hmong who followed God at that time was lower than it actually was<sup>101</sup>.

Being confused in understanding the 'Vang Tsu' phenomenon, Vietnamese scholars and government also consider it to be either the fake version of Protestantism (*đạo giả Tin Lành*)<sup>102</sup> or the thing containing elements of 'no religion at all'<sup>103</sup>. The phenomenon, as mentioned, was prevented from being spread and developed by the government. However, in the later years, those who were first defined as 'Vang Tsu followers' were able to get guidance from FEBC's pastor and reached ECV-N in Hanoi to become true Christians.

Before going further by discussing how the Hmong had become official Protestants, it is vital to discuss another religious change among the Hmong: the emergence of *Dương Văn Minh (DVM) sect*.

Although DVM is not widely acknowledged to be a part of the 'Vang Tsu phenomenon,' the time this sect was begun and some traits of the DVM sect that are Christianity-influenced might prove that DVM was also essentially affected by FEBC. It is recorded that at a night in 1989 in a village of Yên Hương commune (Hàm Yên district, Tuyên Quang province), a 28-year-old male Hmong named Dương Văn Minh '*lên đồng*' (fall into a trance) and met four persons from the Heaven. Minh then shared with people his encounter with *Giê Su* (Jesus) and claimed that '*by 2000 the earth and the sun would be collided and burst, all human beings would die.*' Those who want to be alive must follow '*bố trời,*' in which *bố* means 'father,' *trời* means 'Heaven,' and Minh. Those alive Hmong would have a prosperous life, which was described as '*they would not need to study yet become literate, all bowls and chopsticks are gold, the youth would not get old, the old people would be young again, and the dead people would be alive*'<sup>104</sup>.

After spreading such messages, Minh supported his followers to remove traditional ancestral altars, do worship with cigarettes instead of incense as usual. Followers who came to him would donate money, cigarettes, tea, and sugar. A house with five rooms (*nhà năm gian*) was built in 1990 for religious purposes. Minh was called by his followers' the Savior', who was believed to be assigned by God to help human beings. A number of Hmong from other northern

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<sup>101</sup> A further discussion on 'Vang Tsu' supported by empirical data would be provided in Chapter 6.

<sup>102</sup> Vương 2000b, 123.

<sup>103</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 190-1., Duy Quang Vương 2005b, 135.

<sup>104</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 209. Vương also provides information on DVM: Minh was among the first Hmong who first heard about a foreign radio broadcaster in 1987, then spread the word which marked the beginning of the Vang Tsu movement, *ibid*, 174. Although Vương himself does not make a clear connection between these two pieces of information, I believe that DVM was first affected by messages he received from FEBC and applied them to his own teachings in later years. There are also obvious traits that seem to be Christian employed by DVM sect.

provinces such as Cao Bằng, Thái Nguyên, Hà Giang, Bắc Kạn also got the news and have followed DVM. Some of them came to ask Minh's help for their health and life problems. 'Cúng cầu hồn' (Evocation) was reported to be used for curing by Minh and his assistants. Scared objects/ symbols used by these people are the cross, toad (*con cóc*), cicada (*con ve*), swallow (*con én*), and khene (*qeej/ khèn*)<sup>105</sup>. These symbols seem to not only belong to Christian tradition but also traditional Hmong belief. Such combination, according to a Vietnamese Hmong scholar, is 'hỗ lớn'<sup>106</sup>; and DVM group is considered a 'đạo lạ' (strange religion) or even a 'tà đạo' (heresy).

By 2006, DVM followers were estimated to be around 6,000 people<sup>107</sup>. In general, this group of Hmong has been intensively persecuted. The Vietnamese government, traditional Hmong, and Christian denominations have rejected its existence. In Vietnamese literature, DVM is rarely discussed or mainly described in negative words. In 1990, DVM was arrested and imprisoned for five years for 'his deceptive behaviors and superstitious activities that caused serious consequences.' Plus, DVM's followers are not allowed to build their unique type of house called 'nhà đôn'<sup>108</sup>; or in many cases, some are built but they would be soon destructed by the government. After being released, DVM and his assistants had prepared and then submitted documents to the government asking for permission to establish their religion that they titled 'Tín ngưỡng DVM là tín ngưỡng duy nhất và mãi mãi về sau' (DVM Belief is the Only and Enteral Belief) in early December 2000; however, they have never gotten accepted. Instead, 'erasing' DVM group has become a strategic goal of the Vietnamese government. This group is even called an 'illegal organization' in recent years rather than a religion or faith;

<sup>105</sup> The symbols of the cross, toad (*con cóc*), cicada (*con ve*), swallow (*con én*), and horn (*khèn*) are listed, but not clearly described in which forms they exist. Only a table carved with an image of swallow is mentioned. Quang Hưng Nguyễn, "Chương 7: Vấn Đề 'Tôn Giáo Mới' Trong Cộng Đồng Người Mông [Chapter 7: The 'New Religion' Issue in Hmong Community]," in *Nghiên Cứu Đánh Giá Tôn Giáo Tín Ngưỡng Của Đồng Bào Mông Tin Lành và Một Số "Tôn Giáo Mới" ở Các Tỉnh Vùng Núi Phía Bắc [Research and Evaluation on Religion and Beliefs of Hmong Protestants and Some "New Religions" in Northern Mountainous Provinces]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tri thức [Submitted for Publication], 2020c), 473–74, 476.

<sup>106</sup> 'Hỗ lớn' is an absolutely negative Vietnamese word referring to things which are mixed, useless, junk and messy, Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 271.

<sup>107</sup> Rumsby cited Vương 2007, page 11 that the current number of DVM followers are 10,000 but this information is not found on the original article of Vương, see Seb Rumsby, "Rumours, Sects and Rallies: The Ethnic Politics of Recent Hmong Millenarian Movements in Vietnam's Highlands," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2018, 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1525362>., Duy Quang Vương, "Sự Cải Đạo Theo Ki Tô Giáo Của Một Bộ Phận Người Hmông ở Việt Nam và Khu Vực Đông Nam Á Từ Cuối Thế Kỳ XIX Đến Nay [Conversion to Christianity of a Part of Hmong in Vietnam and Southeast Asia from the Late 19th Century to Date]," *Tạp Chí Dân Tộc Học* 4 (2007): 11.

<sup>108</sup> While Rumsby insists that this unique house is a funeral house Rumsby 2018, 10., Nguyễn says it is just a house storing funeral tools (*dụng cụ tang lễ*) such as the cross, *con cóc*, *con ve*, *con én*, *cây khèn*, Quang Hưng Nguyễn 2020c, 474. 'Nhà đôn' is a unique house type of DVM group which has no equivalent English word. To my knowledge, such objects stored at *nhà đôn* should not be called funeral tools; they should be religious or sacred objects. As far as I study, it should not be a funeral house but a house storing religious objects. Plus, this house also functions as a worship place for DVM followers.

because this way of naming would prevent the Vietnamese government from being accused of persecuting religion and faith. While the DVM group became widely publicized in 2013 as their *nhà đôn* was seriously destroyed by the Vietnamese army and police forces<sup>109</sup>, it is worth concluding that the Vietnamese government is in recent years more ‘flexible’ in behaving with this particular Hmong group indeed.

Finally, I believe the DVM phenomenon is similar to the ‘Meo Trinity’ cult that occurred in Laos in the 1950s. Both groups seemed to be similar to Christian missionaries/ Christianity but presented in different ways. Barney describes ‘Meo Trinity’ as three male Hmong who claimed to represent the Holy Trinity. They traveled from village to village, mimicked missionaries’ behaviors such as burning altars and removing Hmong’s ‘fetishes,’ and performing special exorcisms of the evil spirit. These Hmong then killed themselves by jumping from a high mountain while teaching people how to fly<sup>110</sup>. Hmong CMA pastors and some elderly Hmong in the focal village also said that by the time they first reached FEBC, someone came and asked them to provide ‘cigarette’ and other stuff such as red cloth as offerings to be ‘God followers.’ Because such offerings were not mentioned from sermons they heard on the radio; some Hmong then wrote the letters to pastor Vam Txoov Lis (also known as John Lee), the Hmong pastor preached them from FEBC at that time, to ask and got a reply saying that they should not follow such nonsense guidance<sup>111</sup>. This evidence may additionally verify the presence of DVM, as being described by Vietnamese scholars or other groups who attempted to influence the Hmong in various ways by taking advantage of what was said on FEBC and/or distorting it.

Returning to the Hmong conversion to Protestantism, after accidentally reaching FEBC, some Hmong started to seek physical contacts to learn about God and how to become God’s followers. Their path of becoming official Protestants is discussed below.

*Getting in touch with Catholicism.* From 1991 to 1992, some of Vang Tsu leaders started contacting a Catholic Church. They then got support from priests, studied Christian teachings, and learned how to do missionary work. Many Hmong in districts of Bắc Hà, Bảo Yên, and Bảo Thắng (Lào Cai province) decided to convert to Catholicism and started to be ‘Catholics.’ Specifically, those who converted no longer practiced ancestor worship and shamanism and worshiped spirits. They started practicing communal praying, learning the Bible via radio and recorders, praying after getting up, before eating and going to bed. The Bible was involved in every activity, including wedding and funeral ceremonies. There was no animal sacrifice. In

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<sup>109</sup> A video on this event was published in some social media channels that have reached a larger audience, can see at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzNYPio\\_A1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzNYPio_A1s)

<sup>110</sup> Tapp 1989c, 80-1.

<sup>111</sup> A more detailed discussion on how the Hmong wrote letters to pastor Lee of FEBC will be provided in the subsequent part.

terms of the funeral, the dead person could be buried at any appropriate time except for Sundays. At first, the Hmong only got instruction on how to practice their faith from the radio. Once they got contact with some Catholic churches, they then were guided by priests in Yên Bái, Sơn Tây, Hà Nội and so on<sup>112</sup>.

Some Vietnamese scholars believe that the Hmong found it complicated to follow Catholic teachings; they then converted to Protestantism in the years between 1993 and 1996 that seemed to be more suitable to their simple and specific way of thinking<sup>113</sup>. It is also reported that after this conversion, the Hmong came back to FEBC, tended to follow religious advice on that radio broadcast rather than attempting to get a better understanding of Protestantism. Trần (1996) supposes that FEBC had encouraged the Hmong to fight against the government and to arouse hatred between the Hmong and other ethnic groups. He also accuses Christianity of making the Hmong abandoning their traditional religion and culture<sup>114</sup>.

Meanwhile, according to my participants, converting to Catholicism was not the initial intention of the Hmong. After accidentally reaching FEBC, they were motivated to learn about God. As FEBC was only available via radio-based sermons, some Hmong were determined to seek places where they could be guided precisely. After asking around, they found Catholic churches in which there were people following God. But those Hmong then figured out that the guidance they got from Catholic churches was different from what they heard from FEBC, which made them seek another way. Letters from Vietnamese Hmong safely arrived in pastor Lee, who then guided them to find ECV-N office in Hanoi.

*Who is Active? FEBC, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North and the Hmong.* When it comes to factors that essentially drove the Hmong conversion in the early time, most Vietnamese scholars accuse either FEBC or ECV-N of taking advantage of and swindling the Hmong<sup>115</sup>. Any support of ECV-N to the Hmong was assumed to be ‘deceptive’ in the literature, particularly books and articles published before this denomination was legally recognized by the Vietnamese government. Even in recent years, preventing the Hmong from converting is

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<sup>112</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 185-6. Whereas Nguyễn Văn Thắng insists on another fact. He supposes that the Hmong came to Catholic churches where Catholic priests explained that following Vang Tsu Giê Su (Jesus) is following Protestantism. These priests then guided the Hmong to come to No. 2 Ngõ Trạm Street, Hà Nội to meet representatives of ECV-N, see Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009, 100. This section is written based on my perception shaped by multiple resources and information collected from my research participants.

<sup>113</sup> Although making such a conclusion on the Hmong’s conversion to Protestantism after being Catholic, Trần Hữu Sơn does not provide any specific accounts explaining this phenomenon. To my knowledge, it might be because the Hmong wrote letters to FEBC and received the advice of coming to No. 2 Ngõ Trạm Street to get in touch with a Protestant church. This will be discussed in detail later.

<sup>114</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 186-9.

<sup>115</sup> Thị Kim Duyên Lương et al. 2003, 37.



still defined as a goal that officials aim to and are proud of<sup>116</sup>. In other words, convert Hmong groups were believed to be ‘passive’ in accepting the Christian faith.

Whereas, Ngô offers another understanding. According to her, after a short time getting to know by accident and listening to the FEBC, there were some rumors on how to prepare to go with Fuab Tais, or Vang Tsu<sup>117</sup>, when he returned, such as going to Bắc Quang, Hà Giang to look for Vang Tsu or staying home, stopping going to the fields to work and eating all the cattle then storing food because when Vang Tsu return he would take them to their land. Instead of ECV-N, Ngô insists “FEBC learned of the impact on Hmong people in Vietnam”<sup>118</sup> and then instructed them to contact the Evangelical Church in Hanoi<sup>119</sup>. By saying so, Ngô implies the active guidance of FEBC on helping the Hmong on their way to exploring and practicing new faith. However, my participants told another story.

As I visited numerous Hmong Protestants villages located in both the northern region and the Central Highland of Vietnam, I got chances to talk with many Hmong who were first converts in the late 1980s. They said that they were confused with ‘how to be a Protestant’ at first. Thus, some active Hmong wrote letters then asked tourists to send them to the address pastor Lee provided them via FEBC<sup>120</sup>. In fact, when they first encountered God, some Hmong else approached and asked them – those Hmong who wanted to follow God – to submit (*nôp*) cigarettes in order to be accepted by Vang Tsu<sup>121</sup>. This requirement made them confused, and several people decided to write letters to pastor Lee. One question came to me is that ‘*how the Hmong at the time were able to write Hmong language?*’. Though some Hmong told me that ‘God teaches them’, and that they simply wrote down what pastor Lee said then self-studied gradually<sup>122</sup>, I learned some other possibilities. First, it is probable that they recorded themselves on cassette tapes which were taken to China or Laos then sent to the FEBC’s international office in Hong Kong, which classified them before sending them to the United States<sup>123</sup>. Plus, several experienced Hmong shared with me that they actually wrote letters in the Hmong language, which *possibly* was the script created by and were introduced to the

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<sup>116</sup> Tuấn Nam Đâu, *Di Cư Của Người Hmông Từ Đồi Mới Đến Nay [Hmong Migration from Doi Moi to Present]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia - Sự Thật Hà Nội, 2013), 76.

<sup>117</sup> Ngô claims that Fua Tai is also Vang Tsu, see my explanation on the term ‘Vang Tsu’ in Chapter 6.

<sup>118</sup> At this point, Ngô does not explain how Pastor John Lee detected FEBC’s impact on the Hmong of Vietnam, she only mentions a Hanoi newspaper in 1991 written by a Communist cadre telling that many Hmong were becoming Christians, which Lewis already claims in his 2002 article. See Lewis 2002, 88., T. T. Tam Ngo, *The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 46.

<sup>119</sup> Ngô 2016, 47.

<sup>120</sup> For instance, apart from Hmong religious leaders and elderly followers in the focal village, pastor Lawj H. in Đăk Nông (Central Highlands) and pastor Khaab D. in Thái Nguyên (northern Vietnam) shared with me that. They even told me the names of those who directly wrote letters to pastor Lee in the early 1990s.

<sup>121</sup> See a previous section on the Vang Tsu movement and Dương Văn Minh sect for related information.

<sup>122</sup> Haam M. P., interview by author, 14 October, 2018.

<sup>123</sup> Lewis 2002, 92-3., Ngo 2016, 51.

Hmong by the Vietnamese government since early 1960s. I use ‘possibly’ here because my participants could not give me a full explanation of how the Hmong write script as they did not have any Bible in the Hmong language and could not learn Hmong RPA at that time. Although there is no confirmed source saying that Vietnamese Hmong wrote letters themselves in their own language in the early 1990s, Lewis reveals that his Hmong students did translate such letters into English during that time, which obviously supports my data<sup>124</sup>. Most importantly, either written letters or recorded cassette proves the fact that this ethnic minority people actively sought help on their way to becoming true Christians.

Regarding the Hmong’s search for ECV-N, as mentioned that after pastor Lee told them to seek ECV-N at No. 2 Ngõ Trăm in Hanoi, the Hmong of various northern villages came to the capital city group by group. In 1992, the first groups arrived and were warmly welcomed by Hanoi ECV-N church. However, ECV-N had not yet been legally recognized at that time, and the Hmong had still been prohibited from following ‘western’ God. Thus, their meetings and follow-up activities were hidden. Pastor Haam X. shared that he had to be baptized under a fake name and fake birthplace to avoid getting into trouble with the Vietnamese government. This dilemma that both ECV-N and the Hmong had to confront, in fact, is not documented in the literature. Also, some copies of the Bible were given to the Hmong at that time to bring back their hometown, but they were taken away if any Bible copy was detected. They then also secretly organized the religious unites within the community.

To sum up, being continuously instructed by the FEBC in their earlier days of conversion and ECV-N in Hanoi since 1992, the Hmong has presented their strong capacity of being rational and independent in choosing ways that were best for them. This reality also shows that ECV-N was not a negative force that actively approached the Hmong for their political purposes of fighting against the Vietnamese government. Plus, looking at the whole progress of accepting God, seeking help, and gradually setting up praying groups and building house churches, it could be concluded that ECV-N has helped the Hmong to be Protestants legally. The role of ECV-N would be further discussed in a latter section on the Hmong Protestants of ECV-S.

*Why has the Hmong converted?* I would first review how most Vietnamese scholars and officials have explained the Hmong conversion to Protestantism, then provide an additional discussion that is partially based on empirical data.

First, Hmong people are believed to convert because they desire to get rid of their economic hardship. Such economic struggle is more often than not considered the primary motivation for

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<sup>124</sup> Lewis 2002, 81-2.

them to change their faith to a more modern religion – Protestantism. In the Vietnamese literature, one may find it common that the Hmong are said to be ‘practical’ (*thực dụng*). They are those who appreciate reality more than life after death. Even while being Christians, they care more about their current life rather than Heaven<sup>125</sup>.

Second, the out-of-date traditional religion of the Hmong causes a considerable number of Hmong to abandon it. Several traditional practices are considered inappropriate, such as animal sacrifice or keeping corpses for days in the house. Such ‘backward’ rituals were reasons for the Vietnamese government to prohibit them since the August 1945 Revolution. However, after the Hmong’s mass conversion, the Vietnamese government decided to revalue and preserve several Hmong traditional practices<sup>126</sup> with the hope that these people would no longer follow the western religion.

When it comes to the traditional religion matter, Nguyễn Quang Hưng recently insists that the most fundamental reason is the religious crisis of this ethnic group that made a part of them no longer desired to maintain their traditional religion. The crisis has created a spiritual gap for Protestantism and some new religions to do their missionary work<sup>127</sup>. However, at this point, I am more convinced with the way Lewis Rambo analysis on religious conversion in his book ‘*Understanding Religious Conversion*’, defining that religious crisis is a stage of the conversion process<sup>128</sup>. It cannot be defined as a reason for converting because it is a state of religious faith in essence.

Third, domestic scholars believe that Christian missionaries had a good and effective strategy approaching the Hmong. While Catholic missionaries had a hard time conveying their messages to the Hmong, the Protestantism found ways to Hmongnize (*Mông hoá*) the Christian teachings. As a consequence, the latter has obtained much more success, especially regarding the total number of converts<sup>129</sup>. Protestantism is also well known for its flexibility. It has the capacity for fast assimilating into a new culture by simplifying their rituals to make it best fit to the Hmong, who mainly live in the highlands. Plus, doing missionaries through appealing pictures, videos, or records and appreciating a healthy lifestyle as well as supporting followers in their lives are plus points of Protestantism that attract so many people. On the other hand, it is widely concluded among Vietnamese scholars that doing missionaries is a crucial part of the

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<sup>125</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 187.

<sup>126</sup> Lewis 2002, 86.

<sup>127</sup> Quang Hưng Nguyễn 2015.

<sup>128</sup> Lewis Ray Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 44.

<sup>129</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 188.



plot of Americans and other hostile forces with the aim of overthrowing Vietnamese Communist<sup>130</sup>.

One of the interesting ways of spreading Protestantism among the Hmong is ‘through word of mouth’ (*truyền miệng*). On special occasions such as festivals, village fairs, Hmong women usually are very active in talking to each other. Therefore, ‘Protestantism known as ‘the New way’ becomes one of the main topics of Hmong female converts that eventually lead to the conversion of many other Hmong women. This is one of the reasons explaining why there are more female converts in the Hmong community in Lao Cai<sup>131</sup>.

Forth, being low educated makes the Hmong easily induced and convinced by harmful elements (*thành phần xấu*)<sup>132</sup>, particularly Christian missionaries. It should be noted that Christianity has been believed to be related to hostile forces in Vietnamese history numerous times, and doing missionaries is concluded to be a crucial part of the plot of such hostile forces to overthrow Vietnamese Communist<sup>133</sup>. For instance, Protestantism was first time introduced in Đắc Lắc by a Canadian CMA missionary named On Nyth in 1932<sup>134</sup>. At that time, French colonialism considered Protestantism an effective tool supporting their political purposes among ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands. Also, it was reported that in January 1972, an intelligence US general reached missionary K. Swain out in Đắc Lắc to ask for contacting Front Unifié pour la Libération des Races Opprimée (FULRO)<sup>135</sup> – a reactionary organization defined by the Vietnamese government – in order to look for ‘missing American corpses and prisoners of war’<sup>136</sup>. In addition, after 1975, many pastors and missionaries did flee to America under the sponsorship of the American army. All of such cases eventually led the Protestant Church in Tây Nguyên to be suspended from operating from 1977 to 1980. These events recorded in Vietnamese documents support the idea of domestic scholars that foreign religions might take advantage of low-educated people to fight against the State. This also explains why international visitors have always been watched by the government, even they are travelers or scientists.

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<sup>130</sup> Hồng Dương Nguyễn, “Đạo Tin Lành ở Miền Núi Phía Bắc, Trường Sơn và Tây Nguyên [Protestantism in the Northern Vietnam, Truong Son-the Central Highlands],” in *Về Tình Hình Phát Triển Của Đạo Tin Lành ở Miền Núi Phía Bắc, Trường Sơn-Tây Nguyên [Regarding the Development of Protestantism in the Northern Vietnam, Truong Son-the Central Highlands]*, ed. Nghiêm Vạn Đặng, Hồng Dương Nguyễn, and Duy Quang Vương (Trung tâm Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn Quốc gia, Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, 2000), 79.

<sup>131</sup> Đinh Lợi Lê, “Vài Nét về Phương Thức Truyền Giáo Của Đạo Tin Lành Vào Vùng Dân Tộc Mông ở Lào Cai [An Overview of the Protestant Missionary Mode to the Hmong Ethnic Area in Lao Cai],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 10 (2012): 47.

<sup>132</sup> Hồng Dương Nguyễn 2000, 57. Recently, Vietnamese scholars still support this stance, see Khắc Đức Nguyễn 2017, 55.

<sup>133</sup> Hồng Dương Nguyễn 2000, 78-9., Thị Kim Duyên Lương et al. 2003, 51.

<sup>134</sup> Hồng Dương Nguyễn 2000, 63.

<sup>135</sup> See more information on FULRO at Part III.

<sup>136</sup> Hồng Dương Nguyễn 2000, 71.

Last but not least, a number of Vietnamese scholars have to come to conclude that the government is a catalyst for the Hmong conversion. The government officials are believed to have not worked effectively enough to improve the Hmong life. For example, they might spend a larger amount of money but fail to support their people as missionaries have done<sup>137</sup>. Generally, the officials' leadership is also problematic, resulting in introducing vague guidance on managing religious affairs. While the number of cadres working on this matter is insufficient, their ability to work effectively is also limited, which has led to considerable growth of Protestantism among people. By admitting the life of converts is healthier and more civilized than those who do not, Vietnamese scholars admit that religious organizations have been doing much better than the government<sup>138</sup>. Besides, their extreme attitude towards Protestantism has unintentionally pushed people to come to the other side – the side of the western religion. In fact, this religion is more often than not accused of being an integral part of reactionary organizations such as FULRO<sup>139</sup>.

*Discussion.* Among the above explanations, it seems to be reasonable that the inefficiency of the Vietnamese government and its local officials indeed led to the Hmong's desire for a change towards a better life. Another fact that should be highlighted is that the State failed to not only support ethnic minorities living in upland regions but also to appreciate their Kinh majority's spirituality and help them have a prosperous material life. Before 1986, the government applied a centrally-planned and mainly closed economy that lasted for a long time and eventually made a huge number of its citizens, including the Hmong, suffer poverty. Therefore, the Hmong's desire to get rid of their economic hardship might be considered a consequence of the inappropriate leadership of Vietnamese communists. Such economic hardship might prevent this person from fully practice their traditional religion, which includes expensive animal sacrifice. All things considered, I suppose these three reasons for the Hmong conversion reflect cause and effect reality that actually can be summarized to the word 'insecurity' that Hmong people had to confront.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 80-1.

<sup>138</sup> Mạnh Đức Trần, “Về Tình Hình Phát Triển Tin Lành ở Gia Lai Hiện Nay. Một Số Đánh Giá, Kiến Nghị [Regarding the Development of Protestantism in Gia Lai Today. Some Reviews, Suggestions],” in *Về Tình Hình Phát Triển Của Đạo Tin Lành ở Miền Núi Phía Bắc, Trường Sơn-Tây Nguyên [Regarding the Development of Protestantism in the Northern Vietnam, Truong Son-the Central Highlands]*, ed. Nghiêm Vạn Đăng, Hồng Dương Nguyễn, and Duy Quang Vương (Hà Nội: Trung tâm Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn Quốc gia, Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, 2000b), 267. Mạnh Đức Trần, “Bước Đầu Tìm Hiểu Vấn Đề Phát Triển Tin Lành ở Kon Tum. Một Vài Đánh Giá Kiến Nghị [Initial Study on Protestant Development in Kon Tum. Some Reviews and Suggestions],” in *Về Tình Hình Phát Triển Của Đạo Tin Lành ở Miền Núi Phía Bắc, Trường Sơn-Tây Nguyên [Regarding the Development of Protestantism in the Northern Vietnam, Truong Son-the Central Highlands]* (Trung tâm Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn Quốc gia, Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, 2000a), 277.

<sup>139</sup> Hồng Dương Nguyễn 2000, 81-2.

On the other hand, I believe that being low educated is hardly a reason for converting to a world religion that has a system of rational theology as Christianity. Vietnamese scholars consider that the Hmong were scammed and taken advantage of by Christian missionaries so that they converted. Therefore, elite Vietnamese people suppose that being not well educated prevented the Hmong from realizing the true nature of such religious scammers<sup>140</sup>. However, most of the outsiders seem to take a fact for granted that the pastor who shared Gospel news to the Hmong was himself a Hmong. This point, in fact, is rarely mentioned in the literature. More often than not, Christianity is analyzed as a total outside actor who has a careful strategy in approaching and converting the Hmong.

Furthermore, thanks to follow-up conversations I had with early Hmong converts in the Central Highland of Vietnam, another factor is explored: *Vietnamese Kinh Christians' Impact*. As far as I study, only one report written by local officials mentions how Vietnamese Kinh Christians spread the word on God to the Hmong in the late 1980s, but this encounter is not considered to support conversion. As discussed in a previous section, some Hmong in northern mountainous villages were able to get contact with a Catholic church in Ninh Bình – a lowland province nearby Hanoi – thanks to some Vietnamese Kinh workers who did their wood business in the Hmong region. In fact, the late 1980s also witnessed a considerable number of lowland Vietnamese Kinh teachers who were assigned to go to Hmong villages to help local kids with education. Among Vietnamese teachers, some were Catholics. As their relationships with the Hmong host families became closer over time, they then shared messages on God with their hosts. According to Muas S., his family first heard about God from one of those Vietnamese Catholic teachers<sup>141</sup>. As a matter of fact, it is possible that those workers and teachers may not be the only Vietnamese Kinh groups living for years with Hmong people by the time they heard about God via FEBC. The message on God might be spread in hidden ways that have never been recorded.

In fact, rumors on God might be present among the Hmong of Vietnam since their first people converted to Catholicism in the 1920s. In addition, as dominant Vietnamese Kinh had followed God for a long time, which might become a convincing fact for the Hmong on their decision-making process of accepting God. A 51-year-old Hmong recalled his father's first time asking around to learn about God and received an answer from a Vietnamese Kinh saying: *"only you guys the Hmong have not yet known about God. People here – they have followed*

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>141</sup> Muas S., interview by author, 14 October, 2018.

*God for long*”<sup>142</sup>. As a result, the familiarity with Christianity and its figures might be a visible factor that enhanced the Hmong’s faith on their way to becoming Protestants.

Finally, as I have been told by Hmong villages in the focal field site, it is quite common that the first converts of northern Vietnam in the late 1980s were shamans<sup>143</sup>. At that time, Hmong shamans could afford to buy a radio and had chances to travel around, which might help them be the first persons getting information on God and God’s followers. Also, shamans are often reputable individuals in traditional Hmong communities who know the spiritual world much better than ordinary people. Thus, once they converted, others may find it convincing to convert too<sup>144</sup>. At this point, the role of shamans in Vietnamese Hmong conversion seems to be similar to ‘innovators’ who significantly drove the Laos Hmong conversion in the 1950s<sup>145</sup>.

In short, after over one hundred years with ups and downs, Christian missionaries among the Hmong in Vietnam have achieved certain success regarding not only the total number of the convert but also a certain level of trust of the Vietnamese government. In the early days, while the Hmong conversion had just been detected, most of the Vietnamese state-approved scholars blamed foreign missionaries for taking advantage of them. Nowadays, however, besides pointing out the disappointments of the Hmong in their difficult life, out-of-date traditional religion, as well as in the policies that the government has applied upon them, the genuine religious need of the Hmong is also gradually acknowledged and supported. Furthermore, the government now gradually appreciates Protestantism instead of rejecting it and preventing the Hmong from converting as they used to<sup>146</sup>.

*The late 1980s is the right time?* As a matter of fact, FEBC started broadcasting to the Hmong of Laos in 1953 in Laos language, which was changed to the Hmong language in 1979 thanks to the participation of pastor Vam Txoov Lis and his wife who lived in California of the United States. However, until the late 1980s, the Hmong of Vietnam began to reach this radiofrequency. A question raised in Vietnamese Hmong studies is: *why until the late 1980s did FEBC obtain its impact among the Hmong of northern Vietnam?*

Not all of the scholars researching the Hmong of Vietnam tackle this matter. According to Ngô (2016), only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Hmong began responding to the message

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<sup>142</sup> Yaaj T. T., interview by author, 28 October, 2018.

<sup>143</sup> Yaaj T. T.’s father discussed earlier is a typical case.

<sup>144</sup> The father of Haam T. was also a shaman who first converted in his village and taught other Hmong how to remove ancestral altar and start to follow God. Haam T.’s father then was jailed by the Vietnamese government for one month; interview by author, 14 November, 2018.

<sup>145</sup> Barney 2018, 41-3.

<sup>146</sup> Quỳnh Trâm Nguyễn, “Văn Hoá Của Người Hmông Theo Đạo Tin Lành ở Tỉnh Lào Cai [Hmong Protestant Culture in Lao Cai Province]” (Unpublished Thesis, Hà Nội, Viện Hàn Lâm Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, Học viện Khoa học Xã hội, 2016), 133.

of FEBC because at that time they were able to purchase a radio that was considered a luxury good some decades ago. In fact, some Hmong could earn money by selling opium. In addition, thanks to significant economic achievements in China around the mid-1980s, some industrial commodities, including battery-operated radios, became available through black markets along the border of Vietnam and China. While more and more Hmong were able to buy a radio, only FEBC was available to them in the Hmong language. Therefore, according to Ngô, until the late 1980s, the Hmong could reach the message of FEBC<sup>147</sup>. Meanwhile, several Vietnamese scholars propose another reason. For instance, Nguyễn (2017) believes that even though FEBC already started broadcasting a few decades ago, they only obtained success among the Hmong in the early 1990s thanks to the direct work of Protestant missionaries<sup>148</sup>.

During my time in the field sites, I constantly sought for a fuller answer to this question. While Ngô claims that “In the 1980s, radios and most electronic items were considered luxury commodities that only rich Vietnamese in the cities could afford”<sup>149</sup>, another fact is revealed by my participants. In the 1980s, the Vietnamese government rewarded productive households, including Hmong, of a ‘*hợp tác xã*’ (*cooperative* is a local common production model in which people collectively work the land) who could provide better productivity in planting green tea, for example, a radio. Such radio could be model 303 or 305; the latter one was more expensive<sup>150</sup>. Besides, as a recognized shaman in the region who served not only the Hmong but also other neighboring ethnic people, Yaaj T. T.’s father could afford to purchase a radio in 1982, which allowed him to be the first people who reached FEBC<sup>151</sup>. The case of T. T.’s father might not be the only one in the Hmong community<sup>152</sup>. As a result, it is highly probable that radio was presented in the Hmong life earlier than the time most of them were able to purchase. Once they were attracted and became determined to follow preaches on radio, the collective phenomenon of selling goods to purchase radio to listen to FEBC might happen. I believe this phenomenon should be the consequence caused by the first impression that the Hmong had with FEBC. The act of ‘buying more and more radios of numerous Hmong’ may not be the key reason for the Hmong’s late 1980s conversion, but it was definitely a catalyst that had allowed their change in religion more convenient to a certain extent. In other words, I hypothesize that if every Hmong household had not been able to buy a radio at that time, the conversion would

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<sup>147</sup> Ngô 2016, 49.

<sup>148</sup> Khắc Đức Nguyễn 2017, 27.

<sup>149</sup> Ngô 2016, 49.

<sup>150</sup> Haam T., interview by author, September 30, 2018., Yaaj T. T., interview by author, October 28, 2018.

<sup>151</sup> Yaaj T. T., interview by author, October 28, 2018.

<sup>152</sup> Vaaj S. T.’s father was also able to purchase a 305 radio before hearing about God via FEBC. Vaaj S. T., interview by author, 13 November, 2018.

still have happened on a large scale, albeit slower. The Hmong who desired to convert would indeed have found ways to fulfill their curiosity and wish as they have consistently done in their arduous history.

*Discussion.* Although arriving in Vietnam fairly late compared to other ethnic groups, the Hmong's spiritual life has been highly dynamic. Reviewing their religious encounters in history as well as contemporary conversion to Protestantism as above, one can say that they consistently make an effort to maximize their freedom of being humans and actively choose the best for them regardless of how disadvantaged they are. While slowly accepting or even rejecting Buddhism, a growing part of this ethnic minority people have converted to Protestantism even without any impact of direct missionaries in early days first hearing about God. They were then determined to seek help and found ECV-N after mistakenly approached several Catholic churches. Such actions of the Hmong were/have been remarkably prevented and oppressed by the Vietnamese communist government as well as their family and community who firmly maintain the traditional faith; however, they have decisively and confidently overcome countless challenges to preserve and strengthen their Christian faith.

Apart from the above analysis on the traditional Hmong religion, Christianity among the Hmong of Asia, and the late 1980s Conversion to Protestantism of the Vietnamese Hmong, I would also discuss some controversial concerns in the scholarship.

First, while early conversion to Christianity among the Hmong of Asia and beyond might be the cornerstone for the later conversion of Vietnamese Hmong, the motivations more often than not vary by groups, locations, and times. As a result, it may be problematic if the earlier context is used to explain a recent religious change. For instance, priest Savina's analysis on the similarities of the Hmong's traditional religion and Christian teachings might be an effective strategy of doing missionary among Vietnamese Hmong in the 1920s. Nevertheless, F. Savina is a French Priest who may approach the Hmong from the perspective of the colonial side. Meanwhile, the late 1980s Hmong conversion originally began with their remote encounter with a Hmong pastor via radio through which they could listen to Christian teachings in their native language – the Hmong. Consequently, Father Savina's analysis and strategy can be a reason why the Hmong converted to Catholicism in the early 20th century but do not account for the recent conversion among some groups of these people to Protestantism in the late 1980s<sup>153</sup>. Furthermore, as presented previously, while a part of the Hmong of Thailand

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<sup>153</sup> Father Savina's analysis and strategy are constantly used to explain the Hmong's conversion to Protestantism, see Quang Hung Nguyễn, "Chương 4: Đạo Tin Lành Du Nhập Vào Cộng Đồng Mông ở Việt Nam. Góc Nhìn Lịch Sử và Hiện Trạng [Chapter 4: Protestantism Introduced to the Hmong Community in Vietnam. Perspective from History and the Status Quo]," in *Nghiên Cứu Đánh Giá Tôn Giáo Tin Ngưỡng Của Đồng Bào Mông Tin*



preferred Catholicism rather than Protestantism because they could be more flexible in practices, the Hmong of North Vietnam changed their status of being Catholics to Protestants in the early 1990s<sup>154</sup>. This comparison of same-ethnic groups once again shows us that religious choice is definitely ‘contextual’.

Second, regarding the Vang Tsu phenomenon, it is worth noticing that Vietnamese scholars hold different opinions at certain points. Vương Duy Quang believes that the Hmong is mostly affected by Daoism (he uses the term ‘*Đạo giáo phù thủy*,’ which can be translated to *Witch Daoism*) that eventually led them to get paranoia problems. Such paranoia, according to Vương, was one of the critical factors generating the Vang Tsu movement among the Hmong in the late 1980s. Meanwhile, Trần Hữu Sơn claims that the Hmong is rarely affected by three religions (*tam giáo*) of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. To my knowledge, I suppose that the Hmong is one of the very few ethnic groups who are not easily assimilated by the dominant culture. They are ‘*so Hmong*’ after centuries living in China, being forced to be *Chinese* in ways as well as after hundred years staying in Vietnam. Therefore, except for some of them accept another religion entirely, the Hmong appears to maintain their culture, customs, and identity. Even if Daoism influences the Hmong to a certain extent, I am not totally convinced that Daoism makes the Hmong to be paranoid.

Particularly, according to Vương Duy Quang Vang Tsu first occurred in Colorado, America in around 1980 that was later spread to regions of Atlanta and California as well as in Canada and Australia. He insists that the Vang Tsu group was boycotted (*tẩy chay*) by the Hmong community at a Hmong conference held in Minnesota, the USA in September 1996<sup>155</sup>. This information that Vương provides in his 2005 book is recently referred by Nguyễn Quang Hưng in his 2020 book<sup>156</sup> without any statement on the reliability of such information. To my knowledge, there has been no source confirming such Vang Tsu group in the world other than that of Vietnam. While it is largely acknowledged that the Vang Tsu phenomenon started once the first Hmong of Vietnam reached FEBC in 1987, FEBC is originally operated by several non-denominational American Christians who only followed their mission of sharing Christ with the people of Asia<sup>157</sup>. In addition, FEBC guided the Hmong to get in touch with ECV-N in the early days of conversion. In other words, the Hmong became true Protestants in the most

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*Lành và Một Số “Tôn Giáo Mới” ở Các Tỉnh Vùng Núi Phía Bắc [Research and Evaluation on Religion and Beliefs of Hmong Protestants and Some “New Religions” in Northern Mountainous Provinces]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tri thức [Submitted for Publication], 2020a), 264–65.

<sup>154</sup> Further explanation is available in a previous section.

<sup>155</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 185-7.

<sup>156</sup> Quang Hưng Nguyễn 2020a, 243-4.

<sup>157</sup> “Great God, Great Mission: The Story of FEBC,” N/A, Accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.febc.org/about/history/>.

legitimate way one could. At this point, it should be noted that CMA is considered the ‘Mother Church’ of ECV<sup>158</sup>, which was the very first Protestant denomination introduced in Vietnam. And, it is also a Protestant denomination that a large number among the Hmong diaspora worldwide belong to<sup>159</sup>. Thus, instead of following an unacknowledged/ ‘heresy’ Vang Tsu as it has been accused of for years, Vietnamese Hmong have been making it most legitimate to be confirmed Christians. All in all, I question on the accuracy of the information on ‘*the Vang Tsu group which was boycotted,*’ and would not use it in academic discussions as if it is false evidence, it may affect how other people see the Vang Tsu movement of the Hmong in Vietnam as well as its completed form in later years of Protestantism. Accordingly, it might be problematic if the Vang Tsu movement is defined as ‘a messianic movement<sup>160</sup> or an uprising that should be prevented.’ Instead, I propose that it is indeed the beginning period of becoming Protestant process among the Hmong<sup>161</sup> through which the Hmong successfully made it most legitimate even though they had confronted countless severe challenges from outsiders, particularly the Vietnamese authority./.

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<sup>158</sup> For further details, see Hoàng Phu Lê 2010.

<sup>159</sup> Although there are no statistics on Hmong CMA worldwide, I personally visited and conducted interviews among American Hmong at their CMA church in Seattle, Washington State of the United States. In addition, there are definitely Hmong who follow CMA in Minnesota as I was connected to by some Hmong in Seattle. Obviously, CMA is common among Hmong Christians.

<sup>160</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 182. To be fair, the Vang Tsu phenomenon might not be a messianic movement, but it can be affected by their traditional messianism in certain ways. In fact, in both cases, the Hmong present their wish to have a savior who could help them to get rid of their situation.

<sup>161</sup> In recent years, some Vietnamese scholars define the Vang Tsu movement as Protestantism, but they mainly consider it to be a negative force that should be prevented. For instance, Thăng Văn Nguyễn 2009, 81, 135, 142., Khắc Đức Nguyễn 2017, 23, 49.



## Part III – The Hmong Protestants of Vietnam: An Ethnographic Study

### Chapter 5. The Focal Village and Beyond

Chapter 5 aims to introduce the focal village with specific history and context. Apart from economic, political, and social aspects, the larger proportion of this chapter is on the village's religious context that is the basis for further understanding of Hmong's religious life in subsequent chapters. In addition, the figures displaying research participants in the main field site and beyond would be presented after providing an explanation on emerging research opportunities I encountered and changes I made while being in Vietnam for this study.

#### 5.1 The Focal Village

##### 5.1.1 Field Site Introduction

Yagad region of Đăk commune is located in a buffer zone nearby Chu Yang Sin National Park of the Central Highlands (*Tây Nguyên*) of Vietnam, which has total square kilometers of 589,47 with the highest elevation point of 2,442 meters. The medium-high of this buffer zone is from 500 to 1,000 meters, except for the higher area (from 1,500 to 2,500 meters) that is not suitable for doing agriculture and lower area (lower than 500 meters) that is basins of several big rivers such as Krông Ana, Krông Bông and Krông Pắc. Although being around 100 kilometers from the center city Buôn Mê Thuật of Đắk Lắk province, the route to Yagad is considered one of the roughest roads in the province<sup>1</sup> that there is no direct public transport that to other districts. Yagad stands on a relatively flat land from which one can go in three directions: one to the commune center, one towards B.6, which belonged to a neighboring district – M'Đrăk, and one to a national Route called QL26 leading to a busy coastal city of Vietnam – Nha Trang. Thus, sometimes tourists, particularly western bicycle tourists, may stop by the village, but they are not allowed to stay in the village overnight by the local government.

Before 1995, Yagad did not exist. It was only a natural forest without any residents. At first, several Hmong families arrived in *Cầu Cháy* – an area nearby the current Yagad, and built tents with available materials such as wood and leaves to reside in. Some families settled in the same

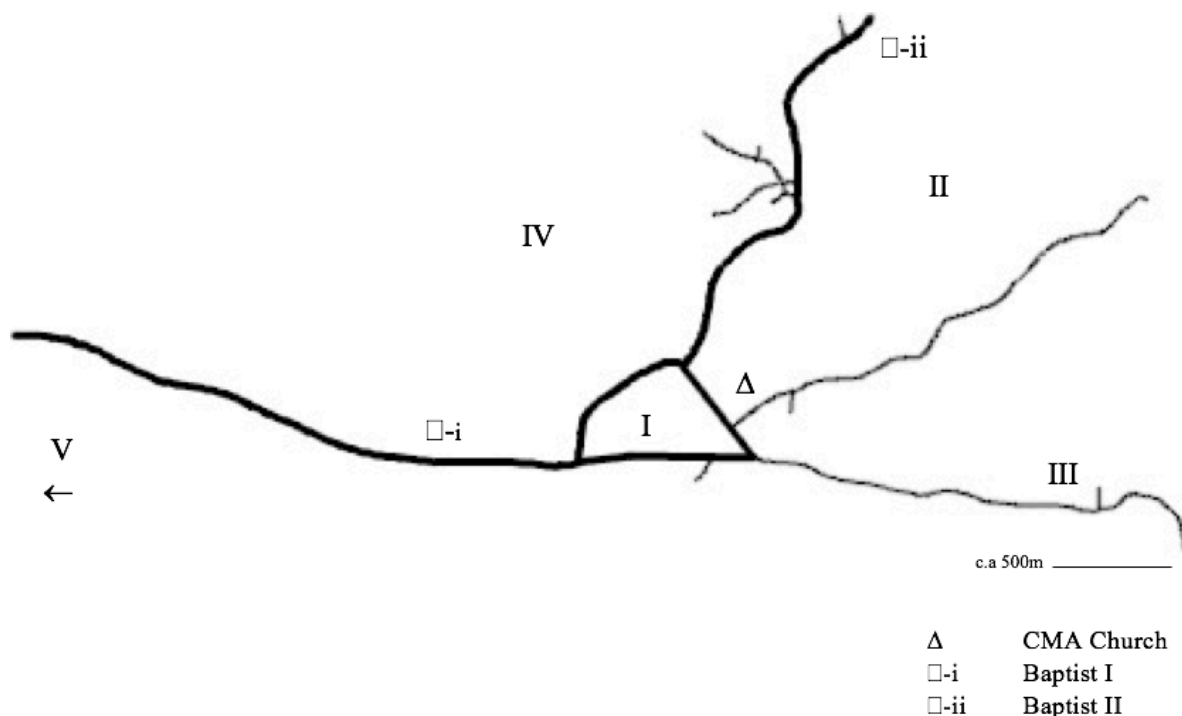
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<sup>1</sup> I got constant complaints on how the route to Yagad is rough compared to other regions from the provincial, district, and commune officials and villagers. The Head of Commune People's Committee even just visited the region a few times.

way in an area which is now called Lakad village, which belongs to Pák commune – a neighboring commune of Đắk<sup>2</sup>. Soon later, some chose Lakad, and some chose Yagad for permanent settlement. According to the Lakad I head, at first, Lakad appeared to be a right area for them to do farming. However, after living and working for a while in the area, they found out later that the land quality in Lakad is worse than that of Yagad<sup>3</sup>.

As it is shown from the map on the research site below, the Yagad village has been divided into five new smaller villages, which are I, II, III, IV, and V (see Figure 2) since 2007. It should be noticed that V is, in fact, located in an area that is quite far from I, II, III, and IV; the furthest is approximately 10 kilometers of the bumpy road. Although they are relatively separated by administrative units, their whole community in this region can be considered a homogeneous group of people who fundamentally share language, belief, practices, and way of life, and originally belonged to the same village located on a relatively flat and connected area – Yagad. Therefore, in this research Yagad region, which includes five smaller villages, would be used to refer to the focal village. Any point made based on the differences among the five new villages would be specifically noted.

*Figure 2 The Focal Village*



<sup>2</sup> Details on how the Hmong settled down in Yagad village would be discussed in the Chapter 6. Religion-Driven Migration and Justifiable Settlement.

<sup>3</sup> In the literature, some reports also reveal that the quality of land in Lakad region is ‘bad’, Y Thuýt Niê, “Di Dân Tự Do và Tác Động Của Nó Đến Công Tác Quản Lý và Bảo vệ Tài Nguyên Rừng Tại Xã Pák - Huyện Krông Bông - Tỉnh ĐắkLắk [Free Migration and Its Impact on the Management and Protection of Forest Resources in Pak Commune - Krong Bong District - Dak Lak Province]” (unpublished Thesis, Đại học Tây Nguyên, 2010), 26.

### 5.1.2 Economic, Political, and Social Context

While Yagad residents at the moment are able to enjoy a clean water system that is home-delivered to them from high mountains thanks to very good geographical conditions, Lakad people still have to use drinking water from self-made wells. Some families in Lakad can afford to make a drilled well (*giếng khoan*), but the water quality is not really good. Most families in the Lakad region need to have a small water filter pool to produce better water for cooking, bathing, and washing. Undoubtedly, the water system is also one of the essential factors that affect how people make a living, particularly in an agriculture-based economy, as well as how comfortable their lives could be in terms of basic needs.

It is commonly acknowledged among Hmong in Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông that Yagad is ‘richer’ than other Hmong villages in the Central Highlands region even though poor and near-poor household rate in Yagad is still relatively high, more or less than 50% of total households<sup>4</sup>. I am not able to obtain exact numbers on detailed incomes of Hmong people in both villages, but it can be observed that while a significant number of Lakad-ers need to seek seasonal jobs in other districts or provinces, people of Yagad may stay in their neighborhood<sup>5</sup>, do various jobs such as planting and taking care of rice, peppers, coffee or collecting wide orchids, mushrooms and *chít* leaves<sup>6</sup>. Yagad region is also obviously more dynamic than Lakad. For example, there are more grocery shops, restaurants, pharmacies, and a bus route that links the village to the commune center.

Noticeably, Yagad residents have been able to make a significant amount of money thanks to nearby natural forests that allow them to harvest various types of wood and sell them to outside traders. It is reported that forest products trading has been active since the Hmong were not present in this region of Vietnam<sup>7</sup>. Also, timber businessmen are said to be mainly Vietnamese Kinh who are more likely to establish a ‘good’ relationship with the local government for their ‘secret’ wood delivery<sup>8</sup>. However, in recent years it seems that the wood

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<sup>4</sup> I was only able to obtain data on poor and near-poor households classified by ‘Vietnamese Kinh’, ‘indigenous ethnic groups’ and ‘other ethnic groups’; there are no detailed reports on Hmong households. However, one can deduce the data of Hmong by looking at the statistics on ‘other ethnic groups’, since they are the majority of residents in the region except a small number of Vietnamese Kinh and Ede. Basically, the percentage of poor and near-poor households among the Hmong is more or less 50% total population. “Phân Tích Hộ Nghèo, Cận Nghèo Theo Dân Tộc [Analysis of Poor and Near-Poor Households by Ethnic Group]” (Ủy ban Nhân dân Xã Đắk, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Yaaj H., interview by author, 26 October 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Chít leave is *lá chít* that can be used to make some handmade products such as *chít* broom (*chổi chít*) – a standard cleaning tool in Vietnamese families.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, in the period of 1982 – 1992 while no Hmong was reported to be in Yagad, there were over 30,000 hectares of forest being destroyed in Đắk Lắk, partially because of logging activities (*khai thác gỗ*). Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 127.

<sup>8</sup> When I asked questions why Yagad seemed to be richer than other Hmong villagers in the district, commune leaders only mentioned their good land quality. Only one district Ede policeman admitted such circumstance on

resources are running out. For example, Yagad-ers used to need only a few days to collect some valuable wood pieces; today, they may need to stay in the forest for weeks to go further into the forest and seek good wood. In the next few years, it is expected that Hmong Yagad-ers may not be able to make a living on wood products. On the other hand, the Hmong people learned how to work as and become good at being carpenters since arriving in the village. Nowadays, skilled carpenters are hired to build wooden houses or work on house parts and make wooden furniture for residents in the region. Some Hmong, particularly the elderly, are still able to make crafts from forest products such as *gùi* (the baskets mainly used by upland people for doing farming), baby carrier, baskets for cooking or holding foods, small chairs, or so. Such handmade products do not sell at broader markets but they serve demands of local people.

In general, the Hmong income range can be estimated as below. It should be noted that all data collected in 2018 and 2019. Thus, estimated numbers on prices or circumstances may change at another time<sup>9</sup>.

First, the daily rate for labor work such as collecting coffee beans, peppers or doing other farming tasks such as cleaning grass in the field, planting coffee trees is approximately 160,000 Vietnam Dong (VND) – 200,000 VND/ day<sup>10</sup>. Working hours and benefits such as lunch and drink are negotiable, depending on each employer. In harvest season, for example, harvesting coffee beans, a Hmong may earn up to 400,000 VND/ day as the employer pays for the total quantity of products collected, not for hours. However, such high income depends on how productive the coffee field could be, not on laborers or employers themselves<sup>11</sup>.

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a conversation we had while visiting a commune Hmong policeman who live in Yagad on 12 January, 2019. I actually known this Ede policeman since I first came to the Central Highlands for my field research. That may be reasons why he honestly shared with me. Meanwhile, all Hmong pastors, church leaders and ordinary adherents I talked with acknowledged that fact to me. These Hmong tend to be certain that if it is not ‘informally’ allowed, to whom they – Hmong – could sell forest-products. In fact, some local research may mention such ‘illegal timber business’ among the Hmong, yet they do not discuss its ‘hidden legitimacy’ aspect except acknowledging ‘weak ability’ to protect forest of the local government such as there is only one ranger who is in charge of ‘managing forest’ in the whole commune, see K’Bon, “Tình Hình Quản Lý, Bảo vệ Rừng Tại Xã Đắc, Huyện Krông Bông, Tỉnh Đắk Lắk [Forest Management and Protection in Dak Commune, Krong Bong District, Dak Lak Province]” (unpublished Thesis, Đại học Tây Nguyên, 2011), 24–26, 33.

<sup>9</sup> All information on how Hmong Protestants in Yagad make a living comes from daily conversations with villagers; some of them are especially noted, such as conversations with Yaaj T. and Yaaj L. on 30 October, 2018, Yaaj. T. on 22 November 2018, with Vaaj L. on 26 January, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> In November 2018, 1 euro equals to 26,434 VND. According to a 2017 report, Vietnamese Hmong’s average monthly income per person is approximately 632,000 VND (23,9 euros), four times lower than national average monthly income per person, Đức Tùng Phùng et al., *Tổng Quan Thực Trạng Kinh Tế - Xã Hội Của 53 Dân Tộc Thiểu Số [Overview of Socio- Economic Situation of 53 Ethnic Minorities]*, Lưu hành Nội bộ [For Internal Circulation Only] (Hà Nội: Tiểu Dự án của Ủy Ban Dân tộc do UNDP và Iris Aid tài trợ [A Subproject of The National Committee for Ethnic Minorities Affairs Sponsored by UNDP and Iris Aid], 2017), 51.

<sup>11</sup> Faaj B. and her husband sometimes earned up to 800,000 VND/ day, which meant they collected around eight quintals of coffee beans that day with the payment rate is 1,000 VND per one kilogram collected. Faaj B., personal conversation with the author, 23 December 2018.

In terms of industrial crops, one hectare of coffee land may produce 60 sacks (*bao*) per harvest, and each sack can store 60 kilograms. By the time I was in the field, the price for one raw coffee berry kilogram is around 5,000 – 6,000 VND. For example, if a family can get 35 sacks of raw coffee berries, they would earn 13,000,000 VND for two tons in total. Meanwhile, in some years price may go up to 9,000 VND/ kg, which depends on many factors. For example, if the weather is good, three or four coffee trees can generate one sack of 60 kilograms. As the weather was not right in 2018 - 2019, up to eight to ten trees can produce the same amount. If the rainfall is too little or too much, a certain number of coffee flowers may not be pollinated or be pollinated too early while all berries have not yet entirely harvested. Throughout the year, Hmong farmers do irrigation and fertilizers for their plants. For example, 1000 coffee trees require 20 sacks of chemical fertilizers, 500,000 VND/ sack. Some households are able to use their cattle's manure, such as of pig or buffalo.

The year 2018 is not a lucky year for Hmong in Yagad. Peppers got pests and diseases that made the harvest not well produced. A couple of years ago, dried pepper could be up to 200,000 VND/ kilograms, but now (2018 – 2019), it is only 50 – 60,000 VND/ kilograms. Meanwhile, cassava (*khoai mì/ sắn*) can help a Hmong household to earn around 25,000,000 VND/ hectare<sup>12</sup> after one year of planting and taking care of. Two-year-cassava has a better price. The price of this industrial plant also varies by year. For example, in 2016, it was only 1,400-1,500 VND/ kilogram, while in 2017, the price went up to 2,000 VND/ kilogram.

Tailoring is a well-earn job in Hmong villages but it requires high skilled workers who also have good sense of aesthetics. There are only a few Hmong working on it. In general, a good tailor may earn 80,000 VND – 100,000 VND per piece of clothes, and s/he may be able to finish two or four pieces each day which makes their daily average income is around 300,000 VND.

Today the Hmong are relatively well equipped with good machines to do their farming. For example, they used to raise buffalos mainly for plowing the field but only for delivering stuff, like wood, today. Currently, most of the Hmong households have machines supporting their farming work, such as agrimotor. Rice reaper also already appears in the Hmong village, but only a few households can buy and rent it out for their neighbors to use during the harvest. ‘*Đổi công*’ is still common among Hmong today, which means people can exchange their working-day to their relatives or neighbors. For example, A helps B's family collect coffee one working-day; in turns, B would help A's family one working-day to collect coffee or another farming

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<sup>12</sup> 1 hectare equals to 1000 square meters here (*sào Nam Bộ*) which is different from that in Northern Vietnam where 1 hectare equals to 360 square meters (*sào Bắc Bộ*).

work that lasts one working day. Such an exchange mechanism does make Hmong community more united. Mã D. (male, age 37) is a Tai who has lived in Lakad among the Hmong since 1995 said, “*once harvest season comes, we can see dozens of Hmong go to the field and work together. Very well organized and united. You cannot see it among Kinh or Nung now*”<sup>13</sup>.

