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Evangelical Faith and Culture in the Lives of Vietnam's Upland Hmong - 1987-2017

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Conference Presentation – James F. Lewis

PROTESTANT FAITH: HISTORICAL MILESTONES AND PRESENCE
On the occasion of the 500th year anniversary of Protestant Reformation

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"Evangelical Faith and Culture in the Lives of Vietnam's Upland Hmong - 1987-2017" - From pre-Christian culture to post-traditional culture: changes, struggles, problems, successes.

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For God so loved the world that he gave his unique and only Son that whosoever believes in him, should not perish but have everlasting life. -John's Gospel 3:16

Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Chuang Tzu said: "See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please. That's what they really enjoy." Hui Tzu said, "You're not a fish – how do you know what fish enjoy?"
Chuang Tzu said, "You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?" Hui Tzu said, "I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand, you're not a fish – so that still proves you don't know what fish enjoy."
Chuang Tzu said, "Let's go back to your original question. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy – so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao." -Taoist legend

I. INTRODUCTION

This conference, jointly sponsored by the NHSSSH and the ECVN–N on the topic of the Tin Lanh faith in the shadow of the 500th anniversary of the European Protestant Reformation, demonstrates a commendable spirit of mutual cooperation. It has the potential to aid in the flourishing of the Tin Lanh religion which is embraced by two millions of its citizens. Along with previous regional and international conferences, it fulfills my call for scholars to "…. avail themselves of every existing opportunity—and seek to create new opportunities…" to advance understanding of religion. (Lewis 2013, 61).

Our conference topic "Vietnam's Protestant Faith: Historical Milestones and Presence" is provocatively located against the background of Europe's 16th century Protestant Reformation. Attempts to suggest detailed comparisons between 16th century Europe and contemporary Vietnam, separated as they are by centuries of time and differences in cultures and religions, is possibly irresponsible. But please indulge me for a moment.

I find similarities and dissimilarities between the religio-cultural changes of Reformation Germany and those experienced by Vietnamese Hmong in the 30 years since 1987. In both settings, homogeneous and monolithic religions were upset by new religious ideas. The ideas challenging Catholicism came from within the religion. The challenges to Hmong Traditional religion came from a radically different orientation. Roman Catholic Christianity was revised; the cause was new interpretations of their common sacred text. But both root and fruit of Hmong Traditionalism is largely rejected and replaced, not revised. Both changed the way the spiritual world was perceived and engaged. Both were spread through innovations in technology; Reformation ideas by the printing press, Hmong Traditionalism by the radio. Both permanently changed or is changing practical matters such as ritual, family, community identity and religious authority. One might be tempted to predict that even as Reformation thought came to terms with rationalism, skepticism and materialism, so in coming decades these new Hmong Christians will probably have to do the same.

This paper centers on the contemporary conversion movement to Christianity among the Hmong of the Northern Mountainous Region (NMR). Taking place within the brief scope of only 30 years, religious change among the 1.2 million highland Hmong in Vietnam's fourteen provinces has resulted in some 330,000 declaring they have exchanged many traditional beliefs for faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They have embraced substantially the same faith as the Tin Lanh Church, which first came to Vietnam in 1911, one of Vietnam's six officially approved religions. It is reasonable to claim that a mass movement of this magnitude among a homogeneous ethnicity which has embraced a radically different religion has no parallel in

recent history anywhere in the world when considering raw numbers, speed of spread, and scope of acceptance.

It is a complex story that includes global influences, societal dynamics, inter- and intra-clan tensions, civic stability, national security, religious freedom and international politics. But, the argument of this paper is that it is first and foremost a story about religious change brought about by choices made by individuals for reasons that were to them compelling and life improving while being backlighted by broader dynamics attended to by other scholars. This is not to deny the societal dimensions or any of the other perspectives that shed light on it. But it is to suggest that there would be no story if it were not for the fact Hmong individuals, leaders of families and clans across the NMR extending even to surrounding states, have rejected centuries of traditional religious beliefs and practices to embrace the historical Evangelical message of the Christian faith.

I will treat the assigned topic, "Tin Lanh faith and culture in the lives of Upland Hmong" in the broader context of the history of religion. The history of Hmong Christianity is, like history itself, a story of change. This change is more than a matter of "conversion", though that may be the most dramatic way of treating it. "Conversion" can mean many things including a fixed, permanent, final, static and completed reality. "Religious change" signifies a dynamic, through-time, non-static process. It may be slow and steady or abrupt and contentious, broadly impacting culture, politics, and society. The Hmong experience is best interpreted as "change" as it invites us to follow the process of this remarkable movement from uncertain beginnings, to belonging to an expansionist religion totally outside the field of its history and consciousness.

