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Undergraduate



Gender, Sexuality, and Inter-Generational Differences in Hmong and Hmong Americans

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Abstract

Hmong American men and women face social and cultural struggles where they are expected to adhere to Hmong requirements of gender handed down to them by their parents, and the expectations of the country they were born in. The consequence of these two expectations of contrasting values results in stress for everyone involved. Hmong parents are stressed from not having a secure hold on their children in a foreign environment, with no guarantee that their children will follow a “traditional” route. Hmong American men are stressed from growing up in a home environment that grooms them to be a focal point of familial attention based on gender, with the expectation that they will eventually be responsible for an entire family; meanwhile, they are living in this American national environment that stresses that the ideal is that gender is irrelevant in the modern world. Hmong American women are stressed and in turn hold feelings of resentment that they are expected to adhere to traditional familial roles by their parents in addition to following a path to financial success the same as men. For both, marriage exists as an escape route from certain familial pressures, provided that they are able to find a partner holding similar ideals, or provided that they are a woman who is able to enter her husband’s family as a way of escaping her own.



Background/Method

There exists a dichotomy between “good girls” and “bad girls”, and the way this is decided is often through dating norms. This is also expressed in the Hmong words *nyab* (daughter-in-law) and the *pojlaib* (bad girl). In anthropologist Bic Ngo’s research, she saw that Hmong American women in the divide were in environments where casual dating was a norm, but under their parents were expected to have supervised dates in order to sustain “good girl” status.¹ Living under two expectations with microscopic observation results in stress; Hmong Americans have devised forms of resistance and methods of escape to avoid this. For young Hmong American women, marriage is an escape route for this; as a wife, these women are now only subject to the expectations of the role as a *nyab* within their husband’s family, rather than the dual expectations of American peers of non-Asian descent and Hmong parents. This is not to say that there exists so strongly a dichotomy of “good” and “bad” for women that conforming to this good/bad dichotomy prevents them from ever having to struggle as Hmong American women within Hmong and American gender expectations, nor does it mean that by deviating from this plan will they be only exposed to struggle; in Hmong refugee Kao Kalia Yang’s memoir, *The Latehomecomer*, the contrary is seen as Yang’s grandmother, despite expressly sticking to the best possible role as her husband’s wife and caretaker of her siblings and family, struggles throughout her time in Thailand and Laos as a poor woman married to an opium addict, and in America as a refugee unable to speak or understand English.²

¹ Bic Ngo, “Contesting “Culture”: The Perspectives of Hmong American Female Students on Early Marriage”, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* Vol. 33, No. 2 (Jun., 2002), 171.

² Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer* (Coffee House Press: Minneapolis), 2008.



For part of the research component, I interviewed two Hmong students, Tshamon Vang and Avita Haam. Both interviews were conducted in person, over the course of about an hour, and audio recorded.

Tshamon is a 23 year old Hmong American man, and a graduate of the University of California, Merced. Tshamon was born in the Central Valley of California to Hmong parents from Laos. Growing up almost entirely in Merced and Atwater, he is one of twelve children, all of whom were born in either France or America. Unmarried, but in a serious relationship, Tshamon sees Hmong culture in America as a progression, where Hmong slowly becomes more intertwined with the American ideal with each passing generation. Having three sisters, Tshamon was able to witness how the treatment towards them and the expectations of them changed throughout his childhood, as he witnessed his sisters gradually creating a changing gender expectation in their household. Coming from a farming family, Tshamon is the second person in his family to complete education after high school in America, and the first to graduate from a UC school. He has never spent any significant time away from his family.

Avita is a 21 year old Hmong American woman, and a student at UC Merced. Avita was born in Fresno to Hmong parents from Laos, spending most of her time in California, save for a brief period of time in which her family moved to Denver, Colorado. Avita is one of four children, all of whom were born in America. Growing up in a family of two daughters and two sons, Avita came from a much smaller family compared to Tshamon's family of twelve, but still witnessed and experienced the different treatments given as a result of gender over time in her family; Avita describes that there is difference between the treatment she receives as compared to her brothers, but does admit that it has changed now that she and her sister are both adults over 18, with the difference in treatment between brother and sister growing smaller. Avita comes



from a family with no farming background, noting that nearly every member of her family has completed college, except for an aunt who married early, and that no one in her family works in a physically intensive position. She is the first in her family to attend a UC, while her relatives all chose to attend CSUs; Avita chose the school partly based on its UC status, proximity to her hometown of Sacramento, and its proximity to a Hmong community. She describes herself as having not grown up in a large Hmong community, and considers it important; for Avita, being able to be around other Hmong people is a key part of her life. Although she lives away from her home in Sacramento, Avita lives with relatives in Merced and, similar to Tshamon, has not spent much time away from her family.

