

YER J. THAO

*Portland State University
Portland, OR*

Culture and Knowledge of the Sacred Instrument *Qeej* in the Mong-American Community

Abstract

This study aims to describe the importance of the oral tradition of the sacred instrument *Qeej* to Mong culture. It is an attempt to help preserve Mong oral traditions and facilitate the continuing practice of traditional funeral rites, in which the *Qeej* plays a central role by guiding the soul of the deceased to the realm of the ancestors. The Mong who live in the United States are faced with a pressing dilemma—how to maintain oral traditions and culture in a society that privileges literacy-based learning. The *Qeej* provides an important case study as it is crucial to the Mong culture and its traditions cannot be translated into print. Recently, younger Mong have started playing the *Qeej* for amusement in secular contexts, a practice that threatens traditional customs. The Mong Cultural Program in Long Beach, California, makes a noteworthy effort at preserving the oral traditions of the *Qeej*.

Keywords: Mong/Hmong culture—oral traditions—funeral ritual—sacred instrument *Qeej*

THE *Qeej* is the sacred, ritual funerary instrument of the Mong.¹ It is made of six bamboo pipes and a wooden chamber similar to a wind chest,² through which the voice intones a highly stylized and ritualistic language. The *Qeej* makes a special and beautiful sound that is produced by master players. The Mong believe that these ethereal sounds communicate with the souls of the dead. Only *Qeej* players who spend years studying under their masters' tutelage know the meaning of these sounds.

The *Qeej* is an important cultural tradition to the Mong and has been part of Mong culture for thousands of years. In contrast to the Laotian, Mongolian, and Chinese *khane*, which are used during wedding ceremonies, New Year's celebrations, and other festive events, the *Qeej* is not meant to be used to entertain people during courtship. Nevertheless, in the United States where Mong communities have settled, there have been cases where the *Qeej* has been used in secular contexts.

In this study, the author will investigate the role that the *Qeej* plays in Mong funeral rites and will discuss its importance to Mong culture in general. He will introduce the activities of a program in the United States that concentrates on cultural preservation, particularly in relation to the *Qeej*. Finally, he will briefly describe different origin stories of the *Qeej*, which indicate that the *Qeej* was intended to be used to honor the souls of the deceased. In terms of methodology, the author reviewed the existing literature relating to Mong oral culture and the *Qeej*, and utilized an ethnographic approach, collecting data through informal interviews and participant observation. Five Mong elders responded to open-ended questions in interviews designed to gain their perspectives on the origins of the *Qeej* and the *Qeej* tradition.³ The author acted as a participant-observer in the *Qeej* class run at the Mong Cultural Program in Long Beach, California, in an effort to detail how the *Qeej* tradition is passed down to Mong children and how the *Qeej* plays a role in the Mong's funeral rites as they continue to be practiced in the United States. The author's own perspective as a Mong educator familiar with various legends and personal knowledge of Mong culture also informed the study to a certain extent.

THE MONG PEOPLE

The Mong are an ethnic subgroup who have a unique culture of their own. Their history dates back to 2500 BC (QUINCY 1988, 26). Archeological evidence indicates that the Mong were one of the Siberian groups that lived in China before other groups migrated there (THAO, P., 1999, 27–35; QUINCY 1988, 26–27; MOTTIN 1980, 15–17; GEDDES 1976, 3–12). According to a study on early Mong history by QUINCY (1988), the Chinese call the Mong “Miao,” a term that means savages. Today, Mong are still referred to as “Miao” in China.

In the early nineteenth century, the Mong migrated to Laos and other Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar. They lived primarily in Laos until 1975, when they began to resettle in the United States, as well as other Western countries, due to their involvement with the Secret Army trained by the Central Intelligence Agency in Laos during the Vietnam War (QUINCY 1988, 177–78; HAMILTON-MERRITT 1993, 118–25; THAO, P., 1999, 42–45; THAO, Y. J., 1999, 2 & 2003, 26–27). It is estimated that, between 1975 and 1988, about 85,000 Mong immigrated to the United States (THAO, P., 1999, 72–74). However, as of 2001, the population of Mong in the United States had reached approximately 300,000 (BULEY-MEISSNER 2002, 327).

HALL (1966, 70) states: “Significant evidence that people brought up in different cultures live in different perceptual worlds is to be found in their manner of orienting themselves in space, how they get around and move from one place to the next.” The same is true of Mong culture. Mong-Americans brought their oral culture from the mountains of Laos and carried their traditions to the United States. They did not give up their values, but maintained strong roots in their cultural traditions. Yet, for hundreds of years the Mong’s determination to preserve their cultural practices has been viewed by non-Mong as foreign and unacceptable behavior. In China, the government perceived them as the enemy who resisted Chinese culture and political power. The Chinese viewed the Mong’s strong kinship and cultural practices as a form of resistance against their government and culture (QUINCY 1988, 1–11). The author found similarly that Mong cultural practice was also viewed negatively by Americans on the California North Coast (see THAO Y. J., 1999, 2003).

The Mong have long maintained a self-governing structure that has protected them and served as their own legal justice system in Laos, Thailand and, eventually, the United States. In the United States, the majority of Mong elders still favor this traditional system. Operating through respect for traditions, it protects families, religion, culture, values, and employs mediation by Mong elders of the community. In many cases, family disputes are resolved within the community by the traditional system and never reach the American, Lao, or Thai courts. The Mong continue to attempt to pass on this tradition to the

next generation, despite the fact that they exist as a minority group in China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and the United States.