Basically, the majority of Hmong in the region are farmers. Except for harvesting activities named above, some other daily farming activities are: manually separating corn to feed cattle, cutting grass and vegetables to feed pigs and buffalos, and collecting wood such as tiny wood used for cooking. Many villagers have smartphones in the present day. Thus, after a long day of working, they may stay home and spend time on the phones. The youth start to use social media and get to know new friends, mainly Hmong, from other regions – especially their home village in the North (*Quê*<sup>14</sup>).

It is common now that Hmong people travel by bicycles and motorbikes; instead of traveling on foot and horses as they used to do decades ago before migrating to the Central Highlands or even today in several upland regions in northern Vietnam. In fact, some young Hmong shared that they were attracted when they first came to Yagad and saw people riding on motorbike very conveniently, which they did not have in their home village in the North<sup>15</sup>. Only one Hmong household has a car used for transport service, particularly in emergency cases that villagers would hire to go to the district hospital.

In short, Hmong in Yagad basically depends on a self-sufficiency economy. They raise industrial plants, both long and short-term types. In addition, there are a variety of ways to make money in the village. Today they are active in learning new techniques and applying machines in order to improve agricultural productivity even though such productivity depends largely on weather conditions. Although Hmong villages’ economic context in the Central Highlands may vary by their geographical locations, they have not actually joined the broader market economy. Meanwhile, most Hmong Protestants in Yagad, more often than not, spend their Sunday, except for church time, go to the commune market (*chợ xã*) to eat traditional dishes and buy necessities and clothes.

Politically, there is only one Hmong working at the local government, commune level, as the police deputy chief. In fact, the number of Hmong working in the political system is small.

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<sup>13</sup> Mã D., interview by author, 24 December 2018.

<sup>14</sup> *Quê/Ngoài quê* is the term Hmong migrants in the Central Highlands often call their hometown in mountainous northern Vietnam. In Vietnamese, *Quê* literally means homeland.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Yaaj L., who came to Yagad for a short visit, then decided to spend her life living in this region since 2014, partially because of the dynamic Yagad.

According to a district report, there are only four Hmong communists in the political system at village level in this commune who play roles as Secretary and Deputy Secretary. Meanwhile, Hmong village heads and village deputy heads are not communists. The Hmong are generally interested in neither joining the communist party nor attending activities held by the government<sup>16</sup>. In some cases, they even refuse to work for the government as, they said, their salary was so low that they could not guarantee a good life for their families<sup>17</sup>. Besides, most of the Hmong admit that they do not want to obey others or suffer discomfort to get higher political positions.

As a matter of fact, the local Vietnamese government lacks people who can speak some Hmong language and work among this group of people. This shortage, on the other hand, does enhance the status of autonomy among Hmong Protestants. Haam T. was appointed to be the village head of Lakad in 2001 while this village had just been established; he was then asked to be a ‘village policeman’ from 2001 to 2006 because no one could take the responsibility. Though following God, yet unofficially, Haam T. was the right candidate for taking a government official position. In fact, T. held several positions in government organizations when he was in northern Vietnam, which makes him a ‘reliable’ person to be assigned to manage the local village and keep the government updated on Hmong people. Similarly, Yaaj. P. is the former soldier of the Vietnamese People’s Army who was also the first village head of Yagad. Thanks to these pro-communism individuals, the Hmong converts might experience a more or less smooth settlement and adaptation processes. Plus, Hmong religious leaders have been highly flexible and respectful in interacting with the local government. The Hmong’s leadership in various positions actually plays one of the critical roles in establishing and strengthening Hmong communities in this part of Vietnam<sup>18</sup>.

Furthermore, since the beginning, the government has assigned some traditional Hmong from northern Vietnam to be policemen who are in charge of managing and/or observing newly-established Hmong villages. Interestingly, most of such Hmong policemen come from Sơn La – the home province of one of the most well-known Hmong communist politician in contemporary Vietnam – Thào Xuân Sùng. Until recently, Sơn La government is also famous

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Why do the Hmong in the focal village do not prefer to join government-sponsored activities’ would be discussed further in a subsequent section.

<sup>17</sup> While visiting a newborn baby and having a conversation with Haam X. S. and his wife on 12 October 2018; S. shared that after completing his time in the army (*đi bộ đội*), he was offered to work in the district center with the salary of 2,000,000 VND. However, the rent was already 400,000 VND then the salary was so low that he could not take good care of his wife and children. Thus, he rejected. While many Vietnamese Kinh desire to have a fixed position in the government organizations that allow them to get ‘*biên chế*’ (being a regular staff of a company/organization with virtually never get fired), the Hmong seem to be more practical.

<sup>18</sup> I would further discuss this matter in Chapter 9.



for its strict policies upon religions among Hmong converts. As a matter of fact, these policemen were recruited occasionally; they have not attended any Security-oriented Universities/ Academies or Specialized Training as standard procedure. At the moment, the circumstance appears to be less severe than some decades ago. There are no Hmong policemen who are assigned to stay long-term in villages, yet a limited number of *trình sát* (reconnaissance troops) are still sometimes present. As I have met some of them, they are now mobilized to be in charge of other villages or positions that may not entirely be related to the Hmong Protestants population as before. Most of the villagers actually understand such force's presence; however, they seem to deal very well with same-ethnic policemen and even develop a good relationship with them<sup>19</sup>. Besides, some youths told me that such presence is annoying and that policemen, either Hmong, Vietnamese Kinh, or other ethnic groups, who went to the village to observe are always rejected or misled by the local Hmong<sup>20</sup>.

Regarding village organization, Hmong villages in the Central Highlands were first labeled as 'buôn' or 'làng,' which is equivalent to 'village' that indigenous people of the region use to name their neighborhood, such as a 'buôn Êđê (Ede).' However, in later years they were changed to be 'thôn' which may either be more familiar with the Hmong as it has been how the Hmong call their village in Vietnamese in northern Vietnam such as *thôn Nậm Piên*, or the government's intention<sup>21</sup>. Today, it is common that the village whose majority of residents are indigenous people would be called 'buôn,' and the village whose majority of residents are immigrants of other ethnic people migrated from northern Vietnam, such as the Hmong and the Kinh would be called 'thôn.' In Đắk commune, there are five *buôn* where most of the people are Ede, two *thôn* where most of the people are Kinh, and five *thôn* where most of the people are Hmong.

Similar to most of the other villages in Vietnamese socialist society, a Hmong village is also managed by a communist Party cell (*chi bộ Đảng*), a self-government board (*ban tự quản*), a village head as well as other government-based organizations such as Elderly Union (*Hội Người Cao tuổi*), Vietnam Farmer's Union (*Hội Nông dân*), Women's Union (*Hội Phụ nữ*), Cultural Family Club (*Câu lạc bộ Gia đình Văn hoá*), etc. Noticeably, all of the village leaders in the

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<sup>19</sup> A typical example would be further discussed in Chapter 9.

<sup>20</sup> Conversation with Yaaj F. and Haam S.

<sup>21</sup> This change is hard to evaluate as it is reported elsewhere that it is also the central government's plan. For example, a native village called 'làng Kon Rơ Ngang' which was changed to 'thôn 7A' or 'làng Kon Hra' was changed to be 'thôn 3'. See Minh Thu, "Tên Gọi Các Buôn Làng ở Tây Nguyên: Không Nên Tùy Tiện Thay Đổi [Names of Buôn Làng in the Central Highlands: Should Not Be Arbitrarily Changed]," *Dân Tộc và Phát Triển*, June 7, 2019, Accessed January 4, 2021, <https://baodantoc.vn/ten-goi-cac-buon-lang-o-tay-nguyen-khong-nen-tuy-tien-thay-doi-38085.htm>.



focal region are Hmong, including a village policeman (*công an viên thôn*) who might be supposed to report to his vertical leadership on local sensitive security issues, such as religious and political matters. In other words, the Hmong people hold relative independence and autonomy in their neighborhood, communicating in their native language that Vietnamese Kinh leaders do not understand. In Yagad, it is said that the commune president (*chủ tịch xã*) only visits Hmong a few times and the current secretary (*bí thư xã*) rarely comes.

'*Hương ước*' (village code) has known to be a traditional characteristic of Vietnamese villages which local villagers, not the government, draft. Though also ruled by a '*hương ước*,' the one of Yagad looks similar to a government document which actually is signed by government-sponsored village leaders, such as the communist party secretary and policeman. In addition, it has an official national name of 'The Socialist Republic of Vietnam' and an official motto of 'Independence-Freedom-Happiness,' which are the beginning part of any Vietnamese official document<sup>22</sup>. However, as previously discussed, the Hmong has relative independence and autonomy in the region; the village head is authentically voted by villagers showing the great democracy among the Hmong. A couple of months before I arrived in Yagad, villagers (III) criticized their village head for being not financially transparent and not taking people's voices for considerations that led to re-election to vote for a new village head. Such transparent election is not very common among Vietnamese Kinh, to my experience and knowledge.

In terms of ethnic distribution, according to a report on Statistics of Residences provided by the commune police chief<sup>23</sup>, the majority of residents in the Yagad region is Hmong people, generating 80.8 % of the total five villages in the total area (Hmong makes up five out of twelve villages in the commune). Except for 206 Ede living in (V), no indigenous people are living together with Hmong. Among other ethnic groups, only Vietnamese Kinh generating a significant number of 353 people in total. The number of Muong, Tai, Yao, Thai, Nung, *Sán Diu* (San Diu), *M'ông* (Mnong), *Pà Thẻn* (Pa then), Ca Dong (Kdong) is minimal, ranging from 1 to 90 people living scattered across the region. It should be noted that except for village (V) in Yagad region, four other villagers have a very high percentage of the Hmong who live tremendously concentrated.

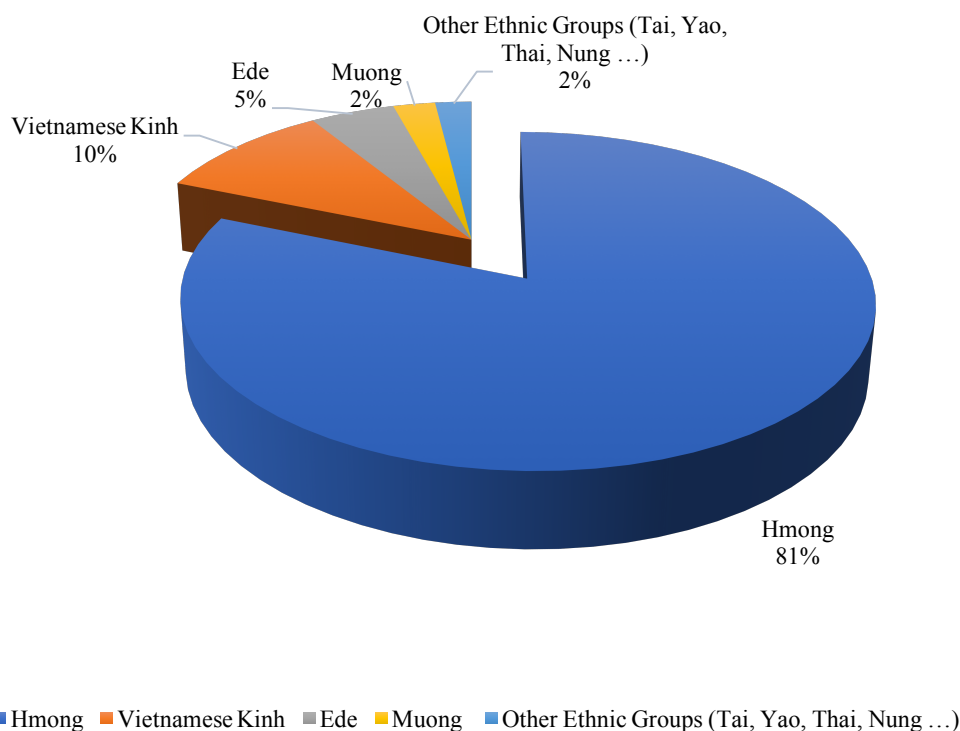
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<sup>22</sup> Thôn Yagad [Yagad Village], *Hương Ước Thôn Yagad Xã Đăk - Huyện Krông Bông [The Convention of Yagad Village, Dak Commune - Krong Bong District]*, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> I select data for only focal region and calculate ethnic distribution from the local report "Số Liệu về Cư Trú Đến Ngày 20 Tháng 04 Năm 2018 [Data on Residency by 20 April, 2018]" (Ủy ban Nhân dân Xã Đăk, Công an Xã [Dak Commune People's Committee, Commune Police Department], 2018).

Although the total Hmong in the Central Highlands only generates around 1% of the total population, it is clear that they are dominant in the field site that can be an advantage for them to organize their community in the way they prefer most. Generally speaking, all people of different ethnic groups live in harmony. There are only a few severe conflicts among the Hmong and Ede reported since the Hmong was present in the region. However, it is said that there are at least four times that some strangers came and scammed villagers that in some cases, religious leaders were not able to keep them away from such scams, which I would discuss further later. Plus, it is widely acknowledged that Hmong have always been and prefer to live all together in a specific location rather than co-residing with other ethnic groups. This tendency is not only right in traditional Hmong society in the past but also in modern time. Several young Hmong told me that, ‘*Hmong cannot live within other ethnic communities like Kinh*’. As a matter of fact, every Hmong village I visited in the Central Highlands always has a couple of Vietnamese Kinh households living there. Almost all of them left their home villages and opened a shop or a restaurant to make a living in those Hmong areas.

**Figure 3 Ethnic Distribution in the Focal Village**



When it comes to other neighbor Hmong groups in the nearby area, it is worth noting that there is a region called ‘*B.6*’ in which some Hmong villages locate. I had repeatedly heard that some Hmong families in B.6 went abroad, and some of them already returned. Interestingly, all Hmong households who were involved in 2011 *Mường Nhé* political revolt in Đắk commune

and its nearby commune – Pắk – were convinced to leave by their relatives who were residents of B.6 area. Also, there is a Hmong CMA group widely known for their Evicting Demons method (*Đuổi Quỷ/ Exorcism*)<sup>24</sup>, attracting mass followers and leaving ambiguous explanations, which has politically questioned the local police department. Even though some visits were made, the government has not yet come to any conclusion. As it does not belong to my current research, I would not move to any further discussion. However, at this point, it should be noted that the Central Highlands, the Vietnamese part that Yagad belongs to, has been a politically sensitive region.

First, Front Unifié pour la Libération des Races Opprimées (FULRO) (1964 – 1992) is a political and military alliance of ethnic minority groups operating from 1964 to 1992. This alliance attempted to fight for their self-determination right and secede from the Vietnamese nation to be independent. They are known to not only fight against Vietnamese communists in the contemporary period but also denounce the Republic of Vietnam (*Việt Nam Cộng hoà* or South Vietnam) for discriminating against them as Montagnards when this government took control over the Central Highlands. On 11th December 1968, there was a negotiation between FULRO and the Republic of Vietnam that finally agreed to claim several rights of FULRO. To a certain extent, FULRO was considered a public organization that had its flag (not a national flag, but an organizational one). After the 1975 victory of Vietnamese communists, FULRO continued to fight against the new Communist regime, somehow in cooperation with Khmer Rouge (Red Khmers) in Cambodia. Due to internal division as well as a weakened army, FULRO officially surrendered in 1992.

Plus, there is another organization called Montagnard Dega Association, MDA (1999 – 2004) being supported by a non-profit organization called Montagnard Foundation, Inc. (MFI), which means *Tổ chức Quỹ người Thượng* in Vietnamese. MFI was found by Ksor Kok in 1990, based in South Carolina, USA. Ksor Kok is, in fact, a member of Jarai ethnic minority of Vietnam migrating to America as a refugee after the 1975 victory of Vietnamese communists. Thus, in the Vietnamese government's eyes, MDA and MFI are just a disguise of FULRO. Although some of its members already migrated to the United States of America after the Vietnam War, they are believed to plan and continue fighting against the Vietnamese State secretly. The revolt in February 2001 in Central Highlands provinces of Đắk Lắk, Gia Lai, Kon Tum and the mass demonstration of approximately 10,000 to 30,000 Montagnards (*người*

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<sup>24</sup> More information is available in Chapter 7.

*thượng*) in April 2004 of becoming obvious evidence for the Vietnamese government to blame these groups for their acts of sabotage.

### 5.1.3 Religious Context

Before taking the focal village into particular considerations, it might be essential to generally understand the religious context in the Central Highlands of Vietnam (*Tây Nguyên*) as a whole. Overall, *Tây Nguyên* is a religiously diverse region where numerous religious groups are active for a long time. Major religions are Catholicism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and Caodaism. According to the 2009 report of the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 1,707,287 people are considered ‘being religious,’ making up 33.38% of the population. To be specific, there are 824,992 Catholics (48.32% of total followers, and of 16.12 % total population), 454,229 Buddhists (26.60% and 8.88 % relatively), 362,689 Protestants (21.24% and 7.09% relatively). Baha’i and Caodaism are also reported to exist in this area; however, there is only an insignificant number of them. It is believed that the rate of people who are ‘religious’ is considerably high in *Tây Nguyên*<sup>25</sup>, compared to that of the whole socialist Vietnam.

Plus, *religious conversion is considered to be a common phenomenon* in this region. There are several main tendencies. First, conversion among those who abandon their traditional religion, mostly from animism to Catholicism. In the northern *Tây Nguyên*, this type of conversion began in late 19th and early 20th centuries, mostly among Ba Na, Xo Dang ethnic groups. Second, conversion among those who abandon their traditional religion to Protestantism, beginning around the 1950s, remarkably developed since the 1990s. Finally, conversion among those who change their faith from Catholicism to Protestantism while vice versa is not common. In terms of *religious harmony* in *Tây Nguyên*, there are mainly conflicts at personal and family levels, not at a religious level. To be specific, conflicts only occur among people in a family or a group who choose different religious faiths or ways of practice. These types of conflicts, according to Ngô Quốc Đông, are not able to break ethnic unity or national solidarity that has been established for a very long time<sup>26</sup>.

*Protestantism in the Central Highlands.* It should be noted that among the three world religions present in the region, Protestantism has the largest number of ethnic minority people following. While there are around one million Protestants in the whole country, up to 630,000 belongs to more than 40 ethnic minority groups. Hmong, Ede, Jarai (*Gia Rai*), and Koho (*Cơ*

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<sup>25</sup> Ngô, “Hiện Trạng và Đặc Điểm Tín Đồ Công Giáo, Phật Giáo, Tin Lành ở Tây Nguyên [Current Status and Characteristics of Catholics, Buddhists, Protestants in the Central Highlands],” 50–51.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 66-67, 71.

*Ho*) are the four biggest groups contributing to the growth of this religion<sup>27</sup>. In particular, Protestantism was introduced in the Central Highlands in the early 1930s. In 1954, there were more than ten ethnic minority groups of 6,000 people following Protestantism. The number considerably increased in later years, reaching 301,000 followers in 2005. To explain this growth, local specialists believe that Catholicism and Protestantism have quite similar conditions for expanding in the area. The most updated number of Protestants in five provinces of the Central Highlands reported in 2015 by local governments is 439,644, belonging to more than 32 different denominations in which CMA (ECV-S) is the largest church. In Đắk Lắk, there are 19 active Protestant denominations<sup>28</sup>, but the number is only 6 in Krông Bông district where Lakad, Yagad, and Nap Hmong regions are located in. Those six denominations are ECV-S, *Truyền giảng Phúc âm* (Evangelical Church-TGPÂ<sup>29</sup>), *Liên hữu Báp tít* (the Baptist Association/ Baptist), *Tin lành Trưởng lão Việt Nam* (Presbyterian Church), *Tin lành Truyền giáo Phúc âm* (Protestant Evangelization), and *Liên hiệp Báp tít* (the Baptist Union)<sup>30</sup>.

Meanwhile, Protestantism is believed to be significantly involved in several groups and events that occurred in this region that aims to topple the Vietnamese government. For instance, as mentioned previously, Montagnard Dega Association (MDA) is considered a reactionary organization that takes Protestantism as its fundamental religion. MDA is believed to lead mass revolts in the Central Highlands in the past decades. Most recently, in Đắk Nông province in 2013, 57 people being found attending activities of the reactionary group – FULRO, 53 of them are members of ECV-S, four of them are Catholics<sup>31</sup>. Plus, another event emerged in northern Vietnam called the 2011 *Mường Nhé* revolt in Điện Biên province is a famous politic-related event that drew the participation of some Hmong Protestants in the Central Highlands. All these facts make ‘*Hmong-Protestant-in-the-Central-Highlands*’ a sensitive topic and make it more understandable why the Vietnamese government always keeps close eyes on highlanders’ activities, especially those who convert to Protestantism that primarily relates to foreign ‘factors’<sup>32</sup>. Being aware of those events and narratives, we can better comprehend their

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<sup>27</sup> Idid, 61., Thị Thu Hà Vũ 2018, 106.

<sup>28</sup> Thị Thu Hà Vũ 2018, 92-4.

<sup>29</sup> As Protestant denominations in Vietnam are not systematically translated to English. I choose to use ‘TGPÂ’ to refer to *Truyền Giảng Phúc Âm* denomination in my work. See a later interpretation for clarification.

<sup>30</sup> Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, Phụ lục 4 [Appendix 4]. As explained, the English names of those denominations are only defined by the author. To date, there is no agreed terms on Protestant denominations in Vietnam in the English language, which might require more detailed and careful research.

<sup>31</sup> Ban Tôn giáo tỉnh Đắk Nông (2013). Báo cáo tình hình kết quả công tác tôn giáo năm 2013, 5., cited from Quốc Đông Ngô 2015, 70.

<sup>32</sup> Being invaded by so many foreign forces in history, the Vietnamese government has always considered any foreign ‘factor’ such as foreign person, group, organization, a potential threat to its power.

circumstance in the past and in the present, particularly throughout the analysis and discussions of this thesis.

*Đắk Commune.* According to a 2017 local report that I was able to collect at the Commune People's Committee<sup>33</sup>, there are four religions present in the commune, which are Protestantism, Buddhism, Caodaism, and Catholicism. All adherents of Buddhism, Caodaism, and Catholicism are Vietnamese Kinh, 15, 11, and 30 people, respectively. However, there are no temples or Catholic church in the commune. While this Ede group is the only indigenous people of the Central Highlands in general and Đắk in particular, both Hmong and Vietnamese Kinh are migrants. Vietnamese Kinh are believed to first settle in Đắk in early February 1987 from Lý Nhân district of Hà Nam province (a northern province nearby Hanoi capital city) as *dân kinh tế mới* (those who attended the New Economic Zones program implemented by the Vietnamese government after the fall of Saigon government), and the Hmong are officially claimed to be present in the commune since 1996 as free migrants who did not follow any government's migration plan<sup>34</sup>.

In terms of Protestantism, there are eight groups of three denominations in the Đắk commune, which are ECV-S, Truyền giảng Phúc Âm (*TGPÁ*), and Liên hữu Báp tít (*Baptist*), having 2,556, 867 and 311 followers respectively (Data in 2016)<sup>35</sup>. It should be noted that not all Protestant denominations' names are entirely synced either on the government documents or in everyday conversations. For example, Vietnamese officials define Baptist denomination as *Liên hữu Báp Tít* or *Liên hữu Báp tít* or *Liên hữu cơ đốc, Báp Tít*<sup>36</sup>, while it may be called by *Liên hữu Báp Tít* or *Báp Tít* by its followers. Whereas in Yagad, there are one Protestant church of CMA (Yagad church) and two Baptist groups. Similar to the religious status in the commune, Yagad also has no Buddhist temples or Catholic churches, which makes Protestantism the dominant religion in the village. Noticeably, only the Yagad CMA house church is officially registered by the government; whereas two Baptist groups have not yet been registered, but both are allowed to practice at their private houses without any intervention from the government, as some scholars claim<sup>37</sup>. Though the Yagad CMA church is the focal religious group of this research, data collected on two other groups, Baptist I and II, would be used for

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<sup>33</sup> People's Committee (known as Ủy ban Nhân dân/ UBND in Vietnamese) is Vietnamese executive arm at various levels, which are central, provincial, and commune levels.

<sup>34</sup> Ủy ban Nhân dân Xã Đắk [Dak Commune People's Committee], "Báo Cáo Thành Tích [Achievement Report]," December 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Đắk Commune, "Danh Sách Điểm Nhóm, Chi Hội Tin Lành [List on Protestant Groups and Units]," October 11, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, see Đắk Commune 2017.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 118-9.



comparative discussion where it is possible in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of Hmong Protestants in the field site regardless of their denominations.

Statistically, more than 70% Hmong in Yagad are Protestants<sup>38</sup>. However, according to some Hmong adults and leaders, it might be up to more than 90% of Hmong who have registered to be church members if we consider them at the household level. In other words, there may be one or more individuals per household who do not join church, mostly male youth who are in the age range from 20 to 35 years old; but almost all of the Hmong households are Protestants.

Apart from one CMA group and two Baptist groups in Yagad, there is another Hmong family-based group – the Thoj family – who claims themselves to be ‘God followers.’ Neither outsiders nor insiders know which denomination they actually follow. Some say they are ‘*Chíng nhán Giê Hô Va*’ (Jehova) denomination; some say they are ‘*Sự Cứu Rỗi*’ denomination, and some say they are *Cơ Đốc Phục Lâm*. They are believed not to eat pork, only gather for service on Saturdays instead of Sundays, and calling out *Giê Hô Va*, instead of Jesus, while reading out the Bible. While most Hmong CMA do not go to work on Sunday, the Thoj family does. However, these particular God followers do not strictly follow such rules. For example, they still eat pork at parties (*đi ăn cỗ*)<sup>39</sup>. Because members of this family do not often interact with other villagers, they are rarely known. District policemen visited them some times to learn about their religion.

Thanks to the introduction and guidance of my host family and some girls in the village who are close with me, I found their house in (II). However, nothing becomes obvious. After a talk, I was allowed to join them for their coming Saturday service, but finally, there was no gathering as they said there were not enough members. I tried to visit them for some other Saturdays, but things stayed the same. What I can describe is: their house looks simple, their meals have only a single vegetable dish; they said they do not have fields for planting coffee or peppers, only a small rice field. Their faces are often dirty for some reason. The old lady, who lives with her son, daughter in law, and their children, talked around and gave false information<sup>40</sup> when I asked how did they get to know God and pray. In fact, this group has only one extended family member. Therefore, although they read Bible, sing hymns, and maintain some practices at their

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<sup>38</sup> Based on a local government report as well as data obtained from church reports and via my conversations with Hmong religious leaders, I calculate the total Hmong in Yagad is 3,695, of which 2,608 are Protestants. This number of converts does not include newborn children who may be counted into the total population.

<sup>39</sup> Haam X. P. realized that while she attended a wedding party where this family also joined. *Cỗ* in Vietnamese refers to parties in general, not specifically weddings or funerals or so.

<sup>40</sup> For example, she took my information to add to her stories, such as my home province and my last name were used to describe the missionary who came to tell her about God four years ago.

home, it is hard to make any conclusion about this group if they are religious or not. Also, there is no clear interaction between them to other Protestant groups in the region<sup>41</sup>.

As a matter of fact, Hmong Protestant groups of different denominations exist together in a shared location that is common today, not only in Yagad but also in other Hmong villages in the Central Highlands. For instance, in a nearby Hmong village – Lakad I – around one hour travelling by motorbike from Yagad, there are three active Hmong Protestant denominations, which are: ECV-S/ CMA (more than 600 adherents), Baptist (above 100), and Presbyterian (around 200 adherents). However, it is observable that there are no conflicts among such Hmong Protestant denominations. In addition, there are households/ individuals who are neither church members nor traditional believers; yet they are still able to live in harmony in the community. Thus, one could say that the religious context in Yagad is diverse, yet not tense. However, it might be hasty if I conclude at this point that the Hmong are able to actively choose their religion or being a none without being discriminated against, which I would provide more evidence in latter sections of this study.

#### *5.1.4 Research Participants in the Focal Village*

The focal village of my research has specific history and structure, which requires a detailed explanation. Plus, due to high politically sensitive topic, my way to probe field sites and research population was time-consuming and did not go straight. Thus, I only can provide more information on my participants in this section.

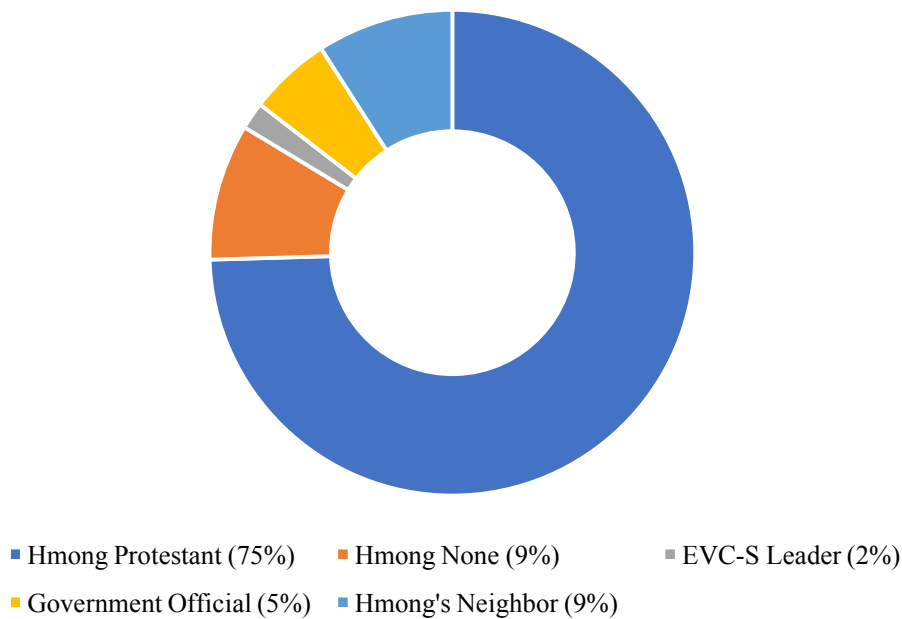
As presented in details above, Hmong Protestants of the focal village share their living space with some other ethnic groups such as Kinh, Ede, Tay, Yao, Nung, etc. Also, their village is politically managed by commune government leaders who are not Hmong. Therefore, to get a more objective understanding of the Hmong Protestant population in the focal village, I intentionally did several interviews with their government leaders as well as neighbors of different ethnic backgrounds that finally classifies my research participants in the focal village as below:

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<sup>41</sup> I choose to describe this undefinable group's essential characteristics in this section to illustrate the religious context in Yagad and because the following chapters are mainly on Hmong CMA Protestants in Yagad. Several more details on this particular group are available in Chapter 9.

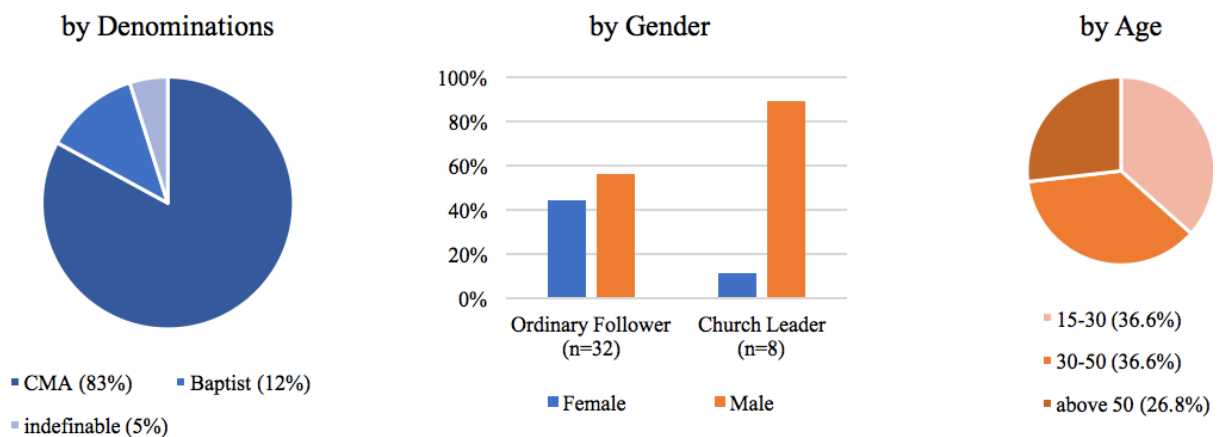


**Figure 4 Distribution of Research Participants in the Focal Village, n = 55**



Furthermore, within the Hmong Protestant community, there are also two main Protestant denominations active in the village. Thus, in order to explore the religious life of Hmong converts in the given village, I employed participation observation and other data collection techniques among the dominant Protestant group – CMA – first, then explored two other Baptist groups and an indefinable ‘follow-God’ group for a holistic understanding of the whole community. Details on Hmong Protestant Participants are presented below:

**Figure 5 Characteristics of Hmong Protestant Participants in the Focal Village, n = 41**



As a result, my subsequent chapters on Hmong Protestants of the focal village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam would be fundamentally built on empirical data collected among Hmong Protestants of the local CMA church. Meanwhile, data gathered among other groups as well as

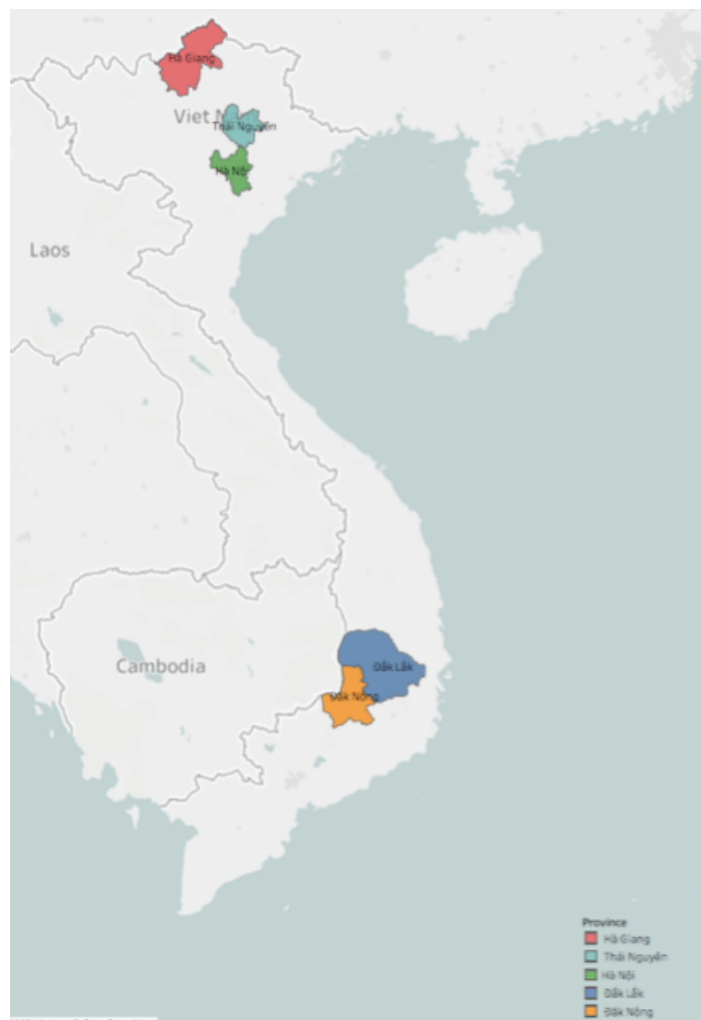
local materials that cover the whole population in the region would be employed to offer as complete as possible understanding of the targeted research population – the Hmong Protestants.

## 5.2 Beyond the Focal Village

At first, I did not plan to take several short field trips to other Hmong villages in Vietnam as the government research permission, and my vulnerable research population is challenging and unpredictable. I decided to gather comparative data as opportunities occurred to me through interactions with villagers and government leaders. Besides, the literature on Hmong Protestants in Vietnam is considerably limited, which drove me to study about them as much as I was able to and in any Hmong

villages I had the chance to access. Thus, this dissertation is finally written up based on empirical data obtained from several other Hmong villages as well: several villages in the Central Highlands of Vietnam where my focal village is located; and, several villages in northern Vietnam where are home villages of my research population – Hmong Protestants in Yagad.

Figure 6 Research Field Sites in Vietnam by Province



### 5.2.1 Other Hmong Field Sites in the Central Highlands and Northern Vietnam

*Other Hmong Villages of the Central Highlands.* As previously mentioned, I planned to do my field research in Lakad at first since it appears to be the purest Hmong

Protestant village on available literature by the time the proposal of this study was written<sup>42</sup>. After staying in Lakad for a week, I found out that Yagad is the largest Hmong Protestant

<sup>42</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009. As Lakad is a coded name, the specific page in Nguyễn's book is not mentioned to protect the anonymity of the real village.

community in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where the first ordained Hmong pastor resides and guides a big recognized church. Thus, a certain amount of data was collected in Lakad – the Hmong region that belongs to a neighboring commune of Yagad – that would be used for comparative analysis, including two CMA churches: Lakad I and Lakad II. Also, during my time in the Central Highlands, I was able to connect with Hmong pastors and adherents of other Hmong villages in the region which are: NaP church (Krông Bông district, Đắk Lắk province), B.6 church (M’Drăk district, Đắk Lắk province), and Grông church (Đắk Nông province). Other than that, a couple of government officials were interviewed after several times I met and have daily conversations with them.

*Other Hmong villages and groups in northern Vietnam.* While being in Yagad, I was told countless times about villagers’ home towns in northern Vietnam where Hmong called ‘*Quê*’ or ‘*ngoài Bắc.*’ I became curious about their relationship with their home villages where traditional Hmong might still be dominant. Also, how Hmong converts live in northern Vietnam, where Hmong Yagaders left in the early 1990s, resonated with me. Consequently, I took advantage of my time in the North, which was designed to collect Vietnamese literature on my proposal and take field trips to Yagaders’ home villages in Hoàng Su Phì district, Hà Giang province. This province is well-known as the first home of Vietnamese Hmong since they fled China to Vietnam hundreds of years ago. To be more specific, I was able to stay in Tả Sứ Choán and Tả Hồ Pin communes of Hoàng Su Phì as well as to conduct interviews and observations in villages of these two communes thanks to my host mom and dad who traveled with me during my trips to northern region. In these two communes, there were ECV-N and TGPÂ denominations active among the Hmong. Furthermore, I was connected by Hmong Protestants in Hoàng Su Phì with a Hmong CMA group in Hanoi, where I was also able to attend their church service and conduct interviews with several converts and a Hmong ECV-N leader.

### *5.2.2 Research Participants in other Hmong villages of Vietnam*

For better visualization, along with the map above, the table below summarizes key participants of my research in other Hmong villages of Vietnam. As these participants provide comparative data for my research, I do not intend to show such participants' detailed characteristics.

*Table 2 Research Participants by Region (for comparative data), n = 33*

<i>Region</i>	<i>Participants by Region</i>	<i>Percentage per Region</i>
The Central Highlands of Vietnam	n = 20	
<i>Hmong Protestant</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>55%</i>
<i>CMA (90.9%)</i>		
<i>Baptist (9.1%)</i>		
<i>Hmong None</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>10%</i>
<i>Government official</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>10%</i>
<i>Hmong's Neighbor</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>25%</i>
Northern Vietnam	n = 13	
<i>Hmong Protestant</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>76.9%</i>
<i>CMA (60%)</i>		
<i>TGPÁ (30%)</i>		
<i>Presbyterian (10%)</i>		
<i>Government official</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>23.1%</i>
<b>Total Participants for Comparative Data</b>	<b>33</b>	

In conclusion, thanks to the empirical circumstances that I was informed right after entering into the field, I ended up conducting my study in the focal village of Yagad instead of Lakad, which was the primary research field site defined in my proposal. Also, I took emerging opportunities to access several other Hmong villages of the Central Highlands of Vietnam and northern Vietnam, which unexpectedly became valuable first-hand sources of comparative data that I am now able to use for writing up my dissertation. Figure 6 above visualizing Research Field Sites for more concise imagination on their geographical locations./.

## Chapter 6. Religion-Driven Migration and Justifiable Settlement

While Chapter 5 mainly introduces the focal village in the present day, empirical data and local documents I collected not only in that village but also in some other Hmong villages in the Central Highlands reveal untold religion-related stories in the past on “*Why did a part of Hmong in Vietnam decide to migrate southward from their northern villages in the early 1990s*”? Thus, before exploring the religious life of the research population, this chapter examines the latest mass migration of Hmong people in comparison with their earlier migrations in Vietnamese history, which eventually shows the essential role of religion in the migration decision of Yagaders and their counterparts a couple of decades ago. The migration and justifiable settlement discovered then appeared to be the last steps of Hmong religious conversion to Protestantism that began in the late 1980s, which have significantly prepared these people to construct their new religious life. Finally, by investigating the given migration, this chapter proposes a perspective to view the correlation between ‘migration and religion’ that has been largely overlooked in the scholarship.

### 6.1 Hmong Migrations within Vietnam

Before exploring the vast southward exodus in the 1990s, I would first review Hmong internal migrations, which might become a good background for later comparative discussion on their recent mass migration to the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

It is widely known that the Hmong of Vietnam are considered a ‘migrating tribe’ who have frequently changed their living locations. Right from the start, they had moved from place to place to seek more stable resettlement. According to some Vietnamese scholars, most of the Hmong of northern Vietnam came from Guizhou (*Quý Châu*), Guangxi (*Quảng Tây*), and Yunnan (*Vân Nam*) of southern China. Meanwhile, the Hmong of Central Vietnam (*miền Trung*), where this minority group mainly reside in the western villages of Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An provinces, came from Laos. During these Hmong migrations within Vietnam before *Đổi mới* 1986<sup>1</sup>, the Vietnamese Hmong’s arrival and subsequent moves as well as later migrations will be examined.

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<sup>1</sup> The year ‘1986’ is used to divide two significant periods of Hmong migrations in Vietnam for several reasons. First, it is the year of the *Đổi mới* Revolution in socialist Vietnam. Second, most domestic scholars use this time to discuss critical migrations in the country; therefore, it is reasonable to follow their way of defining time for discussions on the same topic. Lastly, it is believed that the State’s policies on managing migrations were more effective before 1986, which means after 1986 ‘free migration’ had become more common, see Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 32.

### 6.1.1 Finding A Way Out

As mentioned previously, several western scholars insist that Hmong people were not present in Vietnam before the 1800s. As this research focuses on Vietnamese Hmong, I will discuss their first arrivals in Vietnam based on Vietnamese scholars' perspectives in this section.

Specifically, the Hmong are believed to have arrived in three waves of migrations in the earliest period. First, as previously said that in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century they failed to fight against the 'gai tu gui liu' policy<sup>2</sup> of Han rulers that eventually caused to Lù and Giàng clans of Guizhou to move to Yunnan (China) then flee to Mèo Vạc and Đồng Văn districts of Hà Giang province in northern Vietnam. According to 1994 research by Cư Hoà Văn and Hoàng Nam, it was estimated that they had been in Vietnam for around 300 or 350 years, which is equal to 14 or 15 generations<sup>3</sup>. Second, during the years from 1796 to 1820 (around 200 years, which equals ten generations), most of the Hmong from Guizhou, some from Yunnan, Guangxi, fled to Vietnam after failing to fight against the Qing dynasty (*nhà Thanh*). This second wave of Hmong migration to Vietnam is believed to be through two paths: the first path included one hundred Hmong families of Hoàng, Lý, Vương clans to Đồng Văn district (Hà Giang), then some of them dispersed to Bảo Lạc (Cao Bằng), Bắc Mê, Xín Mần, Hoàng Su Phì districts (Hà Giang); another path was of eighty families of Hoàng, Lục, Vũ, Châu and Giàng clans to Xi Ma Cai, Mường Khương then to Văn Bàn (Lào Cai), Mù Căng Chải, Trạm Tấu (Yên Bái), to Sapa (Lào Cai), Phong Thổ, Sơn Hồ, Điện Biên (Lai Châu)<sup>4</sup>, then 30 families out of 80 who belonged to Vũ, Sùng, and Giàng clans left for northwestern Vietnam (*Tây Bắc*).

The third wave was after the Taiping rebellion (around 150 years ago, which is equal to six or seven generations, data in 2005) which several groups of Hmong joined but were defeated<sup>5</sup>. This time the Hmong arrived in Phong Thổ (Lai Châu), Xi Ma Cai and Mường Khương (Lào Cai); from these areas, they continued to move following northwestern direction (*hướng Tây Bắc*) to Tủa Chùa, Tuần Giáo (Lai Châu), Thuận Châu, Sông Mã (Sơn La). Some from Mù Cang Chải moved to Bắc Yên, Phù Yên then went down to Mộc Châu (Sơn La). The last destination of this wave was in western Thanh Hoá. At the same time, a group of Hmong from

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<sup>2</sup> This policy is explained in a previous section.

<sup>3</sup> Hoà Văn Cư and Nam Hoàng 1994, 17. Meanwhile, some later scholars reveal other facts. For instance, Đậu Tuấn Nam believes the Hmong first arrived in Vietnam 300 years ago while Vương Duy Quang estimates it might be '350 years ago.' Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 26., Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 28. According to Vương, this was the largest migration wave among the Hmong from southern China to northern Vietnam that time. Vương claims his information on first Hmong migrations to Vietnam is mostly based on ethnographic data he collected.

<sup>5</sup> Most Vietnamese scholars do not give an exact time for the third migration wave.

Xieng Khouang (Laos) moved to Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An who then mostly lived in the Kỳ Sơn district of Nghệ An province.

Although there is no entire agreement among Vietnamese researchers on the first Hmong arrival in Vietnam<sup>6</sup>, they all believe that there were three waves of Hmong migration to the country from southern China. Apart from ethnographic data that scholars claim to obtain in some Hmong villages, one may see evidence for such conclusions through folklore songs<sup>7</sup> or the ‘*khua kev*’ (or ‘*quab kev*’ means ‘*showing the way*’ or ‘*bài cúng ma*’) that Vietnamese Hmong have been using for hundreds of years for their funerals to guide dead returning to the ‘ancestral land’<sup>8</sup>.

As discussed earlier, the Hmong fled China for Vietnam mainly to escape Chinese political repression. According to Jean Michaud, they also left with the hope of seeking better living places. To be specific, the Hmong were believed to have had an economic war with the Chinese administration, particularly regarding the production and sale of opium. Remarkably, some of them even had a traditional trading relationship with the Muslim Chinese caravaneers known as the Haw (Hui). It is said that Vinh and Hanoi in Vietnam were parts of classical routes that these Hmong and Muslim traders passed through. Decades ago, some old Vietnamese Hmong still even remembered their trips with the Haw in the late 19th century, “quite often as caretakers for the horses and mules loaded with cloth, salt or opium”<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, the Hmong migrated to Vietnam not only because they had to flee from Chinese rulers but also because they actively sought a better place to live.

Although providing no proof of why the Hmong migrated to Vietnam except for political causes, pioneer Vietnamese scholars confidently state that these people sought new places for living more stably and freely and better quality of life (*sống ổn định, tự do, ấm no*)<sup>10</sup>. I fully share this view and believe that the Hmong’s greatest desire at all times is to have a safe and stable life, not for any other purposes such as politics, which I would further discuss in subsequent sections. When it comes to the first resettlement and internal moves of the Hmong in Vietnam, there are some contradictory opinions on whether or not the Hmong *chose* or *had*

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Times,’ ‘the total number of Hmong arrived,’ and ‘receiving regions’ vary on different sources. For example, Vương considers the second wave is the largest, Đậu considers the last wave is the largest. Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 28., Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 27.

<sup>7</sup> For example, a very famous Hmong folklore song saying that ‘*Người Mông ta cũng có quê hương/ Quê hương ta là Mèo Vạc*’ (We Hmong also have hometown/ Our hometown is Meo Vac), see Hoà Văn Cư and Nam Hoàng 1994, 16.

<sup>8</sup> See Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Michaud 1997, 126.

<sup>10</sup> Hoà Văn Cư and Nam Hoàng 1994, 16., Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 30.



to live in mountainous areas because of the late immigration<sup>11</sup>. According to Jean Michaud, the violent clashes between Hmong and earlier settlers in the upper *Rivière Claire* valley<sup>12</sup> were recorded<sup>13</sup>. In other words, conflicts among the Hmong and lowland people in Vietnam happened indeed, even though ‘how many and how serious such conflicts were’ are not defined. Furthermore, as discussed on the Vang Tsu movement previously that one of the promises and prophecies spread among the Hmong is ‘if they follow Vang Tsu, they would not need to live in the mountains’ because “In 2000, Vang Tsu would return and make the earth flat, the Hmong would not have to live in high mountains anymore”<sup>14</sup>. Thus, if such a message is truly attractive to the Hmong, it might present their deep wish of ‘not living in the mountains.’ In fact, the Hmong are documented to have lived in lower areas in several cases when they could. For instance, some Hmong groups settled in the lower districts of Lào Cai province around four to five decades ago and then peacefully shared common spaces there with some neighboring ethnic people<sup>15</sup>.

At this point, one may conclude that ‘living in the mountains might not be the Hmong’s preference.’ Instead, they may have no other choice. This disadvantage of the late comers is also confirmed by James C. Scott in his famous work on the Zomia where the Hmong inhabit. He generalizes that “Latecomers, if they are militarily superior, will typically seize the valley lands and force existing groups to move upward, often in a ratcheting effect. If the latecomers are less powerful, they must occupy whatever niches are left, often higher up the slopes”<sup>16</sup>. However, it might be fairer to highlight a fact that one of the most important things for the Hmong is *freedom*. They may not prefer to live in the mountains, but if living upland maximizes their freedom, then there is no reason for them to stubbornly settle down in lower regions. In fact, such way of thinking is not rare among this unique people group as they have been well-known for their ‘*autonomy*’ in history.

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, while Vương Duy Quang and Nguyễn Văn Thắng suppose that the Hmong of Vietnam had to settle in high mountains due to late immigration, Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến constantly employs words of ‘*they occupied the mountains*’ or ‘*the Hmong tend to choose places...*’ or ‘*the act of choosing to reside on mountain peaks (đỉnh núi)*’ proving the free choice of these latecomers. See Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 38., Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009, 46., Mạnh Tiến Nguyễn, *Những Đỉnh Núi Du ca: Một Lối Tìm về Cả Tỉnh H'Mông [The Singing Mountains: A Way Looking for the Hmong's Personalities]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thế giới, 2014), 27, 28, 33.

<sup>12</sup> *Rivière Claire* is how the French call *Sông Lô* (or Lô River) of northern Vietnam.

<sup>13</sup> “The first reliable Western records to confirm a Hmong presence in the Indochina Peninsula are from 1860 when several thousand Hei Miao (Black Miao) ‘soldiers’ were seen entering North Vietnam from Yunnan. Annamites remembered and told Bonifacy (1904b: 8) about the violence of the clashes with earlier settlers in the upper *Rivière Claire* valley”, Michaud 1997, 124.

<sup>14</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 176.

<sup>15</sup> In the original book published in 1996, such groups were estimated to move to these lower districts ‘*around from 20 to 35 years ago*’ that should be ‘*around from 45 to 55 years ago*’ by date, Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 18.

<sup>16</sup> James C Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 140.



### 6.1.2 Internal Migrations before *Đổi mới*

Apart from the above waves of arriving in Vietnam and/then moving among domestic places for more stable settlement, based on my research, there is no systematic research on Vietnamese Hmong migration in the period between their first arrival and *Đổi mới* 1986. Regarding the Hmong in a specific province, their internal moves were rarely recorded. Meanwhile, there are several books and articles that examine either the total population of this ethnic group or their essential characteristics in a defined province.

Notably, general information on Hmong history in Lào Cai in some academic works<sup>17</sup> is similar to that of other Hmong available in other sources as mentioned previously. In Sơn La, the total number of 114,572 Hmong is reported, generating 12.99% of total population in the region (data in 2002)<sup>18</sup>. No in-and-out migration of the Hmong at the provincial level is reported. Plus, how belief and religion-related matters among the Hmong of Sơn La had been resolved is discussed, and their total number of 132,220 people living in 600 villages of over 122 communes in 11 districts is recorded in a 2009 book, yet<sup>19</sup>, there is no concrete examination on their moves in and out of the province. Whereas the Hmong of Lai Châu and Cao Bằng provinces are also believed to come from China in three separate migrations, they were able to stably live in these two provinces thanks to the Vietnamese government's policies on *định canh định cư*<sup>20</sup>. Further information on Hmong from those two provinces is mentioned, such as a group of Hmong that moved into more remote areas across the Viet-Laos border, and there had been Hmong moves between provinces, but there is no further detailed discussion. The Hmong of Hà Giang, even being specifically researched in a recent monograph, is only discussed in terms of total population and unique characteristic instead of naming and analyzing any migrations<sup>21</sup>.

It is noticeable that the Hmong of Nghệ An have caught the special attention of Hoàng Xuân Lương who reveals more details on their earlier migrations. The author insists that they primarily came to Laos via Vietnam from southern China. After living in Laos for approximately three or four generations, they then moved to Nghệ An. Precisely, most of the

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<sup>17</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 9-14., Đình Lợi Lê 2012, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Thị Kim Duyên Lương et al. 2003, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Xuân Sùng Thảo et al., *Dân Tộc Mông Sơn La Với Việc Giải Quyết Vấn Đề Tín Ngưỡng Tôn Giáo Hiện Nay [Hmong Ethnic People in Sơn La with the Resolution on Religion and Belief Issues Today]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia, 2009), 16.

<sup>20</sup> 'Định canh định cư' is a national program which focuses on supporting people to stably do farming then stably settle down. Ngọc Tấn Đỗ, *Nghiên Cứu Một Số Đặc Điểm Hôn Nhân và Gia Đình Các Dân Tộc H'mông và Dao ở Hai Tỉnh Lai Châu và Cao Bằng [Research on Some Characteristics of Marriage and Family among Hmong and Yao Ethnic People in Two Provinces of Lai Chau and Cao Bang]*, unpublished Ministerial Report (Hà Nội: Ủy ban Dân số, Gia đình và Trẻ Em. Viện Khoa học Dân số, Gia đình và Trẻ em, 2003), 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Mạnh Tiến Nguyễn 2014, 22.

Hmong from Xieng Khouang moved to Kỳ Sơn district, some from Sam Neua (*Sâm Nua*) moved to Mai Sơn, Nhân Mai, and Tương Dương through Quế Phong, and moved to Mường Lống through Phả Nội<sup>22</sup>. Interestingly, it is argued that apart from shifting cultivation habits (*tập quán di canh di cư*) of the Hmong, several other reasons are accounting for the Hmong's move to Nghệ An. First, the French colonists' brutal oppression policy in Laos forced the Hmong to pay all tax in opium. Taxes were applied to all properties in a household. In addition, women even had to pay a strange type of tax called 'thuế vú' (breast tax). Another situation was in 1915 when French colonialists forced the Hmong of Laos to work manually in order to create *đường 7* (the Street No. 7). Being subjected to violence, suffering hunger and diseases, a large number of Hmong secretly escaped to Nghệ An. In addition, the Pa Chay revolt failed in 1921, finally causing a group of Hmong in Sơn La to flee to Laos and then to Nghệ An so that they could avoid the French's chase<sup>23</sup>. The earliest clans of Hmong in Nghệ An were Lâu, Lì, Vừ, and Vả<sup>24</sup>.

In addition, it is remarkable that the China-Vietnam border war in 1979 might be a major cause that led to some Hmong groups of frontier provinces moved to another area, which is rarely highlighted in the literature<sup>25</sup>. Some participants in the focal village of this study revealed that they got the news on the border war from their family members who were working in the Vietnamese army. According to their memories, these soldiers had the news of the war before it actually happened. As a result, they decided to move the whole family to other locations, such as those from the border province of Cao Bằng moved to Thái Nguyên and Tuyên Quang for safety. Moreover, there have been some facts that support this hypothesis. For instance, a provincial report said that Thái Nguyên<sup>26</sup> could only obtain data on the Hmong people in and after 1979. In 1979, there were 650 Hmong in total in Bắc Thái (the former province of Bắc Kạn and Thái Nguyên), of which 644 Hmong settled in the current Thái Nguyên territory. Up

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<sup>22</sup> Xuân Lương Hoàng, *Văn Hoá Người Mông ở Nghệ An [Hmong Culture in Nghe An]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá Dân tộc, 2000), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Although Hoàng mentions that in the years of 1945 and 1946, another group led by Thảo Tu Khởi fought against the French, then withdrew the troop and established a base on the mountains of Nghệ An. This group then stayed in the province and became residents instead of returning to Laos. However, the information on such troop and the leader named Thảo Tu Khởi is not available. Therefore, I do not include it in this section at the moment. See Xuân Lương Hoàng 2000, 31.

<sup>24</sup> More details on which clan and when they arrived in Nghệ An are shown in the 2000 book of Hoàng, see more at Xuân Lương Hoàng 2000, 31-4.

<sup>25</sup> In a few cases, the border war's impact on migration is mentioned but the migration is believed to occur only after the war ended and/or give no detailed information and explanation, for example see Duy Thụy Nguyễn, *Di Cư Của Người Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Đến Tây Nguyên Từ Năm 1975 Đến Năm 2015 [Migration of Ethnic Minorities to the Central Highlands from 1975 to 2015]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, 2015), 101., Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 31., Quang Hưng Nguyễn 2020a, 233.

