

Book Review

Hmong Songs of Memory:

Traditional Secular & Sacred Hmong Music

Kjell Skylstad Editor in Chief

In volume 8 of our *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, we had the privilege of publishing “Reach Back, Reach Deep, Reach Out,” an article by Victoria Vorreiter that communicated to readers her motivation for launching the *Songs of Memory Project*, an archive documenting the traditional music, ceremonies, and culture of the six major groups living in the highlands of the Golden Triangle – the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, and Karen.

After many years of research and documentation, Victoria has woven together a number of components to create an integrated whole which reflects the many facets that make up traditional wisdom and practices: the *Songs of Memory Book*, compact disc, presentations, and multi-media exhibition consisting of extensive photographs; ethnographic films; and comprehensive collections of musical instruments, textiles, and sacred and secular artifacts.

Of this archival work, Victoria wrote in her article: “A critical role of the humanities is to illuminate and interpret the function that aesthetic experience plays in human development and, ultimately, in defining civilization. Among the arts, music is unquestionably the most powerful because of the unique nature of the aural experience. Here is an intangible, abstract medium that unfolds over time, and is able to transform human consciousness in multisensory ways.

When the aural experience also serves as a means to transmit everything a people knows about its world to future generations, music's significance grows exponentially. For indigenous, pre-literate societies, the oral arts have functioned throughout the millennia as the primary channel for sustaining history, myths, customs, laws, knowledge, and beliefs, thereby linking the first ancestor with all who follow.

However, with the encroachment of advanced technology and global homogeny, how long these age-old traditions continue, or, indeed, are remembered, is questionable. The *Songs of Memory Archives* has as its principal aim to help record and preserve the musical legacy of the highland peoples of Southeast Asia before it disappears." ("Reach Back, Reach Deep, Reach Out: A Case History of the *Songs of Memory Project* in the Community." *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, vol. 8, 2014)

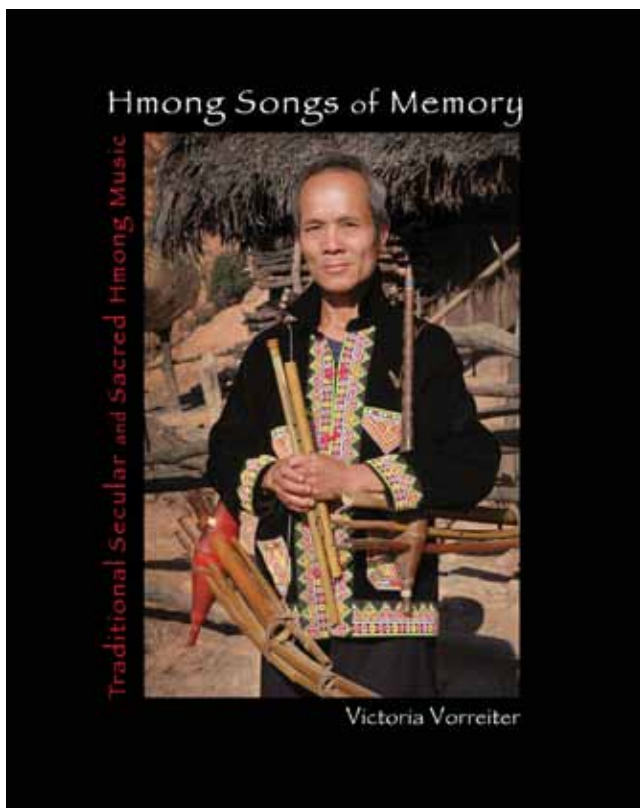


Figure 1. Cover of *Hmong Songs of Memory Book and Ethnographic Film* (2016) by Victoria Vorreiter.

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Inspired by her journey, Victoria continued to expand her research in the years that followed and has just now launched her newest archival work, the *Hmong Songs of Memory* book, film and multi-media exhibition, an in-depth analysis of the life-engendering cultural roots and practices of the Hmong of Laos and Thailand.

Without a doubt, the motivation driving Victoria Vorreiter's pioneering work among the tribal populations of South East Asia answers the clarion call for a renewal of heritage studies, as proposed in the Manifesto of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies in 2012.

The Manifesto outlines a movement to rebuild heritage studies from the ground up – democratizing heritage by consciously rejecting elite cultural narratives and embracing the profound insights of peoples, communities, and cultures that have routinely been marginalized in formulating their own heritage policy. (www.criticalheritagestudies.org/history)



Figure 2. White Hmong Shaman Qhua Neeb Yaj honors ancestors and spirits with spirit money at his altar in Thailand.

A New Level of Research for Cultural Contact

In a remarkable way, the Hmong Songs of Memory *Project* lives up to this summons, bearing the mark of a conscious determination to let cultural manifestations speak for themselves through culture-bearers from all levels of society. As seen in Victoria’s current project, this can be achieved through the adherence to research ethics built on mutual trust and respect and a willingness to allow personal relationships to develop through social empathy and cultural sensitivity. In this way, her collective work—book, film, and exhibition—has allowed Hmong culture to open up layer by layer.



Figure 3. Striped Hmong boys demonstrate their *qeej* skills at the New Year Festival in Laos.

In the *Hmong Songs of Memory Book*, Victoria's integrative approach has led to an intensely stirring text that has been illustrated by vibrant and wide-ranging photographs, all which serve as vehicles to bring the culture to life and transport the reader through time and place. The accompanying *Hmong Songs of Memory* ethnographic film presents yet another dynamic dimension to the role a multisensory presentation can have in documenting and preserving traditional ways of life.

As one of the most important initiatives to counteract the spread of cultural amnesia, Victoria Vorreiter's *Songs of Memory* and *Hmong Songs of Memory* multimedia projects deserve the highest recognition and support locally and globally. For the research community, her work points the way forward to a holistic methodological practice built on interdisciplinary partnership. This work is no doubt one of the most significant archives in recent musicological writings.

Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music

Book and Ethnographic Film

By Victoria Vorreiter

To learn more about the *Songs of Memory* archival project or to order the book see:
www.TribalMusicAsia.com

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ISBN (Ethnographic Film) 978-0-9981239-1-2



Figure 4. Vaj Pliv Yaj performs courting melodies on his *raj ntsaws* side flute for his wife, Khaws in Thailand.