Mong tradition is to pass on their values through oral teachings, story telling, and legends. In Laos, Mong social life and welfare depended on hunting, farming, and gathering as a means of survival. Cultural information, skills, and values were handed down orally from one generation to the next until a written form of Mong language was developed in the early 1950s. Within the advent of the printed word, the beauty of Mong culture deteriorated and this affected the general welfare and social customs of the Mong, who once lived peacefully, harmoniously, and happily within the context of their oral culture. The Mong have had difficulties adjusting to the print culture because their knowledge and skills traditionally come from an oral tradition. Furthermore, oral credentials are not recognized in a society that privileges print culture. Therefore, Mong elders living in the United States suffer because they lack the proper skills to deal with the dominant culture and they find that they cannot utilize their own skills.

Even though the Mong have had a long history of migration far from their homeland, they have been able to maintain strong connections to their cultural traditions. No matter where the Mong have resettled, they have continued to practice and encourage their children to preserve their unique cultural traditions. As the Mong community faces a shift toward literacy-based learning that disrupts their oral traditions, investigating ways of maintaining and transferring oral traditions to the next generation becomes an essential and important task. Examining the *Qeej* and its unique place in Mong culture is especially significant since its traditions cannot be translated into print.

TRADITIONS UNDER THREAT IN THE UNITED STATES

Today, some Mong in the United States have begun to use the sacred *Qeej* in secular contexts. Traditionally, this instrument was used only for *Lub Nteeg Tuag* (funeral services), *Tso Plig* (rebirth rites), and *Ua Nyooj Dlaab* (a rite whereby a son pays respect to the souls of his dead parents by sacrificing a bull). Nevertheless, according to some observers, the Mong have used the *Qeej* to entertain people during the Mong New Year, weddings, and other festive occasions.⁴ This indicates that some Mong-Americans no longer view the *Qeej* exclusively as an important instrument for communicating with the souls of the dead during funeral rituals to help the souls journey to the realm of the ancestors. Mong elders living in the United States are extremely concerned that Mong youth are losing the skills needed to play the instrument, which has such a central place in funeral services. Most parents worry that they may not be able to maintain the beauty of the *Qeej* tradition if the current situation continues. Thus, the conver-

sion of the *Qeej* from a traditional musical instrument to a contemporary one is causing considerable damage to the Mong's traditional funeral rites.

Knowledge of the *Qeej* is meant to be learned and maintained orally, and should be shared among master players—its sacred values should not be revealed to the general public. However, Mong children living in the United States have less exposure and access to their oral culture and traditions. In this modern society, they are surrounded with books and technology. Much of the knowledge they receive in schools and in the larger community is transmitted in printed form which, as mentioned above, has little to do with Mong oral traditions. Therefore the education they receive continues to isolate them from their traditional culture. As a result, they are losing their connection to and/or understanding of oral tradition.

In this environment, Mong children transcribe information about the *Qeej* into textual form to help them remember the necessary skills to play the instrument. While texts may allow a number of children to learn certain skills through texts at a time, the core problem is that the secrets of the *Qeej* are made public, thus compromising the tradition of the *Qeej*. Mong youth increasingly view it as an instrument primarily for entertainment, and within the context of the dominant cultural environment they inhabit, they expect to learn how to play it like modern musical instruments with written notation. Nevertheless, as indicated above, if Mong play the *Qeej* in non-funeral settings or take lessons from written notation, the sacred traditions of the *Qeej* are compromised. In accordance with traditional Mong beliefs, if the *Qeej* is utilized in non-funeral settings, as is happening in the United States, the souls of the deceased will be confused so they might not be able to travel safely back to the realm of their ancestors. In short, within the Mong community, the significance of the *Qeej* is deteriorating as oral traditions disappear, and its richness as a fundamental part of Mong funeral celebrations is in danger of being lost forever.

CULTURAL PROGRAM IN LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

One response to this dilemma is the Mong Cultural Program based in Long Beach, California. This is a community-based education initiative designed to help the Mong-American children maintain their traditional culture and funeral services. There are similar programs found within other parts of the United States where large Mong communities reside, such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. The program came about as a result of the efforts of elders in the Mong community and the Mong Long Beach Non-Profit Organization, which was founded in 1982. This community-based organization provides legal rights education, social services, and New Year's Celebrations for the Mong communities residing in Southern California. In 1998, the organization funded

the Cultural Program to provide classes in Mong culture for children and parents. The program has many activities, including lessons in the *Qeej*, chanting, dance, poetry, singing, and needlework. The Cultural Program takes place every Sunday from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM.

The Program makes a special effort to hold *Qeej* classes for boys so that they can learn how to play the Mong's sacred instrument and thus maintain its traditions. Today, males are allowed to serve as *Qeej* players at Mong funeral rites in the United States. (In fact, according to Mong culture, it is taboo to teach females how to play the *Qeej*.) This is the reason why only boys are instructed to learn how to play the *Qeej*. The *Qeej* teachers and their assistants devote one entire Sunday to the Program, and the parents of boys who participate also spend many hours with them. One teacher and a number of students travel more than fifty miles in order to participate every week. The teachers receive a small gas reimbursement from the organization, and the assistants and other helpers contribute on a voluntary basis.