<sup>26</sup> Thái Nguyên province belonged to Bắc Thái province in the time of 1979. In 1996, Bắc Thái was divided into two provinces: Bắc Kạn and Thái Nguyên.

to 80% of Hmong lived in the Võ Nhai district. After ten years, in 1989, the total number of Hmong in this province increased up to 2,264 people and reached 4,831 people in 1999<sup>27</sup>. Such exoduses due to the short border war of 1979 extended the Hmong's dwelling place, yet only within the northern region of Vietnam.

To conclude, detailed information and in-depth analysis of the Hmong people's internal migrations in Vietnam before 1986 are relatively limited. According to the 2009 Census<sup>28</sup>, Hà Giang, Điện Biên, Sơn La, Lào Cai, and Lai Châu are the five provinces with the highest number of the Hmong. While research on the Hmong in four provinces are mentioned previously in this section, there is, in fact, no early research on the Hmong of Điện Biên – a new independent province was established in September 2003, originally belonging to the former province of Lai Châu. Furthermore, the Hmong people's huge wave reached Điện Biên after 1986 has been a remarkable phenomenon, which I will further discuss in the following section.

### 6.1.3 Internal Migrations after *Đổi mới*

It is reported that before *Đổi Mới* 1986, the state government's policies on managing free migration (*di cư tự do*<sup>29</sup>) was effective; however, it no longer worked in later years. Among waves of free migration, those of ethnic minorities in mountainous provinces of North Vietnam tend to be stronger, particularly the Hmong people<sup>30</sup>. Overall, there were 191,294 Hmong who freely migrated in various ways in and out among the provinces of northern Vietnam and the western region of Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An over twenty-five years (from 1986 to 2010<sup>31</sup>). Their waves of moving can be summarized into major routes: *within northern Vietnam: East to West and West to East direction; at the national scale: southward direction.*

*Within northern Vietnam.* The Vietnam-Laos border region has been an attractive living place for a significant number of these ethnic people, which can be observed through their moves from *East to West migration direction*. This region had received 24,315 Hmong from other northern provinces of Vietnam from 1986 to 2010<sup>32</sup>. Điện Biên and Lai Châu are border

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<sup>27</sup> See “Dân Tộc Hmông [Hmong Ethnic Group],” Official Website of Thai Nguyen People's Committee, 2010, Accessed February 28, 2020, [http://portal.thainguyen.gov.vn/wps/portal/!ut/p/c4/04\\_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3jvkGB3ZzdTEwMLT1MjA89gvzB\\_M2NfAwNHA\\_2CbEdFAPi6Jo4!/?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/DCDT&catId=DCDT](http://portal.thainguyen.gov.vn/wps/portal/!ut/p/c4/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3jvkGB3ZzdTEwMLT1MjA89gvzB_M2NfAwNHA_2CbEdFAPi6Jo4!/?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/DCDT&catId=DCDT).

<sup>28</sup> Ban Chỉ Đạo Tổng Điều tra Dân số và Nhà ở Trung Ương 2010. The data for specific provinces vary in pages throughout the document.

<sup>29</sup> Most Vietnamese scholars define *di cư tự do* (free migration) as a term referring to the phenomenon of migration among individuals, families, clans and/or communities without following specific policies of and receiving support from the government at various levels. Tuấn Nam Đâu 2013, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Tuấn Nam Đâu 2013, 32-5.

<sup>31</sup> Some statistics on Hmong's migration to the Central Highlands would be provided; however, there is no systematic number for every year up to now.

<sup>32</sup> Tuấn Nam Đâu 2013, 47.

provinces which have welcomed the largest Hmong migrant groups<sup>33</sup>. Among districts, there were up to 14,700 Hmong who moved to Mường Lay, 11,019 to Chà Cay, Mường Chà in Điện Biên. Lào Cai became the third most settled province having 2,416 Hmong. All three provinces belong to northwestern Vietnam. In some cases, the Hmong's collective arrival even led to the establishment of new villages and communes in the receiving places, such as new villages in Mường Nhé and Nậm Pồ districts (Điện Biên province) in the late 1990s<sup>34</sup>. On the contrary, it seemed to be that no Hmong moved to northeastern provinces for decades<sup>35</sup>.

Apart from the East-West direction, intra-provincial migration of the Hmong (*di cư nội tỉnh*) in northern Vietnam is also reported. However, this phenomenon only occurred after 1991. Interestingly, the provinces with the largest Hmong moves in and out at the provincial level are places which had received the highest number of the Hmong from other provinces such as Điện Biên (8,099 people), Lai Châu (4,093 people), and Lào Cai (3,276 people). Meanwhile, in northeastern provinces, the number of Hmong who move in and out within a province is much smaller, only around one hundred people or fewer over the past 25 years<sup>36</sup>.

*At the national scale.* During the period from 1986 to 2010, another common migration direction among the Hmong was *North to North Central Coast*<sup>37</sup> (*miền Bắc – Bắc Trung Bộ* which is the first path of the southward migration). There were a huge number of the Hmong who moved from Sơn La, Lào Cai, Yên Bái (northern provinces) to western Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An (provinces of the North Central Coast). Specifically, from 1991 to 2010, it is reported that 12,186 Hmong had successfully settled in these two regions. Noticeably, the number between the two regions are extremely different: most of the Hmong chose western Thanh Hoá to settle down (12,124 people), and a negligible number of them chose western Nghệ An (only 62 people)<sup>38</sup>. According to my research, there is no detailed explanation of this imbalance phenomenon in the scholarship. It should also be noticed that these numbers refer only to the Hmong who currently migrated to these provinces. In fact, the 2009 Census reports that there are already vast numbers of Hmong in Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An, 14,799 and 28,992 respectively<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> I do not cite the total number of Hmong migrants here because the statistics seem to be conflicting. For example, it is reported that there had been 2,553 and 2,477 Hmong arriving in Điện Biên and Lai Châu respectively between 1986 and 2010, while a single district of Điện Biên is believed to already receive 14,700 Hmong in the same period. See Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 47-8, 57.

<sup>34</sup> Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al. 2018, 74, 76.

<sup>35</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 61-3.

<sup>37</sup> Central Vietnam is *miền Trung* or *Trung Bộ* which includes the sub-regions of North Central Coast (*Bắc Trung Bộ*), South Central Coast (*Duyên hải Nam Trung Bộ*). In some documents, Central Vietnam also includes the Central Highlands.

<sup>38</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 48-9.

<sup>39</sup> Ban Chỉ Đạo Tổng Điều tra Dân số và Nhà ở Trung Ương 2010, 179-80.

Most noticeably, almost all of provinces in northern Vietnam and western Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An have witnessed their Hmong people leave for the Central Highlands, particularly in recent decades (*Bắc and Bắc Trung Bộ toward Tây Nguyên (North and North Central Coast toward the Central Highlands) which is the second path of the southward migration*). While most of the Hmong were only found to live in North Vietnam before 1986, their migration to the Central Highlands, which reached its peak in mid-1990. It is reported that by 2013 the number of total Hmong in the Central Highlands was about 59,240, mainly living in the two provinces of Đắk Lắk (29,375 people) and Đắk Nông (23,814 people)<sup>40</sup>.

To be precise, according to various sources provided by the Vietnamese government, there were only 326 households with 2,719 Hmong settled in the Central Highlands in the period between 1986 and 1991. All of the Hmong that time lived in two provinces, Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông. The years between 1992 and 2001 witnessed an increasing number of the Hmong moved to the region, 23,579 people. Since this wave of migration, the Hmong started to live in two other provinces of *Tây Nguyên* which are Gia Lai and Lâm Đồng. The phenomenon continued its pace, reaching up to 33,365 Hmong who arrived from 2002 to 2013. Compared to other ethnic minorities' migrants, the Hmong was the largest group moving to the Central Highlands in the years between 2005 and 2013, generating up to 38% of total ethnic minority migrants to the Central Highlands during this period. Recently 92 households with 251 Hmong were found to live in the remaining province of the Central Highlands, Kon Tum, who came from Kỳ Sơn (Nghệ An) and Tân Yên (Yên Bái). However, after a short time, this group decided to move to another province that again made Kon Tum the only province of *Tây Nguyên* having no Hmong. Basically, the Hmong often choose to live together in the same village as they have always done in their migration history. They are now living in 97 villages which belong to 40 communes in 25 districts across the Central Highlands<sup>41</sup>.

Regarding the departing places, 93% of the Hmong moved to the Central Highlands came from northern Vietnam, mainly from Lào Cai (10,435 people), Hà Giang (8,476 people), and Cao Bằng (8,230 people) provinces. Different from internal migrations within the North, the wave of migrations to the South includes Hmong participants from both northeastern and northwestern regions, 27,473 and 18,596, respectively. Only 3,465 Hmong were from western Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An (Statistic for 1986 – 2010)<sup>42</sup>. Interestingly, Sơn La is the only province

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<sup>40</sup> Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 32.

<sup>41</sup> Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 34-5.

<sup>42</sup> See Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 45-6.

in the North where the smallest number of the Hmong decided to move to the Central Highland, only 472 people<sup>43</sup>.

In fact, the majority of migrants moving to the Central Highlands were farmers. It is also documented that numerous state officials (both working and retired), discharged soldiers, working teachers, and medical staff were joining the migration. Some of them are members of the communist party<sup>44</sup>. After 1995, as a significant number of Hmong already moved, the local governments started to apply various policies to stop the migration toward the Central Highlands. It was even stricter since some Hmong who arrived were also forced to return to their departing villages. In those cases, however, the Hmong people still figured out ways to reach to that chosen land<sup>45</sup>. Generally, the Hmong's southward migration has been considered a negative phenomenon that is closely related to politics, national sovereignty, and security concerns. There were accusations that the migration might be linked with foreign enemy forces that aim to establish a 'Hmong Kingdom' (*Vương quốc Hmông*), which potentially threatened the sovereignty of socialist Vietnam. In short, this southward migration among the Hmong is considered to be abnormal, complicated, and unpredictable, which should be prevented<sup>46</sup>. In fact, '*khó lường*', which has a more negative meaning than '*unpredictable*', is the word used to describe a group of people who should be watched.

When it comes to the motivations of such migration, among various reasons, poverty and lack of farming land are still considered the most essential for the Hmong to move<sup>47</sup>. In turn, regarding their persistent economic difficulties over centuries, the Hmong are even blamed for not being able to make a living and passively waiting for support from the Vietnamese government<sup>48</sup>. In other words, the economy-related reasons are named first to explain the Hmong's largest mass migration in contemporary Vietnam. Any other reasons, if they are mentioned, are associated with illegal activities or enemy organizations. Specifically, the Hmong are believed to no longer follow traditional rules as they used to do, such as they used to only migrate to other places by the time of their traditional Hmong New Year Festival ends (around January in the Gregorian calendar). Instead, they are believed to migrate following

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<sup>43</sup> Further discussion on the case of Son La province would be provided later as it is closely related to a phenomenon that has occurred in the focal village of this study.

<sup>44</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 66.

<sup>45</sup> Duy Thụy Nguyễn 2015, 97. In addition, my empirical data collected in several Hmong villages of the Central Highland proves this fact.

<sup>46</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 70., Duy Thụy Nguyễn 2015, 144.

<sup>47</sup> Ủy ban Dân tộc Vụ Địa Phương II, "Di Cư Tự Do Gắn Với Sinh Hoạt Tôn Giáo Của Người Mông Tại Tỉnh Đắk Lắk [Free Migration Associated with Religious Activities of the Hmong People in Dak Lak]," in *Biến Đổi Tôn Giáo ở Tây Nguyên. Thực Trạng, Chính Sách và Giải Pháp (Confidentially Preserved)* (Buôn Ma Thuột: Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo - Ban Chỉ đạo Tây Nguyên, 2013), 200., Duy Thụy Nguyễn 2015, 86.

<sup>48</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 88.



political-social upheavals in their departing regions in the past 25 years, for instance, illegal Protestant missionary activities<sup>49</sup>.

Are those conclusions accurate? Have the inside voices ever been heard? The Hmong are largely acknowledged to be a marginalized unprivileged ethnic minority group in Vietnam. Therefore, it might be insufficient if any assumptions on their thoughts and behaviors are concluded by only outsiders, particularly those based on the authorities' positions to approach the people. Latter parts of the current section will explore this southward migration of the Hmong in the 1990s to further understand this unique move's essence.

## 6.2 Exploring the 1990s Southward Exodus

As previously mentioned, the Hmong's migration from northern provinces to the Central Highlands has been considered to be illegal and negative phenomenon. This phenomenon is the result of various reasons where migrants' poverty and lack of farming land in their home villages are claimed to be the first and essential ones<sup>50</sup>. Religion-related motivations for migrating, if being generally mentioned or particularly pointed out, are often negatively linked to 'enemy forces' that threaten the whole nation or 'religious rumors' that intentionally mislead the people<sup>51</sup>. They are even blamed for running away from the government by settling down in remote areas and destroying local forests that lead to severe deforestation<sup>52</sup>. It seems that the Hmong's 1990s migration is only judged by outsiders and that those who have moved to the Central Highlands, at least the pioneers, have had no room to explain and/or have their voices heard.

Because the majority of the Hmong immigrants in the Central Highlands are living in two provinces, Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông, in order to explore their recent collective migration, not only Hmong Protestants in the focal village in Đắk Lắk – Yagad – but also in some other villages of both provinces are studied.

### 6.2.1 *Economy or Religion-driven Migration?*

According to local research, before 1989, there were only eight Hmong<sup>53</sup> present in Đắk Lắk. However, after ten years, the total number of Hmong in this province went up to 10,891

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<sup>49</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 67-8.

<sup>50</sup> Y Thuýt Niê 2010, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 54., Tất Thịnh Nguyễn, “Vấn Đề Di Dân Tự Do Đến Tỉnh Dak Lăk Từ Năm 1990 Đến Năm 2003 [The Issue of Free Migration to Dak Lak Province from 1990 to 2003]” (Đắk Lắk: Viện Khoa học Xã hội Vùng Tây Nguyên, 2016), 54., Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 46, 36-41.

<sup>52</sup> Y Thuýt Niê 2010, 30., Tất Thịnh Nguyễn 2016, 39.

<sup>53</sup> The report by a researcher at Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, the Central Highlands branch, is the only source I can find that reveals the number of the Hmong in Đắk Lắk before 1989. Otherwise, most other research or documents only define the number for the period from 1986 to 1991 or so. See Tất Thịnh Nguyễn 2016, 42.

people. Unquestionably, this dramatic increase of the Hmong population in this province is a remarkable phenomenon. Did it happen because the Hmong were not able to overcome their economic difficulties and had to leave their home villages? Let us consider several facts.

First, the Hmong were not the poorest minority group in mountainous northern Vietnam during their whole time living there. Although it sounds convincing that the higher people live, the poorer and less powerful they are<sup>54</sup>, statistics say that the Hmong's capital (*vốn*)<sup>55</sup> in the early 1990s was 11,294 thousand VND per household per year, compared to the lowest income from the Nung ethnic minority with 4,350 thousand VND per household per year. Their production result was 10,141 thousand VND per household per year, which is also higher than some other of their upland counterparts such as the Nung (4,781 thousand VND) and the Tai (5,632 thousand VND)<sup>56</sup>. Furthermore, the Hmong were not those who could not make a living and were passively looking for the government's support as being concluded in other sources<sup>57</sup>. Instead, they were acknowledged to be wise farmers. Different from La hủ (Lahu) ethnic minorities of northern Vietnam who had a low level of knowledge and skills of agriculture techniques and had no plan for their economic development<sup>58</sup>, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Hmong already had diversified farming tools as well as a variety of seeds. With the experience and knowledge of doing farming, the Hmong successfully made the most out of their upland fields (*nuong rẫy*), and they only left and sought another field once they could not improve their current one. This managing of farming land skill is considered to be at a high level that not all ethnic people have. In fact, this technique has defined the property of a few other ethnic minorities in Vietnam, such as the Mngong of the Central Highlands, who were gorgeously depicted by phenomenal ethnographer George Condominas – a French cultural anthropologist born in Vietnam<sup>59</sup>.

Second, among the poor in upland northern Vietnam, the Hmong were not the first who migrated to the Central Highlands compared to their ethnic minority neighbors. According to several local researchers, while there were no Hmong in Đắk Lắk before 1979 and only eight people by 1989, there were already 18,593 Nung and 10,903 Tai residing in this area<sup>60</sup>. Bế Việt

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<sup>54</sup> Scott 2009, 140.

<sup>55</sup> According to early political economists, land, labor and capital are major factors of production.

<sup>56</sup> 1996 Report by Cục Định canh Địa cư, Viện Kinh tế Nông nghiệp (the Institute of Agricultural Economics), cited from Tất Thịnh Nguyễn 2016, 134.

<sup>57</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 88.

<sup>58</sup> Việt Đăng Bế, *Các Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Trong Sự Phát Triển Kinh Tế-Xã Hội ở Miền Núi [Ethnic Minorities in Socio-Economic Development in Mountainous Areas]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia, Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá Dân tộc, 1996), 75.

<sup>59</sup> Georges Condominas, *We Have Eaten the Forest: The Story of a Montagnard Village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.*, Originally published in 1957 in French (New York: Kodansha international, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Tất Thịnh Nguyễn 2016, 42.



Đặng, in his 1996 book, also supports the conclusion that before 1989 there was no collective migration of the Hmong from northern Vietnam to the Central Highlands. Bế reveals that the migration to Đắk Lắk from 1976 to 1991 was the biggest move among ethnic minorities at that time, including 25,956 people and 22,384 labors; in which Tai and Nung were the majority of migrants<sup>61</sup>. Meanwhile, the Hmong only moved within the northern region, which only caused changes in the mechanical population ‘within a small space’ (*không gian nhỏ*)<sup>62</sup>. Therefore, it is reasonable if we say the Nung and Tai moved to the Central Highlands before the 1990s because of their economic hardships. Nevertheless, in the Hmong’s case, the question raised is ‘*are economic reasons*<sup>63</sup> *the fundamental motivations for the Hmong to move in the 1990s?*’. Although some more proof may be required, I would answer with a ‘No’ as apart from supporting statements mentioned above, this answer is also confirmed by participants in my research in the Central Highlands. If ‘no,’ what is the deciding factor?

The migration of the Hmong from northern Vietnam to the Central Highlands in the early 1990s is closely associated with their remarkable conversion to Protestantism in the late 1980s. This religious change gained no support from the converts’ traditional relatives and neighbors and the hosting country’s government – communist Vietnam. As previously discussed, the Vietnamese government has had a hostile attitude towards religion, particularly western religions such as Christianity. After a long time banning almost all religious activities, the Vietnamese government began to allow its citizens, both majority Vietnamese Kinh and ethnic minorities, to practice some festivals and maintain some religious customs. However, it did not mean that they welcomed world religions that do not have essential relations to Vietnamese traditional culture. The conversion among the Hmong started in 1987 to a new religion that, in fact, was not a recognized one. Instead, as shown earlier, the Vietnamese scholars affirmed that the new faith the Hmong chose was a fake religion that should be seriously prevented. There were numerous published and unpublished academic research alarming the government of the development of ‘Vang Tsu,’ which was tightly related to a western tradition – Protestantism<sup>64</sup>.

After finding out about the Hmong conversion in 1991, the government started to apply strict policies upon Hmong converts to stop them from converting and to force the converts to return back to their traditional belief that was actually banned by the government before. Although in

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<sup>61</sup> Viết Đăng Bế 1996, 27.

<sup>62</sup> Viết Đăng Bế 1996, 26.

<sup>63</sup> ‘economic reasons’ means *lý do kinh tế* in Vietnamese. This term is employed in this research because that has been often used by Vietnamese scholars when it comes to explaining the Hmong’s migration to the Central Highlands in the early 1990s. In fact, it is more equivalent to the term ‘economic motivation’.

<sup>64</sup> Discussions on Vang Tsu and Protestantism are available in previous sections.

Vietnamese literature, only words 'administrative sanctions', 'strict preventing methods'<sup>65</sup> and 'rude behavior' (*ưng xử thô bạo*)<sup>66</sup> have been used to describe how the Vietnamese government prevented the conversion since 1991, violence was widely reported on human right observers' documents and international media. In fact, death cases of some converts in several communes of Hà Giang were bitterly shared with me while I was in the field. Those who were put into jails for 're-educating' or even 'threatening' purposes are numerous. All in all, the fact that the Hmong converts in northern Vietnam in the early 1990s were violently attacked is undeniable.

In addition, discrimination was increasingly common within Hmong villages, particularly in the early months and years of conversion. It is obvious that practicing proper funeral ceremonies is tremendously important in traditional Hmong lives. Some respected old Hmong in the focal village I did my research even said that during wartime, the Hmong would always go in a group of at least three. So that if one died, there were two others who could perform the '*bài ca chí đờng*' ritual (*khua kev* means *showing the way*)<sup>67</sup> to guide the dead person returning back to their ancestors. Therefore, changes in religious belief lead to changes in how people respond to death. Traditional Hmong seemed to find it unacceptable to see their family members, who are closest to them, abandon the traditional faith that their ancestors had maintained for centuries. At this point, it should be noted that the Hmong are believed to leave and will not return if they have severe conflicts among clans or communities that cannot be solved<sup>68</sup>. In the case of conversion, the traditional Hmong, in fact, attempted to convince the converts to return to their old religion. If the results were not positive, some converts were even kicked out of the house and even seriously insulted. While talking with the Hmong people of both North Vietnam and the Central Highlands at various times since my 2016 trip, I was told numerous cases that a Hmong convert is no longer considered a member of the family. Consequently, this convert has no right to take the land as an inheritance from her or his parents. The converts in the years of the late 1980s and early 1990s eventually decided *to leave*. Muas S. determinedly said: "*We had been poor for hundred years. We had been living there [northern mountainous Vietnam] for so long. Why we just left because of being poor. We were not accepted. Then we went... If not because of 'following God' (theo/tin Chúa), maybe the Hmong still move here [Đắk Lắk] but it should be a while later, like twenty or thirty years later*"<sup>69</sup>. This opinion is, in fact, widely shared among Hmong in Yagad, even though some of them have not yet been officially

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<sup>65</sup> Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 47.

<sup>66</sup> Hồng Dương Nguyễn 2000, 83.

<sup>67</sup> Seeing previous part on the Traditional Hmong Religion for further information.

<sup>68</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 104.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Muas S. (male, age 40) on October 14 2018 and a follow-up personal conversation with him on 16 October 16 2018.

baptized. For instance, although not converting, Haam P. – Yagad secretary – proposed that “*If it was not because of this conversion [Protestantism], the Hmong would not have moved here until the year of 2000 something*”<sup>70</sup>. Admittedly, in the early period of the conversion, the new religion was ‘the new’; understandably, the number of converts was not dominant, and their voice was largely taken for granted. As a result, instead of getting into continuous conflicts, the Hmong found a wise way out.

The opinions on economic or religious reasons vary by political and religious positions. Although in Vietnamese academic discussions, the economic reasons have been the only essential factors driving the Hmong southward migrations. However, when we attempt to listen to the voices on both sides, we can see the divisions. While the highest official on Religion Affairs in the Central Highlands’ province told me that “*the Hmong came here because they were so poor. Religion did not matter*”<sup>71</sup>, other religious leaders and adherents shared the opposite stance. I had several interviews and personal talks with a Vietnamese Kinh ECV-S leader in *Tây Nguyên* who had been supporting the Hmong for decades, he said: “*if three Jews make a Bank, three Chinese make a restaurant, then three Hmong make a Church.*” He proudly shared that “*the Hmong Protestants in the province were only 18% of total CMA*<sup>72</sup> Protestants, but they contributed 1/3 to build this building (a CMA’s office where we were having the conversation). They bought me an over one billion-Vietnam dong car too... They moved here definitely because of desiring to follow God that they could not do in the North”<sup>73</sup>.

Let us look back at some data. In 1979, it was recorded that there were no Hmong in Đắk Lắk. Meanwhile, though the *Đổi mới* began in 1986 with numerous new Migration Policies implemented, which created many migration waves among lowland and upland people across the country, there were still no massive Hmong groups that arrived in this province from 1986 to 1990. While local research I could access revealed that many Hmong had arrived in the Central Highlands since 1989, the Vietnamese scholars only mention ‘since 1986’<sup>74</sup> – a couple of years earlier than when such migrations indeed occurred. Besides, it is remarkable that most Hmong southward migrants in the early 1990s were those who converted to Protestants, not those who maintained their traditional religion. By 2013, it is still reported that the number of Hmong converts was 21,293, generating 72.5% of the Hmong population in Đắk Lắk<sup>75</sup>. All

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<sup>70</sup> Haam P., interview by author, 19 November 2018.

<sup>71</sup> N. C., interview by author, 26 November 2018.

<sup>72</sup> As previously clarified, ECV adherents and leaders often call their denomination ‘CMA.’

<sup>73</sup> H. C., interview by author, 26 November 2018.

<sup>74</sup> For instance, see Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013., Đức Phương Đoàn 2018.

<sup>75</sup> According to Đoàn, the total number of Hmong Christians in Đắk Lắk in 2013 is 21,293 in which 476 are Catholics and 28,899 Protestants. This might be a typo as the number of Hmong Protestants cannot be higher than that of total Hmong Christians. Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 53.

these facts show that ‘the Hmong, who converted to Protestantism and were pro-Protestantism, started collectively leaving northern Vietnam for the Central Highlands since the early 1990s, yet that phenomenon has not been accurately recorded in government-sponsored reports.’ In other words, those Hmong converts did not migrate at the time numerous other people of various ethnic backgrounds in the country did, yet at the time their conversion to Protestantism had just been detected and remarkably prevented.

As a matter of fact, in the late 1980s, the Hmong’s religious change was still in an early period that brought them many uncertainties. Thus, they may not be determined to make a decision like ‘moving to another place.’ Also, their ‘following God’ phenomenon was not detected at that time; thus, they could still secretly practice their new faith and endure the discrimination of their traditional family members, relatives, and neighbors. However, the government’s severe continuous intervention in the early 1990s might finally be the straw that broke the camel’s back. As a result, those Hmong Protestants found a solution to get rid of such severe circumstances. Empirically, some elderly Hmong in Lakad and Yagad also shared that they found it easier and more independent to leave their home villages after converting as they no longer depended on any shaman if they died. Thus, ‘being Protestant’ is an advantage for the converts to consider their migration decision.

When it comes to the government-sponsored research, the idea that ‘the Hmong migrated to the Central Highlands because of economic reasons rather than religious reasons’ serves as the general statement. If we look deeper into the dilemma that the Hmong Christians confronted by the time their change of religion was not accepted, it seems to be more understandable. I will return to this matter in the latter parts as the circumstances are better illuminated in specific cases.

To conclude, it is evident that the Hmong migration from mountainous northern Vietnam to the Central Highlands in the early 1990s was religion driven. Although it cannot be entirely applicable to the subsequent waves of migration in the same direction, it is the most valid point I find for the Hmong pioneer migrants. As a result, the religious choice eventually became the deciding force that changed the demography of the whole Hmong people in Vietnam: spreading their presence to the South. In the context of religious conversion, their decision to move is an active response to the Vietnamese government’s harsh intervention and their traditional people to overcome their stranded circumstance. Although they have been a marginalized ethnic minority and unheard group in Vietnam, the Hmong bravely took action to rescue themselves and follow their authentic religious faith. ‘Economy or Religion-driven migration?’ this question seems unimportant to those religious people. A Hmong Protestant pastor, who has

profoundly led the Hmong Christians on their first days in the Central Highlands, sincerely admitted that “*it is just God’s Will, God’s Grace that we, the Hmong, from various villages in the North at the same time followed God then together moved here*”<sup>76</sup>.

### 6.2.2 Migration and Settlement: Legal or Illegal?

The Hmong’s migration from upland North to high hills in the South has been blamed for being out of law and surreptitious. These ethnic minority migrants are accused of ‘running away’ from the government by choosing remote forest regions to settle down, which has eventually caused deforestation. In this section, I would like to re-examine these assumptions. Specifically, I would contextualize this migration case to better understand what these voiceless people had been going through and learning what the first migrants – first Hmong Protestant migrants living in the Central Highlands village - thought and did.

First, the Hmong converts, who desired to move, actively sought help and permission from the government at all levels. However, their Christianity-related activities were always banned and aggressively observed. Therefore, in any request, they could not mention their religion or its related concerns. As being rejected by local authorities<sup>77</sup>, Xyooj H. told me that he and his peers went to Hanoi to ask for a meeting with the nation’s highest leaders. He, the respected 54-year-old man, shared: “*I went Hanoi and asked for a meeting with the Head of Ủy ban Dân tộc và Miền Núi*<sup>78</sup>, but he was on a business trip. I then was taken to meet with the Deputy Prime Minister (*Phó Thủ tướng Chính phủ*). I said we wanted to go to Đăk Lăk; we needed the permission”<sup>79</sup>. Undoubtedly, seeking higher political power was a wise decision the Hmong made at that difficult time. I then asked about the reasons he mentioned in the document, he said: “*only for doing economy (làm kinh tế), because they would never accept if I mentioned God.*” At this point, anyone in such a sensitive and tough case would understand what is the best to do in order to be a good citizen and still be able to follow their heart. Regrettably, this type of answer that the Hmong had to choose while encountering authorities may have caused a misunderstanding of their true thoughts. In fact, in most of the research and reports provided by Vietnamese scholars, one can find that the main reason for the Hmong to convert and/or migrate is always an economic-related reason, even in the latest published book in 2020<sup>80</sup>. On

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<sup>76</sup> Hawj L., interview by author, 5 January 2019.

<sup>77</sup> In fact, at that time if a local government allows the Hmong to migrate, they would be accused to do the wrong thing, see Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 112.

<sup>78</sup> Xyooj H. mentioned the exact former name of Ủy ban Dân tộc (The Committee for Ethnic Minorities Affairs now), which used to be Ủy ban Dân Tộc và Miền Núi (can be translated to ‘the Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas’) from October 1992 to August 2002.

<sup>79</sup> Xyooj H., interview by author, 13 January 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Quang Hưng Nguyễn 2020a, 259.

the other hand, this reality implies that the government, in such cases, failed to encourage its citizens to be authentic in their hardest circumstances when they had no choice to guarantee their lives.

However, it should be noted that the above case was not the only time the Hmong came to Hanoi to seek help. As mentioned in the previous part, the Hmong were not allowed to follow their new religion. Getting first news about God via a radio broadcast in the 1980s (FEBC), the Hmong were able to get in touch with a Hmong Pastor, who often preached via that radio wave, by sending him letters and/or cassettes through travelers in northern Vietnam. They finally were guided to come to ECV-N at No. 2 Ngõ Trạm to get support on learning more about God. The Hmong then secretly came to Hanoi group by group. However, the local government leaders were awestruck by that fact. After returning from Hanoi, some Hmong were detected and asked to come to a government office. A high local official then looked at them, surprised, and said: “*even we cannot go to Hanoi*<sup>81</sup>. *How could you, Hmong guys, do it?*”<sup>82</sup>. But the Hmong actually did it, numerous times.

The process of getting permission was actually followed by their attempts to learn about the targeted land, even by traveling there to see things with their own eyes. This fact obviously shows their carefulness and reasoning capabilities. All pioneer migrants I had a chance to talk with in the field said that they or their male family members/ relatives or friends came to the Central Highlands several years before their final settlement in 1995 or 1996 to study the area. They even attempted to meet with local political leaders such as the secretary and the president of the receiving communes where they wanted to move to. I was lucky to be able to listen from two sides. The former Đắk commune secretary recalled: ‘*At that time, I was an office assistant. I still remember two or three Hmong came in to see our secretary on a day close to Tết (Vietnamese Lunar New Year). They brought, as I remember, a chicken and wine or so, and asked us if they could move here. At that time, we could not say Yes. We could not decide. They left. Then after a while, another group came. I cannot remember exactly, but yes, they came to ask us*’<sup>83</sup>. At this point, it is undeniable that the Hmong did not ‘run away’ from the government to avoid any management/ control. Instead, they held such a conscious political attitude that perfectly matched the Vietnamese Confucius culture of ‘respect by gift’ as well as the bureaucratic system of communist Vietnam.

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<sup>81</sup> In the early 1990, transportation was inconvenient. In upland people’s imagination, Hanoi capital city was a far and powerful place that not too many people in remote areas had the privilege and were able to visit.

<sup>82</sup> Xyooj H., interview by author, 13 January 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with the former Đắk secretary T. T. on 24 December 2018.



In terms of the deforestation, the Hmong were blamed for settling down in some forest areas that were listed as ‘protected forest’ (*rừng phòng hộ*) on government documents<sup>84</sup>, yet my research shows that they ended up staying in Yagad with the local government’s permission and had not been a major force in the destruction of forest. Apart from actively asking for the local government’s permission, the Hmong in my research’s focal village were also legally allowed to settle down after several months after they arrived. The local government then came to help them officially set up the village, establishing the main road. People were, in fact, able to participate in a drawing with an equal chance (*bốc thăm dân chủ*/ democratic draw) to receive their land for building a house.

In short, after migrating to the Central Highlands and being officially allowed to settle down in the mid-1990s, then build a new village called Yagad, local Hmong Protestants were to be able to set up their religious groups as well as step by step obtaining their freedom of religion which would be discussed in detail in later chapters. Thus, it can be said that successful migration and proper settlement of the Hmong converts in Yagad are actually the last steps in their conversion process, which opened a new journey for them to define and strengthen their new religious faith as well as complete their religious organization.

### 6.2.3 *Hmong Migrations and Political Concerns*

It is a fact that both internal and international migrations<sup>85</sup> of the Hmong have worried the Vietnamese government. The ideas of establishing ‘the Hmong Kingdom,’ suspicious Protestant missionaries and outlaw activities of ‘*nhóm phi*’ (gangs) and/or reactionary groups are applied to explain for those migrations of the Hmong, which then become the ‘red alarm’ for the authorities. The cases examined above revealed that Hmong migrations to the Central Highlands are more likely to be their own rational choice, which is more often than not well planned rather than being motivated by any political incentives. This section will provide a further discussion supporting that assumption, focusing on a common sensitive topic among Vietnamese officials and scholars: *Hmong Migrations and Political Concerns*.

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<sup>84</sup> Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 127-8., Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 11.

<sup>85</sup> Apart from Hmong migrations within Vietnam, 23,026 Hmong are believed to leave Vietnam for Laos, China, and Myanmar from 1986 to 2010. While the number of people who moved back to their original land of China and Myanmar is small, generating only 3.41% and 0.5% respectively of total Hmong internationally migrated; the group who chose to move to Laos is quite large, up to 22,056 individuals. The wave of migration to Myanmar is actually reported to begin only in recent years, and most of the migrants are from the northwestern province of Điện Biên. See Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 52.



*Objective Fact: The receiving lands in the Central Highlands.* Northwestern Vietnam, western Thanh Hoá<sup>86</sup> and Nghệ An, and the Central Highlands are destinations the Hmong chose to migrate to after their conversion in the late 1980s. Most domestic researchers particularly point out that the Hmong migrated to those places because they were naïve to follow a false rumor of ‘going toward the West to welcome Vang Tsu’<sup>87</sup>. However, several objective facts are largely taken for granted.

First, the Central Highlands has been well-known for its tolerance of Protestantism. According to my research, although there is no obvious explanation for this truth, some Vietnamese scholars firmly insist that the local governments in this region are more open to Christianity<sup>88</sup>. In fact, Protestantism was introduced to people of the Central Highlands much earlier compared to those of northern Vietnam<sup>89</sup>. While the former region received profound support from the westerners such as the French and the Americans as well as their Vietnamese allies in history, the latter region became less ‘Christian,’ particularly after the victory of the Vietnamese Communists in 1945. It is recorded that up to 50% of those who migrated toward the Central Highlands from North Vietnam right after 1954 were Protestants. In fact, while there were no active Protestant missionaries among ethnic minorities in the North from 1954 to 1975, it is documented that this Christian branch obtained significant success among minorities of the Central Highlands and Central Coast (*Duyên hải miền Trung*)<sup>90</sup>. Consequently, the Central Highlands seems to be enormously appealing to Christians, especially to those who confront religious intervention from the government, such as Hmong converts of northern Vietnam.

Accordingly, the news on such promising land might arrive in northern Hmong villages in different ways. For instance, the Hmong’s neighbors who actually migrated to the Central Highlands a long time before might have spread the message of this region in the northern mountains, which the Hmong finally heard. It should be noted that ethnic minorities in the upland are able to communicate with each other, often by learning the others’ language. I witnessed in a village of the Central Highlands that some Nung girls communicated very well in the Hmong language with their Hmong neighbors. Also, several Hmong shared with me that they heard about Đăk Lăk directly from their same-ethnic soldiers who joined the Vietnamese

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<sup>86</sup> One of the fact that make the Hmong southward migration, which began in the early 1990s and lasted until recently, the phenomenon is that almost 100% of 2,000 migrant households arrived in Quan Hoá and Mường Lát districts of Thanh Hoá province in 2002 were the Hmong, see Tuấn Nam Đậu 2013, 37.

<sup>87</sup> For example, see Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 196-8., Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al. 2018, 12-3.

<sup>88</sup> Quang Hưng Nguyễn 2020b, 452.

<sup>89</sup> Details on Protestantism of the Central Highland would be further provided in a subsequent chapter.

<sup>90</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009, 90-8.

army in the Southern battleground (*chiến trường miền Nam*). They were told that Đắc Lắc was a fertile land for the Hmong to live and do farming.

Furthermore, it is a fact that the Hmong living places in the northern mountains were actually intervened by the Vietnamese government in the 1960s. Several re-settlement policies applied, such as moving lowland Vietnamese to settle in mountainous regions or moving the Hmong to settle in lowland regions<sup>91</sup>. This intervention might have broken the Hmong stable living patterns, which likely led to their dissatisfaction with such unexpected changes. It is also probable that such changes have inspired them to start to think of other land and seek better opportunities. Particularly, the *Đổi mới* even better facilitates motilities among citizens of various ethnic backgrounds. Not only the lowland Vietnamese Kinh easily move up to the midland and mountainous areas, either following or not following the government's plans, but also highland people, such as the Hmong, have more chances to seek other lands. These realities might more or less affect the way the Hmong planned their moves.

In short, the Hmong people have been well-known for their deep desire for freedom and autonomy. The given case additionally demonstrates that they are more often than not reasonable in making migration decisions rather than just disorganized and unlawful moves as they have been accused of. It might be problematic if one only considers the Hmong's economic motivation when concluding that '*the Hmong are a 'migrating tribe*'. For instance, they are believed to seek other farming land when the current fields are exhausted. To my knowledge, I propose that those Hmong only leave their home villages and migrate collectively to another land after carefully considering and planning. As previously shown, they have no political incentive while converting to a western religion or migrating to western regions of Vietnam such as *Tây Bắc* and *Tây Nguyên*. Instead, they only seek the most proper solutions to get rid of their extreme hardships and to maximize their freedom and autonomy as much as they are able to.

*Subjective Fact: Vajntxwv or Vajtswv.* As said, the desire to establish 'the Hmong Kingdom' of the Hmong has been a major concern of the Vietnamese government about this people, particularly among the converts. However, *what do the Hmong Protestants think about their Hmong Kingdom?* My research participants show that there is a misunderstanding of how the Hmong think of their Vang Tsu (*Vajtswv*).

As mentioned in Chapter 4, a Vang Tsu phenomenon occurred among the Hmong of northern Vietnam around 1987. Although varying by location and time, Vang Tsu movements have

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<sup>91</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2009, 47.

several shared characteristics. More specifically, movement leader(s) always called themselves people or the son(s) of Vang Tsu. They then spread promises and prophecies in the community, such as the Hmong King would return and help the Hmong to have a prosperous life. Those who trusted them began to pay tribute (*nôp*) cigarettes and red cloth for their leaders. They were also encouraged to buy a radio to listen to Vang Tsu's teachings. In addition, they prepared to welcome Vang Tsu by giving up farming, killing cattle, and learning how to fly in mountains that even led to some deaths<sup>92</sup>.

The term 'Vang Tsu' is believed to be '*Vương Chủ*' (the King) in the Hmong language, as some scholars attempt to explain. Accordingly, it is believed that Vang Tsu missionaries took advantage of the Hmong King's role in Hmong thinking to call God as '*Vua Chủ Trời*' (The Hmong author Vương Duy Quang defines it as *Vangx Chur Ntuz* in the Hmong language). The Hmong, therefore, would easily make the mistake of recognizing God as their King<sup>93</sup>. In other words, it is believed that the Hmong word for God was intentionally translated to a concept that was similar to the Hmong King, which eventually would fool the Hmong people. This negative way of explaining the phenomenon of 'following God' among the Hmong is not rare in Vietnamese literature. Vang Tsu leaders are often described as '*kẻ cầm đầu*'<sup>94</sup> who took advantage of, made empty promises, and even threaten Hmong people to convert them. The Vang Tsu phenomenon is considered a '*sự hỗn tạp*' (a hotpot) of indigenous religious elements, which includes shamanism and Daoism and western Christianity as well as unknown factors that cannot be defined. Such movement leaders and participants are believed to be '*hoang tưởng*' (delusional)<sup>95</sup>. Viewing people this way seems to be 'considering them to have a mental illness that might take their deep thoughts for granted.'

As a matter of fact, the conclusion on the relation between the term *Hmong King* and *God* has influenced common knowledge about the close link between Christianity and the Hmong's consistent desire to establish their own kingdom called 'the Hmong Kingdom' (*Vương quốc Mông*) where the Hmong King would return and rule. It is a fact that not only in the academic literature but also in numerous newspapers sponsored by the Vietnamese government, the term '*Nhà nước Mông*' (the Hmong State) or '*Vương quốc Mông*' (the Hmong Kingdom) is repeatedly related to enemy forces who incite the Hmong to fight against the government, which definitely affects public awareness. Consequently, in many cases, Christianity is automatically blamed for its relevance to Hmong revolts based on the rumor of establishing the Hmong

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<sup>92</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005b, 129-30.

<sup>93</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 133.

<sup>94</sup> As explained elsewhere in this research, '*kẻ cầm đầu*' is a Vietnamese word that refers to and strongly disdains group leader(s).

<sup>95</sup> The author uses '*Vàng Chủ*' that also refers to 'Vang Tsu,' Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 134-91.

Kingdom. The 2011 *Mường Nhé* revolt is an example. It is documented that in last days of April and early days of May 2011, there were 7,000 Hmong from different parts of the country moved to Nậm Kè commune (Mường Nhé district, Điện Biên province), built tents in the region of Huổi Khon hill and stayed there. They were convinced and collectively gathered to welcome the Hmong King and establish the Hmong Kingdom which created a riot in the region. One can find a variety of sources in Vietnamese that accuse some Hmong of ‘calling the Hmong to follow Vàng Chứ’ to establish ‘*Vương quốc Mông*’<sup>96</sup>.

Meanwhile, according to my participants, ‘Vang Tsu’ does not mean *Vương Chủ* (the King), as some scholars have claimed. There are two words that sound similar but have different meanings, which are *Vajntxwv* and *Vajtswv*. While *Vajntxwv* (or Vang Ntxwv) means the King, *Vajtswv* (or Vang Tsu/ Vajtswv Ntuj) means God<sup>97</sup>. The latter one did not originally exist in the Hmong language; it was first introduced to the Hmong via FEBC. Most noticeably, while the pastor who offered the Hmong Christian sermons in their own language was a native Hmong named Vam Txoov Lis, who is known in English as John Lee, most scholars ignore this fact. Instead, they only mention that FEBC is an American radio program that attempts to take advantage of naïve Hmong and fight against the Vietnamese State. In some Vietnamese writing, the pastor - if he was mentioned - even was misnamed as ‘*mủ sư Vạ Trống*’<sup>98</sup> and was considered to be Vang Tsu<sup>99</sup>. These ways of misunderstanding may have been used to make false statements on the Hmong’s response to their same-ethnic pastor and what he possibly honestly shared with their people rather than ‘strategically doing missionary work to convert strangers.’ And, if someone looks at such a unique connection between Vietnamese Hmong in the remote Southeast Asian massif and their same-ethnic pastor on the other side of the globe who had enthusiastically shared his knowledge and experience with his people elsewhere, s/he may find the act of ‘following God’ among these people more understandable and human.

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<sup>96</sup> For example, see an article from the People (*Nhân dân*) Newspaper, which is the central organ of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the voice of the Party, State and People of Vietnam “Xét Xử Đối Tượng Có Âm Mưu Thành Lập ‘Vương Quốc Mông’ [Judging Those Who Conspired to Establish ‘The Hmong Kingdom’],” *Nhân dân Điện tử*, September 26, 2013, Accessed June 19, 2020, <https://www.nhandan.com.vn/xahoi/item/21301302-.html>.

<sup>97</sup> While some old Hmong Protestants told me Vang Ntsu means the King, and Vang Tsu means God, most of the younger Hmong said Vajntxwv means the King, and Vajtswv means God. However, all of the Hmong I talked with insisted that the King and God are two different words in the Hmong language, and their people first heard about God from pastor Lis.

<sup>98</sup> *Mủ sư* should be *mục sư* (pastor) in Vietnamese, however as the Hmong has their accent they often pronounce *mủ sư* rather than *mục sư*. In addition, *Vạ Trống* is the way the Hmong usually pronounce their first pastor Vam Txxov. ‘*Mủ sư Vạ Trống*’ in no way means Vang Tsu.

<sup>99</sup> Thị Mai Phương Võ 2017, 185.

### 6.3 A Theoretical Perspective on Religion and Migration

‘Religion and migration’ has become a common umbrella topic that has drawn increasing attention in various disciplines, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and theology. Based on this empirical evidence-based research, I would provide a brief discussion on the history of religion and migration studies. My discussion would spell out some problems in the literature and offer an unusual perspective to view the correlation between religion and migration will be proposed based on this empirical evidence-based research.

In the beginning, human migrations - both voluntary and forced - challenged scholars to view it through various life aspects. Being acknowledged as a stimulating pioneering effort to approach the relationship of religious membership to immigrants’ assimilation<sup>100</sup>, J. J. Mol (1971) is one of the very first scholars to look closer at the relationship between religion and migration in the context of the 1970s.

Since the 1980s, the studies on this topic have been significantly developed in various ways, particularly regarding the theme of ‘diaspora religion’<sup>101</sup>. Kim Knott (1980s’ Community Religions Project) became one of the first scholars to provide more profound thoughts on the topic by analyzing the theoretical relationship between religion, ethnicity, and identity as well as discovering how religion has changed and been transplanted overseas<sup>102</sup>. Hinnells (1997) highlights the importance of the black African diaspora and migration from South Asia that had been neglected<sup>103</sup>. He also goes further by discussing how religion is changed in overseas contexts. Generally, these pioneer works pay particular attention to ‘migration and ethnicity’ and consider it under the term ‘diasporic religion.’ In current years, the theme of ‘diaspora religion’ has been explicitly explored with a focus on the ‘content’ of religious continuity and transformation in various local, national and international contexts<sup>104</sup>.

It is obvious that most of the contemporary academic research on ‘religion and migration’ (or ‘migration and religion’) is conducted on one religious tradition and/or ethnic community in the hosting countries, mainly in North America and Europe<sup>105</sup>. This tendency has led to the fact that the departure context is largely ignored, particularly when it comes to migrations in

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<sup>100</sup> JJ Mol, “Immigrant Absorption and Religion,” *International Migration Review* 5, no. 1 (1971): 62.

<sup>101</sup> See Ninian Smart, “The Importance of Diasporas,” in *Gilgul* (Brill, 1987), 288–97.

<sup>102</sup> Kim Knott, *Religion and Identity, and the Study of Ethnic Minority Religions in Britain* (Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1986).

<sup>103</sup> John R Hinnells, “The Study of Diaspora Religion,” in *A New Handbook of Living Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), 683.

<sup>104</sup> Sean McLoughlin, “Migration, Diaspora and Transnationalism: Transformations of Religion and Culture in a Globalising Age,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 542.

<sup>105</sup> Also see McLoughlin 2005, 542., Martha Frederiks, “Religion, Migration, and Identity: A Conceptual and Theoretical Exploration,” in *Religion, Migration and Identity* (Brill, 2016), 14.

Asia. Also, the role of religion for migrants' settlement and integration process in the new land is dominant in the study of religion and migration. In other words, the role religion plays in the migration-making-decision process is rarely documented. 'Religion' at this point can be the old religion that migrants choose to maintain or the new one that they decide to convert to. For example, Gozdziaik illuminates the role of religion and spirituality in ameliorating the suffering of ethnic Albanians fleeing Kosova; Celia McMichael considers the role of Islam in reconstructing Somali refugee women's lives in a diasporic setting<sup>106</sup>; Shibuya, Fong, and Shu research the religious effects on the likelihood of employment for immigrants and local-born youth in Canada, and Beek and Fleischmann provide a comprehensive comparison of Turkish and Moroccan minorities in the Netherlands regarding the link between their religiosity and various dimensions of integration<sup>107</sup>. In 2005, the European Forum for Migration hosted a workshop bringing twenty-seven experts from Europe and North America together to discuss 'The Role of Religion for Integration of Migrants'<sup>108</sup>.

Finally, the relationship between religion and migration is mainly approached through the lenses of 'religion, migration and diaspora/transnationalism'<sup>109</sup>. In other words, only transnational migrations/ migrants are paid special attention. For example, Muslim migrants' descendants in Germany (Tobias Roth 2019<sup>110</sup>); in England, Germany, and the Netherlands (Kogan and Weißmann 2019<sup>111</sup>); Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian migrants in Melbourne, Australia (David R. Cox 1983<sup>112</sup>); ethnic minorities of Asian origin in Britain (Kim Knott 1992<sup>113</sup>) the Zoroastrian communities outside Iran (Hinnells 2005<sup>114</sup>). The term 'migrant' itself is also defined as "a person who has moved to a country other than his/ her country of usual residence for at least a year so that the country of destination effectively becomes the new country of residence"<sup>115</sup>. Even if there have been a few studies on regional migration

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<sup>106</sup> Elzbieta M Godziak and Dianna J Shandy, "Editorial Introduction: Religion and Spirituality in Forced Migration," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 2 (2002): 129–35.

<sup>107</sup> Irena Kogan, Eric Fong, and Jeffrey G. Reitz, "Religion and Integration among Immigrant and Minority Youth," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, June 14, 2019, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1620408>.

<sup>108</sup> See Sybille Drexler and Friedrich Heckmann, "The Role of Religion for the Integration of Migrants. A Conference Report," in *European Forum for Migration Studies*, 2005.

<sup>109</sup> Frederiks 2016, 15.

<sup>110</sup> Tobias Roth, "The Role of Religion, Religiousness and Religious Participation in the School-to-Work Transition in Germany," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2019, 1–23.

<sup>111</sup> Irena Kogan and Markus Weißmann, "Religion and Sexuality: Between-and within-Individual Differences in Attitudes to Pre-Marital Cohabitation among Adolescents in Four European Countries," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2019, 1–25.

<sup>112</sup> David R. Cox, "Religion and the Welfare of Immigrants," *Australian Social Work* 36, no. 1 (January 1, 1983): 3–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03124078308549741>.

<sup>113</sup> Knott 1992.

<sup>114</sup> John R Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2005a).

<sup>115</sup> 1998 United Nation's definition, cited from Frederiks 2016, 10.



elsewhere<sup>116</sup>, internal/ domestic migration in developing countries has not become a major interest in international scholarship.

In short, existing research on ‘religion and migration’ is mainly conducted on transnational exoduses after the time migrants have already settled in the new land to see which role religion plays among immigrant communities. Almost all of these scholarly works have been done in Northern America or Europe, which are considered developed regions. These research trends have led to the fact that “Most theory building on migration and religion arises from qualitative research conducted in the North American context”<sup>117</sup>. Considering the matter from such view, this research attempts to view the relationship between religion and migration through an uncommon lens in an unusual context: *an intensive study on the role of religion in the decision-making process of migration among marginalized ethnic people in a developing communist country*.

Going further, the findings presented in previous sections suggest that ‘religion can be a chief motivation for migration instead of being only a catalyst or a post-migration effect as usual’. Although there are some studies focusing on how religion effects the ‘migration intention’ or ‘migration selection,’ religion only plays a supporting role<sup>118</sup>. In other words, most research aim to explore the impact/ role of religion on migrants’ settlement and adaptation in the new land. Again, ‘religion’ at this point can be their old religion or the one they already converted to. They, migrants, either choose to maintain their old religion or convert to another one to adopt the new circumstances. This study, as mentioned earlier, reveals that religion might be the essential force that causes migration. In this case, the role of religion is counted as the initial motivation not only for immigrants (*dân nhập cư*) but also for the demographic change of a whole ethnic group – the Hmong.

In short, I believe that doing research on the departing context and the role of religion in migrants’ decisions would provide a fuller understanding of the correlation relationship between ‘religion and migration,’ as well as their impact on a single ethnic group and in a wider context. In addition, this type of research perspective would be able to reflect ethnic politics in a specific nation and/or territory. Although this situation may not be common in the world,

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<sup>116</sup> Such as Carmel L Jones, “Migration, Religion, and Occupational Mobility of Southern Appalachians in Muncie, Indiana” (Thesis (D. Ed.), Indiana, Ball State University, 1978)., Roger W Stump, “Regional Migration and Religious Commitment in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1984, 292–303.,

<sup>117</sup> Frederiks 2016, 14.

<sup>118</sup> For example, see Stephen H Kan and Yun Kim, “Religious Affiliation and Migration Intentions in Nonmetropolitan Utah,” *Rural Sociology* 46, no. 4 (1981): 669., Stephen Lubkemann, “Where to Be an Ancestor? Reconstituting Socio-spiritual Worlds among Displaced Mozambicans,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 2 (2002): 189–212., and Nathalie E Williams, Arland Thornton, and Linda C Young-DeMarco, “Migrant Values and Beliefs: How Are They Different and How Do They Change?,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, no. 5 (2014): 796–813.



particularly in nations where all citizens' freedom of religion is better guaranteed, it can still happen among groups who desire to migrate because of religion-related reasons such as for more conveniently worshipping and/or attending religious activities. At this point, one can conclude that religion not only plays a vital role in the settlement process of migrants but may also be the life motivation and/or key reason to make life-changing decisions for a person and their whole family. In such cases, deeply studying 'the religious motivation of migrants' can be an important variable when it comes to research of religious belief that has been known as a hard-to-measure aspect in the study of religion.

While most of the other research investigates the religion of migrants in the host country to see if they maintain their religion or convert to another religion, this research was conducted among people who already converted and migrated. Furthermore, because this is a domestic migration, local contexts should be carefully considered. Doing so would enable us to not only understand the migrant people but also the socio-political and cultural context they have been involved in. In the case of communist Vietnam in particular, it reflects the intolerant attitude towards a western religion, especially in the early period of the conversion, and inappropriate policies carried out on disadvantaged ethnic minorities without proper understanding./.

## Chapter 7. Living Out the Faith: Church Organization and Religious

### Practices

While concrete details on Hmong Protestant denominations, organization, and religious activities in Vietnam in both Vietnamese and English are rarely documented, several international newspapers focus on drawing bloody pictures and make sensational conclusions on how Hmong Protestants in this socialist country are not allowed to practice their faith without pointing out which denomination they belong to. It is a fact that the Vietnamese government did a severe intervention in preventing Hmong from converting to Protestantism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, it is also a fact that Hmong Protestants have been restlessly confronting and overcoming continuous challenges to truly live out their faith. This chapter aims to provide a better understanding of their current church organization and collective religious activities with specification on denominations.

#### 7.1 Church Organization: Structure, Officers, and Units

In this section, I would present the history of the local Hmong CMA house church and its current organization that is, in fact, both similar to and unique compared to the mainstream Protestant churches in Vietnam and elsewhere. In particular, regardless of denominations, no Hmong Protestant groups in the Central Highlands are acknowledged to call their worship place a ‘church.’ Instead, they are named ‘prayer place,’ ‘religious group’ or ‘house of worship.’ Although not literally equivalent to any words referring to worship places of Hmong Protestants, ‘house church’ is usually used in English literature to refer to a similar concept: *worshiping in private homes*. Therefore, in this dissertation, I would use ‘house church’ and sometimes ‘church’ to refer to Hmong Protestant worship places, yet it does not mean they are the official ‘church’ in Vietnam. Further discussion on this matter would be later provided.

##### 7.1.1 Hmong CMA House Church in Yagad: A History

*First Days in the Central Highlands.* Although most Hmong followed God before arriving in the focal village – Yagad, neither established a well-organized church nor had well-trained pastors. When they first settled, all households set up praying groups by themselves. At first, three groups were established and located across the village led by three male Hmong in their

late 20s, namely Xooyj S., Yaaj L., and Yaaj H. These three group leaders<sup>1</sup> were not theologically trained, which was a common trait of the Hmong converts at that time. They, therefore, played the role of organizers rather than religious leaders.

In the years of 1997 and 1998, several people, including Mrs. Lê Thị Mỹ Huệ – the daughter of a late ECV-S pastor named Lê Khắc Cung who was in charge of *Ban Hiệp Nguyễn Đắc Lắc* (the Committee of United Prayer of Đắc Lắc) – visited these groups of Hmong converts then guided them to establish *Hội thánh Tin Lành Yagad* (the Yagad Protestant Church). Since then, local groups were guided by an Ede pastor named Y Mía, who came every month to organize a *Lễ Tiệc Thánh* (Holy Communion, which is celebrated on the first Sunday of a month) for Hmong adherents. Very first Yagad villagers then were able to attend Theology Training are Xoom H., Haam X., and Tsheej S. Among them, Haam X. then became an ordained pastor (*Mục sư Tân phong*), who is the current leader of the Yagad church. At that time, as Protestantism was not widely and legally recognized, Theology Training was only carried out as '*Lớp Thầm lặng*' (Silent Course). In other words, theological courses were only held in secret without the government's permission. Since then, the Hmong local Protestant house church belongs to ECV-S, often called '*Tổng Liên hội*'<sup>2</sup>.