Let me cite an earlier Asian example of this. In the past, a proselyting foreign religion, which was quite dominant in its original setting, was spread thousands of miles away by missionaries who engaged an insular society with its own entrenched religious traditions and complex history. These missionaries spoke a foreign language, dressed in peculiar ways and exhibited practices that were strange and unfamiliar. It was initially resisted by the established religious authorities for several reasons. First, it proposed a radically different cosmology. It taught that

the future consisted of endless cycles of time. Each individual cycle in this infinite string of cycles was characterized by first moral and spiritual decline which in turn led to a time of recovery and renewal only to reenter the next cycle and repeat it all over again. Individual ife itself was cyclical as death was followed by rebirth determined by the law of karma. Among the many other troubling features was that it threatened the social order by doctrines which taught a radically different pathway to personal and social fulfilment.

I speak, of course, of the introduction of the Buddhist *Dharma* to China by Indian missionaries in the 2-4th centuries of our era. The *Dharma* conflicted with Confucian religion and society on many levels. First, the Confucian religion was essentially materialist and naturalist in its cosmology. This conflicted in important ways with both the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist versions of reality. On the matter of society, Buddhist monastics neither married nor had families and by their example suggested such was the ideal. This behavior contradicted the Confucian rule that sons were necessary for ancestor rituals and the well-being of the social order. Even the basic vocabulary used to communicate their doctrine was confusing and unclear. Sanskrit or Pali words used by missionaries for the Buddhist *Dharma* had no exact equivalent in Chinese and so they adopted Daoist terms that were not entirely satisfactory. In fact, unsatisfactory word equivalents introduced nuances that Buddhists later regretted. It took decades for Buddhist scholars to find the most appropriate Chinese words to express Indian Buddhist vocabulary. The result was that early on, the Buddhist *Dharma* was suspected as an occult sect which should be resisted, threatening as it did the existing establishment. We know however, that in time, an improved vocabulary helped overcome resistance and establish the Buddhist religion as a permanent part of the Chinese cultural tradition. Parallels between the introduction and establishment of Buddhism in China and the introduction and establishment of the Tin Lanh faith to the Hmong are obvious.

I will turn now to identify changes in the culture of Hmong Christians under four categories: spiritual, Institutional, social, and civic culture.

II. SPIRITUAL CULTURE AND CHANGE

Vietnamese Hmong spiritual culture has undergone dramatic changes since 1987. There is both discontinuity and continuity in this change. We will look first at the Hmong pre-Christian world, factors leading to change, their post-traditional world and finally the issue of continuity and discontinuity between the two cosmologies.

1. The pre-Christian religion of the Hmong

Traditional Hmong cosmology has been called a combination of animism and ancestor worship. (Tapp 1989) It is the traditional religion practiced by the majority of Vietnam's Hmong today going back into pre-history and their long experience living among the Han as they migrated southward into Southeast Asia. Two terms are useful in describing it: ancestor patronage and spirit arbitration.[i] What follows is an extremely spare summary of Hmong traditional religion but given the scope of this paper, it is not possible to do justice to the richness and variations in belief and practice found among Hmong in Southeast Asia and southern China. The terms, nonetheless are useful.

SPIRIT ARBITRATION The Hmong spirit world is polytheistic consisting of some that are benign, some that are malevolent, many that are arbitrary or unpredictable and some that threaten personal and clan life. The number, name and nature of these spirits is not uniform across Hmong communities. However, spirits can and must be manipulated by ritual and arbitrated through the service of a shaman (spirit-priest, or animist-priest) who acts as mediator between the living and the demands of the spirits in times of crisis, danger, misfortune, sickness or death.

Some spirits are local, being bound to house or landscape. They are honored by symbols and taboos and propitiated by rituals. The spirit of the central house pillar, to which other construction timbers are attached is important as it serves as a conduit to ancestors and clan descendants. The family altar, with ritual items on table and/or wall opposite the "spirit door" serves many functions chief among them is the calling back of lost souls, and fetching the souls of newborns. A ritual paper fetish hanging on the wall with dried blood-dipped chicken feathers is replaced at New Year thereby guaranteeing prosperity and the protection of a

legendary Hmong King-Protector (*Vaaj Kaav*). As Tam T.T. Ngo puts it this king promised to "…deliver the Hmong from their suffering life, and bring happiness, wealth, prosperity, and eventually a righteous Kingdom for the Hmong." (Ngo 2016, 8).