Both the master *Qeej* teachers and parents have high expectations for the boys who learn how to play the *Qeej* and encourage them to preserve the Mong oral traditions. Fifteen out of the thirty-six students study at the advanced level called *zaaj*, which entails learning the special *Qeej* language and chants—the study is quite rigorous. If the *Qeej* no longer holds a significant place among the Mong's oral traditions, then the special chants have no meaning for the souls of the dead. The teachers constantly remind the students who study the *Qeej* that they cannot practice the *zaaj* chants inside their own homes. Only the basic fingerings called *ntiv* can be played at home.

FORMAL QEEJ INSTRUCTION TIME

At the Long Beach Mong Cultural Program formal instruction in the *Qeej* runs from 9:30 AM to 12:00 PM. The classroom doors open at 9:00 AM. According to the Director of the Mong Cultural Program, there were thirty-six students in the *Qeej* class, who ranged from as young as seven years old up to young adults.

When the author observed a session, two Master *Qeej* teachers were in attendance, together with two or three elders who were experts in the *Qeej*. They were on hand to assist the teachers. There were eight long folding tables with many chairs arranged into a square. The students sat around the tables and laid their *Qeej* in front of them.

The lesson began with a quick warm-up activity. The students picked up their instruments and played until they were told to stop. The instructors then asked the students to place their instruments on the table and sit down. One teacher explained what he wanted the students to do, and another teacher then called on each student to play everything that they had learned in the previous

lessons. Each student, starting from the left to the right, was asked to play. The teachers took it in turns to listen carefully to each one. If a student made a mistake, the teacher would stop him right away. The teacher then asked the student to listen carefully to him, demonstrating the part that the student had missed. Then, the student repeated that part. If a student played all the parts correctly and had demonstrated his knowledge of the part, the teacher would add a new part for the student to learn by playing it first and then encouraging the student to try it himself. Then, the teacher asked the student to play along with him. In this manner, teacher and student would repeat the part several times. Each part was very short, consisting of only five to eight words. Even though this instruction was conducted in a classroom setting, it was very effective because of the close attention each student received from the teachers. It is important to note that all instructions related to the *Qeej* were given orally.

One teacher informed the author that the students were at different stages of learning. Each student studied at his own level, depending on how much time he practiced at home. The more independent practice the students did, the faster they learned and the quicker they were able to move up the levels. When learning how to play the *Qeej*, one must know all the basic fingerings by heart for each part in order to move from one level to the next. The *ntiv* are the most complicated level of *Qeej* technique, and they are the foundation to the *zaaj*. If a student knows all the *ntiv*, he can then learn *zaaj* more quickly. There are, in fact, thousands of *zaaj* to learn. Most of the students were at various degrees of aptitude with the *ntiv*, which they must learn completely by heart before advancing to the *zaaj*. One of the thousands of chants that is always played first at a Mong funeral is the *Qeej tu sav*, meaning "the last breath." Some Mong refer to it as the *Qeej tu zaam*, meaning, to "dress the corpse." It takes around three to five hours to finish playing the *Qeej tu sav*. Of the entire student body, only seven were studying at the *zaaj* level.

By the time the teachers had finished instructing all the students, it was nearly time to break for lunch. Before the break, the teachers reminded the students to keep practicing the *ntiv* at home in order to prepare themselves for next week's class.

QEEJ PERFORMANCE TIME

After lunch, the students returned to the room, and a formal performance was held from 1:30 PM to 4:00 PM. The chairs and tables were folded and stacked away to make more space, and the students were asked to sit down in a big circle on the floor. One of the teachers walked into the center of the circle with an instrument. He asked them to watch him carefully, and he stood up straight. He held his instrument to his side with his right hand, switched positions by bend-

ing down a few inches, and then brought the instrument in front of him. His left hand joined his right so that both hands were holding the instrument. He then demonstrated the *Qeej* dancing performance, *dla Qeej*, to the students.

The teacher quickly placed his fingers into position over the holes on the *ntiv*, or bamboo pipes, which each have their own names. There are two holes on the two top pipes, and four holes on the side of the bottom pipes. The teacher placed his right thumb on the single hole of the short, wide pipe (*ntiv luav*) while he covered the small pipe (*ntiv tw*) with his left thumb. He placed his forefingers on the single holes of the second two bottom pipes. His right fore-finger covered the pipe called *ntiv raus*, while his left forefinger covered the pipe called *ntiv npug*. His right middle finger covered the single hole on the pipe called *ntiv liag*, and the left middle finger covered the single hole of the pipe called *ntiv puj*. He used his ring and little fingers to support the instrument.

Next, he placed his mouth on the mouthpiece of the wooden chamber and inhaled and exhaled air through the wind chest, *tau Qeej*. There are eight free reeds, *nplaim*, inside the wind chest. Each reed is mounted on a pipe and it vibrates when air passes through the wind chest into the pipe. There are three reeds mounted on the *ntiv luav*, and one reed mounted on each of the remaining five pipes. The tones of the *Qeej* can be made by covering a single hole on the pipes with the fingers as air is blown or exhaled through the wooden chamber.

As the teacher placed his fingers in the appropriate positions, he moved his left foot with a short step forward and bent his knees. He spun his body around, playing the instrument at the same time. First, he spun to his left and then to his right. After that, he alternated five times in each direction, balancing himself with his left foot.

