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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Hmong Transnational Marriages: Nuancing Stereotypes

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Abstract
Transnational marriage is a controversial topic in Hmong communities in the United States, Laos, and Thailand, and has sometimes led to intra-ethnic disputes and conflicts. Initially, many of the Hmong American men who travelled overseas to marry Hmong Lao or Thai women were already married. Furthermore, the Hmong American community has frequently come to believe that economic gain is the primary motivation for Hmong Lao/Thai women to marry Hmong American men. On the other hand, some activists have referred to these marriages generally as "abusive transnational marriages." The association of economic resources with transnational marriage, including remittances, increased bride prices, and opportunities for migration to the United States, has perpetuated negative stereotypes that frequently overshadow the personal stories of many Hmong Lao/Thai women who do not fit with the stereotypes. For these women, marrying a Hmong American man signifies not only personal gain but also economic advancement for their families. This paper reviews the intricacies related to the topic of Hmong transnational marriage between Hmong American men and their Hmong Lao and Hmong Thai brides. In doing so, we argue that it is important to consider the complexity and nuances associated with Hmong transnational marriages, as they take on various forms that go beyond standard stereotypes.

Keywords: brides; gender; Hmong marriage; Laos; Thailand; transnational marriage

Introduction

In October 2013, Juu Moua, a Hmong man from Laos, participated in the second Hmong Studies Consortium conference, titled *Hmong Across Borders*, in St. Paul, Minnesota. The conference, hosted by the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, provided an ideal venue for Juu to present his recent master's research regarding transnational marriages between Hmong American men and Hmong Lao women.

Juu's presentation attracted significant attention from Hmong Americans at the conference, owing to the controversial nature of the topic within both Hmong American and Hmong communities in Thailand and Laos. Following the event, a prominent Hmong American educator from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, extended an invitation to Juu to deliver a follow-up lecture, conducted in Hmong, for the Hmong American community. She also invited him to speak on a Hmong-language radio program based in Appleton, Wisconsin. However, as Juu lacked transportation from the Twin Cities to Appleton, the second author offered to drive him, accompany him to the events, and later transport him to Madison, Wisconsin.

After arriving in Appleton and checking into a hotel that the radio station had booked for them, Juu and the second author met the Hmong radio announcer. He suggested they go to a gathering

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that was being held at the house of one of the community leaders, since there was some time to spare before the radio interview, and the talk was not scheduled until the following day.

The gathering reflected a typical Hmong American event, with the large house filled with people spanning various age groups. The women were primarily occupied with cooking, while Juu and the second author were escorted to the basement, where a long table was set for the upcoming meal. Guests were also offered alcohol. They engaged in conversation with older men seated at the table, during which Juu explained his research. After some casual conversation, however, one of the senior community leaders, a former sub-district chief from Luang Prabang Province in Laos, issued sharp and critical remarks. The dialogue, initially a mix of Hmong and Lao, shifted entirely to Lao, possibly to accommodate the second author, who speaks Lao but not Hmong, and perhaps also because Lao had served as the language of authority in Laos prior to 1975, during the ex-chief's time as a government-recognised leader there.

The former sub-district chief's remarks were forceful, accusing Juu of intending to disrupt the community and ordering him not to present his research the next day in Appleton. Several other male elders at the table appeared to support this demand. Following dinner, Juu and the second author returned to their hotel, with Juu visibly unsettled by the ex-chief's words. He mistakenly believed that the man held official authority in the United States. Later that evening, the Hmong radio announcer reassured Juu, persuading him to proceed with the planned events. Juu, whose research was never intended to provoke conflict, but rather to foster understanding of the complex issue of Hmong transnational marriage, ultimately agreed to continue.

As scheduled, Juu participated in the radio interview, but upon arriving at the venue for his talk the following morning, he found only nine women and one man in attendance. It soon became evident that the low turnout was due to the efforts of the former sub-district chief and his associates, who had spread the word within the community, urging people to avoid the event. Despite this, most of the women who attended were middle-aged and had experienced personal challenges related to their former husbands marrying younger Hmong women from Laos. One woman, the mother of Juu's initial inviter, shared her concerns after the lecture—conducted in Hmong—that her husband had been communicating online with young Hmong women in Laos. She expressed distress, showing photos her husband had received, including inappropriate images that had been doctored to include the young woman's face. Juu and the second author also discovered that the former sub-district chief and other senior Hmong men in the area were in regular contact with Hmong women in Laos, often sending financial support. This seemed to explain the ex-chief's insistence on canceling Juu's event, underscoring the tension surrounding Hmong transnational marriage.

This opening anecdote illustrates the profound controversy surrounding transnational marriages within Hmong America, where such marriages have frequently divided husbands and wives, as well as parents and children. One Hmong American woman who supported abused Hmong women in central Wisconsin noted that from her experience, domestic violence of one type or another was often associated with transnational marriages. Indeed, Hmong American activists have labeled these relationships as "abusive international marriages" (Dabby-Chinoy 2012), pointing to cases where husbands have abused their new wives or where first wives have mistreated the new wives from Laos and Thailand.

While there is no doubt that Hmong transnational marriage is a deeply divisive issue that has caused significant familial and community disruption, it is essential to question whether this is the full picture. Are all Hmong transnational marriages abusive? In this paper, we argue that the standard narratives surrounding Hmong transnational marriage, while reflecting a portion of the reality, tend to under-appreciate the diversity of ideas and experiences associated with Hmong transnational marriage.

We begin by reviewing the literature on transnational marriage in Asia, followed by an overview of Hmong Americans and the historical context of their migration to the United States. This includes

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a discussion of traditional Hmong gender roles and marriage practices, leading to an examination of Hmong transnational marriage. We then present the perspectives of Hmong women in Thailand and Laos regarding transnational marriage, highlighting how these viewpoints reveal a far more complex picture than is typically portrayed in Hmong American discourse. While the prevailing belief among many Hmong is that women in Thailand and Laos seek to marry Hmong American men solely for economic reasons, our findings suggest that the reality is much more nuanced than commonly understood.

Context

Globalisation

It's advisable to begin an article focused on transnational marriages by first considering theoretical ideas associated with globalisation, as the concept is essential for understanding the cross-border relationships that presently shape Hmong transnational marriages.

