



# Perspectives of Queer Hmong Youth

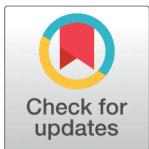
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am Associate Professor of Social Studies Education and coordinator of the Teacher-Scholars of Color Program at the University of Minnesota. My teaching career began in 1995 in a small town thirty miles north of Charlottesville, Virginia, where I taught geography and economics to 8th graders before teaching United States History to 7th graders in Charlottesville. My professional goal is to increase the inclusion of LGBTQ+ and queer histories within the larger social studies curriculum. To that end, I have written about Two Spirit indigenous people, the queering of media images in the social studies, and the queer legacy of Mark Bingham following September 11. One of my biggest opportunities for growth during my career has centered on my nuanced understanding of gender identity and expression, including the various role(s) they play in students' lived/learning experiences at school. Though I have thought deeply about sexual orientation and identify as a gay man, I have had to grapple with the privileges I enjoy as a cis-gender person. In my spare time I enjoy exercising – whether on long walks, short jogs, or hours-long bike rides, I consider myself a fitness enthusiast who really enjoys spending as much time as possible outside.



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## INTRODUCTION

When I arrived in Minnesota in August 2005, I had never heard of the Hmong people, their rich cultural heritage, or their struggle over many years to find a geographic home. Even their significant contributions to the United States armed forces as part of the Secret Army during the Vietnam War was unknown to me. After living in the Twin Cities area for just over a year, I met and befriended a young Hmong man who, like me, had moved here from the South. I had moved here to teach at the local university, and Thomas<sup>1</sup> had



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moved here because he desired to live in a Hmong community where his gay identity would be recognized and validated. Shades of Yellow (SOY) had been recently founded by another gay male member of the Hmong community, to support lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) Hmong people living in this area. Loosely organized, information about SOY was spread mainly by word of mouth and discreet community networking. The challenges/triumphs of SOY members, in combination with the history of Hmong people, inform social studies teachers who wish to present powerful lessons on significant social studies themes like culture, diversity, social justice, and citizenship. This article provides a brief history of the Hmong people and the challenges faced by LGBTQ Hmong youth.

## THE RESEARCH

The Hmong are an ethnic minority group that migrated over time into Laos, Northern Vietnam, and Thailand after living in the Yellow River region of China for centuries. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Vang Pao emerged as a prominent Hmong leader and subsequently joined U.S. armed forces in the Secret War against the Viet Minh, a common enemy, from 1963-1975. In the aftermath of the fall of Saigon, Vang Pao and thousands of Hmong people began a steady exodus from Southeast Asia (Yang, 2008). The latest census data (2010) indicate that just over 260,000 Hmong people reside in the United States (Yang, 2008) with the vast majority of them living in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Like many before him, Thomas found his way to Minnesota, and it is within this larger context that I met and befriended him. He was eager to reach out to groups and individuals who were allies, and I was equally interested in learning more about his story. Thomas invited me to a SOY meeting so that I could meet other members of the group. I was humbled by this gesture of friendship and willingly accepted the invitation. Though I shared Thomas's queer identity, it was a privilege to receive this invitation given my status as an outsider. Not only was I being introduced to a culture heretofore unknown to me, but I was also becoming an ally to SOY, the only LGBTQ support group of its kind for Hmong people. Through a process Miles and Huberman (1994) described as "network-sampling, I met many members of SOY over the next several months. These individuals were friends of Thomas, and because of my growing friendship with him, a level of trust existed from the very beginning. Over time, I became close to two individuals in particular – Kaim and Teeb<sup>2</sup> – and they agreed to be interviewed for this study. Their insights alongside those Thomas provided contributed significantly to what I learned.

## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS:

Given the absence of LGBTQ people in Hmong history and in the Hmong language, combined with the patriarchal cultural norms of many Hmong communities, it would be easy to support a narrative that describes Hmong culture as traditional, and queer Hmong as "victims" who must overcome a plethora of hardships to survive. In their study of queer transnational migrants, Mattheis and Figueroa (2012) found that many of their partici-



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pants described their home communities as unsupportive or hostile to LGBTQ identities. Surely there are hardships that individuals must endure, and one cannot negate those very real experiences where people literally live fearing bodily harm or death if it becomes known that they are gay. Kaim and Teeb both indicated that they knew fellow gay Hmong youth who had gone to great lengths to cover or hide their gay identity in order to spare the family shame or dishonor, including going forward with marriage to a woman. Queer Hmong youth have been physically threatened in person and online, and some fear being abandoned by loved ones. But this is not the whole story. This often-told narrative must be carefully re-examined so that a more complete telling of the story moves forward.