This turning and spinning is performed to confuse the souls of the dead, so that they are unable to remember their way back to their living relatives. When the soul departs for the ancestors' world, the *Qeej* carefully guides it so that it cannot find its way back to the living. Mong belief is that if a soul is able to trace its way back to the family, it will become a family demon and anyone related to this demon will die.

After the instructor finished his demonstration, all the students were asked to stand. They formed four rows with an open space between them and the instructor stood in front. One of the other teachers, along with the assistants, scattered around the room to help the students. The teacher repeated his demonstration and the students imitated him. The teachers and assistants monitored the students throughout the room, helping any student who had difficulty making the turns.

This method of learning through performing is very complicated. It involves great concentration as the performers must move their feet, place their fingers in the proper positions in order to continue playing, and take care not to hit others

with the instrument. Players can also become dizzy, making it difficult to concentrate. The teachers assured us that these turning and spinning performances are always used at funeral rites and that a *Qeej* player must know how to do them. The turning and spinning, however, were not as difficult as hopping and rolling on the ground, which comprise the next level of performance that students must master. The instructor's demonstration made it look deceptively easy.

At the end of this session, the students were asked to sit in a circle. The instructor called on one student at a time to perform in the middle of the circle. After a student finished his performance, the instructor explained to him what he needed to practice at home, including instructions on turning and spinning.

QEEJ IN BOTH ORAL AND WRITTEN CULTURES

The special use of the *Qeej* in traditional funeral rites is a perfect example of the Mong oral traditions, so a change in this custom is an equally perfect example of the effects of cultural dilution for the Mong in the United States. Before the 1950s the Mong lived surrounded by nature and were closely connected to the oral traditions of their cultural education. After the introduction of literacy, this tradition and its values came under threat. Modern education in societies such as the United States has created a huge disruption in the funeral celebration because the traditions of the *Qeej* cannot be maintained without oral transmission. Traditionally, the Mong are not allowed to take *Qeej* lessons in their home. All *Qeej* lessons must take place outside their homes so they do not harm the house spirits that protect the living. Since the *Qeej* is meant to accompany the souls of the dead, it is taboo for the Mong to play the *Qeej* in the house without a dead person (COOPER 1998, 86). All the special sounds that the *Qeej* makes are exclusively related to death.

Professional *Qeej* players are limited in their roles in the United States. In Laos or the United States, when someone dies and there is no *Qeej* player living near the village or city, family members must travel to a different area to find one. As the *Qeej* is an essential part of a traditional Mong funeral, if the family cannot find a *Qeej* player, they may be able to bury the body but they have not released the soul. When they finally find a *Qeej* player, they will then perform a soul-releasing ceremony, *Tso Plig*, for the departed. This ceremony lasts for one or two days, depending on the clan. The specific kinship customs of each clan differ. *Tso Plig* is very similar to a regular funeral, except that the period of mourning is shorter. The Mong have a saying: *Coj koj moog cuag koj puj koj yawm*, meaning, "Take you to the spirits of your ancestors." The *Qeej* leads the souls of the dead to the ancestors' world. These special sounds of the *Qeej* communicate to the souls of the dead for guidance and accommodation. Similarly,

FALK (2004a, 6) notes that the *Qeej* communicates with the spirits and leads them to the spiritual realms.

Traditional Mong belief holds that the *Qeej* is the only way to help the souls of the dead negotiate the unfamiliar journey into the realm of the sacred and the only way to ensure that the dead do not return to harm the living. If the ritual is changed, their spirits will not be able to reach the ancestors' world to rest peacefully, and the living will be cursed by the return of the souls of the dead (*Ua dlaab ua qhua tsis yog*). In the Mong worldview, the soul of the deceased cannot return to his or her ancestors without a proper ceremony.⁵

When the Mong use the *Qeej* in secular environments, it demonstrates that they no longer view it as an important ritual instrument. The use of the *Qeej* in such circumstances has occurred due of the influence of the non-Mong. XIONG (1999, 3–4), whose research combines historical accounts and personal experience, states that the *Qeej* was originally used at weddings and birth celebrations, and that from 1975 the *Qeej* was removed from these roles and is now used exclusively in funeral services to express grief and love for the family of the deceased, as well as to soothe the mourners. Furthermore, MORRISON (1990) holds that the Mong once used the *Qeej* to perform at major festivals (*Qeej Tsaa Hau Toj*), New Year's (*Qeej Noj Tsab*), and weddings (*Qeej Tshoob*). LOR (1990, 7) supports Morrison's work by stating that the *Qeej* was originally played at weddings. Despite this, however, based on the interviews conducted by the author for this research, the Mong were actually influenced in this regard by the Chinese, Laotian, and Western cultures that they subsequently encountered. They began to use the *Qeej* in a similar way to Chinese and Laotian musical instruments, which is to entertain government officials during celebrations, customs that continue even today for the Laotian and Thai royal families. The author observed that the Mong continue to use the *Qeej* in this fashion in the United States by performing for officials, such as governors, mayors, city councilors, and senators. Nevertheless, the Mong who respect the *Qeej* believe it should only be used at funerals.

In addition, the author learned that not only was playing a *Qeej* a very complicated task, but also a master *Qeej* player enjoys a high degree of respect among Mong elders. This is similar to the respect received by an individual Mong who earns a terminal degree at the university level. But according to MORRISON (1990), Mong elders stated that becoming a *Qeej* master was considered more difficult than working for a PhD because its language holds the entire body of their cosmological knowledge.