Globalisation has often been thought of as the compression of the world into a "global village," where people, cultures, and economies come together in an interconnected web of shared experiences and exchanges (McLuhan 1962; Watson 2024). Some see globalisation as a trend toward uniformity, where human experiences around the world will eventually become largely homogenous (Watson 2024). Theodore C. Bestor explored this idea through the global sushi market, illustrating how Japan's demand for bluefin tuna, a key ingredient in high-end sushi, has shaped global fishing industries, particularly in North America and Europe. This demand created international supply chains, turning sushi from a Japanese culinary tradition into a global commodity while retaining its cultural roots in Japan (Bestor 2000). Bestor's analysis highlights how global economic forces influence cultural consumption patterns, connecting distant places and industries, creating a "global village."

Arjun Appadurai provided a different perspective on globalisation. He challenged the notion that globalisation leads to a smooth trend toward cultural homogeneity, where experiences become identical worldwide. Instead, he argued that globalisation is disjunctive, scalar, and contextual (Appadurai 1996; Heyman and Campbell 2009). In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai (1996) introduced the concept of "scapes"—ethnoscapes (people and migration), technoscapes (technology), financescapes (capital), mediascapes (media and information), and ideoscapes (ideologies). These scapes interact in complex and often mismatched ways, creating points of rupture and disjunction that disrupt the expected harmony of globalisation. For instance, an influx of migrants (ethnoscapes) can cause local cultural tensions, while rapid technological advances (technoscapes) might outstrip existing regulations, leading to conflicts. The flow of capital (financescapes) may not align with local economic conditions, and media (mediascapes) can shape perceptions in ways that clash with local realities. Ideologies (ideoscapes) might challenge or reinforce belief systems unpredictably. Appadurai emphasised that imagination is central to this process, with media playing a crucial role in shaping collective imaginations and creating new, diverse worlds (Appadurai 1996).

Transnationalism, similar to globalisation, refers to the flows and exchanges that occur across national borders, including the movement and circulation of people, ideas, information, and goods (Katigbak 2020). As in the case of transnational marriage, transnationalism studies explore more localised, personal dynamics compared to globalisation. These studies often reflect on how individuals navigate multiple cultural, legal, and social systems, building lives that are not confined to a single nation-state. Indeed, individuals seeking partners abroad inevitably navigate aspects of these global systems, including creating relationships that span national boundaries and are shaped by the interconnectedness of global and local contexts, the focus of this paper.

Hmong Americans versus Westerners

In this paper, we make a distinction between Hmong Americans and "Westerners" in the context of transnational marriages because of the unique cultural identities of many Hmong. This cultural

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divergence often creates misunderstandings, with Westerners, people from North America and Europe, frequently viewing practices like arranged or transnational marriages as archaic or exploitative, failing to consider the nuanced cultural motivations behind them. Marriage itself becomes a point of distinction, as Hmong Americans may adhere to traditional norms that include polygamy or arranged unions, which are influenced by familial obligations and the desire to preserve cultural heritage and create family ties. These practices, although common to Hmong, clash with Western ideals of marriage, which tend to prioritise love, monogamy, and equality between partners. The U.S. legal system, shaped by these Western values, criminalises polygamy, putting Hmong Americans who engage in such marriages at odds with the law. The desire to preserve cultural identity is a driving force for many older Hmong American men who enter transnational marriages (Payeejualuemoua 2013), despite the challenges they face from their own families, communities, and the larger Western societies in America. These marriages are seen as pathways to continue traditional family practices and maintain ties to their homeland. However, this desire for cultural preservation can lead to intergenerational tensions within Hmong American families, as younger Hmong Americans, who have grown up in the U.S., may reject these customs in favour of more Westernised notions of marriage and individual freedom. This dynamic often fuels community debates and contributes to the stigma and controversy surrounding Hmong transnational marriages.

Asian Transnational Marriages

The history of Asian transnational marriages can be traced back to the early 20th century with the Japanese "picture bride" system, which set a precedent for future cross-border unions. According to this system, Japanese women were married by proxy to Japanese men living abroad, primarily in the United States and Canada, based on photographs exchanged between families. Many of these brides, motivated by difficult economic conditions in Japan and familial obligations, sought new opportunities abroad, and agreed to marriages without meeting their husbands in advance. Fan (1996) explained that these women hoped to gain economic prosperity to support their families back home. Meanwhile, the Japanese government actively facilitated the system to help Japanese men establish families in their adopted countries (Fan 1996). This system underscores a key aspect of transnational marriages: the varied blending of economic motives with cultural preservation, as both men and women sought to maintain their heritage while securing financial stability in foreign lands.

Following the Japanese picture bride system, Ji-Yeon Yuh (2002) provides a deep analysis of the power dynamics involved in these marriages, specifically focusing on the experiences of Korean military brides who immigrated to the U.S. following the Korean War. Yuh examined how these women navigated not only the challenges within their intercultural families but also the broader societal narratives about their roles as military wives, challenging stereotypes and resisting the power relations imposed by both American and Korean communities. This highlights how transnational marriages are often shaped by intersecting factors of cultural preservation, economic necessity, and social resistance.

The aftermath of the Vietnam War during the 1960s and early 1970s brought about additional transnational marriages. Indeed, the presence of American soldiers stationed in Southeast Asia during the war led to an increase in sexual relationships between local women and military personnel. In Thailand, for example, many women who worked near U.S. military bases at establishments such as bars, nightclubs, and brothels became sexually involved with American soldiers. Patcharin (2019) and Cohen (2003) described how these relationships ranged from brief encounters with prostitutes to longer-term arrangements where women were referred to as "rented wives" (*mia chao* in Thai). Over time, some of these relationships evolved into marriages, and the couples either moved to the U.S. or remained in Thailand. These war-related marriages, while often rooted in economic necessity and survival, were also shaped by personal bonds that developed over time, highlighting the complexities of cross-cultural unions.