Yang (2008) reported that despite the apparent non-existence of gay Hmong before they immigrated to the United States, there are anecdotal stories about Hmong individuals in Laos who were perceived as different, and who were possibly gay or lesbian. The term gay was not used, but she recounts one family's experience with a woman who "behaved like a man" (p. 3). Though this coded language could be interpreted as a difference in gender expression only, Yang perceived this as a possible indication of the individual's sexual orientation. There are also stories about Hmong men and women who never married, indicating another possibility of same-sex attraction. Thomas reported that he always knew he was different. He was a flamboyant child who wore a tiara and his sister's shoes and enjoyed the role of mom when playing house. Likewise, Ngo (2012a) reported that the mother of one of her male participants did not see him as a boy, but rather as a girl in some sense. She never understood the word gay and therefore could only speak in terms of the gender expression her son portrayed. These behaviors, while not the norm in these Hmong families, are not unique. They indicate a continuum of behaviors reported anecdotally from Hmong individuals in the past.

Another part of the story that must be problematized is the coming out narrative. For many Americans, coming out represents an individual's acknowledgment of their queer identity and the desire to stop hiding an important part of what makes that individual whole. Though individuals who come out may endure negative consequences, the coming out process is most-often viewed as a liberating experience. But as Ngo (2012b) explained, "researchers of Asian and Asian American LGBT experiences find that the focus of coming out discourses on individual identity and development fails to take into account the central importance of family social relations and expectations" (p. 124). Further, Aoki, Ngin, Mo, and Ja (1989) reveal that in many Asian and Asian American communities, a person is not simply viewed as an individual, but as a representative of the family and must maintain a public reputation that is positive. Coming out as LGBTQ has serious repercussions not only for the individual, but for the entire family as well. Therefore, it is significant to note that despite the many pressures to remain closeted, some queer Hmong youth are coming out and finding support among family members.

For Thomas, his mother has shown support for him and the entire Hmong LGBTQ community by participating in Pride parades and attending SOY New Year celebrations. Similarly, Kaim reported having support from an older sister, while both he and Teeb suggested, "many family members know about us (gay Hmong youth) participating in Hmong New



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Year even if they don't say anything out loud." These examples of support are particularly significant given the traditional and conservative reputation of the Hmong American community. It indicates that older Hmong adults are capable of shifting their stance on complex issues from harsh critics to supportive allies (Kumashiro, 1999; Ngo, 2012a). Changes in individual attitudes highlight Hmong Americans' beliefs about queer youth among them are not monolithic.

## PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS:

This study raises questions about the multiple identities our students carry with them each day, at home and at school. Though its focus is on challenges and triumphs experienced by one specific part of the larger LGBTQ and immigrant communities, this study reveals the complexity that accompanies many queer students' lives. Issues of race, gender, and socio-economic and immigrant status collide in various ways and play out differently for each of the individuals involved. Teachers need to constantly remind themselves about the complex lives their students live so that they can provide the resources and support these students need. Social studies teachers in particular can serve as leaders in this effort by creating and implementing curriculum that includes diverse histories and perspectives, so that all students see themselves in the lessons being taught.