Other spirits include those of the stove and bedroom door. Hmong traditional religion binds the living in an interactive and interdependent relationship with clan ancestors and the spirits inhabiting their natural world. As is the case with most pre-modern traditional religions, the unseen spirit world, a world of darkness, co-inheres and interacts with the material or visible world known as the world of light. (Vang, T., 92). The two realms completely interpenetrate.

While there are legendary accounts of a transcendent Supreme One, (*Saub)* it plays no intervening role in daily and ritual life other than having once committing to shamans some of its power to deal with evil spirits *Vag Tuam Teem* and *Nyoog* who afflict Hmong with disease and illness. (Tapp, 1991, 94).

The spirits of land, house and ancestors troubled and oppressed Hmong families. They lived with the reality of spirits that were evil, malicious, and terror inspiring. Power to deal with these spirits was in the hand of shamans who could bargain, trick and arbitrate solutions between the suffering person or family and the appropriate spirit. Neither the spirits nor the shaman had absolute power so it became a titanic struggle between forces in a dark spiritual world. The shaman would enter an exhausting trance while contacting, bargaining and negotiating solutions. These solutions involved sacrifices of chickens, goats, pigs or even a wealth-depleting water buffalo or cow mediated by the shaman to satisfy the demands of the spirits. [1]

ANCESTOR PATRONAGE The community sought good relations with spirits, supremely important among whom were those of deceased ancestors. Much of the belief and practice of

[1] For further depth on the Hmong spirit world: consult "The human-spirt world of Chinese and Japanese Cosmology" (LEXAR - HMONG Hanoi 2017 research)

Hmong regarding the ancestors tracks generally with that found in classical Chinese practice. The clan ancestors must be venerated and served since without their approval and ritual satisfaction, harm may come. The living and the dead are in a symbiotic relationship. The welfare of the dead depends on the living doing the appropriate ceremonies. At New Years time, relations with the ancestors is renewed through rituals which involve refurbishing specialty items of the ancestor altar. The dead are reincarnated into their next life similar to popular Chinese notions though details of this existence are vague, not well formulated or understood.

The soul, of which there may be three or more kind (body, shadow or shade of body, and soul-essence) departs, wanders or is lured away on occasion of sickness and must be ceremonially called back to return to health. At death a call goes out for the return of the soul but when ineffectual, mortuary ceremonies must seek to secure a safe passage of the deceased to the afterworld accompanied by funeral song. This is accompanied by the *jeeb* or reed organ which narrates the spiritual landscape the deceased must traverse enroute to the next existence. An initial ceremony of three to ten days is followed by one at thirteen days and then one year. A buffalo or other livestock will be sacrificed which consumes considerable resources as the family hosts relatives and friends. (Tapp).

2. Factors driving change in Hmong spiritual culture

Scholars have sought to identify contributing factors in the astounding pace and extent of the resurgence of religion throughout the world since the late 20th century. The case of the Hmong Christian movement has been of special interest because of its size, speed, breadth and impact on the Hmong people and Vietnamese state. In accounting for this, I choose to emphasize Robert Hefner's binary model which distinguishes between macro- and micro-logics. (Hefner, 2010). Ngo's contributions fall into the macro-logic and include her focus on social, economic, ethnic and transnational factors. (2010, 2015). Along those lines, anthropologist Tran Huu Son early on identified government policies as a key contributor by forbidding Hmong to continue their traditional practices. His *Van Hoa Hmong* tells us that from the 1960s to 1990, the government forbade many festivals and ceremonies and restricted the *Hmông* of Lao Cai to

celebrate the New Year for only a few days rather than the traditional one month. Where there was resistance to such measures, *Hmông* traditionalists were dealt severe punishments such as arrest, imprisonment, and hard labor. (Tran, 1996). Poverty and economic hardships played a role as witnessed in this official document. “The restoration and the development of Christianity in the areas of the minority peoples has many causes. Among them the main one is the fact that the socio-economic life of the people is full of hardship and we have fallen short in our efforts to solve the problem.” (Steering Committee 184, 1999). In all this, Hefner counsels not to put too much weight on the “macro-logic” reminding us that the “micro-logic” of agency and rational choice has its important role.