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The motivations behind many transnational marriages today are often rooted in social and economic aspirations, as women from disadvantaged countries seek better lives elsewhere. In South Korea and Taiwan, for example, women from Vietnam, China, and the Philippines often enter into marriages with local men as a means of escaping poverty and improving their families' economic conditions. Freeman (2011), in *Making and Faking Kinship*, discussed how the South Korean government welcomed ethnic Korean brides from China to address population issues, creating a new wave of transnational marriages driven by both national interests and economic needs. Similarly, Nguyen and Tran (2010) highlighted that Vietnamese women often marry Taiwanese men to improve their social mobility, driven by success stories from their communities. Thi (2005) found that nearly all Vietnamese brides saw these marriages as a way to improve their families' living conditions.

The landscape of transnational marriages is further complicated by the phenomenon of sex tourism, particularly in Southeast Asia. Western men, as noted by Hoang (2015) in *Dealing in Desire*, often sought relationships with Vietnamese sex workers as a form of escapism. Men who faced economic decline or social rejection at home turned to these women for a sense of validation and control. Similarly, Yea (2003) found that men involved with sex tourism often sought to escape their personal and societal obligations, which they felt constrained by in their home countries. In Thailand, the growth of tourism specifically catering to foreigners led to the development of a "marriage market", where tourists encountered local women seeking more permanent relationships (Cohen 2003). These marriages, often rooted in both economic disparity and personal escape, reflect the complex interplay between desire, power, and cultural difference in transnational unions.

Finally, intra-ethnic transnational marriages between Viet Kieu men and Vietnamese women illustrate yet another dimension of these unions. Thai (2018) noted that these marriages often arise from complex dynamics of globalisation and cultural preservation. Viet Kieu men, marginalised in their adopted countries, frequently return to Vietnam seeking "traditional" wives who will accept patriarchal family structures. On the other hand, Vietnamese women, particularly those from more educated backgrounds, often seek Viet Kieu men because of their perceived liberal attitudes compared to local men. Thai (2018) pointed out that these relationships, despite the shared ethnicity, often encounter significant challenges due to differing cultural expectations and personal goals. This highlights that even within transnational marriages, the cultural and social aspirations of both men and women can vary greatly, adding another layer of complexity to these unions.

Hmong: From Laos to Thailand to the West

The Hmong people are believed to have originated from China, migrating across the southern Chinese borders into Vietnam and later into Laos and Thailand during the 19th and 20th centuries. During World War II, some Hmong in Laos sided with the French, fighting against the Japanese occupation and later against the North Vietnamese and Lao communists, who emerged after the Japanese departed (Lee 2015). In the 1950s and 1960s, a significant number of Hmong, led politically by Touby Lyfoung and militarily by Major General Vang Pao, allied with the Royal Lao Government, which was supported by the United States. They fought against Lao and North Vietnamese communists (Lee 2015). As the Pathet Lao gradually took over the country in 1975, with the support of the Vietnamese, many anti-communists Hmong either fled or took up arms against the new regime (Baird 2014; Morrison 2007, 2023). Eventually, many of these fighters and their families found refuge in camps in Thailand. Between 1975 and the 1990s, they were resettled in countries like the United States, France, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada as political refugees. The last large group of Hmong to immigrate to the United States arrived in 2005 (Hillmer 2009).

Beginning in the 1980s, and especially during the 1990s, Hmong in the West developed a strong desire to travel back to Asia. They often dreamt of their ancestral land in China and the place where many were born and raised—Laos (Lee 2006). Through their long migration, the Hmong have

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demonstrated remarkable adaptability to different environments. However, their arrival in a new and dramatically different society like the United States created challenges and divisions between the older generation, who were raised in small-scale communities practising swidden cultivation, and their "Americanised" children, who quickly immersed themselves in the new culture (Vang 1994). Hmong women began to adopt ideas about gender equality from American culture (Vang 1994). This exposure to Western ideologies prompted many Hmong American children and women to move away from traditional patrilineal principles that had contributed to their oppression. They sought to eliminate polygyny, as Hmong men were historically permitted to have multiple wives. Although monogamy is now the dominant form of marriage among Hmong (Moua 2003), polygyny served as a means to gain power and wealth, particularly among Hmong political leaders like General Vang Pao, who had several wives from different clans (Lee 2016). Today, polygyny is still practised by some Hmong in Asia, though to a much lesser extent in the United States.

Amid these cultural shifts, older Hmong American men remain attached to traditional patriarchal values and often express a longing to return to their homelands (Baird 2019; Lee 2006, 2009). Many began traveling to Thailand in the 1980s, and after Laos opened to the West in 1989, there was a notable increase in Hmong Americans visiting Laos (Lee 2006). While some reconnected with relatives and friends left behind in Laos and Thailand, many middle-aged and elderly Hmong American men sought to fulfil their nostalgia by courting or marrying young Hmong women from Southeast Asia. They were particularly drawn to younger brides who they believed embodied "traditional Hmong culture." This pursuit often reflects a broader anti-feminist backlash, as well as a desire for subservient, obedient wives—similar to trends observed in other forms of transnational marriage (as explained above). The practice of courting very young women, even those as young as fourteen or fifteen, has become intertwined with the fantasy of returning to a lost homeland for older Hmong men (Schein 2004). While it has become normalised for married Hmong American men to seek brides from Thailand and Laos, this pursuit remains controversial and is criticised within the Hmong American community (Payeejualuemoua 2013). When Hmong fathers become involved with young women from overseas, tensions often arise between generations, leading to disputes and conflicts.

Hmong Traditional Gender Roles and Women's Agency

Historically, Hmong society has been characterised by a patriarchal structure, emphasising the importance of male leadership and authority within both familial and communal settings. Men are typically tasked with responsibilities related to public affairs, such as decision-making in the community, while women are traditionally assigned domestic duties, including childcare and household management. Hmong men are also leaders in performing various rituals, such as worshiping ancestral spirits and household spirits, and engaging in other shamanistic practices that create ties between Hmong from different clans through marriages. Due to the emphasis on the son as the bearer of cultural and familial responsibilities, newlywed couples are expected to be patrilocal, living with the groom's parents after marriage. They typically establish their own households only after having a few children, especially when homes become too crowded with other married brothers and their families or when couples can support themselves (Choua 2019; Lee and Tapp 2010; Moua 2003; Symonds 2004).

