

BOOK REVIEW SERIES

TAPP, N. 2010. *The Impossibility of Self: an essay on the Hmong Diaspora*. Lit Verlag: Munster, 320pp. €29.90

The book, "The Impossibility of Self: an Essay on the Hmong Diaspora," is a well thought out book which attempts to place the Hmong self into an anthropological context. The book is separated into four parts. The first part examines theories and approaches relating to the 'self'. The second part of the book familiarizes the reader with the Hmong. The third part of the book discusses the changes that relate to Hmong identity and sociality. Finally, in the fourth section, there is an examination of the Miao (the Chinese Hmong) and a critical evaluation of the theories which explore the concept of the self. Tapp spends much time on well-known and sometimes not so well-known works relating to the subject of the self. The book examines the 'self' from the point of view that there is a dichotomy of the pre-modern, or production, self and the modern/postmodern, or consumption, self and discusses the different disciplines which have reflected upon the self. The premise of the book is primarily based on the work of D. Bell (1978) and D. Miller (1987; 1993). Bell's perception of the self is a mirror of the 'authentic' while Miller's perception of the self is that of a decontextualized self. The

weakness of the book's argument is that both Miller and Bell appear to perceive the world from a primarily Western perspective which troubled me throughout the text. However, putting that aside for the moment, let's examine the text and the positive additions it makes towards Hmong studies and to the greater anthropological discipline.

In the first part of the text, the book examines both anthropological and non-anthropological approaches to the self. Tapp considers how we as practitioners have viewed the self, either from a medieval European model, a classical Unitarian model, a romantic model or as a decontextualized modern, post-modern model.

Part two examines the social-historical context within which the Hmong are situated. Tapp examines how the Hmong's past, and those voices which have shaped our present-day impressions of them, affected both Hmong perceptions of themselves and how Hmong specialists' view them. He suggests that the writers of the past had particular frames of reference and objectives that in turn either mystified the Hmong or made assumptions about them. Priest, missionaries, soldiers and ethnographers had particular preconceived thoughts about who and what the Hmong were. Their views are sometimes romanticised images of the Hmong, or sometimes positive or negative, but all have an accumulative effect on the present Hmong and /or others' opinionsⁱ about them. Tapp's main point is that history and historic writings are perceived through the lens of the presentⁱⁱ. As a result when one reads about the Hmong or any group, for that matter, the writers' objectives in the past should be considered. Tapp's analysis deconstructs common perceived notions of who the Hmong were understood to be.

In the latter chapters of part two Tapp examines the Hmong's multiplicity of self, as he terms it. He proposes a different

conception of 'self', which is multiple and contested through the examination of shamanism and funeral rituals contrasting them with globalising trends. Tapp argues that the Hmong have a new selfhood that is fragmented, modernist and textualized, creating a unified self. In addition, new modes of communication, such as mobile phones and internet/email, reinforce connections with distant, far off places and family, to create a borderless Hmong 'national' community. This perception of a national identity appears seemingly close to Anderson's (1984) construction of "imagined communities"ⁱⁱⁱ. However, Tapp discusses the Hmong's national identity as attached to a virtual place, in other words detached.

The third part of the book explores the Hmong as transnationals, as Tapp delves further into their understandings of themselves in the world. Earlier in the text he argues that the Hmong have been part of a globalized world at least since the time of colonialism. However, contemporary Hmong have a vision of themselves with a virtual homeland (since they spread throughout Southern China and Southeast Asia and have had a very long history of being up-rooted). They see themselves tied to a mythical ancestral Chinese homeland, but envisage Laos or Thailand as homelands as well. This portion of the book examines how the Hmong attach themselves to places and formulate relationships either through marriage between transnationals who may have grown up on different parts of the globe. These transnational Hmong use the medium of the internet to reconnect or by visiting places such as China or Thailand to create a common sense of kinship, nationalism, and nostalgia.