Analysis

From my interviews as well as supplementary research consisting of articles and class readings, I came to the following conclusions: Hmong American women experience dual limitations under Hmong expectations and American expectations; existing in-between as “Hmong American” results in a struggle for those attempting to satisfy expectations on both sides; there are differences in treatment across gender; Hmong American women have developed multiple methods of resisting inequalities in treatment; and finally, there is the matter of LGBT Hmong Americans not having the controversial reaction that might be expected given the stressing of heterosexual marriage, creating, and maintaining family as part of one’s expected gender roles. However, this works to effectively remove an LGBT space and remain relatively invisible.

Regarding the limitations Hmong women face, it works both ways in a disservice; in an interview with a Hmong American student, Bic Ngo found that the young women were under constant supervision as long as they were in the home, and thus unable to have agency over



themselves the way a similarly aged American woman might be able to, even throughout their twenties.³ In my interviews with Tshamon and Avita, I found similar results. When asked about the “fairness” of treatment for men and women, Tshamon stated that “Hmong families [have] . . . practice of giving more attention to the men than the female”, adding that he did not believe that the differential would change for at least a few generations.⁴ He continued, stating that women growing up in Hmong families are subject to less attention than Hmong men, and less compared American women, and as a result of that they “have to work a little bit harder [because they’re] not given the same attention or . . . the same resources as men”.⁵ Avita’s expressed in her interview that by virtue of being born a woman, she is subject to mental stress due to these expectations. As a woman, Avita knows that at some point in the future, she is expected to leave her family and move in to her husband’s family regardless of how they feel about each other. For Avita, the consequence of moving in with her husband’s family goes beyond stressing about *nyab* duties: “if that family doesn’t like them it just makes them sad, it just bothers them more mentally.”⁶ The opposite of this can be seen in Anne Fadiman’s book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, with the case of Hmong woman Dia Xiong and her child Arnie; sick with cancer, Arnie undergoes chemotherapy, while Xiong witnesses only the symptoms of chemotherapy and not the remission of his cancer. Complying with expectations to protect her son as part of her role as a mother, Xiong refuses to continue treatment, resulting in the punishment of a Hmong woman by America for committing to her gender role as mother when Child Protective Services are called.⁷ Hmong American women start out in an unfair position by

³ Ngo, “Contesting “Culture””, 171.

⁴ Tshamon Vang (Oct. 27, 2015), Personal interview.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Avita Haam (Oct. 28, 2015), Personal interview.

⁷ Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Farrar, Straus and Groux: New York), 70.



virtue of being born female: the cards are stacked against them from the beginning. There are external pressures from both cultures— Hmong and American— and the presence weighs heavy on these women. There is not only is there the stress of knowing you have access to less resources than an American woman, or a Hmong American man; there exists additional stress from being expected to fulfill the mentally and physically exhausting duties of a daughter-in-law at some point in the future.

With regards to growing up as Hmong American, there exists a problem with one's identity; in both interviews with Avita and Tshamon, they described themselves as living in between Hmong and American, rather than strictly Hmong or strictly American. In an interview with 20 year old Hmong student Anna, Ngo asked her why she thinks her parents don't understand her and what struggles there are in being Hmong and American:

Because they're, they still think um, the traditional Hmong way. They can't, they don't, some of them don't adjust to the American way. And we basically grew up here, you know. But we're tied between the Hmong and the American culture. And we're stuck in the middle of it. And it's kind of like a struggle to fight, you know, both cultures at the same time and to try to succeed. And most people don't do it. Most people fail.⁸

My interpretation of this is thus: both men and women, by growing up Hmong American, they are already starting behind Americans. For women, this puts them at a double-disadvantage; Hmong American women are set back by gender limitations within being Hmong, and additionally set back by virtue of having to subscribe to two different value systems.

Throughout my research, the most glaring finding was the difference in treatment across gender, which showed up in nearly every aspect of my interviews. When asked about if her brothers were ever treated differently from her and her sister, Avita described the situation as her parents being more "lenient" to her brothers; even after turning 18, Avita says her parents are a

⁸ Ngo, "Contesting "Culture"", 171. Quote from an interview with a Hmong student, Anna.