The responsibilities of daughters historically included cooking, cleaning, farming, sewing, tending animals, helping with family ceremonies, and other household chores (Vang 1994). Females were expected to assist their mothers and obey their elders. When a daughter is married, she is considered an outsider to her own family and clan, and she becomes connected to different spirits compared to those linked to her biological father, as it is taboo for Hmong to marry people from the same clan. Her responsibilities shift toward her new husband's family, requiring her to be subservient to the males and older women in her new household. Not only is she expected to bear children and manage the household, but she must also accept her roles without question—something that the first author, as a Hmong American, has frequently observed. However, Hmong women's agency still exists, although it

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often manifests itself differently than that of women of European descent, as Hmong women's roles are often deeply tied to family and community expectations. The personalities, ages, and marital statuses of individual women also play a crucial role in determining how they navigate these expectations. For instance, younger unmarried Hmong women may feel more pressure to conform to traditional roles, while older women or those with more assertive personalities might challenge these norms more readily. Despite these challenges, traditional gender practices and views, both in Asia and the United States, are gradually changing (Vang et al. 2016).

Despite the prominence of traditional gender roles, contemporary shifts in societal dynamics—driven by education, migration, and media influences—have led to evolving perceptions of gender equality within the Hmong American community. As a result of these changes, Hmong American women are gaining visibility and finding it increasingly easy to participate in various aspects of public life, challenging the conventional boundaries of their traditional roles. Educational opportunities have been particularly pivotal in empowering and assimilating Hmong American women into mainstream society, enabling many to pursue academic and professional endeavours beyond the confines of their homes and traditional cultures (Lo 2014). This shift has not only enhanced the economic prospects of Hmong families but has also contributed to a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics within the community. While traditional values and expectations regarding gender roles persist in certain segments of Hmong America, modernisation and cultural exchange are gradually reshaping these dynamics, fostering a more inclusive and diverse perspective on gender within Hmong American society.

The phenomenon of transnational marriage within the Hmong community has highlighted the persistence of gendered stereotypes, particularly when Hmong American men marry Hmong women from Laos or Thailand. In such cases, economic disparities often play a significant role, reinforcing traditional gender roles within marital dynamics. Hmong Southeast Asian women, who may have limited access to education and economic resources in their home countries, are often perceived as dependent on their Hmong American spouses for financial stability. This dynamic can perpetuate traditional expectations of women as caregivers and homemakers, leading to the reinforcement of conventional gender roles in these unions. However, it is important to emphasise again that the age and personality of the women involved can influence their agency and responsiveness to these roles. Consequently, despite the evolving gender dynamics within the broader Hmong American community, transnational marriages demonstrate the complex interplay between cultural traditions, economic circumstances, gender roles, and generational differences, highlighting the ongoing challenges in achieving full gender equality within Hmong society.

Hmong Marriage

Marriage serves as a union that comes with various social implications. Firstly, it involves the granting of rights between partners, encompassing aspects such as sexual and property rights, which are essential for regulating shared responsibilities within relationships (Fox 1973; Murdock 1949). Additionally, marriage extends beyond the individuals involved, as it fosters connections between families and clans. In many cultures, it acts as a means of solidifying social bonds and creating alliances between kinship groups, promoting communal solidarity and mutual support (Fox 1973). Finally, the institution of marriage is intricately linked to the concept of family and lineage perpetuation. It represents a crucial step in the process of establishing a new family and ensuring the continuation of cultural values and practices through the upbringing of children (Murdock 1949). This emphasis on procreation underscores the vital role of marriage in sustaining cultural heritage and societal cohesion.

Hmong marriages are connected to the acquisition of new members to inherit the clan and ancestor of patrilineal spirits; and marriages are also a way to create reciprocal ties between clans (Lee 1986; Mouavangsou 2019). As such, Hmong children can bring honour, pride, and respect to their

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family and clan if they are well behaved and respected, or they can bring shame, disgrace, and "loss of face" if they have poor manners and are not regarded highly (Moua 2003). Emphasis on the honour and shame of families and clans dictates the responsibilities of disciplining and shaping children's behaviours to fall on the parents and older adults. These parental rights can bring about unequal treatment of children based on gender.

Typical Hmong social and cultural values emphasise a strong family and community system, and many Hmong still respect ancestral worship. The kin system plays an important role in mediation and solving problems. Hmong women (especially in Laos) still often live in a cultural system that honours their husbands and treats them according to Hmong patriarchal society (Lee 1986, 2005). Therefore, marriage is not meant only for biological needs or for having descendants, but it is also linked closely to the social need to build relationships with relatives and other clan groups within Hmong society.

There are many ways to get married in Hmong culture. Some prominent ones involve engagement before marriage (*tshoob qhaib*), the groom bringing the bride home (*tshooj coj*), the groom's relatives asking the bride's parents for her hand in marriage (*tshoob nug/Tshoob nqis tsev hais*), bride-kidnapping (*tshoob zij*), marrying a widow (*tshoob poj ntsuam*), and marrying a divorced woman (*tshoob poj nrauj*) (Yaj 1990). All forms of marriages share the similarity of having to be initiated by the groom or his family, with or without the bride's consent. The groom can request permission from the bride's family or just take the bride home to his parents without consultation. Some of these forms of marriage have long been considered by some groups of Hmong to be oppressive of women's rights. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Communist Party of Thailand banned bride-kidnapping in Hmong communities allied with them, and many Hmong women were glad about this decision (Baird and Yangcheepsujarit 2022).

When an agreement is made between the two families for a couple to marry, a formal negotiation would begin regarding the cost of the wedding ceremonies and the bride-price. The wedding ceremony starts with the "welcome ritual" at the groom's house to welcome the bride as a new family member. The couple together with the groom's group or delegates (consisting of his consanguine male relatives and clansmen who are knowledgeable on wedding ceremonies) will then visit the bride's family to begin formal marriage negotiations. This includes examining silver bars to be paid as the bride-price. Once the negotiation is completed, the groom and his family are expected to immediately pay the bride-price, unless it was previously agreed for it to be paid later. The couple and the groom's delegates will prepare to go back to the groom's house once the marriage ceremony is officially over. They will meet the groom's parents to conclude the marriage ceremony (Lee 1988; Moua 2003; Vang 1982; Yaj 1990).