In the category of the “micro logic”, one cannot overlook evidence found in more than 20,000 Hmong letters to the Gospel programmers of the Far Eastern Broadcasting Corporation (FEBC). They witness to how Hmong spiritual culture was undergoing what might be called “Shaman-failure.” Traditional ways of coping with danger, death, sickness and deprivation were being replaced with new solutions. “During those days, the Hmong in the Dien Bien province suffered from poverty, curses, and death related to evil spirits, ancestral worship and shamanism. In 1987, the Hmong heard Pastor Wa Chong [John Chong Lee] broadcast about Vang Chu over a radio station from Manila, Philippines. They heard about a God who had the power to overcome evil spirits and death. They became Christian by the thousands." (Vang, M. 2017).

A further reason for religious change is one that both *Hmông* and insightful government officials both acknowledge. Namely, the Evangelical message had the practical effect of changing *Hmông* lifestyle and worldview for the better—woes caused by government persecution notwithstanding. The Evangelical message gave a positive message about the future, imparted the notion of self-worth, grounded their call for simple justice in divine principles, raised the quality of married life, and made modest improvement in their economic status.

“So many times have we been fined for believing in God. We still wonder why the government would make our lives so miserable. But after accepting Jesus we have led happier and more productive lives. We live in peace and live better lives through God's word. No matter what we

say they seem to never agree. They just ignore us." (*Hmông* letter to FEBC in 1998).

Rejection of the spirit-worship tradition is closely tied to this sense of experiencing a better quality of life. A *Hmông* in 1992 said: "When it comes to following our old tradition—the practices of the shaman and animistic ways, we are tired of it. We don't want anything to do with it. That is why we decided to keep our faith even when the government persecuted us. What this is, is the right and good thing. It is good for us." (*Hmông* letter to FEBC in 1992).

Hoang Quoc Hai, contrasts the Christian and traditional worldviews of converted ethnic minorities of both the North and South: "When the Evangelicals introduced them to a powerful God, He not only loved them but teaches them all kinds of practical and easy-to-do lessons. That God also is personified in flesh and bone and they can even look at his picture in real life.... Their own gods traditionally only receive the offerings, but never give them anything. This God, on the contrary, only gives but never demands anything of them. They believe God is their provider and protector. God is just like a precious treasure that they found for the first time. They are ready to cut off with their past and follow God." (Hoang, 1994).

3. The post-traditional religion of the Hmong

When Hmong began to embrace the Tin Lanh religion in the late 1980's it unleashed a movement of unparalleled religious, cultural and civil change; it was nothing short of a religious and social revolution within the ethnic Hmong community. The Christian message broadly embraced by Hmong is quite similar to if not identical with that which is published, believed and taught by one of the government's six officially recognized religions, the Tin Lanh Evangelical faith. In short it goes like this. There is one creator God who rules and governs the world. He is a God of love who seeks the benefit and happiness of all, including the Hmong. This was good news to Hmong in the backwaters of Vietnam who began to listen to FEBC whose short-wave broadcasts were in indigenous White Hmong from Manila, Philippines.

The goal of the programming and broadcasting was to tell the good news that God had in fact not forgotten the Hmong. God had sent His only Son to pay the ransom due for the Hmong's

transgressions against His Holy Law and all that believe in His Son the Lord Jesus Christ may have their sins remitted in this life. And there was the promise of a better world in the next life. No promises being made for this life. The teaching focused on turning away from the past ways of drunkenness, drug use and production, rampant immorality and animistic practices and turning towards righteousness, loving one's neighbor as one's self, industriousness, spousal faithfulness, and a casting away of all other gods but the one true God "Vang Chu". This is centrist Protestant Christianity in its most primitive and pure form.

It is said to have its beginnings in 1986 when Chu Wa Lor (*Tswv Vaj Lauj*) in Lai Chau province first professed believing in Vang Chu and His only son Jesus Christ. After this Chu Wa walked from village to village sharing the good news of freedom from costly spirit rites and freedom from moral evils and guilt if the Hmong turned to Vang Chu (*Vajtswv*). There was never any mention of "*sor vaagz*" ("proclaiming a king"). Thousands upon thousands responded to Chu Wa's message and from there it spread rapidly to Lao Cai and other provinces. (Vang, T., 2017).