“little bit more lenient” to her, while adding that “they’re still way more lenient to my brother than my sister and I”.⁹ Avita interprets this as her parents thinking that women are weaker:

AGH: [S]o in high school, my sister and I like, wherever we go whatever we do, we have to tell our parents, we have to be home at a certain time. But for my brother, like, I don’t know I feel like he was always out. . . . And then my parents. . . I feel like they wouldn’t even say that much to him. But then with my sister and I, they’d be like oh no, you have to get home this time, mhm, this this this, and then my brother’s like why you home so late? Don’t do it again! And then he does it again and they don’t say anything.¹⁰

As a result of gender-based treatment within the family, Hmong American women are forced to develop their own methods of resistance. In Bic Ngo’s 2002 article, she offered up early marriage in Hmong American women not as a continuation of Hmong early marriage practices, but rather, a form of resistance; by marrying young— before graduating from high school— Hmong American girls are able to circumvent the delicate navigation of Hmong and American expectations by jumping into marriage and escaping the watchful eyes of their parents.^{11 12}

However, this was not the case for Avita and Tshamon. In my interview with Tshamon, he described his sisters as slowly changing expected Hmong gender roles in their household via a series of challenges to their parents:

TVD: I think as my sisters kinda grew up and you know, I think as they kind of assimilated more to like Westernized culture, I think they said— they kinda started challenging my parents you know about the, the role as a, as a woman in the Hmong family. So, I, you know, when I kinda grew up, I kinda saw that I did some of the chores around the house as well, just because uh, because my sister kinda challenged you know, my parents that, just because we’re boys doesn’t mean we’re, you know, we don’t do any of the household chores and stuff.¹³

⁹ Haam.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ngo, “Contesting “Culture””, 163. Ngo cites three different sources when establishing typical female Hmong ages of marriage in Laos (13-16) and typical female Hmong-American ages of marriage (11-23): N. Donnelly, 1994 book, *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*, T. Dunnigan, et al, chapter “Hmong” in the 1996 book, *Refugees in America in the 1990s: A Reference Handbook*, and B. Goldstein, 1985 dissertation, “Schooling for Cultural Transitions: Hmong Girls and Boys in American High Schools”.

¹² Ibid., 176.

¹³ Vang.



To Tshamon, Hmong American women are able to assert themselves through being more American, more “Western”. As a result of this, they changed the duties for both Hmong American women and men within their household. For Avita, as mentioned previously, the harbinger of the closing of the gap in treatment between her and her sister, and her younger brothers was simply reaching the age of majority and moving out for school.¹⁴

My final point of research was regarding the treatment of LGBT Hmong Americans in the Hmong sphere; while I initially set out to find if there was evidence of some form of hatred or a cultural homophobia. My results were surprising to me; in my interviews with Tshamon and Avita, I found that they were unable to recall a history of homophobia in their Hmong community because LGBT are nearly invisible. While being LGBT means that a Hmong person is essentially rejecting core expectations of their gender regarding family and children, the reality is that LGBT are relatively unknown in their local communities. Neither interviewee could recall ever having known an openly LGBT Hmong person; Avita did know of an openly gay Hmong man online, while Tshamon believes he knows two gay or bisexual Hmong men.^{15 16} For Tshamon, his narrative was one of an LGBT acceptance trajectory starting with complete acceptance within American society, and snowballing with each generation of Hmong Americans, adding that he didn’t think “it’s possible” to grow up in a Hmong community and be transgender. Avita’s interview went similarly, stating that her take from an LGBT Hmong seminar was that “it doesn’t happen in our culture, it’s not really accepted, and no one really talks about it because like it doesn’t happen!” Until LGBT Hmong American men and women are able to cultivate a visible space within Hmong communities— whether that is a result from

14 Haam.

15 Ibid.

16 Vang.



Hmong American cultures feeding off of an American narrative of acceptance regardless of identity or not—the result is that while the reaction of elder Hmong people to LGBT may not be one of disgust if not just not accepting it, the majority belief is that it goes against Hmong values, and thus, is not present.

As a result of their upbringing by Hmong parents in America, Hmong American men and women are born into a world where they must navigate expectations of gender and sexuality on both sides. Men are able to receive preferential treatment from the family without the societal pressures of having to uphold their role as a man, while women are expected to fulfill the expectations of their Hmong parents and in-laws in an environment that says gender does not matter. Living under a dual set of rules creates stress for heterosexual Hmong American men and women, while creating further complications for LGBT Hmong Americans; the heteronormative focus in Hmong culture erases any space for LGBT individuals. While Hmong American men and women have the option of aging out of their immediate family's gender expectations and have developed methods of resistance through different channels, the same opportunities are not available to LGBT Hmong Americans.



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