The bride-price serves as security related to a marriage contract, not only between husband and wife, but also between the two families and clans. Bride prices can range from between US$4,500.00 and US$6,000.00 for groom families in the United States. Rates are typically set at between four and six silver bars (and there can be over 10 bars for some families depending on their wealth) in Laos and Thailand (Moua 2003). However, there are some Hmong communities in Thailand that no longer ask for bride-price when their daughter marries because of its derogatory association with the idea of parents selling their daughter (Baird and Yangcheepsutjarit 2022). However, divorced or widowed women often do not require bride prices. Moreover, the bride-price is refundable in the rare case of a divorce, but only if the bride is found to be at fault (Moua 2003).

Hmong Transnational Marriage

Over the last few decades, the Hmong have developed a new form of marriage that was previously unknown to them: overseas transnational marriage. These transnational marriages resemble other types of transnational marriages in Asia, often encompassing the social obligations typically associated with marriage.

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An earlier depiction of Hmong transnational marriage can be seen in the *Dr. Tom* movies, a series of Hmong American films intended to mock the behaviours of Hmong American men who travel to Asia, particularly regarding their relationships with Hmong women there (Schein 2004; Baird 2019). Schein (2004) notes that films and videos of this nature evoke a nostalgic yearning for courtship or passionate love among older-generation Hmong men, but these portrayals also "reduce women to mere objects of exchange" (254). A parody of the Hmong transnational marriage, the main character in the *Dr. Tom* series echoes older Hmong American men's desires for a Hmong wife from their homeland and reinforces stereotypes about Hmong Thai/Lao women lacking agency due to familial obligations. Tom, a janitor in the United States, falsely claims to be a high-income doctor seeking a wife in a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand. Despite being married in the United States, Tom pursues a Hmong woman, who ultimately breaks her relationship with a local Hmong man. Tom's promises of remittances, migration to the United States, and a prosperous future convince the woman's family to pressure her into marriage (Schein 2004).

From a rural, largely impoverished refugee camp, the young woman's options are limited. Marrying a wealthy Hmong American man can also serve as a means for the woman to fulfil her obligations as a caring daughter towards her family. Schein (2004) argues that *Dr. Tom* evaluates the patriarchal privilege and gendered exploitation associated with arranged marriages in a transnational context, highlighting the disabling of women's decision-making abilities and erasure of their desires. Consequently, women are depicted as passive victims with no agency.

The *Dr. Tom* series retells stories of how privileged Hmong American men initially develop transnational relationships with Hmong women abroad while also emphasising the intricacies of these relationships. Transnational marriage is viewed as a problem by the larger Hmong community due to its association with infidelity, polygamy, and deception. While the *Dr. Tom* film series and similar movies have depicted Hmong transnational marriage through film—particularly comedy—limited research has been conducted on this complex form of marriage.

One of the few academic works analysing the social meanings and processes associated with Hmong transnational marriage is Payeejualuemoua's, or Juu Moua's, 2013 master's thesis, which was written in Thai. As a Hmong man from Laos studying in Thailand, he argued that the phenomenon of transnational marriage between the Hmong arises not only from socio-economic imbalances but also from the social structures and flows of modern technology, finances, and ideology in the global context. Globalisation has connected Hmong people in different parts of the world, particularly as Hmong Americans travel back to Laos and Thailand for Hmong New Year festivals and concerts, which facilitate connections that can lead to marriage (Payeejualuemoua 2013).

However, unlike the popular depiction of transnational marriage as purely cross-cultural, Hmong transnational marriage can be categorised as both cross-cultural and intra-cultural. While there are varying degrees of difference between Hmong individuals in America and those in Laos or Thailand, significant similarities often exist because the married couples belong to the same ethnic group, can communicate in Hmong, and practise similar traditions. Yet, minor differences can be quite dramatic, as Hmong in the United States and Southeast Asia are geographically separated, leading to disparities in ideology, desires, and economic status. For instance, the lifestyle of a Hmong American man from a wealthier society contrasts sharply with that of a much poorer, often younger Hmong Lao/Thai woman who may come from a rural village perceived as "backward." In contrast to Hmong women in Laos and Thailand, Hmong men in the United States have access to higher-quality education and are better equipped to navigate Western society. Although both Hmong American men and Hmong Lao/Thai women may have grown up with similar patriarchal beliefs, they are influenced by the dominant national ideologies and narratives of their respective environments, which can create miscommunication and conflict within their marriages.

Payeejualuemoua (2013) explains that some Hmong transnational marriages span across societies and age groups. In the 1980s, a group of Hmong American men over the age of 40 travelled to refugee camps in Thailand to marry Hmong women in their teens or early 20s. These men often

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claimed their trips were to visit relatives, yet many ended up marrying younger Hmong Lao/Thai women. Since Hmong Americans abroad typically enjoy better economic and social status compared to their Hmong counterparts in Laos and Thailand, they often project modern Western values during their visits and utilise U.S. dollars to reinforce their superior standing. Occasionally, Hmong Lao/Thai women are persuaded to become tour guides for Hmong American men, which can lead to relationships that result in marriage. In many cases, Hmong Lao/Thai women become the second wives of Hmong American men.

Transnational marriage between Hmong Americans and Hmong Lao/Thai women reinforces stereotypes of economic power imbalance, similar to many transnational relationships. This power differential is reflected in the economic, social, and technological inequalities between Hmong Americans and Hmong Lao/Thai women. Many Hmong people, both in Laos and Thailand as well as in the United States, perceive Hmong American men as seeking wives from Laos and Thailand to maintain a "traditional" Hmong way of life, while Hmong Lao/Thai women are viewed as desiring economic opportunities (Payeejualuemoua 2013). The Hmong "traditional" wife is expected to be a homemaker who attends to her husband's needs, cares for the children and sometimes the husband's parents, and manages all household chores. This image of a "traditional" wife contrasts sharply with that of a Hmong American wife, who is often more independent, educated, and capable of working outside the home to support her family. Hmong American men tend to presume that most Hmong American women fit this mold, while they view Hmong Lao/Thai women as embodying the "traditional" wife archetype.