Earlier in Hmong history "proclaiming a king" or "receiving a King" (*Sawv Vaj*) was a slogan associated with the Lao Hmong Pa Chay rebellion of 1918 to recruit support for Hmong independence from the French under a charismatic Hmong leader. However, this term was not used for nor equated with belief in the Christian Gospel. For example, when Touby Ly Foung's two wives became Christians in the 1950s the language describing this was they "believed in the Lord" (*Los Ntseeg*) not "proclaiming" or "receiving a king". (Barney, 63).

It is true that the Evangelical message to the Hmong contained a millennial side both historically and Biblically. Historically, the Protestant missionaries who missionized among the A-Hmao in South China - Samuel Pollard and J. Adam in 1890-1920; in Laos -G.L. Barney, Wm. Smalley, T.J. Adrianoff; and in Vietnam - John Chong Ly, the FEBC radio evangelist- all held a linear and millennial view of history taught in the Bible that God would send his son Jesus at the end of human history to defeat all injustice and institute a 1000 year reign of righteousness. This was to be at the end of history, not in the course of history. But the core of this teaching is

that Jesus is Lord of the kingdom of the heart, not the key to a political Hmong kingdom. The potential for misunderstanding between these different kingdom concepts likely accounts for confusion and the emergence of short-lived and marginal groups such as the "Year 2000 Doom Cult" in Ha Giang and Lao Cai which awaited arrival of a "new king." Such is a theme often repeated in Hmong history. Whenever the Hmong were oppressed, A Hmong man would rally the Hmong to resist or fight the oppressor as Pa Cay did in Laos against the burdensome taxing system of the French. Such leaders would often claim that if the Hmong united behind them to fight the enemy, a Hmong king would descend from heaven to establish a kingdom for the Hmong. This kind of deception has taken place at many places and times in Hmong society.

Vuong Duy Quang equates the phrases "proclaiming a king" and "receiving a king" with the term"Vang Chu." (Vuong, 2003. 132-138). In his view the use of the term "Vang Chu" by FEBC was a cynical ploy to connect with traditional millennial hopes and exploit an "excited and illusory environment" of gullible and easily duped Hmong. He rightly recognizes that the term "Vang Chu" is relatively new in Hmong vocabulary but is incorrect in associating it with these millennialist notions.

Vuong's views continue to appear in official publications. A recent example is found in two articles of Dien Bien's *Bien Phong* newspaper (Bien Phong, 15/08/2017, 22/08/2017). It reports *Vang Chu* infiltrated some families in Dien Bien, being first Catholic in nature and then adapted to incite Hmong to agitate for a Hmong kingdom or country. It goes on to say this was vigorously opposed by most people but then came to be more acceptable to the local people and ultimately metamorphosed into the Tin Lanh. The last step was when Tin Lanh organizations in Vietnam and abroad welcomed them resulting in rapid growth. The articles allege that the "so-called Vang Chu religion" is presently being used to provoke Hmong to establish a "Hmong State" similar to what happened in May 2011 when Hmong were "welcoming the king" and "professing the king."

When, where and why did “Vang Chu” terminology arise? Hmong speakers within the Evangelical community point out that Asian Hmong did not have an indigenous term suitable to express the God of the Bible who was all knowing, holy, loving and freeing from costly spirt rites and moral evils. Some borrowed Catholic terms such as “Shang Ti,” or “Hua Tai.” But after considerable debate Lao Hmong settled on a neo-logism, introducing a term not found in past Hmong language. It was a transliteration of the Thai *Phra Chao. Phra* was a classifier for “sacred” or “royalty” and *Chao* meaning “lord”. Phra became *Vang* (*Vaj*) and Chao became *Chu* (*tswv*) or *Vajtswv*.

The Hmong word for God is *Vajtswv* (*Vang Chu*). As “Vaj” means “king” and “tswv” means “owner” it has the idea that God is both king and owner of everything in heaven and on earth. The term was used by Hmong in Laos when they first accepted Christ in 1950. The same term has been used by the Hmong Christians in Thailand since they accepted Christ in 1953. After the passing of the late Hmong General Vang Pao in 2011, a small minority of Hmong who dreamed of establishing a Hmong state, paid for radio broadcasts to get support for establishing an independent Hmong State in Southeast Asia. Falsely claiming the United Nations was behind the plan, their leader was jailed for defrauding elderly Hmong. Even though the leader is in prison, a small group of followers keep the message on the Internet. With the difficult life they are experiencing in Vietnam, many Hmong are persuaded. Some of those who are deceived are Christians. For this reason, Hmong Christians in Vietnam have been suspected and their Christianity has been questioned.