In fact, I have heard different narratives on the first Hmong groups settling in Yagad. The first village head – Yaaj P., shared that they were not allowed to pray in a group when they first arrived. Some district policemen came in and asked them to not believe in God. Some others shared that government officials gave them President Hồ Chí Minh's picture to hang on their house walls. On the last day, I was in Yagad, pastor Haam X. showed me all documents that the district police office sent him and asked him to show up for interrogating. Sometimes he even got threaten by them. Therefore, it can be said that in the first days being in the Central Highlands, Hmong Protestants also confronted prevention from the government. However, it seemed to be less severe than while they were in the North and confronted not only government intervention but also traditional Hmong's pressure.

'How such connection between Đắc Lắc Protestant leaders and Hmong God followers was began' is not clearly told by Yagad pioneers. Pastor Haam X. only said that pastor Lê Khắc Cung somehow heard about the Hmong convert group in Yagad; he then assigned some people to visit Hmong<sup>3</sup>. On a trip visiting Hawj L.<sup>4</sup> – a leading Hmong pastor of the Central Highlands

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<sup>1</sup> Hmong people used the word '*người hướng dẫn*' to refer to these group leaders, which is equivalent to 'the instructor' in English.

<sup>2</sup> *Tổng Liên hội* can be translated to 'General Association,' even though it is not literally exact.

<sup>3</sup> Haam X., interview by author, 04 November 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Hawj L., interview by author, 05 January 2019.

- in Đắk Nông province, I got a more precise answer. According to Hawj L., he was one of the first Hmong who was connected with CMA Đắk Lắk by ECV-N (*CMA Miền Bắc*). He sincerely said, 'I sought them and met with pastor Lê Khắc Cung first, the Kinh (Vietnamese Kinh) rarely actively found us. Like the time we were in the North, we found a way to meet with Kinh pastors; first, they the Kinh would not go up to the mountains to find us.' An Ede acquaintance in Cây Sốt 3 (a commonplace of Buôn Mê Thuột, Đắk Lắk) took Hawj L. to meet with pastor Cung. At first, pastor Cung hesitated to let his people visiting the Hmong because he was afraid of getting involved with the government.

*Continued Prohibition from the Government (1999 – 2006).* After being established with the enormous support from CMA Đắk Lắk, Hmong converts of Yagad confronted continuous prohibition from the local government. It is reported that throughout this period, there were numerous times that prayer group leaders of Yagad were asked to present at the district police station then again got interrogated by officials. Sometimes, they were kept at the police station for weeks. As a result, the villagers were banned from following God, and CMA pastors could not come to the village to hold *Lễ Tiệc Thánh* (Holy Communion) and supporting Hmong adherents. CMA leaders then assigned Haam X. to continue conducting Holy Communion in the village.

*Officially recognized by the Church and the Government: Limited Freedom.* On 05 October 2001, the Yagad Protestant group was officially recognized as a member of ECV-S (also *CMA South*); however, their activities were still in secret to avoid being detected by the government. In 2001, three group leaders who at that time worked as members of *Ban Hướng Dẫn* (Guiding Board) were approved to participate in theology training courses in Đắk Lắk.

In 2007, the Yagad church was finally recognized and allowed by the government to unite five different groups and pray at one worship place. Since then, all Hmong adherents in the village have collectively practiced their Christian faith at the private house of the religious leader Hamm X. By the year 2007, the Yagad house church had 1,487 adherents in which 715 were male, and 772 were female, and 600 out of 1,487 were baptized. At the beginning of 2009, there were 688 out of 1,625 baptized adherents. In the years of 2006 – 2008, Haam X. was allowed to join a Complementary Theology Course (*Lớp Bổ túc Thần học*) at Buôn Ma Thuột Protestant church of Đắk Lắk officially offered by ECV-S.

Although being legally recognized, Yagad was not allowed to extend their house church even though they already submitted documents to ask for the government's permission for years. It should be noticed that in the present day, the Yagad house church is still legally a private house that Haam X. voluntarily donates for the whole Hmong convert community in

the village to have a place for gatherings. If they want to be called a ‘church’ (*nhà thờ*), the land ownership should be changed to ‘religious land’ (*đất tôn giáo*). Such procedure is, in fact, tremendously complicated. The land’s owner should first return the land to the government; then, the government may work on processing the change of land ownership to ‘religious land.’ However, the process is always unpredictable. To both Catholics and Protestants, such *land matters* (*vấn đề đất đai*) have always been their concerns that it might take years or decades for the government to resolve<sup>5</sup>. One of the most famous events related to this matter is the Vietnamese government was accused of confiscating the Thái Hà parish land in 2008<sup>6</sup>. Such event may result in hesitation and concerns among Christian leaders.

By 2018, there are 2,261 Hmong (1061 males and 1200 females) adherents in total at the church, which makes Yagad the biggest Hmong CMA group by population in the Central Highlands. The present-day Hmong CMA church in Yagad would be discussed in detail in subsequent sections.

#### *7.1.2 Relationship between local Hmong church and ECV-S: Vertical*

As previously mentioned, ECV-S is the very first Protestant denomination in Vietnam that was originally supported by a nondenominational American Protestant organization – CMA. Thanks to the Hmong’s connection with ECV-N in the early 1990s and then with ECV-S in their first years settling down in the Central Highlands, Yagad Hmong CMA house church now is a church member of ECV-S. However, until the present day, there are still doubts and questions raised mainly by government officials on the essence of the relationship between the local Hmong Protestant church and ECV-S, and among it with other foreign religious organizations. Some commune leaders told me that Hmong Protestants might get financial support elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, maybe from ECV-S or foreign religious organizations and that they might not be able to develop their community that fast without any external help. In fact, this accuse occurs not only in the literature and among officials of Central Highlands but also officials in northern Vietnam<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> At a meeting between the Đắk Lắk officials on Religious Affairs and Catholic and Protestant leaders in November 2018 in Buôn Mê Thuật that I was able to participate in, the most common issues raised by religious leaders are ‘land-related matters,’ yet nothing is resolved or promised to be soon resolved. In Vietnam, ‘religious land’ has been a controversial concern.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see “Vietnam: End Crackdown on Catholics” (Human Rights Watch, October 6, 2008), Accessed February 17, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/10/06/vietnam-end-crackdown-catholics>.

<sup>7</sup> I talked with some Vietnamese Kinh government officials and a retired local high school rector in the morning on 19 December 2018 before an official meeting with the commune secretary.

<sup>8</sup> In a meeting that my colleagues and I had with district leaders in Mộc Châu, Sơn La province in December 2016, they shared similar concerns.

As mentioned previously, Hmong CMA Protestants not only got direct help from pastors and missionaries of ECV-S on their early days setting up first prayer groups but also throughout their process of attempting to be recognized by the government. In the present day, ECV-S, particularly their office in Đắk Lắk province, has still supported Hmong followers in remote villages to a certain extent. Apart from being in charge of informing Hmong church members of detailed guidelines on religious rituals as well as government regulations, ECV-S provides Bible copies in the paperback version and daily Bible interpretation handbooks (*Kinh thánh hàng ngày*) to the Hmong. While printing Bible in the Hmong language has not been permitted by the Vietnamese government, ECV-S is a secured channel for Hmong converts to get the Bible, yet in a limited amount. Fortunately, thanks to the availability of smart devices, Hmong who afford to buy one can access the online Bible in their native language.

Meanwhile, other guidelines, documents or Daily Bible Handbooks are only written in Vietnamese. Thus, official texts would be translated to the Hmong language and be informed to all adherents. In terms of the Daily Bible Handbook, while most ordinary followers do not have it, group leaders<sup>9</sup> take advantage of suggested topics and interpretations on it, then use their knowledge and experience, which are more familiar with ordinary Hmong, to share with them. In general, only documents and reports sent by and submitted to ECV-S are in Vietnamese; the speaking language used during worship services and prayer groups are always in Hmong.

Furthermore, once in a while, ECV-S's pastors are assigned to visit Hmong churches for *Lễ Bồi linh* (*Sinh hoạt Bồi linh/ Conference*<sup>10</sup>). One or a couple of Vietnamese Kinh ECV-S pastors would come and preach sermons and particularly answer any questions of adherents. There might not be any restrictions on the ethnic group of the pastor who is expected to preach at *Bồi linh* ceremony, but as far as I learn, there are only Vietnamese Kinh pastors who come in recent times. In such ceremony, the Hmong offer consecutive translations in Vietnamese and Hmong for the audience. This type of ceremony is more formal and ordinary Hmong Protestants rarely come and ask ECV-S pastors any theological questions or have interaction with them. At those special ceremonies, ECV-S pastors play critical roles like Master of Ceremony (*Chủ Lễ*) and Speaker (*Diễn giả*).

Regarding theology training, ECV-S also offers education for those who would like to study more about theology, obtain a certificate, or desire to become a pastor. Such activity is available

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<sup>9</sup> Details on Daily Prayer Groups would be provided on subsequent sections.

<sup>10</sup> One of a Hmong CMA woman in Seattle told me that such ceremony may refer to 'Conference' in the Hmong CMA community in the United States, yet she was not sure. While *Lễ Bồi Linh* has no equivalent English term, I use its Vietnamese one. Linda Vaaj, conversation with author, 08 March 2021.

in various forms. Those who finish their high school (12<sup>th</sup> grade) with a diploma and achieve a certain level of English (normally B1-European framework) would be qualified to enroll in Bachelor of Theology program (*Cử nhân Thần học*), which is equal to a University degree. In the meantime, those who have a lower level of education might be considered to attend part-time certificate such as Complementary Certificate of Theology (*Bổ túc Thần học*). Since such a theological diploma and degree are closely related to Hmong clergy, I would further discuss the section of Hmong religious leaders and church officers.

When it comes to financing, the local Hmong churches are greatly independent. Despite existing economic difficulties, Hmong converts not only do 1/10 contribution seriously, build their praying house without the support of any external organizations, including ECV-S, but also contribute their money to ECV-S monthly and occasionally<sup>11</sup>. These facts show a vast difference from how the Hmong conversion to Protestantism has been interpreted, particularly in the beginning period, that they change their religion mainly due to their economic incentives. Meanwhile, only ordained pastors are qualified to get a small amount of monthly salary or reimbursement for traveling fees or so from ECV-S. In cases of lacking money to do some critical work, a Hmong church may loan from other Hmong churches. For instance, the Lakad II Hmong CMA church had to loan 160,000,000 VND for building their house church in 2018<sup>12</sup>.

Except for the direct connection with ECV-S, as far as I have learned in the field, this Hmong Protestant church has no relationship or association with any groups abroad, neither Hmong diaspora nor Christian denominations. Plus, no foreign non-profit organizations are reported to be active in the region. As mentioned before, even foreign travelers who go over Yagad on their way to tourist destinations, such as Nha Trang, are not allowed to stay in the village overnight. Therefore, analysis and statements on the Hmong diaspora network are not applicable to this group of Hmong in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. In this study, they are only used for comparative purposes if applicable. On the individual scale, only a couple of cases of free migrations to Myanmar among Hmong in the village is reported, but they already returned<sup>13</sup>. Although I did not have a chance to stay in other Hmong villages of the Central Highlands for long enough, I am fairly certain that other Hmong CMA house churches across the region are similar to Yagad Hmong church when it comes to the involvement in ‘foreign elements.’

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<sup>11</sup> My interviews with Hmong pastors and adherents at different Hmong CMA churches in Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông agree with it.

<sup>12</sup> Haam M. P., interview by author, 24 October 2018.

<sup>13</sup> The second son of Xyooj H. and two brothers of Yaaj A. – a 30 female religious leader – are reported to go abroad around ten years ago, yet Xyooj H.’s son just came back last year.



Nowadays, there are approximately 20,000 Hmong Protestants among 180,000 Protestants of all ethnic groups belonging to ECV-S in Đắk Lắk. The Yagad Hmong church is the largest by number and is the only recognized church lead by an ordained pastor in the province. The church is also one out of two Hmong CMA groups that are able to conduct a Congress as a *Chi hội*<sup>14</sup>. In total, ECV-S has 354 groups across the province. In 2016, it was reported that the total Protestants generate around 10% of the population in Đắk Lắk.

### 7.1.3 Within the Local Church: Horizontal

It is widely acknowledged that Protestantism varies by denominations, and there is no central authority within this branch of Christianity. To run the denomination as a whole, ECV-S also establishes an administrative system for effective management. Accordingly, the Hmong CMA church in Yagad also has its organizational structure vastly based on ECV-S guidelines, yet they too are greatly independent in running their church in order to create the most accessible and convenient religious environment for their adherents.

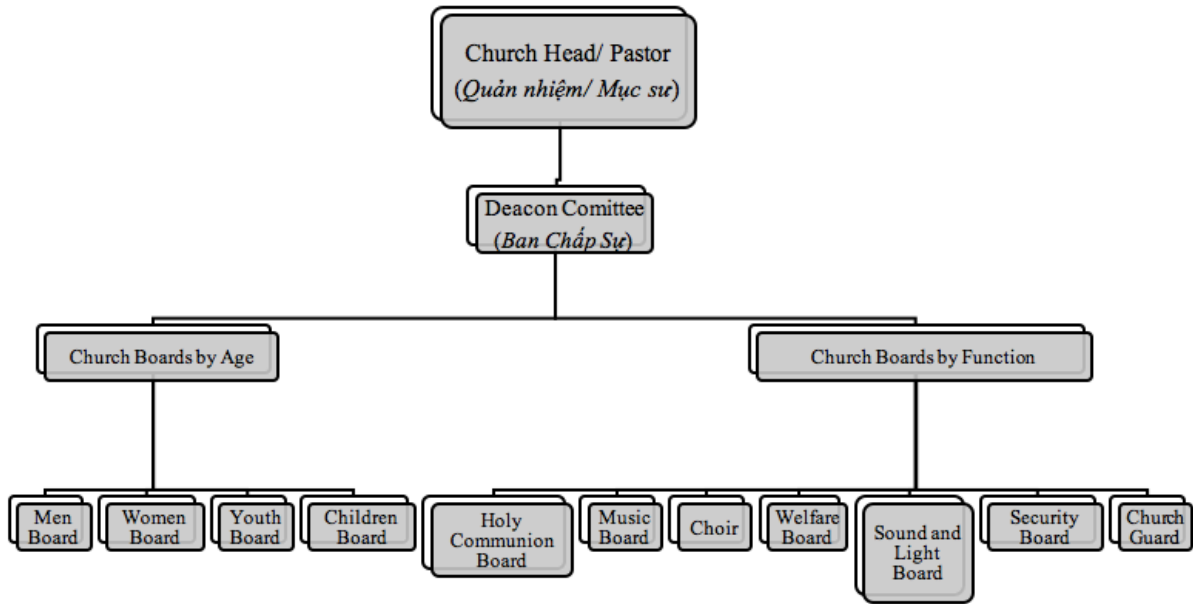
First of all, the Hmong church organization is presented in the figure below. It should be noted that not all English terms are precisely equivalent to Vietnamese terms as language is fundamentally shaped by culture. For example, one of the church board called '*Ban thăm viếng chãm sóc*' which literally means 'Visiting Sick People, Funeral and Care Board' that sounds confusing; thus, I define it as 'Welfare Board' which should be similar by essence. In any case, if the translated terms cause confusion, it would be noted. Otherwise, most of the terms are closely equivalent.

Details on the Hmong church organization, roles of religious leaders as well as officers would be provided in subsequent sections.

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<sup>14</sup> '*Chi hội*' refers typically to a local union/ unit at the national organization's commune level. A '*Chi hội*' is considered independent, and it has the right to do Congress on a term basis. It is possible that '*Chi hội*' is first used within communist organizations, such as *Hội Liên hiệp Phụ nữ* (Vietnam Women's Union), *Hội Nông dân* (Vietnam Farmers' Union), instead of within a religious congregation.

Figure 7 Yagad Hmong CMA Church Organization



Note: I divide all church boards into two categories that, I hope, would be more understandable for later precise discussion on Bible studies groups which actually are Church Boards by Age by essence but have certain unique characteristics. In fact, eleven church boards are in same category.

*Religious Leaders and Church Officers.* As can be seen from the chart, a church head (*Quản nhiệm*) can be the pastor who is supposed to be responsible for most of church work and functions as a religious head. Sometimes, a church head is neither a pastor nor a trained missionary. For example, in a neighboring commune of Yagad, there is a Hmong CMA house church whose church head is an experienced male Hmong, while the only trained missionary at that group is a late 20s male Hmong. Noticeably, while at a house church which is qualified to be defined as a ‘*Chi hội*’ or ‘*Chi hội nội bộ*’<sup>15</sup>, their church head would be called ‘*Quản nhiệm*.’ Meanwhile, if the house church is only defined ‘*điểm nhóm*’ or ‘*nhóm cầu nguyện*’ (religious group or worship group), their church head would be called ‘*trưởng nhóm*’ (group head).

‘Missionary’ (*truyền đạo/ thầy truyền đạo*) is, in fact, a reputable position in the Hmong converts community as such trained missionaries have to attend theological courses to obtain a certificate named ‘*Bằng Bổ túc Thần học*’ (Complementary Certificate of Theology). Although this type of certificate is not a full-time degree, it is officially offered by ECV-S and classes available in Buôn Mê Thuật ECV-S church, Đăk Lăk for those who are not qualified and/or not

<sup>15</sup> An explanation of the term ‘*Chi hội*’ is available in the previous section.

able to attend the Bachelor of Theology Program (*Chương trình Cử nhân Thần học*). Meanwhile, the Hmong who are qualified for the Bachelor program have to go to the Institute of the Bible of Theology (*Viện Thánh kinh Thần học*) located in District 2 of Hồ Chí Minh city to study. This theology school opens to all qualified CMA candidates of various ethnic backgrounds, yet most of the classes are in Vietnamese. Furthermore, this full-time Bachelor's degree has certain requirements that not many Hmong, particularly those who are above 35 years old, are able to meet, such as a high school certificate and certain English proficiency<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, both types of training acknowledge their graduated Hmong the title 'missionary.'

There are various clergy levels within ECV-S and its church members, in which missionary is the first level. Following a standard order, after working several years, a missionary can be assigned to be an appointed-pastor (*Mục sư Nhiệm chức*)<sup>17</sup>. In turn, an appointed-pastor should work hard for several additional years to officially be an ordained pastor.

To become a Protestant religious leader, particularly an ordained pastor, the person should not only be trained and promoted/ recognized by their registered denomination but also the government. In fact, their profile should be submitted to the government from the beginning for an identity check. In some cases, even when a candidate passes their exam on theology and ministry, s/he may not be ordained if the government does not approve. This particular procedure is quite common in Vietnam, especially applied to all Christian denominations.

From the beginning to the late 2000s, Hmong candidates were more often than not classified as 'exceptional cases' since they were well-known for facing many challenges in maintaining their faith as well as having limited access to education. Such disadvantages prevented them from being qualified for any theological training programs of ECV-S. As a result, to have Hmong pastors who would be to lead their huge and remote religious communities, ECV-S had especially supported them to finish their training and be ordained even though they may not meet all requirements<sup>18</sup>. Such flexibility was also applied to Hmong pioneer followers who desired to attend theological courses. For instance, Yaaj L. is one of the first group leaders in

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<sup>16</sup> A current Hmong student of Bachelor of Theology told me that he was not able to submit a B1 (the Common European Framework of Reference CEFR) by the time he was accepted, but he already passed the exam while studying in Saigon (Hồ Chí Minh city).

<sup>17</sup> *Mục sư Nhiệm chức* may not be common in other Protestant denominations across the world. However, it is a crucial position in Vietnam for those who want to become an officially ordained pastor (*Mục sư Tấn phong*) to be challenged and trained, especially within ECV-S and ECV-N – the registered and the most prestigious Protestant denomination in Vietnam.

<sup>18</sup> These flexible regulations applied to Hmong converts are shared and confirmed by both ECV-S officers and the Hmong ordained pastor.

Yagad. Although he only completed the second grade of elementary school<sup>19</sup>, he was still able to participate in theological training in the late 1990s offered by ECV-S.

In recent years, the ordination procedure, as well as theological training admission, are no longer lenient to Hmong converts. To be precise, apart from requirements on education and English proficiency as mentioned above, all ‘would-be ordained pastor’ candidates have only two chances for their ordination exam (in Vietnamese it is *thăm vấn mục sư*). If they fail, they would no longer be allowed to apply. Generally speaking, ECV-S, as well as ECV-N, are well-known for their strictest requirements on the clergy system. They are also the oldest and most prestigious Protestant denomination in Vietnam. For example, to become a CMA ordained pastor, a Hmong has to not only obtain either a theology certificate or Bachelor of Theology to become a missionary first, but also serve at church for years that may take him or her up to more than ten years without any certainty of ‘would-be ordained pastor’. I have met three pioneer Hmong Protestant leaders in the Central Highlands; only two are ordained pastors, and one is appointed pastor. Three pastors first worked with ECV-S from the beginning when the Hmong first migrated to the Central Highlands decades ago. By the time I was in Yagad, there was only one Hmong – Yaaj Q. – who was studying in Hồ Chí Minh city for Bachelor of Theology<sup>20</sup>, while the total adherents of Yagad are over 2,200.

Obviously, attending theological courses and pursuing a degree in Theology is still challenging for Hmong Protestant communities today. While ECV-S waives tuition and house rent for students, yearly living expenses are estimated to be 20,000,000 VND, which is yet a financial burden for many followers who desire to study as the local church cannot sponsor everyone. There is a deacon member, Yaaj T. L., who is in his early 30s shared that he had planned to enroll theological program for years yet cannot make it because of his financial situation. In fact, he spent most of his time serving the church, but there is no monthly wage. When I was in the village, I lived nearby his house and saw his wife going to a forest or field often to earn money. Sometimes when he returned home late from an evening prayer group at around 10 p.m., while having late dinner with some leftover vegetables, his son came in and asked for help with school homework. The case of Yaaj T. L is the typical dilemma that only devout Hmong Protestants but also their local churches are confronting.

In terms of duties, only ordained pastors are able to perform baptism and marriage rituals. Meanwhile, missionary and deacon members are more likely to be allowed to preach and

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<sup>19</sup> To be clarified, an 8th-year-old kid is expected already to complete the second grade in the Vietnamese education system.

<sup>20</sup> Yaaj Q. was recently graduated and started working as a deacon for a Hmong CMA house church in Krông Bông. Yaaj Q., conversation with author, 20 November 2020.

practice other rituals if they are experienced and approved by church leaders. In Yagad, there is only one missionary who is in his late 50s. The position of a missionary in a CMA church is not always apparent. S/he may not be a member of the Deacon committee, yet may play roles such as prayer group leader or pastor's assistant. That is why I do not include 'missionary' in the organizational chart of the Yagad church. In fact, 'missionary' (*truyền đạo viên*) may be similar to 'minister' at many western Protestant denominations, yet 'minister' is often translated to '*mục sư*' (pastor) in Vietnamese. Thus, I do not make them synonyms here to avoid any confusion.

Regarding the Deacon Committee (DC), there are nine committee members at Yagad church; two are females in their early 30s. Depending on the church size, human resources, and the church's preferences, the total number of DC at each Hmong CMA church varies. For example, at a Hmong CMA church in Đắk Nông, there are seventeen DC members in which the only one is female while their total number of adherents is lower than that of Yagad. In general, DC members are not required to have a theology qualification. However, they are more often than not given chances to lead church groups, organize religious rituals, meet with the pastor and missionaries, etc. Thus, they are empowered to become experienced and knowledgeable church officers. They then are able to practice a certain number of religious events such as 'New Home Blessing' or 'Child Dedication,' and preach at sub-groups as well as at church services. Typically, a DC has a two-year term. When a term ends, an election would be organized for all church members to vote. A respected DC member can be re-elected if s/he is supported by 75% of voters. Throughout the year, Yagad DC has a meeting per month in which the pastor also participates, more often than not after a Sunday afternoon service<sup>21</sup>.

There are no missionaries, appointed pastors, and ordained pastors who are female at any Hmong CMA group in the Central Highlands, even though no gender restrictions applied within the clergy of ECV-S. However, it is noticeable that more and more Hmong women participate in Protestant clergy and perform ministry services. Meanwhile, their involvement in broader traditional society is very little. In contrast, the number of males in DC and church group leaders is significantly higher than that of females, which is true at all Hmong house churches I visited. When it comes to this imbalance, I was told that Hmong girls are quite active in '*hầu việc Chúa*'/ '*làm việc Chúa*' (do ministry services/ do God's work) while they are single; but after getting married, they would more likely to stay home for housework and taking care of their kid(s). In many cases, a marriage between a Hmong girl of Yagad to a man of another Hmong

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<sup>21</sup> Further information on Sunday afternoon service is provided in section 'Regular Church Service.'

village makes her no longer be a member of Yagad. Therefore, the number of female Hmong serving at church is less stable than their male counterparts. Statistically, 56 males and 14 females doing ministry services in various roles.

*Church Boards.* Church boards are mainly classified by function and include one or a few members, except for the choir and *Ban Tiệc Thánh* (Holy Communion Board). Holy Communion Board has thirteen members in charge of preparing, bringing trays of holy bread and holy wine to all baptized adherents, and helping with other work until the service ends at the Holy Communion ceremony. In terms of Choir Board, there are no exact numbers of total members revealed either on official reports or by church leaders<sup>22</sup>, yet choir members are actually active in boards by age rather than in the broader Choir Board. For example, there are numerous choirs of different groups such as Women group, Youth group, and Children group. Whereas, Welfare Board works on occasions when adherents are sick, passed away, or in need of being prayed for. At the end of the year in the Lunar calendar, church officers often visit the poorest households in the village, give them some gifts such as rice and money, and pray for them.

‘Church Boards by Age,’ meanwhile, mainly function in sub-groups rather than within four boards indicated on the organization chart above. Those sub-groups, in fact, differ by their activities. Thus, I would provide further details on them along with their religious practice in the subsequent section.

## **7.2 Collective Religious Practices**

Compared to beliefs, religious practices seem to be much more visible. The portion for changes ‘in practices’ of Hmong converts compared to ‘in beliefs’ also takes many more lines in some academic work<sup>23</sup>. Although some scholars mention Hmong Protestants’ religious life or acknowledge spiritual changes among Hmong migrants in the Central Highlands, most descriptions and discussions are not provided in detail and mainly based on interviews with religious leaders instead of ordinary Hmong converts. How the Hmong Protestants actually practice their faith has not yet been systematically explored. In this chapter, I attempt to show Hmong’s religious life from two perspectives: ‘being Protestants’ and ‘being Hmong.’ Does Protestantism as a world religion fully cover the Hmong’s spiritual life or the Hmong has been actively adapting to it as an independent group although they are unprivileged minority people?

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<sup>22</sup> In general, a pastor or a group leader cannot remember detailed statistical data of all boards and groups at their church. Meanwhile, only four ‘Boards by Age’ mentioned on Yagad church reports that do not precisely reflect active groups in the village. Further details are available in subsequent sections.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, see Thị Mai Phương Võ 2017, Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al. 2018.

Before going into details, I would like to clarify that this section on *collective practices* aims to explore what religious gatherings and events that Hmong Protestants have involved in are, how they prepare, and what they do during and/or after such cases. In other words, any observable collective acts and behaviors that are fundamentally pervaded by their religion would be discussed. In the meanwhile, I define ‘*what they eat, drink or dress up as well as other patterns of behaviors in a shared specific space*’ as customs that, in fact, can be religious or not. Therefore, such customs would be discussed in Chapter 10 to demonstrate how Hmong customs have been reconstructed since they converted to a new religion – Christianity.

As a matter of fact, being a recognized religion in Vietnam, ECV-S has clear and concise guidelines on how a church member, such as the Yagad Hmong CMA Church, should organize their rituals. As a result, activities in local churches might reflect ECV-S’s general instructions. However, being Hmong differs from being in other ethnic groups. It is obvious that how the Hmong practice Christianity cannot be exactly similar to how others do. This section discovers common as well as unique characteristics of collective religious practices among Hmong CMA Protestants through *Regular Church Services and Activities*, *Yearly Events*, and *Life-circle Events*.

### *7.2.1 Regular Church Services and Activities*

*Sunday Services.* Similar to most Protestant communities, Yagad Church provides regular Sunday services. However, instead of offering the only morning Sunday mass<sup>24</sup>, this local church set up two gathering sessions for its adherents to come, pray and learn about the Bible. While the first session on Sundays starts at 7 a.m. and finishes around 9 a.m., the second session begins at 2 p.m. and lasts around one hour or sometimes slightly longer. Whereas the former session often focuses on preaching, the latter one is on teaching the Bible. According to the pastor and some other church leaders, whole Sundays are devoted to mass services so that all adherents have a place to gather instead of spending their time in unbeneficial activities. Besides, as there are many followers who have not yet well understood Christian teachings, such long-day services give everyone chances to get more involved in studying Bibles.

*Bible Studies groups*<sup>25</sup>. Sundays in the village even look more dynamic as there are various Bible studies groups active all day long in the church’s neighborhood. In essence, Bible studies

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<sup>24</sup> If we compare only among Hmong CMA churches in the district, it is the fact that all other groups only provide morning Sunday service.

<sup>25</sup> Although Hmong Protestants do not define such groups as ‘Bible Studies groups’, they are, in fact, groups who gather together once a week to study Bible. It might be problematic if they are defined ‘Church Boards’; that is how they call themselves because there are only four Church Boards on official documents. At this point, it can be seen that the local Hmong church has restructured their church organization for better performance relying on their specific conditions.



are weekly activities of church boards performing in more specific groups. They are more or less related to each other. While there are only four boards (Men Board, Women Board, Youth Board, and Children Board<sup>26</sup>); six Bible Studies groups are having private gatherings mainly on Sundays or training sessions together for special religious events, which are: Children Group (*nhóm thiếu nhi-ấu nhi*), Youth Group I (*nhóm thiếu niên*)<sup>27</sup>, Youth Group II (*nhóm thanh niên*), Middle-Age Men Group (*nhóm trung-tráng niên, only males*), Women Group (*nhóm phụ nữ*), and Elderly Men Group (*nhóm các ông/bô lão, only males*). As a matter of fact, age classification by group is not fixed. Church members are flexible in choosing which group they belong to as long as age and gender difference is not too obvious. There is also no age regulation on official documents of the Yagad church. For example, if a 20-year-old man is already married, he would be more likely to join the Middle-Age Men Group instead of Youth Group II. Except for the Children and Youth Groups, which are for both females and males, it is noticeable that even the total number of women at the church is slightly higher than that of men. There are two Bible studies groups that are particularly for males and only one for females. As the number of Women Group members is much higher than men, it may be why they gather at one group at the church where space is enough for them rather than limited space at a private house of an adherent.

In terms of the weekly schedule, while the Children group gathers before Sunday mass, from 6:15 a.m. to 7 a.m. in two groups, other groups gather after the morning service finishes.

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<sup>26</sup> Children Board refers to ‘*Ban Thiếu niên – Nhi đồng*’ or ‘*Ban Thiếu niên – Nhi đồng ấu*’ which are interchangeably used in Yagad official documents. While ‘*ấu*’ in ‘*ấu nhi*’ literally means infants, I use ‘Children Board’ that seems to convey the most accurate meaning of this group. In fact, according to official Regulations by Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneer Organization (Đội Thiếu niên Tiền phong Hồ Chí Minh or Đội) that most Vietnamese follow in terms of ‘age classification,’ *Nhi đồng* refer to children of 6 – 8 age range, *Thiếu niên* refers to children of 9 – 14 age range. Meanwhile, Vietnamese laws (for example, Law regarding Child Sexual Abuse) claims the age of children is below 16 years old. Therefore, it should be clear that, in the field, this Children Board includes children below six years old and between 6 – 14 years old. However, when it comes to Bible Studies groups, there are separated groups of *Nhi đồng* and *Thiếu niên*. All in all, Yagad is, in fact, flexible in age as sometimes personal group preference may be the reason to choose which group they would like to belong to, as long as the age difference is not too obvious.

<sup>27</sup> No equivalent English words refer to both age groups of *Thiếu Niên* (9-14) and *Thanh Niên* (16-30) in Vietnamese. While the age ranges mentioned are classified by two official communist organizations of Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneer Organization and Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, it is confusing which group the age range of 14 – 16 belongs to.

*Table 3 Bible Studies Groups*

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Time Active</b>	<b>Gathering Place</b>	<b>Registered Members</b>	<b>Regular Members</b>
Children	6 a.m. – 7 a.m.	two private houses	619	584
Youth I	10:15 to 11 (a.m.)	private house	136	75
Youth II	10:15 to 11 (a.m.)	private house	80	60
Middle-Age Men	10 a.m. – 11 a.m.	private house	42	35
Women	9 a.m. – 10 a.m.	Church	550	489
Elderly Men	9 a.m. – 10 a.m.	private house	50	30

As we can see from the table above, active hours vary by group that does not allow me to regularly attend one specific group as many times as I hoped I could. In fact, jumping into a group when adherents were already in service was also inconvenient. Therefore, every Sunday, I asked to join one group and stay with them for the whole session. In general, these groups' essential characteristics are: 'more focused,' 'more creative,' and 'more effective' than at collective mass at the church. While listening to the sermon at Sunday service or other mass events, almost all adherents only passively listen. Bible studies groups are much more interactive. Every group has a blackboard to write on what they have learned, do a creative quiz on Bible verses (*đó Kinh thánh*) to make the atmosphere more vibrant. Once in a while, the group leader(s) may randomly check to see if people remember what they have learned from previous lessons. Some groups even practice and perform plays (*kịch*) to illustrate Bible stories, which would more effectively convey messages from the Bible, such as the Youth II group. For large groups, they actively divide the group into smaller units (*tổ*) for better performance. Meanwhile, members of Middle-Age Men seem to be quieter and more reticent. If someone comes early before the group starts, s/he often silently waits for the rest instead of talking out loud. Generally speaking, they have a quite serious demeanor.

Apart from such active groups, there are classes located across the region offered to children that may be equivalent to Sunday School in western Churches. There are fifteen classes located across five villages of the Yagad region. Each class has around thirty to forty students. Such classes are taken care of by a group of 35 teachers (*nhóm thầy cô*) in which there are 28 males and seven female Hmong. In classes of children under six (*ấu nhi*), there are always two teachers in charge of teaching and managing the class. Although such untrained teachers feel that they are lack teaching skills and hope to be provided such training in the future, children in the village do benefit from these classes such as they have chances to study Hmong script at very early ages that help them to be literate much earlier than their grandparents and parents'

generations. Generally speaking, if a visitor first comes to visit Yagad, I believe s/he might be amazed how dynamic a Sunday in the village can be. It does appear to be a big and colorful festival of thousands of participants.

*Lễ Tiệc Thánh (Holy Communion).* Every first Sunday of a month in the Gregorian calendar, the Yagad church organizes a ‘*Lễ Tiệc Thánh*’, which should be equivalent to ‘*Holy Communion*’ in English. Unlike normal Sunday afternoon gatherings, this mass begins earlier at noon (12 p.m.) and lasts approximately two hours. On such day, while morning service is still maintained as usual, there is no longer an afternoon session as the Holy feast is taken instead. During *Lễ Tiệc thánh*, only baptized Hmong Protestants can attend and be offered ‘*bánh thánh*’ (holy bread) and ‘*rượu thánh*’ (holy wine). Those who are excommunicated are not allowed to participate. Mainly similar to such special occasions in Protestant and Catholic traditions, holy bread and wine are symbolized in biscuit pieces and red soda. At Yagad Hmong church, Deacon Committee (*Ban Chấp sự*) is in charge of preparing before the mass, offering holy goods to, and taking back drinking cups from every adherent throughout the service. Those management board members go back and forth in a strict order that displays high solemnity of the holy atmosphere.

Like their Protestant peers in Thanh Hoá province<sup>28</sup>, the Hmong converts do not go to the field or work on Sundays, even though they do not go to church. They strictly follow this law, except for an inconsiderable number of youths<sup>29</sup>.

*Wednesday Morning Service.* In addition, every week, Yagad Church provides another regular service every Wednesday morning, from 5 a.m. to around 6 a.m. Like other Hmong Protestant groups in the region, Yagad used to have Thursday evening mass before 2008/ 2009. However, the pastor and villagers<sup>30</sup> reveal that several unwanted problems happened while most of the followers came to Church for evenings, such as thievery. Plus, as the church has more than two thousand followers, it is extremely challenging to control if they all are away from home throughout the evenings when it is dark. As the mass is in the early mornings, sometimes, fewer people come to church if it is heavily rainy. For example, as I could count, there were only around 110 women and 70 men attending the Wednesday morning service on 21 November 2018 when it was rainy. The total number of participants is usually about four

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<sup>28</sup> Trường Giang Vũ, “Người Thái và Người Hmông Với Đạo Công Giáo và Đạo Tin Lành ở Miền Núi Thanh Hoá [Thai and Hmong with Catholicism and Protestantism in Mountainous the Thanh Hoa],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 4 (2005): 59.

<sup>29</sup> See further discussion in Chapter 10.

<sup>30</sup> Haam X., interview by author, 21 October 2018. Data was checked with many villagers in daily conversations.

hundred or more. On regular days they arrive quite early, around 4:30 a.m. Those who come by feet have to use a flashlight as it is still dark.

*Daily Prayer Groups.* Finally, religious activities in the village are active until the end of the day, thanks to numerous daily prayer groups located in every part of the focal region. There are seven daily groups active (*nhóm hàng ngày*) to guarantee that all adherents across the region can join the nearest one. Those groups start at 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. and last around one hour. The duration depends on whether guests or the choir are visiting them or if their members have more concerns to share or be prayed for. As far as I observe, in most cases, people less likely to attend daily evening gatherings if it is a Sunday or a special day that they already have a mass during day time, such as Christmas. For instance, a daily group in the area (II) has only 19 women, and seven men (only two middle-aged men, five are elderly) on Sunday evenings, while there are up to 30 – 60 participants on other days.

As such daily groups are in smaller sizes and private, it is more visible to see how the Hmong behave throughout a religious ritual. In general, they always attempt to save electricity, only turn on the light in front when there are some people. The number of women usually is higher than that of men. Most women are between 30 and 60 years old. Elderly women may not fully understand the Bible but more actively ask for being prayed (*pray request*) during daily gatherings. They also get sleepy more easily or even fall asleep during prayer time or while the group leader preached *Kinh thánh hàng ngày* (Daily Bible booklet). There is a church choir that visits every daily group in turn. These choir members always follow orders and are highly principled, disregarding how big or small the praying place is. Also, Deacon Committee members, except for the pastor, are responsible for visiting daily groups, following specific schedules that are flexible.

The attitude of adherents can be a source of inspiring church leaders' work. After we visit one of the furthest daily groups (V-i) located in the area (V), the church secretary said, 'this group always motivates us, not us helping them.' People of group V-i were poorer than those who live in central Yagad. They even did not have enough light in the praying room as the electricity was weak, and the number of bulbs was limited, yet enough to bright up their beliefs. There was also no internet service. It is explained that V-i followers cannot go to collect wood to sell as those of Yagad center. In this group, kids are also quieter compared to those of other daily groups. They seemed to understand the sacred religious ritual that they were having. Plus, this group has the most stable number of adherents come compared to others regardless of the weather or any other external factors, around 20-25 persons regularly. Generally, the number of people attending daily prayer vary by groups, from 15 to 20 people in average. There is only

one group (III-i), which has around four to six followers who come regularly. As I can perceive and learn from villagers, there are several reasons explain for this exceptional case. First, ordinary followers find it harder to share with the group leader of (III-i) than with other leaders of the church. Second, the area where III-i is located also has two other groups, which offer people more choices.

Apart from singing hymn commune praying at the beginning, a typical evening gathering at a daily group has several key contents. First, the group leader preaches a short sermon follows the Daily Bible booklet provided by ECV-S. While this booklet is in the Vietnamese language, every lesson is shared with Hmong adherents in their native language. What most resonates with me is how the Hmong Protestants speak out loud their prayer at the end. Their voices are getting louder and louder, and all together. Such special way of praying lasts around five minutes and may be completed by anyone among all participants. When I asked whether or not the last person who finished such praying duration should be the group leader, I got the reply that it is not necessary. Hmong villagers believe that they can freely speak out their concerns so that they feel better; and that anyone has the right to pray more or less in the way they most prefer. After the speak-out-loud praying time completes, group members sing a hymn out loud altogether to officially end their daily prayer.

### *7.2.2 Yearly Events*

Firstly, I would like to name all-year-round religious events that all CMA churches celebrate: *Giáng Sinh* (Christmas) celebrated on 24th or 25th of December, *Thương Khó* (equivalent English term can be ‘*Good Friday Service*’ that is used among some oversea Vietnamese Christian groups) celebrated at Thursday or Friday night before Easter Sunday; *Phục Sinh* (Easter) celebrated in the early morning of the first Sunday after lunar day and after 31st March of the solar calendar; *Thăng Thiên* (Ascension) celebrated on the fortieth day after Easter; *Đức Thánh Linh Giáng Lâm* (Pentecost Service) celebrated on the tenth day after Ascension.

Due to the research scope that merely allowed me to stay in the field for a limited time, I was only able to observe and study a couple of events, which are Christmas and Tết (Lunar New Year); other events were after Easter Sunday of 2019 (21st April). While Christmas is a Christian event, Tết is a traditional Vietnamese Hmong holiday even though it is not the Hmong traditional New Year. According to the Hmong calendar, their New Year is around the end of November on the solar calendar, to be more specific. As far as I know, such New Year is celebrated mainly by Hmong of Laos or overseas Hmong who originally lived in Laos today. A few Hmong villages in northern Vietnam still celebrate it. Meanwhile, all Hmong I

interviewed across the Central Highlands admit that they, including their grandparents, have been only celebrating the Lunar New Year. At this point, I do not have enough evidence to say if Vietnamese Hmong follow such Tết since they were in China or after settling in Vietnam as both Chinese and Vietnamese people celebrate Lunar New Year.

How do Hmong Protestants prepare for their *Christmas* and *Lunar New Year*? Between a vital Christian western event and an important traditional Chinese and Vietnamese holiday, how do Hmong converts appreciate each?

Basically, people who have different interests and roles in the church would have different preferences regarding traditional festivals and religious events. To be specific, those who are more involved in or have key roles in the church find Christmas time more pleasant as they attend more frequent training sessions such as practicing plays, preparing for hymn or so, which are performed at Christmas services. However, it seems to be obvious that most of the Hmong converts prefer *Tết* (Lunar New Year) rather than Christmas even though Tết is neither the traditional Hmong festival nor their new religion's sacred event. This way of thinking, as well as what I have learned from villagers, show that Hmong Protestants are usually open to what is most meaningful to them rather than systematically, strategically, and rationally follow a strict political position. If a group is hugely conservative regarding protecting their identity, either religious, national, or ethnic, they might hesitate to practice and/or follow what does not originally belong to them.

Meanwhile, not all Hmong traditional games, which used to be very common, are performed, regardless of which religion is more dominant in a village. *Ném Pao* (*pov phaus/ pó po/ ném còn*), *Gầu tào* (*tsa hauv toj*) have been identified as 'very Hmong' but are rarely performed today. If they are performed elsewhere, most of them are organized by the local government. Hmong people believed that such government-sponsored activities are less attractive<sup>31</sup>.

One-month of preparing work and practice for Christmas are well invested. All groups have their schedules to gather for such training to avoid time conflict if they use the church for practice. For example, Youth group practices on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. (20 people, only 8 males), Middle-Age group practices on the same time slot on Wednesdays and Fridays (20 people). Women group practices at an adherent's private house every Wednesday and Saturday from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. that is largest by size (40 people). On Sundays from 7:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., the Middle-Age group, in addition, gathers to prepare for Lunar New Year.

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<sup>31</sup> A further discussion is available in Chapter 10.



While all of the other Protestant Hmong groups in Yagad and Lakad that I participated in had together made a party after Christmas mass, Yagad leaders said that it was challenging for them to organize a party for thousands of people. Neither Christmas gifts nor Santa Claus (*ông già Noel*) is present in the village and Hmong children's imaginations as in western countries, only small Xmas tree presented in the church. In 2018, Yagad church decided to celebrate on 'Wednesday,' 26 December. As 'Wednesday morning' is a regular weekly gathering of people, it might be more convenient for them to keep the schedule. While ECV-S suggests its church members celebrate on either 24 or 25 December, the local Hmong church is very independent in deciding on the best time, in church leaders' consideration, for everyone. There was also a three-hour service organized on 23 December when various programs were offered specially for children. Meanwhile, other groups celebrating at different times. For instance, Baptist I chose the morning of 23 December, Lakad I chose the morning of 24 December, and Lakad II chose the morning of 25 December.

Almost all of the people I interviewed said that Lunar New Year has more fun and lasts longer than Christmas so that they can enjoy a longer holiday with their family and friends. The number of women who buy new clothes or tailor by themselves for New Year is considerably more than those who prepare for Christmas. One may say that this phenomenon happens due to the year-end bonus, yet there are only a few Hmong who works in the wage-economy. Hmong converts in various villages of different communes, districts, and provinces tend to travel to visit their relatives on New Year occasion rather than Christmas. This fact can be considered one of the major reasons why they spend more time and prepare more things for the traditional *Tết*. In recent years, Yagad people even travel to other provinces to relax during this time, such as nearby tourist attractions like Nha Trang and Đà Lạt.

Vietnamese Kinh's traditional food also appears on Hmong's meals during Tet, but not *Chung* cake. They prefer to make *bánh nếp* (sticky-rice cake covered by banana leaves). Lucky money and wishes are not common in the village. There is also no obvious house decoration as Vietnamese and western people often do on both special occasions.

Between the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> of December in the Lunar calendar (*âm lịch*), the village begins to be much busier than usual as people go back and forth to others' houses, help with killing pigs (*mổ heo*) and preparing for *Tết*. Every household, except if they already have a big family event in the year such as a wedding or building a house, would kill a pig for the lunar New Year. It is an unspoken rule in the village that it does not matter if you are hungry or not; you should come to the host's family, who invites you for their meal after *mổ heo*, eat and cheer up.



It really seems to be prosperous at every home in the village regardless of how much money they can earn throughout the year.

### 7.2.3 Life-circle events

A belief system has various ways of being expressed. One of the most effective ways is being reflected throughout essential events of a life circle, which are *Birth*, *Marriage*, and *Death*. In addition, *Baptism* is also an inevitable occasion of a Christian life, which marks their regeneration and official admission to the church. Hmong Protestants are not exceptional. In this section, I would like to illustrate how the Christian belief system, closely integrated by regulations on rituals of ECV-S, has displayed throughout the life circle events of Hmong converts.

*Birth*. Unlike female Hmong Protestants in some northern villages who still give birth to their children at home<sup>32</sup>, Hmong converts of Yagad nowadays either go to district or commune hospitals and/or clinics for safer child delivery. They prefer to have better care by professional nurses and doctors for their newborn baby rather than doing it at home as before, as long as they can afford transportation and medical cost. Noticeably, all Hmong Protestants no longer practice shamanic rituals and taboos, for example, ‘soul calling’ for their newborn children or ‘drinking water and washing hand’ ritual for the mother. Instead, they would have a ‘*Lễ Dâng con*’ (Child Dedication) at the church or at their home. In fact, this ritual is quite simple. If parents prefer to do it at the church, they will bring the kid to the Pastor at the end of a Mass so that the pastor and whole church can pray for the kid and officially acknowledge the consecration of her or him to God. If there are numerous newborn babies, the parents take turns to step on the stage. Otherwise, no special ritual is performed. Since then, the kid can join church groups that are suitable for his or her age until s/he is 14 or 15 years old or whenever s/he are ready to be officially baptized.

*Baptism*. According to ECV-S’s Regulations, the one who reaches the age of 12 and has already followed God for at least three months can request being baptized. After showing that desire, s/he would attend Baptism’s Doctrine/ Teachings (*giáo lý báp têm*) for a certain amount of time that depends on each church member, as long as such courses cover crucial topics of Baptism Doctrine. For example, in Yagad, a Baptism Doctrine class is held every Sunday and lasts the whole afternoon, from 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. Whole course lasts around 12 weeks, which means one week can cover a topic. Once the class is completed, those who are confident in their knowledge and understanding will take a test. If s/he passes, then an official baptism will soon

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<sup>32</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 2012, 130.

be taken place. For ECV-S, only the ordained pastor is able to do baptism for followers. In cases, if there are not enough people, or there are some reasons that a Baptism ceremony cannot be organized, unofficial followers can be transferred to another CMA church for being baptized. Hmong believers will only be sent to another Hmong CMA church for such occasion<sup>33</sup>. The Hmong of Yagad used to go to a nearby river for baptism. Nowadays, most of the Hmong churches have a small pool, build right in front of the church or somewhere within the church site. Generally, baptized and unbaptized Hmong Protestants can equally join any groups and access resources that they might need spiritually. The only different things are while baptized Hmong have the right to participate in the Holy Communion to receive holy bread and wine and vote for their religious leaders such as DC members; while the unbaptized do not.

*Wedding.* Compared to traditional marriage, wedding ceremonies and opinions on the marriage of Hmong converts are fundamentally different. First, there are no ‘*cướp vợ*’ (robbing wife/ wife stealing/ wife pulling/bride kidnapping), which is common in traditional Hmong society. The Hmong Protestant couples now go directly to their parents and tell if they are ready for a wedding instead of a traditional would-be Hmong groom with his family and friends ‘pull’ his wife-to-be to his house, then there are several subsequent steps as well as numerous customs that groom, the bride, and both families need to follow. For example, when the girl arrived at the man’s house, there is a ‘chicken ritual’<sup>34</sup> that accepts the girl to be a member of the man’s family, and that if she dies, her spirit will belong to her husband’s family (*làm ma nhà chồng*). However, there might be a ‘hidden agreement’ between the man and his girlfriend rather than ‘merely forcing.’ In fact, after three days of staying at the man’s house and sleeping with the man’s sisters, the girl can go back to her family and tells if she wants to get married to that man or not. Sometimes, the girl’s parents can agree or not with the wedding.

Also, ‘*tiền thách cưới*’ (wedding money/ wedding present) is no longer a burden for the groom’s family. Traditionally, the groom’s family might give to bride’s family money and artifacts that may be up to 50,000,000 VND. At the moment, all gifts are estimated to be more or less 10,000,000 VND for a Protestant wedding. For example, gifts can be ten kilograms of pork, several soda blocks, and some kilograms of rice<sup>35</sup>. Some young women in the field reveal that, nowadays, girls are even given by their parents some valuable gifts such as a motorbike. After the wedding, they can still go back to their family or help their parents to a certain extent.

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<sup>33</sup> I could not attend any Baptism in the field research, yet had participated in some Baptism classes offered by pastor Haam X. and learned about the Baptism procedure from Lakad and Yagad leaders. In 2020, pastor Haam X. sent me some pictures of a recent Baptism performed in Yagad.

<sup>34</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Vaaj. L, interview by author, 14 November 2018.

In other words, girls no longer become ‘the spirit’ of the husband’s family (*con ma nhà chồng*) after the chicken ritual as it is in traditional belief. She does not entirely belong to the husband’s family spiritually and physically.

Wedding food no longer includes animal-blood made dishes as in traditional Hmong wedding. Most of the food at a Hmong Protestant wedding is made from vegetables, chickens, and pork. While people in the village can go to the forest to collect some kinds of vegetables to help the couple, the host family prepare other ingredients such as 50 chickens and four pigs that may be equal to 800 kilograms of pork. In addition, no alcohol drink is included in both exchanged presents (or groom’s offerings) and wedding parties, except if one of the families is not Protestant. In Yagad, although almost all of the tables in a wedding have no rice alcohol or beer, there can be one or two tables that are served with such alcoholic drinks in case the host family has some guests who prefer it. In general, there is only one main meal offered, and guests may give gifts of rice and/or money to the couple. The wedding lasts only one day rather than all day and night or even for several days as in traditional society. There is no music or crowd noise at a Hmong Protestant wedding.

In terms of ritual, if the couple can get a marriage certificate from the government and if they are both baptized Protestants, they are eligible to have a wedding ceremony at a CMA church. Their family members and friends can come to join them there. A wedding party at the Yagad CMA Church is quite similar to that at a western party. The couple is received gifts from the Church and the groups that they have participated in. There are no ‘*người mai mối*’ (matchmakers) or worshipping ancestor and house ghosts (*ma nhà*) as in a traditional wedding. Wedding ritual generally follows Protestant procedure.

In addition, if the groom or bride’s family uses alcohol for their party, the official wedding ritual at church will be held on another day. For example, as the village general (*bí thư thôn*) is a communist and he decided to offer some alcoholic drink for non-Protestant guests on his son’s wedding, the ritual for his son and daughter in law was at church on 13 November 2018 instead of on the day of wedding party – 14 November 2018. In cases that either groom or bride is not baptized Protestant or their ages are not enough for marriage according to the laws<sup>36</sup> or the would-be bride is pregnant before the wedding<sup>37</sup>, they are only able to celebrate at home. The person who has a non-Protestant partner will be excommunicated from the church until when they both become baptized Hmong Protestants.

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<sup>36</sup> The church secretary told me that, as far as he could remember, the church still organized wedding rituals for early marriage couples (*tào hôn*) around the year of 2013.

<sup>37</sup> For example, because the groom was already pregnant, Yaaj T.T.’s family in Yagad did not celebrate a large wedding party or widely announced the marriage. There were only a few people invited to join the private party.

After the wedding, the groom and bride's families also come to visit each other a couple of times. The families may offer one or two meals to treat those who have helped with the wedding. There is no more polygamy in Hmong Protestant communities. In fact, divorce cases are so rare in the village that I never ever heard any by now. The rate of suicide cases is also tremendously low; no case is reported in recent years. Meanwhile, the number of women who suicide in traditional society is considerably high, most of the time accounted for by husband-wife relationships<sup>38</sup>.

Basically, it can be said that for Hmong Protestants, a wedding ritual at church is crucial, and Protestant leaders play an essential role in such special occasions of their lives. However, I believe that family and relatives are still key people who discuss how to prepare and organize the wedding. In other words, the Protestant church takes care of the couple's spiritual life, whereas families and relatives are responsible for the actual wedding and its relevant physical concerns. Although obviously there are no matchmakers or clan heads who are in charge of communicating with the other family, it is hard to conclude that family and relatives of both groom and bride are now less important than in traditional Hmong society as some scholars say<sup>39</sup>.

Finally, it is noticeable that inter-ethnic marriage is extremely rare among Hmong regardless of their religion. Most of the Hmong people prefer themselves or their children to get married with the same ethnic partner disregard of locations and time. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Hmong even travel to another country to seek their spouses. An Ede girl and her friends once visited the son of the village head in Yagad, but he tried to hide or asked his cousin to be his pretended girlfriend so that the Ede girl would give up. According to the village head, Ede is indigenous people in the Central Highlands, and they usually own more land than Hmong. Therefore, he supposes that if a Hmong man gets married to an Ede girl, they would likely live at the wife's family. That is also because Ede follows matriarchy.

*Funeral.* Unlike most western Protestant funeral ceremonies to be taken place at a church or a funeral home, Hmong Protestants only do the funeral ritual at their private houses. In rural areas in Vietnam, the concept of 'funeral home' has also not become common yet. Principally, the Yagad Hmong church only provides an official funeral service if the dead person is a baptized adherent and if s/he does not die due to immoral reasons such as murder.

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, see Thành Nam Vũ, "Vi Sao Phụ Nữ Mông Lại Tìm Đến Cái Chết Bằng Lá Ngón? [Why Do Hmong Women Suicide by Heartbreak Grass?]" (Báo Công an Nhân Dân [People's Public Security Newspaper], July 8, 2005), Accessed February 21, 2021, <http://cand.com.vn/Phong-su-tu-lieu/Vi-sao-phu-nu-Mong-lai-tim-den-cai-chet-bang-la-ngon-8415/>.

<sup>39</sup> A further discussion on the roles of religious leaders and family/clan heads is available in Chapter 10.

Regarding the funeral procedure, the dead person would be gently washed right after s/he dies. The corpse then would be placed on the bed and be waiting for the coming ritual instead of being hung up at the house center as traditional custom. When pastor, deacon committee members, and choir come, they would do a ritual for the dead person to be moved into a coffin which does not need to be placed in order to leave the death's feet towards the main door of the house as traditional Hmong in some regions do<sup>40</sup>. Generally, the choir would sing first, praying, and a funeral sermon would follow. In general, the pastor would explain about death and how a dead person would be able to go back with God in their native language. These steps performed by church members would be repeated for one more ritual that is performed right before the corpse is buried. The only one more step is added at the latter ritual is a short biography of the dead person would be read out loud to honor him or her.

All traditional customs are no longer practiced among Hmong converts. For example, there are no funeral music instruments such as *trống* (drum) and *khèn* (*qeej/ khene*) performed. The dead person is not offered daily meals or prostrated by his or her family members and friends. No temporary altar is established, and no incense is used. Time for shrouding and burying the dead does not need to be carefully calculated according to traditional methods; it only depends on the preference of family and church people. Also, the coffin is simply buried under the ground covering with soil, instead of stones, with no strict requirement on its direction or how the head and feet of death person should be placed under the tomb as in traditional funerals<sup>41</sup>.