The portrayal of Hmong transnational marriages in the *Dr. Tom* film series illuminates the intricate power dynamics and cultural expectations that underpin these unions. Despite the prominence of transnational marriages within the Hmong community, however, research on this complex topic remains limited. Earlier investigations, such as Payeejualuemoua's (2013) master's research, have underscored the multifaceted factors contributing to the emergence of Hmong transnational marriages. His thesis emphasises the impact of globalisation on these unions, as well as the complex interplay between different cultural beliefs and economic disparities within the Hmong community (Payeejualuemoua 2013). Nevertheless, further research is needed to better understand the various nuanced circumstances and the challenges faced by individuals involved in Hmong transnational marriages, particularly concerning gender roles and power dynamics.

Disputes and Conflicts Associated with Hmong Transnational Marriage

Hmong American men's pursuit of wives from Thailand or Laos is often driven by an idealised vision of traditional Hmong wives, a view rooted in nostalgia and reinforced by transnational narratives (Payeejualuemoua 2013). However, these transnational marriages, while a source of hope for some, have become a serious point of contention within the Hmong American community, particularly among younger generations. Many see these unions as extremely problematic, not only because they may conflict with the legal framework of the United States, which prohibits polygamy, but also because they exacerbate intra-ethnic tensions and contribute to family and community divisions. Transnational unions have stirred discussions on the need to balance cultural traditions with contemporary societal values and the challenges of assimilating into a new culture. Family tensions arising from differing perspectives on polygamy and traditional marriage underscore the broader generational divide within the Hmong community. Additionally, negative portrayals in the media have further fuelled the stigma surrounding these marriages, leading to oversimplified and often misleading narratives that fail to capture the complexities and diverse motivations of those involved.

The controversy surrounding transnational marriages in the Hmong community is further complicated by the continued practice of informal polygamy among some Hmong Americans, despite its clear legal prohibition in the United States. In areas with significant Hmong populations, older Hmong American men continue to practise polygamy. These relationships often lead to conflicts, not

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only between husbands and their wives but also among families and clans, with disputes sometimes spilling over into online public forums like Facebook and YouTube. Online debates, often involving strangers, reflect the deep division within the Hmong community on the issue. For instance, the 2024 murder-suicide of a Hmong couple in Dakota County, Minnesota, sparked heated discussions about transnational marriages in Hmong American online communities. One person commented, "He must have spent a fortune, all his life's savings, on his *niam mos ab* [child bride] and her family to be so pissed to do such a thing." Another remarked, "*Laus yuav nkauj mos ab Hmoob Nplog ces zoo li no ntag* [this is what happens when an older man marries a young Laotian Hmong bride]" (3HmongTV Twin Cities Hmong Television 2024). Even though these commenters did not know the deceased, such remarks are common, underscoring the controversial nature of Hmong transnational marriages.

Domestic abuses involving transnational marriages have also made headlines in local news (Horner 2015, 2017; Wang 2015). These cases, often sensationalised in the media, contribute to a narrative of victimisation, where young Hmong Lao or Thai women are seen as exploited by much older Hmong American men. Domestic violence, a recurring issue in some of these marriages, has also garnered attention. In some cases, the new wives are abused by their husbands or by the first wives, who, although legally divorced to facilitate the migration of the second wives, may still live with their former husbands. Stories of passports being confiscated to limit a wife's independence or of restrictions on her movement for fear she may meet other men add to the portrayal of these marriages as inherently abusive.

The strongest advocates against polygamy in transnational marriage are typically Hmong American women, who view these transnational unions as a threat to the stability of Hmong families and the well-being of Hmong women. Some Hmong American activists have been particularly critical. These activists, sympathetic to the plight of vulnerable women, have called for greater scrutiny of transnational marriages and have contributed to the growing stigma surrounding them. However, while the critiques of these marriages are valid and necessary in many cases, they do not tell the full story.

Many Hmong organisations have launched campaigns to combat abusive transnational marriages within the Hmong community. One such initiative, *Building Our Future: A Community Campaign*, which began in 2013, described transnational marriages as "an epidemic that is creating havoc for [Hmong] families" (Thao-Urabe et al. 2019; McCambridge 2015). In 2020, during the pandemic, a group of dedicated Hmong women professionals from across the United States came together virtually to establish the *Vivncaus Mentoring Program (VMP)* in collaboration with *Givers of Dreams* and the *English Enrichment Center* in Luang Prabang, Laos. Originally focused on reducing child marriages in Laos, *Hmong Women Today* has since expanded its efforts, forming partnerships with international programs to close the opportunity gap for young leaders in Southeast Asia and empower them to reach their full leadership potential. "Our dedication to empowering the next generation of leaders has inspired us to expand our programs," which now include a conference, the *Kwv Tij Mentoring Program (KMP)* for young boys, and study abroad sponsorships. This success led to the creation of *Seeds4Hope* in April 2023; a nonprofit dedicated to advancing these efforts (Seeds4Hope 2023)[1].

The negative portrayal of transnational marriages in the media and public discourse has contributed to the stigmatisation of these transnational unions within the Hmong community. The focus on the exploitative aspects and the portrayal of Hmong Lao/Thai women as either passive victims or opportunistic individuals seeking material gains has reinforced a one-dimensional narrative that fails to capture the nuanced realities and diverse motivations behind these marriages (Xiong 2021). As a result, the experiences of those involved in transnational marriages are often reduced to simplistic and stereotypical depictions that overlook the intricate web of cultural, economic, and social

[1] https://seeds4hope.newzenler.com/about

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factors influencing their decisions and actions. Thus, while we are sympathetic to critiques of abusive transnational marriage, we do not believe that all Hmong transnational marriages are abusive, although some advocates have implied that this is the case.

Different Perspectives of Hmong Lao and Hmong Thai Women Regarding Transnational Marriages

The Hmong American community has categorised Hmong Lao and Thai women marrying Hmong American men into two dominant stereotypes based on economic motivations. These women are often portrayed as either easy targets for exploitation or as cunning individuals seeking monetary gain from Hmong American men. Such narratives are prevalent in the Hmong American community, local newspaper articles, and popular media representations, such as the movie series *Dr. Tom*. However, beyond these economic motivations, various other factors influence the decisions of Hmong Lao and Thai women in choosing transnational marriage over unions with men from their home countries.