In view of the above, Vuong Duy Quang’s statements that “Vang Chu” is synonymous with “proclaiming a king” grossly oversimplifies the facts. A surprisingly frank and accurate understanding of the identity of “Vang Chu” is found in the following official government document and ought to help put this issue to rest. It says “…in recent years there has appeared in the region of the Hmong minority the preaching of the *Vang Chu* (Lord of Heaven) religion. This religion has the same contents as the *Tin Lanh* (Evangelical Protestant) religion and had connections to the Christian religion (*dao Tin Lanh*).”(Steering Committee 184B, 1999).

4. Continuity and Discontinuity of the two cosmologies[2]

It has been suggested that fundamental features of traditional Hmong legends contain analogies to themes found in the Bible such as creation, human fall into universal sinfulness, and a coming king. Corollaries to these, embedded in Hmong Tradition, enable Hmong to experience a smooth transition into the Gospel message. (Vang, T., 1998). The existence of such parallels has been challenged by other Hmong scholars. (Xiong & Xiong, 2008). Whether there are such thematic corollaries as Vang believes, it seems to me that the religious change might also be partly facilitated by the similarity of the spiritual architecture of their pre-Christian and post-traditional worlds.

Both religions accept a seamless interface between the spirit world and the visible, tangible, concrete, sensual and empirical world. Both realms are real to daily experience. Conversion to Evangelical faith does not change this. Hence, one can say the experience of an interactive spirit world is shared by both religious cosmologies. Hmong Christian religion, like that of the traditional religion, does not dichotomize the transcendental or spiritual world from the tangible or material world. For Hmong traditionalists and Hmong Christians both levels are real, interpenetrate, interact and are intensely relevant to daily life. Spirits exist in both. The spirit world and the concrete, the invisible and the visible, the intangible and the tangible interpenetrate – they thoroughly intermix and are inseparable. There are no boundaries; there is no ceiling between the two. This makes the Christian cosmology not entirely different from the traditional one.

However, the two also are radically different and discontinuous, not in the fundamental structure of their cosmologies but in the content of these spiritual worlds. The old religion's

[2] Christian Culas's "Innovation and Tradition in Rituals and Cosmology" in **Hmong-Miao in Asia** (2004) provides a chart schematizing boundaries and cosmological spaces of the living, the dead and the divinities (Immortals) which is accessed by the shaman and the messianic leader for the benefit of the Hmong supplicant. P. 97-126

spirit world was unpredictable, arbitrary and always on the take. The new religion's spirit world was one whose one God has all authority, is knowable, moral, protects, saves and lovingly gives to the Hmong. The heavens are not cleared of evil spirits but are now subject to the power of Jesus, God's son. All authority has been given to him who protects and cares for the Hmong and their families.

Moreover, Hmong claim to have personally experienced the presence and power of Jesus by the Holy Spirit who dwells in them. This is an inner, personal, individual and existential reality that is not fully subject to examination by social or psychological tools. Without pushing it too far, it may be similar to how Chuang Tzu claimed to know what fish enjoy in the anecdote given at the beginning of this paper. Hui Tzu's response was that Chuang Tzu was not a fish and so couldn't know what fish enjoy. Chuang Tzu doesn't say how he knows just that he knows. There is a similarity here to the Hmong experience of faith (*Los Ntseeg)*. The experience of belief or faith is not the same as acceptance of a worldview, doctrine or contours of a formal religion. These are open to description and historical investigation. But the transcendental personal and highly subjective experience of the presence of Jesus in the life is what, more than anything else, accounts for the tap-root of religious change among many Hmong of Vietnam.

Both cosmologies acknowledge a supreme transcendent but the role and importance differs. The Hmong traditional notion of a supreme reality corresponds to what scholars call *deus otiosus*, the absent or hidden god. It is a vague reality, distant and unrelated to daily affairs of life and death, whereas the Christian notion is highly defined, personally present and substantively good. The Hmong view is that the Christian God created the world and spoke in times past to prophets and apostles, the record of which is in a sacred text, the Bible. The God of the Bible has a moral character who loves, cares, judges and is active in the world. The name of this God is *Vang Chu*.