Once the funeral ceremony ends, there are no more rituals or animal sacrifice. Economically, the Protestant funeral ritual is much less expensive than of traditional Hmong as no buffalo, pig, or chicken are killed for doing rites. A family also does not necessarily have a son to be in charge of the funeral for his parents because the church would do it. In addition, souls of good Protestants are believed to go with God that makes Hmong converts no longer worry about spirits going back and bothering living people in various ways. In fact, Hmong Protestant dead persons also do not need things for their journey returning to their ancestors such as a red cloth which would function as an umbrella, one and a half grain of rice, which equals to 1,5 ton of rice that would help the death's souls to not be hungry and so on<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Thị Mai Lan Trần, “Lý Cũ và Lý Mới Trong Tang Lễ Của Người Hmông ở Tỉnh Điện Biên [The Old Way and the New Way in Funerals of the Hmong in Dien Bien Province],” *Tạp Chí Dân Tộc Học* 3, no. 195 (2016): 46.

<sup>41</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 110.

<sup>42</sup> Mạnh Hùng Nguyễn, *Tang Ma Của Người Hmông ở Suối Giàng [Hmong Funeral in Suối Giàng]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thanh niên, 2010), 72–73. In fact, this book is one among a few Vietnamese research that provides numerous details on traditional Hmong funeral. Although it focuses on only a group of Hmong in Yên Bái province of Vietnam, it can be significantly referred to as funerals of traditional Hmong as a whole, to my knowledge.

Noticeably, the total time corpse can be kept in the house is around 24 hours instead of 48 hours as their Protestant Hmong elsewhere<sup>43</sup> or even up to seven or ten days as their traditional counterparts in the North<sup>44</sup>. If the person dies on Saturday, then the funeral rituals will be conducted once Sunday passes over. In case there are some family members or relatives who live far from home and need several days to return, then the dead person can be preserved for a couple of days, but it needs to be sure that the corpse has no adverse effect on other people and environment.

The atmosphere of the dead person's house is not too tense, yet not pleasant. There are no taboos to avoid. People talk comfortably but not laugh out loud. Kids play altogether around the coffin. When church people come and perform rituals, family members become more serious and show their high respect. The food served is simple with no-alcohol drinks. Interestingly, the role of men on such occasions is obvious. They serve food, clean up and wash dishes that one rarely can see in a traditional funeral ceremony. Meanwhile, women are eating and talking as they already do preliminary work before the meal. While Hữu Sơn Trần (2012) and Quỳnh Trâm Nguyễn (2016)'s observation<sup>45</sup> reveal that Hmong converts are not allowed to and/or do not cry, that is supported by Nguyễn (2016)'s research<sup>46</sup>, both two funeral ceremonies of Hmong Protestants I attended in the field show a different scenario. They may not make noise by crying out loud through the rituals, but their sorrow is displayed on their faces. The moment when the coffin is buried, the death's family seems to be the saddest. They cry and scream to say the last goodbye to their beloved person.

It is interesting that Hmong Protestants in Yagad and Lakad become even more well-known for their 'proper' funerals after a Hmong policeman in the district – Haam A. C. – got serious critics from his indigenous neighbors for the unpleasant smell from the corpse of his father in 2012<sup>47</sup>. As a traditional Hmong, A. C. had to choose the right time to do the funeral for his father, which led him to hold his father's corpse for seven days in the house. This experience reminded him of a later funeral that he did for his mother. He finally only kept his mother's corpse in the house for three days. However, the case of Haam A. C. is not typical among the Hmong of Central Highlands, even though there might be some Hmong living in the region who neither attend Protestant churches nor maintain traditional religion. As a matter of fact, no shamans or *yawg mus* (*thầy chi đờng*) living in both field sites in the Central Highlands where

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<sup>43</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 2012, 130.

<sup>44</sup> Mạnh Hùng Nguyễn 2010, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 2012, 130.

<sup>46</sup> Quỳnh Trâm Nguyễn 2016, 111.

<sup>47</sup> Some say it was in 2012, and some say it was in 2013.



I visited. Such nones do no funerals for their dead family members and only provide meals for those who visit and help. After one or two days, the dead person would be buried<sup>48</sup>.

*Occasional Events.* Apart from collective religious practices among Hmong Protestants discussed above, numerous occasional events are taken place at church or adherents' private houses. I do not include ceremonies on 'Pastor Ordination' (*Tấn phong Mục sư*), 'Appointment' (*Bổ Nhiệm*) in this section because they are not collective religious practices of ordinary followers. Otherwise, ceremonies and services on 'Thank God' (*Lễ Cảm tạ*), *Lễ Bồi Linh*, 'Healing Prayer' (*Xức dầu cầu nguyện cho người bệnh*)<sup>49</sup> and private prayer services requested by adherents on their special occasions are discussed because in such events, church leaders and ordinary adherents altogether prepare for or directly get involved in.

Among these occasional events, I was only able to attend *Lễ Cảm tạ* at Lakad II Hmong CMA church and some private services in Yagad that the pastor and deacon committee members came to and serve at the adherent's house. Although the *Lễ Cảm tạ* in Lakad was for introducing the new place of worship which should be organized as a 'Church Dedication' (*Cung hiến Nhà thờ*) according to ECV-S' regulation. However, Hmong CMA Protestants in the Central Highlands have never organized such event by date. As mentioned, no Hmong places of worship are qualified to be called a 'Church' even though their groups are already officially recognized by the government. 'House church' (*nhà thờ tư gia*) is used instead. Thus, a 'Church dedication' cannot be celebrated for 'a new house church,' only a 'church' is eligible<sup>50</sup>.

It is observed that at religious events where Vietnamese Kinh Pastors who hold high positions at General Association (*Tổng Liên hội*) of ECV-S and Đắk Lắk representative committee (*ban Đại diện*) attend such as *Lễ Bồi Linh* or *Lễ Cảm tạ*, the atmosphere seems to be more serious. Adherents rarely come to ask their questions on their Christian beliefs and practices even though sometimes '*learning more about God and the Bible*' is the main goal of the event. At such times, there are handouts printed in Vietnamese and English and translation services offered by native Hmong Protestants. Once events end, visiting pastors are more often than not being invited to have a meal with the local church, mostly with church leaders.

In addition, private prayers requested by ordinary adherents would be reviewed by the pastor and deacon committee. Once requests are accepted, church leaders would come to adherents'

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<sup>48</sup> Cases of H. and D.'s families in the field. I only heard about these two cases while talking with Yagaders; I could not interview H. and D.

<sup>49</sup> All Vietnamese terms of Protestant ceremonies and services are maintained as original on Church's Documents.

<sup>50</sup> Haam X, follow-up conversation with author, 10 April 2020.



house and pray for them. Some of the common private services are ‘Home Blessing’<sup>51</sup>, ‘Last Day of the Year’ or ‘New Year.’ On such occasions, the host family prepare food and drink, mostly simple pork dishes, vegetable soups, and soda. There are always at least three church officers attend those private prayers. The basic parts of a service are singing the hymn, reading out several Bible verses, and focused praying for several minutes that are especially dedicated to the host family. Regarding the ‘Home Blessing’ service, the host family says that they no longer need to consider which is a ‘good’ day to organize the event as the Hmong often do traditionally. The schedule is fixed if it works for both church officers and the host family.

Finally, all Hmong Protestants in the focal villages no longer use shamanic healing practices to cure their health problems. Instead, they would either go to nearby clinics or hospitals to check or go to local Hmong healer (*thầy thuốc*) for being cured by herbs. Villagers consider that if one cannot get cured by medicine (*thuốc tây*) and/or herbs, s/he might get sick because of ghosts. In such cases, praying would cure. Healing prayer is performed depending on patients’ circumstances and preferences. It can be taken place at the church after the service ends or at the patient’s house.

Notably, there is an emerging phenomenon of sickness and diseases healing among several groups of Hmong Protestants in the Central Highlands of Vietnam called ‘*đuổi quỷ*’ (*Dispel Demons/ Evicting demons/ Dispel Evil Spirits/ Exorcism*). I had heard continuously about this phenomenon in Hmong villages I visited in the highland region. Although Hmong CMA Church in Yagad does not practice it and consider it a trait of heresy, as mentioned before, there is another Hmong CMA Church (B.6 church) in the nearby district named M’Drăk who has practiced ‘*đuổi quỷ*’ for four years and in a large scale<sup>52</sup>. According to the church head of B.6 Hmong CMA group, ‘*đuổi quỷ*’ is the way the pastor uses some Bible verses and his words to speak out loud in order to kick ‘*con quỷ*’ (demon) from the infected person out<sup>53</sup>. In other words, the pastor would have a conversation with the demon(s), gently or harshly, to take it out of his possessed adherents’ body. In Yagad, only Baptist I pastor admitted to practice such healing

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<sup>51</sup> It seems to equivalent to ‘Home Blessing’ service in English, but the Vietnamese word used by Hmong Protestants is ‘*khánh thành nhà mới*’ which literally means ‘Inauguration of a New Home’.

<sup>52</sup> In fact, ECV-S’s Đắk Lắk Representatives and Provincial Policemen already visited and asked B.6 church’s leaders in details on ‘*đuổi quỷ*’ but then do not take any actions. I do not go into a deeper analysis on this case as it is not closely related to Hmong Protestants’ religious life in the focal village. It is a questionable healing method that I cannot conclude at the moment in terms of its *essence, how traditional Hmong belief may affect it, or whether it has a positive or negative impact on adherents’ mental health long term.*

<sup>53</sup> Thoj C., interview by author, 14 January 2019.

methods once, yet not for Yagad Hmong Protestants but a visitor from one other church<sup>54</sup>. In fact, it has not become common in the focal village.

Generally speaking, religious events discussed above may vary by purpose and duration, yet all have fundamental steps, which are: singing hymn (by whole church first and later by some church groups), opening prayer, preaching a sermon (or Hmong converts often call as ‘sharing God’s words’); dedication (*dâng hién*/ offering money), public confession or/ and prayer request, closing prayer. There is always an MC who leads the service. This person is more often than not a Deacon Committee member. Most of the time, the pastor is the person who preaches sermons; however, an appropriate, knowledgeable and experienced church officer also can preach, such as a missionary or a Deacon Committee member. In fact, some parts of the service may be flexibly performed. For example, sometimes singing the hymn, preaching sermons, and/or prayer request may last longer or shorter than usual. Occasionally, a financial report or plans on coming events or common concerns are announced, discussed, or voted on during a service. After the service ends, if any adherent who may have concerns to share or make prayer request in particular privately, they would meet the pastor one on one.

### **7.3 The Hmong Way of Practicing Protestantism: Final Thoughts**

The details above are mainly on the local Yagad Hmong CMA church organization, which is seen through church structure and officers, committee and boards, groups, as well as their collective religious activities that altogether represent how Hmong Protestants have been living out their new Christian faith. This integrated discussion emphasizes some other essential characteristics of how Hmong converts practice their religion that has been defined through decades since their mass conversion to Protestantism in the late 1980s. In other words, although following a western-rooted religion, Hmong converts distinguish themselves from other similar Protestant groups instead of being totally and passively assimilated. This process of establishing such unique traits, in fact, can be either active or in forced manners, which can be done either consciously or unconsciously. In this section, it should be noted that I only discuss the church organization and collective religious practices of Hmong converts, not on their beliefs and/or their integrated identity.

When it comes to interaction between adherents and church leaders, it is observable that such interaction is not really active during services, such as Sunday services, Holy Communion ceremony, or Christmas ceremony. These religious activities are considered sacred, and people

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<sup>54</sup> Muas L., interview by author, 24 January 2019.

tend to listen and pray rather than ask any questions. However, in smaller scales, such as within Bible studies groups or daily prayer gatherings, or daily conversations, ordinary adherents may communicate more comfortably, ask questions and share their thoughts with their religious instructors. They find most religious leaders and church officers friendly and accessible. As a matter of fact, all Hmong Protestants in the village, regardless of their positions in religious or political settings, are either relatives or neighbors who have been altogether overcoming hardships in their early days in Yagad and throughout the years establishing and strengthening their community. Also, as far as I learn from literature and my experience with Hmong people, most of them rarely feel inferior to others or irrationally obey any human powers. Thus, it is understandable that the gap between ordinary adherents and religious leaders is not substantial; only their preference matters. For example, as mentioned, a daily prayer group leader seems to be relatively rigid, which makes some Hmong hesitate to ask him any questions on Bible or come to his house for gathering. People are not afraid of him but prefer not to communicate with him too often.

However, the external connection is reported to not exist among Hmong Protestants in Yagad as well as at other Hmong house churches I visited in the Central Highlands. As previously mentioned, Hmong CMA Protestants in this region of Vietnam have only a direct relationship with ECV-S, yet they are entirely financially independent. This fact may answer some local government officials' wonder how the Hmong of Yagad could develop that much without financial support from others. In fact, I find some evidence on Vietnamese reports and research showing that there are international organizations and individuals who have transferred money to Protestants in the Central Highlands to support religious activities and/or even secretly prepare to fight against the Vietnamese government. However, Hmong Protestants are entirely not involved<sup>55</sup>. In case of international contact as I was shared by some Hmong youths in Đắk Nông<sup>56</sup>, it is likely to be only Southeast Asia Hmong who may have a special connection like 'being relatives' or 'sharing Hmong related interests'. They mostly stay in touch via

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<sup>55</sup> Xuân Dung Trần, *Một Số Vấn Đề về Tôn Giáo và Đấu Tranh Chống Hoạt Động Lợi Dụng Tôn Giáo ở Tây Nguyên* [Some Religion Issues and the Fight against Activities That Take Advantage of Religion in the Central Highlands of Vietnam], Lưu hành nội bộ trong lực lượng công an [Internal Circulation only in the Police Force] (Place: N/A: Nhà xuất bản Công an Nhân dân, 2006), 132–40., Triệu Long Đoàn, *Đạo Tin Lành ở Miền Trung Tây Nguyên* [Protestantism in Central and the Central Highlands] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia Sự Thật, 2013), 104., Thị Kim Thoa Nguyễn, “Bước Đầu Vận Dụng Những Quan Điểm Mác Xít về Tôn Giáo Để Nghiên Cứu Tình Hình Phát Triển và Ảnh Hưởng Của Đạo Tin Lành Hiện Nay ở Đắk Lắk [Initially Applying Marxist Perspective on Religion to Study the Current Development and Influence of Protestantism in Dak Lak]” (unpublished Thesis, Hà Nội, Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn, Đại học Quốc gia-Hà Nội, 1999), 49.

<sup>56</sup> Conversations with K. A and Lauj D. on 5 and 6 January 2019 in Đắk Nông province.

Facebook, the most common tool available to them. Otherwise, except for contacts among Hmong converts' family and clan members, there are no overseas religious activities reported.

Besides, 'church capacity' is a real problem that Hmong converts have been confronting, which unexpectedly becomes an identity marker to Hmong Protestants. I was amazed to gradually realize that all Hmong houses in the Central Highlands do not have enough seats for all of their adherents to attend services throughout my field trips. Up to hundreds of people have to stay outside of worship space. Some people stand, and some people sit at every available space around the house church. Consequently, a significant number of Hmong Protestants may not be able to listen to what the pastor and church officers speak from inside or they may get distracted by external things easily. This is a problem that Hmong converts have confronted during their religious practices, yet the problem is not from the church itself. A further discussion would be provided in Chapter 9 in order to explain the reason for such problem. Meanwhile, their church space is also designed differently from Protestant churches of other ethnic groups, for example, Vietnamese Kinh's. To be specific, a Hmong's house church is usually divided into two sides, one for females and another side for males. This preference is said to be traditionally kept among the Hmong without any intervention or request by outsiders like their ECV-S or the Vietnamese government<sup>57</sup>. Plus, it is visible to most of the observers that a Hmong Protestant house church, regardless of their locations, always has a slogan hanging on the center wall saying '*Qmuas vai TswNtui*' in the Hmong language, which means 'Honor God' (*Tôn vinh Đức Chúa trời*)<sup>58</sup>.

Furthermore, 'noisy kids' or 'kids' distractions' may or may not be a problem at a Hmong house church, yet it is a fact. Although the pastor shared that he reminded all adherents many times, it might not be a strict rule because there are always many kids being at church, even playing together or speaking out loud throughout the service. To me, it is indeed a humane characteristic of Hmong Protestant churches. Throughout history, Hmong families have always been well-known for their high birth rate. There are no daycare or similar services available in the village. Only over five-year-old children are accepted at kindergarten. In fact, the image of a Hmong woman who carries a baby on her back and holds one or more children by her hand has been widely common on the mountains and now at Protestant house churches. Every kid in the field is given a plastic bag of candies or snacks for them to go to church with their parents. Therefore, church and sermons may unconsciously go into children's perception, which may be a good background for them to attend Bible studies groups in their later years. Meanwhile,

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<sup>57</sup> Khaab D., Yaaj T. U., follow-up conversations with author, 03 and 06 November 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Đức Phương Đoàn 2015b, 123-4.

Sunday school does offer Bible classes for children from the age of three or four, which also creates a healthy space for children to get involved in while there are no other public or private schools available to them.

Being highly disciplined in practicing their religion, yet Hmong Protestants are considerably flexible in many cases and tolerant to people of different beliefs and religions. As pointed out before, even that Hmong Protestants do not drink alcohol; they do not criticize their neighbors who do so at some events such as weddings. Those who decide to not follow God and/or attend Church can still live in harmony with converts without any pressure to convert, which are very different from what has been claimed in the literature when it comes to Hmong converts and non-converts relationships<sup>59</sup>. Such ‘acceptance,’ in fact, can be related to their Protestant neighbors – the indigenous ethnic minority group of the Central Highlands Ede – who are believed that 85.6% of them have not faced any protest from their non-convert people, which proves a more open-minded attitude towards Protestantism nowadays<sup>60</sup>. Also, the nones are able to choose which rituals they would follow for their whole life, even no rituals at all, such as no funeral when they pass away without being judged by their Hmong Protestants. Meanwhile, I do not see any Hmong Protestants who still believe in animism and participate in animist rituals as their Protestant counterparts in the Central Highlands<sup>61</sup> as well as in some Southeast Asian countries. Furthermore, different from some of Hmong Catholics who still practice taboos regarding ‘house spirits’ (or house ghosts ‘*ma nhà*’)<sup>62</sup> and/or having ancestral altar under the altar of God (*bàn thờ Chúa*)<sup>63</sup>, Hmong Protestants no longer follow any animism-

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<sup>59</sup> For instance, traditional Hmong are reported to be isolated and boycotted if they live in a Hmong village where the majority of villagers are Protestants, Thị Lan Hoàng, “Đời Sống Văn Hoá-Xã Hội Của Người Mông Theo Tin Lành ở Tây Bắc Hiện Nay [The Socio-Cultural Life of Hmong Protestants in the Northwest Today],” *Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam* 7 (2018): 57., T. T. Tam Ngo, *The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 134–35.

<sup>60</sup> “Báo Cáo Tổng Hợp Kết Quả Điều Tra Xã Hội Học Tại Tây Nguyên Năm 2003 (Phần Công Giáo + Tin Lành) [2003 Sociological Survey Summary Report on the Central Highlands of Vietnam (Sections on Catholicism + Protestantism)],” unpublished Report (Hà Nội: Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, November 2004), 18–19.

<sup>61</sup> For example, there are up to 22.7% surveyed indigenous ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highlands believed in their traditional spirits (n = 4,188), Dũng Vũ, “Niềm Tin Của Cộng Đồng Tin Lành Các Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Tây Nguyên Vào Lực Lượng Thần Linh và Vào Thế Giới Linh Hồn [The Faith of Protestant Ethnic Minorities Communities of the Central Highlands in Spirit Forces and in the Spirit World],” *Tạp Chí Tâm Lý Học* 7, no. 184 (July 2014): 3., or some of Muslims and Christians are believed to still participate in animist rituals, Rita Smith Kipp, “Conversion by Affiliation: The History of the Karo Batak Protestant Church,” *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 4 (1995): 873.

<sup>62</sup> Nguyễn, “Sự Tương Đồng Trong Cách Phản Ứng Của Người Hmông ở Việt Nam và Người Miêu ở Trung Quốc Với Ảnh Hưởng Của Ki-Tô Giáo [Similarities in the Responses of the Hmong in Vietnam and the Miao in China with the Christian Influence],” 79.

<sup>63</sup> Thị Thu Giang Nguyễn, “Nếp Sống Đạo Của Người Hmông Theo Đạo Công Giáo ở Giáo Họ Hầu Thào, Lao Chải (Giáo Xứ Sapa) Hiện Nay Thể Hiện qua Việc Tham Dự Các Phép Bí Tích [The Religious Life of Hmong Catholics of Hầu Thào Families, Lao Chai (Sapa Parish) through Sacramental Participation Today],” in *Nếp Sống Đạo Của Người Công Giáo Việt Nam [Religious Life of Vietnamese Catholics]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Từ điển Bách khoa, 2010), 433.

based taboos and/or practices. Such ‘being Protestant’ among Hmong of Yagad and beyond actually proves a contradictory fact compared to their ‘half-believed’ Protestant ancestors in the past<sup>64</sup>.

Additionally, local Hmong church officers and ordinary adherents are independent not only in finance but also in making decisions in which way they prefer to practice their Christian beliefs. Instead of following what most Protestant churches do, Yagad church organizes its weekly service on Wednesday mornings, and prayer groups gathering every day to create the most suitable conditions for everyone to live out their religious faith. While Đoàn affirms that ‘Thursday evening’ is a weekly gathering among Hmong of Đák Lắk<sup>65</sup>, my research proves their flexibility in gathering schedules. It is worth noting that Hmong religious leaders do not help ordinary adherents economically, neither do Protestant pastors of ECV-S, as it has been claimed and advocated in the literature even in recent years<sup>66</sup>. Hmong church leaders only keep their people updated when there is news related to their agricultural activities. In general, Hmong people learn from each other and their neighbors of various ethnic backgrounds to do farming and other labor work. For example, my host family in Yagad built places to raise silkworms in October 2020, making them the first Hmong doing such silkworm business in the region, thanks to a Vietnamese Kinh neighbor and his family’s support. They are also connected with traders to sell products such as silk and baby silkworms<sup>67</sup>. Such knowledge and experience exchange between the Hmong of Yagad and their neighbors are actually reported to be present since the first days they settled down in this region. However, as mentioned earlier, the Hmong initially did not get voluntary support from local indigenous people.

Interestingly, there are no retreat and/or meditation sessions among Hmong Protestants as in many western Christian communities. Therapy services are not provided as a professional or specialized sector but naturally exist among Hmong as daily and necessary conversations. Not only religious leaders are those who would be consulted if Hmong Protestants encounter serious life problems. They tend to come to those who they trust most to share their thoughts, get suggestions or even ask for proper intervention. For example, an over 50-year-old woman came to my host family to share that her husband wanted to sell their house, which would make her homeless eventually. This woman is not a relative of my host family, but she trusted and felt

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<sup>64</sup> Tapp 1989c, 88.

<sup>65</sup> Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 91-2.

<sup>66</sup> Although Hoàng generally refers that pastors and missionaries have also aided ethnic minorities economically; he discussed throughout the text, including such statement, with examples on Hmong Protestants, see Văn Chung Hoàng, “Evangelizing Post-Đổi Mới Vietnam: The Rise of Protestantism and the State’s Response,” *ISEAS - Yusok Ishak Institute*, published electronically, 34 (2017): 5.

<sup>67</sup> I have frequently contacted my host family by phone calls. This information was shared with me on 14 October 2020 by the host daughter-in-law and host mom.



relieved after speaking out about such a problem and seeking advice from my host mom<sup>68</sup>. Furthermore, suicide cases are also rare, particularly when compared to the suicide rate in traditional Hmong society. This activity is well-known to protest against the reality among these people, especially Hmong women. Their new belief systems and low expectations of others are key factors affecting such rates, which I would further discuss in a subsequent section.

There are actually several characteristics that may be unique among Protestants of ECV-S and other denominations of Vietnam as a whole rather than Hmong converts themselves, yet I think it is important to mention. As a matter of fact, it is applied to registered religious groups in Vietnam that all events that church officers plan for the coming year should be planned in advance and submit that proposal to the local government by 15 October. In any case, if there is an unplanned collective gathering, the church leaders must ask for permission from the government. Any religious activities performed without prior permission is out-of-law. Plus, all religious leaders are only able to preach at their registered house churches. In other words, they are not allowed to go to another house church to preach sermons except if the pastor is approved or assigned by a higher committee such as the Provincial Representative Committee or General Association of ECV-S. If a Hmong pastor would like to visit her home village in the North, he must present as an ordinary citizen rather than a Protestant pastor. In such case, Hmong pastors shared with me that if they would like to preach, they would do it for their people within a private space, which is considered legal. Any request for preaching at another church usually is not approved by the government.

In terms of church participation, it can be pointed out that nowadays, Hmong men are less likely to go to church or attend Bible study groups compared to women<sup>69</sup>. Statistically, the gender distribution at the church already shows a slight imbalance among them: 53.1% females and 46.9% males (the total number of adherents is 2,261)<sup>70</sup>. It is even more apparent that male youths are likely to leave the church or not participate in church services and religious activities. According to both Protestant and non-Protestant Hmong in the village I talked with, some people do not go to church (*đi lễ*) not because they do not want to donate money as the donation is voluntary, not mandatory. As a matter of fact, Hmong women stay at home often, thus attending church might be their preferred activity to get more socialized. Meanwhile, men often go out for their work or social network so that they may be more involved in the broader world

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<sup>68</sup> Fieldnotes on 28 January 2019.

<sup>69</sup> See details on Bible Studies groups' participation above. That phenomenon, in fact, also occurs among the Hmong Protestant communities in Vietnam and beyond. For example, see Winland 1994, 35.

<sup>70</sup> Chi hội Yagad, "Bản Báo Cáo Tổng Kết về Công Tác Hoạt Động Của Chi Hội Yagad Trong Năm 2018 [The 2018 Yagad Church Unit Report]," January 5, 2019.



than joining church<sup>71</sup>. As far as I can observe, not all Hmong women are talkative or well socialized, yet they enjoy dressing out and gathering with people.

It should be noted again that Sunday church services are taken place all day long in Yagad, both mornings and afternoons; thus, a considerable number of villagers would like to take a break from the Bible study group before attending the latter part of the day. Plus, a group of Hmong youth in high school or college or work outside the village cannot attend church frequently. Considering these facts, I would say their participation is relatively high, more or less 1,000 people, except around 600 children who gather before the Sunday service starts in the morning. Noticeably, the Yagad church on Sunday is always full of people inside and outside the church. This reality is due to the fact of ‘church capacity’ that we discussed before. Consequently, such a reality may be why some Hmong do not go the church at certain times.

While Baptist groups use a big screen to show Bible verses for their services, almost all Hmong CMA churches still use paperback Bible. While ECV-S is a registered religious denomination that allows them to own a certain number of Bible copies and send them to their adherents, Hmong Baptist groups in Yagad are not registered, which may prevent them from being allowed to own and share out Bible copies. Today in Vietnam, the Bible has not yet allowed to be printed in the Hmong language in Vietnam; thus, except for those who can afford to buy a smart device to read the Bible online, it is still a concern for numerous denominations to make the Bible available for all of their Hmong followers. On the other hand, those who use electronic devices throughout the service may lead to their children’s desire to watch videos or play games.

Regarding ‘adherents’ posture,’ while listening to the sermon at the church, the Hmong often sit but would stand if they turn to read out Bible verses or pray collectively. Some individuals may prefer to pray on their knees with the forehead placed on the ground. This posture, in fact, is typically performed by all participants of daily group gatherings when the session ends. In terms of ‘prayer,’ apart from praying for themselves and their families, most Hmong Protestants have been getting familiar with praying for others like ‘the nation’ and ‘government officials.’ They call such prayer ‘*câu thay*’ (literally means *pray on behalf of others*). They also pray for the donated money to be rightly used for good purposes. Such habit has definitely established moral values among Hmong converts of ‘*thinking for others*’ and/or ‘*being good to others without being asked for or expecting returns,*’ which has not yet common in Vietnamese society

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<sup>71</sup> Conversations with villagers, such as Yaaj H. (Protestant) and Yaaj P. (non-convert, but not traditional Hmong), fieldnotes on 31 October, 2018.

as it also appeared to Chinese converts to Protestantism while talking about their dominant culture<sup>72</sup>.

Basically, compared to church services of their Protestant peers in northern Vietnam, which are described to be taken place in eleven activities (1. *Sing hymn*; 2. *Learn a verse from the Bible*; 3. *Pray God (cầu Chúa)*; 4. *Sing hymn by Choir*; 5. *Read out a verse from the Bible*; 6. *Sing hymn*; 7. *Pray God*; 8. *All people join Choir to sing a hymn*; 9. *Read out a verse from the Bible*; 10. *Sing anthem*; 11. *Pray God*)<sup>73</sup> or less than that (1. *Sing hymn*; 2. *Mutual Pray*; 3. *Sermon*; 4. *Conversations*)<sup>74</sup>, Hmong converts in Yagad and at other house churches I visited have additional steps throughout their services except for those activities just mentioned. For example, scholars do not explicitly mention ‘*cầu thay*’<sup>75</sup>, ‘dedication’ (*dâng hiến*), and ‘prayer request’ steps, which are widely and fundamentally practiced among Hmong Protestants in the Central Highlands. Although my research time among northern Hmong converts is limited, I believe that they all follow essential parts of a church service as their counterparts in the Central Highlands, yet not be fully described in the literature.

To conclude, the relatively well-organized Hmong CMA Protestant house church and its various specialized groups have actually created a vibrant religious picture in Yagad. Undoubtedly, it is impossible to require all adherents of a religion to understand their religious teachings entirely. For Hmong Christians, studying Bible and understanding religious teachings also greatly depends on personal motivation and efforts. However, one fact should be highlighted that Hmong CMA Protestants in the focal villages and those in other Hmong villages I visited have good access to various religious sources. They get significant support from the trained pastor(s) and missionary(s), deacons, and religious groups, which are available daily and weekly. Regarding adherents themselves, most of them are honest, disciplined, becoming active Bible learners and prayers within their community. Meanwhile, illiterate Hmong converts may not be able to study Bible by reading, yet being devout by frequently making prayer requests and participating in services./.

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<sup>72</sup> Andrew Abel, “Favor Fishing and Punch-Bowl Christians: Ritual and Conversion in a Chinese Protestant Church,” *Sociology of Religion* 67, no. 2 (2006): 165.

<sup>73</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 2012, 128.

<sup>74</sup> Nguyễn mentions such activities but does not refer locations where these activities are taken place, see Khắc Đức Nguyễn 2017, 90.

<sup>75</sup> Đoàn mentions the content of Hmong prayers which is ‘having a good health and abundant crop’, but he neither points out ‘*cầu thay*’ and particular thoughts among the Hmong Protestants of Đắk Lắk, see Đức Phương Đoàn 2015b, 124.

## Chapter 8. Explore the Invisibility: Religious Beliefs and their Expressions

### 8.1 Defining Term and Approach

Different from Religious Practices, *Religious Belief* is a term that is not easy to talk about or describe. Theoretically and terminologically, I would use the concept of *Belief* that Carl Olson offers in his book '*Religious Studies. The Key Concepts*' to guide my discussion so that I would follow a relatively defined definition not to go off-topic.

From indigenous to international religions, beliefs are convictions, assertions, and habitually accepted unquestioning viewpoints that define a religious culture's worldview, its way of life, its social structure, the nature of human existence and its problems, the solution to the problems of life, and an often concise statement of the fundamental agreed upon religious claims. Statements of belief unite a people and differentiate them from outsiders. From a cross-cultural perspective, beliefs can prove to be very durable over a long period of time. This does not imply that beliefs are static once they are established because they continue to be altered and refined according to historical circumstances by religious thinkers<sup>1</sup>.

In the case of my research, it is even more challenging to make any conclusion on the lived religious belief of a group who have been altering their belief systems due to current religious conversion. Thus, taking advantage of being able to stay close to the Hmong, and hold deep and thoughtful conversations, I choose to generalize most common characteristics following specific indicators of religious beliefs, as Olson names above, among Hmong Protestants through their private sharing instead of covering 'religious belief' in collective or theological scale. As this research is an ethnographic study that aims to most authentically convey the voices of the target population, academic concepts, terms, and topics of this chapter would be built from participants' stories and thoughts on their belief, which do not necessarily match any theories on *religious belief* elsewhere.

In addition, the previous religion of the research population is animism, and they used to practice shamanism. Thus, apart from key figures and concepts of Christianity such as God, the Bible, Heaven, Evil or so, a couple of topics on animism and shamanism would be used for comparative analyses which may make it most visible on "*how a group of people 'have been transforming their religious belief'*" which is actually invisible over a long period of time.

Although some theological questions involved through my research, I am not trying to evaluate if the Hmong deeply understand the Bible or not; I only attempt to see how the

Hmong understand the Bible in their own ways and then how they apply the theological understandings into their life: define their role in life, value what most important to them and how they would expect they would be after death. As Hinnells points out, “It is inevitable that if a theology is to be meaningful to a person, if it is ‘to speak to that person’... then it has to be different from that in a different environment”<sup>1</sup>. In this part of my research, I would try to show how Protestant teachings mean to the Hmong differently from their counterparts in the West as they live in various geographical locations.

It is difficult to say who has stronger belief than others, but it is possible to see how they see themselves and others through the lens of their religion and if that religion helps them to live a more fulfilled life or not. To my perception, this might be the best standard to consider the function of religion to human life, which can be sought for the answer through the question of ‘*does the religion enable its adherents to live a positively fulfilled life as s/he wants to?*’. To be clear, ‘*positively*’ is not to harm others and nature, and ‘*fulfilled*’ is to meet one’s expectations to the largest extent. Accordingly, I would interpret my empirical data following such standard in terms of *the function of religion*, not comfort through material abundance or through modern science and technology.

## **8.2 Role of Religious Leaders on Ordinary Adherents’ Beliefs**

To explore the religious beliefs of an individual or a group, it is essential to evaluate key factors that have been significantly shaping their religious belief on a regular basis. By doing so, one could have a knowledge background for further discovering religious belief in its multifaceted meanings and on various scales, and for a fuller understanding of a religious group as a whole and in relation with other aspects such as behaviors or customs. To Hmong Protestants, the external factor that appears to be most influential on ordinary adherents to the largest extent is their religious leaders, regardless of their theology certificates and degrees.

*Considering Common Factors Influencing Religious Belief.* As a matter of fact, factors that have a fundamental impact on adherents’ religious beliefs vary by religious groups. Such factors include but not limited to religious tradition, demographic factors, language<sup>2</sup>, or religious socialization, personal communities<sup>3</sup>. I would now examine to which extent these factors have an impact on my research population regarding their religious beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> John R Hinnells, “Why Study Religion,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005b), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Suro et al., “Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion,” *Pew Research Center*, 2007, 23–25.

<sup>3</sup> Marie Cornwall, “The Social Bases of Religion: A Study of Factors Influencing Religious Belief and Commitment,” *Review of Religious Research* 29, no. 1 (1987): 44–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3511951>.

Hmong CMA Protestants in Yagad are considerably homogeneous, which means they are not divided by religious tradition, demographic origin, or language. All of them converted to Protestantism from their traditional animism. Although they may migrate to Yagad from various villages in northern Vietnam, no obvious difference appears due to their departure places. Also, there are Flower Hmong (*Mông Lênh* or *Mông Hoa*), Black Hmong, and White Hmong living together in Yagad, yet they communicate in the Hmong language that everyone can understand. While the majority of Hmong in Yagad are Flower Hmong<sup>4</sup>, dialects do not matter for them. Some of them even prove to me that they are able to read the Bible on some different available online versions.

In terms of factors on *human relationships* such as ‘*religious socialization*’ and ‘*personal communities*,’ they more often than not depend on Hmong ‘*personality*’ and their ‘*economic conditions*’ rather than ingroup and outgroup ties. In fact, the Hmong appear to have equal opportunities for *interacting within* their community in both religious or secular context. Plus, as mentioned earlier in this study, Yagad Hmong convert group is a relatively closed society. Thus, their *connection with outsiders* might not be an effective indicator to be considered its potential impact on their religious beliefs.

Meanwhile, Hmong’s economic conditions affect to a certain extent how they read and study the Bible, pray and reflect, particularly among those who have to go to the forest regularly to collect wood, orchids, and mushrooms for weeks. However, as mentioned in ‘the focal village’ section, Yagad Hmong have quite fertilized soil to do various home-based farming activities. Furthermore, most of forest products are only seasonally available for harvesting; thus, those Hmong who go to collect those products are absent from home once in a while, not throughout the year. Therefore, economic conditions can be a challenge for strengthening one’s belief, yet not a decisive factor if that person really desires to do so. At this point, the remaining factor is the ‘*personality*’ of adherents – a highly complex factor – which I would attempt to discuss its multiple aspects in the following sections.

*Why ‘religious leaders’ matter to Hmong converts?* As discussed above, common factors play a vital role in shaping religious beliefs in most other groups, yet not applicable to Hmong Protestants. For this religious group, it is observable that when one attends church service, Bible studies group, or a prayer gathering on a regular basis, it might be obvious to see how active the group is through how dynamic their leader is. There are a couple of reasons accounting for such characteristics.

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<sup>4</sup> I could not obtain any reports on the exact number of Hmong by their sub-groups but got such information from some villagers.

Traditionally, the Hmong is largely known as an ethnic people who have greatly appreciated their leaders at various levels, such as family heads, clan heads, or village heads. Having a strong sense of community, Hmong people are in most cases tremendously united to get common problems resolved, vastly thanks to their high consensus and role of leaders. They have lived in mountainous parts of Vietnam, which are relatively isolated to other ethnic groups that helps to maintain their autonomy status and keep them communicated within merely their own language. On the one hand, this reality requires Hmong to be united to protect themselves from outside forces, yet prevent them from interacting with other ethnic groups and learning new things outside their society. Thus, community leaders even play a more important role, providing one among few sources for the Hmong to get consultation for their life concerns.

In contemporary Yagad, leaders' roles are not less important than those of their past or traditional societies, yet in a different version: *religious leaders*. By saying this, I do not mean that family and clan heads are not as important as religious leaders, which most Vietnamese scholars claim<sup>5</sup>. As we examined in previous sections, Hmong got countless difficulties not only by the time they decided to migrate to Yagad from northern Vietnam but also on the first days settling in the new area. Such hardships obviously required effective leadership so that they could be able to create a good community as it is today. Besides, numerous scammers came to the village, stirring up villagers' lives that actually alert them to be more conscious. Thus, it is understandable that people feel unsafe and better follow leaders to get the most updated news and appropriate responses. In such cases, the role of leaders is strongly proved. Which leaders are they? Religious leaders. While most Hmong in Yagad now are Protestants, they keep regular meetings and are constantly updated on common concerns by their religious leaders, not by the village head.

Like their ancestors and people in the North, Hmong Yagad maintain themselves considerably separated from the wider society that limits them to learning new knowledge from outsiders. Particularly, almost all of the Hmong Protestants in the village are not avid readers and not highly active in studying theology as their counterparts in advanced regions such as self-learning from the internet or studying together with their Christian counterparts of various congregations. They are not frequently challenged by theological concerns, other religions and theories. They are more likely not to consider seeking spiritual alternatives once their lives are already safe and stable. Such reality leads to several consequences. First, when it comes to one of the key questions on religious beliefs of 'what do you think about other religions?', most of the Hmong may not be able to give out a rich and relevant answer. Accordingly, it is clear that

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<sup>5</sup> A detailed discussion on the roles of religious leaders and clan/family heads is provided in Chapter 10.



Hmong Protestants more often than not believe that only those who follow God (*tin nhận chúa Giê-su*) would be able to go up to Heaven<sup>6</sup>. Also, this fact partly explains why some Hmong converts cannot recognize how various denominations differ that, in some cases, leads Hmong to follow false religions or unintentionally involve in political protests then are unexpectedly sentenced<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly, Hmong religious leaders play an essential role in guiding their adherents not only in terms of spirituality but also in secular matters.

Furthermore, a Hmong religious leader might be able to form his audience to a large extent, such as gathering and worshiping environment or understanding their belief and practicing it. When I was in Lakad, the Lakad I Hmong CMA church house was led by an old missionary who usually is relatively slow, ambiguous in communicating, and preaches by reading his note. Accordingly, some of the followers shared that they seemed to be sleepy during the service until their sub-group meetings when they were challenged by assignment-questions, a check-up by their group leaders, such as the Women Bible studies group. Meanwhile, several other CMA house churches in the same district reveal a different fact. Adherents pay more attention and seem to be more engaged if their leaders are creative in preaching and interacting with them. For instance, when I sat nearby some female Hmong at a Thursday evening service in a five-hundred-followers gathering a Hmong house church in Lakad II, they were busy with their kids but suddenly headed up and followed the sermon when a DC member preached and took realistic examples which are familiar with these ordinary Hmong. His dynamic tone captivated the attention of his audience. Within Yagad, this pattern is also typical, particularly among church group gatherings, as I pointed out in a previous part.

Such essential role of religious leaders might be different in developed countries or in places where adherents are confident in their abilities of self-studying their religion. Nevertheless, suppose we approach the case from a traditional education perspective that most of the people in Vietnamese society still follow today. In that case, it is understandable that the teacher typically plays an orienting role toward their audience. In other words, ‘learners’ are mostly ‘passive’ in obtaining their knowledge at traditional lectures.

It should be noted again that Hmong Protestant leaders do not help their adherents with economic concerns. Church leaders only keep their people updated on general news or raise awareness of possible risks in farming or doing business with outsiders. There is no concrete advice or specific help provided to followers. In general, church leaders only practice their duties fundamentally in terms of spiritual guidance and support. Also, they do not replace the

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<sup>6</sup> I would further discuss when it comes to *Hmong Protestants' belief in Spirit* in a subsequent section.

<sup>7</sup> Illustrated examples would be provided in the section dealing with *Hmong involvement in Politics*.



role of family and clan head. For instance, how an important event of a Hmong should be organized is the concern of their family and clan, instead of pastors, missionaries, or DC members. If they are involved, Church officers are only in charge of conducting appropriate religious rituals for the host family. Technically, with more than 2,200 adherents, church leaders are apparently not able to take care of every individual and household. Thus, the conclusion that Hmong people convert to Protestantism in the past and today due to religious leaders' material support is not convincing.

*How Hmong religious leaders influence their adherents?* Unlike Catholicism, which is known to have a clear hierarchy and the Pope is acknowledged as the supreme power over the whole Church, Protestantism may vary by denominations, yet most of them, in general, follow a democratic structure to a certain extent<sup>8</sup>. Is it true at Yagad Hmong CMA house church? Do Hmong Protestants totally believe that they can directly communicate with God without any higher human power support?

Objectively, it is worth noticing that the relatively stable statuses of assigned church head and elected DC members are more likely to limit democracy principles at Hmong CMA house churches that more or less influence ordinary adherents' attitude and behaviors toward their leaders. First, all Hmong CMA house churches in southern Vietnam today, in fact, are '*chi hội tự dưỡng*' (can be translated to '*self-nurturing unit*'); which means ECV-S would assign their church head. In other words, the adherents cannot independently select by their head. Though those house churches are actually tremendously large in size, enough to build a church, and are willing to convert the land ownership to 'religious land,' they are not able to be a '*chi hội tự lập*' (*self-independent unit*) which is supposed to have absolute right to establish and run the church in the way majority of adherents most prefer<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> ECV-S also claims on its 2001 Charter and other official documents to follow Democracy and Publicity principles, Election by Secret Ballot, for example, see Hội thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (Miền Nam) [The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South], *Hiến Chương [The Charter]* (Nhà xuất bản Tôn giáo, 2002), 10.

<sup>9</sup> See requirements, rights, and responsibilities for both types of unit (*chi hội*) at Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (Miền Nam) [The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South], *Nội Quy Giáo Luật Kỷ Luật [Code of Canon Law and Discipline]*, Lưu hành nội bộ [Internal Circulation Only], 2016. For example, total adherents for being qualified to be 'self-independent unit' (*chi hội tự lập*) is over 100 and over 40 for 'self-nurturing unit' (*chi hội tự dưỡng*) while Yagad has already over 2,200 adherents and entirely independent in terms of finance. When I asked why Yagad church is qualified to be a 'self-independent unit' but not yet get approved to be acknowledged, there were no answers or explanation. Although ECV-S's regulations may vary by words in different versions, the content generally is similar. For example, in the 2016 version, while Article 15. 1c says 'self-independent unit has right to maintain, invite Church Head (Quản Nhiệm), Church Deputy Head (*phó Quản Nhiệm*) or ask for having a Church Head Assistant (*phụ tá Quản Nhiệm*),' there is no such right mentioned for 'self-nurturing unit,' see Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (Miền Nam) Tổng Liên Hội 2016, 19-20. On a retyped version in October 2015, it is certainly claimed that the head church of self-nurturing unit is appointed by ECV-S (*Tổng Liên hội*).

As we discussed earlier, the theology training and ordination process are challenging and require approval not only by religious institutions but also by the Vietnamese government. Thus, there are only a few Hmong who are able to and/or desire to become pastors that lead to a very limited number of candidates for church head position. Though it is a fact that ECV-S assigns only the church head and all adherents democratically elect the local Deacon Committee, it is observable that most DC members are more often than not maintained over the years/ terms. These facts additionally prove the ‘stable status’ of church heads and officers at Yagad and beyond. Accordingly, ‘*lack of entire independence and democracy*’ and ‘*getting used to following a stable leadership*’ are more likely to create ‘*passive obedience*’ among followers. I do not say it is good or bad. To a certain extent, it is even better for a ‘relatively new’ religious group to be strengthened while having a stable organization and good leaders. However, even if they are aware of or not, ordinary Hmong adherents would more likely feel that their religious leaders have specific powers and that they better follow such pre-arrangement and established structure rather than asking for any change based on democratic principles.

Meanwhile, it is fair to say that as long as the will of church leaders and officers matches with the majority of Hmong followers, their church would be healthy and function well like it is supposed to do. This tendency is, I believe, more likely to happen among the Hmong rather than arbitrary status. In general, the Hmong do respect and follow their leaders, but in case such leaders are apparently unreasonable to the whole community, all or a part of people would find a way to protest like a vast group of Hmong did to their traditional leaders by converting to Protestantism since the late 1980s or how Hmong villagers of Yagad collectively dismissed their village head a couple of years ago.

Empirically, all of my research participants indeed affirm that their pastors and religious leaders are more powerful than them, particularly in terms of the efficiency of prayers. However, it is not because of supernatural power that they may own. Hmong CMA Protestants believe that pastors and church leaders understand the Bible better so that they are able to better connect with God (*gản Chúa hơn*) and know how to pray more appropriately. This thinking and attitude come from their self-awareness that they lack advanced theology knowledge, which then limits their capacities to communicate with God in appropriate ways. In Hmong’s words, they interpret things simply as they literally mean: ‘*We cannot help ourselves... Like I already confessed and prayed, but it did not work. I told them [pastor and DC members] then they prayed for me... Sometimes if it did not work either, then maybe I had done something wrong*’<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Haam S., interview by author, 09 November 2018.

As a matter of fact, those who devote their time to do ministry services have more opportunities to learn the Bible, lead prayer groups, and encounter theology trained seniors who may support them in various ways to deeper understand Christian teachings. Meanwhile, ordinary Hmong followers spend most of their time working in the field or do manual jobs to make a living. Thus, such circumstances may minimize their chances of doing religious reflection, studying the Bible, or even leading them to make excuses not to think of their faith. Yaaj N., who had to run away from their parents to ‘freely follow God’ is a typical case. After ‘paying all prices’, crying until having some mental problems, she now is a 25-year-old baptized Protestant and a mother of children. Being faithful, yet N. admits that she is getting lazier and feels like sometimes she goes away from God just because being a mom and having more responsibilities as an adult prevent her from studying the Bible or even just sitting quietly at church to listen to the sermon and pray. Such dilemma is actually common among Hmong, particularly young adults. Haam G., a 15-year-old girl, shares: “*if I forgot to read the Bible, or not learn hard, I feel like I stray from God (ròi xa Chúa). When I was around 12 to 14 years old, I was very diligent... but now I feel like I am so lazy; all others on my age are lazy too. I do not know why, but I feel afraid that I am away from God*”<sup>11</sup>. Apparently, such Christians are aware of how inevitable their faith means to them in life, yet being distracted by increasing life concerns. They then admit that their church leaders become ‘reminders’ and ‘inspirers’ on their spiritual journeys. In fact, Hmong people have been well-known for their early marriage (*tào hôn*) phenomenon. Although it becomes less common among Hmong converts, I still met a young woman who got married at the age of thirteen and had two kids soon after that. Most of them drop out after finishing high school or secondary school. They then devote their lives to work, marriage, and taking care of their kids. Thus, it is a fact that Hmong Protestants have a burdened life in their very early ages compared to their Protestant counterparts in western societies or urban regions of Vietnam.

Acknowledging such fact, one may wonder ‘*how often ordinary Hmong come to their leaders for the prayer request.*’ In general, it is observable that illiterate Hmong are more likely to make prayer requests than the rest of the adherents. While most of Hmong can read the Bible in Hmong, only around 50% of Hmong women over 35 years old can speak and read Vietnamese<sup>12</sup>. By the time Yagad Hmong arrived in the Central Highlands in 1996 and 1997, their female population was in their late teens or older. They could not attend school in such age and circumstance and were expected to be ready for marriage and then got busy being a

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<sup>11</sup> Haam G., interview by author, 01 November 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Lakad II DC members, focus group discussion by author, 24 December 2018.

wife and a mom. Thus, it is understandable that they are not good at Vietnamese – the language officially taught at school. Though a part of them can read the Bible in Hmong, they do not understand its implicit meanings. Instead, they only get basic ideas via sermons preached by religious leaders, which are well illustrated in common concepts and examples in their native language. When it comes to their religion, they only smile and mention simple words instead of getting involved in the deeper conversation as their younger/male counterparts<sup>13</sup>. Meanwhile, those who cannot read the Bible in both Hmong and Vietnamese are elderly people, approximately 70 years old or older<sup>14</sup>. However, illiterate Hmong are tremendously devout, which can be seen via their higher religious participation rate and daily expressions such as strictly following Commandments. This observation is also shared by other Hmong villagers and church leaders in Yagad and beyond.

Those who are able to read the Bible make prayer requests less often yet more likely to ask. Basically, most of their concerns are related to their life that should be seen through Christian teachings, not fundamental theological questions, which are even still challenging to trained missionaries. For example, one of the missionaries in Lakad shared with me that he did not entirely understand ‘*Lai the' hoc*’ (‘On Future’) when he attended theology courses because they were taught in the Vietnamese language and were extremely complicated. Thus, he chooses not to preach in detail on such topics to avoid saying wrong things or being not able to explain them well<sup>15</sup>. In addition, ordinary followers tend to reach church leaders closer to them than others, such as relatives or neighbors living near their house.

Meanwhile, the belief of ‘religious leaders are more powerful’ varies by theologically-educated Hmong and church officers<sup>16</sup>. For example, an over 50-year-old male missionary in Yagad supposes that pastors have more experience in praying and they have more power as God bless them more than ordinary people. According to him, an ordinary person would never get theological knowledge equal to that of a pastor, even if s/he self-studies very hard. In turn, a pastor has not yet fully understood the Bible, s/he needs to study more and more, but he believes ‘being a pastor means studying the Bible with God as s/he already finished theology

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<sup>13</sup> Such illiterate female Hmong were very friendly to me; they gave me food, showed their care when we sat or did something together but rarely shared their faith as they did not know how to talk about it even when I had someone supporting me in the Hmong language. We mostly communicated in basic Hmong or Vietnamese.

<sup>14</sup> Yaaj G. T., interview by author, 07 November 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Haam M. P., interview by and follow-up conversations with author, 14 and 24 October 2018.

<sup>16</sup> I do not ask questions on the ‘power of religious leaders’ to ordained pastors as they are considered to be the highest among clergymen. Meanwhile, missionaries may think of ordained pastors as religious leaders to tell their thoughts on this concern.

courses offered.’ In his perception, studying with God means learning and praying simultaneously, particularly when he does not profoundly understand something in the Bible<sup>17</sup>.

Whereas, a 37-year-old male missionary and some DC members at Lakad II church consider that the power of prayer depends on one’s faith, not depending on his or her position. In other words, a pastor does not have more power than ordinary adherents merely because s/he is a pastor. Only if a pastor has a stronger faith, his prayer might work better. Even if the pastors and DC members pray for a follower, the prayer works or not relying on that person, not on church leaders. Throughout our discussion, some Hmong Lakad II church officers also stressed that communal prayer was more effective yet not necessarily done by religious leaders. On the other hand, they also admitted that most adherents did not understand the Bible well. Thus, religious leaders like them should study the Bible then thoughtfully plan sermons that were practical and understandable to everyone. They agreed that preaching was a challenging work that required high carefulness, not as easy as the way we talked in daily life<sup>18</sup>.

In short, it has happened among Christian institutions that their adherents may perceive their denominational church in a very different way compared to what their leaders do and what their church is supposed to function<sup>19</sup>. This circumstance has also occurred among Yagad Hmong Protestants, but it is mostly displayed in constructive ways. Hmong people’s intrinsic characteristics and objective factors applied upon their whole convert community have uniquely shaped a local democracy, which is now in ‘relatively balanced negotiation,’ positively supporting the development of such a new ethnic minority church. Furthermore, other ECV-S church members in Vietnam are believed to take advantage of male adherents in the age range 35 – 50 who might financially contribute significantly to the church. Thus, those men are often encouraged to hold church positions such as group leader(s) or secretary(s) or so<sup>20</sup>. Conversely, Hmong church officers in Yagad often lack time to do farming and make a living like other villagers. Their wives, instead, even have to go to the forests to collect sellable products or do more labor work to take care of the families so that their husbands can have more time serving at the church.

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<sup>17</sup> Yaaj G. T., interview by and a follow-up conversation with author, 07 and 22 November 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Focus group discussion by author in Lakad on 24 December 2018. There were eight males and one female who are DC members of the Lakad II Hmong CMA group; all of them in the age range 30 – 40.

<sup>19</sup> James D Davidson, Joseph A Schlagen, and William V D’Antonio, “Protestant and Catholic Perceptions of Church Structure,” *Social Forces* 47, no. 3 (1969): 314–22.

<sup>20</sup> Xuân Hùng Nguyễn, “Nghĩ Lễ và Lối Sống Của Tín Đồ Tin Lành - Trường Hợp Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (Miền Nam) [Rites and Lifestyles of Protestants - the Case of The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 11 & 12, no. 159 (2016): 94.

### 8.3 Transforming Perception of ‘Ghost’/ ‘Spirit’

As mentioned before, the traditional Hmong religion believes that many ghosts, including house ghosts (*ma nhà*), actually exist, which fundamentally impacts living Hmong’s life in its numerous aspects. In English literature, it should be understood as ‘spirits,’ yet in the Vietnamese language, the word the Hmong use is ‘*ma*,’ which literally means ‘ghost,’ not spirit. Thus, I employ ‘ghost’ and ‘spirit’ in this section interchangeably to make it readable in English and be loyal to the way Hmong Protestants in research fields and several Vietnamese pioneer scholars in Hmong studies use.

*Idea of Ghost and dead Ancestors in traditional belief.* In general,<sup>21</sup> traditional Hmong believe in animism, which acknowledges the physical energy of ancestral spirits, being and specific non-being spirits, as well as a variety of ghosts residing within their house called ‘house ghosts.’ In memory of elderly and middle-aged Hmong in Yagad nowadays, they are still able to recall some of the stories back then and firmly described circumstances in the past such as ‘*ông bà nó về đòi trâu đòi bò*’ (‘grandparents<sup>22</sup>... they came back to ask for buffalos and cows’). There are both ‘*ma tốt*’ (good ghost) and ‘*ma xấu*’ (bad ghosts) in their imagination. While good ghost protects Hmong such as Main Pillar Ghost (*ma cột chính*) or Gate Ghost (*ma cửa*), bad ghosts are bothering Hmong and/or making them sick such as Sun Ghost (*ma mặt trời*), Brook Ghost (*ma suối*), Chimney Ghost (*ma ống khói*), so on.

Meanwhile, dead ancestors are ‘good ghosts’ (*ma lành*) who are supposed to bless their children. However, if ancestor worship is not properly conducted, such ancestors would punish and/or return to ask their children for buffalos or pigs<sup>23</sup>. Traditional Hmong also believe in reincarnation. For example, as previously mentioned, the dead person’s soul would possibly be reincarnated to his/ her children’s generation within the same clan.

*Bible-based Truths: How Hmong Protestants interpret the World and Human Beings?* Before going into the deeper investigation on Hmong converts’ perception of Ghosts, I would like to examine how Bible-based truths mean to them, which fundamentally shape their view on the essence of the world and human beings.

First, all informants of my research affirm that the Bible is literally correct. They believe that if in some cases, a human person thinks that there is something wrong with that sacred book, it might be his/ her problematic perception rather than ultimate truths in the Bible. When

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<sup>21</sup> For more details, see a previous part on ‘Traditional Hmong Religion’.