In exploring transnational marriage in the Hmong community, the first author has conducted ethnographic interviews with Hmong women involved in these unions, first as part of her master's thesis research and more recently for her pre-dissertation PhD research. The in-depth interviews provided insights into the varying opinions among Hmong women regarding their transnational marriages with Hmong Americans. While some Hmong Lao and Thai women acknowledged the prevalent narratives surrounding women in such relationships and supported the perspectives of their Hmong American counterparts on monogamous marriage, they also emphasised their "autonomous lives."

For her master's thesis, for which research was done in 2020, the first author interviewed two women, referred to as Ka and Pang (pseudonyms), residing in Minnesota and Wisconsin, respectively. Originally from Northern Thailand, these women challenged stereotypes by revealing diverse motivations for their marriages, including career opportunities, family influences, and love. In contrast to the negative perceptions often associated with Hmong women in transnational marriages, Ka and Pang were highly educated and were not driven by predatory motives. "I married my husband because we both wanted to start a business in Thailand together," Ka explained, emphasising her independence. Pang echoed this sentiment, stating, "I chose my husband because of love, not money." Both women had established successful lives in Thailand prior to marrying their Hmong American husbands, showcasing their agency in selecting partners based on personal preferences rather than merely financial needs.

Ka shared about her evolving relationship with her husband, noting, "Although we've only used the word *'hlub'* on rare occasions, I know that my husband loves me. He is supportive of my decisions, and he continues to support my family abroad." Initially, their marriage lacked affection, but after living together for over 15 years, they developed a strong emotional attachment built on mutual care and understanding. Ka acknowledged that "love became a reason for my continued relationship with my husband even though it was not the initial reason for our marriage." This highlights her agency in shaping their partnership over time.

Similarly, Pang discussed the foundation of her marriage, recalling, "I was surprised when my husband brought up the topic of marriage," especially since their relationship had begun as a friendship. She felt a strong connection with him when she asked, "If there is one thing, I can never stop you from doing, even if I asked you every day to stop, what would that be?" His response, "going to church," resonated with her because they shared the same Christian religious beliefs. Pang also described her husband's supportive role in her life, stating, "He even reminded me to send money to my parents when I forgot, or he asked me to send them money during important holidays such as Mother's Day." These dynamic underscores the mutual support that characterises their marriage.

In addition, the first author's pre-dissertation research of informal interviews with four young Hmong Lao women, aged 14 to 23, in a village in Bokeo Province, also provided insights into their

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experiences with and perceptions of Hmong American men, illustrating the complexity of the issue. Among them, Mai (pseudonym) had married a Hmong American man of similar age and had three children. Her marriage was arranged by her parents during childhood, and she shared that she had met her husband only once before their wedding, stating, "we had been engaged since we were children but had never met before." Currently residing in Wisconsin, Mai was visiting Laos for a month due to her mother's illness, leaving her youngest child, a 6-month-old, with her in-laws in the United States.

The other young Hmong Lao women, who had not been courted by Hmong Americans, discussed the advice they had received from their Hmong American relatives. They expressed a willingness to marry older men but indicated a preference for Hmong American men in their late 20s to early 40s. One woman shared, "my aunt said [Hmong] men in their 20s are still addicted to games and have no stable job." The advice for this 20-year-old further emphasises that the older Hmong American men are more established, have stable jobs, making them better able to provide for their families and wives when they marry. Despite being considered young by American standards, these women eagerly anticipate marriage and starting families, illustrating the interplay of cultural expectations, family influences, and individual aspirations within the context of Hmong transnational marriages. This anticipation reflects their agency in choosing partners who align with their personal and familial aspirations.

In addition to these interviews, it is crucial to consider external societal influences on Hmong women in Laos and Thailand. The cultures of Laos and Thailand differ significantly from Hmong traditions, as they are characterised by matrilocal societies with matrilineal kinship systems. However, this does not necessarily translate into significant leadership roles for women in local or national politics. According to Lim (2011), senior Thai men typically hold positions of power, though rural families are traditionally structured around female members. In this context, the passing down of authority through the female line underscores the vital role women play in managing households, with some even holding local leadership positions. Matrilineal practices in Northeastern Thailand afford women advantages in property rights, as daughters inherit a portion of the family's land while sons receive capital assets like buffalo and cattle (Lim 2011).

Similarly, Schenk-Sandbergen's (2012) study of the matriarchal system among elite urban Lao women in Vientiane, Laos, reveals that despite the encroachment of patriarchal ideologies due to liberalisation and globalisation, matrilineal inheritance rights remain prominent in the capital. The emergence of matrilocal, matrilineal, and bilateral social systems in Laos during the early 1990s, driven by increased land values resulting from the "opening up of the market," indicates the growing influence of the matriarchal system among ethnic minority women traditionally situated within patriarchal frameworks (Schenk-Sandbergen 2012). While the Hmong in Laos and Thailand may adopt diverse perspectives and practices influenced by the dominant societies in their respective countries, the extent of this adoption varies among individuals. It also raises questions about the impact of Lao and Northern Thai matrilineal systems on the traditionally patriarchal Hmong community, further enhancing our understanding of the multifaceted nature of Hmong transnational marriage. Moreover, the agency of Hmong women in navigating these societal structures plays a critical role in their decision-making processes, challenging conventional stereotypes.

The situation in Laos is further complicated by more elite Hmong individuals, particularly those residing in the capital city of Vientiane, who have become increasingly critical of Hmong transnational marriages. They often perceive these unions as damaging to the reputation of Hmong people in Laos. Some individuals have even advocated for banning such marriages, reminiscent of attempts by the Cambodian government to prohibit foreign men over 50 years old from marrying Cambodian women (Delauney 2011). Although that law has since been rescinded due to human rights concerns (Ry Sochan 2020), rural Hmong women have responded differently. Some actively arrange for their daughters to marry older Hmong American men who visit Laos, reflecting the complex dynamics at

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play. This suggests that, despite societal pressures, many Hmong women exercise varieties and degrees of agency in seeking opportunities for upward mobility through strategic marriages.