III. INSTITUTIONAL: RITES OF PASSAGE, FORMAL TRAINING AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Rites of Passage

Hmong have had ceremonies and rituals embedded in their collective life for centuries. It is stunning that many of these pre-Christian practices have been rejected, revised or replaced while Christian ones have been added. Traditional practices such as shamanism, sacrifice to the ancestors, offerings to the spirits on occasion of weddings, funerals and the New Year have been stopped. A recently printed manual in Lao Cai contains guidance on how to perform a comprehensive range of new ceremonies.[ii]

A fundamental ceremony of Christian initiation is baptism. When Hmong first believed, they learned that baptism was an ordinance endorsed by and commanded by Jesus. But how and when to do it? Who should do it? What the first Hmong convert in Vietnam did was to self-baptize. Then he who was baptized took upon himself the responsibility to baptize others.

Hmong had no guidance, initially about how to perform Holy Communion an ordinance rooted in primitive Christianity. It is to be noted that other than radio broadcasts and cassette tapes from FEBC, Hmong had no formal training or guidance from outsiders about how to do any Christian formalities for almost five years into the movement when there may have been as many as 100,000 seeking this entry-level ceremony. Traditional funeral rites were replaced since no longer did the dead have power to influence the living. Other written ceremonies help to guide pastors in Marriage ceremony and child-naming rites.

Formal Training

A major change in spiritual leadership has been the replacement of the shaman with that of a recognized Christian leader. These leaders have often been, up to now, younger adult men who are literate in both Vietnamese and Hmong. They have begun to seek and receive both formal and informal training. Some have attended teaching sessions in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. A small number of them have attended the Bible College held in Hanoi's Tin Lanh church at 2 Ngo Tram. A new phenomenon has been the arrival of overseas Hmong pastors and international workers who have organized short-term training sessions in matters of Bible knowledge, theology, preaching and worship. Most have the approval of the leadership of the Tin Lanh church in Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi.

Organizational Life and Structure

As soon as the growing strength of the Hmong conversion movement became known, various religious bodies in Vietnam and the world began to recruit them into their organizations with the intention to disciple them in their new found faith. Among them were a small number of unorthodox and heterodox groups which taught doctrines that disturbed the peace and tranquility of the churches. Complicating things further were new converts who having no training in Bible knowledge and theology, interpreted the Bible in ways contrary to standard Tin Lanh doctrine and practice. This created conflict between Christian communities and further troubled relations with traditional Hmong and officialdom. It is being suggested these problems might be addressed by urging all Hmong evangelicals to affiliate with one of the recognized Christian denominations. Presently, there are three; the Hoi Thanh Tin Lanh (ECVN-n), with 1500 chapels; Hoi Truyen Giang Phuc Am, with 800 chapels; and Lien Huu Co Doc, with 100 chapels.

One of the biggest changes for Hmong is that prior to becoming Christians, their religious life was determined by decisions made by clan and family leaders. Now their religious life, at least those who cooperate with a formal body, have ties that are inter-provincial, national and even international. The power of national and international connections gives Hmong opportunity to move out of a rural and provincial outlook and become part of a world Christian community.

But a scramble to belong and the drive to recruit has led to competition. An example of intra-Christian pluralism is reported in *Bien Phong* newspaper. It says that “in recent times”, there have been conflicts between some of 11 different Protestant denominations resulting in physical assaults and competition between groups, and internal dissention within the groups affecting the stability of rural security in the border province. (*Bien Phong*, 22/08/2017).

IV. SOCIAL CULTURE AND CHANGE

Hmong, like other Christian ethnic minorities, have benefited socially and educationally from their conversion to Christ. Christian tribal people experienced the "lift" of Christianity in various

ways. They were released from the binding fears of evil spirits and from debilitating and expensive addictions. Hmong began to learn their own written language when they had the Bible in their own tongue. "No longer just savages condemned to live at the margins, but a people with growing self awareness and self respect! From nothing to something! Perhaps not surprising that this should be seen as threatening to a totalitarian regime – and a reason for repression". (Reimer, 1995).

The conversion movement has had profound implications for what has been until 1987 a homogeneous society consisting of 12 clans. Now the acceptance of the Tin Lanh religion has divided families, clans, villages, and cooperative communes leading to a social crisis of great concern to government officials whose initial reaction was to severely suppress the movement for its impact on social stability and national solidarity. *Bien phong* says of Hmong in Nam Ke commune , Muong Nhe District Dien Bien Province: "it is not difficult to recognize cultural conflicts between the religious and the non-religious."(*Bien phong*, 15/08/2017).