The Mong culture has a very complex oral structure, especially with regards to the *Qeej*. Mastering the *Qeej* requires highly developed oral skills and intense concentration in order to memorize the special language codes that the Mong use to communicate with the souls of their dead. As XIONG (1999, 4–5), has argued,

it is important to understand that learning to play the *Qeej* is not like learning how to play guitar or other modern musical instruments. With the majority of musical instruments, similar chords can be played on all the instruments, so that any given instrument can play the same song, whereas the *Qeej* has its own chords, its own sounds, and even its own special language. The *Qeej* master uses his own chords. XIONG (1999, 5) discovered that learning the chorus of a song is more difficult than learning the lyrics, because the fingering patterns (multiple notes and chords) are harder to follow and memorize. When non-Mong try to understand the special language codes of the *Qeej*, it makes no sense to them, because the meanings are embedded in the Mong's chants and in the rituals.⁶ Anthropologists COOPER, TAPP, LEE, and SCHWORER-KOHL (1996, 42) observed the Mong playing the *Qeej* in Thailand and asserted:

Part of the hypnotic power of the weaving *Qeej* player is caused by the continuity of sounds. Notes and chords of the *Qeej* flow into one another like the music from bagpipes, and the player seems, to the non-Hmong observer, to have no need to pause for breath. Unlike bagpipes, the *Qeej* has no reservoir of air. The continuity of sound results from the fact that the player breathes through the *Qeej*, which resounds not only when air is blown through it but also when air is sucked in. The windchest is held with the balls of both thumbs and the small fingers of each hand are free to close and open the holes in the six pipes.

Men play the *Qeej* along with funeral rites for five to ten hours non-stop throughout the day and the night. A Mong elder's funeral usually lasts for seven days and nights (*Ua qeej nruag nrov xyaa nub xyaa mo*). The younger the deceased, the shorter the ceremony is. As mentioned above, females are not permitted to learn the *Qeej* and perform the funeral rituals. At a Mong funeral, the duty of women is to prepare food for the guests (*Nam ua mov*), and men handle all other responsibilities throughout the funeral service. Women and girls who are related to the deceased may help guard the corpse in order to prevent non-family members from disturbing the body.

Those who do not know how to play the *Qeej* cannot interpret the special meaning of the sounds. However, some elders know at least some part of the sounds made by the instrument and, of course, all master *Qeej* players know the meanings of the sounds. There are two dialects spoken in the Mong/Hmong language. The Blue Mong or Mong Leng is called *Moob Leeg*. The White Hmong is called *Hmoob Dawb*. The Mong/Hmong language consists of unique consonants, vowels and tone-markers, and it is classified into two major groups:

“Mong Leng,” known as “Blue Mong” and “Hmong Dawb,” known as “White Hmong.” This classification involves the speakers of the two major regional dialects of the Mong, including their new generation of learners enrolled in public schools across the United States and around the world (THAO, P., 1999, 109).

Therefore, the two different kinds of special sounds made by the *Qeej* are called *Qeej Moob Leeg*, meaning “Blue Mong (or Mong Leng’s) *Qeej*,” and *Qeej Hmoob Dawb*,⁷ meaning “White Hmong’s *Qeej*.” The Blue Mong (or Mong Leng) play different sounds from the White Hmong, but they are interchangeable in the way that they speak. The Blue Mong can speak the White Hmong language, but not vice versa. This is why the Blue Mong are able to learn the White Hmong’s language more quickly. It is more difficult for the White Hmong to learn how to speak the Blue Mong language. Therefore, the Blue Mong are able to play the *Qeej* chants in both languages.

It is during a funeral ceremony that people can learn how to listen to the *Qeej*. Usually, family members who are related to the deceased ask a *Qeej* player to translate the codes when he finishes playing each set (*Ib zaaj*) during a ritual. Such a translation only happens upon request, when the *Qeej* player is asked to stop and explain. If no one asks him to translate, he continues playing with no translation. Sometimes one may ask other Mong masters to quietly translate, but this does not always happen. It is impossible for someone unfamiliar with the sounds of the instrument to fully understand everything that is played, for there are thousands of special words and phrases in the *Qeej* repertoire.⁸ Consequently, it becomes very difficult for the non-Mong to understand the messages without a direct translation from a master player. The player himself may be the only one who can explain “what the *Qeej* has said.”

There are significant dangers in attempting to interpret any aspect of a given culture apart from, and without the cooperation of, the members of that culture (HALL 1981, 220). Further problems may arise when a person who may be a member of that culture is not trained in the area that is being studied. A translation by a Mong who is not a professional *Qeej* player will not reflect the linguistic meaning of the *Qeej*. It is important for an ethnographer to become conscious of the complexity of human culture and the differences between the subject culture and the researcher’s culture. According to anthropologist Michael AGAR (1996, 100), “One way to understand ethnographic research is to understand how the ethnographer adapts to the stranger role. As a stranger, he is cut loose from his former significant others. He has a strong sense of increased possibilities, and is overwhelmed by perceptual chaos.”