Specific to the inclusion of Hmong culture – and the recognition of queer Hmong youth in particular – two areas of possibility stand out. In *Teaching History with Film*, Marcus et al. (2010) discussed a teacher who used various films in a history and anthropology unit to introduce an ethno-history of the Hmong. The authors concluded that “among the most important [objectives] is humanizing an often marginalized and misunderstood people and doing so by using assignments that ask students to adopt a Hmong perspective” (p. 46). The various films used include *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America* (1984), *The Killing Fields* (1984), and *The Split Horn: Life of a Hmong Shaman in America* (2001). They helped students to learn more about the Hmong and their culture, which helped students develop respect, tolerance, and eventually care about/for Hmong people. With similar curricular goals in mind, more modern films/documentaries could be utilized as well. Some of the documentaries might include *Home at Last: Hmong People in the Ozarks* (2011), *Stories in Thread: A Tapestry of Hmong Identity* (2016), and *America's Secret War* (2017). Examples of feature films that center Hmong culture include: *Nyab Siab Zoo (The Good-Hearted Daughter)* (2009), *Journey to the Fallen Skies* (2011), *Paj Ntaub - The Rose Cloth* (2015), and *1985* (2016).

McCall (1997, 1999) also turned to a form of the arts to demonstrate and teach about Hmong culture. Through a study of Hmong paj ntaub, artistic creations that express Hmong culture through stories and designs on clothing and everyday items, and the women skilled in these arts, McCall called attention to the scant use of the visual arts in comparison to the emphasis on integrating literature into the social studies curriculum (p. 138). McCall concluded that for young children, the visual images of Hmong everyday life in Laos depicted on story cloth, a type of paj ntaub, provided background knowledge in a more memorable man-



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ner than verbal explanations did alone. The use of textile arts also demonstrates McCall's commitment to including women's voices in the social studies curriculum because [textile arts] "are typically viewed as a craft and less valuable than male-dominated painting and sculpture" (p. 141). Later, McCall revealed how story cloths became a means for recording aspects of Hmong history and culture that was comprehensible to a wider audience. Among other historic and/or cultural scenes, they showed the agricultural lifestyle among the Hmong while living in Laos, and they showed the disruption of Hmong lives caused by the Vietnam War, the turmoil endured during the escape from Laos to Thailand, and images of life in the refugee camps. Given the stories shared by queer Hmong youth like Thomas, Kaim and Teeb, images depicting SOY New Year and Hmong participation in Pride celebrations might be included on individual story cloths, making the intersections between traditional Hmong culture and the modern-day lives of queer Hmong youth more visible.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This name and others used to present the views of the members of Shades of Yellow are all pseudonyms. "Thomas" was used because at the time of our interaction, he referred to himself using a name commonly heard in the United States. Since 2015, however, he has used a more traditional Hmong name.

<sup>2</sup>The other two participants were given Hmong pseudonyms out of respect for their given Hmong names.

## Q & A WITH J.B. MAYO

### Question #1

#### *Teacher's Question:*

I am wondering what the goal of the groups like SOY and other Hmong organizations that support queer community members, as well as the individuals interviewed for the study are? I mean this as more specific outcomes rather than a generalized understanding of goals such as acceptance, support, visibility.

#### *J.B. Mayo's Response:*

When I think about SOY, the term that comes to mind is affinity space. An affinity space is one where people come together based upon a shared identity (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) where they can discuss topics or issues that are specific to their shared identity and lived experience. Of great importance in affinity spaces is each individual's ability to speak freely and openly about any concerns that may be weighing on their hearts and minds. Similarly, affinity spaces offer folks an opportunity to share joy, hopes, and dreams in ways that just are not possible in mixed crowds. Sharing in this way leads to a deeply shared sense of community, where people can be vulnerable (or brave) in ways that are just not possible in other spaces. When one considers that the word gay doesn't even exist



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in the Hmong language, one can understand the great importance of building community within SOY. For many of the young people I met in SOY, this was a group that became family, which I have stressed is such an important social construct within Hmong culture. I will also add that affinity spaces are not necessarily rigid in terms of who is allowed to enter. As an African American who was quite a bit older than most of the SOY participants I met, I was still invited in based upon my queer identity and my previous relationship with Thomas.

For the individuals that agreed to be interviewed for my study, Kaim, Teeb, and Thomas, I strongly believe that each of them valued the opportunity to share parts of their personal journeys as each grappled with being queer and Hmong in their own ways. Telling one's personal story is often a form of validating one's existence – a way of saying to the world, “I am here, and I matter!” – and especially for those of us who walk and live in spaces that may be considered outside of the norm in our given communities. Validation holds a great deal of importance for young people, and perhaps even more for young people who identify as LGBTQ and who are members of marginalized and/or minoritized groups.