<sup>22</sup> In most cases, the Hmong call ‘*ông bà*’ such as ‘*đời ông bà*’ (grandparents’ generations) to refer to their ancestors, not just limit to ‘grandparents’ as it literally means.

<sup>23</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 44.



I raised the question ‘*someone believes that the Bible was written by human beings, how one could say it was God words?*’, I got the answer from a 34-year-old male Hmong, who only completed the 4<sup>th</sup> grade at school, that ‘*because there are Holy Sprits (Đức Thánh linh) within such human persons and guided him/her*’<sup>24</sup>. I was quite amazed at how specific and spontaneous his answer was. I do not mean that he understands Christian theology well, yet it says something about his certainty in faith regardless of which level of education he may obtain. This case is typical, not exceptional, in the field.

Apart from entirely trusting the Bible, similar to most of their northern Protestant counterparts<sup>25</sup>, all of the Hmong people I have talked with in the Central Highlands totally believe in God and only worship God instead of worshipping a variety of spirits as traditional Hmong do. They never doubt the Creator – Almighty God and they believe that God always has His Will<sup>26</sup> which actually becomes the way they explain everything such as fundamental life questions on *Misfortunes and Sickness* and *Death and the After-life*. These concerns, in fact, essentially influence the way Hmong converts reconstruct their perception of ghosts.

Those who are self-aware that they are not good at understanding the Bible are more likely to admit that they are not sure why bad things come to them. These people, shown from my data set, do not frequently attend Bible study groups. Whereas among those who respond, there are various opinions in terms of *misfortunes and sickness*. Some people suppose that all undesirable events that occurred in human life are how God challenges us. If we are able to overcome them, then our faith would be strengthened. Otherwise, we would have negative feelings and experiences which is because we are already far away from God. Some say that because of our sins or wrongdoings, God punishes us. Such punishment and challenge may even be revealed through respondent prayers. To be specific, if they pray but God does not respond in any visible way, some Hmong Protestants think that it is because they have done something wrong or are already away from God. They especially believe that we human beings are away from God because of evil spirits interfering with our faith, which would be further discussed later in this section to illustrate better how the concept of ghosts is transformed among Hmong Protestants.

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<sup>24</sup> Xyooj D., interview by author, 19 November 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Vũ Thị Thu Hà, “Chức Năng Của Đạo Tin Lành Trong Vùng Dân Tộc Thiểu Số ở Việt Nam Hiện Nay [Functions of Protestantism in Ethnic Minorities Areas in Vietnam Today],” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* 05, no. 173 (2018): 48.

<sup>26</sup> Hmong Protestants use ‘*Ý Chúa*’ (God’s Will) or ‘*Chúa làm việc*’ (it is how God works) to refer to ‘God’s Will.’



Regarding *Death and After-Life* concern, most of the Hmong converts believe that ‘following God’ is the only way for someone to be saved. It even becomes their absolute truth that I heard countless times in the field: ‘*chỉ có hai đường thôi!*’ (there are only two ways) which means the only way to have a good After-Life is following God; otherwise we would be sent to a bad place. They strongly affirm that Jesus would return one day to judge so that it would be a ‘*ngày phán xử*’ (Last Judgment) for everyone. Nevertheless, no one is certain of the time Jesus would return; they only believe it would happen on ‘a day in the future.’ This belief is far different from what Vietnamese scholars wrote about Hmong converts that they were naïve to believe that ‘Jesus and/or Hmong King would return to save Hmong soon,’ which then led them to do wrong things such as gathering to protest or mass migrating to western regions<sup>27</sup>.

*The concept of Heaven and Hell.* In the traditional Hmong religion, it is believed that there is no word referring to ‘hell’ (*âm phủ*). ‘The other world’ appears to be a ‘dark hole deep under the ground’ in which ‘bad people’ would go and work very hard after their death<sup>28</sup>. Meanwhile, ‘*ông Trời*’ (Heaven as a figure) is also a controversial idea. Some scholars say that Hmong people hate ‘Heaven’ as it lets ‘diseases’ and ‘dead’ fall on the earth, making the Hmong suffer<sup>29</sup>. Some others say ‘*Trời*’ (Heaven as space/land) is also the place in some parts of which ancestors reside; there is also a beautiful garden that makes souls of ‘living people’ more likely to get lost<sup>30</sup>. Relatively, there may be different opinions on traditional Hmong ideas of ‘heaven’ and ‘hell,’ yet such two concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ places where people may belong after death actually exist.

Being Protestants, the Hmong still have ideas of such ‘after-life destinations’ but in a different meaning. Though not all Hmong well understand the detailed process of ‘*what would happen after death?*’, they are fully aware that if they believe in God and follow Commandments, they would be saved to be with God in Heaven. Most of them often say, ‘believing in God would be able to go up to the Heaven after death’ (*tin nhận Chúa Giê-su sẽ được lên Thiên đàng*). Some converts, particularly those who seem to be diligent in learning the Bible, consider that there has not yet been ‘hell’ and ‘heaven’ until Jesus returns and judges. Tswb T. believes that “*When God returns, he will pick us up. He will give us new bodies (Chúa biến hoá cho mình thân xác mới). Hell and Heaven already exist, but now is not the right time*

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<sup>27</sup> A detailed discussion on this matter is in Chapter 6.

<sup>28</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Mạnh Tiến Nguyễn 2020, 187.

<sup>30</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 58.

yet. The place we (*mình*<sup>31</sup>) would go after death is called 'Bình An' or 'Bình Yên' (Peace)."<sup>32</sup> In other words, at the moment or 'in our lifetime', there are only temporary places where dead people would be sent to. The name of temporary places varies by Hmong. For instance, some Hmong call '*Hồ lửa*' (the lake of fire) or '*Vực sâu*' (Abyss) as the place bad persons or those who do not believe in God would stay after death, and '*Bình yên*' or '*Bình an*' (Peace) or '*trên Không trung*' (up in the air) as good persons or those who believe in God staying and waiting for Jesus to come back then restore human in 'new body' (*hình hài mới*)<sup>33</sup>. 'Heaven' only appears by the time Jesus returns. Although some may be confused among concepts of 'hell' and 'the lake of fire' or 'peace' and 'up in the air', most Hmong are extremely clear on opposite directions of two destinations. They all believe Jesus would return, yet admit that they are not sure when it would be. None of them affirms Jesus would return soon during their lifetime. Also, most of them confidently claim that 'to live or die is God's work', and they are not afraid of death because they would be with God afterward. However, living in this life means doing the best to live well, not just take life for granted because of the eternal life after death.

A question raised afterward, '*What about their ancestors who followed the traditional Hmong religion? Would they be saved and go to Heaven with them?*'. I would discuss this matter along with the way Hmong converts now think about ghosts, which, in traditional thought, are also their dead ancestors.

*Ghost in New Sense.* One may wonder why a couple of fundamental concepts are discussed throughout this part, but only attention to Ghost/Spirits' concept is mainly drawn. I would say that Ghost/Spirits is the crucial factor shaping Hmong's thought and attitude towards their on-going lives and the cornerstone of cognitive transformation among this population compared to their same-ethnic people who maintain traditional religion. Again, I do not intend to advocate a specific group or religion, yet to see how their belief impacts their lives in various aspects.

As a matter of fact, Hmong converts' Christianity-based understanding of other matters is inevitable, which supports shaping their new perception of ghosts/ spirits. Overall, *the belief in animism and shamanism* leads the Hmong to make an animal sacrifice for healing and worship; otherwise, they would live in fear if they do not meet ghosts/spirits' requirements, including their ancestors' which are predicted by shamans, particularly in cases of sickness and death.

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<sup>31</sup> The Hmong often use '*mình*' as I/we. In this context, '*mình*' means 'we who follow God.'

<sup>32</sup> Tswb T., interview by author, 24 December 2018. T.'s opinion was supported by Muas S., Haam M. P. and some other Hmong who were in the conversation.

<sup>33</sup> Muas X., Yaaj N., interview by author, 10 November 2018., Faaj C., Xyooj D., 19 November 2018., Yaaj Q., interview by author, 20 November 2018.

Traditional Hmong even worry if they leave their house to go somewhere else as house ghosts (*ma nhà*) are only able to protect them while they are at home. Meanwhile, *following God and being Protestants* allow Hmong converts to believe, think and behave in a different way that has finally established their new way of living. They no longer need to worry about ‘ghost’ as God protects them. So, ‘*what they, as Protestants now, think about Ghosts/Spirits?*’

First, most of the Hmong converts acknowledge the *existence of ghosts or demons* in the physical world. They also can be in any physical shape. Such evil forces are able to negatively interfere with human lives, make people sick, or even control their minds in some cases. During our talks and interviews<sup>34</sup>, most of the Hmong do not describe demons in complicated stories or concepts; they simply affirm that demons are trying to take them far away from God. While traditional Hmong in Vietnam believe that there are good and bad ghosts (*ma lành* and *ma dữ*), Hmong Protestants do not think that ‘good’ demons exist. The further a person is away from God; the easier demons can convince him/ her to do bad things or even possess him/her. When it comes to Satan, they suppose that it is also a form of demons.

*Are dead persons ghosts? Are their ancestors’ ghosts?* At this point, one could relate to their belief in death and after-life that dead people, including their *dead ancestors*, are not ghosts, and any dead Hmong would neither be ghost nor exist again in life in any forms, including through reincarnation. They do not believe in reincarnation as their traditional counterparts do. This belief, in fact, explains why the Hmong no longer practice any traditional funerals or shamanic rites that are to avoid souls of the dead coming back and bothering living people. So, regarding the question of ‘*would dead Hmong ancestors go to Heaven by Judgment day,*’ answers also vary by individual Hmong, but most of them confirm that ‘God is just’ (*Chúa là Công bình*). For several Hmong, their ancestors did not follow God and perhaps would possibly not be saved. According to Xyooj H., “*Ancestors (ông bà ngày xưa) did not know God; they all could not go up to Heaven. Anyone who does not follow God cannot go to Heaven regardless of how good s/he is.*”<sup>35</sup> Whereas, some believe that since they did not know about God at their generations to believe him, so God would judge them later according to his justice<sup>36</sup>.

In short, similar to ‘ghosts’ in traditional Hmong belief, ghosts or demons in Hmong Protestants’ imagination are also evil spirits that create sufferings to human beings. The most distinguishing thing is that while the former belief considers the soul(s) of dead Hmong ancestors a type of ghosts who may act good or bad, the latter does not count them as ‘ghosts.’

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<sup>34</sup> Numerous Hmong shared with me similar thoughts; I only name here some of them such as Yaaj L., interview by author, 27 October 2018, Vaaj S., interview by author, 13 November 2018, Xyooj D., 19 November 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Xyooj H., interview by author, 13 November 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Haam M. P., interview by author, 24 December 2018.

*Are they afraid of ghosts?* When I raised this question to the daughter-in-law of my first host family in Lakad, while she had not yet responded, the host mom, Haam T.'s wife, who stood nearby said, 'no more ghosts... believing in God so no ghosts!' (*tin Chúa thì không có ma đâu!*). She does speak much Vietnamese, yet is able to say what she exactly means when it comes to the obsessive concept of 'ghost.' Meanwhile, Muas M. – a 30-year-old kindergarten teacher – did not dare to go with me to a remote Hmong village as she was afraid of the ghost on the way back home alone around 8 or 9 p.m. while I stayed in that village. Muas M. is the wife of a Hmong district policeman, and both of them are traditional Hmong. However, it does not mean that all Hmong converts no longer feel scared about ghosts, particularly among young girls. Some admit their feelings to me, but they said they attempted to pray in such moment that genuinely helped them to be calmer. That is how God works for them. Admittedly, instead of being afraid of ghosts who would make living people sick or bothering them in many ways at any unexpected time, Hmong converts today are no longer continuously obsessed with such forces. They become more confident about what ghosts actually are, how ghosts can negatively affect people, and what to do to deal with ghosts instead of worrying about their limited economic abilities that may prevent them from pleasing unpleasant ghosts.

*So, 'what Hmong CMA Protestants do while they are away from God because of evil spirits' interference?* My research shows that Hmong CMA Protestants choose to reach God do in a couple of ways, especially in times of difficulties: pray, attend church services and religious groups, read and study the Bible by themselves<sup>37</sup>. Some Vietnamese scholars blame that Protestant missionaries had used 'psychological tricks' to convert the Hmong such as by convincing them that their diseases would be cured if they pray to God or reach God's words<sup>38</sup>. However, after some decades of being Protestants, such belief still strongly exists among the Hmong.

In fact, *'how effective such methods are'* varies by individuals, which largely depends on their personalities and perception. To be specific, an introvert and/or experienced person more likely chooses to pray more frequently, while an extrovert and/or a young person possibly find 'attending church and groups' more helpful. Xyooj S. and Xyooj A. are 19-year-old Hmong girls who are very active in joining the choir and other church activities. They said that they preferred to be at the church and sing out loud while they were sad. In contrast, experienced and quiet Hmong like Haam S. chose to stay home or pray by themselves at times of

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<sup>37</sup> When I asked in which way/ activity that they felt closest to God, answers varied but could be grouped into such categories.

<sup>38</sup> Đinh Lợi Lê 2012, 47.

difficulties<sup>39</sup>. Praying works better than any other methods for most Hmong adult women, particularly those who can only read the Bible in the Hmong language with little understanding. Compared to their higher rate of attending religious activities, it is understandable to see that they join church services and prayer gatherings in which they tend to make prayer requests rather than enjoying ‘peer gatherings’ as younger followers. Meanwhile, those who have good knowledge background of the Bible as well as general understanding of the sermons preached by their leaders tend to read the Bible more often in their times of troubles and attempt to apply what they learn from Christian teachings to their life, regardless how introvert or extrovert they can be<sup>40</sup>.

Particularly when it comes to *sickness*, as mentioned previously, it is a common belief among Hmong converts that prayer would cure spiritual illness and medicines (or in everyday language, it is called ‘*thuốc tây*’ which means ‘western medicine’) would cure physical diseases. Thus, they rely on their beliefs and intuitions to prioritize how to treat their health problems. Nevertheless, most of them choose to do both simultaneously if their sickness is becoming severe; so that they can maximize the possibilities of getting over their pains and/or discomfort. Even if prayer does not cure, it will make them feel relieved instead of constant worrying or fear. As a matter of fact, all of the Hmong converts highly appreciate the power of communal prayer. As mentioned previously, some may make prayer requests or invite church leaders to pray for them at their private houses.

When it comes to prayer in general, Hmong Protestants tend to be flexible in the ways they pray. They pray at home or even in the field while doing farming or in the forest while being there for days/ weeks to collect forest products. In terms of the praying time, they usually pray right after getting up in the morning, before going to bed in the evening, and before any meals they have all day long. While most of the other research on Hmong Protestants only mention their ‘three times praying per day’ as it is technically described; Hmong converts of all villages in the Central Highlands I visited, in fact, affirm that they also pray before a trip to the field or another place such as district center, or are going to do something meaningful.

Prayer becomes a habit among the Hmong converts, even for those who rarely read the Bible or never join Bible study groups. A couple of villagers sincerely told me that when they were tired from work, they could not remember to read the Bible, but always remember to pray. Those who wear a hat daily would put it down while praying. Children, mostly at the age of

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<sup>39</sup> Xyooj S., Xyooj A., interview by and follow-up conversations with author, 13 and 22 November, 21 December 2018., Haam S., interview by author, 09 November 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Muas X., interview by author, 09 November 2018., Yaaj N., interview by author, 10 November 2018., Faaj C., interview by author, 19 November 2018.

three or older<sup>41</sup>, get familiar with sacred moments of praying among their family members. They more often than not stay silent during such time, and some close their eyes even though a few minutes ago they may be super noisy/ obstreperous. If a family does not have such a praying habit, someone may realize by observing how their kid(s) respond while people are praying as I did while being in the field sites.

Undoubtedly, Christian knowledge on all fundamental life concerns to Hmong Protestants might be as principally vital as to their world-wide fellow believers. On the other hand, this section highlights ‘changing understanding of ‘ghosts’ among them’ because ‘ghost’ is a crucial concept shaping traditional Hmong epistemology and life. By particularly examining ‘Hmong Protestants’ perception of ghosts’ as a part of their worldview based on the Bible and their denominational spiritual guidance, the section provides a fuller picture of ‘what their new religious belief on the world and human being is’ and ‘how such belief can fundamentally change their mindset and way of life in various aspects compared to their traditional same-ethnic people.’

#### **8.4 Direct Revelation and Social Interaction in Relation to Religious Conviction**

As mentioned earlier, one of a few most potent factors fundamentally affecting Hmong Protestants’ religious beliefs is their *personality/ personal character*<sup>42</sup>. How personality affects a person’s religious belief and vice versa would be explored via individual cases. Also, as revealed, these people more often than not prefer to think in visual and concrete ways rather than get involved in the abstract and complicated discussion. Their religious conviction works in the same way. In fact, when I asked ‘*whether or not they speak with God; and if yes, how?*’, most of them do not understand what I mean. They literally think that we humans cannot speak with God as we do in daily life. I then realized that I was using a ‘western concept’ to ask simple and straightforward Hmong Protestants, which was not appropriate. How their religion makes sense to Hmong converts, I accordingly suppose, are most apparent through their own feelings and experiences that are perceivable to them. Thus, although ‘directly communion with God’ is widely acknowledged to be common among Protestant denominations, communion in visible signs, not supernatural forms, for Hmong converts is a crucial channel to establish and/or strengthen their faith. Plus, social interaction is another essential and obvious factor that

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<sup>41</sup> As I observe, some kids at the age of more than one-year-old are already able to be aware of such praying habits; yet I am not sure if all kids under two can get such sensitivity.

<sup>42</sup> I do not discuss ‘*how a person’s character is built*’ here, which might be beyond this research’s scope. In this study, ‘*personal character/ personality*’ is considered relatively stable so that it can be examined in a dialectical relationship with religious belief and its expressions.



challenges them to reflect on their lives and problems, leading to a significant change in their belief.

*Direct and Visible Revelation.* Religious experiences are primarily described as something suddenly happen to someone that they think is beyond themselves and the universe<sup>43</sup> or may occur through various levels of religious practices such as meditation, yet it is different for most of the Hmong Protestants. Being simple and tending to think about everything in their literal meanings, Hmong Protestants seem to be most devout while experiencing direct and visible revelation that they believe comes from God and/or Holy Spirit instead of transcendent manifestation. As mentioned, they neither practice any type of meditation nor have communal retreats on a defined basis. Consequently, ‘being revealed’ via such practices is also not possible to them.

Although it was a sudden thought that came up to Tswb T. while he and his wife were in the forest collecting wood, T. did not witness any apparent signs of God. As they were collecting some wood pieces, T. felt that they needed to take a break even though it was getting dark. T. said he usually would not make a pause if he were running out of time at the end of the day. However, he did not know why he decided to leave the area they were standing and working at that moment. After only a few minutes, a giant tree nearby suddenly fell down that really scared them as if they had not taken a break and left, they would have been fatally injured. T. believed that God definitely protected them, yet he affirmed he did not obviously see any signs or hear any voices of God or Holy Spirits<sup>44</sup>.

In some other circumstances, revelation occurred to Hmong converts through natural phenomena that they wish to happen. For instance, ‘pray for rain’ (*cầu mưa*) sounds ancient, but it is a solution for a significant concern of Hmong farmers, who still enormously depend on natural conditions to make a living. Xyooj D. (male, age 38) recalled, “*That year my rice plants’ flowers were blooming out, but it was so dry. We had no water for irrigation. If there was still no rain for longer, we may all starve to death. I prayed, once then twice... then clouds appeared. Fourth and fifth time praying it was raining. I firmly believed that God answered me... It was in 2013*’. I asked, could it be a coincidence? D. affirms, ‘*I believe it was because of my prayer,*

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<sup>43</sup> As William James illustrates sudden religious experiences recorded by individuals in the latter part of *Lecture III. The Reality of the Unseen* in his book William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature*, Centenary Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 54–64.; or as John Hick mentions and discusses from various sources throughout the section on religious experiences in his book, see John Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience, and the Transcendent* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 29–31.

<sup>44</sup> Tswb T., interview by author, 24 December 2018.



as it was sunny for so long. All rice fields of all households looked all white' (*trắng hết*, which literally refers to the status of rice fields lacking water). He replied to my question of 'how did you feel afterward?' that 'I cried... then I felt super relieved. It was a tremendously comfortable feeling (*thấy rất thoải mái*)'<sup>45</sup>. Throughout our focused conversation, D. was always confident in his faith and understanding, very responsive to all wonders I raised, and followed his own coherent narrative without any hesitation.

In addition, God's revelation is believed to happen to heal human relationships. Yaaj G. (female aged 30) went on a trip visiting and doing ministry at a Protestant church in Đà Lạt, around 100 kilometers from her house, but her husband was not pleased about it. Her husband kept silent and had not contacted her since she left for the trip. G. was depressed and just attempted to keep praying. A few days later, she believed her intense prayers on days and the whole last day finally brought her a phone call from her husband<sup>46</sup>. I did not ask in detail why he was not happy, why she looked forward to his call that much, or why she did not simply call him, but I felt certain that his call was her full attention at that time. Thus, it could be considered a miracle to her that, she believed, was God's response to her persistent prayer.

As mentioned in the previous section, 'suffering, misfortune, sickness and death' that we discussed are closely related to 'ghosts'/demons/ evil spirits in Hmong's imagination, God's response thus can be visible in healing efficiency. In fact, it is quite common among Hmong that they decided to be a Christian because their diseases were cured by prayers offered by pastors and missionaries<sup>47</sup>. While most of the Hmong in Yagad and other villages of the Central Highlands are already Protestants, healing efficiency is understood as God's protection upon them. This phenomenon is one of the common signs of God that Hmong converts believe they are revealed. A 33-years-old Hmong woman named Tsaab T. S. is believed to have received God's miracle by being cured of her persistent disease – ovarian cyst (*u nang buồng trứng*) – after two days of continuous praying without eating or drinking. Although it is not a fatal disease, S. had suffered terrible pain even after her surgery at a district hospital on 14 January 2014. In 2015, she came to a commune clinic for an ultrasound scan to recheck her health. Thu V. – a Vietnamese Kinh doctor at the clinic – said there were still two big cysts and advised S. to buy medicine for home treatment. However, after many sufferings with medicines and

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<sup>45</sup> Xyooj D., interview by author, 19 November 2018.

<sup>46</sup> I met with G. several times at a daily prayer group since November 2018, had quick talks with her on the way to going home, but I did not ask for permission to come to her house as I heard that her husband was quite difficult. We then had a longer conversation on 22 January 2019 while her husband was absent.

<sup>47</sup> Both Vietnamese government officers and Hmong converts agreed I met during my fieldwork in December 2016 in Sơn La province of northern Vietnam acknowledged this fact.

surgeries, S. refuses any more pills. S. and her husband, Lis S. C., thought that there was only God who would be able to help her, which then led them to conduct a two-day intense prayer as mentioned. Thu V. was surprised that after only four days since S.'s ultrasound, her big cysts disappeared. She asked which medicine S. had used and did not believe in supernatural miracles after getting the answer. S replied, *“Everything is from our faith. If we do not believe, then it does not work; if we believe, then it works. What about you while studying to become a doctor? Did you believe that you would be able to become a doctor?”*<sup>48</sup>. Since that day, S. has had no pain that actually strengthens her and her husband's faith much more than any other words.

Meanwhile, ‘fortunes’ are also considered to be God's blessings or grace that come to Hmong Protestants as the way God responds to their prayers and requests. Such fortunes, similar to common knowledge, may be mental and physical well-being and economic prosperity. This belief seems to be ‘unreasonable’ to a significant number of Vietnamese government officials and scholars, which I have the chance to hear many times. For instance, Trần writes in her recent book: “They [Hmong Protestants] consider God to be above all and to be everything who helps them to have a good life, but they forget that the reason they can live such a good life is thanks to our Government's investment... the Vice-President of Điện Biên Vietnamese Fatherland Front gave them 200,000 VND, they replied ‘Thank God Amen’. The Vice President had to explain: *“No God gives you, it is my salary... you have to be grateful to me, not God. If you thank God, I will take it back. What do you think?...* They do make a mistake on acknowledging God instead of what *Cách mạng*<sup>49</sup> brings them”<sup>50</sup>. Such assumptions and charges that several government leaders and scholars pose to Hmong converts and vulnerably challenge them show their lack of understanding of these Christians.

Furthermore, most Hmong Protestants believe that faithful persons would be rewarded with certain types of fortunes, yet it seems that they are not devout just because of promising material benefits. Basically, Hmong converts do not have high expectations of others, even in family relationships such as parents – children. As said before, a Hmong kid of more or less ten years old is most of the time allowed by his/her parents to do whatever s/he desires as long as they do not harm others. Continuing education or leaving school is also Hmong children's choice instead of their parents' expectations as in most Vietnamese Kinh families. Their expectations

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<sup>48</sup> I met and talked with Tsaab S. while we were visiting another CMA group in Đắk Lắk on 14 January 2019; then, I had an interview with her on 01 February 2019 at her house. After around one hour, her husband came home, and we had a short talk altogether.

<sup>49</sup> *Cách mạng* is widely used among Vietnamese, which literally means ‘Revolution’ and implicitly refers to Vietnamese communists.

<sup>50</sup> Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al. 2018, 200.

upon others, in general, are low, at least lower than in the Vietnamese Kinh society, which I have been experiencing<sup>51</sup>. Hmong converts tend to pray to avoid misfortune and overcome sickness that had been tremendously haunting them in the past, rather than asking for material benefits. For some Hmong, if not almost all of them, God's blessings are even present in undesirable responses. Take the case of Faaj C.'s family, for example. Even though C. (age 40) and his wife already have eleven daughters; he affirmed that he did not pray to God for a son, which he once admitted to being their wish. C. believes that as long as it is God's will, they would be fine with God's arrangement<sup>52</sup>.

Through the examples above, one can see that Hmong Protestants' faith is considerably enhanced in a 'perceivable and convincing way' via visible revelations in which they feel their God at most; but in turn, revelations are more likely to happen to those who believe in that possibility. Yaaj P. and Yaaj S<sup>53</sup>. (a married couple, age 64) who are in the same family but differ in faith and scared experience. While Yaaj. S believed that after her prayers on wishing to be literate, God really opened ('*Chúa mở cho*', S.'s word) her to the ability to learn Hmong language that allows her to read the Bible in Hmong; her husband, P., has never had any visible revelation. Instead, when it comes to P.'s religious experience, he only mentioned methods and experiences that helped him in life, such as learning from mistakes. When it comes to religious commitment, S. attends church services as well as the Women Bible study group frequently, but her husband remains to smoke and drink alcohol sometimes and randomly participates in religious activities. P is a former Vietnamese People's Army soldier who had years serving Communists. This fact may be a factor influencing his faith<sup>54</sup>. Accordingly, it might be possible that adherents' existing life philosophy and experiences essentially influence how they believe in revelation that may happen to them. It seems that I am turning to a famous saying of Saint Augustine Of Hippo that 'Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand'. Though I do not approach my research from any theologian perspective, it sounds convincing to me that while

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<sup>51</sup> I would return to this topic in a subsequent section.

<sup>52</sup> Faaj C. offers his house to be the place for daily prayer gathering in his neighborhood. Having many children may be a financial burden for him and his wife, yet C. and his family were extremely devout. He explained well what he believed in God and the Bible to me as well as appeared to be a sincere person.

<sup>53</sup> In the traditional Hmong religion, those who have the same clan worshipping the same ghosts (*cùng ma*) are not allowed to get married. In many cases, a couple appears to have the same last name, for example, Yaaj, but in fact, they belong to different clans.

<sup>54</sup> I met Yaaj P. at a 'Naming Ceremony' of P.'s grandchild in October 2018 while his face was quite red because of drinking alcohol. I actually attempted to interview him as he was the first village head of Yagad, who may have many memories of the first days they settled but had not gotten any chance until 27 January 2019. During the conversation with them, Mr. P. supported me to translate some complicated phrases that Mrs. S. could not well speak in Vietnamese. In fact, P. is considered one of the critical persons contributing to establishing and building Yagad.

we ‘*believe in something*,’ that would, in turn, empower us to access ‘*something*’ in perceivable ways.

To conclude, as can be seen through the above cases, visible revelations that occur to Hmong Protestants are usually associated with their constant prayer within a specific context and time. The prayers may vary in forms and duration, such as ‘speaking out loudly,’ ‘whispering,’ ‘thinking’ or so in hours or days or even longer, depending on individuals. Revelation, Hmong believe, is how God replies to their prayers on their life concerns and wishes such as favorable weather for farming, human relationships, healing diseases, and blessing fortunes. Besides, Hmong converts who have at least once experienced direct and tangible revelation are more likely to have stronger faith than others who have never had it. In turn, believing in the possibility of God’s revelation empowers them to experience it.

*Social Interaction.* In a previous part, I already point out that Hmong Protestants in Yagad is a relatively closed society, yet some youths prefer or have to go to college or work outside of the village. Although this group does not significantly impact the Hmong community as a whole, there are actually tangible influences on Hmong’s religious belief, which occur from their social interaction with others in broader society. In addition, social interaction within the entire Hmong society is also a particular motivation that not only strengthens newly converts’ faith but also creates emerging conversion patterns to Protestantism today among Hmong people.

*First, in the wider society,* while most young Hmong choose to stay in their village, do farming and other labor jobs as their parents, some decide or have to leave for college, work, or joining the army mainly located in cities or other non-Hmong regions. In general, ethnic minority people, both indigenous and non-indigenous, are dominant at local kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools. However, Vietnamese Kinh are the majority in higher education settings or workplaces in urban cities<sup>55</sup>. The older people are, the more complicated life problems they may encounter, particularly those Hmong who get involved in a wider diverse society. It happens to Hmong college students like Muas X. (married woman aged 26, mother of a 2-year-old son). Muas X. was a pharmacy student at a college in Buôn Ma Thuột city of Đắk Lắk province. After getting involved in various relationships with not only classmates but also with some older friends, X. gradually realized how different it was between her remote village and the city. She admits,

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<sup>55</sup> There are actually up to more than 70% of the total population in the Central Highlands of Vietnam as a whole are Vietnamese Kinh today, while in local villages such as Yagad Vietnamese people are the minority.

*“I constantly had conflicts with Kinh people (Vietnamese Kinh), sometimes even bled... I did not know how to control myself; I was so hot-tempered... I once tried to drink a lot of alcohol to see if it was true that while people got drunk, they would forget everything as my friends, my home mates told me and unfairly treated me while they were drunk, but I was still awake and fully aware of everything. I gradually understood the world. While being in the city, I saw people having a lot of conflicts; it was so loud... When I returned to the village, I felt so relieved and peaceful, which I had not realized before leaving my home. I thought God changed me so that I understood life better and appreciated my village, people, and faith much more than before.”<sup>56</sup>*

While the case of Muas X. is the social interaction among the youth in a dynamic city, the environment that Haam S. (married man, age 25, a father of two kids) was involved in is the Vietnamese army, which is a highly political environment. S. did not tell me details of his life while being a soldier of Vietnamese People’s Army, but indeed claims that he does not want to be ‘admitted to the Communist Party’ (*kết nạp vào Đảng*) even though his uncle, a very reputable Hmong communist in the village, encouraged him to do so. The uncle, in fact, told S. that there were some positions available for Hmong people at the government offices but no promising candidates. In general, in order to get promoted and be assigned to a high position in the political system in Vietnam, one is expected to be a communist first and foremost. Having served in the army force, S. has advantages to be accepted to the system. However, he sincerely said that he was not good at ‘pleasing other people’ such as government leaders, which was one of the reasons he preferred to do farming instead of working for the government. Returning to the village, similar to X., S. admitted: *“Since following God (theo đạo), we know how to better tolerate others instead of starting fights (gây sự). In cases if we know that someone is lying or doing something wrong, we just keep silent. Our ego is smaller than before, and we are less narcissistic compared to how we were in the past.”<sup>57</sup>*

These two typical cases of how social interactions may impact an individual’s religious conviction and character show that ‘actual conversion’ can happen even after ‘baptism’. In other words, many Hmong Protestants only truly appreciate their religion and become more faithful until they can do a more thoughtful reflection on their life problems thanks to social interactions in broader society. Psychosocially speaking, those empirical examples significantly

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<sup>56</sup> Muas X., interview by author, 09 November 2018.

<sup>57</sup> I had a conversation with S. and his wife at their house on 12 October 2018 while visiting his new-born daughter with a Hmong sister. S. often did not use ‘I’ or ‘we’ in the conversation, only talked like he was confiding.

support William James' interpretation on 'why conversion can change individual character in terms of 'religious emotions' and 'inhibitions' interaction,'<sup>58</sup> even though James seems to focus on 'sudden conversion' instead of 'gradual change' discussed above on 'actual conversion' after 'baptism.'

*Second, within Hmong society, 'actual conversion' among 'baptized converts' has become common. As a matter of fact, most of Hmong people live quite separately from other ethnic groups. They also have a high sense of community. Thus, being divided by religion does not make the Hmong completely separated. The Hmong of northern and Central Highlands regions who are relatives or share common characteristics like 'having the same home village' are still in contact, either frequently or occasionally. In addition, converts and non-converts no longer have a strained relationship<sup>59</sup>, particularly as it was during the early period of their conversion to Protestantism, facilitating constant interaction between Hmong Protestants and their traditional people. These interactions occur in numerous cases, such as marriages or visiting relatives, which are finally resulted in 'actual' and/or 'first-time' conversion among traditional Hmong.*

Lis C. got married to a Protestant Hmong man called 'Haam C.' in Lakad in 2014. Lis C. and her family maintained the traditional Hmong religion by the time they planned to get married, yet she then converted to Protestantism after arriving and living with her family-in-law in the Central Highland. C. admitted that she did not truly want to be a Protestant at that time, but all of the people in her husband's village were converts, including her family-in-law, which made her feel 'converting' to be inevitable. However, after a couple of years, she realized that she had essentially changed. C. said, "*I did not know how to truly love (thuong) people before... now when I had conflicts with my husband and parents-in-law, I got on the bed, cried and prayed... then I felt really relieved.*"<sup>60</sup>

Noticeably, after C.'s marriage a short time, her mother and brothers, who still live in northern Vietnam, also decided to convert to Protestantism, particularly after his father's death. As traditional Hmong, C.'s mother was forced by C's father's elder brother to prepare expensive offerings such as buffalo, which, at that time, were unaffordable to her. C.'s brother even knelt to beg his uncle to waive such pricey rituals, yet got yelled at and lightly hit by the uncle. According to C., her uncle's family was not really good to them. While her father was at

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<sup>58</sup> James 2002, 204-11.

<sup>59</sup> A detailed discussion on this matter is available in the later chapters.

<sup>60</sup> Lis C. was quite close to me. We talked frequently and went to field together sometimes to do farming. She told me her 'actual conversion' on our daily conversions in October 2018 that I noted on my fieldnotes.



the hospital, they came to visit and asked her to buy lunch for them even though at that time, C. had only a little money. C felt that her uncle and his wife took her father for granted and treated her family not well. Such relatives' attitudes might be why Hmong people like C. and her family have to think twice about what love really is. Plus, 'how Hmong converts in Lakad have genuinely supported each other without forcing or expecting a return' has challenged introspective traditional Hmong, who have been suffering significant burdens imposed by their family and clan members, to do more reflection and comparison. For instance, those in Lakad often offer free rice, vegetables, and clothes to new Hmong neighbors regardless of religious belief<sup>61</sup>.

*Third, within Hmong society,* 'Today Conversion' among 'traditional Hmong' is worth highlighting. Apart from these cases among 'baptized converts,' there is a growing number of traditional Hmong who desire to or are determined to convert to Protestantism thanks to their frequent interaction and thought-provoking conversations with their Protestant Hmong relatives, friends, or neighbors. At the same time, the conversion is, in fact, one of the most potent expressions of religious conviction.

Yaaj N. (married female aged 23, mother of a 2-year-old daughter) at first lived in a remote village of Hà Giang province in northern Vietnam where is also the home village of many Hmong in Yagad. She got to hear about God in her childhood as her uncle converted; however, she did not like Hymns or anything about God. Until she was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, some of her classmates converted, with whom she sometimes hid her parents to gather, then learned how to pray. When she got older, she constantly felt sad and thought that her parents somehow did not truly love her. They were most of the time drunk, did not take care of her or talked to her. N. finally had the chance to learn more about God and had a copy of the Bible thanks to 'Mrs. M'. Mrs. M is living in Yagad, but her son still stays in the North with her husband, who does not convert. Talking with Mrs. M often helped N. to be aware that God was good, following God is good, and that many Hmong people in the Central Highlands are following God. Such perception finally made N. run away from her home for Yagad with an uncle in 2014 while having only a few pennies in the bag. Although N.'s parents came to Yagad to find her and force her to go back home, N. hid and got help from a Hmong female friend instead of her relatives who refused to host her because of her parents' complaint<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> Haam T., interview by author, 30 September 2018.

<sup>62</sup> I got to talk to Yaaj N. countless times while I was in the village, as her story really resonated with me. We often read the Bible and talked about it together. This story I heard from her on one of our first conversations on 11 October 2018.



The case of Yaaj N. is not exceptional. On a trip with my host family to their home village in Hoàng Su Phì district of Hà Giang, I met three male Hmong teenagers, named L. (age 16), N. (age 19), and K. (age 15), who live in different villages but share similar stories. Though being prevented from converting by their parents, these young Hmong were determined to convert while most people in their neighborhood maintained traditional religion. They admitted that they were so tired of drunk people in their villages. Also, improper behaviors, like domestic violence, frequently appear that actually challenge them to rethink life and its meaning. They feel disappointed about and doubtful the reality<sup>63</sup>.

Meanwhile, Hmong converts whom these youths met with at schools, in villages, and particularly those who returned from Central Highlands of Vietnam are, they acknowledged, very good people. It should be noted that traditional Hmong are still dominant in the villages I visited in Hoàng Su Phì, which, in fact, prevents local Hmong converts from being ‘full Protestants.’ For instance, converts cannot reject to drink all the time while hanging out or celebrating with their traditional peers as ‘drinking alcohol’ is a common way of socializing in traditional Hmong society. As a result, Hmong Protestants’ impact and their better lives in the Central Highlands on these young Hmong are much more profound.

Mrs. M. is a living exemplar to these young Hmong. She is described to be a generous and good person who always treats everyone kindly. She often guides the youth she met on how to deal with their problems and relationships with love. Although she is not a missionary and does not carry out any ministerial responsibility, Mrs. M. is willing to financially support those who desire to learn about God and/or participate in a theological course even though she is not a wealthy person. For traditional Hmong who have a chance of living or visiting Hmong Protestant village(s) in the Central Highlands, as previously mentioned in Lis C.’s case, the positive life of converted people is well proven.

Besides, Hmong’s influence on non-converts through their internal interactions is greatly more significant than in the past because of tangible comparison that appears obviously to traditional Hmong today. In the past, Hmong people were not able to compare themselves to anyone else. They all were poor, lived in mountainous and isolated northern Vietnam. Thus, their religious change was primarily inspired and supported by external agencies such as FEBC and ECV-N. Thanks to convenient transportation and virtual communication, the Hmong in northern Vietnam now have more chances in encountering the new in their counterparts’ group living in the Central Highlands region. Consequently, these facts possibly explain why the

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<sup>63</sup> L., N. and K., interview by author, 20 February 2019.

conversation to Protestantism among this ethnic group today is more likely to happen among the youths than married adults<sup>64</sup> population in the late 1980s while Hmong people in Vietnam first collectively converted.

Returning to the figure Mrs. M. and people like her, they make today's conversion of Vietnamese Hmong to Protestantism similar to conversion stories among the Hmong in Laos in the late 1950s when the innovators played a crucial role in converting traditional Hmong<sup>65</sup>. Such native innovators gave the decisive influence on religious conviction among the Hmong via their same-ethnic group interactions. However, Hmong converts like Mrs. M are only ordinary people. They do not hold a unique status such as being a shaman or a politician as Hmong innovators in Laos but are doing 'silent' missionary among their people, contributing to creating an emerging conversion pattern among Hmong people in contemporary Vietnam./.

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<sup>64</sup> This fact is claimed elsewhere, but at least in my continuous research from 2015 to date, most of the first converts in any village were matured adults who had the chance to communicate with the outer world and reflect on making decisions.

<sup>65</sup> Original work Barney 1957, translated version Barney, "Kitô giáo: Sự đổi mới trong văn hoá người Mông. Chương III: Những thay đổi gần đây trong văn hoá người Mông [Christianity: Innovation in Meo Culture. Chapter III: Recent Changes in Meo Culture]," 40–41.

## Chapter 9. Being Hmong Protestants in the context of an Alien Society

Chapter 9 examines relationships between Hmong CMA Protestants with other groups of various backgrounds in an alien society where they have lived for merely a couple of decades. Let us imagine that the Yagad Hmong CMA group is the center point (1) from which some connections would be linked to the group of (2) other Hmong Protestant denominations, (3) other Hmong who do not convert, (4) other neighboring ethnic people, (4) local government. These connections present the relationships between Hmong CMA adherents and others by group, which I would discuss in detail in this chapter. Finally, let us come back with (1) ‘Hmong CMA Protestants themselves’ to consider if the conversion to Protestantism has led them to lose their ethnic identity as Vietnamese outsiders have worried about, which is the focus of Chapter 10 – the last chapter of this research.

As this chapter explores inter-group relations, apart from data gathered among the focal village’s research target population, all relevant data collected in Yagad and beyond would also be employed.

### 9.1 Hmong Protestant Denominations: ‘Scrambling for’ Followers or Co-existing?

As being reviewed, while research in various Hmong Protestant denominations in Vietnam is limited, it is often firmly concluded that the phenomena that Protestant groups and/or denominations have been ‘scrambled for’ (*tranh giành/ giành giật, lôi kéo*) followers of each other actually exist<sup>1</sup>. When I was in Yagad, one of the experts who specializes in ‘traditional Hmong in northern Vietnam’ texted me: ‘*They scramble for followers there, don’t they?*’ It seems that ‘scrambling for followers’ has become a trait of Hmong Protestant groups in this socialist country. However, what I have observed in the fields, both in Central Highlands and northern Vietnam, and learned from Hmong converts, both religious leaders and adherents of various groups, reveals a different reality.

Admittedly, there was one case in Lakad years ago. According to Haam M. P. - the church head and Hmong CMA missionary of Lakad II, two Hmong of another village in Đắk came to some ordinary Hmong CMA’s houses and convinced those CMA followers to switch to their denomination, which they called ‘*Tin lành Truyền giáo*.’<sup>2</sup> They criticized that CMA wrongly interpreted the Bible. In other words, Hmong CMA should follow their denomination which

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<sup>1</sup> Conclusions made without providing supporting evidences, for example see Đức Phương Đoàn 2015a, 84., Khắc Đức Nguyễn 2017, 98., Đức Phương Đoàn 2018, 51, 63.

<sup>2</sup> *Tin lành Truyền giáo* can be translated as ‘Evangelical Protestant group.’

holds the truth. After a couple of days, when P. and his DC members found out that fact, P. came to talk to those two Hmong that: *“If you want to console people’s faith, you should come directly and publicly to our gathering. Coming privately and telling people such things are not fair, it seems like ‘scrambling.’”*<sup>3</sup> Such phenomenon only existed for a short time in Lakad, while no similar case is reported in Yagad. In other words, there have been no groups or individuals who come to convince Hmong followers to switch to their denomination for years, either publicly or secretly. As a matter of fact, local and provincial government leaders also confirm such status.

When it comes to the ‘undefinable’ group in Yagad that I mentioned before, no groups or individuals of another denomination came and approached those people. In fact, all members of this group belong to an extended family – the Thoj family. At the moment, there is also no contact between this family and any other religious group. They, the Thoj family, are believed to first independently practice their own belief by the time some family members returned to Vietnam from Myanmar. Regardless of the truthfulness of the assumption, it is evident that they have not been affected or convinced by any other Protestant denomination to abandon CMA. According to the Thoj family, the switching process was completed without any pressure from CMA leaders<sup>4</sup>. Meanwhile, pastor Haam X. shared that he did not prevent them from leaving the church. However, as he worried that they might follow a heresy or be scammed as some other Hmong in the region were, he raised some theological questions to challenge them with little hope that they would consider more carefully. As they were determined to leave, he eventually let them go without any further questions or conditions<sup>5</sup>.

Within Yagad, as mentioned earlier, there are three active Hmong Protestant groups in the region: one CMA group of more than 2,200 followers and two Baptist groups having 300 and less than 100 followers, respectively. In general, the total number of Hmong who switch from CMA to Baptist denomination and vice versa on a yearly basis is negligible<sup>6</sup>. Most of the Hmong who left CMA for Baptist are, in fact, temporarily excommunicated by the CMA church. ‘Temporarily’ means that after three or six months, those excommunicated followers can be restored to their membership status if they genuinely repent their sins, which should not be ‘grave sins’ such as murder or adultery. Another common reason for some to switch their

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<sup>3</sup> Haam M. P., interview by author, 24 December 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Thoj T. and his mother, Yaaj S., interview by author, 21 and 24 November 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Haam X., interview by author, on 23 November 2018.

<sup>6</sup> There are four households including sixteen followers in total left Yagad CMA for another denomination in the region in 2018. Whereas, in the 2015, 2016 and 2017 report of Yagad that I was able to collect, there are no data available. It may be because there were no one switched or it was not recorded.

denomination is that they prefer to gather at ‘a more convenient place’ for them in various meanings. For example, after getting married, Faaj B. began to live with her husband’s family and attend church service at the Baptist I group of which her husband and parents-in-law are members<sup>7</sup>. Distance and relationship with the religious leader(s) are also factors that account for why some Hmong choose a specific denomination to join. Take the typical case of Vaaj P. for example. P. got married and has lived in Yagad (II)<sup>8</sup> with her husband’s family. In 2018, another Baptist group was established in Yagad (II), which was actually divided from Baptist I group<sup>9</sup>. While the Baptist II gathering location is much closer to P.’s house, the group leader is, in fact, a relative of her husband’s family, which becomes convincing reasons for Vaaj P. to leave Baptist I for joining Baptist II.

At first, the Hmong CMA group was the only Protestant group in Yagad. However, Muas C. – the father of the current Baptist I pastor – was excommunicated by CMA in 2002<sup>10</sup> that led him and his family sought help from other Protestant denominations. They got support from *Liên hữu Cơ đốc* (Christian Union) denomination in 2005, with whom they had lost contact since 2008. Muas C.’s group was able to get in touch with Liên hữu Baptist afterward, thanks to the introduction of another Baptist group in the district.

Regarding why and how the Yagad Baptist group has been divided into two Baptist groups, I had the chance to interview group leaders of both Baptist house churches several times. Tsaab S., the current Baptist II house church head, became an adherent of the Baptist group in Yagad in around 2015 or 2016<sup>11</sup> and soon got elected to be the vice head of the group (*phó nhóm*). After actively doing God’s work at Baptist for a couple of months, S. decided to leave and build his own group, which at first had only three households on 22 April 2018. The group has around one hundred members of twenty households by January 2019. Regarding why they moved, S. said that it was inconvenient to go to Baptist I as it was far from their neighborhood, particularly on rainy days. Meanwhile, Muas L. – the Baptist I house church head and pastor – was not aware that the group was divided until he returned from Hồ Chí Minh City, where he had a short Theology training course. L. said, “*S. is also my relative, calling me Uncle. I at first was*

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<sup>7</sup> Faaj B., interview by author, 23 December 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding the sub-village defined ‘Yagad (II),’ see ‘Figure 2. The Focal Village’ in Chapter 5 for more details.

<sup>9</sup> How the Yagad Baptist group was divided would be soon discussed in this section.

<sup>10</sup> I did not mention why they were excommunicated as I heard various reasons from people, and such reasons, while they cannot be validated, may affect one’s reputation.

<sup>11</sup> The Hmong often say ‘around’ (*khoàng*) to refer to a time that they cannot remember exactly. It is quite common that these people do not really care about the exact time when something happen.

*angry and did not know what really happened; but now I think that is good as long as they do good things, having a good place to worship God.”<sup>12</sup>*

In fact, S. used to be an alcoholic and faced serious criticism from his family and neighbors. At a daily prayer that I joined with S.’s family, his children even said that they did not dare to stay close to their dad because he always drank a lot and did not act nicely to them. S.’s father did not want to see him, but now their relationship is much better. After converting to Protestantism, S. has successfully converted six more Hmong men and convinced them to stop drinking. It is possible to conclude that S. has changed his personality and actually done God’s work voluntarily. For example, S. admitted that as he used to be a ‘bad person,’ thus he would like to do all by himself to serve people first instead of asking them to donate. He went to the forest to collect small wood pieces to make chairs for people who come and gather for church services on the first days the group was established<sup>13</sup>.

It is hard to judge the incentive of Tsaab S. for establishing another group, but it is clear that Tsaab S. did not ‘scramble for’ followers of Baptist I. Those who left Baptist I voluntarily gather with S. at his house. For instance, the case of Vaaj P. I mentioned earlier in this section or Tsaab T. S., who was healed by constantly praying without drinking and eating for two days discussed in Chapter 8, switched to Baptist II from CMA as she is Tsaab S.’s sister. All in all, the two groups’ relationship after one year of being divided is generally good. The Baptist I pastor, Muas L., is invited to preach at Baptist II on some occasions. Meanwhile, Hmong Baptists find it normal to gather at a more convenient group rather than viewing it as a way of abandoning their former group.

*What do Hmong Protestants think about the difference among various Protestant denominations?* It is worth noting that Hmong converts in Yagad have rarely encountered or had the chance to learn more about other religions such as Buddhism or Catholicism. Thus, their ‘comparison and knowledge on how Protestant denominations differ’ are limited within a specific scale. Most ordinary Hmong said that ‘*cùng tin Chúa thì như nhau thôi*’ (if we all follow God, then we are similar). The differences they may define normally are observable traits such as among lyrics of hymns or several religious laws. For example, they all recognize that while the CMA church does not accept the early marriage, Baptist groups welcome all couples and do the ceremony for them regardless of whether they are legally granted a marriage

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<sup>12</sup> I did a follow-up interview with Muas L. on 24 January 2019 after meeting Tsaab S. and his group. Significant information was gathered during the interviews with L. on 8 and 11 November 2018.

<sup>13</sup> I attended Sunday service with Baptist II and interviewed with Tsaab S. on 13 January 2019. On 25 January 2019, I came to join their daily prayer and talked with his whole family, including his wife and two sons.

certificate by the government. Similarly, religious leaders of various Protestant denominations in Yagad shared the same opinion. Muas L. even admitted that Baptist followers at his group are ‘trash.’ By ‘trash,’ he does not intend to disrespect them but acknowledging that some Hmong Baptists are those who used to be CMA adherents yet were excommunicated. L. also thinks that the majority of his followers do not well understand the Bible/ Protestant teachings as their CMA counterparts do. The co-existence of various Protestant groups in Yagad, in fact, provides optional alternatives for every Hmong who desires to follow God, maintains their faith and has their own preferences.

Beyond Yagad, let us examine a ‘switching case’ in northern Vietnam that I had the opportunity to interview with ‘insiders’ in person. This case may offer helpful insight into ‘why Vietnamese Hmong Protestants change their denomination’ instead of making a hasty generalization that religious leaders scramble for the other group’s followers.

While a Hmong CMA group in Tả Hồ Pin (THP), Hoàng Su Phì district of Hà Giang province, got successfully registered by the government, its group leaders suddenly switched to *Truyền giảng Phúc Âm* (TGPÂ) denomination in around 2011. According to several THP Hmong followers, they had no idea why their group switched, only simply followed their leaders<sup>14</sup>. One of the Hmong officials, who still followed traditional religion, even told his convert relatives to convince THP leaders to re-switch as it was better for them while CMA was already legally recognized<sup>15</sup>, but nothing changes. Apart from talks and interviews conducted in Hoàng Su Phì, I had a follow-up interview with Yaaj T. H. in Hanoi. He insisted that THP group leaders, Yaaj T. H. and Yaaj S. L., were not accepted to study Theology at ECV-N in Hanoi due to their limited education<sup>16</sup>. Meanwhile, TGPÂ enormously supported them and offered them theological courses. They then decided to switch. After almost ten years, for some reasons, Yaaj T. H. is pursuing a Bachelor in Theology at ECV-N No. 2 Ngõ Trạm Hanoi, while THP is still officially a TGPÂ group. When I asked which Protestant denomination he belonged to at the moment, he said that he joined TGPÂ when he went back to his home village and joined CMA when he was in Hanoi working for a travel company.

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<sup>14</sup> I talked with Faaj S. B. (male, age 25), Yaaj M. (female, age 23), Yaaj T. H. (male, age 31), and Hawj V. (female, age 33) on 19 and 20 February, who are adherents of THP group for years.

<sup>15</sup> In 2013 while Yaaj H. visited his home village, he was told by his brother – a District Vietnamese Fatherland Front’s Head in Hà Giang – to convince the THP group to re-switch but failed to. Our conversation about this case was on 19 February 2019.

<sup>16</sup> A Hmong ECV-N official – Yaaj T. U., shared that there was no theological training offered at ECV-N Hanoi before 2012. Although being an adherent of ECV-N, U. had to go to Hồ Chí Minh city to study Theology in 2009. Yaaj T. U., interview by author, 18 March 2019. Thus, I am not sure about Yaaj T. H.’s statement on ‘they were not accepted to study Theology at ECV-N in Hanoi’ when such rejection is reported to happen in around 2010 or 2011.



Whereas Yaaj S. L. is believed to give up his Protestant mission recently to work labor jobs to support his family even though group members voted for him to continue to be a THP leader.

It is not easy to make any conclusion on why THP leaders decided to switch, but some points could be considered. First, abandoning a legally recognized CMA to switch to TGPÂ, which was not recognized in 2011, shows that in some/many cases, it is not about whether or not a Protestant group obtains its legal status but about the benefits that a religious group can get from their denomination which may be economic or political or something else. Second, group leaders play an essential role in constructing how their group is, particularly among groups that are not well organized and their followers are just beginning to learn about their religion. It should be noted that Hmong Protestants are as not dominant in THP as in Yagad. There are currently only 24 out of a total of 95 households (25.3%) following God. Plus, group leaders have not had a chance to be well trained in theology as Hmong missionaries and pastors in Yagad. Thus, it is understandable that their group structure is more fragile. In short, the case of the THP Hmong Protestant group in a northern village of Vietnam also proves that Hmong followers and their group leaders are active in choosing which denomination they prefer rather than being forced or scrambled by someone else.

All in all, those switching cases are reported to be completed in harmony between church leaders of departing and receiving denominations and among them with their ordinary Hmong adherents. There are no obvious behaviors of ‘scrambling for followers’ among Protestant denominations in Yagad and in other Hmong villages that I had visited<sup>17</sup> as it is concluded elsewhere. Learning about why and how Hmong Protestants switch their groups allows us to understand better Hmong thoughts and decisions, which are actually not related to ‘promising’ benefits but to their own convenience and preference. Plus, the co-existence of various denominations provides more options for Hmong to maintain, strengthen, and live their Christian out. Especially for excommunicated followers, it is possible for them to choose an alternative to continue to ‘be a Protestant’ rather than totally being abandoned or feeling hesitated to return the church from which they are removed. Such co-existence, for me, is a healthy competitive environment for Hmong Protestants to enhance their community. Meanwhile, the tendency of ‘splitting into smaller clan-based religious groups’ may become more common among Hmong Protestants. If it becomes true, it might well reflect a strong clan

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<sup>17</sup> I was shared similar status among Hmong Protestant groups of Tả Sứ Choán commune by S., Phương L., and two other village policemen while we attended a *Lễ Bồi linh* of a local Hmong TGPÂ group in Tả Sứ Choán on 20 February 2019. At the *Lễ Bồi linh*, the pastor who preached was the Head (*Tổng quản nhiệm*) of TGPÂ denomination in Vietnam named Đoàn Trung Tín.

relationship within traditional Hmong society that has been still existed in the current convert population.

## 9.2 ‘Traditional – None – Converts’: Religion is A Choice

Since a mass conversion to Protestantism occurred among the Hmong in Vietnam, it has been widely recorded that there are severe conflicts between Hmong who convert and those who keep their traditional religion<sup>18</sup>. As briefly discussed in Chapter 7, the situations in Yagad and some other Hmong villages of the Central Highlands of Vietnam appear to be improved, notably through how they treat the others on special collective occasions such as wedding. In this section, their voices are explored to understand the situation more deeply, particularly examining how they actually think of each other.

*Who are the Hmong nones in Yagad, and what do you think about Protestantism?* Nowadays, although most Hmong people living in Yagad are Protestants, some identify themselves as nones. They have either never been an official member or left the church after a specific time being a Protestant. While most of the Hmong in the village who have never been baptized are communists, those who left the church are non-communist male youths.