Beyond the problem of Christian and non-Christian clan divisions, Christian Hmong are dealing with a relatively new kind of divisiveness in the NMR. It is what may be called intra-Christian pluralism. This conflict is the result of some Christians who decided to reject all Hmong cultural practices unless found in scripture. This divides the Christian community internally and alienates some, who might be called "Purist Hmong," from their brothers in the faith who do not see the need to reject all vestiges of the Hmong cultural tradition. The Purists, already alienated from traditionalists, remove themselves even further to the margins of the community. Moreover, It increases official criticisms about the divisiveness of Christianity, something seen totally unnecessary from their point of view. About this, many Christian teachers of Hmong agree: "Be careful. What contradicts the Bible - yes, give up. But what does not, you can practice. At least it is neutral and you can practice or not without fear of unfaithfulness. There is much in Hmong culture that is good and compatible with Christian life and living."

The point here is that with the arrival of Hmong Christianity in the last 30 years, a previously highly homogeneous culture has had its first taste of pluralism which troubles not only the state, not only the traditionalists, but even the insiders to the new religion. Hmong Evangelicals are experiencing two stages of pluralism. The first stage is Evangelical/Traditional pluralism. The second is Evangelical/Evangelical. The latter requires Christian Hmong to seek solutions to their own pluralism. Are these developments an incipient Christian culture war?

V. CIVIL CULTURE AND CHANGE

Hmong, like other ethnicities, have long been on the margins of SRV's social services, development schemes and educational services. (Rambo, 1995). When the spread of the Tin Lanh movement came to the attention of the authorities, the state's security apparatus kicked into high gear. While there were many levels of concern, some more legitimate than others in my view, concern that Hmong might raise a rebellion like that of the past, was one concern. (Lewis, 2002.) Moreover, Hmong who gained what has been labeled a "trans-national" identity in their embrace of Christianity could well pose a significant challenge to the authority of the State. (Ngo 2010).

Now that roughly one-third of the 1.1 million Hmong have embraced Christianity, and now that the state's effort to stop, eradicate or reverse and the movement has waned, and now that approximately 100 of the 1500 Tin Lanh Hmong communities have officially registered and are fully covered by official provisions of religious freedom, a question remains. "What are the consequences for Hmong-state relations in civil society? What are the current attitudes, postures and practices of Hmong relative to the civil authorities? Should Hmong still be regarded as a threat to the state's authority? Not by any measure. Rather than resort to violence to achieve redress, Hmong have repeatedly presented petitions to village, district and provincial officials when aggrieved. They have been remarkably patient overall in seeking peaceable solutions when aggrieved.

Further, they have used official channels to call to the attention of authorities their right to embrace and practice the Tin Lanh faith. When I was with the 2006 IGE delegation visiting a Hmong house-chapel in Lao Cai, a copy of the Prime Minister's "Instructions concerning a number of tasks regarding the Protestant Religion" (February 4, 2005) was posted prominently on the main pillar of the house for all to see, reassuring Christians and serving notice to local authorities that they intend to peacefully follow yet take full advantage of the Prime Minister's promises.

VI. CONCLUSION

The changes in Hmong society described above resulting from their transitioning to the Tin Lanh religion appear to be widespread and permanent across Hmong communities in the NMR. These broad and sweeping changes have spiritual, institutional, social and civil consequences. Collectively these, and other changes that have not been addressed, are giving the approximately 330,000 Tin Lanh Hmong in the 15 provinces of northern Vietnam a new identity. Without doubt, this identity has upset the social fabric of many Hmong communities and introduced new tensions even among the Tin Lanh followers. But in spite of past government opposition and vicious steps to stop and reverse Hmong conversions, the Tin Lanh Hmong do not appear to be dissuaded from digging in and further solidifying their faith. The very size and vigor of the movement portends that a new social and religious chapter is being written in Vietnam's modern religious and ethnic history. The 30 years since its onset (1987-2017) are an amazingly short time to have so drastically changed the religious landscape. We can hope that the Tin Lanh Hmong will take their place alongside all other Vietnamese citizens to join in a collective effort to build a better Vietnam and vault it into leading role in freeing the human spirit to soar to heights not yet attained.

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[i] In the scope of this paper, it is not possible to do justice to the variations in belief and practice found among

various Hmong in Southeast Asia and southern China.

[ii] These including baptism, the Lord Jesus Meal, Easter, Christmas, weddings in church or home, wedding ceremony with marriage negotiators, child naming, receiving an honorable name by adult married male after bride price has been paid, child dedication, New Rice Harvest Festival meal, Hmong New Year, locating a new building site for a home, dedication of newly built house, and funerary rites. Source: Boua Hmong speaking informant John Yang.