At least one anthropologist, Catherine Falk, who has done extensive research on the White Hmong community living in Australia, attempted to transcribe

the special sounds into musical notes with the help of a Hmong translator to show us how complicated the *Qeej* is (FALK 2004b). FALK has produced two translations (1998, 2004a & 2004b), which make aspects of the *Qeej* tradition accessible to a wide audience. Nevertheless, when the author showed master *Qeej* players the text, they could not understand what was written. The first source of confusion for them was trying to read “What the *Qeej* says” in Western musical notation. But, perhaps more significantly, the second source of confusion was that the deeper meaning of the oral tradition of the *Qeej* became lost through the conversion to printed form. As the translations do not accurately reflect all the special sounds made by the *Qeej* that the Mong use in their funeral rites, they may potentially cause further conflicts with the values and beliefs of the traditional funeral celebration. Nevertheless, what the translations do highlight is the complications involved in attempts to convert an oral tradition into print form.⁹ As anthropologist Edward HALL (1966, 222) states:

A given culture cannot be understood simply in terms of content or parts. One has to know how the whole system is put together, how the major systems and dynamisms function, and how they are interrelated.

Hall commented that “white men” devoted their lives to “helping” the Native Americans discover their own culture through literacy. He argues that “white men” revealed the culture of the Indians, and that this actually threatened the Indian people. The Mong face a similar threat to that of the Native Americans and their sacred rituals in the United States. The special sounds of the *Qeej* no longer possess the same significance as they did in oral form once they became written down. The Mong will face a similar culture crisis as that of the Native Americans if their sacred traditions continue to be documented. The result is the same, even when the sounds are transcribed directly from a master *Qeej* player.

According to the *Qeej* masters whom the author interviewed, when the *Qeej* is translated by non-Mong educators who have little knowledge or skill in Mong language, or by Mong educators who are not master *Qeej* players, the translations will not reflect the true significance of the *Qeej* tradition. AGAR (1996) explains how an interpreter can create many discrepancies in research data, and concludes that interpretation can be very devastating because one is then forced to focus on the specifics of language as well.

Attempts at translating the special sounds and chants of the Mong *Qeej* into written form remind one of Edward HALL’s (1981, 69) conclusions with regard to hidden culture:

This means that if one is to really understand a given behavior on the basic level I am referring to, one must know the entire history of the individual.

It is never possible to understand completely any other human being; and no individual will ever really understand himself—the complexity is too great and there is not the time to constantly take things apart and examine them. This is the beginning of wisdom in human relations.

The Mong's *Qeej* was not designed to make music *per se* (MORRISON 1990). It is possible that the special sounds of the *Qeej* will differ because the Mong/Hmong speak two languages. The White Hmong may have a different *Qeej* sound than the Blue Mong. In a sense, it would be difficult for anyone to try to translate *Qeej* sounds into musical notation, or any other kinds of written form, to represent both languages.

ORIGINS STORIES OF THE QEEJ

In reviewing the literature, the author found that there is more than one version of the story of the origin of the *Qeej*. Nevertheless, his research did reveal that, according to these stories, the *Qeej* was intended for the Mong to use only to honor the souls of their dead. There were at least five different origin stories for the *Qeej*, each with variations:

1. The *Qeej* derived from a god-man by the name of Sinsay, *Xem Xais* (reported in MORRISON 1990).
2. *Qeej* came from the seven sons who made it to celebrate their father's funeral ceremony (reported in FALK 1998, 2).
3. The *Qeej* was made from a god-man, *Siv Yig*, because of the lost book that he gave to the seven brothers (reported in COOPER 1998, 83–84).
4. The *Qeej* instrument was given to the Mong people by a god-man, *Saub*, and the Mong went to the dragon, *Zaaj*, to learn how to play the instrument (reported in XIONG 1999, 2).
5. The *Qeej* was given to the Mong by a pair of ancestral grandparents (reported in LOR 1997, 2–5).

The author is not sure which story is an accurate reflection of the instrument's origin. MORRISON (1990) indicated that one of her interviewees reported that no one really knows the facts of the true history of the *Qeej* and the Mong.

The first origin story claims that the *Qeej* was the gift of a god-man by the name of Sinsay, *Xem Xais*. Sinsay was married to seven wives. Each wife ruled a kingdom that he had successfully conquered. His seven wives constructed the instrument for him because they missed him when he left them behind in their kingdoms as he went off to war. Sinsay left each of his wives behind to take care of her family in her kingdom. The wives missed him so much that they each

made a pipe, called *Ntiv Qeej*. The first wife made the windchest, called *Taub Qeej*. Together they made a complete *Qeej* for Sinsay. It should be noted that this version is actually a Laotian story.

The second origin story states that the *Qeej* was the creation of seven sons whose father died. The sons each contributed an item to make an instrument to perform with during their father's funeral ceremony. The playing of the instrument was to accompany the father's transformation from physical body into spirit. In this way, their father would not simply turn into a "maggot" and crawl out of the house.

The third origin story recounts that the *Qeej* first appeared in a lost book written by *Siv Yig*, a Shaman spiritual lord. He gave the book to the seven brothers. When the brothers died, the Mong appealed to *Siv Yig*, who showed them how to make the *Qeej*. The instrument represented the seven brothers. *Siv Yig* taught the Mong how to play hundreds of pieces of music on the *Qeej*.

The fourth origin story version tells us that a God called *Saub* gave the *Qeej* to the Mong. After the Mong got the *Qeej*, they learned how to play it from a dragon named *Zaaj* that ruled the land and the sea.