Delving into the interplay between these cultural and class dynamics offers intriguing insights into how societal shifts and external influences shape the perspectives and practices of the Hmong people, particularly regarding evolving gender roles and community structures within the context of transnational marriages. By examining the varied agency of Hmong women, we can better understand the complexities and nuances of their choices, and the outcomes of those decisions, within the broader landscape of globalisation and cultural exchange.

Towards a More Nuanced Perspective about Hmong Transnational Marriage

The literature regarding transnational marriages in various Asian contexts reveals that these unions are frequently shaped by intricate social, economic, and cultural factors. However, they tend to occur more commonly between women living in underdeveloped countries and men from richer countries (Constable 2005); and they occur both across cultures and within the same-cultural communities under the context of economic, social, technological inequality. Case studies associated with Hmong, as well as people from South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, illustrate that people often seek partners from different countries for a variety of reasons. These motivations range from desires for economic stability and improved living conditions to quests for emotional fulfilment and escape from societal pressures. While some of these unions are shaped by socioeconomic disparities and the pursuit of financial security, others are founded on the hope for romantic companionship and a better quality of life. Despite the diversity in underlying motives, these marriages often confront societal stigmas and stereotypes, perpetuating misconceptions about the intentions and agency of the individuals involved. Additionally, cultural differences in these unions create unique challenges, particularly for women who must adapt to new cultures while preserving their identities.

Through their long migration pattern, the Hmong are celebrated for their skilful adaptation abilities to different situations. However, their arrival in a new large and complex country (the United States) has created a division between the older generation who were raised conducting shifting cultivation in small communities located in remote mountainous areas and "Americanised" Hmong children who quickly became immersed in their newly adopted culture (Vang 1994). When Hmong fathers become intimately involved with young Hmong women from overseas, conflicts often arise between the two generations. These conflicts underscore social changes and challenges that are occurring, including tensions between the traditional expectations of the older generation and the evolving perspectives of the younger Hmong Americans, who are increasingly influenced by Western values. The complexities of transnational marriages often become intertwined with these generational conflicts, leading to heated debates and discussions. For instance, polygamy continues to be a strongly contested topic, creating divisions and disputes within Hmong families and communities, both in the United States and Southeast Asia. The portrayal of Hmong American men as seeking younger wives from Laos and Thailand in order to preserve traditional values further deepens the generational divide, reflecting the broader challenges of cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of societal changes.

The portrayal of Hmong women as passive victims or determined seekers of material gain underscores the overarching gendered power dynamics and societal expectations that often shape these transnational marriages. Women in these unions often grapple with the challenge of balancing their cultural heritage with the expectations of their new communities. They face the task of integrating into a new society while preserving their cultural identities and managing their relationships. These experiences highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics shaping these unions, including generational conflicts, and evolving gender roles. Recognising these complexities can lead to a more inclusive and compassionate conversation that acknowledges the diverse experiences within the Hmong community. This understanding also sheds light on how cultural

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traditions, economic disparities, and gender norms play a role in shaping the dynamics of transnational marriages.

Moreover, the complexities of intra-ethnic and cross-cultural marriages reveal power imbalances and challenges. Issues such as polygamy, domestic abuse, and legal complexities associated with Hmong transnational marriage underscore the challenges inherent in these marriages, call for a deeper understanding of the social, legal, and emotional motivations and complexities that shape these relationships. It is also useful to investigate the intersecting forces of globalisation, economic disparities, and cultural values in the context of Hmong transnational marriage.

Conclusion

It is important to challenge the dominant narrative that equates all Hmong transnational marriages with abuse and exploitation. While abuses do frequently occur, such circumstances are not representative of the entire phenomenon. Many Hmong Lao and Thai women enter transnational marriages for reasons that go beyond simple financial gain or opportunism. Ethnographic research, such as that conducted by the first author, reveals a more nuanced reality. Interviews with Hmong women involved in these marriages show that their motivations are diverse, ranging from career opportunities and family influences to personal choice and love. For instance, the cases of Ka and Pang, who were introduced earlier, challenge the stereotype of the economically desperate woman seeking a way out of poverty. Both women were well-educated, financially stable, and made their marriage choices independently, not out of necessity.

Moreover, the views of Hmong women in Laos and Thailand, as gathered through interviews, reflect a complex web of cultural expectations and personal aspirations. Younger Hmong women often look favourably on the prospect of marrying older Hmong American men, not merely for economic reasons but because of the perceived stability these men offer. Cultural factors, including family dynamics and the role of women in Hmong society, further shape their decisions. These factors are influenced not only by Hmong traditions but also by the dominant matrilineal systems in Laos and Thailand, which grant women certain advantages in property rights and family structures (Lim 2011; Schenk-Sandbergen 2012).

The diverse perspectives and experiences of Hmong women challenge the simplistic view that all transnational marriages are always driven by exploitation. They also reveal how external societal influences and cultural shifts are reshaping the dynamics of gender and marriage in the Hmong community. As these women navigate the intersection of traditional Hmong values and the realities of modern life in Laos, Thailand, and the United States, their experiences highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of transnational marriages.

Returning to the initial vignette involving Juu Moua's presentation, the opposition he encountered from the ex-sub-district chief and other community leaders in Appleton underscores the deep-seated tensions that these marriages provoke. Their resistance to his research reflects a broad anxiety about how transnational marriages are perceived, both within the Hmong community and by outsiders. The sharp critique Juu received, which resulted in a deliberate attempt to suppress his presentation, illustrates how sensitive and divisive the topic remains. These reactions are emblematic of the ongoing struggle within the Hmong diaspora to reconcile their cultural heritage with the pressures of life in the United States, where legal, social, and cultural norms often clash with long-standing Hmong traditions.

Thus, while transnational marriages continue to be a source of controversy, they are far more complex than the dominant narratives suggest. A deeper understanding of the diverse motivations and experiences of those involved is crucial to addressing the tensions and misunderstandings that surround these unions. By moving beyond the simplistic depictions of transnational marriages as inherently abusive, scholars and community leaders alike can foster a more informed and nuanced dialogue on the future of Hmong marriage practices in a transnational context.

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