Haam P. is a communist who has played several roles in the government system, but he highly respects God and Protestant teachings. He believes that Communist Party (*Đảng*) and God are quite similar in the way they tell people to do good things. However, P. does not think that ghosts exist<sup>19</sup>. Like Haam P., Hawj S. – a communist and a village head – never joins church services even though his wife and sons are devout Protestants. They are not sure what would happen to them after death, but the most important thing is they find themselves to be ‘fine’ to hold such view and still live well among their people. Although not converting, these communists have chosen to live among the converts mainly because they trust that Protestantism is good and reasonable at many points. The only problem is, as mentioned previously, they are not able to follow religious commandments. Whereas Haam X. T. – a Lakad I communist – has never been baptized, yet he has his own faith and prays in his private spaces. T. believes that serving a secular nation is also a mission that God gives those who have the capacity to do so. Thus, he finds it justifiable to adapt to the working environment within the Vietnamese political system, such as drinking alcohol with government leaders, which is a way, he believes, to complete their mission. T. supposes that the Bible does not explicitly

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<sup>18</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 2012, 132. Trường Giang Vũ 2005, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Haam P., interview by author, 19 November 2018.

prohibit ‘drinking alcohol’, the only matter is that those who use it should be sober enough to not let ‘alcohol’ ruin themselves<sup>20</sup>.

Meanwhile, Yaaj F. (male, age 28) and Hawj H. (male, age 32) are young adult men who left the church after being involved in church activities for a short period. F. had regularly participated in church for a while, but he said ‘*going to the church on a regular basis seems boring. If we do something, we only can maintain our joy for a short time*’. F. believes that souls exist, but he does not think that there is something called ‘the other world’ (*thế giới bên kia*). After death, bodies merely go into the soil (*đất*) while souls come with the wind. Whereas H. admits that his wife is already baptized, he is not because he cannot do all commandments, which can be considered a common reason that the Hmong none in Yagad keeps their religious status. Both F. and H. prefer to gather with peers and do something like drinking alcohol while feeling bored.

Noticeably, while most of the male Hmong Protestants tend to work within the village, those Hmong like F. and H. more likely/ prefer to work also with people of different ethnic backgrounds who live outside the village. Sometimes, F. and H. have opportunities to work in other provinces thanks to their external network. It should be considered that the financial burden on these young adults may be a reason for them to get into contact and work outside the village, which, in fact, gradually loosens their relationships with the church. According to a young Hmong who often goes to the church, if Hmong converts do not have such network, they only go to collect forest-products and do farming. Meanwhile, if someone is in contact with Vietnamese Kinh business people, they may be hired for various occasional jobs such as delivering wood out of the village<sup>21</sup>. At this point, it seems that the Hmong is somehow affected by the market economy in the broader world as social skills and network are playing essential roles in their incomes. It is similar to a shared cultural characteristic in Vietnamese society that the ability to ‘drink alcohol’ is a key skill to succeed.

In short, one may conclude that those Hmong nones, ex-Protestant or not, definitely respect their convert people and consider that all God’s commandments are absolutely reasonable, which they just find them hard to follow seriously. In other words, they do not convert not because they find Protestantism nonsense; but because they well understand themselves that genuinely being a Protestant is not easy to them, and they may not be able to commit.

*What Hmong Protestants in Yagad think about their Hmong nones?* As mentioned in Chapter 7, Hmong converts in Yagad are willing to help their non-convert people. They also provide

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<sup>20</sup> Haam X. T., interview by author, 25 November 2018.

<sup>21</sup> I got to talk with Thoj D. (male, age 27) after interviewing Vaaj T. on 10 January 2019.

flexible options that the nones may prefer even though those options may not be considered ‘good’ to Protestants, such as drinking alcohol or planning a wedding that does not follow Protestant protocols. Also, most of the Hmong Protestants I have talked and/or interviewed admit that if their children do not follow God, they will worry but will not force them to believe by any means. Similarly, such attitude is common among adult and elderly Hmong converts if their children – Hmong youths – do not follow Protestantism or abandon their Christian faith<sup>22</sup>.

Take the Haam F. case above, for example. F. is the youngest son of my host parents. My host family, including an elderly grandfather, parents, F’s wife, and children, is Protestant; F. is the only one who left the church. I more than once asked my host parents about F. and they always told me that it was just his choice; they did explain to him but eventually respected his decision. F. is still in charge of many family matters. Nones like F., who lives in Yagad, actually still follow some common principles among Protestants instead of entirely abandoning all religious characteristics. For example, they also do house chores such as cooking, which might be considered to belong to women, such as cooking; and they do not work on Sundays, similar to their Protestant counterparts. Thus, F’s presence and behaviors have neither actually disappointed his parents nor his wife and children. For a long time, F. and his Protestant family members have well-maintained harmony in the family and respect each other’s life.

In terms of friendships among the Hmong youths, it is quite apparent that Hmong converts tend to hang out with their Protestant peers instead of staying close with none Hmong; and vice versa<sup>23</sup>. Thus, it should be highlighted that although friendship preference actually depends on religion’s shared interest, there is no visible conflict or discrimination between both sides.

*How do Hmong Protestants in Yagad think about and behave towards their traditional relatives?* As a matter of fact, there are no traditional Hmong who practices animism, including ancestral worship, in Yagad. Nonetheless, how Hmong converts in this village interact with their traditional counterparts can be discovered through their occasional visits. Generally speaking, a significant number of family and clan members of Hmong Protestants in the Central Highlands have still lived in their home village in northern Vietnam, their departing place before migrating southward. Consequently, the Hmong of two regions have shared origin and certain shared concerns that create chances for them to gather together. One may see that they

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<sup>22</sup> I actually raised the question of what people did if their children did not follow God to almost all of my Hmong Protestant participants across the country and got quite similar responses. Their flexible attitudes towards life matters, in general, seem to be significantly shaped by their Christian faith and its teachings.

<sup>23</sup> I learned this from both Hmong nones as well as Hmong Protestants, for example, through conversations with F. and H. as well as a group discussion with young Hmong Protestants on 27 January 2019.

travel back and forth to visit each other at special times such as the Lunar New Year or for wedding and funeral ceremonies, both from northern Vietnam to the Central Highlands and vice versa. Though such occasional visits might not be enough to make a conclusion on the relationship between Yagad Hmong Protestants and their traditional people in the North, it is vital to learn how they think of and behave to each other in contemporary time compared to their severe conflicts in the late 1980s and early 1990s as being revealed in the scholarship<sup>24</sup>.

*Relationship with home villages in the North.* While most Hmong Yagaders have ‘normal relationships’ with their relatives in their home villages of northern Vietnam, some still find it hard to ‘talk again’ with those who had a conflict with them in the past. However, no severe conflicts are reported. For instance, Haam P. has six brothers. While the second brother, Haam D., chose to maintain traditional religion and stay in Nậm – a village of Hoàng Su Phì, Hà Giang, P., and four other brothers migrated to Yagad in 1996 and left the land, properties, and cattle for the second brother. Since then, Haam D. has never visited his brothers in Yagad. Until now, they rarely talk together but stay in touch with each other’s children<sup>25</sup>.

When we were in Hà Giang – a northern province of Vietnam where a large number of Hmong migrated to Yagad from, my host parents, who are converts but rarely express their faith as explicitly as their brother, Yaaj T. G. – a traditional Hmong. For instance, they only prayed silently before eating and did not talk about religion in general. While we talked about the *khèn* that the brother holds on the wall, those converts stayed neutral and only recalled what they could remember about it without judging. A couple of years ago, G. came to visit my host family in Yagad and gave some gifts, including a landscape picture of their home village. My host father, Yaaj H., finds the gift beautiful and keeps telling his neighbors and guests about it with great pride rather than ashamed of having a brother who still worships ‘ghosts.’

In general, it is observable that Hmong converts in Yagad still visit their traditional relatives, have meals with them, and stay in long conversations about their lives. In cases, the relationship has not yet considerably improved like the Haam P. family’s case, convert people choose to talk to their nieces and nephews instead of interacting with their traditional brother. However, the relationship between traditional Hmong and converts seems to be much less severe. It is worth noting that because Hmong in Yagad have lived far away from their traditional relatives, it is possible that the distance significantly helps them be polite to each other, enabling them to maintain a positive attitude towards each other.

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<sup>24</sup> See previous parts for further information.

<sup>25</sup> Haam P., interview by author, 19 November 2018.

To conclude, my research consistently shows that Hmong Protestants in Yagad are remarkably tolerant to their family members, relatives, and people regarding religious choice. The Hmong, converts or non-converts, have been apparently lived in harmony for years altogether in Yagad. In addition, although living far from each other may be a factor defusing the severe relationship between traditional Hmong and converts, which is widely described in the literature, Hmong Protestants in Yagad have proved how they respect their traditional people by avoiding unnecessary religion-related debates, maintaining frequent contact as well as showing their care and love regardless the difference in religious choice.

### **9.3 Defining ‘*Peb Hmoob*’ in the New Land**

While Chapter 5 provides a basic description of the ethnicity distribution in Yagad, this part aims to explore how the Hmong have defined their position in the immigrant land through critical circumstances in the past and today. Plus, how Hmong Protestants and their neighbors have interacted with and thought of each other would be revealed via their stories and voices collected in the field sites. As a matter of fact, ‘*peb Hmoob*’ (We Hmong) is a common pronoun that the Hmong use in their everyday language, which shows their incredible sense of community and identity. Thus, moving to Yagad and starting to build new lives, they have been gradually defining their own characteristics, which makes them unique to others self-reliant, independent, reliable, and welcoming.

Right after settling down in Yagad<sup>26</sup>, Hmong immigrants were new to the weather and other farming conditions in their new land. As the journey from northern Vietnam to the Central Highlands was far and unpredictable, while Hmong migrants traveled by extended families, which left minimal spaces for other stuff, they were able to bring only a few castles and seeds along with them. Thus, they had to look for local sources and seek help from indigenous people. However, it is reported that no generous support from indigenous neighbors was available to them. The Hmong then had to buy local plants and seeds and choose good seeds/ plant branches to grow for self-sufficiency. They started to go into the forest and got forest-products to eat and to build their little tent. For example, in the first years, the Hmong house frame was formed by small wood pieces covered by locally available leaves.

Being well aware of the newcomer status, Hmong immigrants not only fundamentally depend on themselves to survive and improve their lives but also voluntarily accept local rules and policies that sometimes are applied upon them unfairly compared to indigenous ethnic

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<sup>26</sup> See more at Chapter 3 on Settlement.



people of the Central Highlands. For example, after five sub-villages were divided from Yagad, only village (V) was provided a community house (*nhà cộng đồng*) as more Ede were residing there. Meanwhile, most residents of the remaining villagers were Hmong people; thus, they got no similar privilege<sup>27</sup>. Some Hmong questioned that but finally considered it to be ‘normal’ as they were immigrants. The case regarding the water system is similar. While the local government has offered Ede a fixed one, Hmong do it by themselves without complaining<sup>28</sup>.

After a couple of decades living in Yagad, Hmong Protestants have not only earned the high respect of their neighbors but also become trusted and friendly neighbors to other ethnic groups in the region. To business people, who are more often than not Vietnamese Kinh, who own stores, restaurants, pharmacies, or so, Hmong converts are reputable and reliable customers. While indigenous people may not be allowed to ‘get first pay later’ (*mua chịu*), the Hmong can buy food or essential goods without paying. They then can pay off when the harvest season comes, and they have enough cash. These phenomena are not uncommon in Hmong villages in the Central Highlands, as whenever I had the chance to talk with a business person across the region, they told me the same situation. Hmong Protestants’ good characteristics are also widely acknowledged and appreciated by their neighbors, which are: working hard, living all together in harmony, and drinking no alcohol - one of the primary reasons of violent conflicts<sup>29</sup>. One of the ECV-S pastor who has experienced working among Ede and Hmong for decades told me that if the Hmong say something, they will do it; but if an Ede says something, s/he may or may not do it<sup>30</sup>. In other words, Hmong Protestants seriously follow commitments that they make, which probably essentially impress others on their reliability.

Meanwhile, people of other ethnic groups who may want to participate Yagad church house are always warmly welcomed. It is documented that there are 5 Pa then and 5 Yao attending Yagad church in 2015, but Yao adherents left in 2016 then Pa then in turn left in 2017<sup>31</sup>. After talking with a would-be Ede Protestant named Niê N. in her early 20s, I believe that the language might be the significant barrier for Protestants of other ethnic groups in participating in the Hmong Yagad church where only the Hmong language is used. Due to the severe sickness of a brother, continuous difficulties that her family has confronted, and numerous failures on

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<sup>27</sup> Haam P., conversation with author, 17 December 2018.

<sup>28</sup> The Đắk commune secretary (*Bí thư xã*) V. C., interview by author, 22 October 2018.

<sup>29</sup> I came to a local coffee shop sometimes and talked with the shop owner – a 38-year-old Vietnamese Catholic woman named Lê T. Meanwhile, I met and talked most of other Hmong’s neighbors in Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông on occasional visits such as a Tai small-size shop female owner (T.), a Kinh family (Cao Đ., Lê T. Đ), and two Nung and Tai youths (Thu H., Hoàng N.).

<sup>30</sup> Pastor H. C., interview by author, 26 November 2018.

<sup>31</sup> I was able to collect Hmong Yagad Church’s Annual Report in the years of 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018.



conducting traditional Ede rituals performed by a shaman, N. began to learn about God and Protestantism. Thanks to the introduction of a pastor, she was able to get in touch; N. came to Yagad house church and got much support from Hmong leaders to learn about the Christian faith and how to practice it. However, N. admitted she could not keep up joining the Hmong church because of the language barrier as she could not understand anything throughout the service<sup>32</sup>. Yagad church once in a while also welcomes Protestant adherents of various ethnic backgrounds. While most of the guests are Kinh and Ede Protestants, there are also some other ethnic minority groups' adherents. Y. R. is a 60-year-old Chil<sup>33</sup> man who is living in Lâm Đồng province. Although R. does not speak Hmong, his presence and share God words (*chia sẻ lời Chúa*) in Vietnamese at a church service is widely encouraged. When the service ends, R. is welcomed and offered meals by those with whom he had met and sometimes talked<sup>34</sup>.

There are no signs of disrespecting or discriminating against the Hmong from their neighbors in Yagad. While Vietnamese Kinh is a majority ethnic group in Vietnam who often hold leadership positions at various levels, all village leaders in the region are Hmong. I saw a Vietnamese Kinh woman came to the Hmong deputy village's house to ask for permission to be absent at a village meeting as her husband is sick. She then shared difficulties that her family had confronted recently with the most respect and honesty<sup>35</sup>. Obviously, it is common that marginalized Hmong have to wait for their Vietnamese Kinh government leaders to approve their documents or support them in some cases related to administrative paperwork; sometimes, those Hmong even get no reply or support from their leaders. Nevertheless, in Yagad, not only the majority of residents are but also all leadership positions belong to Hmong. This circumstance makes other ethnic groups, including Vietnamese Kinh, the minorities. Thus, how neighbors of various ethnic groups think of and behave toward Hmong villagers and leaders, and how all of them have been living in harmony together throughout the past decades might prove a fact that the Hmong have been accepted, trusted, highly respected and particularly 'distinguished' as *Hmong* in the new land – Yagad of the Central Highlands.

#### **9.4 Religious Freedom in Boundaries**

This section examines the relationship between Hmong Protestants and the local governments, especially exploring to what extent religious freedom is practiced among these

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<sup>32</sup> Niê N., interview by author, 9 January 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Chil is an ethnic minority group of Vietnam.

<sup>34</sup> I met and talked with Y. R. on 29 October 2018 in Yagad. He was also a regular guest of some Hmong youth I was quite close to in the village.

<sup>35</sup> H., conversation with author, 18 December 2018.

convert people who have been known to suffer severe intervention from Vietnamese authorities. Whereas Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 provide basic information on the contemporary political context of the region and discuss several politics-related events by the time Hmong arrived in Yagad, this part goes further by discovering tangible interactions between Hmong citizens and their state leaders. Furthermore, the Hmong leadership revealed through communicating with the government, which has significantly shaped their status in Vietnamese political leaders' eyes, will be examined.

Nowadays, the local government offers various support and activities to the Hmong, yet does not achieve significant success in attracting these people and building absolute mutual trust. On an occasional basis, the government organizes several events and provides goods to support the Hmong of Yagad economically. For example, a small-sized class on orienting Hmong women to learn to tailor (*nghe may*) is available<sup>36</sup>. However, as far as I know, there are only a couple of women who are able to make a living or serve themselves by tailoring. Those who desire to learn are often directly taught by their Hmong neighbors or relatives instead of government staff who are supposed to come to teach them in person. Once in a while, the government has a specific financial program that supports the Hmong. It is reported that the Hmong in Yagad were offered castles in January 2018, which had two options: three pigs or two goats. While Hawj L. chose to get three pigs, which were still healthy, Yaaj H. chose two goats in which one died and one was killed for meat. The Hmong said that such packages were much cheaper than the government's price on the document. For example, a goat package had two goats, one net, eight concrete slabs (*tám bê tông*) and two kilograms of nails (*đinh*), which costed a maximum of seven million VND but was stated to be thirteen million VND. Also, goats killed by people showed that there were a lot of plastic bags in their stomachs. In fact, Hmong in Yagad shared that they already asked the government to grant them money so that they could use it for self-investing in the castle. However, the government refused to do so<sup>37</sup>. Apparently, it seems to people that the support programs of the government are not efficient. Plus, people even doubt what the government has done for them, which may not be good for their mutual trust and relationship.

Meanwhile, several government officers complain that they encourage Hmong women to sing or participate in Entertainment Program (*chương trình Văn nghệ*, which may also be

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<sup>36</sup> A couple of government leaders came to Yagad and asked Hmong women what if they wanted to learn tailoring on 27 January 2019. After getting those who registered, they might go further on designing the class. However, I was not able to collect much useful information on how efficient their program is.

<sup>37</sup> Group discussion on 15 January 2019.

known as *Art/ Music Program*) that the commune (*xã*) organizes. However, only a few joins even though Hmong converts are allowed to sing their preferable hymns on such communist events<sup>38</sup>. However, as mentioned earlier, not attending government-sponsored activities does not mean the Hmong holds a hostile attitude towards the government, but because participating ‘*văn nghệ*’ activities that are not related to their faith may make them ‘stray away from God,’ which actually worries them.

Regarding religious affairs, it is problematic that Hmong pastors and missionaries are not allowed to preach outside their neighborhood. It actually limits them from performing their religious missions and supporting their people. Some Hmong religious leaders in Yagad and beyond said that even if they asked for permission to preach in another village, they are usually rejected except if ECV-S assigns them with convincing reasons<sup>39</sup>. In fact, this is a principal law applied to all Protestant denominations of all ethnic groups across the country by the government. In Hoàng Su Phì, Hà Giang – the hometown of many Hmong Yagaders, the case is even worse. While no Hmong is qualified to be a pastor, either appointed or ordained; outside Protestant leaders are rarely allowed to preach there<sup>40</sup>. Such fact definitely limits Hmong converts’ from fully living out their faith as well as prevents non-converts from converting. That rule also applies to Vietnamese Kinh pastors who belong to the majority ethnic group of Vietnam. Some of them came to preach among the Hmong in northern region, yet were also kicked out by policemen<sup>41</sup>. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the Hmong house church leaders should submit an event plan to the local government that states how many and on which dates their religious events are planned to be collectively taken place on the following year by 15 October. Any activities organized without prior permission of the government are outlawed.

Besides, as mentioned in Chapter 7, all Hmong house churches I have visited in the Central Highlands and beyond do not have sufficient spaces for all adherents. ‘Church space’ has always been a problem for Hmong Protestants. In around 2007, because of the seriously shortage of seats for followers, Yagad church leaders decided to extend their house roof with available materials such as pieces of clothes or plastic bags. At that time, the house church was simply a private house of pastor Haam X. However, district police officers then came in and forced them to remove all extended parts. Consequently, Hmong followers in Yagad had

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<sup>38</sup> I met and talked with an Ede woman who was the leader of the Women Union at the commune level (*Hội Phụ nữ Xã*) at an event that was specially organized to celebrate the 88th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Vietnamese Women Union on 19 October 2018 in Pák.

<sup>39</sup> Haam M. P., interview by author, 14 October 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Yaaj T. G., interview by author, 18 February 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Hawj H., interview by author, 17 September 2018.

continued to suffer tremendously narrowed gathering spaces, which is especially challenging on heavily rainy and sunny days. The problem is not much improved even after a new house church was built in 2012. It is common that although the whole land is quite big, the total square that a Hmong Protestant worship place is much smaller. In Yagad, the house church is only more than 300 square meters built in the land of over 1,000 square meters. All the time, many Yagad adherents have to sit outside of the house church.

Another typical example is a Hmong house church in Grông, Đăk Nông, which is only 360 square kilometers while the whole land is around 1,300 square kilometers (*1 xào 3 Nam bô*). It has the capacity of 500 seats, while their church now has over 1,200 regular church members<sup>42</sup>). Such problem is also recently present in Lakad II where a new Hmong CMA house church was built in November 2018, but the worship space is only for around 550 seats, which is not enough for over 800 Hmong adherents. Meanwhile, for example, a CMA Protestant church in Hanoi, where I attended several times, always has more available seats for all participants. In fact, Hmong religious leaders have no obvious answer on why they cannot have enough space for their adherents. When I raised a question on how differences between a house church and a church, a Religious Affairs government leader only said those two types were basically similar without mentioning the worship space's actual area. As I concluded previously, such disadvantage in church capacity has become a problem, or even indirect intervention, to Hmong Protestants in maintaining and strengthening their religious faith.

Furthermore, the local government, as well as district and provincial government leaders, are believed to not make any direct command or intervention in front of ordinary people in recent years. If there is anything they need to discuss or ask Hmong Protestants to follow precisely, they are more likely to come to church leaders for private conversations. On Christian occasions, mainly Christmas, government leaders may visit and give some gifts to local Hmong registered house churches at various levels. However, unregistered house churches, such as the Hmong Baptist group in Yagad, are not on the visiting list. In general, the governments at various levels (*commune, district, province*) may assign one specific department or a person for such visiting task. In some years, there may be no visit. Thus, one may say that most of the ordinary Hmong Protestants are entirely free to join their church, gather for service and Bible studies without any intervention from the government in the present day.

In fact, the Hmong Protestants have gained wide recognition and acknowledgment from government leaders across the region. Though still having some questions or even doubts, the

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<sup>42</sup> Hawj L., interview by author, 5 January 2019.

Đắk secretary and president admitted Hmong converts' activities are better organized than their communist ones. They even claimed that being religious is not a misconduct. Thus, they [Hmong Protestants] should be treated equally to others. When male Hmong joined the army, they would get a B point instead of A (the highest point in the evaluation system) just because they followed a religion (instead of saying 'Protestant', Hmong Protestants are often referred to as those who follow religion (*theo đạo*))<sup>43</sup>. The former Đắk secretary who had worked with Hmong for decades said that "To be honest, I am a politician and I prefer to work with religious people (Hmong Protestants) as they are very good citizens"<sup>44</sup>. In another case, a report saying that Hmong Protestants had made it difficult (*gây khó khăn*) for government officials to complete necessary tasks – typical complaint used in government reports. This assumption was then asked to get corrected by a commune leader insisting that the Hmong had not done anything difficult for the government<sup>45</sup>.

Additionally, school teachers also implicitly admit the impact of religious leaders on Hmong students rather than mandatory school commands. In the early 2018 academic year, a secondary teacher named V. came to the pastor Haam P. in Lakad II to ask for help with convincing Hmong teenagers to go to school for 'lớp phổ cập'<sup>46</sup> as there was no one show up for the First Day of School (*Ngày Khai giảng*)<sup>47</sup>. Among Vietnamese Kinh-people, the teachers usually come directly to our parents or our village and commune heads to deliver such message, but it seems that religious leaders are more reputable to spread the words in Hmong Protestant villages.

In any sense, such compliments and acknowledgment that government leaders have for Hmong Protestants obviously show a positive attitude toward religious people. Therefore, their religion – Protestantism – is becoming a familiar topic in Vietnamese society, particularly in Kinh's conversations, which absolutely improves common knowledge on foreign-rooted religions such as Christianity. Hence, while Protestantism and its work are no longer strange and suspected in the broader society, it is reasonable in all discourses that every Protestant deserves complete religious freedom.

Meanwhile, it should be pointed out that the Hmong leadership role, which has been effectively and flexibly employed, is essential in shaping an improved relationship between Hmong people with the local government. They are very flexible in responding to and

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<sup>43</sup> I talked with some government leaders before an official meeting with the secretary on 19 December 2018.

<sup>44</sup> The former secretary of Đắk T., interview by author, 24 December 2018.

<sup>45</sup> It was a meeting that some Hmong leaders also participated. Xyooj H., interview by author, 13 January 2019.

<sup>46</sup> A particular type of education program in Vietnam, which aims to make all citizens complete compulsory education.

<sup>47</sup> I met with V. and had a brief talk on 22 October 2018.

interacting with the government. To be specific, they may adequately report the updated status and problems in their villages to the government, but they often put their people at the highest priority. For instance, as mentioned before, while admitting that Hmong villagers may gather wood without permission from the government, they pointed out that if the government did not allow timber traders to come and buy wood, to whom the Hmong could sell. Hmong leaders are also willing to debate if a government official blames them for destroying the road connecting the village to the commune center as it has been actually damaged by wood delivery trucks. Plus, they tend to be polite and humble to reject doing things that they find not appropriate to them to maintain a ‘positive and cooperative attitude’ but not to lose their freedom and autonomy. In many cases, Hmong leaders even dedicate their personal faith and privacy in exchange for working for their people. Haam T. told me that he had to privately pray in his room, had never been baptized and joined church as an adherent even though he truly believed in God. Being a communist and holding government-appointed positions do not allow T. to be a ‘public’ Protestant. Meanwhile, in another circumstance, pastor Haam X. wisely rejected the invitation to be a member of *Hội đồng Nhân dân Xã* (Commune People’s Council) by telling the commune leaders that his limited capacities would prevent him from being a good candidate. By saying so, X. could avoid getting involved in the political system without making government leaders feel offended or consider that he was uncooperative (*bất hợp tác*).

Furthermore, regarding ordinary Hmong Protestants, all of those whom I interviewed and talked with insist that if a Protestant strictly follows religious teachings, s/he is definitely a law-abiding person as secular law and God law are generally similar<sup>48</sup>. However, it does not mean that all secular law is proper. According to them, government staffs are also human beings. Thus, they may make mistakes that sometimes Protestant citizens can question without violating religious law. To those who work for the government but are Hmong, Yagaders have gradually established trusted relationships with them even though those staff may initially be assigned to observe and control Protestant Yagaders. Let us take Yaaj V.’s case for example.

V. was recruited and specially trained to be a policeman in around 2008. He then was assigned to live among and keep updated on the Hmong of Yagad to the government. Although V. comes from Son La province where is the home of none of the Hmong Yagaders, he was adopted by a Hmong family – Yaaj T. T. family – in the village then had lived with them until he finished his mission. After almost ten years, V. is now no longer a reconnaissance policeman that the government planted in the village but a child of Yagad. Though V. still sometimes

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<sup>48</sup> Haam X. T., interview by author, 30 September 2018; Haam P. and Muas S., interview by author, 14 October 2018.

comes to the village and does ‘check-ups’ on people, he is now in charge of another non-Hmong village in Đắk Lắk. As a matter of fact, it is not easy to truly comprehend the relationship between V. and Hmong Protestants in Yagad. However, I see that V. and Yaaj T. T.’s family are still in frequent contact<sup>49</sup>. Plus, he is warmly welcomed by Hmong converts whenever he comes to the village. It is rare to obtain for both Vietnamese Kinh and Hmong police officers if they have never lived with local people might rarely obtain. To a certain extent, Hmong Protestants in Yagad have been successfully built a healthy relationship with their same-ethnic government cadres, which is good for their community, particularly on religious matters that have caused the government to carry out such reconnaissance schemes.

To summary, although there are still remaining misunderstandings and unresolved concerns exist between Hmong Protestants and the government of various levels elsewhere across Vietnam, their relationship is considerably improved in the contemporary Yagad and beyond. In particular, it can be said that the ‘relative freedom of religion’ among Hmong converts is significantly secured. This improvement is not only the result of recent reformed policies in religious affairs as mainly recorded in literature<sup>50</sup> but also great thanks to the restless effort of the Hmong, especially their widely-appreciated lifestyle in both secular and religious contexts as well as flexible and wise ways in behaving with the government./.

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<sup>49</sup> I talked with Yaaj V. on 12 January 2019 after meeting him several times. As another district policeman joined us, and as they were policemen, not all specific information was shared. We had a New Year party together with Yaaj T. T. family later when I had the chance to ask him as well as some other Hmong more about his case.

<sup>50</sup> For example, see Hữu Sơn Trần 2012, 132., Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al. 2018, 171.



## Chapter 10. Conversion to Protestantism and Ethnic Identity: Is it a Win-Lose Relationship?

Hmong conversion to Protestantism in the late 1980s is widely considered by many Vietnamese government leaders and scholars to cause to the loss of their Hmong ethnic identity<sup>1</sup>. In their arguments, as Hmong converts abandon their traditional religion, their *Hmong* culture is gone<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, some other scholars propose that Hmong converts no longer maintain the traditional religion-based ethnic identity. Instead, they create a new identity<sup>3</sup>. Have Hmong Protestants lost their ethnic identity or totally created a new one? Chapter 10 would examine in which ways ‘*being Protestants*’ for years has impacted Hmong converts’ ethnic identity. Also, fundamental aspects of Hmong ethnic identity in Hmong Protestants’ thoughts, behaviors, and customs would be particularly explored. In other words, how Hmong converts’ religious identity and ethnic identity have been negotiated throughout decades to shape ‘*who Hmong Protestants are*’ in the present time would be discovered in this last chapter. On the other hand, for a more objective and holistic understanding, a number of remaining changes among Hmong Protestants, which are neither consequences of ethnic nor religious factors, will be pointed out.

It is worth highlighting that Chapter 10 will further discuss ‘*customs*’ of Hmong Protestants, which I did not mention while examining either their religious practices or beliefs because some customs might be significantly shaped by Hmong ethnic characteristics rather than their new religion. Also, due to this research’s scope, I do not go into in-depth details of all customs of Hmong Protestants but aim to emphasize the most apparent aspects that show their identity. Meanwhile, certain emerging customs have been established thanks to the profound impact of their current religion – Protestantism. Thus, how those Hmong converts appreciate Christian teachings and follow them as ethical codes on the collective scale would be discovered, which have gradually created new values of their religious identity. In addition, I will especially discuss several aspects of Christian teachings<sup>4</sup> and the ‘emerging’ customs that have been shaped thanks to Hmong Protestants’ daily behaviors over time. Undoubtedly, it takes time for a new religious belief to be an integral part of a community and become customary, collective

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<sup>1</sup> Duy Quang Vuong, *Hiện Tượng Di Cư Của Người Hmông Với Vấn Đề Theo Đạo Hiện Nay [Hmong Migration Phenomenon with the Current Religious Conversion]* (Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo (Internal Report: Unpublished), 2005a), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Thị Mai Phương Võ 2017, 266.

<sup>3</sup> Văn Thắng Nguyễn 2004, 573.

<sup>4</sup> Although various aspects of Christian teachings are discussed in Chapter 8, I would further examine some of them in this chapter to illuminate better the impact of ‘being Hmong Protestant’ on the Hmong.

actions/ behaviors. Therefore, this research only focuses on the most visible customs, which are more or less pervaded by their new religious belief.

### **10.1 Religious Ethics: New Values Established**

For more than twenty years following Protestant religious teachings in organized ways, it is understandable that new values are established in the Hmong Protestant community. As Hmong Protestants in Yagad live separately from their traditional counterparts, the process of creating new values might be even faster as it does not confront severe preventions from their non-convert people. However, ‘why can ‘*new values*’ be defined as ‘*new*’?’ As discussed in previous sections, Protestant beliefs and practices are significantly different from animism and ancestral worship. Such differences have been defined and enhanced through repetition over a long time, which will create ‘*totally new*’ values, eventually making ‘Hmong Protestants’ no longer ‘traditional Hmong.’ Consequently, those values might be considered ‘religious identity’ markers of Hmong Protestants, particularly in comparison with their same-ethnic groups who maintain traditional religion.

To be noted, this section only refers to major new values currently shaped among the Hmong thanks to their conversion to Protestantism. Therefore, it does not precisely answer ‘*How are Hmong Protestants different from traditional Hmong?*’, which someone can find detailed discussions in previous chapters.

*Gender Roles and Norms.* It is obvious for an outsider who participates in a party of Hmong Protestants in Yagad and other Hmong villages in the Central Highlands that both men and women prepare, serve meals, and clean up. This image seems to be unfamiliar to traditional Hmong and also to me as a rural female Vietnamese Kinh. I have often witnessed most men sitting at a table, drinking tea, and chatting while their wives and female relatives are cooking and cleaning in the kitchen in clan essential events. As an unspoken rule, most of the communal meals I had with Hmong across the country, regardless of their denominations, either CMA, Baptist, or TGPÂ, Hmong men are more likely to finish cooking, serve food, wash dishes, and clean up when the party ends. Meanwhile, women get up earlier, prepare ingredients, and cook. All people professionally follow what they arrange in advance without any loud arguments. Within families, Hmong men also more likely to do house chores than their traditional peers.

Another observable change in the Hmong convert community is that instead of always staying behind and supporting their husbands, many Hmong Protestant women participate in religion-based community activities. They become more confident in speaking out their thoughts, being themselves, and building their own career. Though there is no female Hmong

pastor at CMA house churches, Hmong women's church leadership participation is a positive sign of gender equality. This fact shows their potential of holding more critical positions in the future. Interviewed female religious leaders shared that their husbands generally supported them to do God's work. The house church also partially funds capable female Hmong who desire to attend theology courses. Apparently, while Hmong girls can attend schools today, female Hmong adults also can get enormous support to pursue their further education in the broader society.

Another critical characteristic showing how gender equality is considerably improved in the Hmong Protestant community is that *polygamy* absolutely no longer exists. In traditional Hmong, it is quite common that Hmong men have more than one wife. Plus, domestic violence is significantly reduced, and the divorce rate is extremely low. Although there are no exact statistics, I have not heard any case that a Hmong married couple gets divorced in Yagad and beyond except for only one couple in M'Drăk many years ago. It should be noted that polygamy might also be rarer in traditional Hmong communities nowadays as a common tendency in modern human society and the divorce rate might still be low among Hmong people. However, the phenomenon that 'a Hmong wife has to suicide because of her conflict in husband family but she gets no support from her parents' is no longer present among Hmong Protestants today compared to that in traditional Hmong communities. The image of a traditional Hmong woman who suicides by heartbreak grass (*lá ngón*) is actually well-known in Vietnamese society, which is even concretely depicted in several mainstream pieces of literature<sup>5</sup>.

Plus, instead of 'totally being the ghost of husband family' (*con ma nhà chồng*), a Hmong Protestant bride can go back and forth to visit or even take care of her parents after the wedding. The pressure of 'having a son' is also enormously reduced. In traditional society, Hmong men are in charge of numerous responsibilities that women cannot perform. For instance, only male Hmong adults can 'seek and invite the shaman to do necessary rituals for the family,' 'take care of ancestor worship when his parents pass away,' and 'discuss essential concerns within families and clan as well as in wider society.'<sup>6</sup> After converting, the role of Hmong men is fundamentally changed. While the religious leaders are those who take care of all rituals, Hmong women are more acknowledged and can do much more than merely being housewives as previously discussed. Besides, Hmong Protestant parents may choose to live with any of

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, see *Vợ Chồng A Phú (A Phu Couple)* by Tô Hoài, which is published in High school literature textbook in Vietnam.

<sup>6</sup> See role of traditional Hmong men more at Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 68-74.

their children, regardless of gender, instead of with *the last son* as in a traditional Hmong family, as long as the parents and that child get along well.

*Personality.* The Hmong people, at least in Vietnam, are well known for their high ego, which is often related to their ‘*cái lý người Mèo*’ in Vietnamese. While in informal talks, the Hmong is still called ‘*Mèo*’ sometimes<sup>7</sup>, ‘*cái lý*’ is their own rationality and way of doing rituals in traditional society. For example, in the traditional funeral, ‘*làm lý*’ (can be translated as ‘*do reasoning*’) is considered to be an invitation from the host family to the *yawg mus* before ritual performed for the dead person, which is done by offering him two cups of alcohol. These cups are called ‘*chén rượu lý*’<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, in a traditional wedding, two matchmakers who know the ‘*reasoning*’ well (*thạo lý lẽ*) are invited by the groom family to go to the bride family for the wedding settlement (*dạm hỏi cưới* which can be literally translated to ‘ask for the wedding’). In other words, ‘*lý*’ is the right way the Hmong believe in and strictly behave based on it. Thus, they are often considered to be stubborn, and no one can convince them about something that they believe is not true and/or right. Vietnamese government officials also learn that the Hmong has high ego and self-esteem, and they do not easily give up their own reason to follow unreasonable commands<sup>9</sup>.

However, after converting to Protestantism and practicing it for years, Hmong has been acknowledged to behave more calmly, which is resulted in much fewer conflicts within and outside their community. Most of the district policemen and local politicians I met told me that they [Hmong Protestants] were smart and diplomatic (*khôn khéo*). If they did not want something, they just avoided talking about it or admitted that their ability was limited. One of the young Hmong adults told me very clearly that, “*since converting, we become more tolerant and less aggressive... our ego is smaller than before*”<sup>10</sup>. It is also tangible in the way Hmong Protestants communicate with outsiders, including government officials, as discussed in a previous section on the Hmong leadership. One may argue that they become calmer because they want to avoid unnecessary troubles with the government. However, this change in personality is becoming typical behavior among Hmong converts towards their neighbors as

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<sup>7</sup> See the part on Hmong names in Chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> Although the author uses word ‘*thầy cúng*’ that can be translated as ‘*shaman*’ (*txiv neeb* in Hmong), as discussed in Chapter 4 in Hmong traditional funeral the one who performs ‘*Showing the Way*’ ritual might be ‘*yawg mus*’ (*thầy chi đường*). Thus I prefer to keep the original Hmong word to avoid confusion. See Mạnh Hùng Nguyễn 2010, 82.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the *lý* of Hmong people is well described on a short article published by the official e-journal of Hanoi Municipal Police Department (*Công an Thành phố Hà Nội*), see Chí Hùng, “Cái Lý Người Mèo (Mông) [The Hmong’s Reason]” (*An Ninh Thủ Đô*, October 30, 2007), Accessed December 8, 2020, <https://anninhthudo.vn/cai-ly-nguoi-meo-mong-post11996.antd>.

<sup>10</sup> Haam S., conversation with author, 12 October 2018.

well. They, Hmong Protestants themselves, also have claimed that forgiving others and maintaining harmony is what God teaches them.

*Customs and Entertainment Activities.* Due to the significant impact of ‘being Protestant,’ some Hmong customs and entertainment activities have been considerably changed. In the focal village, the converts do not drink alcohol that even results in no alcohol drinks available at local shops. As a matter of fact, Hmong Protestants in northern villages, where non-converts are the majority, find it hard to avoid drinking alcohol because of peer pressure from their traditional Hmong people<sup>11</sup>. Meanwhile, ‘drinking no alcohol’ becomes a stable custom in Yagad, where Hmong converts are the majority. Take Yaaj T. X.’s case as a typical example of how religion plays moral codes for its followers in everyday life. X. is a former group leader of the Yagad church who was excommunicated because of adultery many years ago. After being caught, he left the church and began working for the government at the village level in 2013<sup>12</sup>. X. also started smoked cigarettes and drunk alcohol, and never revisits the church. In fact, those Hmong involved in sins such as early marriage (*tảo hôn*) or abortion (*phá thai*) are more likely to go back to church after a time of self-repenting. Some choose to switch to another Protestant group that welcomes and accepts them. However, X. seemed to commit a severe sin that prevented him from returning to the life he had had. In other words, leaving church depleted his motivation to follow Protestant teachings, which finally steers him to a different lifestyle. X. does not return to the traditional Hmong religion either. He is now still accepted and welcomed at Yagad village events and among his neighbors without any discrimination.

Regarding to food, some Hmong converts may occasionally participate in a traditional ritual to respect their non-convert people. However, they do not eat any food used as offerings nor blood food like their traditional people. In some regions, it is also reported that Hmong Protestants no longer eat dogs<sup>13</sup>. In fact, I have not seen any Hmong convert consuming dogs in Yagad and other Hmong villages of the Central Highlands. Nevertheless, to my knowledge

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<sup>11</sup> According to Yaaj S. D. (male, age 31) – a Hmong Protestant of TGPÂ in a northern village of Hà Giang, around 1/3 Hmong converts in his region drink alcohol occasionally. When I interviewed him on 20 February 2019 at his house, I even saw his father coming home in a drunken state even though his whole family already converted.

<sup>12</sup> I do not name the specific position to protect his identity as the case is quite sensitive. I met him a couple of times since 29 October 2018 and discovered that he was a former church group leader, but I did not know the circumstance that he was involved in until he had to cancel our outdoor activity because he was drunk. A few weeks later, I found out X.’s case while talking with a religious leader, then checked the information with some other trusted Hmong I was close to in Yagad.

<sup>13</sup> According to Nguyễn, ‘do not eat dog’ is one of ten God Commandments defined and followed by Hmong Protestants in Lào Cai, see Quỳnh Trâm Nguyễn 2016, 98-9.

and what I have learned in the field sites, ‘*eating dogs*’ may not be biblically prohibited. Thus, such change may not be a consequence of the Protestant lifestyle.

Like several ceremonies that are essentially pervaded by religion, such as Funerals and Weddings discussed previously, Hmong Protestants nowadays no longer calculate ‘lucky days and lucky hours’ or ‘lucky directions’ for their important life-events. For example, the house owner does not need to check which date is the best for his/ her family to hold the New House Inauguration ceremony. Instead, it depends on the host family and church officers’ availabilities. The officers are invited to come and pray for the family. Plus, Hmong converts do not consider the best year/ month/ day/ hour to build the house in various stages like their traditional people do. In fact, Hmong converts only need to pick up the most convenient time for themselves and those who may be involved in<sup>14</sup>. Unlike most Catholic Vietnamese families that I have visited, almost all of the Hmong Protestants’ houses are rarely decorated with Christian images or verses. According to them, they do not worship any symbols and pictures. Thus, if there are any Christian items in their houses, those items are used for decorative purposes rather than being worshipped or prayed.

In terms of entertainment activities (*hoạt động văn nghệ*), Hmong Protestants rarely participate in government-sponsored activities such as singing or dancing. Their preferable activities are mostly hymn-based, including singing hymns, performing Bible-based plays, and so on. Noticeably, Hmong hymns are in the Hmong language, but they can be built up based on foreign or even communist music melodies. For example, the melody of a Christmas song called ‘*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*’ in German or ‘*Silent Night*’ in English is used for a Christmas Hmong song titled ‘*Hmo muaj moo zoo*,’ but its lyrics are replaced.

*The Holy Sunday*. Unlike their traditional people, it is observable that the majority of Hmong converts in the focal village follow Commandments to the letter. One of the signs is that all Hmong Protestants do not work on Sundays such as going to the field. My host mom is a tailor. She might not be able to understand theology well, but seriously follow God’s words. Through months I had lived with her family, I saw that she could work until midnight on Saturdays, then woke up early on Sundays to prepare for morning Sunday service, but she never worked on Sundays. For the Hmong, Sundays are the day off to worship God. They believe that, “*We have six days for ourselves already, now only one day for doing God work,*” and that “*if you do not*

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<sup>14</sup> I participated in the New House Inauguration of and talked with the family head Tsheej T. (male, age 22), on 20 December 2018.



*do God work, then how can you be with God*<sup>15</sup>. In their understanding, ‘do God work’ means going to church, learning the Bible, and supporting church work such as preparing for an important event, and so on. Thus, Sunday is not just a day of rest, but it is the holy day that God’s followers devote themselves to ‘do God work.’ Instead of pointing out visible outcomes of ‘devoting Sundays to do God’s work,’ it seems to be an ‘unarguable’ Commandment to follow and a necessary thing to do for Hmong Protestants.

## **10.2 Hmong Ethnic Identity Markers in Protestant Context**

When I asked Yagad Hmong what made them different from other ethnic groups, most of them said it was their *clothes* and *language*. Let us explore how these Hmong identity markers are preserved among Hmong converts first and then investigate some other observable aspects. In fact, when it comes to Hmong religious change to Protestantism, the Vietnamese government often blames those converts for destroying Hmong ethnic identity. This section will provide relevant discussions on such statement.

*Clothes.* As a matter of fact, one may find it hard to recognize male Hmong Protestants through their clothes as most of them nowadays wear regular shirts and pants as their Vietnamese Kinh counterparts. For formal occasions, they tend to wear suit and tie. On some important events, some Hmong men wear their traditional cloth set which is made by linen. Meanwhile, Hmong people are tremendously well-known among Vietnamese Kinh for their colorful female dress, which is the typical dress of Flower Hmong rather than other Hmong sub-groups such as Black Hmong or White Hmong. However, Hmong women in Yagad and in other Hmong villages may wear a ‘Flower Hmong’ skirt daily today, regardless of which sub-group they belong to. This fact is merely because the colorful skirt of Flower Hmong is more commonly offered in the market than in black or white. A skirt costs only 50,000 VND, which is affordable to most Hmong women. For everyday wear, they often mix a regular T-shirt with a traditional skirt. Thus, it may not be apparent to realize Hmong women by sub-group if one looks at their everyday outfit, but it is definitely easy to realize a Hmong among their female neighbors such as Thai, Nung, or Ede. Notably, Hmong women prefer to have several different traditional outfits, yet they tend to wear their sub-group dress set while attending church, particularly for important events such as weddings.

Regarding their headscarf, if one visits the largest Hmong Protestant groups in Đắk Lắk (Yagad) and Đắk Nông (Grông), s/he may easily realize that while a majority of female Hmong

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<sup>15</sup> I talked with Haam X. P. and Yaaj L. on 27 October 2018 and these words were what they both told me during our discussion.



in Yagad wear a colorful scarf which totally covers their head, their counterparts in Đắk Nông use a white scarf with tiny checkerboard pattern that does not cover the top of their head. Colorful scarf shows Flower Hmong identity while white checkerboard scarf shows White Hmong identity. Thus, Hmong outfits may vary, but their headscarf obviously shows the dominant sub-group community they belong to. In other words, while Flower Hmong is dominant in Yagad, White Hmong is more dominant in Grông. It can also be observed that female Hmong of another sub-group is more likely to follow their neighborhood's dominant style. Nevertheless, most Hmong women prefer to maintain their sub-group identity, especially through their outfits on important occasions, disregarding which dominant Hmong community they are a part of.

In terms of *clothing material*, it is a unique trait that Hmong clothes are traditionally made by *lanh* (linen)<sup>16</sup>, which is the signal for a dead Hmong to be recognized by their ancestors and accepted in 'the other World' according to traditional belief. This traditional item is also one of the critical points that Hmong Protestants are criticized. After converting to Protestantism, they no longer need to wear *lanh* clothes on such a life-important event. *Do Hmong Protestants in the Central Highlands abandon 'lanh' after converting?* My research shows *No* as the answer. Both Hmong converts and non-converts in Yagad and Lakad shared that they had attempted to plant *lanh* several times; however, the outcome was not positive. The weather and land quality in Đắk Lắk caused the *lanh* plant (flax) to grow faster than in their home villages in northern Vietnam with shorter/thicker bark (*vỏ cây lanh*). Thus, Hmong villagers could not strip *lanh* bark to make it into *lanh* fabric in the traditional way that they would be used to make traditional Hmong clothes.

In fact, trying to grow *lanh* plant even caused profound misunderstanding about Hmong Protestants in the Central Highlands. While *lanh* leaves look similar to cannabis (marijuana) leaves, dozens of police officers on several police cars suddenly came to Yagad, suspecting that the Hmong planted cannabis<sup>17</sup>. Although this accusation was false, the rumor on '*Hmong Protestants planting cannabis*' spreads. As the Hmong people used to be widely known for their opium economy, it might be the reason causing such rumor. At an unplanned meeting in Buôn Mê Thuật city, a Hmong student came with me who then got a very improper question from a Rector of a local High School. The rector asked if he could buy some opium or marijuana from that Hmong student and said that the Hmong in the Central Highlands were very good at cultivating such illegal plants. Undeniably, if the rumor and false assumption are preserved and

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<sup>16</sup> More detailed information on *lanh* cloth and its role in traditional Hmong funeral available in Chapter 4.

<sup>17</sup> Yaaj H. and Haam P., interview by author, 31 October 2018, Xyooj H., interview by author, 13 January 2019.

used to refer to Hmong in the Central Highlands, it might be problematic and may cause troubles to those involved.

Although failing to plant *lanh* and not being required to wear *lanh* clothes for traditional rituals, some Hmong Protestants still prefer to buy authentic *lanh* clothes in the market, which is quite expensive, around 1,000,000 VND or more for an outfit. Furthermore, I suppose that they definitely well preserve their unique characteristic of ‘*making traditional clothes*’ in a very new way: *doing embroider (thêu)*. If someone walks through the Yagad region, they may see a familiar image that Hmong girls and women are sitting alone or in a group and embroidering their own piece(s) of cloth. All female Hmong know how to embroider at very young ages, around more than ten. Those piece(s) of clothing can later be made into traditional dress or everyday items such as baby carriers with or without a tailor’s help. Sundays and numerous religious events throughout the year are great opportunities for female Hmong Protestants in Yagad to be in their favorite outfit. Consequently, their demand for traditional dress is much higher than their traditional counterparts who have fewer chances to dress up and go out. Almost all Hmong women in Yagad prepare at least one dress set for Christmas and Lunar New Year occasions<sup>18</sup>. They can either buy available clothes in the market or go to a tailor who then measures them and makes a set that fits them. Each traditional dress set costs around 700,000 VND to more than 1,000,000 VND in total, depending on the material quality and the design of the set.

*Language/ Writing.* While several international scholars claim that the ‘desire for writing/ literacy’ is one of the main reasons for the Hmong in Asia to convert to Christianity; according to Trần, the Hmong of Vietnam are not really in need of using the writing script in their own language. Trần explains that because Hmong society is still mainly agriculture-based self-sufficiency and their farming experience as well as knowledge can be transferred across generations through the oral way. Also, there is no synced Hmong writing system that supports Vietnamese Kinh officials and people of other ethnic groups in exchanging documents in the Hmong language, which eventually becomes a communication and culture barrier between Hmong and other ethnic people. In other words, Vietnamese Hmong have been well maintained their language via oral tradition, yet the writing script is not primarily used and adequately appreciated. As a matter of fact, the writing script is a powerful tool to preserve and transfer

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<sup>18</sup> As mentioned, my host mom is a tailor specialized in making traditional Hmong dress. Since the end of November and throughout December, I witnessed the house was more often than not full of female Hmong who came to get their measurement to get a new outfit for coming Christmas and Lunar New Year. This time was the peak time in the year that my host mom had to work quite late and rarely had time to take a rest.

knowledge across time and space. It is also considered one of the most efficient identity markers for ethnic groups. Those Hmong who convert to Protestantism in Vietnam, in fact, preserve such ethnic identity marker very well in their religious context.

It is a fact that numerous Hmong writing systems exist among Hmong of different sub-groups and countries throughout history. In Vietnam, there is also a particular story. One of the earliest recorded documents says that Father Savina, a French Catholic priest who first converted a group of Hmong in Sapa to Catholicism<sup>19</sup>, already worked on creating a script for the Hmong at the time he lived with these indigenous people in northern Vietnam in the early 20th century. However, Vietnamese scholars cannot collect this script as the first Hmong who learned and used it already passed away a long time ago<sup>20</sup>. It is believed that Yves Bertrais, G. Lindwood Barney, and William A. Smalley built a Hmong script as well in Laos in the 1950s, which then becomes the widely used Hmong RPA. To my knowledge, there is no obvious evidence proving that they cooperated with Father Savina at that time.

In 1961, the Hmong writing script was built by Nguyễn Văn Chính and Phan Thanh based on Quoc ngu writing (*chữ Quốc ngữ*) – the official writing for Vietnamese nowadays – following the Vietnamese government’s plan<sup>21</sup>. The time such Vietnamese-based Hmong writing was invented and taught for the Hmong of Vietnam may vary<sup>22</sup>, but it is widely admitted that the government failed to convince the Hmong to use its product. Since the late 1970s, no Vietnamese-based Hmong script has taught, and only a few Hmong can still use it. However, some sources reveal that the Vietnamese Hmong writing (*chữ Mông Việt Nam*) is still used at a few high schools and colleges (*cao đẳng*) in northwestern Vietnam. Whereas, the Hmong RPA is officially used at the Television Station of some provinces such as Bắc Cạn and Thái Nguyên<sup>23</sup>. This writing system is referred to as *chữ Mông quốc tế* (the international Hmong writing) by the Vietnamese government and its officials. In fact, this system has been used by Hmong Protestants in Yagad and beyond for their religious as well as secular purposes.

Although the Hmong RPA is officially used at several Vietnamese offices on Hmong-related matters, it is worth noticing that it is not allowed to be printed as Hmong Bible copies for Hmong Christians to use. However, as an officially registered Protestant denomination, ECV-S can get a certain number of Bible copies in Hmong RPA for its adherents. Thus, Hmong CMA

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<sup>19</sup> See Chapter 4 for further information.

<sup>20</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 193-4.

<sup>21</sup> Vương Anh Ngô, “Mong Muốn Có Chữ Mông [Desire to Have Hmong Writing Script],” *Nhân Dân*, February 7, 2015, Accessed October 15, 2020, <https://nhandan.com.vn/dan-toc-mien-nui/mong-muon-co-chu-mong-224866/>.

<sup>22</sup> According to Trần, the Hmong writing program was started in 1956 and 1957 and then wholly paused in 1978 – 1979 in Lào Cai province, Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 195-6.

<sup>23</sup> Vương Anh Ngô 2015.

Protestants in Yagad and in the Central Highlands can still use this writing system. To my knowledge, Hmong Protestants in Vietnam, regardless of their denominations, have been using this writing as well since they converted. Though I have not enough evidence to claim that the Hmong RPA is largely used among traditional Hmong in Vietnam today, some traditional Hmong I met already used it on Facebook. Also, the Hmong RPA might become much more common across the country due to a fast-growing number of Hmong Christians as well as the positive interactions among this population with their traditional counterparts.

*So, how do Hmong Protestants in Yagad use and preserve their native writing?* It is clear that Hmong converts now use the Hmong RPA in their everyday life to communicate with their people disregard of religion, primarily via virtual channels, as they might require more writing besides speaking. Nevertheless, the Hmong RPA is most widely used in a religious context. As discussed in Chapter 7 on religious activities, there are various church activities available in Yagad, and the total number of participants is relatively high. Thus, the frequency of using writing is definitely high. For example, at all church services, the writing is used through the pastor's sermon, reading the Bible, singing hymns, and so on. All materials, including handwritten handouts, are used at Bible studies sessions are in Hmong RPA writing. Noticeably, as Sunday school in the region is quite big in size and Hmong students are numerous (more than 600) at early ages, all Hmong converts now and their future generations might be very good at their native writing. Meanwhile, the oldest Hmong in Yagad can read the Hmong script is around 75 years old, and only a few who cannot. In other words, unlike their traditional people, Hmong Protestants have a very efficient tool now to preserve and transfer their knowledge and experience. Their history might be documented in some ways instead of being wiped out like that of their ancestor lived in China.

In short, Trần supposes that there is no synced Hmong writing system yet when it comes to official documents and that writing does not significantly help with mutual interactions between Hmong and other groups. However, it does not mean that the writing is not in demand, at least in Yagad where most of Hmong are Protestants today. Unlike traditional Hmong, who may not have chances to learn and use the Hmong RPA regularly, Hmong native writing nowadays is one of the essential factors nurturing Hmong Protestants' spiritual life as well as preserving their Hmong ethnic identity. Nevertheless, the advantage of using this writing system among Hmong converts is obviously taken for granted by some Vietnamese government-sponsored scholars who evaluate it based on political interests rather than the wish and benefits of the

people<sup>24</sup>. Once again, this attitude proves that the government desires to prevent its citizens from choosing their preferable religion rather than putting a priority on attempting to preserve their ethnic identity.

While *clothes* and *language* are usually supposed to be the most apparent ethnic identity markers among Hmong Protestants, there are also some other aspects and characteristics that distinguish them from other ethnic groups, explicitly or implicitly, even though those converts already abandoned their traditional religion, which is considered the firm basis for establishing and maintaining Hmong identity for thousands of years. In this short section, I choose to discuss characteristics and aspects that appear to be most observable and recognizable.

Firstly, my research shows obvious signs proving that *patriarchy*, the cornerstone of traditional Hmong society<sup>25</sup>, is still preserved among Hmong converts. Although the gender equality is improved, such improvement is sometimes exaggerated by some scholars<sup>26</sup>. The patriarchal manifestations in the converted society have been largely ignored in the literature.

Basically, similar to traditional Hmong society, in Hmong Protestant families in Yagad, women are still supposed to stay home, give birth, do house chores and take care of their children while their husbands tend to go out to make a living and socialize<sup>27</sup>. Though it is becoming more common for Hmong women to go to the forest or work labor jobs to earn money, *gender roles* in the family are still quite separated. After giving birth only one or two weeks, Hmong mothers already work, at home or in the field. In a village of northern Vietnam, it is also reported that even though Hmong converts are following the new way (*lý mới*), male Hmong still play essential roles in reality<sup>28</sup>.

Also, it might be less pressure to *have a son* in Hmong Protestant families nowadays, but a significant number of them still prefer to. Being in Yagad, one may see many families having

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Trần and her colleagues consider that learning *tiếng Hmông La tinh* (the Hmong RPA) among Protestants is detrimental to widespread dissemination of the Communist Party and the State policies, which eventually causes the Hmong to be easily taken advantage of (*lợi dụng*) and incited (*kích động*) by bad elements, see Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al. 2018, 148.