The fifth origin story states that the *Qeej* was given to the Mong by a grandmother and grandfather after the Great Flood that destroyed all life on earth. In this story the instrument was used at a wedding. This study also supports the fourth origin story by stating that the dragon, *Zaaj*, who ruled the land, taught the Mong how to play the instrument (LOR 1997, 3–5). The fact that these chants involved a dragon indicates that they were wedding chants, not funeral chants. The Mong used *Zaaj Tshoob*, which means "dragon's chants," for "wedding chants." This could also be a reference to the same *Zaaj* who taught the Mong the chants that Lor and Xiong reported (LOR 1997, 3–5; XIONG 1999, 2–3).

There are many more stories about the origins of the *Qeej* from different versions of Mong legends. The author feels that none of these origin stories can be considered conclusive. Further research needs to be conducted, because each story has several different versions. AGAR (1996, 238–39) says:

In many recent anthropological discussions, *emic* and *etic* are used to characterize a different distinction, roughly translated as the "insider's" versus the "outsider's" point of view. The problem here is that it is difficult to imagine any ethnographic statement that is not a blend of these. A statement would almost always contain some assumptions about perception or intent on the part of group members, but it would also be construed by the ethnographer in terms of his own professional context and goals.

The author's interviewees overwhelmingly confirmed that the instrument is to be used only on those occasions that involve the souls of the dead. In his

interviews with the five Mong elders who are master *Qeej* players and by observing performances at the Mong Cultural Center in Long Beach, California, the author learned that the impulse for the creation of this instrument began with the Mong's concept that people do not die, but live forever. The Mong believe that when they die, their souls will be reincarnated. They merely exchange their old "skin" for a younger one, *Plhig*. This transformation is very painful:

Once upon a time, some Mong found a dead tiger. They called out to the tiger. They said they would rather die and be reincarnated than go through the process of changing their skin. They brought the dead tiger into the house for a funeral. They called all the people in the village to come see the tiger. They made a *Qeej* from hemp straw called *Qeej Plhaub Maag*, and a drum from a bitter squash called *Nruag Plhaub Taub*. There was a great celebration. The people cried out to the tiger and it disturbed *Yawm Saub*, the Creator. The Creator wanted to know what was going on down on earth. First, the Creator sent the bumblebee, *Nkawj*, to find out what was wrong. The bumblebee went, but could not get through the crowd. So the bumblebee returned to tell the Creator that there were too many people and his trip had not been successful. So, the Creator sent the fly, *Mog Ntsuab*. The fly was much smaller and was able to get through the crowd. The fly saw a dead tiger and the Mong who were calling to the tiger. The fly returned to tell the Creator that the people were crying and saying to the tiger that they wanted to die like the tiger, rather than getting a new skin. After the tiger was buried, death became a curse to the Mong. From this point on, the *Qeej Plhaub Maag* and *Nruag Plhaub Taub* have been used in Mong funeral rites to send the souls of the dead to the realm of the ancestors to be reincarnated.¹⁰

Since the villagers' *Qeej* was only made from hemp straw and the drum was made from bitter squash, it did not last very long and quickly broke. There was a wise man who went to ask the Creator to find a way to make the *Qeej* last longer. The Creator told him to use bamboo pipes, copper, and wood to make the *Qeej*, and a tree trunk and cow hide to make the drum. In all the author's interviews on the origins of the *Qeej* with five Mong elders, it appears that, according to the Mong legends, *Qeej Plhaub Maag* was the origin of the *Qeej* in its current form of bamboo pipes, copper, and wood. The source above adds further information to the Mong *Qeej* origin, which holds that this *Qeej Plhaub Maag* provides a more accurate history.

CONCLUSION

The *Qeej* is not a musical instrument to the Mong. It is traditionally a sacred instrument for guiding and communicating with the souls of the dead. Students

learn to play the instrument by using their ears, fingers, and bodies, in a method that is both physically and mentally demanding. It involves kinesthetic, tactile, auditory, and visual learning styles, and it also requires tremendous concentration. All lessons must be learned by heart through memorization. There are very few people who know how to play the *Qeej* because most of the learners quit during their struggle at the beginning level of basic fingerings, *ntiv*. The *ntiv* are very difficult to learn, and yet, the *Qeej* is a central part of the Mong's sacred oral tradition. The Long Beach Cultural Program is an excellent way to help Mong boys preserve the *Qeej* and continue the knowledge of the Mong oral tradition. Given the current situation whereby such traditions are in danger of being corrupted or even lost, similar programs like this need to be established in all Mong communities across the United States in order to educate their children about their valuable cultural traditions.

This case study of Mong traditions in the United States and the use of the *Qeej* in non-ritual settings demonstrates that the role of this sacred instrument has changed from a funerary to a non-funerary instrument because young Mong are acculturating to the dominant culture and slowly abandoning their own culture. For the most part, they are no longer interested in learning how to play the *Qeej* and in studying the special chants associated with it, a sacred tradition that the Mong have practiced for thousands of years.

Research on the true origins of the *Qeej* of the Mong must continue. It is important to compile data from the various similar Mong legends, story telling, and, most importantly, the traditional funeral service itself. These are vital resources in furthering the investigation of the origin of the *Qeej*. Through extensive study of the Mong culture, researchers will need to combine empirical data from various sources to formulate an accurate theory for the origin of the *Qeej*. The number of resources made available by both Mong and non-Mong researchers will help increase this body of literature. It is important to view the Mong culture through research from both the *emic* and *etic* perspectives. Therefore, researchers must be aware of these differences (AGAR 1996).