## **Question #2**

### ***Teacher's Question:***

You suggest valuable resources teachers can use; how might you suggest teachers could best make use of these resources in their teaching practice?

### ***J.B. Mayo's Response:***

Allow me to answer this question by first sharing one of my strong, fundamental beliefs about teachers: They are highly professional individuals with expert knowledge who care deeply for the students and the communities they serve. Further, no outsider – like me – can ever know a teacher's context like they do, therefore, any suggestion here can only be broadly communicated, which then allows individual teachers to engage their expertise and knowledge within their local contexts. With that said, I believe that the updated (and more recent) films and documentaries found in the main text of this article will provide teachers a broad view of Hmong culture. None of them depict queerness explicitly, but overall knowledge about Hmong people and their history is important. Further, I agree with the following broad themes when teaching with film as outlined in William Russell's (2012) article called *The Art of Teaching Social Studies with Film*. In this article he discusses five classroom-tested methods for teaching with film: (1) film as a visual textbook, (2) film as a depicter of atmosphere, (3) film as analogy, (4) film as historiography, and (5) film as a springboard. The citation for this practice-based article is found in the reference section of this article. Finally, I will reiterate here that the use of textile arts and story cloth depicting modern-day LGBTQ themes like *Pride* and *SOY New Year* could serve as powerful, culturally responsive examples of inclusion for queer Hmong youth.



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### Question #3

#### ***Teacher's Question:***

You mentioned that building empathy with the Hmong people is an important step in this process. What kind of tasks and assignments do you recommend to teachers to effectively assess whether this process is occurring?

#### ***J.B. Mayo's Response:***

I believe that building empathy is a process that comes with understanding a particular culture (including both historical and modern-day knowledge) and by creating opportunities in the classroom such that students see similarities between themselves and the group/culture about which they are learning. Because the Hmong are (perhaps) still the lesser known community within the larger scope of Asians and Asian Americans living in the United States, a first step is to highlight their presence within these larger communities so that students are better able to distinguish them. The recent national spotlight enjoyed by Olympic gymnast Sunisa (Sunni) Lee has certainly helped in this important step. A local community-based organization here in St. Paul, Minnesota, the Hmong American Partnership, states that part of its overall mission is to “promote the rich heritage of our ethnic communities.” This quote reminds me that teachers have the power (and responsibility) to promote all the various communities represented in their classrooms. When this becomes regular classroom practice, empathy will grow. Again, please refer back to my fundamental belief about teachers stated in Question #2.

### Question #4

#### ***Teacher's Question:***

Can you elaborate on how the family and community dimensions are unique, and what implications that has for how teachers might need to support Hmong youth coming out that might differ from how they would typically support LGBTQ youth?

#### ***J.B. Mayo's Response:***

Families are important to many cultures. For young people who may not find support for their questioning of their sexual orientation/identity, friends and mentors at school can provide a vital space where they can ask questions, seek resources, and (hopefully) feel safe while engaged in this quest for better understanding of self. Having gone through a similar process along my own journey of self-discovery in the 1980s, I can recall the incredibly important role friends and resources at school played in my overall sense of self. That said, the recognition of queer identities within the curriculum and language use that signifies the normalcy of same-sex attraction would have been welcomed. From this perspective, I'm not calling for or suggesting that teachers' support for LGBTQ Hmong youth would necessarily look all that different, but rather I am saying that within Hmong culture, it may be extremely challenging for queer youth to openly express their needs. Therefore, teach-



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ers must be acutely aware of the possibilities for queerness that exist just below the surface, which heightens the importance of queer-inclusive curriculum, language, and everyday school practices so that the young person who needs to see it (and feel it) actually can.

What may be different among some queer Hmong youth, however, is the process by which their self-recognition of queerness is acknowledged or “celebrated.” As I mentioned in the body of my article, the coming out process may simultaneously be joyful and shame-inducing, given the strong family connections that exist within Hmong culture. Therefore, the expectation that a queer Hmong youth will openly attend meetings of a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA), for example, may be inappropriate. It will be incumbent for teachers to find more discreet, subtle forms of supporting Hmong youth who identify as LGBTQ.

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