Part four of Tapp's book initially examines the Chinese Hmong, or Miao. Tapp first explores the concept of romanticism in China, which gauges the metaphors of the ethnic other in China. However, historically, romanticism

may arguably be based on a European or Western philosophical tradition and, therefore, may be a bit of a problematic fit. Nevertheless, Tapp endeavours to situate Chinese ideologies into a romantic mould. He concludes that aspects of romanticism did not exist before the 19th and 20th Century in China. He then, discusses the Miao from a contemporary Chinese perspective. The Chinese perceive the Miao as a romantic primordial Chinese. They are seen by the Chinese as backward and exotic country bumpkins, which has justified national public discourse to deny their participation in the modernisation project. Tapp suggests there is a valorisation/denigration of ethnic minorities at the same time. As a result, he situates Chinese Hmong as an ethnic minority who have a public Chinese self and private Miao self^{iv}.

In the second half of part four, Tapp challenges the theories regarding the modern self and then removes the Hmong from its contradictory labyrinth. Tapp argues that the 'self' defines significance and meaning and that spirituality and ritual secure the meaning of the self. Thus, the Hmong shaman reconstitutes the self in a post-modern world; in a post-modern world, where the self has become referenceless. In contrast, the Self anchored in ritual and religious belief and is the primary foundation of identity for the Hmong where ever they may find themselves in space or time.

In conclusion, Tapp's attempt at examining the self from an anthropological perspective is daring. However, the most troubling part of the book was the theoretical arguments he decided to use and ignore. Tapp has decided to avoid Eastern perceptions of the self. The Hmong self should be considered from this Eastern philosophical milieu within which they exist. The Hmong, even with religious change and transnational migration, have been able to maintain non-western perspectives as was observed and illustrated

by (Fadiman 1997). Tapp, himself, in his earlier work mentions that the Hmong have many shared cosmological aspects with Chinese cosmology such as how they divide the world into a sky world, a living world and underworld (Tapp 1989). This Chinese cosmological aspect and its relationship to the Hmong self has not been investigated in his book. However, if it had, it might suggest that Hmong perceptions of self could be understood very differently and, to some degree, have common cultural representations of the self with those of Chinese philosophical constructions. He does mention Eastern ideas of self, but merely in passing.

In the conclusion of this book Tapp states that Hmong spirituality and "ritual is the hypostasis which reinserts the self into a timeless and communal narrative of history" (p274). It has been argued by many in Hmong studies that the Chinese/Hmong religious cosmologies and spirituality share some similar foundations. He does suggest that the Chinese self was different and not based in romanticism, but it manifests questions about what the Hmong and Chinese selves have in common, if anything. However, if this omission is overlooked, Tapp makes salient points that might be taken into consideration when doing fieldwork or when (re)examining texts with regards to the Hmong. The text is a good overview of the work done in Hmong studies and although the premise about the 'self' is not fully explored, it presents a good place from which to begin thinking about the Hmong self.

Dr. Simeon S. Magliveras, *The American College of Greece, Deree College & Nanyang Technical University, Singapore*

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i Jenkins 2008 discusses how ethnic groups envisage themselves suggesting that how a dominant groups categorise a subordinate group, positively or negatively, effects a subordinate groups perceptions of themselves.

ii Frentress and Wickham (1992) and Hirsch and Steward (2005) suggest that memory and history respectively are remembered, viewed, and understood, in the context of the present. Frentress and Wickham also suggest that those things which are not understood are then easily forgotten.

iii Anderson (1983) suggests that the national identity began with print capitalism. Tapp infers the Hmong boundless 'national' identities may be a function of electronic media in the same way.

iv Tapp's understanding about concealment resembles Herzfeld's (1997) concept of *cultural intimacy*, where public personae's are expressed while at the same time private personas are cherished and shared with like individuals who share the same representations of the other. Herzfeld calls this type of behaviour, *disemia*. He used the example of the Greeks Hellenistic public personae and their private flawed Byzantine/ Romios self which contemporary Greeks would share with among themselves in private.