There is also a need to further study the meaning of the sounds of the *Qeej*, and whether two Mong languages have any effect on the sounds that are produced. We still do not know whether the sounds of the *Qeej* of the Blue Mong are distinguishably different from the *Qeej* of the White Hmong, and whether this makes any difference to the rituals, or to the listeners.

Despite modern influences, in order to preserve the traditional Mong culture, the *Qeej* must remain an oral tradition with respect to the performance aspect of the *Qeej*, particularly at the funeral rites for assisting the souls in departing to the spiritual world.

NOTES

1. The term “Mong” will be used exclusively over the term “Hmong” throughout this study. There are two languages spoken in the Mong/Hmong society. “Mong” is the language of the Mong Leng or the Blue Mong, whereas “Hmong” is the language of the Hmong Der or the White Hmong.
2. Catherine FALK (2004a & 2004b) uses the term “mouth organ” rather than “wind-chest” for the *Qeej*.
3. The Mong elders and *Qeej* master players who participated in this study are: Shong Chue Vang, Wa Xeng Thao, Song Ger Xiong, Nhia Cha Yang, and Chor Yang. All interviews were conducted between 2001 and 2002.
4. See, for example, MORRISON 1990; CATLIN 1997; LOR 1997; COOPER 1998; FALK 1998; FALK 2004a & 2004b; XIONG 1999.
5. For recent work on the role of the *Qeej* in Mong funerals, see FALK 2004a & b.
6. FALK (2004a) mentions the tremendous difficulties she faced understanding and interpreting the *Qeej* special language codes as she was listening to her recorder.
7. See FALK (2004) concerning her study with a White Hmong *Qeej* player, Mr. Xeem Thoj. To my knowledge, no researcher has done a thorough comparative study between the White Hmong and Blue Mong or Mong Leeg *Qeej* languages.
8. FALK’s research (2004a & b) contained translations for some of the *Qeej*’s special words and phrases that the author is referring to.
9. To give another example, the author witnessed a conversation between an anthropologist and representatives of the Hoopa Native American tribe in northern California concerning the translation of a sacred song. The anthropologist raised the issue that the written translation he had did not seem to match the oral version that was sung at the ceremony we attended. The Hoopa people replied that in order for him to understand the song he would need to learn it by heart just as their people did, and not just rely on a translation. The Hoopa people sing this particular song every year in this ceremony, and up until that time no one had questioned them about whether their version was right or not.
10. This story was provided by the Mong elders and *Qeej* masters that the author interviewed from 2001 to 2002.

REFERENCES CITED

- AGAR, M. H.
 1996 *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- BULEY-MEISSNER, M. L.
 2002 The spirit of a people: Hmong American life stories. *Language Arts* 79(4): 323–31.
- CATLIN, A.
 1997 Puzzling the text: Thought-songs, secret languages, and archaic tones in Hmong music. *World of Music* 39 (2): 69–81.
- COOPER, R., N. TAPP, G. Y. LEE, & G. SCHWORER-KOHL
 1996 *The Hmong*. Bangkok, Thailand: Artasia Press.
- COOPER, R., ed.
 1998 *The Hmong: A Guide to Traditional Lifestyles*. Singapore: Times Publishing.

- FALK, C.
 1998 *The Hmong Khaene (Qeej Hmoob)*. Hmong-Australia Resource. <www.hmongnet.org/hmong.au/qeej.htm>, accessed 7 March 2000.
 2004a Hmong instructions to the dead: What the mouth organ *qeej* says (part one). *Asian Folklore Studies* 63: 1–29.
 2004b Hmong instructions to the dead: What the mouth organ *qeej* says (part two). *Asian Folklore Studies* 63: 167–220.
- GEDDES, W. R.
 1976 *Migrants of the Mountains: The Cultural Ecology of the Blue Miao (Hmong Njua) of Thailand*. London: Oxford University Press.
- HALL, E. T.
 1966 *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Dell Publishing.
 1981 *Beyond Culture*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- HAMILTON-MERRITT, J.
 1993 *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- LOR, G.
 1997 *Qeej history*. <www.pcpros.net/~ntxawg1/qeejhist.htm>, accessed 17 July 2000.
- MORRISON, G.
 1990 The Hmong *Qeej*: Speaking to the Spirit World. Paper presented at the Seventh Annual U. C. Conference on Southeast Asia Studies, University of California, Berkeley.
- MOTTIN, J.
 1980 *History of the Hmong*. Bangkok: Odeon Store.
- QUINCY, K.
 1988 *Hmong: History of the People*. Cheney, WA: Eastern Washington University Press.
- THAO, P.
 1999 *Mong Education at the Crossroads*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- THAO, Y. J.
 1999 Multicultural Learning Environment for Mong Children in the California North Coast: Home and School Collaboration. MA Thesis, California State University, Monterey Bay.
 2003 Empowering Mong students: Home and school factors. *The Urban Review Journal* 35(1): 25–42.
- XIONG, N.
 1999 *The Hmong Khaene (Rab Qeej Hmoob)*. ASST1' Spring: California State University, Chico. <www.csuchico.edu/%7Eecheinz/syllabi/asst001/spring99/xiong_n/myasst>, accessed 26 June 2000.