<sup>25</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 71-2.

<sup>26</sup> For instance, Seb Rumsby argues that Hmong women in northern Vietnam are often first converters in their family, then they make a significant impact on other family members. Rumsby believes that Hmong women are first converts; they then convince their husbands to convert. In case they fail, they would keep complaining until their husband changes his mind or challenge their husband by asking him to choose whether he wants to follow them or his parents. Seb Rumsby, "Phụ Nữ H'Mông Làm Biến Đổi Tôn Giáo Vùng Cao Việt Nam [Hmong Women Transform Vietnam's Upland Religion]," *BBC Vietnamese*, April 2019, Accessed October 14, 2019. I personally doubt such a conclusion as Hmong women are rarely willing to give up their marriage and/or challenge their husband that way. Plus, all of the Hmong I interviewed and talked to insist that their family's first converters are their grandfather/ father/ husband rather than grandmother/ mother/ wife. This fact is particularly actual throughout their first mass conversion in the late 1980s. Now, they are all already Protestants.

<sup>27</sup> Related discussion can be found at *church participation* by gender in Chapter 7.

<sup>28</sup> Thị Hồng Yến Trần et al. 2018, 154.

up to six or even eight daughters and they still attempt to have a son. The oldest son of my host family already has seven daughters. He had six daughters by the time I left Yagad and has had one more in early 2020. In fact, they do not need a son to take care of them after they die as their traditional Hmong do because Protestant funeral ceremony and other rituals are taken care of by religious leaders. After getting married, most of the Hmong brides still stay with their family-in-law instead of Hmong grooms live with his wife's family. Thus, it seems that having a son is still more helpful to the parents than having a daughter. This bias is, in fact, also still dominant in Vietnamese Kinh society today.

Noticeably, many scholars say that clan head (*trưởng họ*), aunt (*bà cô*), and elderly people are no longer critical in convert community. The roles of family and clan heads in traditional society are believed to be replaced by pastors and religious leaders in Hmong Protestant communities<sup>29</sup>. In some cases, a Hmong Protestant family even does not recognize their clan head<sup>30</sup>, or village rules are even replaced by religious laws<sup>31</sup>. In other words, the religious tie replaces kinship tie among Hmong converts, which eventually transforms the nature of relationships among the Hmong<sup>32</sup>. However, all of my research participants claim that religious leaders only support them on spiritual concerns, whereas their reputable relatives and family members are still mainly consulted for important decisions.

As mentioned previously, only nine church leaders are supposed to guide more than 2,200 Hmong followers in Yagad spiritually. Technically, those leaders are not able to take care of specific problems for all followers' families. Take my host family for example. The host dad shared that as his four brothers lived in Yagad, whenever there was a problem or an important event that needed to be planned in his family, all brothers would gather together and discuss. In traditional families and clans, the clan head and the oldest brother seem to make the final decision<sup>33</sup>. However, it seems that the voice of family/ clan members is considered more equally among the converts. Though Yaaj G. T. did not have any brothers living in Yagad, he also insisted that religious leaders did not completely replace the Hmong clan and family members. Each side, religious or bloody relationships, has its boundaries.

When it comes specifically to *spiritual functions*, it is unquestionable that since Hmong Protestants no longer practice animism, ancestor worship, and associated customs, key

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<sup>29</sup> Thị Mai Phương Võ 2017, 267.

<sup>30</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 2012, 131.

<sup>31</sup> Quỳnh Trâm Nguyễn 2016, 97.

<sup>32</sup> Thị Lan Hoàng 2018, 56.

<sup>33</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 74, 77.



traditional roles no longer exist. For example, there are no ‘Cho Đaz Khuô’ (*người cầm quyền ma quyền khách*) or ‘Faux’ (*bà Cô*) in the Hmong convert community. In traditional Hmong society, people in charge of these two roles should well understand worship rituals (*cách làm ma*) of the clan and support other related persons in performing rituals<sup>34</sup>. Thus, I believe, at this point, one can say that religious leaders in the Hmong convert society replace some key figures who are supposed to take care of Hmong spiritual life in traditional society. However, it does not mean that religious leaders entirely replace all critical clan and family members, as some scholars report in the literature.

Finally, one of the recognizable signs showing the profound impact of the Hmong clan in Hmong convert society is the emergence of a *clan-based Protestant group* in Yagad that is discussed in section 9.1. Even though this pattern has not yet become common, it is undeniable that the clan relationship is one of the critical factors for the Hmong to choose which religious group they would like to belong to.

*Food. Music.* As mentioned, the customs of Hmong Protestants have been altered due to their conversion to another religion, yet certain traits of ethnic customs can still be seen through their everyday activities. Regarding food, *thắng cố*, *mèn mèn* are the iconic delicacies of Vietnamese Hmong, but they are no longer common in both traditional and convert Hmong’s daily meals today. However, Hmong Yagaders still use traditional ingredients to make certain dishes. For example, they brought a particular plant from their northern villages and used it to make colorful sticky rice. Several types of wild vegetables are still widely used even though such vegetables may not be edible to Vietnamese Kinh, such as *suab* (an edible type of fern), *qaub teb*... Even though I was a rural girl spending most of my childhood on the hills, I have never eaten any delicious fern as Hmong women made for me and cannot realize which type of fern is edible that even Hmong children could do without any hesitation. In our daily conversations, some elderly Hmong men told me that if they wanted to know which wild leaves were edible, they would let a pig eat such leaves first. If the pig was healthy afterwards, the leaves were edible for humans as well.

As a matter of fact, most of the daily meals of Hmong Protestants in Yagad are plant-based; they have their own recipes to make some exceptional food such as *đậu nành lên men* (fermented soy beans). They also make various cakes, such as banana and sticky cakes (*bánh chuối* and *bánh nếp*), to welcome guest(s) or on other special occasions. Such type of snack is also occasionally made just for family and neighbors gatherings. Although one may observe

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<sup>34</sup> Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 77-8.



that the way of cooking among Hmong Protestants is somewhat affected by Vietnamese, I believe they mostly maintain their traditional cooking style. The unique food of Vietnamese Kinh is not actually typical among Hmong converts. For example, while *chung* cake and spring rolls are must-cook food during Lunar New Year, Hmong Protestants choose to make their own cakes and dishes. The most common dishes they make for significant events are fried pork and cabbage soup. In fact, the Hmong do not make fried pork dry and crunchy as the way Vietnamese Kinh prefer to cook; their pork dish remains soft and has less flavor. Similarly, cabbage soup is simply boiled with a little salt. Some of the main spices that the Hmong in Yagad use for their daily meals are chili pepper, pepper, *pewj qaib* – special leaves look similar to chives, which can be planted in the region. *Thảo quả* (cardamom) is also used sometimes as Yagaders often get it as gift from their relatives in northern Vietnam. Otherwise, they rarely buy other cooking spices.

While *thịt gác bếp* (marinated pork or buffalo hung over the kitchen to get dried by its heat) is also a special food among the Hmong in northern Vietnam regardless of their religion but it cannot be properly made in the Central Highlands due to the hotter weather. Some Hmong converts in Yagad still try to make some *thịt gác bếp* for Lunar New Year or other occasions, but they are not able to keep it for long as their counterparts do in the North where the weather is much colder in the months before and after the Lunar New Year. In general, after converting to Protestantism, Hmong food and cooking style stay mainly unchanged. In cases, if there is any apparent difference, it may be more or less ‘local’ depending on the living locations of Yagaders’ home villages in northern Vietnam rather than due to their religious change.

*Music.* It is more challenging to realize ‘ethnic identity’ through the ways Hmong converts play music as music/art activities are not explicitly or usually performed. In fact, one of the most outstanding ethnic heritage of the Hmong is revealed through their music instrument system in which a key instrument ‘*khèn*’ (khene) is actually used to perform religious rituals, primarily for funerals. Thus, even though ‘*khèn*’ is also used in music activities (*hoạt động văn nghệ*) at community festivals, in Hmong Protestant eyes, it is more often than not associated with ‘*ghost worship*’ that does obsess them. While younger Hmong Protestants may not precisely remember or even have no idea at all about traditional funerals, their older people have not yet entirely forgotten. Pastor Haam X. believed that ‘*khèn*’ could be used in the Protestant community as a purely musical instrument without any religious prohibition; however, people’s memories of how a funeral was to them are still present. To many Hmong, the funeral is scary not only because of its mourning essence but also of financial burdens that they had to confront in order to do a ritual ceremony. Yaaj T. T. (a 55-year-old male follower)

additionally told me, it did not matter to play *khèn* or other traditional music instruments such as ‘*kèn lá*’ (leaf horn)/ *sáo* (flute), but young people are not interested in learning and old people no longer have the habit of using them; thus, they are no longer common in Yagad. Before I left, he performed *kèn lá* at my host family house as a special gift to me that obviously showed me his good skills even though he had not played it for a very long time.

However, some Hmong Protestants in Yagad also attempt to maintain their traditional music<sup>35</sup> in a Protestant context as long as it does not remind them of any negative feelings that they had to suffer in the past. To be specific, one of the common traditional music genres of the Hmong is *hais lus txiaj* (also known as *hais kwv txhiaj*), which is still performed in Yagad nowadays, particularly on special occasions such as Christmas. I did not entirely understand the lyric of *hais lus txiaj* pieces that some young Hmong converts performed, but I had been told that the lyric was similar to that of hymns, which mainly honors God. Before coming to Yagad, I sometimes listened to a Hmong Christian radio station called ‘*Hmong Kaaj Sab Christian Radio*,’ which often offered *hais lug txiaj* performances; thus, it caught my attention right after I heard Hmong Protestants presented it, which is definitely ‘*very Hmong*.’ Meanwhile, it seems that if Vietnamese outsiders talk about Hmong traditional music, they would possibly mention ‘*khèn*,’ ‘*đàn môi*,’ (lip lute) ‘*kèn lá*’ ... or ‘*funeral songs*’ instead of *hais lug txiaj*.

*Common Ethnic Personalities.* When it comes to common ethnic characteristics of Hmong people, it is quite tangible that changing their religion does not prevent Hmong converts from being ‘*not Hmong*’. In Vietnam, as an ethnic minority group, they have been well known for their unique traits of being honest and straightforward, having a high sense of community and unity as well as having great hospitality towards their guests, which are well preserved among Hmong Protestants.

It is undeniable that there might be individuals who own very distinctive or quirky personalities in any human group compared to the majority of other members. Thus, in this

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<sup>35</sup> As far as I study, pioneer Vietnamese scholars in Hmong studies do not provide comprehensive knowledge on Hmong music. For instance, while Vương Duy Quang rarely goes further on this topic, Trần mentions basic characteristics of Hmong folk music which includes *dân ca giao duyên*, *dân ca than thân*, *dân ca gắn liền với nghi lễ - phong tục gia đình* Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 131-9. Noticeably, a 1997 book titled ‘*Âm nhạc Dân tộc H'Mông*’ (Hmong Music) by Hồng Thao offers more specialized discussions. Hồng Thao particularly mentions various genres of Hmong music/ singing in particular sub-groups, which generally are *hát đối đáp*, *hát ngâm*, *hát kể*, *hát đồng dao*, *điệu than*, *mời ma*, *tiễn đưa hồn*, *Hu-câu*, *hát làm mối* Hồng Thao, *Âm Nhạc Dân Tộc H'Mông [Hmong Music]* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá Dân tộc, 1997), 45–96. Although those types of singing and their names, which are defined in Vietnamese by Thao do not entirely match ‘*hais lus txiaj*’, I guess it may be *hát kể* described in the book. In fact, my research participants are not sure how ‘*hais lus txiaj*’ can be translated to Vietnamese Kinh neither.

section, I discuss Hmong collective ethnic characteristics on the whole-ethnic group scale, which are observed by myself, supported by tangible evidence, and confirmed by other villagers of different ethnic groups who live nearby Hmong in a shared living location.

First, Hmong Protestants remain explicitly *honest and straightforward* in how they live and behave to others, including strangers. It is reported that since arriving in Yagad, Hmong Protestants have been seriously scammed at least four times by outsiders. Most of these outsiders are Vietnamese Kinh, who promised the Hmong to give the ‘disease killer’ tea, offer Hmong unbelievable high interests if they invested a certain small amount of money, and so on. In some cases, it even became a rumor spreading across the region, saying that if the Hmong did not collect several special herbs then mix them together somehow, they would be killed by the poison that someone would spray over the village. Pastor Haam X. said that there were many Hmong going back and forth across the region to seek such herbs<sup>36</sup>. When I first settled down in Yagad after several visits, I came to the village head and the village policeman’s house to register for my temporary stay, then was told that a Vietnamese Kinh woman was coming to Yagad with a reference letter from the commune office. However, that lady turned out to be a scammer. Therefore, since then, Yagad has become absolutely strict on checking visitors’ identities. In fact, the Hmong have been well-known for their ‘honest’ personality because they would easily trust what others tell them without doubting or raising complicated questions. However, once they lost their trust, it might not be possible for them to recover it.

Being Protestants, the Hmong show their honesty in various ways, such as actively confessing their sins even though they are aware that they might soon be excommunicated from the church and lost their honor. For example, Hmong women who had no choice and decided to do an abortion then came to meet the pastor and confessed about it instead of silently hiding their behavior. Similarly, some male Hmong who could not stop drinking alcohol are more likely to choose to leave the church even when still prefer to be a Protestant and consider that being a Protestant is a good thing. I did not see anyone who tried to lie to maintain their church membership. As mentioned previously, Vietnamese Kinh business people living in Yagad gave a lot of compliments to the Hmong while talking with me. They said that the Hmong always pay off their debt at grocery stores, which are different from Ede. As Ede is the largest indigenous group living in Yagad, it is normal that outsiders tend to make the comparison between the Hmong and the Ede. In other cases, Hmong are believed to be the men of their word<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Haam X., interview by author, 18 December 2018.

<sup>37</sup> See more at previous sections on how government officials, Vietnamese Kinh religious leaders, and the Hmong’s neighbors think about Hmong Protestants in Yagad.

From my experience as a Vietnamese Kinh, such honesty and simplicity are not extremely common in Vietnamese culture, where Confucius's thoughts are still dominantly pervaded.

Furthermore, except for intentionally avoiding unnecessary interactions with strangers<sup>38</sup>, Hmong Protestants hold *great hospitality to their guests*, which is actually an ethnic characteristic of the Hmong people regardless of their religion. In general, a stranger or an acquaintance who comes to visit a Hmong family with proper purposes or reliable behaviors, that Hmong family is more likely to offer him/her a meal. They may discreetly ask a family member to 'mố gà' (killing a chicken for food). At first times, I was surprised to see a finished meal ready for me before my conversation with a family member(s) was completed. Such treat, as I observed, is present in Yagad as well as other Hmong villages across the country. Normally, a Hmong family does not always have chicken for their daily meals, except if they have a guest(s). Their hospitality is also available to strangers who may only stop by their house once in the whole life. A morning in November 2018, while I was in the kitchen taking some notes and boiling water for my host family, I was asked to come out. I then met two Dutch cycling tourists and talked with them while my host mom was especially making two cups of *nước mía* (fresh sugarcane juice) for them, without asking them to pay for the drink. During the meal, they try to suddenly put more rice on your bowl if you are finishing eating.

However, outsiders may want to be aware that in many cases, Hmong Protestants may leave without saying anything if you are in a conversation with them, but you need to leave elsewhere for a few seconds right at the time they have to go. In a culture highly influenced by Confucianism as the Vietnamese society, it may make guests feel confused. Take me for example. When I was a kid, my father was seriously yelled at me because I closed the gate while our guest had not gone far enough. Plus, most of them are more likely not to say things in advance; they just act. For instance, if they want to do something for others, they more often than not silently do it instead of announcing it to others in advance. As far as I can observe, this happens to their guests as well as among family members. On my first day, I was in Yagad, I wondered where I could get a curtain to cover my bed, which shared the shared space with the living room and the bed of my host parents; my host father did not say anything. I then did not understand why he did not respond and attempted to find another solution. By around 6 p.m. on that day, when I went back to the bed to get some personal stuff as all my belongings were

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<sup>38</sup> As mentioned earlier, due to numerous vulnerable circumstances that the Hmong have confronted, they have become more careful in talking to strangers today. When they meet a stranger, the most common response is 'I do not know' (*tsis paub*) then leave.

placed around the bed, I was surprised to see the curtain my host father was hanging up. Such circumstances occurred to me numerous times when I was in the field that helped me understand Hmong better. In fact, such unfamiliar behaviors of the Hmong are not described in the literature; thus, I was not well prepared. I believe that except for showing how Hmong converts well maintain their ethnic characteristic of having great hospitality to their guests, these possibly hidden customs should be clarified to avoid misunderstandings that may arise if there are any cultural differences.

In addition, throughout history, the Hmong is also very famous for their *high sense of community and unity*<sup>39</sup>. Although no longer living together with their traditional brethren, Hmong Protestants in Yagad firmly maintain such ethnic characteristics. They are said to have the ability to ‘*build a house within one night*,’ which I was actually able to witness while staying in Yagad. Everything was well organized to remove a house frame for a Hmong family so that its house foundation (*móng nhà*) can be remodeled for better functions. While some people were in the kitchen and cooked meals for everyone who came to help, other people all together held the house and moved simultaneously, following sound signaling, which they all wordlessly understood. If I had not been in Yagad, I would not have had such a chance to witness that event on 12 November 2018, which I have never seen anywhere before. The whole house frame was extremely heavy that I could not precisely calculate, and there were up to fifty Hmong workings on it together in very well-organized order. This is only one typical example of how Hmong Protestants are united and support each other. In other cases, a wooden house of 15 or 20 square meters can be entirely finished within a couple of days, and the bigger house requires around 30 or 40 Hmong workings together. On days at the end of the lunar year, up to more than twenty Hmong come and help a family kill pigs for *Tét*. Another occasion is that up to forty and fifty Hmong work altogether in the upland fields, particularly in sowing, planting, and harvest seasons. Their mutual support and solidarity, in fact, appear as familiar images in Yagad.

Plus, almost all Hmong Protestants prefer to stay in their village rather than leaving for another place. Apart from temporary study and work in urban areas that a few Hmong are involved in, as I discussed earlier, most Hmong youth in Yagad choose to stay in their village, do farming, and other work as their parents do. Most of them are not willing to exchange their freedom, comfortable and pleasant life in the village with their people for working at government offices where they might need to ‘please’ their bosses or act in a way they do not

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<sup>39</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 160-1.

like<sup>40</sup>. As mentioned previously, this group of people is well known for their independence and they “allergic to all kind of authority”<sup>41</sup>. One may easily realize that Hmong people, either traditional or converted, rarely live in a village where they are not the majority of the population like several Vietnamese Kinh families living in Yagad. This ethnic minority group has been, in fact, widely recognized for living concentrated all together like same-ethnic homogeneous community rather than being scattered, which apparently shows their high sense of community.

From my experience, I would say that Hmong Protestants have had a relatively stable life in Yagad, which they do enjoy rather than seeking another better place or desiring for *modernity*, as some scholars conclude. While being in the village, I got more often than not questions on how to study English rather than how to go abroad, how life overseas looks like, or mentioned their diaspora overseas. I did not see their great intentions to resettle in a more prosperous country or desire to own luxury items. Neither do I see them enormously admiring nor extremely scared of those who hold high political positions or own colossal fortune. I believe the Hmong do not feel inferior to other people regardless of who those people may be. They are brave to speak their mind if they find something not suitable for them and their people. For instance, as previously mentioned, ordinary Hmong farmers came directly and confidently to Hanoi’s central authority to ask for migration permission in the early 1990s. They were also willing to confront the government officials if they were blamed for destroying the local roads, which had been built for a few years but were damaged by logging trucks of Vietnamese Kinh traders. In fact, the Hmong are also known for challenging government officials by their honest and wise sayings. For example, when government cadres came to visit Hmong people and politely admitted that due to the bumpy roads from lowland to upland, they could not bring more salt and *dầu hoả*<sup>42</sup> to people. The Hmong then responded, ‘why our trees in the forest are so big and why our houses and pigs are so heavy but *cán bộ* (the way Hmong people call government cadres) delivered to the lowland without complaining that it is difficult?’<sup>43</sup>. Such stories that ordinary people challenged the government officials are not rare, but sometimes are considered to be ‘*liều lĩnh*’ (reckless), ‘*sẵn sàng chống phá chính quyền*’ (potentially treasonous), or ‘*manh động*’ (impulsive)<sup>44</sup> by some scholars rather than ‘being confident in themselves.’ To me, as most of them do not admire or feel afraid of human powers, they might not be interested in pursuing modernity or social status at all costs.

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<sup>40</sup> A more detailed explanation on this matter would be provided in the following section.

<sup>41</sup> Mottin 1980, 60.

<sup>42</sup> A kind of paraffin used for lighting purpose.

<sup>43</sup> In this article, the Hmong are also described to be ‘smart, creative and self-reliant’, Chi Hùng 2020.

<sup>44</sup> For instance, Quang Hưng Nguyễn 2020b, 434.



In 2011, only a family in Yagad trusted the ‘promising’ land in *Muròng Nhé* then blindly moved northward, which unexpectedly got them involved in the political revolt. After talking to them as well as learning from Yagaders, I found out that Vaaj A. T.’s family had a lack of farming land that was the principal motivation for them to leave Yagad. Since returning from *Muròng Nhé* right after two weeks of settling down in that northern area, the A. T. family has been considered the ‘poor household’ for years. He is a good person in the eyes of his neighbors as well as in mine. Except for trusting his son-in-law, who lived in B.6 (M’Dráak district of Đắk Lắk province) and purely desiring for a better life, I believe A. T. and his family members did not have any political motivations nor insatiable greed for money.

The case of A. T.’s family and attitudes towards wealth and political power of most Hmong Protestants in Yagad convince me that they do not obsessively care about or pursue modernity or globalization. At this point, I entirely agree with some pioneer Vietnamese who propose that the Hmong simply desire *a good life* with enough food and a secured place to live in instead of being ambitious to obtain political power or wealth overseas<sup>45</sup>. Their history also proves that they only politically revolt or begin mass protests when they have no choice or being actually cornered.

To conclude, by examining how key Hmong ethnic identity markers and characteristics can be seen through Hmong Protestants’ thoughts and behaviors above, it is obvious that their religious conversion to Protestantism does not always prevent them from preserving their ethnic identity. Instead, in many cases, being Protestants is actually a catalyst for enhancing or even becomes an efficient way to strengthen their ethnic identity markers such as clothes and language. Thus, the conclusion that ‘*converting to Protestantism destroys Hmong ethnic identity*’ is apparently problematic.

### **10.3 Remaining Changes and Concerns**

While sections 9.5.1 and 9.5.2 provide detailed discussions on new values established among the Hmong due to their religious conversion and how their ethnic identity has been preserved and enhanced in the Protestant context; this part defines significant remaining changes and concerns in the Hmong Protestant community in Yagad, which are neither consequences of ethnic nor religious factors, to more objectively and holistically comprehend the religious life of Hmong Protestants. In other words, this section supports the idea that not all changes and emerging concerns in a Hmong convert community in the Central Highlands are caused by their

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<sup>45</sup> For example, Hoà Văn Cư and Nam Hoàng 1994, 16., Duy Quang Vương 2005c, 30.



conversion to western religion, as it is concluded elsewhere in the scholarship. Some changes, in fact, are also found in traditional Hmong groups.

*Attending higher education and joining a wage-based economy have not yet become common and/or preferable.* Most Hmong Protestants in Yagad either leave school while they finish high school or earlier. When I was in Yagad, I was surprised to get a question from a 12-year-old Hmong girl asking me: ‘*When do you leave school?*’ (*Khi nào chị nghỉ học?*). Instead of asking that ‘*Which grade are you in?*’, Hmong children and youth seem to consider ‘*leaving school*’ as a must-do in their life. As a matter of fact, most Hmong Protestant children in Yagad and Lakad do not like to go to school even though they get financial support from the government, such as tuitions and textbooks, not only because they have a high sense of community. Several Hmong adults told me that *Tây Nguyên* has more jobs (labor jobs) than in their home village in the North; thus, children neither study hard nor prefer to go to colleges as their counterparts in the North. Besides, some youths are now also distracted by digital games that they even skip their lectures to go to an internet shop and play games there. More importantly, there are rare chances for the Hmong who finish college to have a stable job at government offices and public settings (*vào biên chế*) such as public schools, local public hospitals, and so on. Even if there is an opening position, they might need to exchange a large amount of money for getting the job, which is actually corruption<sup>46</sup>. These external factors either discourage or prevent the Hmong from leaving their village for higher education or government positions in urban areas.

*A variety of traditional games and festivals are no longer present.* When I was in several Hmong villages in northern Vietnam where traditional Hmong are dominant, I found out that many Hmong traditional games and festivals are also no longer played and organized as they are in Yagad. This fact proves that the religious change of a part of the Hmong people is not the reason for such loss when it comes to Hmong ethnic identity, as some scholars conclude<sup>47</sup>. It is actually documented that in recent years the Vietnamese government has applied its program on organizing traditional festivals for the Hmong across the country such as *nào xồng* (*nquam toj*), *gầu tào* (*tsa hauv toj*) festivals and so on after a long time prohibiting them from holding those festivals<sup>48</sup>. However, government-sponsored Hmong festivals fail to attract their

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<sup>46</sup> For instance, the Lakad I village head – Haam X. T. interviewed on 23 October 2018 – said that there was a case in the village that a male Hmong spent around 180,000,000 VND (~ 6,700 euros) to be offered a permanent Security position (*nhân viên bảo vệ*) at a local school. At a group discussion in Yagad on 31 October 2018, a village secretary (*bí thư thôn*) also told me that it would take around 2 – 300,000,000 VND (~ 7,500 to 11,300 euros) to get a position such as full-time kindergarten teacher.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Thị Lan Hoàng 2018, 57.

<sup>48</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 174.

intended subjects – the Hmong (*chủ thể*)<sup>49</sup> who are widely known for their strong resistance to any external intervention and imposition. Some festivals organized by the government are said to be perverted (*biến thái*) compared to their traditional ones. For example, while the *Tết pole* (*cây nêu*, which is also known as *lunar New Year pole*, *New Year's tree*, and *Tết tree*) is traditionally used for *Gầu tào* festival, it is today replaced by a red flag with yellow stars (*cờ đỏ sao vàng* which is the national flag of Vietnam)<sup>50</sup>. In another case, it is believed that the Hmong music is used to support the political ideologies that create disappointment and sorrow among the Hmong, particularly the elderly people<sup>51</sup>. In terms of traditional games, there are only several games such as *đá cầu* (shuttlecock), *chơi quay cù/đánh cù/đánh sảng/ tu lu* (tops spinning), which are common today in Yagad as well as in the northern home village of numerous Yagaders in Hà Giang province. Meanwhile, one of the most exceptional traditional game of the Hmong - *ném pao* (*pov phaus/ pó po/ ném còn*) – is rarely seen to be played by Hmong in Yagad and their home villages in the North except for those which are organized by the government<sup>52</sup>.

*Prefer to live in a convenient neighborhood rather than in the mountains.* As mentioned, there are several contradictory assumptions in the literature on ‘why do the Hmong live in the mountains?’. Some say they chose/ preferred to; some say they ‘have to’ to settle uplands as there were other ethnic groups who lived in lower regions by the time they migrated to Vietnam in the 19th century. Nonetheless, it should be highlighted that the Hmong, particularly the youths, prefer to live in convenient neighborhoods rather than in the mountains nowadays.

Many Hmong from northern Vietnam, both converts and non-converts, were impressed by how easy it was to travel around in Yagad and some other Central Highlands villages compared to in their home villages during their first visits<sup>53</sup>. In many northern upland areas, traveling by motorbike or car has not become common yet. One of the typical Vietnamese Hmong images is that after a *chợ phiên* (fair), Hmong wives walk along and take care of their drunk husbands on the horse’s back while returning to their homes. More Hmong can afford to buy a motorbike nowadays, yet their mountainous bumpy roads may not allow them to use it for everyday life. Before having cell phones, a Hmong family used to use a gun to announce if a family member

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<sup>49</sup> Thị Mai Phương Võ 2017, 230. In Yagad, Hmong also said that only a few Hmong participated in activities that the government organized in the present time.

<sup>50</sup> Quang Hưng Nguyễn 2020a, 282-3.

<sup>51</sup> Lonán Ó Brian, “Hmong Music in Northern Vietnam: Identity, Tradition and Modernity” (Electronic Thesis, South Yorkshire, The University of Sheffield, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> While no one played *ném pao* in Yagad during the New Year holiday 2019, the Pák commune president sent me a video showing that the commune government did organize that game for Lakaders.

<sup>53</sup> For instances, cases of M. who is a Hmong policeman’s wife residing in Pák, of Lis C. in Lakad, of Yaaj L. and Yaaj D. in Yagad, and of K., N, and L. who still live in Hoàng Su Phì district, Hà Giang province.

died so that their people on mountains could hear the signal and come. They could even talk to their neighbors among hills by ‘shouting out loud,’ but it took them hours or even a day to actually visit their neighbors in person by passing over hills and valleys. In some areas today, the Hmong children still have to travel on their feet, climb over several mountains, and spend the whole day long to get to their school, where they would stay for the whole week to study without their families<sup>54</sup>. However, in Yagad in particular and some other Hmong villages I have visited in the Central Highlands, most Hmong households own at least one motorbike. Furthermore, such open attitude shows that the present Hmong generation, regardless of their religious preference, is ready for being/ want to be more engaged in the wider society or at least actively take opportunities out there rather than staying isolated in the mountains as their ancestors. Nevertheless, ‘prefer to live in a convenient or even flat neighborhood’ does not mean the Hmong prefer to live together with people of other ethnic groups. As previously mentioned, they have been – and tend to – lived concentrated altogether in villages which they are dominant.

*Several lost and changing customs.* In terms of the statement accusing that ‘the Hmong’s conversion to Protestantism destroys Hmong traditional customs and identity,’ there are several recorded facts, which show that those traditional customs and identity are already somewhat lost in traditional villages instead of among the converts. In traditional Hmong regions of Lào Cai province, there are only a few Hmong who are able to play *khèn* well (khene). In 1996, it was recorded that the number of Hmong who could use traditional musical instruments was lower than those who could not. The youths do not know how to sing Hmong folk songs neither. Regarding traditional Hmong characteristics, which are closely associated with their traditional religion, it is obvious that the Vietnamese government has, intentionally or unintentionally, destroyed Hmong cultural heritages by prohibiting traditional rituals and even arresting innocent shamans who are extremely knowledgeable about their ethnic customs, traditions and folk arts, particularly in the years of 1970s and 1980s<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> I met some Hmong children walking on their bare feet to their elementary school nearby commune center on a Sunday in Summer 2009 when we walked to the remotest villages to deliver necessary goods and medicines in Sơn La province. Nowadays, such tough journeys to school of Hmong children in northern Vietnam are still widely documented on government-related sites. For example, see cases in Hà Giang and Yên Bái provinces at Việt Hà, “Cô Giáo Người Mông Giàng Thị Chá Cõng Con Nhỏ, Vượt Núi Đá Đền Với Trẻ Mầm Non [The Hmong Teacher Giàng Thị Chá Carried Her Baby, Crossed the Rocky Mountains to Be with Her Kindergarten Students],” *Báo Ảnh Dân Tộc và Miền Núi*, January 23, 2020, Accessed December 19, 2020, <https://dantocmiennui.vn/co-giao-nguoi-mong-giang-thi-cha-cong-con-nho-vuot-nui-da-den-voi-tre-mam-non/283211.html>, Hà Thanh - Nam Trần, “Đường Đến Trường ‘Nơi Tận Cùng’ Mù Cang Chải [The Road to School at ‘the End’ of Mù Cang Chải],” *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, October 26, 2020, Accessed December 19, 2020, <https://tuoitre.vn/duong-den-truong-noi-tan-cung-mu-cang-chai-20200926005001555.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Hữu Sơn Trần 1996, 176-8.

It is also documented that Hmong traditional *clothes* and *houses* nowadays are partially changed not only among Hmong Protestants but also traditional Hmong. While a majority of Hmong women still wear traditional dress in their everyday life that may be made from *lanh* clothes or ready-made cheaper ones in the market, male Hmong are more likely to wear *quần âu* (casual pants), *áo sơ mi* (shirt), or *áo phông* (T-shirt). Those male pieces are said to be similar to the Vietnamese Kinh style<sup>56</sup>, but they actually are western clothing styles introduced into Vietnam in recent centuries, which is internationally common. Therefore, concluding that traditional clothes of a minority group – the Hmong – are replaced by those of the majority group in a country – the Vietnamese Kinh – may cause a careless assumption on cultural assimilation.

Furthermore, while traditional Hmong houses may vary in structure and building materials depending on which location they reside in Vietnam, several changing Hmong house traits can be found in both traditional and convert Hmong communities<sup>57</sup>. For example, the *trình tường* Hmong house style is widely famous among the Hmong people in upland regions such as Đồng Văn, Hà Giang province. This type of house is manually built by soils (*đất*) and surrounded by stone fences. Remarkably, the stone fences need no glue or nails to be built except for only one material – rocks. However, such type of traditional house is said to be ‘fading’ (*mai một dần*) in the present day. Instead, as I visited Hmong houses in Yagad of the Central Highlands and Hoàng Su Phì, Hà Giang of northern Vietnam, I found that many Hmong people in both regions choose building materials, which were not available in their traditional society in the past, to build their houses such as *son* (paint), *gạch lát nền/ gạch hoa* (floor tile), *mái tôn* (tole roof) and so on. Thus, if someone says that the Hmong people have failed to well preserve their traditional house, such failure might not be the result only of the conversion to Protestantism among them, even though it is vital to admit that a traditional Hmong house is essentially built following spiritual principles which are no longer present in Hmong Protestant houses.

When it comes to *the way of communicating*, digital devices and virtual communication channels such as Facebook, Zalo<sup>58</sup>, or so have become much more common and considerably affected Hmong Protestants for the better or worse. As mentioned earlier, the Hmong in Yagad are able to earn money from various sources, but that does not mean all of them are no longer ‘the poor’ and can afford to buy a smartphone or so. Besides, those who have at least one device

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<sup>56</sup> Quỳnh Trâm Nguyễn 2016, 63.

<sup>57</sup> I do not discuss fundamental differences between traditional houses and Hmong Protestants’ houses in this part; only similar changes that occurred in both communities are mentioned.

<sup>58</sup> A Vietnamese chatting platform.

can to know and/or keep in touch with their relatives and people across the country or even beyond via such channels. Although there is no frequent contact between Hmong Yagaders with their diaspora overseas, as previously mentioned, their network is much larger than their previous generations. Though economic opportunities might not be tangible or common among the Hmong, as in Vietnamese Kinh society, where people can benefit a lot from their network, the marriage between Hmong of various regions is becoming common. Plus, their relationships are probably stronger thanks to such virtual channels, particularly for those who have to live far away from their parents because of living with family-in-law. It is quite apparent that social media platforms, for instance, Facebook, have not yet become one of the most distracting things for the Hmong like many people worldwide. However, if the Hmong, especially children and the youths, use them so often or not wisely enough, it might lead to harmful consequences. Some cases that Hmong facebookers from China or Thailand called for money or convinced local Hmong in the Central Highlands to go abroad are already reported as scams<sup>59</sup>.

*Some traditional and religious values are challenged.* Finally, it is worth highlighting that Hmong Protestants in Yagad are confronting several concerns which, however, are not caused by their ethnicity and religion. Specifically, as previously mentioned, many Hmong youths in their teenagers prefer to play video games at internet shops rather than studying and helping their parents with farming work. Although it has not yet become common, some complain that Hmong teenagers start to lie in some cases to get out of their parents' control. Some male Hmong youths' strange appearance worries their older people, such as dying their hair with a bright color or piercing their ear(s). Although these trends are considered absolutely normal elsewhere, for the Hmong or even for many Vietnamese Kinh, they might be 'out of values' that make their owners look like gangsters. The good thing is, as I can observe, only a few Hmong youths have such signs except for those of different ethnic groups who visited the village.

Furthermore, religious leaders, as well as elderly people, often share their worries with me that more and more young adults and married men are abandoning church these days. Although the church participation rate among Hmong Protestants in Yagad is relatively high, as mentioned before, the tendency of 'leaving church' is always a concern for institutional religions worldwide rather than reflecting severe problem(s) at the local church. Plus, in some cases, a number of Hmong have still been confused among various religious denominations/groups or even find it hard to recognize a heresy. 'Heresy' is an abstract term that requires a

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Hawj L. on 05 January, 2018 and conversations with Hmong youths in Yagad.

more specific and completed definition, but I do not tend to discuss it in academic meanings. In the Vietnamese context, ‘heresy’ is more often than not considered a ‘bad group’ that aims to cheat people by their words and fanciful promises mainly related to spirituality. A heresy is definitely not officially registered by the Vietnamese government. It is also not allowed to be practiced, either publicly or privately. Religious groups that have not yet qualified to be locally registered; however, if their denominations are officially recognized by the government, they can still practice at their own house church without any intervention<sup>60</sup>. Returning to the Hmong’s case, A would-be Hmong pastor shared with me that one of his most prioritized concerns is how to help his followers to realize which religious group is good<sup>61</sup>. It is worth noticing that, most recently, a heresy - a Christianity look-alike - became a phenomenon in Vietnam in 2018 that has worried most Christian leaders in the country<sup>62</sup> Hmong Protestant leaders.

In short, one may conclude that not all changes and concerns among Hmong Protestants are the consequences of their conversion to Protestantism. Some of those changes have, in fact, also occurred in traditional Hmong communities or elsewhere. Thus, when it comes to the impact, either positive or negative, of the Hmong’s conversion to Protestantism on their lives, one should consider not only religious and ethnic but also external factors.

## Conclusion

Overall, ‘*being Protestant*’ has a profound impact on the Hmong people, which has led to establishment of new values, most of which are widely acknowledged as positive by outsiders, including the Vietnamese government and scholars, such as drinking no alcohol and conducting inexpensive rituals. Furthermore, Hmong identity markers at some aspects in Protestant context even function better to preserve Hmong identity, yet do not make Hmong converts’ half-

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<sup>60</sup> This conclusion only refers to two unregistered Hmong Baptist groups in Yagad whose denomination is officially recognized. In other cases, even if a denomination is not recognized, their followers may still be able to practice at their private place.

<sup>61</sup> Xyooj S. L., interview by author, 28 January 2019.

<sup>62</sup> The Vietnamese government, Protestant registered denominations as well as both mainstream media and social media have criticized the heresy called ‘*Giáo phái Đức Chúa Trời Mẹ*’ or ‘*Hội thánh Đức Chúa Trời Mẹ*’ which, for example according to the *Văn bản số 79* (Document No. 79) sent to *Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ* (Government Committee for Religious Affairs) by ECV-N, confuses people as its name sounds similar to other Protestant recognized groups; see Minh Đức, “Đạo Tin Lành Kịch Liệt Phản Đối ‘Hội Thánh Đức Chúa Trời Mẹ’ [Protestantism Vehemently Opposes ‘Hội Thánh Đức Chúa Trời Mẹ’],” *Tiền Phong - Cơ Quan Trung Ương Của Đoàn TNCS Hồ Chí Minh*, May 3, 2018, Accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.tienphong.vn/xa-hoi/dao-tin-lanh-kich-liet-phan-doi-hoi-thanh-duc-chua-troi-me-1268820.tpo>., Hải Yến, “Lật Tẩy Tà Đạo Hội Thánh Của Đức Chúa Trời Mẹ Tại Quảng Ninh [Unmasking the Heresy Called Hội Thánh Đức Chúa Trời Mẹ in Quang Ninh],” *Báo Công an Nhân Dân*, July 22, 2018, Accessed December 17, 2020, <http://cand.com.vn/doi-song/Lat-tay-ta-dao-Hoi-thanh-cua-Duc-Chua-troi-me-tai-Quang-Ninh-502505/>. I do not claim that it is a heresy or not as I do not have enough evidence, but it is a fact that should be acknowledged and paid particular attention.



believers' as their previous generations or counterparts elsewhere. In other words, Hmong identity transformed under the impact of 'being Protestant,' yet essential ethnic identity markers are fundamentally well-maintained. Meanwhile, several customs and rituals are no longer practiced among the converts; but not because they are against traditional Hmong, they only choose better ways for them. Plus, those customs and rituals, in fact, are found to be abandoned even among the Hmong who remain their traditional religion.

Consequently, one could say that there is no win-lose relationship in the case of Hmong conversion to Protestantism in Vietnam regarding their religious and ethnic identities as being concluded somewhere in the literature and government reports. Conversely, the Vietnamese government has partially made some Hmong customs disappear on a large scale by prohibiting their traditional festivals and/or jailing their traditional shamans from the 1960s to 1990s, whose consequences are now present in both Hmong traditional and convert communities. On the other hand, if someone chooses to view the Hmong ethnic group as a whole, regardless of their religion, they may conclude that converting to Protestantism creates separation between Hmong. It may be accurate; however, there are two points we need to consider. First, the relationship between the two groups, as examined previously, is much improved. Also, religion is a choice. Thus, people may want to learn how to respect other decisions rather than forcing them to follow a fixed set of standards. Suppose the conversion among some Hmong to another religion makes some other traditional Hmong feel not good or not right. In that case, it is more about personal emotions and perspective rather than the essence of conversion. Second, when we see how ethnic identity works for a group of people, we may see how they distinguish themselves from other ethnic people rather than only evaluating how they maintain ethnic identity compared to what their ancestors had been. It may be problematic if the ethnic identity of traditional Hmong becomes the standard for Hmong converts to meet to indeed '*be Hmong*' ./.



## Conclusion

Since taking over the country, it is a fact that the Vietnamese government has been heavily criticized for their policies and moves in religion and ethnic minorities-related matters. ‘Religious freedom’ is believed to be significantly restricted and ‘the life and voices of marginalized minorities’ are said to be largely taken for granted. By exploring a specific case that covers both given concerns, this research provides insights into how an ethnic minority group – the Hmong – has been actively living out their religious faith since the very first mass conversion despite countless, unseen, and untold hardships on multiple aspects of their lives. The research built on ethnographic data gathered mainly throughout intensive fieldwork in a focal village of the Central Highlands called Yagad as well on field trips to several other villages of Vietnam, appreciating the thoughts and voices of more than 100 participants of various backgrounds.

First arriving in Vietnam from motherland China in the late 1800s, the Hmong had been reported to live concentrated in the highest mountainous northern regions only, which relatively separated them from the lowland population. After 1960, this living pattern has been partly broken due to the Migration Policies of the Vietnamese government. Since 1990, the first Hmong migrations to southern Vietnam have been documented, which eventually leads to a historical demographic change of this ethnic minority group in the country. Those mass southward migration waves, as my research reveals, are religion-driven rather than economic-driven as they have been interpreted. Almost all Hmong immigrants in the Central Highlands are statistically proven to be ‘Protestants.’

In terms of the Hmong conversion to Protestantism which began in the late 1980s, collected narratives show that instead of being taken advantage of by any outside actors, Vietnamese Hmong who choose to convert have been actively seeking ways to learn about their new faith and strengthen it. After accidentally reaching FEBC in around 1986, they tried to practice following what pastor Vam Txoov Lis had told them on the radio. The Hmong, at first, were confused as they only could passively listen to the radio rather than being directly guided. That fact led a part of them mistakenly following Catholicism and/or being convinced by ‘fake’ missionaries. In the early 1990s, after some Hmong pioneers wrote letters to pastor Lis and got his reply that guided them to seek a Protestant church in Hanoi, Hmong in various villages came to EVC-N office group by group. Their enthusiastic attitude and determination were indeed the

key factors that helped them be officially recognized as Hmong Protestants in Vietnam nowadays.

Though their conversion has been heavily prevented, oppressed, and even insulted by not only the political rulers but also their families and people, Hmong Protestants did numerous ‘trial-and-errors’ and found the solution. They were determined to seek new places to resettle down and build up a new life. After getting initial information on the Central Highlands region from many sources, such as via national channels on radio and former Hmong soldiers who had stayed in that region for their army mission during the Vietnam War, many male Hmong of various northern villages, mostly household heads, started to travel to different parts of the Central Highlands to probe and choose the neighborhood that they would move their whole family to.

The Hmong’s processes of seeking new land and settling down were not easy. They got fatal diseases in remote places, lacked food, or were rejected by the local government. This study shows that Hmong migrants did attempt to ask for government permission at various levels for their southward migration instead of ‘running away from the government’ as being assumed in the literature. They came to Hanoi to ask for support from the highest political officials after being rejected by their local governments. Also, after arriving in the Central Highlands in around 1995, Hmong migrants tried to contact the local leaders to ask for settlement permission. They eventually got legal approval to stay in the new neighborhood afterwards. While some scholars blame those Hmong immigrants for making remote forests of the Central Highlands disappear, several local reports I could access show a fact that forests had been destroyed for commercial purposes before the time Hmong people actually came. Besides, ‘unspoken permissions’ that allow timber business people to exploit the forests might be the crucial reason why illegal wood gathering activities have still been present in Hmong residences today. Thus, it is evident that the Hmong might not be the only and significant factor making a considerable deforestation in the region.

In the new land, Hmong immigrants at first got little support from their local neighbors. However, after a couple of decades, they have been successfully built a strong community on their own, becoming politically and economically independent. Plus, they become trusted, friendly neighbors and customers to people of other ethnic groups. Thanks to flexible and wise leadership, well-awareness of being newcomers, and positive attitudes, Hmong Protestants in the focal village have successfully adapted into the alien society yet are able to maintain their relative autonomy and freedom. They still keep living concentrated as their previous

generations have been doing. They run a village where all of the leaders are their people – native Hmong, in which the indigenous language becomes an effective barrier to protect them from outsiders to a certain extent. It is also a fact that Hmong youth today starts to prefer living in more convenient neighborhoods instead of staying in the highest mountainous layers of Vietnam as their ancestors used to.

When it comes to their religious life, as almost all Hmong immigrants were Protestants, they established various small groups to practice their faith right after settling down in 1995. Two years later, thanks to information from their former church ECV-N, they tried to contact ECV-S leaders who then enormously supported them in ministry services and organization. Nevertheless, both their conversion to Protestantism and ECV-S were not legally recognized at that time. Thus, their religious activities had to be performed in secret. Thanks to reformed religious policies of the Vietnamese government, the support from international activists, and particularly Hmong continuous hard work, the Yagad Hmong CMA group was recognized in 2007. However, in the years later, Hmong converts had still been forced by the government to remove extended parts that they made to help followers having enough space to sit at the church. Until 2012, Yagad church was finally allowed to build a new house church even though its capacity has not been sufficient for all adherents since the beginning. Such ‘lacking seats for followers to attend church’ phenomenon is common at all Hmong house churches I visited across Vietnam.

After the Yagad Hmong church became a member of ECV-S, several Hmong have been supported to attend theological training in Buôn Mê Thuột city of Đắk Lắk province and Hồ Chí Minh city. Some become pastors, either ordained or appointed, some are missionaries, and some continue to study their religion on short-term courses. The local church has also been built and enhanced, which is relatively stable and well-organized today. Noticeably, although following the essential guidance of ECV-S, the Hmong church is fundamentally independent not only in finance but also in the ways they live out their Christian faith. Unlike other house churches, there are numerous daily praying groups located across the region that make it available for every adherent to attend religious activities regularly. Also, the church and group leaders are dedicated, knowledgeable, and experienced who are said to be tremendously supportive to people. Wednesday morning, Sunday morning, and afternoon gatherings are offered weekly to create the most accessible religious environment for everyone. In turn, the church participation of the Hmong, including attending formal services and other religious activities, is relatively high, making the church always full of people both inside and outside.

Like other Christians, Hmong Protestants also celebrate important religious events such as Christmas and Easter. However, these people seem to prefer the Lunar New Year – the traditional biggest Vietnamese festival in year-round. This preference does not imply any political or religious incentives, but it is about ‘the extended time off’ that allows people to have more breaks with their beloved ones. Meanwhile, Christmas is the most critical Christian event. It takes Hmong converts around one month to prepare for various church activities for this occasion. The women are also in higher demand to tailor by themselves, buy or order from a professional tailor a new traditional Hmong dress set during this season, and even higher before the Lunar New Year holiday. Nevertheless, they do not especially decorate their houses and neighborhood for religious occasions as most western Christians do. Also, no ‘red envelope’ custom is performed among those Vietnamese Hmong, which is a common practice in their host culture.

Life-circle events, in particular, show a significant change in Hmong Protestants’ spiritual practices compared to those among traditional Hmong. While other Hmong Protestants elsewhere in Southeast Asia are believed to be ‘half believers’ who do not abandon their traditional religion entirely, no shamanic rituals performed and no fresh animal’s blood or alcoholic drinks present in any Protestant ceremonies in Yagad, such as weddings and funerals. Also, different from some of their same-ethnic Catholics, those Protestants do not practice any taboos defined in traditional religion. The Hmong converts prefer to choose scientific healthcare, herb-based cure combined with healing prayer for their sickness instead of doing ‘soul calling’ and other traditional rituals. However, they do not practice any retreat and/or meditation sessions as many western Christians do.

My research furthermore shows that religious leaders do not help their people in doing business (*làm kinh tế*) as it is described to be an ‘economic incentive’ for those who convert in the literature. The relationship between Hmong religious leaders and ordinary adherents are fair and equal, which make spiritual support and mutual understanding most accessible and possible in the community. Meanwhile, Yagad church officers even often lack time to do farming and make a living like other villagers. They get profound support from their spouses instead of having external financial help as some outsiders may doubt. It is a fact that apart from denominational contact within ECV-S, no overseas political and religious involvement is reported among Hmong Yagaders.

Regarding religious belief, among various internal and external factors, the most influential one that fundamentally shapes ordinary Hmong Protestants’ belief on a regular basis is their

religious leaders, disregarding theology certificates and degrees. Living in a closed community, being not avid readers and not frequently challenged by other religions and theories, Hmong converts primarily rely on their leaders to learn about their faith. Most of ordinary Hmong followers believe that their leaders' prayers are more efficient due to their better understanding of God's words and proper ways of praying, not because of any supernatural power that religious leaders may own. Some religious leaders also propose that a title or a position does not make someone's prayer works better, it is all about the faith that a believer holds. When it comes to 'collective prayer,' both leaders and followers agree that it is more effective than an individual one. Meanwhile, ordinary followers also vary in expressing their faith-based concerns. For instance, while diligent Bible-learners raise theological questions more frequently; illiterate followers, mainly elderly people, make more prayer requests yet being highly devout.

After converting to Protestantism, the essential change reconstructing Hmong's worldview most is 'their belief in God and Bible-based truths.' That belief does transform the perception of Ghost/ Spirits, which have been haunting traditional Hmong for millenniums. Hmong converts do not think that their dead ancestors are ghosts. They only suppose 'ghosts' are 'evil forces,' not the dead's souls, which do exist in the living world and are able to make humans stray away from God (*ròi xa Chúa*) by interfering with their faith. The names of 'Life-After' worlds slightly vary by individuals, yet most of them insist that there are two contradictory places where 'good' God followers and 'bad' people would be sent to after death. While most Hmong Protestants think 'God is just' so that their dead ancestors in the past would be able to go to Heaven in some ways, some people think that since their ancestors did not know about and did not follow God so they could not be sent to Heaven. Nevertheless, they all believe that God will return, but we humans cannot be certain about the time. Accordingly, Hmong converts interpret misfortune and sickness basing on those truths, saying that 'evil forces create bad things,' and 'good things are what God responds to human prayers.' However, many Hmong also believe that God challenges them by making their lives hard in several ways, such as sending undesirable responses. None of the Hmong Protestants blames God for their losses. Most of them think that even human people die unexplainably, it is God's will, and we humans can eventually be with God, which is not scary.

Being known for simplicity in thinking and way of life, Hmong who converted also appear to be unique in the ways they communicate with God. They more often than not 'feel' God in visible and perceivable experiences rather than abstract theological concepts and theories.

God's revelations often occur to them through various ways such as 'sudden thought,' 'natural phenomena,' 'healing human relationships,' 'healing efficiency,' 'fortunes,' or even through 'undesired responses.' However, revelations are more likely to happen to those who believe in that possibility. Meanwhile, one's religious faith can be considerably shaped/ reshaped and strengthened thanks to 'social interactions,' inside and outside the community, which functions even for those who are already baptized but struggle themselves. Among internal interactions, the crucial role of Hmong 'innovators' in converting their people to Protestantism is once again confirmed as that of their ancestors did the 1950s in Laos; even though such Vietnamese Hmong 'innovators' can be ordinary people rather than those who held a unique position like being a shaman or a politician as their Laos counterparts.

Remarkably, while some scholars insist that converting to a western—rooted religion makes the Hmong lose their ethnic identity and traditional culture, which has become evidence for Vietnamese communist leaders to hinder their conversion, this study reveals a contradictory reality. As Hmong Protestants have been immersed in Protestant teachings, numerous new values are established among them. Those values are mainly related to 'gender roles and norms,' 'personality,' 'custom and entertainment activities,' and 'the holy Sunday,' as examined, proved to positively impact people's lives, which the government and academic scholars widely acknowledge. Besides, it is evident that the critical Hmong ethnic identity markers, especially 'clothes,' and 'language,' are even better preserved in the Protestant context. Plus, some traditional aspects and characteristics are investigated to be still present among the converts, such as those related to 'the patriarchy,' 'food and music,' and several 'common ethnic personalities.' Meanwhile, it should be highlighted that several remaining changes and concerns exist in the contemporary Hmong Protestant community are not consequences of 'religious change.' To be specific, those changes and problems are 'attending higher education and joining a wage-based economy have not yet become common and/or preferable,' 'a variety of traditional games and festivals are no longer present,' 'preferring to live in a convenient neighborhood rather than in the mountains,' 'the way of communicating,' 'some traditional and religious values are challenged,' and 'several customs are changed or lost.'

Overall, after more than twenty years living in the Central Highlands, Yagad Hmong have not only successfully established and strengthened their community but also lived in harmony with their co-residents of various ethnic backgrounds. Their tolerance in 'religious choice' is profoundly proven to be present within their own families as well as in the broader community.

There is no pressure on even newcomers who remain unconverted or on the Hmong who decide to switch to another religious group. ‘Switching between denominations’ among Hmong Protestants is evidenced to happen in a voluntary and respected process, not as ‘scrambling for followers’ as it is concluded elsewhere. Various Hmong Protestant denominations do co-exist in a healthy environment which not only provides more options for followers to choose their most appropriate group but also offers alternatives in specific cases when people have limited choices.

In terms of ‘religious freedom’ as a human right, the local government is reported not to intervene in any religious activities nowadays. The officials rarely visit Hmong converts or make direct commands as they used to. In any particular cases, only religious leaders are summoned to meetings. Thus, it is possible that ordinary Hmong Protestants in Yagad have the freedom to maintain and strengthen their faith, being able to get various religious resources that have been available to them on a regular basis without any troubles. However, apart from the restricted access to Bible in the Hmong language and limited church capacity that might prevent Hmong from fully practicing their religion, some controls are still applied. Hmong missionaries and pastors are only allowed to be active in the registered village. In other words, any preaches given outside their neighborhood are considered illegal. Plus, all religious events throughout the following year have to be reported to the local government by 15 October. Any events organized without permission are also out-of-law. Consequently, religious freedom is relatively guaranteed for the Hmong in Yagad, yet boundaries are set. The Vietnamese government might not be hostile towards ‘foreign religions’ due to ‘ideology difference,’ yet it pays particular attention to what is defined as ‘politically sensitive concerns.’

To conclude, the recent Vietnamese Hmong conversion to Protestantism and their religious life have been controversial topics that the government leaders, domestic and international scholars, and human rights observers hold contradictory positions at numerous points, yet intensive investigations are lacking. While the number of studies on Hmong Christians in Southeast Asia is limited, they are only conducted in Laos and Thailand, mainly focusing on Hmong conversion. A recent book and several articles of a Vietnamese scholar on Hmong Protestants in northern Vietnam are remarkable; however, they also aim to explore Hmong conversion without defining and examining those converts’ specific denominations. Meanwhile, most domestic scholars study Hmong Protestants mainly through interviews with government and religious leaders instead of staying in the field with the insiders for months and attentively listening to them. Plus, those government-sponsored scholars more or less hold the



communist position considering Hmong converts to be ‘objects’ for political purposes rather than to understand them as human people. Such perspective sometimes results in publishing judgments on those religious followers from an atheist stance and/or a superior position. My research, therefore, contributes an intensive and systematic knowledge of the religious life of Hmong Protestants of different denominations produced based on my frequent reflections as an apolitical individual to avoid possible biases. The research findings are also verified in multiple methods to ensure accuracies, such as member checking and triangulation of data resources. The validity check process, in fact, has been significantly supported by many participants of diverse political, cultural, and ethnic groups who are closely related to the targeted research population. Thus, the research outcomes might help outsiders better understand these marginalized people, especially the Vietnamese government and traditional Hmong who have been hostile upon those Christians. Furthermore, interviews and follow-up conversations with the very first Hmong converts additionally reveal several facts that have never been published, such as ‘untold factors supporting conversion’ or ‘misunderstandings on Hmong terms *Vang Tsu* which leads to many political accuses on Hmong converts,’ even though these points are not research questions of this research./.

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